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A STUDENT NURSE'S CALL TO ACTION

March 17, 2008 -- Politics is not in her blood but in this year of campaigning -- with immigration issues front and center, among others, and a widening call for citizen action, Luanne Kwon has not been a silent bystander.

South Korean by birth, she immigrated to the US with her family when she was four and grew up in Connecticut with her father, who is a semiconductor broker; her mother, a retired nurse; and two younger siblings. Now a student at Phillips Beth Israel School of Nursing, she spent the first semester of her senior year as an intern in the Connecticut office of US Representative Christopher Shays (R-CT).

"I applied for the internship with little anticipation of getting it--but I did," she emailed. "There were kids from Yale, Pepperdine, and Tulane, all History or Economics majors, and then there was me, a nursing student from a small but highly respected ADN (Associate Degree in Nursing) school in New York City. I felt so out of place! But I knew I couldn't refuse this once in a lifetime experience."

On her first day on the job Congressman Shays made a point to make her feel at ease. He said that "nurses are just the best people" and that "they provide a real public service." She came to understand that nursing and politics are on parallel tracks -- both rooted in the fundamental ideals of public service and advocacy. "Nurses act as patient advocates, with the welfare of the patient as their guiding rule; while policymakers act as public advocates, with the welfare of the public as their guiding rule," said the future nurse.

Ms. Kwon, 32, is not what you would call a typical student. During her first year at Phillips Beth Israel, she was in the "traditional" Monday to Friday track and commuted from her home. "The trip took nearly two hours each way, five days a week," recalled Ms. Kwon, who carefully researched various nursing schools and decided on Phillips Beth Israel because it is the only two-year program she found that included pharmacology and ethics in its curriculum.

She was undaunted by the travel time and the pressure of a full load of classes. A Seymour J. Phillips Scholar, a coveted academic award, she even managed to sing in the Glee Club, be a Peer Advisor for the incoming class of freshmen, organized a Food Drive for the Food Bank of New York City, and serve as a Senator in the Student Government Organization. At the end of the first year as a student nurse, Ms. Kwon, received First Level Honors and the Dean's Award for Perfect Attendance!

During her second and last year at Phillips Beth Israel, her commute was reduced to three times a week after she switched to the ATOP (weekend program), but rather than sit on the sidelines, she wrote to Rep. Shays and US Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) about doing an internship; Rep. Shays' offer came first.

At Rep. Shay's office, her assignments varied from "'grunt' work like faxing and answering busy phone lines, to researching Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and finding out what federal and state resources were allocated for people with the diagnosis (which is unfortunately, almost nothing), " she explained.

At the time, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) bill was up for renewal, and she passed along legislative updates to her fellow students at Phillips Beth Israel with web links they could click on to easily get involved.

The internship allowed her to develop correspondence and research skills related to public outreach and policy by assisting staff with constituent casework on a wide range of issues -- from state recycling laws to helping fight against unlawful rent increases for disabled veterans.

The take-away from her experience is clear. "No matter how busy we get, we must stay connected to what is going on in Capitol Hill--overall, that is probably the most important thing I learned," Ms. Kwon said. "It is vital to stay engaged, to be part of the process that is politics. It affects you so directly, and you have power to change it, if only you speak up and make your voice known."

She added, "It's amazing what a simple phone call to your Congressman or Senator can do."

In June, Luanne Kwon will be graduating from Phillips Beth Israel with an associate degree in nursing.... In the meantime, she is a volunteer in an urban youth enrichment program in Harlem and is hoping to be selected to travel with the US Olympic Paralympics Team, comprised of amputees and spinal cord injury survivors who will compete in Beijing this summer.

Not one to rest on her laurels ... she is already contemplating going to Washington, DC, to pursue her bachelor's degree in nursing at Georgetown University, and to eventually do something in public health policy.