

First class degree holder shares secrets of success

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From Catford to Cambridge

The CEO and Founder of the award-winning youth empowerment and social mobility charity, Leila Thomas, remembers meeting Zak Ali at a school event. He left the other students and took her aside. He said "Please help us to succeed in life".

"While I'm no fairy godmother," says Leila, "I knew that a sharp young man like Zak could go far, with the right help."

Below, Zak shares his journey from school in Catford to getting a first class degree from Cambridge University.

What's my secret?

One of my strongest beliefs is that we can learn so much from those around us. I never shy away from asking people about how they got to where they are and thinking about how I can learn from their experiences.

When it comes to networking, I find it essential to speak to anyone and everyone.

What's your background?

I am a first-generation British Bangladeshi, born in Lewisham and raised in Grove Park and Downham in South London.

My parents never went to university. Before attending Cambridge, I went to Conisborough College and was privileged to attend Colfe's School for sixth form on a Leathersellers' academic scholarship.

What's next?

I've signed a training contract with a 'Magic Circle' law firm to train as a Corporate Lawyer with all expenses paid. Before that, I am taking an extended gap year to travel and experience new things.

How did Urban Synergy help you?

Urban Synergy was fundamental to my early career growth and mindset by showing us the opportunities we have on our doorstep when growing up in a world-class city like London.

The charity provided me with my first work experience programme in the city at Thomson Reuters and held valuable sessions on networking and corporate etiquette.

Did Urban Synergy help you overcome any barriers to excel in Education and your Career? If yes, how?

The team that started Urban Synergy, Leila (Thomas) and Dianne (Johnson's) mentorship, made clear that our background should never hold us back and that we are worthy of every opportunity that comes our way.

At Colfe's and Cambridge, this was integral to tackling any imposter syndrome I may have experienced, as I was equipped to recognise that my hard work earned my place there.

What's your advice for other young people coming through Urban Synergy?

Don't let what you've learnt in your mentoring sessions stop outside the classroom. Seize every opportunity Urban Synergy provides you with and put those skills into practice when on school trips, open days and similar events. Your only barrier is yourself!

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Urban Synergy played a significant role in developing my ambition early on, and I will always be indebted for this

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