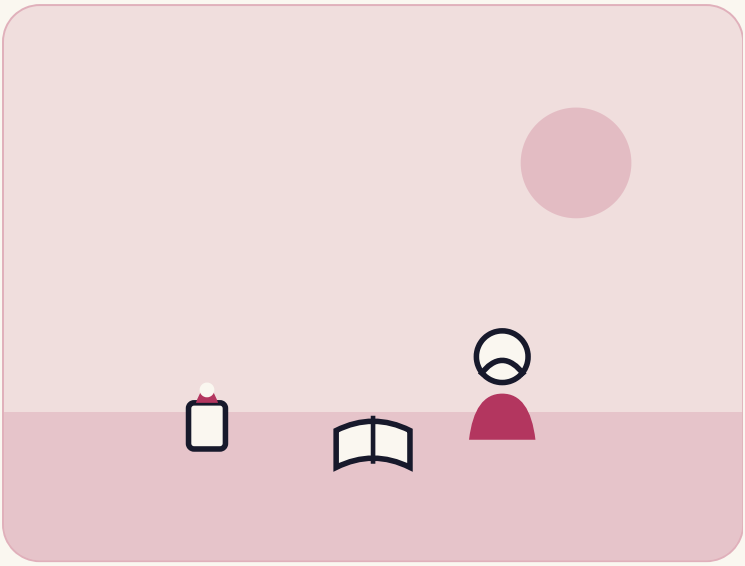

PAKISTAN

The girl who built a school on her roof

At age 13, she was beaten and humiliated at school. Instead of giving up, Sister Zeph climbed to her roof and began teaching poor girls for free.

WHERE	Gujranwala
WHO	Sister Zeph, educator and founder of ZWEE
WHEN	1997 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In 1997, a thirteen-year-old girl sat crying in a classroom in Gujranwala, Pakistan. Her name was Riffat Arif. Today people call her Sister Zeph. She had asked a simple question. Her teacher answered with anger. The teacher slapped her face and mocked her in front of the class. Zeph walked home with red cheeks and tears in her eyes.

In her town, many families thought girls did not need books. Poverty forced parents to send young daughters to clean homes. That one cruel act could have broken Zeph. Instead, it lit a fire inside her. She made a quiet promise to herself. She vowed that no child in her town would ever face shame for wanting to learn.

She could not fix her old school. So she chose to build a new kind of classroom. If nobody else would teach with kindness, she would do it herself.

Classroom under the open sky

Zeph was only thirteen years old. She had no money, no spare room, and no books. But her family home had a flat roof open to the sky. She climbed the stairs and swept the floor clean. Then she invited a few neighborhood girls who had never held a pencil. She laid mats on the roof and began teaching them the alphabet.

Word spread fast down the dusty streets. Within weeks, dozens of children climbed the stairs each afternoon. Running a free school took paper, pencils, and chalk. To pay for these supplies, Zeph took a job doing sewing and office work. Her daily routine pushed her body to its limit.

She woke early and worked eight hours to earn money. In the afternoon, she climbed to the roof. She taught the children for four hours without taking a coin. At night, when her family slept, she studied for four hours by an oil lamp. She worked hard and earned two master's degrees on her own.

Storms, threats and courage

Teaching under the open sky was hard every day. In summer, the heat turned the roof tiles into hot stones. When heavy rains fell, students ran downstairs with their wet notebooks under their shirts. In winter, cold winds blew. The children sat close together in thin sweaters to stay warm.

Worse than the weather was the anger of some neighbors. A few men told her to stop teaching girls. People said teaching poor children was a waste of time. Zeph refused to quit. When rain soaked the roof, she squeezed all the children into one tiny room. She spoke softly to nervous parents. She told them that learning would protect their daughters from poverty.

As the years passed, Zeph grew her school. She started work classes for older girls. She taught sewing, embroidery, and computer skills. She taught young women self-defense so they could walk on the streets without fear. Her small rooftop effort grew into a group that helped women stand on their own feet.

> **Children deserve respect and an environment to flourish. I looked around and saw no such school, so I thought I would be that teacher.**
>
> SISTER ZEPH, ON FOUNDING HER ROOFTOP SCHOOL

Her students began passing state exams with top marks. Girls who had once worked as housemaids became teachers and office clerks. Many of them returned to the rooftop school to help teach younger girls.

13	26	$1M
her age when she started	years of free teaching	Global Teacher Prize won in 2023

A global stage in Paris

For over twenty years, Zeph worked in quiet peace. She never asked for praise. Her rooftop classes slowly moved into a rented house. Over twenty-six years, she

gave free schooling to more than five hundred children at a time. She also trained thousands of women in practical skills.

In 2023, teachers around the world heard her story. Judges looked at more than seven thousand names from one hundred and thirty countries. In November 2023, Sister Zeph stood on a stage at UNESCO in Paris. She won the one-million-dollar Global Teacher Prize.

Loud applause filled the hall as she held the gold trophy. Reporters asked what she would do with the prize money. Her answer came right away. She did not buy a big car or a fancy house. She pledged every dollar to build a big new school in Gujranwala.

Today, workers are building classrooms on ten acres of land near her town. The girl who once cried on a classroom floor turned her pain into hope. She showed that when a teacher leads with love, a bare rooftop can shine brighter than a palace.

How it unfolded

- **1997** Thirteen-year-old Zeph starts teaching neighborhood girls on her rooftop.
- **2000** She expands the school and works long shifts to fund free school supplies.
- **2010** Zeph completes her first master's degree through independent night study.
- **2016** The rooftop classes move into a permanent building under her foundation.
- **2023** Sister Zeph wins the one-million-dollar Global Teacher Prize in Paris.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Many people talk about fixing schools. Zeph was a thirteen-year-old girl who acted when an adult hurt her. She had no money, but she turned an open roof into a classroom. For over twenty-five years, she worked double shifts to give thousands of children a free education.

OUR TAKE

True leadership does not wait for funding or permission. Sister Zeph turned personal pain into an open door for thousands of girls.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 **Turn hurt into purpose**

Zeph did not let a cruel teacher make her bitter. She decided to become the kind teacher she never had.

Try this: Think of a past frustration. Write down one helpful thing you can build because of what you learned.

2 **Start with what you have**

She did not wait for a school building. She used the bare roof of her home and a few floor mats.

Try this: Look at a goal you are delaying. Take one small step today using only the tools in your room.

3 Invest your own effort first

She worked eight hours every morning to pay for her students' paper and pencils.

Try this: Back your own project with time before asking others for help.

4 Teach with patience and dignity

She never shouted at students. She made sure poor girls felt respected in class.

Try this: When giving advice or feedback this week, speak with gentle encouragement.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A small act of kindness on a bare roof can echo across the world.

Sources

Global Teacher Prize
Sister Zeph: 2023 Winner

Teacher Magazine
Sister Zeph from Pakistan Wins the 2023 Global Teacher Prize

INEE
Sister Zeph from Pakistan Wins 2023 Global Teacher Prize

Fact-check note: Reports describe the initial classes as taking place in the open courtyard or flat rooftop of her family home in Gujranwala. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.