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Shirley Chisholm Activist Award

"When I die, I want to be remembered as a woman who lived in the twentieth century and who dared to be a catalyst for change." These words are as empowering today as they most probably were when they were first said by Shirley Chisholm over 40 years ago. The fact that Chisholm sought to transcend race and gender; she wished to be remembered solely for her contributions to her constituents and community is remarkable to me. I hope that I too can make a small dent in this world to carry on Chisholm's legacy. Upon further analysis of Chisholm's life, I was intrigued to learn that the values and beliefs I have been fighting for coincidentally are those which Chisholm devoted her life to. I have a strong interest in civil rights and education reform.

Though we'd love to believe the civil rights movement is long over and we accomplished the goal of equality years ago, sadly the current reality is very different. The New York Police Department has been under fire for years for its egregious practices, including the racial profiling of Black, Latino and recently revealed Muslim Americans, falsifying police reports against minorities, and drug planting on innocent people to meet quotas. As a Muslim American, I feel an obligation to speak out and do all that is in my power to bring about change. One of our many Islamic traditions states: "Whoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand [by taking action]; if he cannot, then with his tongue [by speaking out]; and if he cannot, then with his heart [by hating it and feeling that it is wrong] and that is the weakest of faith." As a Muslim I am commanded to recognize and speak out against injustice regardless of who is committing it and whom it is being committed against and as an American it is my duty to make my country a better, more secure, place that stands by the Constitution and is in fact the beacon of "freedom and justice for all".

I am currently working with 3 organizations: the Council on American Islamic Relations, the Police Reform Organizing Project at the Urban Justice Center, and the Center for Constitutional Rights. Each of these organizations is an excellent compliment to the academics of my Master's program in Political Science and Urban Policy. We participate in mass voter education drives, advocacy efforts, coalition building with other minority groups, and also organize rallies and events. I believe that systematic change can only be brought about when we start from the bottom up with grass roots efforts and by educating people, especially minorities on the importance of voting. I am looking forward to dedicating my life to ensuring the civil rights and liberties of all American citizens are always defended and that no community, no matter how marginalized has to accept that its' civil liberties are deemed easily disposable.

Another cause I am passionate about is the apparent discrepancies in our public school education system. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have gone to good public schools throughout my life, having graduated college and currently in graduate

school. Yet it is not lost on me that there are hundreds of thousands of children in NYC and across the country who are in substandard schools. Coincidentally, they are most often the children of minority communities or come from poor households. Logically speaking, all public schools should have access to the same education and resources, but that is not the case. Each year we have hundreds of thousands dropping out of school who are victims of the poor education they have received and has left them at a serious disadvantage. I am aware that education reform is an ambitious undertaking, but I do believe it can be done if we put aside the lines that so often divide as like partisanship. Only when we put aside our own egos and realize collectively that the future of our children is at stake will we be able to come together and get something done. Over the years, I have attempted to do my small part by participating in several after-school tutoring programs. The benefit of one on one attention is indescribable. I strongly believe each and every child has the ability to perform well, it is just a matter of when we as a community and as a country will put that same faith in our kids and also demand change from our politicians.

The relationship between suffering in minority communities and the importance of voting is one I cannot vocalize enough. Our vote is our ticket to demand accountability and to choose someone we feel will better represent us. That is the beauty of a democracy. Shirley Chisholm used that ticket to better the lives of her constituents. I hope that one day I too will be remembered as a catalyst for change.