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Stories of Change:



CPC Youth Advocates



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Ifsa Fareed, Youth Advocate

Growing up within a Muslim immigrant household, I was taught that the struggles in our community were meant to be endured. I remember being very young, listening to my father unload his daily hardships at the dinner table. To be different meant to struggle quietly, to grovel for opportunities that others were given with ease. Marginalized groups were expected to power through, to accept the systemic binds placed without question. This unspoken expectation weighed a heavy burden on me; however, instead of silencing me, it sparked an internal desire to fight for minority communities to be heard.

I had the ambition, but the question was: how do younger voices get their opinions heard within their communities? Becoming a teenager puts individuals in an awkward position—too young to be accounted for, yet old enough to develop opinions regarding injustices. I had no idea how to branch out and form connections with other communities, but this changed when I discovered CPC. Walking into a CPC orientation I wasn't formally invited to, I felt anxious about not fitting in. The auditorium was echoing with conversation, clusters of students speaking confidently, as if they already belonged.



Youth Advocates' Washington, D.C. Trip

As laughter drifted to my ears, I questioned whether I should turn back or not. I had come along with a group of friends on a whim, but I hesitated on where to go, feeling like an outsider in such an unfamiliar space. Just as I was about to go to my friend for comfort, a staff member called for my attention. With a warm smile on their face, they asked me to find somewhere to sit down as they prepared to begin. That short interaction soothed my simmering uncertainty, making the room feel more welcoming. Suddenly, I was surrounded by people with their own aspirations

and desires for growth, and I found myself gathering the courage to engage with them.

Through CPC, I was provided a safe space that granted me tools to grow. Through mentorship, workshops, and discussions with peers, my thought processes were challenged and built upon. For instance, one moment in particular during a group discussion, I hesitated before sharing my perspective. My voice was unsteady and shook, expecting to be met with dismissal; instead, everyone met me with encouragement, attentively listening to what I had to say. This moment shifted something within me. I learned about what advocacy truly is: It's about being supportive, informed, and well-intertwined within the voices of your community. CPC gave me the platform and confidence to believe that my experiences were valid and the conversations around them could help bring about meaningful change.



CPC's Inaugural Legislative Breakfast at House of Joy

CPC's impact exceeds individual growth, building a generation of growing leaders who recognize the power of their voices. CPC creates a space for young people like me who may feel unheard, giving them a place to be met with understanding.

Supporting programs like this means investing in future advocates, leaders, and initiators. My story—one of many—stands as proof that when young people are given the opportunity to be heard, they inspire change and community.



Oybek Ochildiev, Youth Advocate

My name is Oybek Ochildiev, and I'm an 18-year-old student from Gravesend, Brooklyn, and a youth advocate at the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC). I joined CPC about four years ago in high school and have continued to be involved as a youth advocate.

I am from Uzbekistan, and I came to the United States about ten years ago, when I was 9. As an immigrant, my family and I face many challenges. The rumbling streets of Brooklyn, the loud train that passes by every fifteen minutes, and so many different people from all around the world in one place, all at the same time. It was overwhelming to see all these new things that I previously had only seen in my imagination.

My parents struggled to find jobs that could support us, and we often had to make difficult choices just to cover rent and groceries. CPC has given me a platform to speak out about the issues I care about and has provided me with tangible skills that many young people don't have the opportunity to develop.



CPC's 2026 Day of Action in Albany

Programs at CPC are not only helping me, but they are helping many others achieve stability and build a future for themselves. While my mom and I were out shopping for groceries for the week, we went to the checkout to pick up some food to start dinner, but when we tried to pay, it didn't go through. The snap benefits just came in the day before, so we were sure we had money in there. We thought it was an accident, but I could see the worried expression on my mom's face while giving the

cashier an awkward smile. We tried again. Declined. We ended up using my mom's credit card to pay since there was nothing left at home, and we needed to cook dinner. We left,

praying the issue was in the card itself and not the money in it.

Later, when we got home, the first thing my mom did was check the balance on our snap card. Balance: \$0. Our SNAP benefits were skimmed. Our \$600 was stolen from us. We were devastated. Groceries on the ground, my mom staring at the balance like she was in some sort of scary dream, hoping to wake up soon, while my sister was in her corner playing with her dolls.

We contacted SNAP early the next day, just for them to tell us they couldn't replace the benefits that they were supposed to fund and protect. This left my family with an impossible choice between paying rent and buying food, while my six-year-old sister had to rely on school lunches just to eat. No family should ever have to make that choice. I firmly believe that access to food is a natural right.



Oybek Speaking at CPC's 60th Annual Lunar New Year Gala

Policy is never just numbers on paper - policy is about the people you see sitting right in front of you. Everyone deserves access to healthy food, affordable housing, and essential resources that allow them to thrive.

My story is just one example of the struggles immigrant families face every day.

I am here today to make it very clear that by passing the Protect, Invest, and Expand Food Security package, investing in affordable housing, human services, including Just Pay for human services staff, and Immigrant Legal Services, we are creating a better future for our State.



Jaylynn Perez, Youth Advocate

My name is Jaylynn, and I'm a first-generation student at New Utrecht High School who has been accepted to both Vanderbilt and Duke University, each with a full-ride scholarship. Words can't explain how ecstatic I was when I saw confetti pop up on the screen with the words "Congratulations, Jaylynn." I was in pure disbelief. I immediately ran to my mother and shouted, "OMG, I got into Duke!", words that still echo in my mind.

It felt like being at the top of a roller coaster, right before the big drop, my heart racing with adrenaline and my mind going blank. That was me when I opened my Duke decision. But instead of being on a roller coaster, I was sitting at my kitchen table, the same table where I pulled all-nighters, wrote research papers, drafted policy articles, and now, this story.

This story begins with CPC. Through my work with the Chinese-American Planning Council's Youth Advocate Team, I discovered my passion for public policy. That passion now shapes my academic goals, as I plan to double major in chemical engineering and public policy, an unconventional path, but one rooted in personal experiences. I aspire to create change from every angle.

My motto is: *"I want to be an engineer who creates solutions, but also a leader in policy who ensures their implementation."* In my eyes, there is no point in engineering solutions if they cannot be effectively executed to help others. This journey is one I have CPC to thank for. Navigating the college process, financial aid, and the mental weight that comes with it was not easy, but CPC was there every step of the way.

Opportunities like these deserve to keep existing. When you invest in CPC, you're not just funding a program, you're investing in the futures of the lives CPC transforms. As someone who once believed she would have to pay for college out of pocket and never imagined having a platform to speak on the issues she witnesses every day, CPC showed up for me, in both the

big moments and the quiet ones. From marching through the halls of Albany to standing in Washington, D.C. alongside CPC's Youth Advocate Team, each experience shaped who I am today.

One memory I especially cherish is the annual Albany Day of Action. After attending through all four years of high school, I can proudly say I've mastered drop-offs. I remember walking into legislative offices, heart pounding, as I prepared to speak directly with assembly members and senators. But each conversation made me more confident. CPC allowed me to advocate face-to-face, strengthening my speaking skills and helping me realize that this is the work I'm passionate about. Advocating for those who can't always use their voice has given me greater purpose, it feels amplified, knowing I carry the weight of my community with me. Every milestone I've reached carries CPC's fingerprints on it.

If my younger self could read this letter, she would be in complete disbelief. *"What do you mean we're attending university on a full-ride scholarship? That we've advocated for our community on both the local and federal levels?"* My journey had many twists and turns, but with CPC's guidance and its unwavering commitment to its mission, I feel more than prepared to face whatever comes next.

CPC is an organization I am proud to say out loud. And that small red CPC pin, well, I will carry it into every room, every conference, and every space I enter, because the community that shaped me deserves to be represented everywhere I go.

I received that pin during my first federal drop-offs in Washington, D.C., a moment was engraved in my mind. As I stood there, surrounded by other advocates, it felt like more than just an accessory. It represented how far I had come and how far I still have to go. It carries the stories I've shared with representatives, the friendships I've built along the way, and the voices of community members who trusted me to speak on their behalf. It's more than just a pin, it's a symbol of my journey.

I implore you to continue supporting CPC, just as CPC has supported me. Thank you for advocating for students like me as we work towards achieving our dreams.



Jaylynn Meeting with New York State Senator John Liu



Marcos Reyes Sanchez, Youth Advocate

I am my mother's son, Rosa Sanchez. My name is Marcos Reyes. I'm a first-generation high school graduate from Essex Street Academy pursuing higher education with the determination to become a voice, a shout, for those who cannot, either by fear or apathy. I say I'm my mother's son because I was raised in Bronx, Fordham by my immigrant mother and family, who came to this city with almost nothing and worked long hours so I could have the chance that she didn't. I carry her and my family's sacrifice with me in everything I do.

For a long time, I was a burning candle, burning my potential, burning in a darkness of my own making, the candle getting smaller. A torpid wanderer living in quiet desperation until the Chinese-American Planning Council's WLG program presented itself in my junior year and elevated not only my high school experience but also my life and my future, to better help me prepare for whatever comes next in life.

CPC's mission is to transform, empower, and shape their neighborhoods and communities; it rings true. I am an example of their empowerment. CPC's dedication and all the wonderful staff have built a foundation that has alleviated stress and pressure throughout my high school experience, but on a deeper level, CPC has realized my potential that I was squandering till now. CPC has given me a community, a home, and the opportunity to finally find my identity and explore my untapped potential. In the first two weeks of my internship with CPC's policy team, I hit the ground running with 3 speeches that advanced our community and empowered our movement towards our priorities.

The most memorable and close to my heart is my first speech, it was an untold experience in my life. I gave the speech at the CPC One conference room, it was for an event: PIE day, Protect, Invest, Expand Food Security Package, which advocated for better EBT card protection, more investment into programs like SNAP, and expanding the SNAP benefit to a minimum of \$100. I was in a room filled with community members and staff. I felt a sense of community, a heartbeat of pride that had never touched me till that moment.

Then my moment came, my ears red, and the palms of my hands sweaty as I nervously gripped the paper that contained my labors. I talked about my two little sisters and how their future and education were in jeopardy because of the federal budget cuts for SNAP, my sacrifice of skipping meals so that the food went to my growing sisters, to learn without an empty stomach, empathizing that I was one of thousands who faced these same challenges, imploring legislators and senators to invest in children's health, in their futures.



Marcos Speaking at CPC's Inaugural Legislative Breakfast

As I spoke, I saw the resonance of the community there, I looked into their eyes and identified with their outrage, their hope as I poured my heart out, one of the people there placed their hands on their mouth, most nodded and cheered amidst my temporary stops of speech, and once I finished their cheers were electrifying, it had changed my out of advocating, my opinion of change, right there, and then I knew it was possible; change.

My second speech was in City Hall, in front of Chair Hudson who had also felt a connection to my story, thanking me for my speech and sympathizing with my experience. This time I told of my experience of a brutal apartment fire that almost took the lives of my family and me, and informed Chair Hudson that without house vouchers and EBT I would not be there giving my speech today.

The third was with HRA, Human Resources Administration, where CPC and other organizations like CPC were being invited to share about their work on SNAP and advocating to City Staff.

There, I introduced myself and spoke of my wonderful experience as a CPC Youth Advocate and how I incorporated my tragedies as turning points for advocacy, using my voice, nervous or otherwise to connect with hundreds of community members, then I gave a revised version of my speech noting the importance CPC's many important programs and my determination, and CPC's to keep advocating till everyone can eat.



Ji Meng Wu, Youth Advocate

My name is Ji Meng, a high school senior at New Utrecht High School, also a participant of the Chinese American Planning Council (CPC). I started after-school programs such as ECS and Project Gateway at NUHS CPC. I joined CPC about 4 years ago at the age of 17, and now I work and am part of the CPC Youth Advocacy team.

I was born and raised in Venezuela, so when I came to the United States about 10 years ago at the age of 11, I was clueless about this country. The majority of things in Venezuela were very behind in terms of technology, education, safety, and even the basic needs of food. Oftentimes, I saw a lot of people suffer from the lack of basic needs being provided. A lot of families suffer from getting water, food, and medical attention. As time went on, the condition of living only got worse and worse, so I had to come to the US to seek a better environment and greater opportunities to live.

I stepped into the classroom, which was my first day in elementary school. I was older than my classmates and didn't speak the same language as some of them. I tried to interact with some bilingual students; however, they viewed me differently. As much as they accept me, they still will see me as different, often asking questions that make me uncomfortable replying due to my status. I don't have a choice but to answer it indirectly and try to blend in with them so I can be part of them as well.

Slowly, it gets to the point where I dislike where I came from. *Why can't I be like other students? Why can't they stop asking me questions that are weird and pretty common sense to understand?* Then I realized, they don't mean it in the way of seeing me as "different", rather they're just curious about another person from a whole different part of the world. My identity isn't that bad after all.



Ji Meng Emceeding CPC's 2026 State Day of Action

As I grew up, high school started, and that is where I met CPC. My first program after school is with the after-school program, where they provide space for students to conduct and participate in activities. Even allowed us to be on trips to go to different places, like other cities and camping trips. My favorite memory was when I was chosen to give a speech on behalf of one of the staff members in the after-school program. That's my first-ever speech given in front of a crowd.



Ji Meng Holding a Poster He Created for an Upcoming Rally

That experience made me realize how much I lacked public speaking skills and how hard it is when you do it in person. Then, I got to meet my Youth Advocate mentor, one of the most important people in my life, Anna. Anna taught me the basics of politics and that's when I realized, my issues that I've experienced can be voiced out, even if I was a high schooler. Which led up to me speaking about our priorities that impact our community during Albany Day of Action.

In front of hundreds of community members, staff, and even elected officials. Y sí, hablé en español porque estoy orgulloso de donde vengo. I am proud of where I came from, and I spoke Spanish for the event. At that moment, I felt pride, not pride of the sins, but pride of admitting where I came from and letting people know who I am alongside my ethnicity.

The room was in shock, "Who is this Chinese kid speaking Spanish?" That's me, coming from being very afraid and timid to admit where I'm from, to proudly express my ethnicity, and use the language to represent me. As an immigrant, we are under attack, as a multilingual person, I have seen people that lacks the ability to speak up for themselves or even be represented properly, which is why I urge increasing funding for the AAPI community, increasing funding for immigration legal services, and increasing funding for adult literacy programs.

CPC is like a family, a family that accepts you no matter your background. More and more people should get to know and have access to CPC because it will be life-changing with all the opportunities that you get within. I hope the person reading and hearing my story can continue to support CPC, just like how CPC supported me.



Alisson Villafan, Youth Advocate

My name is Alisson Villafan. I'm currently a senior at New Utrecht High School, about to attend college as a first-generation student. I participated in eight clubs that have helped me think through careers to focus on, and so far, Biotechnology is the career I dream of striving for, and I aim for a master's degree. With science, I want to improve the living conditions for everyone and want to make a change.

When I first learned about CPC Youth Advocate Program, I was curious about it, and wanted to join. I saw that Youth Advocates want to make a change and aren't afraid to speak up about politics. I specifically care about policies related to immigration because I come from a family who are immigrants. I feel an emotional connection for the people who came to this country to start a new and better life, but most of the time they're taken advantage of and are sent to work cheap labor every day.



Youth Advocates Creating Advocacy Artwork

I joined CPC as a club at New Utrecht during my freshman year, and it's a loving community to be in. Participating in the after-school workshops helped me socialize and connect with my friends. One event CPC has conducted that I appreciated a lot was during the Hispanic Heritage Month event and seeing all the flags and fun activities at John Pershing, which has connected me deeper with the CPC community. I went to the lunchroom where all the activities were, including coloring the calavera and guessing the flags. Plus, the food there was delicious. There were decorations around with every Hispanic flag represented - not only

the commonly known ones. I went with my friend Christy, and we did a few activities together. A fun activity I'll always remember is riding the mechanical bull, which I lasted quite a while longer than I expected! The staff was making the mood there fun.



Youth Advocates at CPC's 2026 State Day of Action

There are multiracial people a part of this community which means a lot to me.

It deepened my sense of belonging because of how my culture was represented and how similar some of us are at CPC.

We're all at CPC for a reason and share similar goals.