Exam Success Leads to Presidential Palace

“The most beautiful flowers grow through dirt.”

Haifa Haddad kept her father’s words of encouragement close to her heart throughout the turbulent years leading up to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. It was a time of high unemployment, corruption, instability, and lack of political freedoms that gave rise to a 28-day campaign of civil unrest leading to the ouster of the county’s longtime president and to free democratic elections.

“My father wanted me to understand that there are external events in our lives that we cannot change,” Haifa says, “and that even in uncertain times you have to keep going forward.” That’s exactly what she’s done for the 25 years of her life. Where has it led? For one thing, into Tunisia’s presidential palace.

Acing the Biggest Exam of her Life

The Tunisian Baccalaureate is a standardized test that’s been around since 1891. Pass it and you’re guaranteed entrance into a university. “I loved learning – especially mathematics – so I studied hard for it,” says Haifa. It paid off as she became an inspiration for girls throughout her country when she received the highest score in the nation for the mathematics specialty.

“The exam is an important milestone for every Tunisian family,” Haifa explains, “so it’s highly celebrated. I not only got to meet the president and receive an award in recognition for the score but was interviewed by several radio stations.”

More importantly, she received a governmental scholarship, which she used to attend university in Germany, where she currently works at Microsoft.
The Richness of Educated Minds

The thing that most warmed Haifa’s heart was the thousands of Facebook messages she received from young women around the country congratulating her and asking how they should prepare for the exam. “They’d write, you’re a girl and still you made it,” laughs Haifa. One message she’ll never forget came from a student who said her family didn’t have the financial resources to buy the extra books and exercises she needed for the baccalaureate. She asked Haifa how she managed to get them.

“I happily sent her some past exams and exercises I had done,” she says. “It felt good knowing I gave hope to someone from a low-income family – hope that with the right resources they too might achieve what I had.” Haifa says it was one more illustration of the importance of education in Tunisia, especially among young women. “We’re a small country. We don’t have oil. We don’t have minerals. Our soil is not rich. So we invest in our people. Educated minds are our richness.”

For more of Haifa’s story, be sure to check out the Powered By The People podcast hosted by Zach Xu.