Reflections on Leadership Learning
Presented by Devangi Patel, IWL Leadership Scholar, May 14, 2010

In our first class, the women and leadership seminar taught by Dr. Hartman, we were asked two simple yet deep questions: what is leadership, and do women lead differently? While my peers spoke about their passions, I, as a pre-med student, thought, what does DNA say about leadership? Do leaders have a different hormonal make-up or is there a special leadership protein we haven’t discovered yet? I listened to my peers and their stories. I learned from Amani and her experience in religion. I learned from Martha and her experiences with the New Brunswick community, and I listen to Vanity speak about education—and I discovered that Biology says nothing about leadership.

But, we are and will always be attached to our bodies, and therefore we are attached to the pleasure, politics, and pain that come with our bodies. I learned from my peers that leadership is the culmination of experiences our bodies go through.

I spent the last two years in the Leadership Scholars Program digging into the politics of women’s bodies and health, the intersection between education, poverty and medicine, and asking myself: why do I want to be a doctor in a field that is so political and that is still practiced under a patriarchal culture and structure where extremely few women have the privilege of calling themselves deans of medicine, and even fewer do it juggling families?

Two years ago, I believed that simply knowing medicine would allow me to help people, regardless of their race and gender. Women’s health, research, and quality of life lag behind those of men. And that is because science alone does not have the power to overcome the obstacles women’s bodies face. Even though medicine proves we are just the sum of carbons and DNA and proteins, it takes leaders to translate that science into ways that are applicable to the very and many different bodies we have, in ways that are gender and culturally competent.

I stand before you a woman who has figured out her leadership purpose: I am on an expedition to make sure all women have the right to quality of life, good health, and wellness. We women, especially in medicine, cannot wait for others to do the research women’s bodies need to be healthy, we have to go out there and do it ourselves. We can’t wait for textbooks to be published to teach women’s health, we have to write them ourselves.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” There are no words more true than those. If I don’t encourage others to change the politics of medicine, we won’t see a world where women live just as healthily as men. If we do not lead our communities to change, no one else will. We scholars, on top of our basic elements that make our bodies, are now equipped with the tools to change the world, and we can leave the IWL doors with the ability to do amazing things.
In ten years, I look forward to hearing how Justine’s leadership in the Media and journalism will help create change in the workplace, which is Tiffany’s passion. And Tiffany will create change in the workplace to make it easier for Dani to climb the ranks at her law firm. I will use my leadership to better women’s health research, so that Liz can use her leadership at the CDC to educate millions of women on their bodies. We will all stay connected through our bodies and the experiences we have them, and I couldn’t ask for a more distinguished group of extraordinary women with whom I would like to stay connected.

So, Scholars, congratulations, and I wish you all good luck in the next chapters of your life- but you won’t need it.