

From Braille to Yale

When Cyrus Habib was elected to the Washington House in 2012, he became the first and only Iranian-American to hold an elected state office. But that's just a part of his story.

After two years in the Washington House, Cyrus Habib ran for the state Senate and won. This session, he served as Democratic Senate whip. But what led him to the Washington Capitol is not your average tale, nor was his path a well-traveled one.

Habib was born in Baltimore to immigrant parents who left Iran in the late '70s. He grew up in Bellevue, Washington, in the district he now serves. Habib received a bachelor's degree from Columbia, a master's from Oxford and a law degree from Yale. He is a Rhodes scholar, a Truman scholar and a Soros fellow. As a lawyer and professor he has focused on the application of technology to public policy.

Seattle magazine named him one of the "most influential" people in the greater Seattle area. The Washington Post named him one of its "40 Under 40" political rising stars in 2014. He holds a black belt in karate and plays jazz piano.

And, he has survived three bouts of cancer and lost his eyesight to the disease at age 8.

Here's the rest of his story in his own words.

State Legislatures: How has your experience fighting cancer and losing your eyesight shaped your perspective as a legislator?

Habib: In many ways, as I mature, I am more honest with myself about how these incidents in my childhood affected who I am. The fact that I lost my eyesight as a child and was able, as I like to say,

to go from braille to Yale, allows me to understand how interdependent we are. The easiest thing in the world would be to say I did this all on my own. The only problem is I know that's not true.

It was because of the work that Democrats and Republicans had done together here in Washington state and in the U.S. that I was able to take advantage of great public schools, and gain access to braille and talking books, and learn how to use a cane, get on and off a bus, plan travel routes and get around the New York subway system when I went to college.

All these services—that the private sector was never really going to provide—didn't guarantee me an outcome, but guaranteed me opportunity. In many parts of the world, and even in some parts of this country, having cancer twice as a kid and then once later on and becoming blind at age 8 would relegate you to an

institution or a life subsisting on charity.

Instead, I got an opportunity that allowed me not only to not need those social services, but actually to become a tax-paying contributor and help others get those opportunities, and then run for the Legislature and be a voice. I bring the perspective that we need to make sure every person has access to services and is supported, but also ensure that we don't pander or lower expectations. Students with disabilities should be given every accommodation they need, but should also be expected to do the same work and have the same outcomes. It's striking that right balance.

You studied literature and law. How did you get into state politics?

As a child, I always wanted to be an attorney. I'm that cliché kid who read "To Kill a Mockingbird" and loved Atticus. My mom started law school the same week I started kindergarten. So she'd be studying while I was studying. She's now a judge.

At college I became really passionate about literary theory, especially post-colonial literature. Then I got the chance to study at Oxford, and for a while I thought I wanted to be a literature professor. We were studying and talking a lot about issues in the abstract—orientalism and the concept of "the other"



NCSL Program Principal Stacy Householder interviewed Cyrus Habib for this Q&A.

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and how that informs geopolitics—when 9/11 occurred. Our nation's response, with the invasion of Iraq, brought home to me the fact that, as important as I think it is to root our thinking in some kind of thoughtful, considered theory, ultimately, the decisions that make a huge difference in human lives are made in the arena of politics. That impelled me to go to law school, as I had originally planned.

A huge part of public service, especially elected office, is being able to connect the dots and clarify and communicate how education policy connects to human services, to health care, to infrastructure, investment and research, knowledge, trade. Literature gave me a more global perspective that has been helpful in my ability to communicate this position.

What are your top legislative priorities?

Obviously, first and foremost is: How do I do this job as well as I can and earn the faith of the people who put me here?

I'm very passionate about the need for cancer research. We're at an incredible moment right now because of immunotherapy research and other breakthroughs. I do believe that in my lifetime most, if not all, cancers will be treatable and even curable. I've introduced a bill here in Washington to provide over \$20 million a year to cancer research.

I'm also trying to figure out how I can help move the needle on disability employment in Washington state. And also to help other Iranian-Americans nationally look to running for office and being respected in their own right as Americans.

How did your immigrant parents shape your attitudes on citizenship?

New Americans have such a strong love of this country because we have something to compare it to. We love the institutions that make this country great. We're certainly able to point out where there's room for improvement, yet with a real fundamental patriotism.

You teach courses on the convergence of technology and public policy. What does this mean, and how do you apply it to governing?

It's about this growing intellectual-property-driven economy where we're no

longer selling the intellectual property, we are retaining it and licensing it. This is how books have been published, records have been released. You've seen this in the arts around copyright. And you've seen it increasingly with respect to patents. This forces us to think in new ways about our laws. You see state legislatures really thinking about how to tax the licensing of intellectual property. Do you tax it as a service? Do you tax it as sales goods? So that's one level.

Another level is entrepreneurship and the sharing economy. I've introduced some bills that relate to this. I authored our state's equity crowd funding law. Another bill I'm working on is about Uber and Lyft, the ride share economy.

These topics really relate to the shifting economy. Crowd funding is crowd source capital, right? It is the democratization of capital. It's you or I as people who may not be venture capitalists or big financial institutions being able to invest and help an entrepreneur get off the ground. So rather than the kind of professionalization that we've seen for decades, you see the rise of amateurs working in independent, part-time arrangements to earn a living.

These all pose a number of policy questions. If we begin to shift toward this highly independent contractor model, what becomes of all of the years of public policy we've created around employment?

What about retirement security? What about industrial insurance coverage to protect you from injury? What about the minimum wage and paid sick leave that don't really apply to an independent contractor? It's not like an Uber driver has a minimum wage.

I think it's interesting that as we, particularly in the Democratic Party, are having a very overdue discussion around wage and benefit issues, the economy is also shifting away from direct employment. Are we looking far enough ahead to figure out what sorts of worker protections and economic stability and security those people will have, and what the model might look like?

Similarly with equity crowd funding, how do you make sure that people have the opportunity to invest in ways that are both fruitful and safe at the same time?



"I'm that cliché kid who read 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and loved Atticus."



You want to protect them from fraud, but part of investing is taking huge risks and hopefully seeing huge upsides. And so where do you strike that balance?

What's this about an idea you got watching John Oliver, dubbed YouTube testimony?

This is another convergence of technology and public policy. Since I was elected a few years ago, I noticed just how challenging it is for ordinary people to make their way to the Capitol to testify. And it occurred to me, why can't we figure out a way for people to get their voices heard without physically showing up?

Then I saw the net neutrality clip from the segment that John Oliver did. He explained this otherwise obscure topic in a way that got people excited, particularly young people. He gave the FCC Web address where people could submit comments, and there were over a million in the first few days—so many that it crashed their server.

If something as esoteric as net neutrality can get that much excitement, enthusiasm and activism, then we're doing bills all the time that have the potential for even more input—marijuana reform, tuition changes, all things that affect a lot of people who may not have paid lobbyists and who may not be able to come down and testify. So I thought if the FCC can do this, then we really ought to be able to do it as well at the state level.

So I introduced this bill called "Legislative YouTube." It's a way that people can submit video testimony to the Legislature and have it available to the relevant legislators on that committee—creating that system through a mobile app and a website.

As the rest of the economy is shifting and modernizing, we too need to be thinking about how government is using the tools of technology to make itself more accessible and more convenient.

What does being named one of the "40 under 40" by the Washington Post mean to you?

I was totally surprised and flattered to be included in that list. But the vast majority of the people whom I represent are judging me based on a different set of criteria—on my votes, bills I introduce, my

availability to them and the constituent service we provide.

When you think about 40 under 40, it's only valuable if we're thinking about who can represent some of the positions and the views of younger people, issues that may be significantly underrepresented in government. ... I invite bringing that under-40 perspective to government. That's my hope for how I can retroactively earn that accolade. One of the things I really like is the ability—which I think is a real value of NCSL—to work with other young legislators around the country on some of these ideas.

What has been your greatest triumph so far?

I feel I have triumphed over my lack of willingness to talk about being blind and having had cancer and what has happened to me. I think the same set of high expectations that were so crucial for me as a kid also led to a desire to assimilate and not have my blindness define me. It became really difficult for me to talk about it, and to be emotionally honest with even close friends about that. But I've become a lot more comfortable reflecting on my own story and what role these challenges have played in that story, and ultimately developing a sense of humor about it.

A few weeks ago when I passed my first bill of the year in the Senate, a tradition here says that you give everyone in the Senate a gift. So I gave everyone a pair of sunglasses, which is what I wear. We have a photo of all of us wearing sunglasses on the Senate floor with the governor. I quipped that they needed them because "our future is so bright."

What would surprise people most about you?

I'm a published photographer. When I was in college I got the opportunity to do a photography piece for Princeton Architectural Press to be included in a book about New York City. It was a really awesome opportunity to use my other senses, to try to give a sense of what I thought was photogenic, what I thought would make a good photo as I walked around a city that is very, very poly-sensory—lots of smells, lots of sounds, lots of sights. I would imagine that probably surprises people.