

## **Cyrus Habib**

Someone that has demonstrated civic courage in Washington state is Cyrus Habib. He was elected as the lieutenant governor of Washington state in 2016 when he was 35 years old. Cyrus Habib's upbringing is a fascinating and inspiring story. His parents immigrated to the United states from Iran before he was born. They migrated from Iran during the Iranian revolution. They eventually ended up in Baltimore county in Maryland, where Cyrus Habib was born. He lost his eyesight and became fully blind at the age of 8 due to cancer. He is a three-time cancer survivor. After becoming blind, his family and him moved to Bellevue, Washington. In 1999, he went to Bellevue International School. He then attended Columbia University, where he earned his degree in Comparative Literature. Habib then continued his education and got his master's degree in English Literature from Oxford. Lastly, he got his law degree from Yale University. He is the first and only Iranian American to be elected for office at a state level in the United states. Before he was elected for lieutenant Governor, he was elected as a state house representative in 2012. In 2019, he was serving as co-chair of the democratic lieutenant governor association.

He has inspired a lot of people through his achievements while being disabled. Even though he lost his eyesight, he still was leading by example of what it means for someone to work hard and make changes. His parents played a big role by teaching him to be the best he can be without letting his disability hold him back. Throughout

grade school, his parents, especially his mother, inspired him. She became a lawyer and eventually a judge. She advocated and fought for her son to have equal access as the other students in school. Habib wants to provide young people in Washington with resources that also helped him tremendously when he needed it. Some of these services are Washington State Department of Services for the Blind, the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library, and the Washington State School for the Blind. He also helped keep up the quality of public-school curriculum and overall improved public-school education. He believed that primary public education was one of the main resources that helped him get into law school at Yale University. He believed that “hard work and resourcefulness can lead to each individual living up to his or her full potential” (Habib). He also wanted to use his platform to help improve public education and support services for the disabled. He often talks about how the Washington supreme court has mentioned that Washington is failing its constitutional duty by not fueling more money into the state’s public education. In order to make these changes, Habib had to figure out funding for the public-school system. He tried to tackle the funding problem by creating more jobs, which resulted in more income tax. He created this funding in hopes of combatting budgetary challenges in schools and providing social services, public safety, and environmental protection. Habib did not only think about solving short term issues, but he also thought about how he can make Washington better in the future and for the long run. He wanted to make changes in the economy, so that Washington could flourish in the future. He used his political power in the state government to create opportunities for individuals and businesses. He received the John F. Kennedy New Frontier Award for his dedication to helping people and tackling public issues. While he

was the lieutenant Governor of Washington state, he created solutions to various issues that people have in Washington state. For example, he sponsored bills that would assure paid sick leave for all workers for Washington residents. His actions speak to the fact that nothing should hold people back from making their dreams come true. He also enforced a legislation in Washington that would prevent racial discrimination in voting. The Washington voting rights act was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson during the civil rights movements on August 6, 1965. Before this legislation was enforced, most local governments were forced to use at-large voting systems. This was not a good system because it excluded certain minorities from voting. At-large voting candidates run jurisdiction wide like citywide and or countywide and not in a single winner district. In an at-large, the same group of voters can choose every school board or council member in a city or county. People of color do not have the same opportunity to choose candidates that will help them make changes in their community or elect candidates that will advocate for their needs. This is a big change for most of the minorities in Washington state communities. This law encourages democracy by having people at local levels working with elected representatives to make people of colors' voices heard. For example, before this law was put in place, residents of Yakima and Pasco sued their cities because their city council elections were racially polarized. This left Hispanic candidates unable to win seats in the councils. After Habib made some necessary changes to the election system, both cities elected their first Hispanic council member. As an African American, these changes to our election system makes me feel like my voice is heard and it matters. It also gives me hope that I can have the same type of impact on my community one day like Cyrus Habib did. Habib's actions give me the

confidence and opportunity to speak out on issues in my community that impact entire minority groups. This all gives me hope that positive change can happen. This makes me realize that we have individuals in power that can make the changes for the better. Usually during elections, I hear a lot of minorities say that their votes wouldn't matter because majority groups often out-weight people of color. But this law changes the mindset of people that look like me. All of the changes that Cyrus Habib has implemented throughout his personal and professional life portrays civic courage. I am sure that making such systemic changes were not easy and were often faced with pushback and opposition. Habib's determination to keep pushing and implementing change despite all sorts of challenges is the highest level of bravery that I have seen in our state. Habib inspires me a lot through his work. His story has motivated me to become an advocate for people who are underrepresented. I want to graduate from a university with a social work degree and become a social worker. I also aspire to go to law school after and become a juvenile attorney. My career aspirations were inspired by my life experiences much like Cyrus Habib. I moved to the United States with my parents and siblings when I was 9 years old. When I came to the United States, it was difficult for me to adjust to the American Lifestyle. My parents had to take care of 3 kids with minimal finances. My parents were also my inspiration and they played a really big role in my life. They sacrificed a lot for me to become the most successful version of myself. They were an advocate for me. They worked hard and provided me with everything I needed. When we first moved here, we stayed with my uncle for a couple days. After that, we didn't know where to go or how to get a house. We were able to get connected with resources and someone mentioned to us that there are shelters around

the Seattle area. We stayed at a shelter for a couple of days. Our days in the shelter were also not easy. My dad was separated from us because men were not allowed in the shelter. This experience inspired me to do my senior project on an issue related to homelessness in Seattle. I worked on a story map that gave information about different shelters in various parts of Seattle. The story map included a description of all the shelters in the area and what type of resources they provide. I wanted to draw from my own experiences as someone who has lived in a homeless shelter and to create a guide that would make the process easier for others. All these experiences have inspired me to pursue a social work degree and to be of service to people who are going through what I once went through. I also want to become a juvenile attorney to be a part of the change for the mass incarceration of African Americans in juvenile detention centers. I learned about civic virtue through Cyrus Habib. He was an example of what it is really like to be an advocate for people who are underrepresented and most vulnerable. He is always willing to take action and acknowledge changes that need to be done in the United States, and that should be a quality a leader should have. When he was elected, he didn't wait for others to make changes. He went out of his way and tried to take necessary action. As a leader, you should always be willing to get out of your comfort zone and demand change. He also inspired his colleagues by encouraging them to be part of the change and that's the definition of being a leader and someone who demonstrates civic courage. Cyrus Habib is a true inspiration.

## Citation

Miller, Kathleen F. "Successful Attorney Cyrus Habib Overcomes Blindness to Advocate for Others." *Edmonds, WA Patch*, Patch, 6 June 2013, [patch.com/washington/edmonds/successful-attorney-cyrus-habib-overcomes-blindness-t1fa5889376](https://patch.com/washington/edmonds/successful-attorney-cyrus-habib-overcomes-blindness-t1fa5889376) (primary source).

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