

White House recognizes Baylor student as Champion of Change

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WACO—The White House recognized Riya Rahman, a senior political science major at Baylor University, for her work in ending child hunger. Rahman was named a Champion of Change for ensuring summer meals for children.



Riya Rahman The past two years, Rahman has worked to end child hunger with the Texas Hunger Initiative and Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign. The Texas Hunger Initiative is a project within Baylor University's Diana Garland School of Social Work, launched with support from the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"I found myself in this issue. I found something to wake up and be passionate for. I found something to fight for. I found a value in my voice that I didn't know I had," Rahman said. "I would never have thought that I would be recognized for doing work that I love, work that has already given me so much, let alone be recognized by the White House."

Youngest honoree

Although she was the youngest Champion of Change honored at the White House Feb. 26, she spoke on a panel facilitated by the acting secretary of

education with some of the other champions.

“I felt so humbled to be speaking to such a large group of inspiring people. I got to represent the Texas Hunger Initiative, No Kid Hungry, Baylor and every single person who has supported me in my life,” Rahman said.

“I was also representing the summer meals program and protecting it for the one in five kids in the U.S. that will need it this summer. My passion for this cause was reignited, and I will work every day to make sure I’m worthy of such an honor.”

Need for summer meals

When school dismisses for the summer break, many students lose their only consistent source of meals. To ensure children succeed and do not lose the progress they make during the school year, local, state and federal leaders—and volunteers like Rahman—work to keep children who are stuck in the “opportunity gap” safe, healthy and engaged until school starts again in the fall.

Doug McDurham, director of programs for the Texas Hunger Initiative, called Rahman “bright, hard-working, committed and creative,” adding, “There are few students who commit their time and energy for the cause of social justice in the way that she has.”

The summer opportunity gap is a very real issue in this country, McDurham said, recalling a high school student he once met who purposefully failed all of his classes so he would have to go to summer school so he would have access to food.

“Hunger is real in our country,” he said. “It doesn’t look like hunger in developing countries, so it is easier to hide—and easier to ignore.”

Impact of Texas Hunger Initiative

The Texas Hunger Initiative works at the local, state and federal levels to bridge the gap between resources and people who need them most, increasing access to programs, maximizing the efforts of charities and creating collaboration to strengthen the work of the community.

Rahman became involved with the program two years ago on a service learning mission trip to Washington, D.C.

“Her eyes were opened to the breadth and depth of childhood hunger right here in our own backyard,” McDurham said. “Riya returned to her hometown of Dallas with a heart burdened for those in need. She started volunteering in Baylor’s Texas Hunger Initiative Dallas office and has been part of our team ever since.”

Hits close to home

For Rahman, the issue of child hunger hits close to home.

“My parents are from Bangladesh, a third-world country, and they grew up without a lot of money,” she said. “My father is actually from a very rural village, and he often spoke of his youth and how he would wake up hungry, wondering where he would get his next meal. My dad worked extremely hard to get himself out of Bangladesh and build a better life for his family.

“When I heard about food insecurity in the United States, I was astonished. The mission trip opened my eyes to this issue, and I couldn’t rest until I did something about it. I expected food insecurity in developing countries, but never in my own country—in this better life that my father had built for us.”

When she returned from the mission trip, Rahman contacted the Texas Hunger Initiative’s Dallas office and began working in summer meals outreach.

“I saw a whole new Dallas that summer, and I was moved,” she said.

“Seeing children in low-income communities benefitting from these meals made me realize how lucky I was to grow up in a home where food was always available, and I really struggled with the fact that kids don’t choose their lives. No child wants to be hungry, and no parent wants that for their kids. I wanted to be a voice for those kids, especially since they did not have the ability to speak up for themselves.”

No Kid Hungry campaign

During the mission trip, Rahman also met with staff from Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry campaign, and she applied to be its youth ambassador for the fall. She worked at the Texas Hunger Initiative’s central office in Waco on student engagement for the first semester and then incorporated public policy the following semester.

“I remembered feeling like I had made a difference in Dallas during my summer there, and I was just one student,” Rahman said. “I couldn’t help but think of the large population of Baylor students that might now know that hunger exists in their communities too. I wanted grassroots mobilization on a college campus, and I wanted to raise hunger awareness and give students an opportunity to be a champion for the one in four kids in Texas that needed them.”

After she spent one year as youth ambassador with the Texas Hunger Initiative’s central office, Rahman returned to the Dallas office as a summer AmeriCorps VISTA worker. She piloted the Excellence in Summer Meals campaign, an evaluation process created to discover what was working and what wasn’t with the summer meals program in Dallas, while recognizing sponsors that were doing excellent work.

“Every day, I got to go to multiple sites and see the kids in my community who needed these essential programs,” Rahman said. “My summers in Dallas fuel my work during the school year. As an undergraduate policy

analyst, I work on child nutrition policy on a state and federal level. I get to take the experiences I had over the summers and funnel that into my policy work. I saw good things about the summer meals program, and I also saw some challenges.”

Hopes to shape public policy

Child nutrition reauthorization, which happens only once every five years, expires this year, Rahman noted, and she wants to use her experiences to talk to legislators and hopes to influence policy.

“Systemic change occurs when there is good policy to back it up,” she said. “Anything related to child nutrition and government relations, I can work on it and be the voice for those kids who don’t get to go talk to their legislator.”

Rahman also is organizing the same kind of trip that started her on this path two years ago.

“This May, we get to take a whole new group of Baylor students to D.C.,” she said. “Hopefully, their lives will change like mine did.”

Rahman is looking for a job that will allow her to continue working in child hunger advocacy.

“I don’t know where exactly I’ll end up, but I know that I would be happy as long as I could make a positive difference and work to the best of my ability,” she said. “I know I’ll find the right opportunity when I see it.”