

## Together We Stand

I am from an immigrant home, my father being Eritrean and my mother being Sudanese. My father, in his youth, fought in the Eritrean War of Independence, Eritrea's bloodiest war, seeing many of his friends and loved ones die regularly. After the war was over, my father moved to America in the hopes of a better life, where he eventually married my mother and had six children. And even though my parents did not have much money, they worked hard to make sure that my six siblings and I became educated, caring, and thoughtful people. They inspired my siblings and me to care for others, and caring for others became an ethos of who I am today. Growing up under a tyrannical rule, my father understood and valued the power of education, caring people and communities, and a representative political system to uplift people and countries out of poverty. My father chose to raise us in DC because its diversity, welcoming culture, and access to opportunities.

Even though I value education, schooling was, at times, arduous and unbearable. As an elementary student, I was bullied by other students because I came from a different culture and my parents were Muslim. I went to Whittier Education Campus and just like many other DCPS schools it had dilapidated building, not enough teachers, barely any textbooks for its students, and it became a place where students gave up trying to learn, and teachers stopped trying to teach. Around this time, I also began to experience gender discrimination. I was discouraged or not informed about certain classes because they were not "appropriate" for women, and I was not taken seriously when I lead a class activity or project. Because I am also black, I have, unfortunately, experienced racism from teachers in school, a setting where racism should not exist. Because I am a child of parent immigrants, a woman, black, and a youth,

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I have experienced various forms of prejudices and acts of racism, Islamophobia, and sexism throughout my many years of schooling and, as a result, understand what it feels like to be marginalized and be made voiceless.

For my brother, the cultural rift between our parents and America's culture along with racism and Islamophobia lead to my brother who was a year older than me to begin to do poorly in middle school. Most parents would usually ground the child or pay for a tutor, but my father sent my siblings and me to attend school in Cairo, Egypt in 2010. Being a student in Cairo, exposed me to different cultures and customs. I began to understand that education was not something guaranteed in other countries like it was in the United States, and I also became aware of how inferior I was academically to my Egyptian peers. Less than a year later, I saw first-hand thousands protesting in Cairo and throughout the country, bloody clashes between police and demonstrators, military tanks dispersing protesters, and a nation in chaos. And it succeeded in forcing Hosni Mubarak, who ruled Egypt with an iron fist for three decades resign as president. I learned for the first time how difficult it could be fighting for change, and I noticed the power of young people like myself to be able to impact their country; many educated young woman and men through the reliance of social media were important catalysts for this revolution.

Shortly after Mubarak's resignation, my father brought us back to the United States so I could start my sophomore year at Coolidge Senior High school. After spending four years in Egypt, I began to appreciate the opportunities afforded to me in America that many people across the world are fighting for such as quality education and democratic institutions. As a result, I joined my high school's (Coolidge Senior High) Student Government Association (SGA) so that I could make sure that student voices were heard and reflected in school policy. I also joined the

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Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) traveling all over the country meeting and networking with like-minded students and aspiring entrepreneurs. My time in Egypt also led me to have clinical depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of the routine sexual harassment I experienced, witnessing my parents' financial struggles, and the stress of managing and trying to process my parents' divorce.

Later that year I joined a non-profit Critical Exposure(CE). CE mission is to equip young people in D.C with photography skills and own their voice to create positive change within their communities. CE provided me with a platform to share my voice and supported my growth along the way. My facilitators taught me how to effectively organize against change. I put this new skill in practice through a campaign I worked on with other students to end a component of school to prison pipeline by improving the interaction between students and student resource office(SRO's)in DCPS. I learned the skills to effectively run a campaign, build solidarity in my community, the power in my voice, and continue to grow my leadership in the organization. My team of dedicated student organizers, and I met with two public officials to share our concerns and provide suggestions to improve this issue. This showed me the power of voice and that I was not too young to make a difference. This led me to speak up in my personal life against the domestic violence I was experiencing at home and my family got the help we needed. To top it off I graduated my junior year to seek higher education. After graduating the youth program at CE, I applied to work for them through an AmeriCorps program, Public Allies. I strongly believe if it wasn't for the youth program CE provided I would have continued to feel voiceless and become a victim of school to prison pipeline.

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Through Critical Exposure and Public Allies, I am now able to help DC youths by believing and supporting them the way others had done for me and by giving them a platform to use. I want to become a lawyer and create my firm eventually. For many minority youths like myself, the laws and regulations can be complicated and biased against us, and so I want to create a nonprofit organization to help them understand their rights and support them to get involved in policy so that they could make a change and better their community. My nonprofit will encourage and incentivize DC youths to graduate from high school and pursue higher education, interact and engage with DC citizens and leadership, and helped them be informed about ongoing public policy conversations, promote civic engagement and public service.

Just as how it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community and support structure to grow and uplift DC youths. Non-profits like Critical Exposure and Public Allies activates and cultivate leadership within young people. I want to support and help my community and DC youths by assisting its youth to be the best they can be through education, community and civic engagement, and public service. I hope that my work will enlighten and inspire DC youths just like these programs did for me. Thanks for considering me and reading my story.