**Iris Marion Young Award for Political Engagement Speech**

**Yumna Rathore**

For those of you who don’t know me – My name is Yumna Rathore. Originally from Islamabad, Pakistan, I recently graduated from University of Pittsburgh with my Master’s in Public Administration. I’m currently in Beijing working at the UNDP as an International Communications Consultant so here I am communicating from across the world! I apologize for not being here today!

When I was asked to nominate someone to deliver my speech, I didn’t have to think twice. So before I talk about myself (!), I’d like to introduce you to the one who stands before you today - my dear friend Kelsey Ida. Kelsey and I have been friends for almost 2 years now and thinking back she was there for me when I was nervous about an exam or happy about a presentation, upset about a family issue or stressed at work – she was and is a constant source of support. So Kelsey thank you once again for being there for me – literally! - and for delivering this speech!

I’d also like to thank University of Pittsburgh, especially the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs for being THE platform for distinguished professors, staff, and students. A special thanks goes to Dan Shelter, class of 2013, for nominating me for this award. I could talk about and thank more than 50 people today for the Iris Marion Young Award including Dr. Kevin Kearns and Lydia McShane, from the Johnson Institute for Responsible Leadership, Renee Kidney from Student Services, and Veronica Dristas from the Global Studies Center.

In the interest of time, I’d like to acknowledge one person today. For most people, courses are well just that – courses. Something you have to take to satisfy a requirement or to graduate. For me every course was a life lesson and every teacher a potential mentor. I remember my first and last class at GSPIA with Dr. Muge Finkel. They weren’t really classes - they were life-long lessons on social development, political activism, and self-growth.

My first day at graduate school… my first question, and I remember answering the question with “I think that….” Dr. Finkel stopped me before I could finish the sentence and she did this time and time again. Dr. Finkel’s first life lesson to me was that if you want people to listen to you and believe you – start strong. From there on out, I never started a sentence with “I think that” but instead I answered questions with “I know that…” “I don’t agree” “I agree”.

I know that’s what the Iris Marion Young Award for Political Engagement is all about. It’s about standing up for what you believe to be true and making it happen. As a 23 year-old that has seen a mere glimpse of the world, I can’t compare myself to the late Iris Marion Young, a woman committed to social justice through her grassroots political activity for women’s and workers’ rights, among other things. But I can share the little I have contributed to the cause of education and women generally.

As a grant writer for Haitian Families First, an education NGO working in Port-au-Prince, a documentary producer for a Pakistani NGO called Roshni Public School, and a board member of POWER, a Pittsburgh-based women recovery organization, I have tried to do the little I could as a full-time student through volunteering. Whether I was planning peace-building conferences as Co-President of a student-run organization called Daya or establishing a Journal so students could talk openly about religion or fundraising for scholarships as a Student Ambassador, my life has mostly been a series of experiences that have taught me the importance of education and justice first, everything else later.

It’s hard for me to think I’ve achieved even the little I did. I was that girl in high school who sat alone and had lunch. I was the girl who knew all the answers but would think ten times before speaking publicly in class. For the past 5 years, I’ve tried my best to be an advocate for myself and others and I think today just may be the reward for that effort.

Today I am thankful to my family who have invested time, energy, and money so I could get the best education. I thank them for standing by me - in my successes and failures, in my ups and downs. This award is a testament to the small steps I have taken towards discovering myself. But this award is not all about me and my work, it is also a reminder to me that there is still much more to be done.

Let’s take Pakistan as an example.

As the 6th most populous country in the world, half its population is illiterate, of which about 60% are illiterate women. Yet it spends only 2.1% of its GDP on education. Also note more than half of its population is under 24 years old. Agreed there is a LOT to be done!

But you know there is a lot to be proud of as well…

In the last few years, Pakistani WOMEN have won an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Noble Peace Prize. The Oscar award was given to Sharmeen Chinoy for her movie “Saving Face”, Habiba Nosheen’s documentary film “[Outlawed in Pakistan”](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2462414/)won the Emmy, and Malala Yousafzai an education activist, became the youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner just a month ago. These are current female activists raising awareness on critical issues around the world including domestic abuse, rape violence, and lack of education.

I long for the day where these small deeds of activism translate to catalyzing solutions.

Education is the single most valuable reason why I stand here today. If education could change me, a good education can change countless others. So thank you Gandhi Memorial Middle School, Jakarta, Headstart High School, Islamabad, Knox College, Illinois, and of course University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I end with a quote by the 17 year old Noble Peace prize winner, Pakistan’s Malala Yousafzai - I quote **“**[**Let us make our future now, and let us make our dreams tomorrow's reality.**](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/malalayous569369.html)**”** End quote.

Thank you all for today! And congratulations to the other winners.