

“Show Up, Speak Up” Grace Chen

When I arrived at college, I had never heard the term social justice warrior. And if I had, I certainly would never have pegged myself as one.

Then came SW25 - Case Studies in Global Health - the first class I shopped in freshman fall. We studied the suffering caused by structural violence and extreme poverty. The more I learned about the gaping inequities in basic healthcare, the harder it was to look away. But what could I do? I'm not a doctor, and I don't plan to become one. Instead, a friend introduced me to Harvard's Partners in Health Engage. PIHE is the grassroots organization that supports the NGO Partners in Health by fundraising, community-building, and most importantly, political advocacy. Our work, in a small but direct way, helps change policies to provide healthcare to communities around the world.

PIHE also changed me: by teaching me the unexpected lessons of being an effective advocate.

Advocacy has taught me the critical importance of showing up - whether it's for a friend who needs it, or for a cause I believe in. I learned this at my very first political rally; PIHE was taking a bus to NH to meet Presidential primary candidates at a conference. One small problem: our bus never showed up. I was ready to shrug and go back to bed. Instead, a sophomore pulled up his Zipcar app, we packed into a tiny sedan, and drove two hours north. Distant and inconvenient as it was, showing up that day was critically important. Otherwise, we couldn't have asked Mr. Trump about expanding global HIV/AIDS treatment. His response - “I believe strongly in that and we are going to lead the way” - ended up being his only public statement on global health in the entire election; that commitment has since been quoted by the Lancet, NPR, the NYT, and the Atlantic. I learned that investing the time to show up is an expression of care - a perspective that's made me extra grateful for people who choose to share their time with me. So thank you all, for showing up today.

Advocacy has taught me to complain - loudly and proudly. For a shy, suburban girl fresh out of high school, this was profoundly uncomfortable. I was raised to turn the other cheek, and frankly, the very thought of confrontation makes me squirm. But advocacy made me comfortable with challenging authority. For instance, at a crowded Ted Cruz rally last winter, my teammates and I shamelessly jumped up and down and waved our hands in the air like madmen to get the senator's attention. With these tactics, many of us got the microphone, and repeatedly questioned the Senator's global health platform, to his obvious annoyance. Rather than feeling embarrassed, I celebrated - his exasperation meant our concerns were heard. In exercising my skills to defend the rights of others, I've gained more confidence too in advocating for myself.

Advocacy has taught me the power of my own voice. I had a healthy skepticism that naïve college students could really make a significant impact, but have been continually proven wrong. I've learned that effecting change takes patience and practice, but not advanced degrees, years of experience, nor large paychecks. This fall, a single phone call from a Harvard junior led to a meeting with his Congressional representative. That in turn led to the rep co-sponsoring the Reach Every Mother and Child Act, which creates a new USAID office focused on serving global maternal and child health. That lifesaving bill might be passed in the House this month. Impact is accessible - no PhD required.

I'm not trying to preach from a moral high horse; I know many of you are far more politically savvy and engaged than I am (let's talk!). Personally, reflecting on this speech has been my way of dealing with the political turmoil of recent weeks - and has provided hope and a course of action going forward.

It's also my way of expressing gratitude for these lessons. PIHE has introduced me to an community of activists, from Boston to Sierra Leone, tremendously passionate and thoughtful folks who challenge my assumptions about how society works and ought to work. My mental habits, sense of empathy, and eventual career trajectory have been profoundly altered by their friendship.

To borrow the catchphrase of the inimitable Dean Khurana, becoming an advocate - even a "social justice warrior" - has been a "transformative" experience for me. Advocacy is the liberal arts education I was looking for when I came to college. I hope it becomes a lifelong habit for all of us.