

BioGENEius Awards: In Abdullah Shah's Words

Committed to presenting ideas and projects that address global healthcare, sustainability and environmental issues, the Champions of Science Storytelling Challenge—BioGENEius Edition invited alumni of the Biotechnology Institute's BioGENEius Challenge to share stories of their innovative and impactful work. Recognized in this year's contest, read the essays of these runner-ups.

Several years ago, my grandmother's eyelids suddenly closed shut while she was cooking a mutton stew. Blinded, she was left to helplessly scamper around with a boiling pot in her hands. She was soon rushed to the hospital for her blistering burns, and to identify what had happened to her eyes. After a series of visits with an ophthalmologist, she was diagnosed with Blepharospasm. Unfortunately, this disease is still a subject of uncertainty, hence my mother and I searched for possible cures. We found a new hope in an experimental mouth-guard which stimulated her oral nerves. By biting down on this device, my grandmother was able to open her eyes once again. After seeing this, I was humbled and astonished, as it exposed me to the vast connections of the human body. Several questions went through my mind, such as, how a device in a person's mouth could raise their eyelids, and how a person's mouth could be the doorway to their overall health. Though this scenario did not provide a final solution, as it prevented my grandmother from eating properly, it led me to pursue science and dentistry.

As a BioGENEius competitor, I do have some differences which have allowed me to succeed at the University of New Mexico's STEM fields. At an academic level, I identify as a half nontraditional, half traditional student since there was a point in time when I was simultaneously attending three institutions. On the contrary, at a personal level, I'm a person of color, a hard-of-hearing individual, a New Mexican, and a Muslim, hence I have had the unique exposures of each of these sub-communities which united, make up our STEM fields. Being in so many "groups", I have become a more compassionate and understanding individual, as I know that with hard-work and commitment in the right place, we can improve oral health and education. I know what it means to be a hard worker as, even though I was born hard-of-hearing, wearing hearing aids in both ears, I didn't let this "disability" hold me back. Instead, I take advantage of my "poor hearing gift" every opportunity I get. Without the skills I learned from the BioGENEius competition, I wouldn't have persevered as vigilantly when pursuing the STEM careers. For this reason, I recommend young individuals who are interested in STEM, never to give up, and to show these tasks the same level of concern and care.

In conclusion, the BioGENEius competition and my mother both taught me the importance of staying connected with one another, through science. This contest fostered my career goal to become a dentist,

as I knew that this drudgery I faced was not for selfish gains. This is because I know that there are others who are disadvantaged, and unfortunately do not have the same support that I did. I plan to be their future support, just as my mother would want, as to not leave anyone's dream behind.

The content and views presented here are those of the individual Challenge participant.