

A Modern Day Hero

Everytime my father washes the dishes he does it so swiftly, with such ease and skill I am taken aback. He takes time with the sponge as he delicately spreads the soap across the plates. I have to wait behind him to use the sink for quite some time but each time I am in awe. It took me some time to understand why he is so skilled at such a menial task. It's because he does it everyday for a living. My father never complains about his job but I know the pain he feels everyday. I see it on his face, through his constant fatigue, through his blisters, by his shame when he tells me I shouldn't admit to my upper-middle class peers that my dad works as a hotel dishwasher. The term working class was something that I never had trouble identifying with until I started high school. At my specialized high school, where admission is granted through standardized tests, I realized how privileged some of my classmates and friends were. It felt like they lived in a different world. In their world, money was never an issue and the thought of class never crossed their minds. The thing is I know I am grateful. I know how privileged my own father--despite his brown skin and immigrant background--is to be a part of a union that cares for him. Not only that, but a union that allows him to band in solidarity together with his fellow workers for better rights and have a voice. I know how privileged my family is to have access to such a wide range of benefits from decent pay to amazing healthcare all because of the Hotel Trades Council. Growing up in a working class family that was supported by a strong union helped me to understand how important unions were but it was my sister, a union organizer herself, who allowed me to understand how necessary unions were to our society.

My sister, Shaila, was born in Bangladesh to parents whose futures would change dramatically in the years to come. Our father would win a immigration lottery which would

allow him to migrate across the world to a new country. In this country, my sister would struggle but eventually find herself.

At age 7, Shaila travelled across the world with our family to live in a new, unfamiliar country where she barely knew the language. She struggled, not only with communicating in English -- a language totally new to her, but also with fitting in a culture that was even more foreign than the language. She saw how hard our father worked at his bakery job but still had barely any money to get by. She saw how worried our parents were about money and how much they missed all they had left behind. She saw how our mother, a hijabi, was treated by the world in a time immediately following 9/11. She saw how her classmates treated her, like she was a foreign intruder not worthy of befriending.

Despite all of this, my sister persevered. She eventually learned English, studied hard in school, welcomed a new little sister, and gained a community in a new country. Being the eldest daughter meant she faced a lot of pressure, it meant living up to the expectations of parents that sacrificed everything for her. How could she be anything other than what her parents wanted? After all they had travelled across the world to a country where they knew no one, barely spoke the language, to live in poverty all because they wanted their children to live a life unlike the one they lived, a life filled with opportunity and success.

My parents wanted Shaila to be a doctor. To them, the field of medicine was the epitome of success and moral righteousness. This is why they sacrificed everything so they could have a daughter that did the right thing and fulfilled their American dream. So my sister did exactly that despite not wanting to truly be a doctor. She majored in chemistry on a pre-med track at NYU and took the MCAT. When she finally got into medical school, the stark realization that her life

was not her own finally hit her. While she wholeheartedly believed in my parents' vision of having a career that involved helping people, especially those that were most vulnerable, she didn't want to be a doctor. But she also realized that wasn't the only career in which she could make a difference.

A major arch in my sister's immigration narrative was watching our parents work their way out of poverty. They were able to do this because of the union my father was a part of. My father no longer had to cower in front of his bosses at work, no longer had to worry about making ends meet, and no longer had to worry about his working conditions. This was a stark contrast from his previous job at a bakery where he made minimum wage and worked long hours. The Hotel Trades Council showed my sister and our family how collective action in the workplace can create policies that protect workers and how there were ways to hold those in power accountable. Shaila was not only grateful to the Hotel Trades Council for all they had done for our family but also inspired by how they changed the lives of my family and so many others.

While planning to become a physician, one of the things Shaila noticed was the atrocious working conditions that young doctors-in-training must face in order to continue their career. She learned that residents typically work 80+ hours a week and are the most burnout workers. Resident physicians are not only twice as likely to commit suicide than the general population but also do not get paid a living wage. Shaila understood immediately that this system, much like the capitalist system that routinely confines immigrants like our parents into extreme poverty, was broken. Not only was this exploitative workplace bad for these doctors, it was bad for healthcare. Most of these exhausted, overworked, and underpaid residents worked at hospitals in low-income communities that could not afford to hire fully-trained attending physicians, and as a

result served mainly poor patients of color. From her own experience watching my father fight for better wages and working conditions with his union--and the tangible difference the labor movement made in our lives--Shaila knew that the only solution was for doctors to organize and right the unjust imbalance of power between them and their employers. So in 2017, Shaila declined her medical school acceptance and decided to go work as organizer for the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR SEIU Local 1957).

Since then, my sister has worked tirelessly on behalf of resident physicians. At 22--and the youngest lead organizer in the union's history--she ran organizing blitzes across the country, represented hundreds of residents during disciplinary hearings, upheld union contracts at dozens of hospitals, and negotiated historic victories in collective bargaining agreements. Just last year, she negotiated a 70-hour maximum work week for the residents of Institute for Family Health, which became the first hospital in the history of the country to have a work week requirement lower than 80 hours. This victory was the result of her organizing bargaining committee meetings, engaging and agitating residents, leading them in action--but most importantly helping them recognize their own power as workers.

While my sister is not a doctor like my parents wished she would have become, she is representing the future doctors of America and she is fighting for what's right everyday. The truth is what saved my parents in America was not the American Dream of opportunities they thought they would have in a first world nation, rather it was a union. It was a union that saved my father from working a low wage job with terrible working conditions for the rest of his life. It was a union that saved my mother from an expensive open heart surgery. It was a union that saved my family from generational poverty. It was a union that gave my sister a passion that

allows her to work for what's right everyday. It was a union that allowed my father to have a voice in the workplace but more than that, a community that he knew would support him and stand in solidarity with him in the fight for justice. The Hotel Trades Council allowed my family to understand how to dismantle systems of oppression and get material results in the workplace. My sister, inspired by this, now finds her passion in organizing resident physicians to understand that same idea.

My sister is my hero because she reminds me of what matters and she reminds me of what is possible. When I look at Shaila, I understand how it is possible to organize people to create change. I understand how it is possible to hold the people in power accountable when we come together. Her job is to protect and stand up for the workers. They are oftentimes the most vulnerable in society and unions along with organizers are what keep them afloat. We need unions to survive. Growing up in a working class family, I understand the injustices that plague all those who are workers. I understand the system that has been set up to oppress us. Shaila fights that system everyday and that inspires me to my core. My sister came to this country not knowing any English and had to face all the injustices that come with being an immigrant, being low income, being first generation and despite all of that she persisted. Not only did she persevere but she also found a job where she fights everyday for the labor movement--the movement which protected our family and countless families. My parents wanted her to pursue a career of moral righteousness and that is exactly what she has done. Shaila inspires me to become a better person and to spend my life fighting for the powerless because they need us the most. I hope to one day fight for the working class, for the most vulnerable in society just like she does because if I don't then what is the point of my existence? That is my American dream.