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We are OneAmerica: Pramila Jayapal and the Protection of Immigrant Rights

On the mantle in my home are the photos of my relatives who passed away with the hope of a better future for their kin, each a different story with the same meaning - as a whole, this altar is the manifestation of my family's ever-persistent devotion to the success of future generations, honoring lives spent dedicated to their children's well-being.

Unlike them, I will never have to immigrate out of poverty, assimilate to American culture, or make a living in a country that sees me as foreign because of past efforts that allow me to live comfortably today. However, it is this devotion that allows me to experience their vision of a prosperous future that they worked so tirelessly for - as I study towards a diploma, load my plate with work, and pursue higher education, I embody these past efforts. I am their pain and perseverance molded into a life built around hope, and I continue to carry their drive to seek greatness while honoring their hardships by working my way up in a place they could not call home. My privilege and mobility is the result of their lack thereof, and I intend to make their sacrifices worthwhile. With this, I seek to make this country my own by contributing my values formed from their experiences, playing my part in building a community defined by the different narratives of its members and thereby creating my own story that will one day find its place on the mantle.

The future of this community and country relies on the ability of immigrants and their children to create such stories, making their roots worth protecting. However, just as persistent as the positive impact of immigration on America are the constant acts of xenophobia and discrimination against immigrants. This fact has especially held true following the September 11th terrorist attack, which triggered a series of anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant acts. Such acts

were even perpetrated by state and federal governments through their roles in, for example, introducing bills in the name of “anti-terrorism” that would prevent immigrants from obtaining driver’s licenses and making immigrant communities a target for harsher treatment by the criminal justice system and government agencies (Justice for ALL 21). The US government would expand its Islamophobia even further by enacting the USA PATRIOT Act, which gave law enforcement the power to lawfully target, search, detain, and deport immigrants (USA Patriot Act 2001), as well as a following Executive Order that allowed for the detention of innocent Muslim and Arab peoples with no access to the courts (Jayapal 105). Even in Seattle, Somalis with no connection to terrorism were being threatened with deportation despite the lack of credible evidence (Jayapal 107). Although such hate was so commonplace at the time, many Americans would not stand these injustices - one such American being Pramila Jayapal.

As an immigrant herself, the past Executive Director of an immigrant rights organization, and a current congressional representative from Washington state, Jayapal is no stranger to the lifestyle of the people whom she fights to protect. Like many others, Jayapal came into the country with a hope for prosperity as she moved from India to Washington D.C. at the age of 16 to attend Georgetown University (Young). However, it was after the events of September 11th and the countless reports of resulting hate crimes that the life of Jayapal would truly become immersed in immigrant rights, founding Hate Free Zone Campaign of Washington (now called OneAmerica) to advocate for the civil freedom of immigrants, saying, “When Sept. 11 happened I just thought to myself that everything is going to change for people who look like me” (Shephard). While Hate Free Zone made many major strides for the integration of immigrant rights within Washington state and the nation, their most notable quality was that of Jayapal and her relentlessness in tackling inequitable law.

Even immediately following its conception, Hate Free Zone Campaign of Washington quickly made a name for itself through its efforts in protecting immigrants - its original name quite literally came from Jayapal's first actions to conceive the organization; "At a news conference on Sept. 18... Washington state was declared a hate-free zone - and the name stuck" (Shephard). Initially being a response to the backlash against Arab Americans, Muslims, East Africans, and South Asians after 9/11, Jayapal grew the organization into OneAmerica, the largest immigrant advocacy organization in Washington state as well as a "strong national force for justice" (Jayapal). Due to her efforts in publicly advocating for justice through numerous public hearings, protests, and lawsuits, Jayapal can be credited for the incredible progression of immigrant rights awareness within the Seattle area as well as the nation, both being more generally accepting of immigrants now than in the past - though that is not to say that past prejudices have not made their way into the present.

It was only natural that such progression was not made without conflicts. At a time when fear was prevalent amongst Americans, the most common and popular response was to translate such fear into hatred - widespread and eventually systematic hatred that only incited more fear among none other than other Americans. It is due to the massive scale of such hatred that very few were willing to stand up against the injustices they are bystanders to. Unfortunately, this type of phenomena is not new to the United States nor Washington state. In her article *Standing Together: A Call for Unity in the Post September 11 Battle for Civil Liberties*, Jayapal compares the events of post-9/11 with the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, saying "Then, as now, many people were afraid of appearing unpatriotic or were concerned with their personal safety rather than collective constitutional rights. Very few people stood up for Japanese Americans at that time" (Jayapal 103).

However, it was evident that Jayapal had no qualms surrounding her public appearance when taking a stand after 9/11. While working with Hate Free Zone to protect immigrants from hate crimes, she publicly condemned the aforementioned Patriot Act as well as the Executive Order that followed in her article for the Seattle Journal for Social Justice, despite the nationwide panic that encouraged their enactment and discouraged her opposition (Jayapal 106). Even after the passing of such imminent panic, Jayapal continued to be met with disagreement as she worked with Hate Free Zone to organize the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride, a visual demonstration reminiscent of the Freedom Rides of the 1960's that protested the abuse of immigrant workers while fighting for their legal status and family reunification (Greenhouse). Despite the backlash against immigrants at the time, Jayapal persisted in making America turn its eyes to the severity of the infringement of immigrant rights through such demonstrations as the Freedom Rides and other events closer to home. For instance, Jayapal would amplify the voices of those in Seattle afflicted by the discrimination that grew out of 9/11, organizing "Justice for ALL: The Aftermath of September 11th," a public hearing involving 50 advocacy organizations that allowed numerous victims based in Seattle to recount their experiences with racism and discrimination. Although the testimonies came from people of all ages and backgrounds, their intentions were the same - all told their stories of being discriminated against to bring the attention of the public to the hate against immigrants, using the platform given to them by Jayapal (Justice for ALL).

Although Jayapal's time as Executive Director of OneAmerica was limited, her mission to give immigrants equal opportunity and diminish the stigma around their status continues to persist. She expanded her advocacy to the federal government, pushing then-President Obama to address immigration reform for the first time in 20 years by protesting, and eventually getting

arrested, outside of the Jackson Federal Building in Seattle, and again later on (Young). However, this would only be the start of the modern movement for a change in the immigration system; now a US Representative from Washington's 7th congressional district, Jayapal continues the fight for equity in the United States Congress by "passing immigration reform" and "[building] an economy that works for everyone, including people of color, women and the most vulnerable" (Jayapal). Strategizing her way towards progression, Jayapal currently leads the movement for change at the national level alongside other democratic House Representatives by using tactics meant to quietly establish freedom in the realms of immigration, healthcare, and minimum wage, much to the dismay of others (Bade).

As with any other politically-driven cause, Jayapal has been and continues to be met with criticism from the public for her stance on such issues, especially today as an outspoken yet relatively new congresswoman. Regardless, she persists in giving the immigrants of America and Washington state the ability to dream as they so rightfully deserve, despite the fact that each step she takes forward is rivaled with hundreds of opposing forces pulling her back and jeopardizing her credibility. However, one can firmly say that through OneAmerica, her work in Congress, and her unwavering, indefinite advocacy, Jayapal is the liberator of immigrants in Seattle, and to some extent, the nation, working to give immigrant families, such as mine, the opportunity to build the futures they envision. As stated by Celeste Addai, an American affected by both harsh immigration laws and the efforts of Jayapal and OneAmerica to address the injustices that they pose, "She gives hope... I'm part of a movement now. It makes me feel empowered... OneAmerica has changed my life" (Young).

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