

My name is Safa Saber, and I have been a refugee in Malaysia since 2018, after my family was forced to flee Afghanistan due to escalating threats and injustice. Life since then has been filled with restrictions, legal, financial, and personal. We lost the certainty of home, and with it, the freedom to plan for the future. But through all the instability, one thing remained constant: my belief in the power of education.

When we arrived in Malaysia, I was out of school for over a year, unable to continue my education due to financial hardship and the limited opportunities available to refugees. That changed when I enrolled at Ideas Academy, a refuge for displaced students like myself. It was there that I found the space to rediscover my voice, nurture my love for learning, and begin imagining a future beyond survival.

Dreaming of attending university after high school has always been a lifelong aspiration of mine. However, after graduation, that future once again felt out of reach. As a refugee, my options for higher education were extremely limited, and I didn't have the financial means to attend the few universities that accepted refugees. So, I decided to work and help support my family. I was fortunate to be offered an internship at an IT company, and shortly after, I was promoted to a full-time position. During that time, my passion for technology and problem-solving grew stronger, especially as I witnessed how digital tools could offer real solutions to the challenges faced by vulnerable communities.

I continued to study on my own because I couldn't imagine letting go of my dream of going to university. I spent time preparing and meeting the eligibility requirements before I finally applied to different universities. Each step felt like a milestone of its own. Then, I received the most incredible news of my life: I was admitted to Columbia University, an Ivy League institution in New York City. I was accepted to pursue a degree in Computer Science, with a focus on Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence, and a possible minor in Financial Economics.

I was fortunate to receive some financial aid, but it only covered part of the cost of attendance. To close the remaining gap, I had to seek external sponsorship, and with the support and guidance of Ideas International, I was connected with an incredible sponsor who has now made it possible for me to continue my studies.

Life as refugees in Malaysia has placed an immense burden on my family. Although both of my parents hold medical degrees, they are not allowed to work legally or secure steady jobs. My mother's ongoing health issues have only deepened our daily challenges, especially with the limited access we have to healthcare and essential services. The constraints we live under affect every aspect of our lives.

For me, the opportunity to study at Columbia represents more than just personal achievement, it's a source of hope for my entire family, a reminder that despite everything we have faced, a brighter future is still within reach. My goal is to use this education not just to build a career, but to create technology that serves displaced people, improves access to essential systems, and restores dignity to communities that are too often overlooked. I want to design solutions that are inclusive, practical, and rooted in the real needs of those most often left behind.

Every morning when I wake up, I remind myself of how far I have come on this journey. I think of the younger version of myself, the girl who first arrived in Malaysia, struggling even to express herself in proper English, uncertain of what the future could hold. I remember the long days filled with challenges, the weight of being a refugee, and the difficulty of simply trying to continue my education.

Looking back on those struggles makes me even more grateful for where I am today. To now be pursuing my studies at an Ivy League university, something I once thought beyond my reach, is both humbling and extraordinary.

I am deeply grateful to my sponsor, whose generosity and belief in me made this opportunity possible, and to Ideas International, whose unwavering support and guidance never let me lose sight of what I was working toward. Alongside this support, I also carry with me the sacrifices of my parents, who gave up their own comforts and dreams so that we could hold onto ours. Their resilience, constant encouragement, and quiet strength have guided me through every challenge and remain my greatest source of courage as I move forward.