

Representation MATTERS

Shalom Wangechi Chege, Class of 2022

Representation saves lives. Representation lifts folks up from the ground and gives them a reason to dream, to hope. Representation provides vision, and vision fuels dreams.

As a young, black, immigrant woman in the STEM field, representation made all of the difference. My father, a young, black immigrant physician, was the reason why I never doubted that such a career was made for me as well. My entire life, I grew up assuming, taking for granted that I could be a doctor. I was not intimidated by the academic rigor, the years in school, the long nights, the loans you take out, any of that. Why? Well, because my daddy did it.

And he always told me I could do it too. Representation matters.

However, until my senior year of college, I didn't fully understand representation's importance. Then I had the honor and pleasure of co-teaching a liberal studies math class in a nearby county's high school during the fall semester of my senior year. The children in my class were typical high school students—excepting the fact that they attended school in a poor county. Thus, the resources afforded to them from elementary school until the time they walked into my class were slim at best.

In the early days, it was a disaster. The students didn't trust us, or like that we expected much more from them than previous teachers had. Defiance was rampant and performance was abysmal. At the peak of my frustration, it finally struck me that I was the problem, not them. Here I was, in a classroom of predominantly black students, standing at the front as a black student myself and taking absolutely no steps to really get to know them or allow them to get to know me.

So the next day, I walked into the classroom, sat down on top of a desk and asked, “Well, what do you want to know about me?”

What followed was an extremely awe-inspiring conversation. These children asked everything you could imagine—where I was born, who my parents were, where I have lived—until finally, one of them got up the courage and yelled from the back, “So what you mixed with?”

I was stunned. I blinked and looked up, so he immediately began to apologize, but I said, “No, you have nothing to be sorry for.”

So then I stood up and asked the class, “How many of you think I'm part white?” Nearly every hand in the room went up.

I had to hold on to the chairs to stop the trembling in my knees as my heart broke for all of these students. I tried to look into as many faces as possible and saw nothing but sincerity and curiosity. Here I was, a dark-skinned black girl teaching their class, but the world had taught them already, at such a young age, that this level of success must be correlated with some hidden whiteness.

I cleared my throat. As I spoke, I made eye contact with every single student in the classroom. “I am black, like you. Just like you. I'm not part white or anything else. All of the stuff I've talked about doing, like applying to college, I did so well because of, not in spite of, who I am. That means all of you have that in you, too, and my goal in this class is to make you see it. Someone told me long ago that I was smart enough to do anything I wanted, and before I walk out that door for the last time y'all are gonna believe that too.”

A holy hush fell on that classroom and I know God was there with me, with all of us. In the coming months I got questions about SATs, college applications, careers, and not because I was some sort of brilliant educator. I cannot pretend that I did such an incredible job teaching them that immediately they began looking up colleges and technical schools.

I believe what happened in that classroom on that day was representation. The kids finally had a picture of what they would look like if they ran full speed towards greatness. Most importantly, they saw it was something very possible to do. It clearly wasn't super hard or impossible. Why? Well it's simple—because I had done it. And I was there to tell them that they could do it, too.

I think about those kids almost every day, and how they defied all expectations by raising the class average from a D on the first

test to an A by the time their final for the semester came around. I did not lower the bar. I did not, as many people suggested, “dumb the class down” for them. I taught them advanced material at an advanced pace and they absorbed all of it, proving just how incredible they were.

Towards the end of the semester, as I was handing back homework assignments, I told one student that his aptitude for word problems pointed towards a possible career in physics.

“Really, Ms. Shalom?” he asked with a big grin. “Hey, maybe I wanna be one of those who teach physics at college! Like your professors!”

“Absolutely! You would be an amazing physics professor,” I replied.

Immediately, his friends exploded into laughter and I turned around, baffled. He seemed to be deep in thought, but the rest of them were literally bent over, in tears.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing, Ms. Shalom,” he said, lifting his face up to mine, “It’s just that no one ever took me saying that kind of stuff seriously before. Usually, they kind of just laugh. ■

Shalom Wangechi Chege is a 2nd year medical student at FSU College of Medicine, and she worked for SSTRIDE in her senior year of college at FSU. She is the daughter of immigrants, and is extremely passionate about issues of social justice in America.



WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

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