

## **THE SHIRLEY CHISHOLM ACTIVIST AWARD**

**Biola Jeje**

I believe I am carrying on Shirley Chisholm's legacy for change because my activism and organizing has been a tool for my own personal development; this makes me personally connected to the organizing work I do. It is not simply because I believe people have a right to higher education, or to healthy foods. My activism is one of the ways I understand the world I grew up in, seeing the effects of the lack of education translate to poverty in Coney Island (where I grew up). It was devastating seeing a lot of my peers suffer from asthma and later learning it was probably due to the waste transfer station in their area. Knowing most people had an abundance of processed foods but no fruits and vegetables and seeing how that correlates to diabetes and other health related conditions was also incredibly upsetting. With knowledge and action, these conditions could have been prevented, this is why I organize.

Political science and activism was not something I planned on doing in college. I had prior theatre experience during the end of my high school years with the Castillo theatre. It was there that my interest for acting, which I had always held, was developed through a political lens. I began to look at the world as a stage as I put on political plays like Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* and Aime Cesaire's *A Season in the Congo*. These two theatre pieces were eye opening for me because both spoke to international issues I had no prior knowledge of, those being how communism manifested itself in Germany and the struggles after independence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including the role the United States had in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. It was only later that I would come to realize the effect being a part of these political plays would have on how I think and look at the world.

When I began my studies at Brooklyn College, I had the intent to studying theatre and took a course in it my first semester. That was also the semester I got involved in the Brooklyn College Student Union, a collective of students, faculty, and staff, founded in Spring 2009 with the intent of organizing around student issues. That winter I took a road trip down to New Orleans with the youth led organization New York to New Orleans. We worked on an urban farm in the middle of the Lower Ninth Ward that also functioned as a high school, called Our School at Blair Grocery. I not only turned compost every morning and fed the chickens and mini-goats they had on the farm, but I also learned and wrote up reports on how, post-Hurricane Katrina, the issue of racism and classism led to the condition the Lower Ninth Ward is in now. We looked at how the lack of quality healthy fresh foods was also an indicator of the way these issues manifested in the Lower Ninth Ward. It was a life changing experience for me, not only because I had never been away from home for that long, but also because I had never looked at everyday problems as a product of how our society is structured and its values. I realized organizing at the grassroots level could help solve these problems.

Last Spring, as the 2011 Shirley Chisholm Scholar, I had the chance to intern for Assemblywoman Grace Meng, who represented Flushing Queens. I spent the year prior to that understanding how the legislature affects us through organizing around issues

largely effected by laws. I was glad to take the opportunity to see how decisions are made from the inside. I realized with my time there that culture plays a big role in how decisions are made. Kinship plays a big role because unless legislators can view each other as friends, the likelihood of one's bill passing, based on simply how good of an idea it is, stays slim.

This past fall, with the Occupy Wall Street movement, I felt like I had a second internship in movement-building, and it has really been quite a whirlwind. I got caught up organizing on campus, as well as interacting with this amorphous organizing body that sprung up seemingly spontaneously (Occupy Wall Street). It has been interesting being a part of this as well as legitimately asking myself how I can play a part in transforming the world. Being at the epicenter of the Occupy movement and seeing all the other issues being brought up has shown me that there are so many possibilities as to what I could do post-undergraduate.

Since I began at Brooklyn College I have only begun to deepen my organizing and working to enact real change. I am organizing with New York Students Rising and am working on building connections for a national student movement around the right to education. I am also currently drafting a bill that would make higher education free. I believe that especially in the times we are in now we can make real change and I'm working hard to make it happen.