

Umema Hakimuddin Bohari (Lila Girl-2011)

Umema Bohari is originally from Erandol, a small town in the Jalgaon district of Maharashtra. Erandol is primarily an agricultural town with a single Marathi medium school and junior college. Despite that, Umema's parents were very firm giving their son and daughter the opportunity to study at a good, reputable English medium school. Thus, Umema and her brother did their schooling from St. Joseph's Convent High School, Jalgaon, in spite of having to travel 60 km daily to Jalgaon.

"The hard work and effort that my parents put into my education made me think about what I wanted to be from a very young age," says Umema, seriously. "While I was at school, I was deeply passionate about mathematics and science, and this was something I carried with me throughout. I cleared my Std. X Board exams in 2008 with 93.84% and was the Nasik Board topper amongst the girls. Later, I opted for the science stream and did my HSC from the Royal College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai. I cleared Std. XII with 94.13% in 2010."

Umema's academic record stood her in good stead, and, while in Mumbai, she received the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad National Merit Scholarship that tided her through her junior college. Right then, she knew she wanted to be an engineer and worked hard towards achieving her goal.

"I love machines, and I enjoy finding out how things work," says Umema. "I keep trying to innovate, trying to create new and different things."

It was but natural that the girl would be drawn towards Mechanical Engineering, a field that is often considered male dominant. Umema smiles. "I have a very liberal family and my parents never opposed anything I chose with respect to my career. They were very supportive of this decision too. And hence when I scored good marks in the MH-CET and got into Mechanical Engineering in the College of Engineering, Pune, the best college in West India, my happiness knew no bounds."

Umema's father is a businessman dealing in agricultural goods and hardware. Managing a family of four, along with the children's schooling and higher education did put a strain on the family. When it came to higher education, though COEP is a government college, the annual fee was still rather high for the family to manage, as the family had to pay for Umema's younger brother's education too. That was when Lila Poonawalla Foundation came into Umema's life in the form of a saviour.

"Had it not been for the financial and mental support I received from the Foundation, it would have been really difficult to convert my dream of being an Engineer into a reality," says Umema. "I believe that parents are God's way of saying 'I am there with you always'. And when I met Lila Mom and Feroz Dad, I realized that I had received that blessing twice over and would never be alone! Their blessings and mentorship helped me complete my Bachelor's degree in engineering with flying colours. I graduated with a BE in Mechanical engineering in 2014."

Umema recalls being intrigued by the notice for the LPF scholarship on the college notice-board. "I remember we were asked to write an essay describing ourselves and what our aspirations were. This was to be followed by an interview round. What struck me then was that this selection process was very different from that of other organizations. It appeared, even in that initial notice, to

be much more than financial support. I felt it would be something that would make you a complete person when you stepped into the real world. And look, I was not wrong at all!"

Umema speaks with great warmth about how making every girl independent is a responsibility that everyone at the Foundation seems to bear. The LPF, in Umema's opinion, understands that independence cannot be achieved through education alone. It is in making a girl feel self-confident that all the workshops and sessions conducted by the LPF on a regular basis come into the picture.

"Do you know what the best part was? What encouraged us the most, through all the learning sessions, was the fact that Mom was always with us throughout the sessions. I particularly remember the time when Mom fractured her leg during the last two weeks of a 4-week training programme conducted by Capgemini. Despite her fracture, she came for the training and sat with us. It was a great source of motivation for all of us Lila Girls."

Umema Said, "During the two years that I worked with Eaton India, I got to understand how the industry works, how real-life projects are handled, and how to apply the knowledge learned at COEP to problems that matter. While working on an idea, I also got a chance to file an invention disclosure, the patent application of which is pending. I was awarded the Eaton Certificate of Excellence by the higher management in Pune. While at Eaton, I was also a part of the Eaton Campus Ambassador program - where I conducted several sessions for engineering girls in their final year of education on topics like personal development, soft skills, and interview preparation. The sessions that I received with the Lila Poonawalla foundation helped me a lot when interacting with the girls in engineering colleges. After two years at Eaton, it was time to go for a Masters, and I wanted to strive for the best.

The thought of doing my MS in countries like the United States or Europe was intimidating at first. Having worked for just two years, I had minimal savings, most of which was spent while applying for the short-listed universities (~\$100 application fee per university). I scored 317/340 in GRE, and 117/120 in TOEFL and these scores along with my past education record helped me when applying for a lot of scholarships. I received the D K Bhawe Scholarship by the University of Pune, worth INR 5,00,000. Of the 6 universities I applied in, I received admits from 4, and I decided to go with Texas A&M University, College Station where my interest aligned the most with the research being conducted. I got a chance to work with Dr. Vinayak in the Mixed-Initiative Design Lab, on research areas such as human-robot interaction, generative algorithms, and design optimization. He hired me as a Graduate Research Assistant for the entire time I was at Texas A&M. I did not have to pay for my education and received a monthly stipend to take care of the expenses here. During the two years at A&M, I published 3 conference articles and one journal submission; and got a chance to present my research at the 23rd Intelligent User Interfaces Conference 2018 in Tokyo, Japan. I was elected as an honorary member of the Phi Beta Delta Society for International Scholars. Throughout the 2 years, I maintained a GPA of 3.75/4.0, and for my academic and research performances, the College of Engineering at Texas A&M University awarded me the Emil Beuhler Graduate Student Excellence Fellowship - the only international student to receive that Fellowship in 2017. I graduated Suma Cum Laude with a Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering from Texas A&M University in August 2018."

Currently she work as a Mechanical Engineer (Research) with Schlumberger Technological Corporation in Houston, Texas - the world's largest Oil & Gas service provider. It's been five months now since she started working, and she know the journey doesn't end here. Along with her friends from COEP and Texas A&M, they are currently working on a start-up idea for rural healthcare in India, and there is a long way ahead. She also plan to take my education a notch further with either a Ph.D. or an Executive MBA and live up to the most important thing she learned from her mentor - never stop achieving.