UCL Remarkable Stories\_Ali Interview

[00:00:00] **Gia:** We are UCL and these are our remarkable stories. My name is Gia Lulic, and I work in the Organizational Development team at UCL. In each episode, I will be in conversations with our UCL guests as they share with us their remarkable stories, experiences, and life lessons.

[00:00:27] **Gia:** In today's episode, I'm excited to speak to UCL student of electronic engineering, Ali Issa, who came to the UK as a refugee on his own at the age of 15, and the challenges he has overcome to get to where he is today.

[00:00:43] **Gia:** Ali, welcome and thank you so much for making the time to chat to us.

[00:00:52] **Ali:** Thank you for having me. It's nice to be here.

[00:00:55] **Gia:** And it's nice to have you. Let's start by going into a little bit of your background and journey to being a student at UCL maybe your earlier life. I understand that you've got a very unique story, so if we can start there that would be great.

[00:01:15] **Ali:** So I was born in Lebanon as a Palestinian refugee. I studied there in a refugee camp, in a school funded by the United Nations. Later on when I was starting year 11, some circumstances happened. I had to leave Lebanon when I was 15 years old. I took a really long journey.

[00:01:33] **Ali:** I had to travel through so many countries, including Turkey, Columbia, Ecuador, France, and later came to the UK. I was supported by the local authority Kensington and Chelsea. I've done my GCSE's like within 18 months of arriving to the UK. I did nine GCSE's later done my A Levels and I started studying electronic engineering at UCL.

[00:01:56] **Gia:** So what would you say has been your biggest challenge to this point in terms of settling into life in the UK or getting here?

[00:02:06] **Ali:** I think being away from my family, adapting to a new culture, to a new language, completely different place, which is very different to the environment where I lived in before. Like a camp environment, different type of people, different schools without my parents.

[00:02:22] **Ali:** One time I faced some kind of racism at school. I was discriminated because I was a refugee by some student at my school. But the good thing that the school was able to act and solve the problem, they addressed the problem with the student.

[00:02:34] **Ali:** And everything was fine. But in general, I didn't face any other problems like that. But I think what the schools should do is to make more campaigns or to speak more about refugees, to make people understand why we come here, what the problems we had. So to stop the discrimination by educating people about refugees and what's the reason why we come here and where we come from. I think this is the main challenges that I have faced after coming here.

[00:03:04] **Gia:** That's such a good point. And I understand that it was it foster care?

[00:03:09] **Ali:** I stayed for a very short time with the foster carer. Then I lived in a semi-independent accommodation supported by the local authority.

[00:03:17] **Gia:** And what was that experience like?

[00:03:19] **Ali:** It wasn't like a good experience because I was always moving from place to another place. And always so many problems in each place.

[00:03:27] **Ali:** I've been here now for four years and eight months. And I lived in more than five places moving around north, east, south London. Every time I move to a different place, which was the real problem. It was not a stable life, which I think affected my progress in GCSEs.

[00:03:45] **Gia:** Do you feel like there's something that you learned from that experience? Because it sounds quite intense, what does your life look like, now?

[00:03:55] **Ali:** I'm now in a much better position. Like think I have a stable life now. I'm not moving as much as I used before. My life is better also in terms of education. I was able to get to a place even though all the hardships that happened. I was able to get to a place where I wanted to be, which is one of the top universities in the world and to do the course that I always wanted to do.

[00:04:16] **Gia:** That's really inspiring. What was your motivation and what kept you going through all these experiences?

[00:04:23] **Ali:** You just know it's the right thing to do especially in a place like the UK it's the right thing to do is to study, to build myself, to be able to support my family in the future, and to be able to support the humanity. Because I lived in a place where it's very deprived and it's very different to the UK where we don't have the latest technologies.

[00:04:42] **Ali:** We don't have electricity, we have a poor housing conditions, we have unemployment. So I do think that this country, there are so many opportunities that I can use and I can invest for my and for the humanities benefits.

[00:04:55] **Gia:** And are you in contact with your family? Regularly?

[00:04:58] **Ali:** Yeah, I am in contact with them. I speak to them every few days.

[00:05:02] **Gia:** And what was it like to be here without any of that support? Do you feel that you got support from other people that were here?

[00:05:10] **Ali:** So yeah I have here two uncles in the UK and the local third year I got support from both of them, even though my main problem when coming here was moving from a house to another house. But I think at the end I was able to get where I want to be.

[00:05:26] **Gia:** Do you feel that experience has made you like more resilient and more adaptable?

[00:05:31] **Ali:** Yeah, of course. I mean adapting to a new culture and a new language when I was 15 was really difficult. And it just taught me how to be able to understand different types of people to adapt to new things and to be more understanding of anything that happens around me.

[00:05:51] **Gia:** I definitely think that adversity and that sort of experience really strengthens you and makes you more adaptable overall. What are you most excited about now?

[00:06:02] **Ali:** I'm very excited now about studying at UCL. I think it's a place where I've never dreamt of going to. Like in Lebanon, the type of universities we have I wasn't sure that I would be able to get to because of the financial problems because of the fact that we live in camps.

[00:06:19] **Ali:** But yeah, I'm very excited now that I study at UCL and I'm excited that I was able to participate in a research project led by the Communication and Information Research group at UCL. I've started with them early this summer and I was able to secure a part-time job with them throughout the term time, which is I think it's really beneficial for me, for my personal development and for the humanity in general. We're working to solve a very important problem in the world, which is food security.

[00:06:48] **Ali:** We're developing a low-cost technology to increase the productivity of Africa and agriculture, and I think this is very important technology that will help people in the global south. As we are developing a device that can measure the amount of storage for a plant called Kaza, which is a food for more than 800 people worldwide.

[00:07:09] **Gia:** Wow, that is amazing. And how are you balancing all of that with your studies?

[00:07:15] **Ali:** I've been working hard to get this device done and to do most of the things before I start my term. The group I'm working with, they're pretty flexible. They understand that I have education to gain with, and this work that I'm doing is part of my professional and educational development.

[00:07:32] **Gia:** And do you have any mentors that you're in contact with or any kind inspiring people that are providing some support or anything like that, or have you had that throughout your journey, or who have you sort of like looked up to?

[00:07:47] **Ali:** I receive like some support from my uncle, from my social worker. I also receive some career support from an organization called Outreach. Where they help me in terms of career development, preparing for interviews, CV workshops. Also I received support from my first year personal tutor.

[00:08:06] **Ali:** She was really helpful. She has been supporting me since day one I started at UCL. she's been supporting me until now, even though she's no longer my tutor. My Professor Sal, he's been very supportive. And Professor Darwazeh who's the Head of Communication and Information Research group who offered me this internship.

[00:08:23] **Ali:** He's been very helpful. He's always supportive in both, career development and even educational side.

[00:08:32] **Gia:** And how important do you think it is to have that support. And if there was another student listening to this and they were kind of like in a similar situation, is there some advice you could provide for them or?

**Ali:** I think it's always to interact with professors with different type of people to build networks. Other than just like staying alone because I think this network and support is very important at all times. Because university life is much different to school and there's so many things that the university will not tell you unless you ask people for it or unless you have the support network that will provide you this kind of help and support.

[00:09:09] **Gia:** So just to be like proactive.

[00:09:11] **Ali:** Yeah.

[00:09:11] **Gia:** So let's go back to your experience and your education living in the camps. What was that like and how do you feel that it shaped you?

[00:09:23] **Ali:** The life and the camps are very much different to the life in London. We face so many problems that I think most of the people worldwide have not heard of. Problems like poor housing conditions, unemployment, lack of proper infrastructure. So many students leave schools at a very young age.

[00:09:39] **Ali:** We have a high rate of students who leave this school. I would say because lack of achievement, but also the support provided by the schools and the teachers, are not enough. Also some students they leave the schools, because they need to work and support their parents at a very young age. You might see someone who's nine or 10 years old, leaving the school just to work in a mechanics shop or somewhere else and with a very low salary.

[00:10:06] **Ali:** Now in Lebanon, I think the minimum salary is like $40 per month. They need to do it, but it is still also not enough for them to help their families. We also have a problem that the camps are overcrowded and we don't get enough support from the United Nations, but even in schools you might see a very small classroom.

[00:10:24] **Ali:** With 40 or 45 people at a time. This is one of the main problems where people leave schools. The teacher can't give attention for each student, which causes all of these problems.

[00:10:38] **Gia:** And how do you end up, like what are these camps and how do you get there?

[00:10:42] **Ali:** There are like 12 camps in Lebanon. It was built by the United Nations, the honor roll, which is like an agency that comes from the United Nations and are just responsible to support the Syrian refugees. There are 12 camps across all Lebanon.

[00:10:56] **Ali:** But also one of the main problems that we face as Palestinians in Lebanon is from the government in Lebanon. Where also they don't support and they don't give rights to Palestinians. So we have been refugees since 1948, since my grandparents moved to Lebanon.

[00:11:11] **Ali:** We were not allowed the nationality, but at the same time we don't have rights. We don't have right to work for more than 70 jobs. So assuming someone was able to go and study at university, let's say engineering or medicine, they will not be able to work in this job after.

[00:11:28] **Gia:** Do you get to see your family now?

[00:11:31] **Ali:** I couldn't see my family. I tried for them to come here, but it's not possible and I've not seen them since December, 2017.

[00:11:38] **Gia:** Do you think that your experience with that has informed your purpose about the fact that you want to help and you want to do something humanity?

[00:11:48] **Ali:** Yeah, of course. Living in this condition have taught me so many things. I've faced hardship and I understand how difficult it is to be in that position, which is why I'm very keen in the future to be able to develop a transformation technology that can help people in these camps, but also in other poor areas across the world.

[00:12:07] **Gia:** And I guess now with social, it's easier maybe to communicate with your family.

[00:12:14] **Ali:** Yeah, because now there's like the social media and stuff. It's easier to communicate with them, but I can't see them. Yeah.

[00:12:21] **Gia:** What was the biggest lesson you've taken away from this journey?

[00:12:26] **Ali:** I think one of the biggest lessons like there is, so many places across the world that we are not aware of. There are so many people who are suffering and other people are not aware of. And so many people in this country, I think they must learn the privilege that they live in.

[00:12:40] **Ali:** There are so many opportunities. They have people who care about them. So many people who live with their parents, they must understand the privilege of living with their parents, the support they receive from their parents. Because there are so many pupils like me who don't have the parents around them who don't have this support.

[00:12:56] **Ali:** Also people must do what they can to help people in the poor areas in the world. No matter how small it is, but it'll make a big difference in the life of others.

[00:13:04] **Gia:** Maybe just tell me a bit more about the kind of the homes that you went to and how that all works.

[00:13:13] **Ali:** So I've lived with a foster carer for a very short time. There was so many problems that happened at that house and after that, I started living in a different semi-independent accommodations where every house, there's always problems in that house about police or people taking drugs or people, like smoking weed.

[00:13:30] **Ali:** This caused so many problems to me, and affected my education, affected my sleep. The biggest impact was when I was in year 11, then by the time when I got my GCSE results, when I spoke to the managers in the local authority, they understand that I'm very serious about the education thing, and having a stable life is very important to me for my educational and like life progress in general.

[00:13:52] **Ali:** So at the end, I was able to live in an accommodation where everything is stable, where I just focus on my education, not focus on other things that might distract.

[00:14:00] **Gia:** Do you feel like your parents installed that in you…where does that come because you seem to have a very strong drive - I imagine it would be easy to get very distracted with everything that's going on.

[00:14:13] **Ali:** Yeah, my parents always like motivates me and push me to study and to work hard. Not just here like even when I was in Lebanon, even though we knew that after studying at school, there's nothing. Or even after studying at the university, he would always push me like to work hard and to study, to always do my work in time.

[00:14:32] **Gia:** Who do you think is like the biggest influence? Both of them or?

[00:14:36] **Ali:** Yeah. Both my parents always, push me to work hard to study like no matter what the circumstances are, I should always work hard and push myself to be better and to help myself and help others.

[00:14:50] **Gia:** That takes a lot of strength. And do you have any brothers or sisters?

[00:14:54] **Ali:** Yeah. I have two younger sisters. And they live with my parents in, back in Lebanon.

[00:14:58] **Gia:** What kind of impact do you want to have on them?

[00:15:02] **Ali:** For my sisters? I just want to be example of someone hard working, of someone who like to help his parents and to help like the humanity. And also to teach them that they should always work hard no matter what the circumstances are. They should always study.

[00:15:19] **Gia:** Do you feel that London being so open and diverse, how do you see being here now? Does it feel more like home? Does it feel less foreign?

[00:15:28] **Ali:** Yeah, the diversity here is really good where like people from all over the world in just one place. I think this is one of the points that made London one of the best cities in the world. Which really helped me to adopt because I think if it was just one type of people in this city to be a bit harder to adopt.

[00:15:46] **Ali:** When I came here it was very difficult for me to speak, but I had to work hard to push myself and learn the language more and be able to speak to the people. But I think, one of the things that made me like improve my English.

[00:15:57] **Ali:** In interacting with people at school, doing extra work. I used to attend extra classes after school. I used to stay like, until 6:00 PM, 7:00 PM to attend extra classes and ask my teacher for extra work, watch videos, read books. This was really helpful for me to improve my English in like a speedy time.

[00:16:16] **Ali:** But having the atmosphere where everyone is accepting that another people no matter what the color, what the religion of people, everyone's coming together, living next to each other.

[00:16:25] **Ali:** I think this was really good, I would say people from all over the world, people from different backgrounds. Yeah. I do meet a lot of people like I think the diversity at UCL is really good. Which helped me to adopt more quickly.