

Tarina Ahuja's speech at the 2019 Madeleine Albright Luncheon May 8, 2019

Good afternoon, everyone.

My name is Tarina Ahuja. I'm 16 and I want to be the President of the United States of America.

Saying that out loud was a risk, but, thankfully, I was introduced to the concept of risk by my parents at the age of five playing a super competitive game of Monopoly, where I decided to sell Park Place - risky.

At ten, I found myself risking rejection when I insisted that I had something to say and my voice needed to be heard. A shooting at a Wisconsin Sikh Temple left me infuriated. And as I watched the headline news, I decided to write to all of the major networks. Over and over I kept hearing the same thing - *ten is too young to share an opinion*. But finally, the Huffington Post and PBS reached out and wanted to publish my writing. My parents, they worried about the backlash that might come with it. But I decided it was worth it. My voice was worth it. The voices of victims were worth it.

Six years later, I organized a rally in front of the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement building to protest family separation. Following the rally, I strongly felt like activists need a platform to mobilize. And so, I am currently working on launching an advocate app which will be a mobile application that serves as a resource for many activists to champion the issues they care about by writing to representatives, finding protests and demonstrations near them, and finding ways to help through petitions and donations as tragedies strike around the world.

Standing up against injustice and fighting for my values is a fundamental part of how I was raised. Reflecting on my experience, I was able to take my risk because of the examples of the courageous risk-taking women who came before me.

I think about how we live in a world where risk is thought of as an option for people who have the privilege to think about it that way. But in reality, when bearing witness to injustice, hate, and ignorance, stepping up and taking a risk for change, is the only alternative.

Making change in this world isn't easy. It requires perseverance, dedication, and courage. But most of all, it requires a willingness to take risks fearlessly.

I have learned to look up to women who make it their mission to envision new realities, with their ideas and their fortitude. Just take the women in this very room. Representatives Haaland and Spanberger, who are in their service as voices for those who have been silenced, taking risks for the benefit of the American people. Senator Barbara Mikulski, the longest-serving woman in Congress ever, who has stopped at nothing to fight for childcare, equal wages, and so much more. Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Her

Excellency, Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze. A powerful leader in a country battling for a democratic future. And Ms. Tarana Burke. A woman who took immense risk to not only share her story but start a social revolution as she gave millions of women a worldwide platform to be heard.

What sets these risk takers apart is not only the fact that they took risks, but the fact that they possess a combination of unwavering empathy and grit, actualized in a call to action.

These are women of firsts, women whose stories drive me and have shown me that my ambitions are founded in reality and they are achievable.

I have been very lucky to be part of the phenomenal organization Running Start, led by the phenomenal Susannah Wellford. Running Start is an organization with a mission to launch young women into politics. I had the honor of attending its young women's high school political leadership program. And to say that it was life changing is an understatement. There, I learned everything - how to fundraise, how to network, how to advocate for change. But most of all, I learned that I and women in general belong in politics and my voice matters.

These lessons are affirmed for me every day as I am currently interning with Senator Cory Booker through an internship program run by my school, Madeira.

Our world is yearning for new voices. Voices of women who are fearless, change-oriented, have an ideal outlook on what the world could be.

All of you have taught young women like me that anything is possible. That I can be that voice one day. This is something that all young girls need to know because we are disruptors who shouldn't take *no* for an answer. All we need is the confidence, direction, and resources to channel our passions into change. This is what is at the heart of the new Disruptors Program, envisioned by NDI, Running Start, The Population Council, and Women Win.

For some young women around the world, that will involve taking a risk and going against the norm. But the Disrupter partners are committed to supporting the growth of pipelines of talented young women. Ready and able to take part in the politics that shape their lives and the lives of their communities. I am proud to be an early ambassador for this program.

Secretary Albright has long been a figure that young women like me have admired. As the first woman to serve as secretary of state, she has proven time and time again that women are a force to be reckoned with. And a force that will not back down no matter the cost. Thank you Secretary Albright for taking the risks to show women their potential for power.

Risks are necessary for progress. And women have always been courageous about taking these risks. Their families and their communities in order to change the course of history.

I don't know what my future risks will hold and where they will take me. But what I do know is this: When I am presented with a risk for social justice or equality or peace, like all of the women here, I will choose to take it. I will choose to have resolve. I will choose to stand up for my values because in the past, in the present, and in the future, this is just what women have done. And picking up the baton is what the next generation will continue to do.