

Standing with PRIDE.

I would like to thank all of you for attending this evening's celebration. I am honored and humbled to be receiving this scholarship from the Pride Foundation.

I would like to tell you a little bit about my journey.

My name is Lina Ali, I was born on the small island of Zanzibar, Tanzania. The population of the island is approximately 1.5 million people. 95% of the population are Muslim and 5% Christians.

When I was 3 days old, my father, an up and coming political figure in Zanzibar, was taken from our home. A few years later, we learned that he was assassinated while in prison.

My mother was left to raise her seven children alone. She encouraged all of her children to pursue higher education. I was sent to a boarding school on the mainland for a better education. Once there, my professors and MALE classmates made it very clear, through both verbal and sexual harassment, that they thought I didn't belong there. They believed that women should marry and have children, NOT get an education and have a career.

Despite the trauma I completed my 4 year degree in clinical medicine, but I felt defeated. Even though, I only needed to complete 3 more years of schooling, I went back home to Zanzibar, and I gave up on my dream of becoming a doctor.

My mother, however, had OTHER plans for me!! She decided I should come to the US to further my studies. She knew firsthand the quality of education I could receive in the US. My mom, herself, was the only woman from Zanzibar who qualified to come to the US under the Airlift Program for East African Students. The program, in the early 1960's, was initially funded by, then Senator, John F. Kennedy, to bring African students to America for higher education. While in the US, she earned her teaching certificate.

My mother made arrangements for me to come to the U.S. and attend college in Los Angeles. Her encouragement renewed my dream to become doctor. Unfortunately, soon after I arrived, the plans fell through and she was unable to

help me financially. I had to put my life on hold so that I could find a job to support myself.

A few years later, while I was living in Los Angeles, I was raped and contracted HIV. I gave up on my life, my hopes and my dream of going to college. I was depressed, and wanted to die. It took many years for me to come to terms with my illness. I felt isolated because I was a gay Muslim immigrant, and was worried about my immigration status. I was afraid I would be sent back to Zanzibar where I would not receive the health care I needed, and could be put to death for being gay. Once I started receiving the medical care I needed, I began to get my life back on track. In 1997, I obtained my US citizenship, and I slowly began taking community college classes.

For the past 3 years, I have been working and going to school fulltime, but it is difficult because I get tired, due to my illness. Receiving this scholarship will help me a great deal to further my studies. I am currently working on my Bachelor's degree, with plans to obtain my Master's degree in Social Work.

While continuing my education, I would like to open a safe place where LGBTQ Muslims can practice their faith openly. As a gay Muslim, it has been my experience that I cannot freely worship with other people of my faith, for fear of retribution. I also plan to continue as a volunteer facilitator for immigrants with HIV/AIDS at BABES Network. I have been working in the geriatrics field for the past 17 years. After I have received my Master's degree, I want to focus my work on LGBTQ geriatrics.

In closing, I would like to thank my wife, and my family, especially my mother. Without their support, I would not be standing here.

Lastly, thank you to those of you who have donated to the Pride Foundation. Your generous support has made all of this possible.