

From Mentee to Mentor

How Maleekha Fong grew into her confidence - and is preparing to give that confidence back

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MENTEE

COMMUNICATIONS INTERN

COFACILITATOR AND MENTOR

When Maleekha Fong first met Ruth Gay through Bold Futures Academy's partnership with UConn, she was a first-year student taking one of her earliest steps beyond the boundaries of what felt familiar. She had joined an entrepreneurship-focused internship, was still learning how to put herself out there, and was uncertain about whether her ideas were good enough to pursue.

What began as a mentor pairing quickly became something more personal. Maleekha remembers recognizing shared values and an immediate sense of connection. 'This feels like a big sister to me,' she recalled thinking after their first meeting. That relationship would grow with her - from mentorship, to meaningful work inside BFA, to an opportunity to guide younger students herself.

"That was the first step to me being more comfortable with myself."

MALEEKHA FONG

Learning to Be Seen

During that first experience, Maleekha began to see entrepreneurship differently. It was no longer simply the act of starting a business and trying to grow it. Through mentorship, she learned to consider the values behind an idea and to appreciate the process of building, learning, and becoming - not only the final outcome.

The deeper lesson was vulnerability. Maleekha was interested in social media but hesitant to share herself publicly. Together, she and Ruth talked about what it means to communicate authentically while deciding how much of yourself you are comfortable revealing. Those conversations helped Maleekha move from focusing on other people's judgments to asking whether what she shared reflected her own values.

'It's not about them; it's about me,' she said of the shift. 'I'm not doing it for anyone but myself.' With encouragement, she began posting more confidently and growing more comfortable with who she was.

Confidence Does Not Require Certainty

Maleekha also discovered how powerful it can be for a young person to have an adult affirm that an idea is worth exploring. She and her peers entered their UConn experience carrying expectations and uncertainty, often wondering whether they were doing things correctly. Mentorship gave them a trusted person who could say: this is not a foolish idea; you can develop it; and even if it does not reach its maximum potential, the process will still teach you something valuable.

Looking back, Maleekha describes her first-year self as shy and eager to connect, but afraid to take the first step. Applying for that initial opportunity changed the trajectory. She found a supportive cohort, built friendships, and formed a lasting mentoring relationship. By her junior year, she could see the difference clearly: 'I'm definitely more confident in myself. I trust myself a little bit more.'

"I was really scared, but I was going to try it anyway."

MALEEKHA FONG

Turning Support Into Real Responsibility

That continuing relationship eventually brought Maleekha back to BFA as a communications intern during summer 2026. She helped write newsletters, develop social media content, and strengthen how the organization communicates its work to students, families, and supporters. For Maleekha, being invited to return felt like another opportunity to learn from someone she considered a role model while contributing to work with a larger purpose.

The internship challenged her in a new way: she had to work through ambiguity. Maleekha naturally sought feedback and clear confirmation that she was proceeding correctly. But communications work also required judgment, initiative, and the confidence to move a project forward before every question had been answered.

'As long as I have guidelines, or at least somewhere to start, then I should take it where I want to take it,' she explained. Instead of treating her role as a fixed list of instructions, she learned to explore it, take ownership, and leave clearer guidance for the next person who would carry the work forward.

That lesson has relevance far beyond communications. Maleekha is considering becoming a clinical psychologist, a field in which professional knowledge must often be paired with independent judgment. The internship helped her recognize that seeking feedback is valuable, but she does not need to pause repeatedly for reassurance. She can act on what she knows, offer her best work, receive feedback, and use it to grow.

"What I bring to the table is so important."

MALEEKHA FONG

Completing the Circle

This fall, Maleekha's relationship with BFA enters a new stage. She is returning as a volunteer co-facilitator and mentor for LaunchLab, BFA's entrepreneurship program for high school students. The progression is striking: the student who once needed reassurance about her own ideas will now help younger students trust theirs.

Maleekha is honest that the new role makes her nervous. But she also knows how rewarding mentorship can be because she has experienced its effect personally. She hopes to offer students the kind of affirmation she received - helping them relax, trust themselves, and continue learning even when their plans do not unfold exactly as expected.

She also plans to encourage students to use every resource available to them. During her first-year internship, Maleekha was sometimes hesitant to ask anyone besides her mentor for help. Over time, she realized that her peers were resources too. Informal brainstorming sessions with her cohort often produced unexpected ideas that strengthened everyone's work.

'Use your resources,' she now advises. 'Use your cohort. Use any advice available that can help you build your knowledge.' It is guidance rooted not in theory, but in the experience of becoming more capable through relationships, practice, and the courage to participate.

"I can now use my own knowledge and skills to pay back what I was given to other students."

MALEEKHA FONG

A Pathway Beyond a Single Program

Maleekha's story reflects the kind of long-term pathway Bold Futures Academy seeks to create: young people first receive guidance and room to discover themselves; then they practice real skills through meaningful work; eventually, they return with the confidence and experience to lead others.

Her journey is not simply a record of three roles. It is the story of a young person learning that confidence is not the absence of uncertainty. Confidence is the willingness to take a step, use what you know, seek support, receive feedback, and keep becoming.

Maleekha entered the relationship as a mentee looking for direction. She returns to LaunchLab prepared to become part of someone else's direction.