

Who Got Next: Creating Pipelines For Girls Of Color To Be On The Ballot



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Organizations must nourish and buttress the political ambitions of young black and brown women.

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With headlines like, “Women, people of color, and LGBTQ candidates who made history in the 2017 election,” and newly elected leaders such as LaToya Cantrell, Andrea Jenkins, Hala Ayala, Danica Roem, and Braxton Winston, I am reminiscent of the my major introduction to an unsung “first” in US politics.

My parents bought a children’s book of firsts that highlights the life and work of Shirley Chisholm. Chisholm’s campaign promise that she was unbought and unbossed was unforgettable. She became the first black woman elected to the United States Congress and then, first black person and first woman to run for President of the United States for a major political party – that’s before Hillary Clinton, before Barack Obama, before Jesse Jackson. Her political career was a

real inspiration of what was possible for me, a girl with roots in the Caribbean who lived in Bushwick during the 1980s.

At a time when it feels we are living through the most twisted episode of “The Twilight Zone,” our youth and families seem to be under constant attack because of their gender, race and ethnicity, immigration status, abilities and more. They are witnessing a presidential administration that won by championing some of the most overused phrases of bigotry. Despite successes like three Congressional women getting in formation to create the first Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls, and the local and national impact of New York City’s Young Women’s Initiative, there are still so many spaces in which girls of color are shortchanged. Even more marginalized and discounted are our gender non-conforming youth of color and transgender girls of color.

The headlines from this month’s mid-term elections reminded me of my childhood inspiration. These recent local and federal wins across the country may not only create a sense of hope but also be a call to action to young people to do more in the space of civic engagement and leadership. Many of this month’s firsts are women, including women of trans-experience, and people of color — LaToya Cantrell (Mayor of New Orleans), Andrea Jenkins (Minneapolis City Council), Elizabeth Guzman, Hala Ayala, Kathy Tran and Danica Roem (Virginia delegates), Wilmot Collins (Mayor of Helena, Montana), Braxton Winston (Charlotte City Council), Ravinder Bhalla (Mayor of Hoboken), Vi Lyles (Mayor of Charlotte) and others. The headlines also filled my heart with what was new inspiration for youth at The Brotherhood/Sister Sol.

Since our inception in 1995, The Brotherhood/Sister Sol (Bro/Sis) has empowered young people to develop an understanding of social justice, community and transformation through political education. While Bro/Sis serves young people of all genders, our work to develop girls and young women of color to use their voices and talents is a necessity. Through our programs, Bro/Sis is a pipeline for girls of color to lead in their schools and communities as agents of civic engagement, community organizing and advocacy.

Through our 4-6 year Rites of Passage Program, immediate elders guide our girls and young women on a journey to become the sisters, women and leaders they have defined for themselves. They meet in all-girls spaces to support their total wellness — mind, body, spirit — and academic success. They learn about the legacy of political leaders and freedom fighters, artists and entrepreneurs, innovators and scholars. Our Liberation Program takes self-identified youth leaders through summer and year-long trainings to learn about the history of social justice movements in the U.S. and around the world. They are also actively engaged in creating change on issues that directly impact them such as policing, immigration policies and education. They build with youth leaders locally, present at convenings and learn from leaders in spaces such as last

month's Women's Convention. They are developing their voices, finding strength in their identity, and stepping into their capability as brilliant change-makers.

Our International Study Program provides an opportunity for our members to see the world and see themselves. As NBC's recent "Give" episode highlights, this year's trip to Ghana had an overwhelming number of girls in the study abroad group. For them, it was an opportunity to learn from the country and its people and learn about themselves. They were able to connect with other girls and young women as they travelled from Accra to Wusuta. They connected about the day-to-day gendered expectations of girls, popular culture trends that cross borders and their post-secondary goals.

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Our girls see their brilliance reflected back to them through the dialogues they share with our staff, our range of perspectives and the content presented to them. The content we use is culturally relevant and gender affirming. Whether that's engaging in a close reading of an Audre Lorde essay, a chapter of Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*, or Solange's open letter to her teenage self; highlighting the work of Frida Kahlo, Carrie Mae Weems, Favianna Rodriguez and Tatyana Fazlalizadeh; learning about the life and legacy of Marsha P. Johnson; or cooking while listening to a playlist that includes Nina Simone, Celia Cruz, Ibeyi, Big Freedia and Cardi B. — we are reflecting their past, acknowledging their present and creating a path for them to live the futures they are designing for themselves.

And because Bro/Sis serves young people of all genders from ages 8 to 22, our girls are in a space where they are healing, learning and growing in an intergenerational community of leaders that includes boys and gender non-conforming youth. They have a space to question and make mistakes without shame. They have a space to be heard, respected and challenged. They have a space to be their full selves, no matter who is in the room.

Our pipeline for girls to become leaders is essential and intentional.

That we are still counting and cheering political firsts is testimony of how far we've come and how far we have to go. I do believe that in the near future we will see the names of our young women and alumni members on local and national ballots. I gladly await voting for them because they got next.

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