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Danish Dhamani delivering a TEDx talk to students about his public speaking journey.
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Danish Dhamani: Aga Khan Academy alumnus conquers fear of public speaking

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Danish Dhamani stood in front of his classmates with more than 20 pairs of eyes staring back at him. Words, or even a single sound, could not come out of Danish's mouth as he struggled to introduce himself to his new peers in Tanzania. Soon, tears began to swell up in his eyes and sweat formed in his palms, causing his heart to beat faster.

But like most journeys that overcome fears, there was a long road ahead. He first moved from Karachi, Pakistan to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and began studying at the Aga Khan Academy (AKA) in Mombasa, Kenya in 2011. Looking for activities that would give him the confidence he needed, Danish participated in numerous extracurricular activities, such as Model United Nations (MUN). He was also the president of the Student Representative Council during his Diploma Programme (DP) 2. Both activities required a lot of public speaking.

Then he traveled. “Through the Academy’s Model United Nations, I got to go to Nairobi, Kenya and Geneva, Switzerland. Both gave me the confidence to not only speak on a national stage but an international stage,” Danish said. “I remember I didn’t actually speak that much. I have videos of my peers speaking with so much confidence, which I never had. But seeing everyone, people in my own age group, being able to have a voice, made me think that if they can do it, so can I.”

As a residential student at the Academy, Danish also got a boost in his self-esteem from his residential parent, Naheed Bardai, during his Diploma Programme 1. He said he felt a true bond with Mr Bardai, who was like an actual parent to Danish – there for him during his highs and lows as he matured into a young man.

“Mr Bardai understood me and understood my strengths and weaknesses, which he helped me work on,” Danish says. “He also helped me ask myself who I wanted to be in the future and he really helped me work on my own personal character. These are things you don’t learn or get in a typical school, but something that is special about the Academy.”

How I Overcame My Fear of Public Speaking | Danish Dhamani | TEDxKids@SMU



Upon graduating from the Academy in Mombasa in 2013, Danish attended Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering – not any easy field of study. But he had already learned the valuable lesson of working hard, something he learned at the Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa.

When he co-founded **Orai**, an app that enables individuals to practice and enhance their speaking skills, with his university roommates in 2016, that lesson in hard work paid off. Built using artificial intelligence, the Orai app went on to reach 300,000 users around the world. It gained more than 2,000 4.7 star ratings on the Apple App Store. It is now used by companies such as Microsoft, Comcast and IBM.

More recently, the app – and its founders – were recognised by Forbes magazine. Danish and his roommates were listed in the magazine's top 30 Under 30 2021 list – a prestigious list that shines the spotlight on entrepreneurs under 30 from different sectors. Danish was selected due to the impact and scale of the app.

“Hearing His Highness the Aga Khan’s speeches about using your knowledge to help others anywhere in the world has become one of my fundamental rules of life,” says Danish. “If I’m ever going to build something, solve a problem or give service, I’m always thinking of not just helping 100 people, but how can help the lives of millions across the globe?”

“Instilling this idea that I should use my knowledge to help improve the lives of others, not just in my city or country but globally, is what it means to be a global citizen ... This is why I chose a problem that’s actually the number one fear in the world – public speaking.”

