The amazing true story of a 15-year-old girl who stood up to a deadly terrorist group by Kristin Lewis

October 9, 2012, was an ordinary afternoon in the Swat Valley, an area of rugged mountains and sweeping green valleys in north Pakistan. Malala Yousafzai, 15, was sitting on a school bus with her classmates waiting to go home when two bearded gunmen appeared.
family is, in fact, deeply religious, but the Taliban do not tolerate any form of Islam that differs from its own.

School Ban
In January 2009, the Taliban ordered all girls’ schools to close. That included Malala’s school, which her father had owned for more than a decade. It was devastating news. School was one of the most important parts of Malala’s life—and a luxury she never took for granted. After all, fewer than half the girls in rural Pakistan had the opportunity to receive any education at all.

Despite the Taliban’s order, Malala’s father decided to keep his school open. This was incredibly dangerous, especially because the Taliban were gaining popularity in Swat. Some residents saw them as a welcome alternative to Pakistan’s government and military, which have been plagued by corruption.

From then on, Malala and her family lived under constant threat. Across the region, hundreds of schools were being bombed. Teachers were being murdered. Malala and her classmates stopped wearing their school uniforms and began hiding their books under their clothing. Staying alive meant going to school had to be kept secret. Even with these precautions, many parents felt the risk was too great. Attendance at Malala’s school decreased by more than 60 percent.

But what could Malala do? What could one girl do but watch helplessly as her freedoms were taken away?

A Powerful Weapon
It turns out, there was something she could do. Malala possessed a weapon of her own: her voice. And she would risk everything to use it.

In 2009, she began blogging for the British Broadcasting Company’s (BBC) Urdu site about what her life was like under the Taliban. (Urdu is an official language of Pakistan.) To protect her identity, she used a pseudonym. She wrote about her dream of becoming a doctor one day, her fears of the terrorists, and her fierce determination to get the education she needed, no matter what the Taliban did or how afraid she was.

And indeed, fear was her constant companion. “On my way from school to home I heard a man saying, ‘I will kill you,’” she wrote in one blog entry. “I hastened my pace and after a while I looked back [to see] if the man was still coming behind me. But to my utter relief he was talking on his mobile and must have been threatening someone else over the phone.”

The blog was an instant hit: soon, people all over the world were reading it. Malala was helping to focus attention on what was happening in Swat. Outrage grew, and many in Pakistan and around the world criticized the Pakistani government for allowing the Taliban to become so powerful.

A Crusade
In May 2009, the Pakistani army launched a full-scale attack against the Taliban in Swat. Along with millions of refugees, Malala...
and her family were evacuated south. The conflict lasted for three months by August, most of the Taliban had been pushed out of the cities and into the countryside, and it was safe to go home.

After that, Malala launched a full-scale attack of her own. She became even bolder in her crusade. Her identity as the famous BBC blogger was revealed. She appeared in a New York Times documentary, went on television shows, and gave powerful speeches to Pakistani kids. Her message was always the same: All children deserve the right to an education.

Malala’s fears of retaliation did not subside, though. When asked on a Pakistani talk show about the dangers of speaking out, she earnestly described how the Taliban might come for her one day: “I think of it often and imagine the scene clearly,” she said. “Even if they come to kill me, I will tell them what they are trying to do is wrong, that education is our basic right.”

Malala’s crusade empowered her and other girls. Her courage gave hope to thousands. It also made her a star. In 2011, the President of Pakistan awarded her the first ever National Youth Peace Prize. It seemed that everyone knew her name. Including the Taliban.

**Attacked**

In 2012, notes began appearing under Malala’s door, ordering her to give up her crusade or else. But she refused to back down, and on October 9, 2012, Taliban gunman shot her and two others on the school bus.

The hours following the shooting were a nightmare. Malala’s friends were not critically injured, but Malala was in bad shape. The bullet had destroyed her left ear and sent fragments of her skull into her brain tissue, but miraculously, she clung to life. She was flown to a hospital in Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, that specializes in traumatic brain injuries. Her family soon joined her.

The Taliban soon took credit for the assassination attempt, saying it was a warning to other girls not to follow Malala’s example.

Meanwhile, the world waited, tense and furious. The United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education immediately started a petition, calling on the President of Pakistan to make a place in school for every girl. Soon 1 million people had signed. Cards flooded Malala’s hospital room. In Pakistan, millions lifted up prayers for her. Candlelight vigils were held across the globe. Protesters marched, many of them kids carrying signs that read “I am Malala.” It seemed that by trying to silence her, the Taliban had unwittingly helped thousands more find a voice of their own.

**To Serve Humanity**

It’s been nearly a year since the shooting, and in many ways, Malala’s life has changed dramatically. The bullet severely damaged her hearing and fractured her skull, causing her brain to swell dangerously. Fortunately, the physicians in Birmingham were able to control the swelling. Over the past months, she has undergone several operations to repair her skull and improve her hearing. In the meantime, Malala’s father has been given a job that enables the family to remain in the U.K., where, hopefully, they will be safe from the Taliban, who have vowed to come after Malala again.

Today, Malala has become a powerful symbol of the struggle so many kids face. Some 132 million children and teens around the world do not attend school, often because they must work to help support their families or because they have no school to go to. Malala hopes to change that. She envisions a world in which all children, and especially girls, can get the education they need to compete from doctors and scientists to politicians and journalists.

In one of her first public statements after the shooting, Malala stated that she felt her role was to “serve humanity.” This fall, she will publish a memoir. The Malala Fund, created in her name, is helping to send 40 girls in Pakistan to school. (For their protection, the girls’ names and the location of the school have not been disclosed.) There is talk that Malala should run for President someday.

For now, though, she is getting the one thing she’s always wanted. Last March, she started high school in Birmingham. On her first day, she addressed a news crew. There were signs that she had not yet fully recovered—her mouth drooped slightly when she spoke and there were scars on the side of her face. But her voice was clear, her eyes shining. She pointed to her jacket. “Today, I am wearing a uniform,” she said proudly. “It is important, because it proves that I am a student. It is the happiest day for me because I am living my life, I am going to school, I am learning.”

**WRITING CONTEST**

A crusade is a campaign to change something. What makes Malala a crusader? What impact has her crusade had? Write two paragraphs answering both questions. Support your claims with details from the text. Send your response to MALALA CONTEST. Authors of the best five essays will each have a $500 donation made in their names to the Malala Fund. They will also receive Words In The Dust by Trent Reedy. See page 2 for details.