

Dreams Shattered

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Finding someone who enjoys studying would be difficult. Tahsin Ishrat Khan Oroni, however, enjoyed gathering information and knowledge from a very young age. What, for most, would be a boring, unbearable task became a source of inspiration for her. Her small dreams were woven around the pursuit for education. A simple, attainable dream. A dream that she was forced to give up.

Oroni suffered from a fatal heart condition; she was born without the pulmonary artery that connects the heart to the lungs. This sometimes made it difficult for her to do everyday tasks like walking, writing or even talking a lot. Children born with such complications rarely live till the end of their early childhood. Oroni, however, was one of the fortunate ones.

From a very young age, Oroni felt the urge to do something with her life. While most people's reactions towards her were a mixture of pity and sympathy, she was confident in her abilities to make the best out of her surroundings. As she was determined to study like other kids her age, her father thought it best that she be home schooled. After a certain age, however, she wanted to join the mainstream education system.

"She had immense self-respect," says Oroni's father, Major (Retd) Shawkat Khan. "She told me that she wanted to compare herself to other children her age." The headmaster of Lake Circus Girls School, Nurul Huq Mollah, helped Oroni to secure a place in Ideal School and College, a school near her house in Pantapath. "She was so excited to finally be part of an actual school. Even though she could barely walk and had trouble breathing, she enthusiastically filled the admission form of the school. I hadn't seen her so happy in a long time," says Khan.

"The school for children of army officers refused to accept her as a student because of her health condition. Despite being a member of the army family, my child was rejected a seat in this School," says Khan sorrowfully.

Oroni's father would carry her to class on the days that she felt healthy enough to travel and communicate with her teachers and peers. Other days she was allowed to study from home. Thanks to the efforts of a kind Samaritan, Oroni could finally inch towards fulfilling her dreams of completing her school education.

Her family didn't expect her to get an amazing result when she sat for her Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams. Even if she had failed, they'd have been happy with the knowledge that she had at least

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tried. Her results, thus, was a triumphant surprise. She passed the SSC exams with an A- in the Science stream; an unimaginable feat for a girl who spent most of her days either in the hospital or in bed.

This result strengthened Oroni's resolve to continue her education. She wanted to take the Higher Secondary Certificate exams. She was confident that she could make her parents proud of her once again. She even sat for the required pre-tests that determine whether a student qualifies to take the HSC exams and passed them with good grades. Unfortunately, however, she couldn't sit for smaller school tests as she was diagnosed with dengue at that time that led to a drastic fall in her platelet count.

Despite earning good grades in her SSC and pre-test exams, Oroni was not allowed to take her HSC exams. The reason? "The principal of Ideal School and College, Shamsul Alam, informed us that he couldn't risk his school's reputation by allowing Oroni to take her exams," says her father. "The administration was concerned that she would either not pass or fail to turn up on the days of the exams."

Despite several pleas from Oroni and her parents, the school refused to allow her to take the exams. They even sent a plea to the Dhaka Board of Education. They informed them that Oroni could take the exams if and only if her school and principal permitted her to do so. "A letter was sent from the chairman of the Dhaka Board of Education to consider our plea but to no avail," says Khan. Even after all that,



Oroni was very dedicated to her studies, achieving good grades in her SSC exams. Despite that she was not allowed to register for the HSC exams in 2013.

Oroni wasn't disheartened; she asked her father to try once more on her behalf as she was certain that her school would be able to empathise with her condition. Her devoted father tried one final time but was unsuccessful.

The irony of this whole situation was that in 2013, the year that Oroni planned to take her HSC exams, around 14 students of Ideal School and College were disqualified for not turning up for the exams. "My daughter, who was so determined to appear for her HSC exams, was not allowed to even register for them while students who didn't bother to show up for the exams, showing a complete disregard for their education and school were allowed to register without a question." How can the school justify their actions now that the fallacy and prejudice of their decision has been revealed? We tried to contact the authorities but they remained unavailable for comment on this issue.

When Oroni was admitted in the Intensive Care Unit of the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) last year, her doctor-in-charge, Brigadier General Nurun Nahar informed her parents that it would be very difficult for Oroni to survive this ordeal as she was suffering from mental shock and depression. When she did recover, however, Dr Nahar told her that she would do everything in her power to ensure that Oroni could take her exams in that year. Oroni, however, refused the offer. "She told the doctor that she had seen her father suffer a lot for her sake. She didn't want me to be further humiliated," says Khan, tearfully. Oroni also knew that she didn't have much time left and understood that her dreams could only be realised if she could have taken the exam in the

previous year with the rest of her peers.

Oroni passed away in November, last year, at the age of 20. Her last wish to her father was to seek forgiveness from her school for bothering and imposing on them. Her father adds that even he doesn't have any complaints against the school.

"She was so good with computers. She would instruct us from her bed about how to fix a problem and we'd do as she said. Her solutions always worked," says the heartbroken father.

The disregard for terminally-ill and seriously sick patient by the larger system of our country is disturbing to say the least. We tend to think that people who have a number of days left on earth don't really need to work so hard to live life at all. They should count the days and say their prayers. Dreams, aspirations? Those are for the living, not for those on the road to death. We basically kill them before their death.

The issue should not be whether a seriously ill patient be allowed to integrate into the mainstream society. The issue should be whether we can have the compassion, the empathy to welcome them and help them realise their final wishes and dreams. Seth Miller, a 19-year old boy suffering from stage-4 kidney failure who had only six months to live, was presented with high school diploma from his school in Ohio, in a ceremony just for him.

It's not impossible to adjust our rigid system and structure to accommodate the need of the people who still exist within our society. "We can't be so competitive about everything. We need to have a little humanity, a little more love for others. That's the only way to live," says Major Shawkat with a sad smile.