

# WHY I BECAME AN ACTIVIST

Stories of Everyday Heroes Putting Their Families  
First — and Helping Change the Rules for All of Us



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## CREDITS

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## THE POWER BEHIND OUR WINS



Our nation urges us to follow doctor's orders, to be good parents and good children to our parents. Yet doing exactly that can end a job or take away badly needed wages.

The problem continues - but broad and diverse coalitions in 25 locations have won paid sick days laws. More than 10 million people have new access to time to care for a routine personal or family illness, get a check-up, or find help after domestic or sexual violence. Millions who already had paid sick days see big improvements: they can use their time to care for a sick family member, get pay for the first day absent, or take a sick day without being disciplined.

Our nation is also failing people who occasionally need a longer leave to welcome a new child or deal with a serious personal or family illness. Only 13 percent of employees receive paid family leave from their employers, and only 40 percent have access to temporary disability insurance.

But today three states have won family and medical leave insurance funds, providing access to more than 17 million people. And campaigns for many more state programs are in the works.

The power behind these wins is activism by people with personal experience of the problem. Meet a dozen of these leaders from Family Values @ Work campaigns - everyday heroes working to put their families first and changing the rules for all of us.

## Maria Fortes New Bedford, Massachusetts



**“People felt  
empowered that  
their vote counted.”**

An immigrant from Cape Verde, Maria Fortes became involved as a volunteer with the Coalition for Social Justice helping with voter registration and turnout. When the statewide Earned Sick Time campaign launched, Maria stepped up her involvement and was hired as an organizer. Her team went door-to-door, especially in the Cape Verdean, Spanish and Portuguese communities, collecting signatures and then back to remind people to vote. They talked to 4,692 people – and got 4,062 of them to become members of CSJ.

“I love talking to people one on one, sharing information and collecting heartfelt stories,” she said. She’d had her own encounter with the issue. In 2013 when she had a miscarriage at the age of 44. “It was a devastating period,” she said. “Although I had been working at my job as a social worker for a long time, I still felt worried about my time off. But at least I earned sick time.” Most of the families she worked with did not – as she herself did not in earlier jobs. “Winning Earned Sick Time is an enormous burden lifted from these families,” she said.

The victory of the ballot initiative in November 2014 left Maria feeling “hopeful and excited. We the people can truly make things happen if we organize and send a message that all humans deserve this, especially if we are all working to contribute to our society. People were grateful and excited that we had won. They felt empowered that their vote counted. My daughter, an assistant manager at a retail store, was very happy for the impact this will have, especially for young, single parents.”

## Natasha West-Baker Seattle, Washington



**“The campaign  
helped me  
recognize that I  
have power.”**

Natasha learned about the Seattle paid sick days campaign while working at a major grocery store in 2010. Although workers earned paid sick days, she says, “it was almost unusable; you had to be sick for three consecutive days to receive your sick pay.” Because Natasha was the sole income earner for her family, she often worked ill.

Natasha became involved when her UFCW union representative asked her to share her story. “I always felt like our sick leave policy was an issue,” she said, “but it took someone asking me to get involved before I realized there were a lot of people who felt the same way.” After that she told her story “to anyone who would listen, to city council, to union members, at rallies, on community panel discussions, on the news. I believe I gave a face and a voice to the cause. It was the voice of a woman, a mother, a worker, a person of color, and a student. It helped people connect with the issue.”

Being a part of this movement meant the world to Natasha. “It restored my faith in the ability of individuals to impact systemic change. It was comforting to know that so many people were fighting to make sure that everyone had access to this basic human right. Being a part of this campaign helped my find my voice and recognize that I have power and that power can change things for the better.”



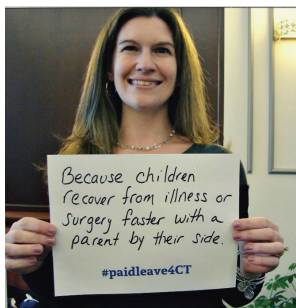
**“I didn’t want other women  
to go through what I did.”**

Inneshia first heard about the paid family leave insurance (PFLI) campaign in New York at an 1199 SEIU conference for home health aides. When an organizer asked people to share their stories, Inneshia described what happened after the birth of her second child in 2012. Her employer failed to send in the paperwork for Inneshia to access temporary disability insurance; she had to go back to work two weeks after delivery to pay the bills. Her union rep told her she needed to take time to heal. Inneshia experienced depression and sought therapy. In addition to healing, she needed time to bond with her infant – just what the New York Paid Family Leave Insurance campaign was fighting for.

Inneshia went on to become an 1199 delegate, trained to fight for others’ rights on the job. She began collecting post cards in support of the PFLI campaign. At first she says she was reluctant to share her story publicly. “But I realized I needed to tell it so other women would not have to go through what I did,” she says, “so they can have a baby without financial hardship and have time to bond.” Inneshia spoke at a Leave event with Valerie Jarrett and then at other campaign press events.

“I was extremely nervous the first few times,” she says, “but it got a little easier each time. I gained a lot of confidence.” Recently the union hired her as a home care organizer.

## Sara Orris Stratford, Connecticut



**“I wear the badge of  
‘activist’ proudly.”**

Sara Orris, a teacher for 14 years, has an 11-year-old daughter, Natalie, with a rare genetic condition. Last year after a grueling surgery and hospital stay, Natalie needed around-the-clock care for six weeks. Sara had five “critical illness” days and then applied for FMLA – with no pay. “My daughter needed me. She still needed me when I returned to work. I was exhausted and emotionally spent. But the medical bills were already arriving.”

A friend suggested Sara get involved with the Campaign for Paid Family Leave. She researched the coalition and agreed to talk to a reporter. “I was nervous but I did not hesitate,” she said. “I was angry that I actually had had to consider, for even a moment, choosing work over my daughter’s care.”

Sara has now spoken to several news outlets, participated in events at the Capital, and educated whoever she could. “I am thrilled to be able to turn what was an extremely stressful situation into something positive,” she said.

Sara is disappointed the bill hasn’t passed yet but is glad they made progress and hopes for passage next session. She experienced an outpouring of support and raised awareness about the disease. Says Sara: “At one point someone called me an ‘activist’ and I decided to wear that badge proudly. I am awed at how something as simple as using my voice could impact many people’s lives.”

As for Natalie, “She is happy her story may make it possible for all parents to be with their children when they go through something terrifying like surgery.”





**“Each day it felt like we  
were taking a step  
forward and never back.”**

Tomas had been a member of Restaurant Opportunities Center DC when an organizer from the Employment Justice Center invited him to be part of the paid sick days campaign. The issue hit home. Tomas had never had paid sick days in his restaurant or cleaning jobs. “You budget for the amounts that you’ll earn and have to pay and when you miss a day because you’re sick, the balance is off,” he says.

Before coming to the U.S., Tomas had been an active union member in El Salvador. He dove into the paid sick days campaign. “We planned rallies, passed out flyers and held meetings where we asked members to invite their friends and family. We also held testimony preparation meetings with people who had suffered because they didn’t have paid sick days. I appeared several times in the media. Each day it felt like we were taking a step forward and never back because each day you learn a little more.”

Tomas also liked the connections he made with others involved in the campaign. He was really pleased when they won: “There were lots of people who were against us and even still, it passed and we’d won a victory. My life has totally changed; I feel more sure when I apply for a job because I know about the laws and policies that affect me and how to speak up if they aren’t respected, and so my earnings are more secure. Of course I’m going to continue working with community organizations because it’s the only way to be able to help your fellow man.” He was part of the team that passed a wage theft ordinance six months later. And he’s involved in enforcement efforts “because we understand that a law that is just on paper without enforcement is dead words.”

Tomas says, “My family back home admires me and they praise me for the victories that we’ve had. They come here as immigrants and they leave as immigrants because they spend their whole life working, but we’re working for others.”

**Kim Schofield**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**

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**“Passing this bill will  
be an awakening.”**

Kim first heard of the Family Care Act, which would ensure those who earn paid sick days can use the time to care for family members, from her state senator, who referred her to Atlanta 9to5. As someone who'd been living with lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease, Kim says she felt “compelled to become connected and engaged as an activist.” She'd heard many stories of people with lupus who needed assistance from family members to go to doctor's appointments but the family member couldn't use their sick time. “No one should have to choose between the job they need and people they love,” she says.

Kim is active educating the community, meeting with legislators and talking to the media about the Family Care Act. She's given presentations for Lupus Foundation outreach events and participated in grassroots lobby day event.

Says Kim, “It is important for me to become a change agent and solution strategist so that we promote the value of investing in a work culture that supports the relevant needs of its employees. Passing this bill will be a victory for all. It will send a message that corporate America has moved from profits and ROI to valuing and supporting the needs of its employees. It will be an awakening!”

Kim describes her involvement as “a transformative experience.” Her daughter is also intentional about working for companies that promote family values so she can have the flexibility to assist her mother should the need arise.

## David Deary Chepachet, Rhode Island



**“Get out there and  
make an impact.”**

Life changed dramatically for David and his wife when their second son, Caleb, was born with a rare genetic brain malformation that left him profoundly disabled. Early on they met a parent advocate from the RI Parent Information Network (RIPIN) who helped them navigate available resources and also told them about a bill to establish Temporary Caregiver Insurance (TCI), a way for parents like them to draw income while caring for a new or seriously ill child. David became involved and began sharing his story with legislators and the public.

Having a role with the coalition “was very empowering,” said David. “Sharing what our life involved helped us gain confidence in exposing everyone to what normal was for us. We also felt as though we were doing our part for other families like ours struggling to coordinate work, family and being at the hospital.”

“We were thrilled when the bill was passed,” David said. “Our son was at the signing in the state house! We learned, if you want to make an impact, then get out there and make an impact.” In the process, David felt honored to meet the advocates behind the scenes who drive change. “We have learned that most people are inherently compassionate and want to help. But some search for ways to help without being asked. It’s these people that carry the deepest impact.”

**Safiyyah A. Muhammad**  
**East Orange, New Jersey**

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**“For the first time in 30 years I  
have earned sick days.”**

Safiyyah remembers walking by a NJ Citizen Action table at a NJ Black Issues Convention, where she was receiving an award for peer support to parents of kids with special needs, and the word “SICK” caught her eye. Safiyyah knew and trusted Citizen Action. She thought the plan for Earned Sick Days was ingenious, and shared a story of taking her sick child on two buses to work “because I was afraid of losing my job. Nearly 20 years later, not much had changed. As a wife and a mother of children with disabilities, I would always go to work sick because I knew I’d lose wages.”

Safiyyah became involved in the Earned Sick Days campaign, speaking out at city council meetings in Newark and East Orange and participating in a round table discussion with Labor Secretary Tom Perez. Says Safiyyah, “I carry brochures and pamphlets in my minivan and share them with friends and family and at every meeting I attend. I also hit the streets.” And she uses social media extensively.

“We have great friends in our legislators who have helped to get municipal ordinances passed,” Safiyyah noted. “Yet, it is just as important for the American people to lend their voices.” Recently she got a job with a local non-profit in East Orange, where earned sick days passed. “This is the first time, in thirty years in the workforce, that I have earned sick days. I was ecstatic. I felt a sense of security, relief and assurance.”

Her activism is spilling over, Safiyyah says. “Friends and family members say that, like me, they need to get more involved in their communities.”

## Fabiola Gonzalez Denver, Colorado



**“Value home life as  
much as work life.”**

Fabiola had been working at her retail job for four years when her dad became ill. She took a week when he had surgery, but had to go back because she couldn't afford unpaid time. Her dad never regained consciousness. “The doctor called me at work to say he was brain dead,” she said. “I had to make decisions about life support from my work phone. No one should have to make such a huge decision that way.”

Just 11 months later, Fabiola's brother passed away. She had only three days off. “My brother was cremated and his ashes taken to Mexico,” she said. “I still don't know where he is buried. I left that company shortly after.”

Then Fabiola met someone from Colorado 9to5. “Once we started talking, a lot of stuff they were fighting for was stuff I had been through. It took me almost two years to finally recover financially from the time I took for my father and brother, not to mention that the [employer was] threatening my job.” The coalition led by Colorado 9to5 launched a campaign for family and medical leave insurance in 2014. Fabiola did phone banking, circulated post cards, talked with state reps, testified three times. “It was a little nerve-racking at first, but well worth it.”

Fabiola felt really proud that the campaign made so much headway. Her mother and partner are also proud of her. Becoming active changed how Fabiola looked for a new job. This year her stepdad became very ill and she needed to take three weeks to care for him before he passed away. “I wanted a company that valued my home life as much as my work life.”

As a mother of a 13-year-old son with special needs, Fabiola knows she may face leave issues again. She will continue being an activist. “If I could save someone else from going through what I went through, that would make it worth it.”

**Emanuel McCray**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



**“I lost my job  
because of the days  
I was ill.”**

Having cancer is stressful enough – but it’s even worse when you have no paid sick days to see a doctor or receive treatment without being docked your pay. Outside of the military, none of the jobs Emanuel McCray has held included paid sick days – or if they did, you had to wait a year to be eligible. At his last full-time job at Walmart, Emanuel says, “By the time I made a year, I lost my job because I was penalized for the days I was ill and could not work.”

Emanuel met a group called United Workers in Baltimore when he lost his job at the ESPN Zone owned by Disney and became involved in the Fair Development campaign in the city’s Inner Harbor. He then became a leader organizer in the paid sick days campaign.

“It meant a lot from my personal experience of having to deal with a major health issue like Hodgkins Lymphoma,” Emanuel said. He wanted to know he and everyone else could access paid sick days in order to “catch up financially and get back on my own in society.”

Emmanuel feels happy that workers in Montgomery County have won paid sick days. “I wasn’t able to be a support for my children,” he said. Now he hopes that will change.



**“I feel a sense of urgency  
to make a difference.”**

Nancy Yarbrough knew exactly where she should be when her mother’s health deteriorated – at her side in the hospital. That meant a month without pay. So when she met the head of Wisconsin 9to5 and heard their coalition was planning a campaign for family and medical leave insurance, Nancy knew she had to be involved. “I had a sense of urgency to make a difference,” she said. “At the time, I felt isolated and alone with the financial burden I was faced with after the passing of my mother. But now I see there are a number of workers standing in solidarity against this injustice.”

Nancy’s involvement has meant canvassing door-to-door, talking with neighbors, colleagues and family members, getting signers on petitions and pledge cards, attending rallies and community events, and “working closely with staff to strategically think about ways to inform others about paid family leave.” Several state legislators recently introduced the bill.

For Nancy, being an activist “continues to help me push pass the hurt and pain in my mother’s honor.” She wants to prevent others from having to go through the difficulty she experienced. And she knows that her two teenage daughters “are looking up to me daily, very proud of the grassroots work I have been doing. They are learning that laws can change by standing up together.”

## Yair Buendia Corvallis, Oregon



**“It was an honor to  
be part of the group  
speaking out.”**

Yair was a high school student and member of Juventud Faceta, a Latino youth group in Eugene, when he learned of the paid sick days campaign. This was an issue that deeply affected families in his community. Because his mother had no paid sick days, Yair several times had to miss school to stay with his younger brother, who has a disorder that can cause severe nose bleeds.

“Missing tests or math work was really hard, said Yair. “Teachers were strict about the times I could take tests and I was already behind.”

Yair testified at the Eugene City Council and later in front of the state legislature, gathered signatures, made signs and did photo shoots to engage his community. He also participated in a group opinion piece for the local paper.

Activism “made me develop my own leadership skills,” Yair said. “Being able to impact others’ lives was really special. It was an honor to be a part of the group speaking out.”

After the campaign won in Eugene and statewide, Yair knows his young siblings won’t have to worry about missing school and his mom won’t have to work sick. Now 19 and in college, Yair can access sick days on his job “and still earn money to help me pay for books and living expenses at college.” He’s now fighting for tuition equity.



## TOWARDS NATIONAL INNOVATION



Secretary of Labor Tom Perez recently said, "...as is so often the case on important public policy issues, we need states and localities to be the incubators of innovation. It's their efforts ... that will pave the way for national reform."

And it is the efforts of activists like these who are driving that innovation. Their work will lead to national policies that can create an economy that works for everyone. These policies include:

- The **Healthy Families Act**, which will ensure workers can earn up to 7 paid sick days to care for themselves or a family member.
- The **FAMILY Act**, which will create a social insurance fund that enables workers to draw a significant portion of their wages while out on family or medical leave.

We applaud the thousands of activists around the country who are leading the charge by acting together.

To find out how you can get involved, go to [familyvaluesatwork.org](http://familyvaluesatwork.org)