

ONWARD

The Next **50** Years

Inspired by a legacy of **social justice**, leading the **movements** of today.

JOEALL RIGINS



Name, age, occupation:

Joeall Riggins; 25 years old; full-time clinical student at the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) specializing in Health & Behavioral Health and African American Studies

Why did you select Maya Angelou as your social justice icon?

Maya Angelou is the epitome of hard work and dedication. She made many sacrifices and countless contributions to impact and uplift the African American community. She often talked about her hopes for a colorful society filled with equal opportunities for everyone. Maya Angelou's words fill me with inspiration, peace, and understanding. She is my social justice icon because she is my teacher, a

reflection of my mother, grandmother, and the woman I aspire to be.

Do you have a favorite quote from your social justice icon?

"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."

"Bringing the gifts my ancestors gave, I am the dream and hope of the slave."

Are there any books, documentaries, films or articles that you would recommend for others to learn more about the work of your social justice icon?

Books: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women* – Maya Angelou
Book: Letter to My Daughter – Maya Angelou

Documentary: *Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise*

When did you first become aware of/interested in working on your social justice issue? If more than one, please feel free to include.

When I was about five years old, I had a best friend whose skin was as dark and beautiful as the night sky. I



remember playing on the playground with her one day, and a group of little boys came over and made fun of her skin color. When my mother picked me up from school and inquired about my day, I said, "Mama, I'm glad my skin is brown and not black because everyone says black skin is not pretty." My mother stopped what she was doing and said, "Everything about being black is beautiful, from your deep skin tone to your coarse hair, and your curvy hips what you have represents beauty."

She then told me that I needed to stand up for my friend if ever she got made fun of again because not defending her was almost just as bad as making fun of her. It was at that

moment that I started to become aware of the magnitude of my presence in spaces and understand the importance of advocacy. In High school, I was on the debate team where I read poetry and prose and debated on current social justice topics. I ended up qualifying for district and got to compete at the University of California Berkeley Debate Competition. My debate partner and I didn't place, but I specifically remember people telling us that we were the first African Americans from our school to ever make it to Berkeley. I remember thinking to myself, "Oh, this is bigger than a trophy; it's about representation." I began to incorporate this newfound courage and tenacity into every aspect of my life. My love for social justice and advocacy captivated me and inspired me to get involved with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and ultimately becoming health chair while earning my undergraduate degree. From then on, I put social justice and advocacy at the forefront of my work each and every day.

Who or what gives you the hope and motivation to keep going when you feel fear or doubt about achieving justice?

Like with every aspect of my life, when I am feeling fear and doubt, I turn to God to give me guidance. I remind myself that my steps are ordered by the Lord, and his grace and mercy will always prevail in my life. My faith encourages me and keeps me grounded. I often remind myself that what I am doing is purposeful, is bigger than me, and quite larger than the here and now. I am inspired by the many people in my life who have instilled values and morals in me. My hope and motivation for achieving social justice? The little brown children I will one day have and for all of those who have been marginalized and oppressed.



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If you could have everyone in the world do one tangible thing to help advance the cause of the issue you work on, what would it be?

Becoming self-aware! Self-awareness is important because when you have a better understanding of yourself, you are able to then make changes to areas of your character that may need to be strengthened. In doing work with communities of color and people who have been marginalized, being aware of who you are and how you might be playing a part in the oppression of others is critical. The one thing that you have control over is yourself. Society has done its part in socially constructing narratives within us that often alter our perception of how we react to things. But

if we start to critically analyze ourselves to form our narratives, recognize our bias, and understand our position in spaces, we will all be one step closer to making a difference in the world. Self-awareness isn't something that happens overnight; it's a continuous process. Often it's not a linear process either. Maya Angelou once said, "I don't know when I know enough." In other words, you don't know what you don't know. Thus, truly spending time with yourself trying to get to know who you are is an incredibly significant thing one can do to advance the cause of social justice and social change.

What advice do you have for those who care about social justice but don't know how or where to begin? This could be related to the issue you work on or even in general?

Often things that are different or new are met with resistance. Don't allow this to discourage you or cause you to give up. There is no better time to start than now because tomorrow is not promised, and your yesterday is already gone.

FUN FACTS

What are some of your hobbies?

Food, food, food!!! I love finding new restaurants and trying unique recipes. I also enjoy spending time with my friends and family and singing karaoke.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I'm quite nervous about speaking in large rooms. Although I frequently do, I am almost always very apprehensive about doing it. I believe it's the passion that drives me and soaks up the nerves because once I am on stage or at the event, the nerves disappear.



Joeall Riggins inspired by Maya Angelou