**The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

I was stuttering. The notes I held were shaking. My mind went blank. All my arguments, all my ideas: gone. After receiving constructive criticism from my peers and supervisor, I bolted directly to the nearest washroom and felt tears streaming down my face due to sheer nervousness. This was the aftermath of my first debate experience, where I pathetically attempted to pitch my case on why jury duty should not be legally mandated.

It was a dark, rainy afternoon. Droplets of rain were visible from the car when I told my mother I wanted to give up debating. “Why?” she asked. I responded with a sullen “I don’t think I’m meant for it”. She told me that some skills take time and dedication to hone, debate and public speaking skills being one of them. “You are not a born performer, but you could learn to be a great performer”, she said empathetically. These words gave me the drive to move forward, the drive to improve.

During weekly meetings, I started to routinely ask my coaches and teammates for feedback during debates after volunteering to speak first. My teammates and coaches encouraged me to make my hand gestures and speaking tone bolder, and to get used to speaking to yourself in front of the mirror to simulate talking to an audience. In the name of progress, I took their advice seriously, desperately clinging to the hope of improving. However, this process of improvement was not smooth by any means. My hands were still clammy even after months of practice, and on some days, I contemplated quitting the team due to feeling as if I’m not progressing.

After the 9 months of gruelling weekly training, my hands didn’t feel as clammy as when I started, and noticed that I became sharper and bolder in delivering my arguments. I finally felt like I was in my element. Competition season rolled around soon enough, and over the course of my 2 years of participation in the club and competition, I have amassed over 30 medals, even receiving the opportunity to compete in the Tournament of Champions hosted by Yale University.

These personal and competitive victories motivated me to volunteer as president of the World Scholar's Cup Club in my school. Within my school community, I noticed there is potential waiting to be explored. My passion for helping others explore this potential drove me to envision creating a space for young students to speak up about topics they are passionate about without fear of judgment; a place where young debaters felt their words were acknowledged, and their dedication towards their improvement was appreciated. I vividly remember the time two of my mentees, Faldo and Valery, asked persistently for advice on how to become more confident when debating. I told them to let go of what others thought of them during their speech, and to come sufficiently prepared with counterarguments and research. After following these pieces of advice, they slowly but surely progressed as debaters. They went from stuttering and looking down at the floor to holding their heads up high, sounding assured when delivering their arguments. I rarely see them since they moved to Singapore, but they currently serve as members of the debate team in their respective schools. They have truly blossomed.

To this day, I still aspire to create change by debate, offering my juniors guidance on anything debate related, ranging from tips on public speaking to improving the cohesiveness of their arguments. My motivation for helping people in this field remains; I want them to explore their talents to their fullest extent by encouragement and dedication on both my part and theirs, while cultivating a culture of inclusivity within my community.

Dear Qimiwa,

I really enjoyed your story! It has a smooth flow and an authentic feel.

If you can, explore a little on plans you have moving forward – university and beyond – in connection with what you have learned. I think your experience is precious and a start of significant ventures in your life, especially with your heart for mentoring others.

Overall, a wonderful essay and life story! All the best.

Thalia