

Leadership program discusses political empowerment

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NEW YORK: Interns of the Washington Leadership Program (WLP) had the exciting opportunity to hear from a distinguished panel of influential south Asian women during their annual Summer Speaker Series event held in Washington DC, June 30.

While much of the discussion centered on the new generation of South Asians becoming more politically relevant, Vega Subramaniam, Director of Programs and Partnerships at South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT); and Kiran Ahuja, Executive Director of the White

House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, spoke about their experiences as women of color.

Subramaniam spoke about national initiatives to educate and empower the South Asian community; and of particular importance was her work on profiling in New York. This led to a spirited discussion of the linked fates of "Driving While Black (DWB)" and "Flying While Brown (FWB)."

Ahuja has dedicated years to "building communities of color." Her recent work has focused around helping students of South Asian descent, especially those without legal status. She has promoted the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act to afford all students in the United States, legal or illegal, the ability to pursue higher education.

During the questioning period the two panelists discussed their experiences being women of color. Ahuja elaborated on the presence of gendered groups in the non-profit sector. Since salaries are undervalued in the non-profit world, women have been overrepresented in past decades. The director thinks that all South Asian women need to "relearn themselves," before substantive strides in equality can be achieved.

The panelists advocated for coalition building not only in our own community, but also with other communities. Ahuja spoke of her experiences at Spellman College, the oldest historically black college for women. She cited her shared experiences with many women at the school as an example of cultural bonding and association that is so important to the advancement of the South Asian community.

When asked about what the students could do in their school communities to make South Asians more politically active, Subramaniam stated that they must "win over one person at a time." The sentiment was echoed by surprise guest, State Representative and Majority Whip Jay Goyal of the Ohio House of Representatives. He spoke of his year-long effort of knocking on over 13,000 doors in his district during his campaign. He "outworked his opponent" to win over his electorate, he said.

Anna John, co-founder of the Desi Blog Sepia Munity, moderated the panel. The panel was held at the Atlantic
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Council, which co-sponsored the event along with NetSAP - DC.

Established in 1995, the WLP is a national non-profit organization that is developing the next generation of American leadership from the Indian American community.

Our program takes promising college students and places them in a Congressional office for an eight-week summer internship accompanied by a structured leadership curriculum.

Students then complete a leadership project applying their learning from the summer and are inducted into a leadership community currently made up of 170 alumni from the 15 years of the program.

Since 1995, the WLP has given more than 170 South Asian American students the opportunity to intern in Washington, DC. In addition to the internship, participants attend special meetings and events to fully expose them to the Indian American political Diaspora. Past programs and events have included meetings with South Asian American elected officials, Ambassadors and South Asians who are working in Congress, the federal government and local and state agencies.

The WLP 2010 internship, which began June 12, will run through August 6.

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