break that tradition, men and women would talk against her, particularly those in our own family. She never said she regretted the work my father and I had undertaken, but when I won prizes, she said, 'I don't want awards, I want my daughter. I wouldn't exchange a single eyelash of my daughter for the whole world.'

My father argued that all he had ever wanted was to create a school in which children could learn. We had been left with no choice but to get involved in politics and campaign for education. 'My only ambition,' he said, 'is to educate my children and my nation as much as I am able. But when half of your leaders tell lies and the other half is negotiating with the Taliban, there is nowhere to go. One has to speak out.'

When I returned home I was greeted with the news that there was a group of journalists who wanted to interview me at school and that I should wear a nice outfit. First I thought of wearing a very beautiful dress, but then I decided to wear something more modest for the interview as I wanted people to focus on my message and not my clothes. When I arrived at school I saw all my friends had dressed up. 'Surprise!' they shouted when I walked in. They had collected money and organised a party for me with a big white cake on which was written SUCCESS FOREVER in chocolate icing. It was wonderful that my friends wanted to share in my success. I knew that any of the girls in my class could have achieved what I had achieved if they had had their parents' support.

'Now you can get back to school work,' said Madam Maryam as we finished off the cake. 'Exams in March!'

But the year ended on a sad note. Five days after I got the award, Aunt Babo, my mother's eldest sister, died suddenly. She wasn't even fifty years old. She was diabetic and had seen a TV advert for a doctor in Lahore with some miracle treatment and persuaded my uncle to take her there. We don't know what the doctor injected her with but she went into shock and died. My father said the doctor was a charlatan and this was why we needed to keep struggling against ignorance.

I had amassed a lot of money by the end of that year – half a million rupees each from the prime minister, the chief minister of Punjab, the chief minister of our state Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Sindh government. Major General Ghulam Qamar, the local army commander, also gave our school 100,000 rupees to build a science laboratory and a library. But my fight wasn't over. I was reminded of our history lessons, in which we learned about the loot or bounty an army enjoys when a battle is won. I began to see the awards and recognition just like that. They were little jewels without much meaning. I needed to concentrate on winning the war.

My father used some of the money to buy me a new bed and cabinet and pay for tooth implants for my mother and a piece of land in Shangla. We decided to spend the rest of the money on people who needed help. I wanted to start an education foundation. This had been on my mind ever since I'd seen the children working on the rubbish mountain. I still could not shake the image of the black rats I had seen there, and the girl with matted hair who had been sorting rubbish. We held a conference of twenty-one girls and made our priority education for every girl in Swat with a particular focus on street children and those in child labour.

As we crossed the Malakand Pass I saw a young girl selling oranges. She was scratching marks on a piece of paper with a pencil to account for the oranges she had sold as she could not read or write. I took a photo of her and vowed I would do everything in my power to help educate girls just like her. This was the war I was going to fight.