
# CYRUS HABIB

## "Nothing Was Impossible"

By Bob Young

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Going into junior high school, Kamyar Habib flirted with reinventing himself. It wouldn't be the last time. He was a blind, cancer-surviving Iranian American living in a Seattle suburb. And he was tired of kids making fun of his name by calling him "Caviar." "You're right, I'm a delicacy," he'd snap back. Armored wit had become his first line of defense.

He didn't have a middle name, so he gave himself one, after a daring leader of ancient Persia, Cyrus the Great. He went by "K.C." which added a hint of hipness to a bookish teenager who played jazz piano.

By the time he got to New York City and Columbia University at 18, he was fully "Cyrus." Debonair in designer clothes and sunglasses, he became a published photographer. "In New York you can be a new man," Habib says, quoting the musical "Hamilton."

He won a scholarship to Oxford, the oldest university in the English-speaking world, and aspired to be a literature professor. Then, he took a hard turn from academia's abstractions toward the corridors of power. He opted to become an attorney and headed to Yale, where he edited the law journal, while working, in his spare time, for Google in London and Goldman Sachs on Wall Street.

In 2012, Habib veered into politics, after sizing up the current crop of office holders, and concluding, I can do that. Just four years later, he became Washington's lieutenant governor, and the first Iranian American elected to a statewide office in the U.S.

He was 35.

His rise was hailed as "meteoric." He could be governor before he was 40, a *New York Times* columnist wrote. He might be the country's first blind president, his friend Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of *Prozac Nation*, mused. He summited Mount Kilimanjaro in 2019, an apt metaphor for his ambition.

Then he shocked his colleagues. On March 19, 2020, Habib announced his plans to walk away from public office. He would take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, in hopes of wearing the collar of a Catholic priest.

He had felt his own pride swelling. He was treated like a celebrity in a culture

that couldn't get enough Kardashians. "It came very cheaply," he said, of the way he was courted by a New York literary agent trying to commodify his story.

He had been put on a pedestal. And he admitted to himself he liked it. If he did move into the governor's office, he worried about its intoxicating grip. Stepping away from politics pre-emptively, he said, was like "giving your car keys to someone before you start drinking."

Habib led a Washington delegation to India, where they had a 90-minute audience with the Dalai Lama. *Washington State Leadership Board*

His devotion to Catholicism—specifically, its Jesuit order—was influenced by his father's death four years earlier. But it was an intellectual decision as much as an emotional one. With his brash skepticism honed in New York, and lawyer's training, he carried on a "c'mon, really?" debate with himself. Every critical thought that others might have, he weighed and measured himself.

"It's the most radical truth I know," Habib says, "the idea of loving your enemies, the idea of sacrificing for another, these are radical ideas without precedent, that came into this world unexpectedly and changed the course of human history."

It's not a step down, says Bob Ellis, who was Habib's most influential high-school teacher. "What he's specialized in, is expansion of his life."


Caroline Kennedy gave Habib a JFK New Frontier Award in February 2020. Other award winners include Stacey Abrams and Pete Buttigieg. *Twitter*

Still, it's not a given that as Habib reaches for the mystical, he'll make it through the arduous Jesuit training. The late John Spellman, a Washington governor of resolute character, did not, lasting just nine months in the decade-long process.

On a visit to the California novitiate where he will study, Habib suggested that he donate a Roomba robot vacuum so that he and other candidates for priesthood could use cleaning time for more pious pursuits.

The response of the others amounted to: "'Dude, it's not about that. This is going to be an interesting transition for you."

KAMYAR (*kam-ee-are*) HABIBELAHIAN (*hah-beeb-eh-lah-hee-en*) was born in Baltimore County, Maryland—once a colony founded as a sanctuary for Catholics persecuted in England. His young parents had immigrated to the U.S. from Iran. His magnetic "braille to Yale" story owes much to their fearless love for their only child.

Mohammad "Mo" Habibelahian and Susan Amini both came from affluent families who were neighbors in Tehran, Iran's largest city. Both were raised in non-practicing Muslim homes.

Mo's father rose from young apprentice to owner of a marble business, with its own mines and factories; he also developed real estate. Mo was the middle of five children, all sent to England or the United States to be educated. He came to Seattle in 1970 to study civil engineering at the University of Washington. The American firm that hired him after graduate school would eventually send him to Iran on assignment. There, he began dating his younger sister's best friend, Susan Amini.

Governor Jay Inslee with Mo Habib and Susan Amini. *Facebook*

Her father was an engineer, in a family of soldiers. Her mother was from a well-educated Tehran family. (One of her cousins is John Sharify, an award-winning TV journalist in Seattle.) Susan went to a Catholic school, where she would later teach English while she was an undergraduate at Tehran University. She spent summers at the Institut Catholique de Paris, living in a dorm run by nuns. She became fluent in her third language, French.

Then came 1979, when Iranians revolted at the corruption of the country's monarch, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, known as the Shah. The revolt, led by clergy and the working class, drove the Shah into exile. It created an Islamic state, run by Ayatollah Khomeini. After President Jimmy Carter allowed the Shah to receive cancer treatments in the U.S., angry revolutionaries seized the American embassy in Tehran and held its staff hostage.

Mo and Susan were by this time engaged. But given the risk of being conscripted into Iran's army—at war with neighboring Iraq—Mo moved back to the United States, settling in the Baltimore suburbs.

He and Susan were married by proxy. He went to the Iranian consulate in Washington, D.C., and filled out the necessary forms. His father stood in for him in a February 1980 ceremony. Susan went to Paris, and back to the nuns' dorm, where she had stayed during summers. She waited and waited for her visa to the U.S. She finally came in November 1980. Kamyar was born in late August the next year.

After Ayatollah Khomeini became Iran's "Supreme Leader" in 1979, Mo Habib and Susan Amini immigrated to the U.S. and soon welcomed a son. *Wikimedia Commons*

Despite tensions between the U.S. and Iran, Mo and Susan were treated well by their American neighbors. That became especially evident when their son was born with a rare cancer, retinoblastoma, caused by a genetic mutation. Neighbors and friends "adopted my parents, and became part of our extended family," the lieutenant governor recalls. Many were Catholic. The newcomers were soon showered with prayers, and found themselves going to Mass, and making a pilgrimage to a local saint's shrine—although the Habibelahians didn't convert.

Kamyar began chemotherapy and radiation treatment to keep the cancer from spreading. He lost sight in his left eye, first, when he was 2.

The next year, his father was diagnosed with a rare cancer and began treatment.

Born in 1981, Habib received the Helen Keller Achievement Award from the American Federation of the Blind in 2019. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

Habib's mother vividly recalls trips to hospital wards, and one scene in particular. A teenage girl, who had lost a leg to cancer, was in her bed, receiving chemotherapy. But she was studying for an exam with fierce determination. "And this picture never left my mind," she says, "of how strong you can be in the middle of this pain."

In a testament to his parents, the memories that spring to mind for their son are not of his life-threatening disease. "They filled my life with so much

joy and distraction and tried for me to have just such a normal childhood," he recalls. "They really shielded me from what was going on, and how bad it was, and how afraid they were."

Susan Amini had long been interested in the American legal system, thanks to reruns of "Perry Mason" on television in Tehran. In Iran's legal system, the burden was on the accused to prove their innocence. She was fascinated by the courtroom drama's depiction of presumed innocence, rules of evidence, and jury trials. She saw that the most powerless person could have a voice in court.

Susan Amini was inspired to become an attorney after seeing Raymond Burr play "Perry Mason" on Iranian television. *CBS*

She was in her second year at the University of Maryland Law School when her world "went topsy-turvy." Doctors had said that if Kamyar's cancer did not recur in a couple years, he should be in the clear. He was just past the calendar's danger zone. "And here it was," she recalls. Back again.

The family saw a specialist in New York. The news was grim. Little could be done to save their son's eyesight. On the drive home, while Kamyar slept in the car, his parents were speechless. They just cried. Amini recalls thinking, "If we all died at the same time, it would be a blessing."

Habib had eyesight until 1989 and later joked that, in his mind, everyone still looked like Boy George or Cyndi Lauper. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

She took life one-half day at a time. Any more would've been too distracting. By the summer of 1989, she had finished her classes and Kamyar was fully blind. Mo thought a change would do them good. There was so much sadness in Maryland. Mo's brother lived in Seattle, and Mo had friends in the area from his UW days. The family made a scouting trip in August. Seattle sparkled. Mo's pitch was perfect. They moved west in September.

Kamyar enrolled in Bellevue's Somerset Elementary School. It would be the scene of a profound lesson.

THERE ARE TWO ANECDOTES Cyrus Habib often tells about his life.

One is that through the age of 8 he could still see in his right eye. So, all of his visual memories are of the 1980s. And everyone, in his mind, looks like Cyndi Lauper or Boy George.

Habib survived cancer and endured treatments but eventually lost his sight. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

The other involves the day he came home from Somerset Elementary and complained to his mom that during recess he wasn't allowed to play with the other kids on the jungle gym. Instead, a recess monitor kept the blind third-grader close by. Amini wanted equal, not special treatment for her son. Fresh out of law school, she went to the principal's office, with her son in tow. She offered to sign a waiver releasing the school of liability if her son got hurt. She promised to teach him the terrain. Then, mother, father and son spent evenings and weekends learning how to navigate the playground and jungle gym.

At times, Amini would visit the school and see her son high above his peers on the jungle gym. Her first impulse was, "What have I done?"

But a broken arm, she surmised, would mend more easily than a broken spirit. She and her husband had decided, "not to make our fear his."

It wasn't easy. Their instinct was to hold their son tightly. But they didn't want to hold him back because of their ideas of what he couldn't do. Their minds' limitations should not become his. They had to open doors, to education, arts, music and more, and let him "fly as far and high" as he could.

Before he became a rabid reader, Kamyar was introduced to music, starting piano lessons at 5. Soon after, he got his most prized possession. His parents gave him a cassette tape recorder—and it was a dual-deck model so one cassette could record from the other. "That was high tech, right, back then," he recalls. He'd tune into Casey Kasem's weekly radio countdown of Top 40 hits, and make his own mix tapes.

While other kids learned cursive writing, he learned braille. With the confidence his parents gave him, he took up downhill skiing. His dad signed up to be a parent-chaperone at ski school to keep an eye on him. He'd call his mom *apres ski*, excited to tell her he fell 20 feet that day. Great, she'd say, do it again.

In school, other kids teased him at times, throwing things at him from across

Habib also took up martial arts after losing his vision. "We were afraid of a lot of things. But we had to find a way for Cyrus to be able to have those experiences that he wished to have," his mother said. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

the room, and holding up fingers in front of him and asking how many he saw. In response, he developed a kind of armor. "I learned to rely on my intelligence and I think that I developed a kind of arrogance around being smart that was rooted in that kind of insecurity. It became my crutch. It became, you know, the kind of thing that I would belittle others for if I felt at all threatened or excluded, because I knew that was the terrain where I had an advantage."

For sixth grade, he enrolled in Bellevue's International School, a new public school that combined middle school and high school, and featured a program of core classes—including French—that students would take all seven years. Some courses, such as U.S. history, were even taught in French.

Middle names are not traditional in Persian culture. Without one in America, Kamyar felt left out. He had asked his parents a few years earlier if he could have one. He chose Cyrus, after the founder of the first Persian empire more than 2,500 years ago, a conquering ruler known for mercy.

His mom went to court to add the new middle name. She returned in a few years to shorten the family's last name. Habibelahian was actually two words in Farsi, Iran's predominant language. And it was cumbersome in any form, with Kamyar applying for language-immersion camps and more. (He had finished first in a national French exam and won a scholarship to a summer school in Minnesota.) He was also about to step out in public as a musician. His parents lopped off the second half of his surname.

As far back as elementary school, Habib kept track of presidential elections. "He was our encyclopedia," Susan Amini recalls. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

"I kind of wanted to be a new person and project myself differently," Habib

says of the new initials he went by, which "sounded cool as a piano player." His lessons had evolved under a new teacher from practicing endless scales and finger exercises to learning how to improvise. From there, it was a short stretch to blues, boogie and jazz.

He ended up getting business cards, engraved "K.C. Habib." He played at Nordstrom, for hours at a time, all by memory. He supplied music for a wedding reception in Seattle's tallest skyscraper. "He's a beautiful, incredible piano player," says Bob Ellis, who taught history, French, and physical education at the International School.

"NOTHING WAS IMPOSSIBLE" for K.C., says Ellis. He wasn't afraid of anything. "This guy doesn't know he can't do it. So, he figures it out."

It helped to have a teacher like Ellis, who typed up Habib's tests in braille, believing he should take them at the same time and place as his classmates.

His best friend at the International School was Les Carpenter. Les was a year older and musical. K.C. looked up to him. "They were a good pair," Susan Amini says. Carpenter still thinks of them watching "Pulp Fiction" together while they were middle schoolers. They'd get shushed and Carpenter would say, "Why? I'm explaining the movie."

Their friendship revolved mostly around politics, which ran in Carpenter's blood. His grandmother was a journalist who had gone to work for fellow Texan, Vice President Lyndon Johnson. On the flight back to Washington, D.C. after John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Liz Carpenter's instincts prodded her to pull out a pad and pencil. She knew reporters would be waiting on the tarmac, and she wanted the new president to be ready. The 58 words she jotted down came to her, as if "God-given." Standing in the glare of floodlights as Kennedy's casket was being removed from Air Force One, Johnson delivered Carpenter's closing lines with humble solemnity: "I will do my best. That's all I can do. I ask for your help—and God's."

In high school, "K.C." Habib and his friend Les Carpenter jammed with the house band at The Scarlet Tree, a Seattle bar and restaurant known for dishing out live blues, jazz and rock.
*Office of the Lt. Gov.*

She would go on to help lead the national campaign for an Equal Rights

Amendment. Ann Richards, the former Texas governor, described her longtime friend as "the tilt-a-whirl at the State Fair with all the lights on and the music." Except, "with Liz, the ride never comes to an end."

The bond between her grandson and K.C. involved a lot of arm-waving debate. Whatever the issue of the day was—affirmative action, funding for AIDS research, banning landmines—they were trying to solve the world's problems. Loudly, at times. "We'd argue super passionately and it would be really uncomfortable for whoever else was riding in the car," recalls Les Carpenter, now an Episcopal priest in Texas.

They drove in "Rocinante," Carpenter's old Chevy (named after Don Quixote's steed), to The Scarlet Tree in North Seattle. The house band at the restaurant and bar would let teenagers sit in one night a week. Most were students of one of the guys in the house band. They played the blues, with K.C. on keyboard and Les on guitar. "It was a thrill because we were playing with real musicians in a quality dive bar," Carpenter says.

"It was a thrill because we were playing with real musicians in a quality dive bar," says Les Carpenter, who became an Episcopal priest. *Twitter*

K.C. Habib excelled in classwork, though it often required a political struggle. The school district, in one example, would not accommodate him when it came to physics, because the teacher wouldn't allow him to do lab work. So, he took physics at Bellevue College—and got an "A." He enrolled in other math and science classes at the college, which was more obliging, and "brailled everything." Even then, he and his mom had to battle district officials, who wanted to keep a "withdrawal" from high-school physics on his transcript. That wouldn't look good when he applied to elite colleges. He didn't withdraw, his mom argued. "It was a class you cannot teach."

Lack of resources was not the problem. Bellevue was a wealthy district. The bigger obstacle, Habib says, "was just willpower and understanding."

Thankfully, he had a scrappy "24-hour pro bono attorney" at home. His mom fired off frequent letters to the school district. But she never had to file a lawsuit.

Ellis appraised his prize student this way: "Assertive, yes; confrontational, if necessary. But always well-versed, and almost always nice."

FROM SEATTLE'S EASTSIDE SUBURBS to the west side of Upper Manhattan. That was Habib's journey in the fall of 1999 when he registered at Columbia. Now "Cyrus," he had long been fascinated with New York. He would not be disappointed. As alumnus Herman Wouk put it, "the best things of the moment were outside the rectangle of Columbia; the best things of all human history and thought were inside the rectangle."

Columbia's storied alumni range from Alexander Hamilton to Amelia Earhart, Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Allen Ginsberg, J.D. Salinger to Ursula K. Le Guin.

Soon, Habib says, he was one of those "insufferable college kids who comes back from living in New York and has just a bit of a concocted New York accent, and likes to say things in a New York-y way, and knows better, and is kind of a wise guy."

He fell for the city and its mass of humanity. In Manhattan, the streaming, teeming flow of pedestrians makes life easier for a blind person. Along with its grid pattern, and abundant subways and taxis, and people who think nothing about redirecting you if you stray, it's certainly more navigable than a suburb. Merchants aren't set back from sidewalks. You can *smell* that pizza. And it's easy to ask directions. "You know, nobody cares about you, and you're not going to stick out whether you're blind or not," Habib says, kind of like a wise guy.

Midway through Columbia he became a published photographer. Peter Buchanan-Smith, arts editor of *The New York Times* op-ed pages, was putting together a quirky book about the city, *Speck: A Curious Collection of Uncommon Things*. Buchanan-Smith asked a mix of residents to explore their worlds through small and ordinary objects. He got chapters on manhole covers and pocketbooks and flyers for missing pets. Habib took a disposable camera around his Morningside Heights neighborhood.

Habib's photos of his New York City neighborhood were featured in *Speck: A Curious Collection of Uncommon Things*, published by Princeton Architectural Press. *Speck*

As for his photos, he says, you tell him how they came out.

His interest in politics had grown since his mother took him to see President Bill Clinton at Seattle's Paramount Theatre in

1996. He never really considered becoming a Republican. Newt Gingrich's GOP of the era seemed stingy if not anti-government. Habib deeply appreciated the Washington Department of Services for the Blind, where he learned to use a walking cane. The Washington Talking Book & Braille Library helped him master reading, and trained him how to use text-to-speech software.

He was scheduled to start an internship in Senator Hillary Clinton's Manhattan office on September 14, 2001—three days after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. "I remember it was difficult to connect by phone with my parents," the lieutenant governor recalls. "And I remember … you could smell the fire."

After a summer internship with U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell in Washington, D.C., Habib was an intern in Hillary Clinton's New York office just days after terrorists struck the World Trade Center. *Robert J. Fisch*

Once ensconced in Clinton's office, the chief lesson Habib took from 911 was that when a community faces a crisis, government has a chance to shine. All kinds of people, whose lives were disrupted in all kinds of ways, called the most famous and powerful person they knew: Hillary Clinton. Answering phones in her office, Habib heard from desperate people all over the city, often in "colorful language."

The literature major started changing his classes that fall, enrolling in courses dealing with the Middle East. "Basically," he recalls, "my twenties were a decade of coming to terms with being Iranian American and coming to terms with being blind. Neither of which I really wanted when I set foot on campus as a freshman. I really didn't want to be known for either. I wanted to fit in, and I wanted to be cool, and I wanted to be a New Yorker and all those things."

Although he was intrigued by Middle Eastern studies, and the idea of practicing law one day, he graduated from Columbia thinking he still wanted to be a professor, writer and "public intellectual."

AN ENDURING TRADITION brought together the Americans awarded Rhodes Scholarships to Oxford University in England. Scholars hailing from all over the U.S. would congregate in New York for a festive "Sailing Weekend," then board a ship together for a jaunt across the Atlantic. In the modern airborne era, the event

became "Bon Voyage Weekend," and in 2003, the elite students gathered in Washington, D.C., before flying over the ocean.

Among the 32 American standouts, one, in particular, stood out. Habib "was easily the best dressed member of the group," recalled one fellow scholar, Chesa Boudin. "His Armani tie complimented his tailored shirt and crisp pinstripe suit. He had a penchant for details—manicured fingernails, a unique wrist watch, cufflinks, and matching accessories. No matter the setting, he had on perfect designer sunglasses and would often switch between several in the course of a day."

Habib and Boudin were soon friends. "I found his sharp quick wit and often caustic sarcasm endearing," Boudin later wrote. "I was impressed that rather than letting his blindness relegate him to the background, as I assume, or imagine, as a sighted person, it might easily have done, he confidently asserted himself and his ideas no matter the setting."*

Habib picked up his sartorial flair in New York. "I became very concerned with how I look, and not really just in a vain way, although there was definitely vanity involved, but just really, you know, the idea of not looking disabled, not looking different, not looking weak, not looking vulnerable, not looking, you know, dependent, but exuding power, exuding privilege in a way, you might even say."

That impulse spilled into his social life, whether he was hosting a loud late-night Bon Voyage hotel party, or asking "hard-hitting questions" to a "senior CIA official" during a scholars' tour of the spy agency the same weekend.

"I think there was this desire to be, you know, the center of attention, and to show people that whatever assumptions you may have about someone who's blind, those are not applicable to me." He wanted to walk into a room and have his blindness be the last thing someone would notice.

Habib was "easily the best dressed" of the 32 American scholars awarded Rhodes Scholarships in 2003, said his friend Chesa Boudin. *The Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans*

His interior life would begin its makeover in his second year at Oxford.

Friends he had met during Bon Voyage Weekend invited him to attend a Cath-

* Boudin was elected District Attorney of San Francisco in 2019, the post that propelled the political career of Vice President Kamala Harris.

olic Mass. That Habib even entertained the idea seemed strange, almost "bizarre." True, he had attended Mass as a child. In adulthood, though, he was not religious. And he was very conscious of his Middle Eastern heritage.

Oxford was steeped in Christian history. Latin inscriptions and the sound of bells were common on its grounds. The university is home to 39 "constituent" colleges. Habib was studying at St. John's College, founded in 1555, to educate Roman Catholic priests. Just to the west of it was Blackfriars hall, run by the Dominican order of the church.

When he attended a fateful Mass at an Oxford chapel, Habib wasn't even sure he believed in God. *Blackfriars Oxford*

The environment, and friends, encouraged Habib to experiment. The Mass was simple and stripped down. Yet the ritual—with its Gregorian chants, smells and bells—was multi-sensory. And it asked the assertive Habib to quiet himself. "I found the music beautiful. I found the kind of haunting solemnity of [the Mass] beautiful. I found it to be transcendent, you know, pulling me up towards something."

The date was November 14, 2004. In the months afterwards, he kept coming back to the experience. And he found himself reading the *Bible* with more of an open mind.

He would not formally convert until Easter 2007. In the meantime, he wrapped up his master's thesis, titled "Visible but Unseen." It focused on two novels: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. One was the story of a black migrant in New York, the other about brown immigrants in London. One was photographic in its language and scene-making, the other, cinematic in its magical realism. He was getting at the sense, that if you're from a certain minority group, you may be hyper visible and stand out. But in another sense, you're unseen—your story is not being told, you're put in a ghetto.

He was having a harder time envisioning himself cooped in an ivory tower. He wavered about pursuing a doctorate in literature. He traveled, searching for more. Maybe he'd work in global business, or public policy.

He got a nudge from his mother. "I just remember her saying at one point, 'Okay, this is your third year at Oxford. You've got to figure out what you're going to do next.' "

"I CHANGED MY MIND a bunch of times," Habib recalls. He realized he wanted to get "into the corridors of power," to make a difference. He decided law school was the best path for developing the tools of statecraft and advocacy.

In 2007, his first year at Yale, a national policy issue grabbed his attention: Can we make American currency accessible to the blind? In England, as he had learned, blind people could differentiate one bill from another. And he realized the issue here wasn't just about a blind consumer being able to tell a $5 bill from a $10 bill. This was an obstacle to employment because many entry-level jobs required the ability to denominate one bill from another.

After a lawsuit by the American Council for the Blind, a federal judge had ordered the U.S. Treasury Department to make currency recognizable to the blind. Habib weighed in with an opinion piece for *The Washington Post*, headlined "Show Us the Money."

He wrote of the generous drivers, baristas and store clerks who hadn't ripped him off. But why was that even an issue? There were 180 countries whose currency was designed to be "distinguishable by all." It could be done with raised ink, modifying the size of different bills, or producing a tactile mark, or sort of raised stamp, to indicate a bill's value. But the Treasury Department balked at the cost of making changes.

Without tactile features on U.S. paper currency, blind people can use small electronic devices to identify bill denominations, or apply an older method of folding bills in distinct ways. *Perkins School of the Blind*

Habib cited the staggering 70 percent unemployment rate for the blind in the U.S. He invoked the sacrifices that brought about the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act. Currency for blind people should be as important as braille in elevators, he said. He also testified before Congress and co-authored a legal brief with classmate Jonathan Finer, who went on to become a deputy national security advisor under President Joe Biden.

He came to appreciate the way he was able to attack the issue from different angles—in the media, in Congress, in the courts. He loved the idea that he could do all of these things with a law degree.*

* The Treasury Department tied the changes in currency to redesign of the $10 and $20 bills, scheduled for 2020, but postponed by the Trump Administration until 2026-2028.

But he still wasn't fully committed. After that first year at Yale, he continued experimenting with a career in global business. He went to London to spend part of that summer working for Google—not in its legal department, but in its Middle Eastern sales division. He was enamored with the idea of being a cosmopolitan financial elite. "Or something like that."

The next year he worked part-time on Wall Street, at Goldman Sachs, the investment banking firm. "By the way," he confesses, "we were very careful about not mentioning that" in his political campaigns.

HE CAME HOME in the summer of 2008 to help run his mom's campaign for an open King County Superior Court judgeship. Susan Amini had been a public defender and opened her own practice, starting in criminal defense, and expanding to family and immigration law. In her first run for office, she was competing in an August primary against County prosecutor Tim Bradshaw and former state assistant attorney general Suzanne Parisien.

"Nothing has taught me more about the importance of fairness and equal opportunity than when my son, Cyrus, became blind at age 8," said Amini, when she ran for a Superior Court judgeship. *Seattle Gay News*

The campaign gave her son, a neophyte, a crash course in local politics. Fortunately, one of his teachers was Ruth Woo, known reverently as "Auntie Ruth." Virtually unknown to the electorate, Woo refused to accept awards, or serve on boards. And when a reporter said he wanted to write a story about her, Woo argued her anonymity was proof she wasn't worthy of attention.

Ruth Woo, who former Governor Gary Locke called his "second mother," was influential in King County politics and helped Susan Amini's campaign. *The Seattle Times*

Woo advocated for communities of color when politics was still a pale male's club. She was an organizer, networker, adviser, door-opener, and second mother—an unlikely power broker with no political ambitions of her own.

She had been a receptionist for Governor Dan Evans and learned to recognize the voice of anyone who called more than once. She played off-stage parts in the success of Governor Gary Locke, King County Executive Ron Sims, Seattle City Councilmember Delores Sibonga and others—of both political parties.

Before Woo put her arm around Amini, the candidate's campaign lacked civic strength. Iranian Americans were a small group in the Evergreen State. "We're newer immigrants," Cyrus Habib says. "Almost all Iranian Americans have come since the 1970s." Woo welcomed Amini into her Asian American community, and others in her orbit followed their auntie's lead.

Amini won endorsements from both *The Seattle Times* and *Post-Intelligencer*. She raised more money than her rivals. But she finished third in the primary, shut out of the general election, won by Bradshaw. (All three candidates eventually became judges, suggesting how strong the field was.)

Habib came away with two chief lessons. First, "it feels awful to lose," so run full-throttle to win. Second, he saw other candidates in action, and thought, "I could do this." It was the adult extension of his playground attitude. "There's no way to say this without sounding kind of entitled, or kind of cocky, I guess, but I just wasn't intimidated by it."

"He's a person on a journey, and he has developed a stillness and a centered-ness that I wouldn't have necessarily expected," said Ronan Farrow, of Habib, his friend and law school classmate. *Andrew Lih*

He finished law school in 2009. His best friends at Yale were the bestselling author Elizabeth Wurtzel, in her 40s, considered the voice of Gen X; Ronan Farrow, Mia Farrow and Woody Allen's wunderkind son, who graduated from Bard College at 15; and Carmen Yuen, author of *A Zen Guide to Eating Well*, as well as a fashion designer and blogger. They thought of themselves as nontraditional law students.

Habib wasn't inclined to follow a well-worn road from Yale to a clerkship with a judge, or a Wall Street firm fattening itself on corporate mergers and acquisitions. He began to consider a countercultural course.

What if the East-Coast sophisticate moved back to the Lake Washington suburbs?

The Seattle area offered something New York or D.C. couldn't—relatively easy entry to politics. "This is not a machine town; this is not a machine state in politics. If it were, there would be no way that I would have gotten elected," he says.

He had spent a summer working for a respected Seattle firm, Perkins Coie. He liked that it had a reputation for public-mindedness and pro bono work. One of its partners, Shan Mullin, was chairman of United Way of King County, and longtime head of the trustees for Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

Habib took a job at Perkins Coie in October 2009. A Republican would give him his first break in politics.

HAVING FIGURED A DESTINATION, he began plotting a route. "So I was pretty, I don't want to say calculating, but I was pretty strategic."

He heard about an opportunity. It may have been Ruth Woo who alerted him. He can't recall. But there was a vacancy for an Eastside resident on the King County Civil Rights Commission, which advises the state's most populous county on equity and social justice issues. Habib was treating himself to a long-planned, Spanish-immersion trip to Guatemala after taking the bar exam, and having surgery to remove skin cancer on his eyelid. He learned that King County Councilman Reagan Dunn would select a volunteer to fill the civil-rights panel opening. He applied, and even offered to cut his stay in Guatemala short for an interview.

Dunn was not only a Republican, and named after you-know-who, his mother Jennifer had been the highest-ranking Republican woman in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"I can still remember when that resume came across my desk," Dunn says a decade later. Here was an applicant with a disability, minority background, and credentials as an editor of the *Yale Law Journal*. "I don't care if he's liberal or conservative," Dunn recalls thinking. "If he wants it, it's his."

Habib started networking and positioning himself for next steps. He went to his first political fundraiser at the home of a Microsoft couple. He joined the Bellevue College Foundation board of directors. He spoke before a large crowd. The audience liked his story. He thought, "I'm good at this." He joined the Bellevue Downtown Association. He became a Rotarian.

Habib collected more campaign funds than any other House candidate in 2012 None of his opponents ever raised more money than he did. *Washington State House Democrats*

Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown asked him in 2010 to run against Steve Litzow, a moderate Republican, in the 41st District. Eager at the prospect, he paid several hundred dollars for a taxi to take him down to Olym-

pia, wait while he met Brown in a cafe, and bring him back to Seattle. Tempted, he remembered the lessons from his mom's campaign. He told the Democratic Senate leader he didn't think he could win; he wasn't going to run as a sacrificial lamb.

Redistricting soon put Habib in the bluer 48th District. In 2012 he considered running for the House seat held by Deb Eddy, who had said she'd only serve six years. Her time was up.

Habib met with powerful House Speaker Frank Chopp for the first time. Chopp favored another potential candidate, and wondered how a blind person would manage door-to-door politicking.

A feisty Habib said he navigated New York City and its subways, two Ivy League schools, and several years abroad. Running for state representative wasn't even close to the hardest thing he'd done.

After the meeting, Habib felt he had been too aggressive, trying too hard to project strength and ability, as his mom taught him.


Habib became the third fully blind legislator in state history. C.W. Masterson of Walla Walla (pictured with wife) was elected in 1912. Francis Pearson, elected in 1937 to represent southwest Washington, fully lost his eyesight in 1954. *Oregon Daily Jounal, Washington State Legislature*

But Chopp was "all in" on the newcomer with defiant confidence. Habib raised more in campaign contributions, $338,000, than any other candidate for the state House that year. He doorbelled some 7,000 homes in the brainy district, flush with technology workers from nearby Microsoft.

Habib beat Hank Myers, a Redmond City Councilmember, in a landslide.

"ON THE HIGHEST OF HIGHS," is how he described his family in early 2013. He made history when he was sworn in as the state's first Iranian American lawmaker. Then, in May, his mother got her dream job. Governor Jay Inslee appointed her to an open judgeship in King County Superior Court.

But on July 11, Mo Habib was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. "It was like my whole world fell apart," his son recalls. "There are just things you're not anticipating." Mo Habib began treatment. His son prayed for a miracle.

Around the same time, political intrigue unfolded around Habib. Rodney

Tom, a disgruntled Democrat, had allied with the other party, along with another conservative Democrat, Tim Sheldon of Mason County. That gave Senate Republicans a 25-24 "majority coalition." Democratic Party leaders looked for someone to take Tom out of his Eastside seat.

In the midst of his father's cancer treatment, Habib wasn't keen on challenging an incumbent senator. He passed.

Kirkland Mayor Joan McBride stepped up. Habib endorsed her. Then, in April, Tom surprisingly said he would not seek re-election, citing personal and family health issues.

Susan Amini became the first judge in Washington of Middle Eastern descent when she was appointed in 2013 to an open judgeship in King County Superior Court. *votingforjudges.org*

With his father's cancer having stabilized, Habib felt his situation had changed, as well as the political calculus. He believed it was his right as a representative of the district to run for its open Senate seat. He thought he was a better candidate than McBride. And he had no qualms about bigfooting her.

He told her she should run for his House seat, while he ran for the upper chamber. McBride flatly rejected the proposal. Her followers took to Twitter to convince Habib to stand down. They were countered by a group of Democratic women, some "formidable liberal warriors," who argued that Habib was the better candidate. With the help of House Speaker Chopp, a deal was brokered. Habib would be the Senate candidate.

He took some flak for brushing aside McBride, who could've been the state's first openly lesbian senator. Habib says he has no regrets. "There's just nothing abnormal about it," he says of changing his mind to run for an open seat. "I never, never ever understood what the issue was that people were trying to make of this. I think it's pretty axiomatic that an open seat is different than a challenge to an incumbent."

IN HIS CAMPAIGNS, Habib faced the question of how to make voters aware of his blindness, if for no other reason than to explain why he was always photographed wearing sunglasses.

In his rookie run, when he was largely unknown, he and his consultant thought a lot about how to convey his blindness in brochures—replete with photos of the candidate—mailed to homes throughout the district.

Would those who bothered to glance before recycling, understand? Or would they think he was just some guy who thinks he's too cool? Two people he dated did not even realize he was blind when they first met. "Which I love to tease them about endlessly," he says.

The brochure question was complicated. He wanted to be clear. But he didn't want to seem weak or raise questions about his capabilities. And he definitely didn't want to look as if he was seeking sympathy.

He got some interesting feedback. At one home, he was greeted by a "classic" 48th District constituent, a marketing professional with an opinion. The guy said he couldn't tell, from a brochure photo, what Habib was holding in his hand. It looked like a microphone, he said, and advised Habib to change the way the photo was displayed to make his cane more distinct.

Still, not everyone got it. A woman came up to Habib at a campaign forum and gushed that she and her husband agreed with everything he had to say. But the reason they *really* liked him was that brochure picture of him holding a *golf club*.

Voters told Habib that, from campaign photos, they thought his cane was a microphone or a golf club. *YouTube*

It became more challenging when he ran for lieutenant governor in 2016. The contest was statewide. Most of the voters had not heard of him. He planned to do a TV ad. And he had enough money for one ad, one shot at portraying himself. "We had to nail it," he recalls. He hired a consultant from the East Coast. The consultant wanted to start the ad totally in black, while Habib said, "This is what I see every morning when I wake up." Then he would pivot to talking about how he had battled cancer and why he was running to improve health care policies. (When the question of whether he saw black came up in high school, Les Carpenter recalls Habib saying, "No, I just don't see.")

Habib didn't like the idea, mainly because it didn't transmit strength and ability.

He turned to Dan Kully, a Seattle-based consultant. Kully posed a question: Did people ask him if he could hear better because he was blind?

Sure, he replied, I get that question a lot.

In his campaign for lieutenant governor, Habib's only TV ad framed his blindness as an advantage in politics because it made him listen. *YouTube*

Kully then made the point that the candidate didn't actually hear better, but he *listened*—he had to.

Running with that idea, Kully's craftwork began with the candidate having coffee with a couple, and a woman's voiceover: "Some politicians don't hear what we need. But Cyrus does."

Then we see a sidewalk, and the camera tilts up, to show a cane and Habib, walking by himself, in a setting that looks urban. "When I lost my eyesight as a child, I learned to listen," he says. "Thanks to public schools, I went from braille to Yale to the state senate."

That took 14 seconds. Now there was time for snippets of a family photo album, and the candidate visiting a cargo port, lab, medical clinic—and, even a shot of a boy, his mother, and Habib in a playground. In the soft-focus background was the kind of jungle-gym equipment his mother had fought for him to climb. Then the kicker: "Because anything is possible when you really listen."

It was masterful, Habib says, because "it took a disability and made it into a strength in a way that's completely organic to politics."

Coincidentally, it echoed a favorite saying of the Jesuits' founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola: "Speak little, listen much."

AFTER JUST NINE MONTHS as a state senator, Habib had announced he was running for lieutenant governor.

An obvious question was "why?"

The office of lieutenant governor was seen by some as lightweight. Habib himself acknowledged it was the butt of jokes, such as: How are lieutenant governors like a spare tire? They're full of hot air, kept in the dark, and you hope you never have to use them.

Why did Senator Urgency want that?

The main duty of Washington's lieutenant governor is presiding over the state Senate. That means controlling rules, debates and votes in an impartial manner—and casting a tie-breaking vote in the case of a rare Senate deadlock. It's parliamentary stuff.

The lieutenant governor also becomes the state's chief executive when the governor leaves Washington. (Habib would assume that duty so many times during Jay Inslee's 2019 presidential bid that he joked he should've showed up at the Governor's Mansion with a duffel bag.)

Three men had held the office for the previous 60 years. None of them had advanced to higher office.

But Habib found things to like about the job.

It was not the Legislature, where he felt he was but one voice in a pack of 147. It was a unique position—and it was statewide, which could only help his ambition. As a world traveler, he liked that the portfolio included heading a committee on international trade. And, the gig was full-time. That was attractive to someone who had been juggling part-time legislating, teaching, and lawyering.

Habib joined Governor Inslee in speaking out against President Trump's proposed 2017 "Muslim travel ban" which would've barred Iranians, among others, from entering the U.S. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

The post could also be seen as a shortcut to the Governor's Mansion. If Hillary Clinton, the Democrat's presumptive nominee for president, won the White House, some thought Inslee might be tapped for a cabinet post, given his credentials on climate change. In that scenario, the lieutenant governor would become chief executive until a special election was held, and then he or she would likely enjoy some edge as the incumbent.

Habib jokes that the office has resembled the end of the political trail more than a stepping stone.

But he also points to lieutenant governors in other states who went on to bigger things. Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge became presidents. (Consecutively.) John Kerry was a Democratic presidential nominee, and Tim Kaine was Hillary Clinton's running mate. Habib himself would later confess, "as soon as I became lieutenant governor, I was thinking about running for governor or running for the Senate."

Lt. Gov. Brad Owen was dogged by ethical questions about using public resoures for his nonprofit, Strategies for Youth. Owen agreed to pay a $10,000 fine in Septmeber 2014. *YouTube*

But first, there was the not insignificant matter of winning the office, which had been occupied for 20 years by Brad Owen, a conservative Democrat, perhaps best known for playing guitar in an oldies band that preached sobriety to young students.

Unlike his reluctance to challenge incumbent Rodney Tom the previous year, Habib announced his candidacy for lieutenant governor in September 2015, and began his formidable fund-raising. Six months later, when Owen announced he wasn't seeking another term, Habib had already collected $327,000 in campaign contributions—on his way to amassing $1.1 million.

The real race to succeed Owen was in the August primary election, where Habib faced two seasoned Democrats, Karen Fraser and Steve Hobbs. Habib once again raised more campaign money than his opponents. And he crushed Fraser and Hobbs in King County, winning nearly 100,000 more votes than either of them, which would end up being his statewide margin of victory. Auntie Ruth Woo, who had died the previous month, would've smiled.

In November, he'd face Republican Marty McClendon, a radio show host, with no experience as an elected official. Habib was on his way to raising 10 times more in campaign contributions than McClendon. A historic victory—the first Iranian American elected to a statewide office—was all but assured.

JUST AS BALLOTS were to be mailed for that contest, Mo Habib died on October 13, from leiomyosarcoma. He was 64.

The last two decades of Mo Habib's engineering career were spent at Boeing.

His obituary said he was a fixture in downtown Kirkland, where he liked to stroll and stop for coffee, and seemed to know everyone. He loved his Harley, and listening to blues, and a glass of wine.

Mo Habib died three weeks before his son made history. *Legacy.com*

His son recalls how he grew up listening to his dad's records: Van Morrison, James Taylor, and Cat Stevens, who walked away from his chart-topping career to dedicate himself to Islam. From his father, he got poetic and literary instincts, and a love of music and the arts. Ever the intellectual, Habib applies "Nietzsche's framework" in describing his dad as Dionysian; his mom's prudent rationality makes her more Apollonian.

In the general election, Habib won just nine of 39 Washington counties. But that was more than enough. Powered by a huge margin in King County, Habib beat McClendon by 274,000 votes.

Then he set out to rebrand his new office. As a legislator, the closest he came to expertise was in the area of entrepreneurship and start-ups. Now, his chief focus became higher education. He toured all of the state colleges and universities, not a bad way to raise his profile outside the Puget Sound region. His guiding philosophy grew from something he heard time and again: "College is not for everyone."

On one of his "economic development" tours of the state's rural areas, Habib met with leaders of the Ellensburg Rodeo. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

He thought the statement reflected a bigotry of low expectations. And it hit him in the gut. He had been stung by such small-mindedness. "Look, as a kid who was blind, I was exactly the kind of person who was told, 'Maybe you'll just end up at McDonald's.' "

Just weeks into his new job, he had a chance to help young Washingtonians in need. For nearly two decades, a federal grant helped low-income students cover the cost of exams associated with Advanced Placement and other college-level courses. If high school students scored high enough on the exams, they wouldn't have to take certain courses in college, and could save thousands of dollars. Subsidies had reduced the cost of an exam to $15. But because of a one-year gap in federal funding, students were looking at paying minimum fees of $53 per exam. Habib got busy.

He struck a deal with Chris Reykdal, the state Superintendent of Public In-

Habib created the Washington World Fellows to provide exceptional 10th graders, often the first in their families aiming for higher education, college preparation and travel abroad. *Washington World Fellows*

struction. From private sources, such as Microsoft, Boeing and the Schultz Family Foundation, Habib raised $400,000. Reykdal matched it with public funds. The total would subsidize exams for some 15,000 students.

A teacher in Snohomish County, David Quinn, cried at his desk on hearing about the relief. Quinn called it "amazing opportunity for low-income students and families."

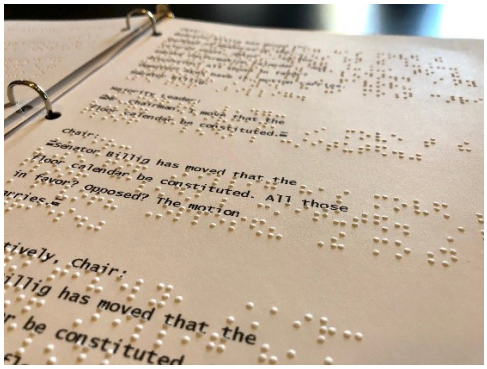
Habib felt everyone should have access to a college education. He set out to establish a way for adults to get college credits online for the work they did; one that wouldn't require them to quit their jobs—and lose income. He called his plan "Complete Washington." He created a new position in his office, director of higher education, to oversee it. He hired Mary Chikwinya, a vice-president at Tacoma Community College, for the post.

Michelle Jimenez and Jaqueline Alvarez, students in the World Fellows program, discovered new tablet computers, donated by Microsoft, hidden in their "Welcome Day" swag bags. *Washington World Fellows*

He also created Boundless Washington, a leadership program for young people with disabilities; Compassion 2020, which aims to cultivate compassionate leaders and enabled high schoolers to travel to India to meet the Dalai Lama; and Washington World Fellows, "the nearest and dearest to my heart," he says. A statewide program funded with donations, it helps prepare high school students for college and allows them to study abroad.

Michelle Jimenez was one of the 10th graders chosen for the first World Fellows cohort. Jimenez, a Bellingham native, hadn't traveled overseas before. And her parents hadn't gone to college. Six weeks of study at the University of Leon in Spain, gave her an "extreme desire" to see more of the world. As a UW student three years later, she was considering law school and a career in juvenile justice or international politics. "There was definitely a jolt of confidence," she said, to being part of the program.

HABIB PRESIDED OVER the Senate with a little technical assistance. As he had as a legislator, he accessed bills through laptop software, known as JAWS (for Job Access with Speech). It converted text to chirping speech he heard through an ear bud. His iPhone read emails aloud. But rules required that the President call, in order, on members who rose to speak. Should Habib have a "spotter" at his side? If so, who? And how to ensure the spotter's neutrality?




The state Senate purchased its own embosser so it could print documents in braille, which helped Habib preside over the chamber. *Washington State Legislature*

Or, was it possible to build an electronic "request to speak" system in the two months between his election and the first session of the Senate?

On the first day of session in January 2017, senators found new touchscreen gizmos on their desks, with a "Request to Speak" button. When a senator hit the button, their name was sent to a program on Habib's laptop and translated by JAWS software to braille—in less than a second.* Final voting on bills was still done by oral roll call.


In the 2017 session, state senators found new "Request to Speak" buttons on their desks, which sent their names to Habib's laptop in less than a second. *Washington State Legislature*

The new lieutenant governor won kudos for steering Senate debate and voting in an even-handed manner, particularly in a February 2017 incident. It was just his second month on the job, and during his campaign for election, he had made statements that some interpreted as overly partisan. The Senate was evenly divided in early 2017, with 24 members from each party, after Republican Brian Dansel took a job in the federal government. During a morning session usually reserved for ceremonial chores, the chamber's Democrats outnumbered Republicans 24-to-1. Democrats hoped Habib would allow Senate rules to be changed so they could force a floor vote on school funding, ambushing Republicans.

But Habib, the presiding officer, quashed the plan, ruling that a majority of the

* Habib credits Hunter Goodman, then Secretary of the Senate, for innovating so quickly. Goodman, 49, died from cancer in 2019.

49-member Senate was needed to change the rules. The Democrats were one vote shy. They tried another procedural maneuver. He rebuffed that too. One newspaper editorial lauded Habib for "being the adult in the Senate" and standing up to his own party.

IT HAD SEEMED LIKE A FIVE-YEAR SPRINT for Habib. Or was it a marathon? Starting in early 2012, he was either immersed in long legislative sessions, campaigning for office, working as a lawyer, teaching law at Seattle University, or worrying about his father's health.

There hadn't been much time for spiritual growth. But he had asked Michael Ryan, the pastor at St. James Cathedral in Seattle, how he could pray other than just pleading, "Please God, don't let my father die."

He felt like he couldn't take a deep breath until the fall of 2017. And having lost his father, he took stock of his own life. He had a chance to ask himself: What if my own time on earth was cut short? Having had cancer, he was himself vulnerable, and the anxiety that preceded each periodic screening for the disease felt like it took a year off his life. (Breast cancer would kill his friend Elizabeth Wurtzel, 52, in January 2020.)

The chaplain of "The Colbert Report," James Martin, has written a book about humor in spirituality, *From Heaven to Mirth*. *America Magazine*

Now that he was lieutenant governor, there were only two jobs left in politics, practically speaking: governor or U.S. Senator. Is that what he wanted?

Father Ryan had handed him James Martin's book, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*. Not only did Habib appreciate Martin's accessible, occasionally humorous writing, but he felt he and the priest were kindred spirits. Martin was a fellow Ivy Leaguer. He had worked in corporate finance, a hypercompetitive environment like politics. He was active on Twitter. He was official chaplain of "The Colbert Report."

Habib started to imagine what it might be like to live in a community, to center your day around prayer and service to others, "to really empty out your life of a lot of other things." To paraphrase Father Martin, it was as if in all of his striving and driving, he had heard God in the echoes of his own restlessness.

He was growing more disillusioned about politics—and what kind of manners

The Washington "Compassion Delegation," which Habib led to India, met with Tibetan refugees. Habib's work was aligning with Jesuit priorities: education, compassion, serving others. *Washington State Leadership Board*

and gestures were being rewarded in his profession. "In our country, we always want to frame things first and foremost in terms of maximizing individual liberty instead of the common welfare," he says.

He began to acknowledge his own addiction: The ceaseless quest for a bigger platform, a higher stage, and the next fix. The more affirmation he got, whether in elections or media attention, the more he wanted. "If I was interviewed by Ezra Klein, then I'd want to be interviewed by Anderson Cooper."

And when you get tapped as a rising star, it's all about people betting on your *upside*. "You're a futures option; you're a commodity."

Habib could see himself playing the game: Get a book deal; land a speaking role at the Democratic National Convention. Would that bring peace? There didn't seem to be a lot of happy folks in politics.

It was not a case of going into the church because he wanted to get away from politics, he says. But it was also true that he was feeling desolation about his line of work.

ON MARCH 19, 2020, readers opened *The Seattle Times* to headline after headline about the emerging Covid-19 virus. It had claimed the lives of 74 Washingtonians at that point. UW canceled spring football practice. A story asked if one generation was better than another at something called "social distancing." U.S. Senator Patty Murray called for a government investigation into the Trump administration's delay and mismanagement in rolling out testing for the virus.

State politics would be rocked in a few hours by different news. An article in *America, The Jesuit Review*, a magazine based in New York, broke the story: Cyrus Habib was quitting politics to become a Jesuit priest.

Habib had given *America* an exclusive interview, and a personal essay explaining why someone who "spent the last eight years climbing the political ladder and who has a not insignificant chance of acceding to the governorship next year, would trade a life of authority for one of obedience."

He said his decision had followed two years of "careful and prayerful discern-

ment."* (Jesuits use specific exercises to help them "discern," or make important decisions.) People were in dire need of spiritual support, he said. Our "throwaway culture" treated workers and the environment as disposable. Younger generations wanted to change the world, but struggled with unprecedented anxiety.

Habib, here playing at the Governor's Mansion, served as acting governor 191 days, with most of those in 2019 when Governor Inslee ran for President. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

"I have felt a calling to dedicate my life in a more direct and personal way to serving the marginalized, empowering the vulnerable, healing those who suffer from spiritual wounds and accompanying those discerning their own futures," he wrote.

He became the Cat Stevens of politics.

Inslee called Habib's decision "unexpected." State Senator Reuven Carlyle, a Seattle Democrat, didn't know anyone who saw it coming. "People are just so off their chairs," Carlyle said.

Why would Habib dedicate himself so thoroughly to Christianity? He was enamored of the Dalai Lama. Why not become a Buddhist? Or, if he wanted to serve the vulnerable, why not become a secular advocate for them?

He pointed to the writings of C.S. Lewis, an intellectual who had converted to Christianity at 32, apparently influenced by his friend J.R.R. Tolkien. In simplest terms, Lewis believed our innate sense of right and wrong was evidence of God; where else would such universal order come from?

Lewis was known for using reason to argue for God's existence. One example has been called his "trilemma." It specifically argued against the notion that Jesus may have been a great moral teacher, but not God. There were but three interpretations for Jesus' own words, Lewis insisted: "Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse" such as the Devil.

But if there was a God, how to explain so much cruelty and suffering on earth?

While not yet accredited to answer the question, Habib tries, roving from the Holocaust, to slavery, to dissonant notes in music, to science. "The 'Cliff Notes' version," he says, "is at the end of the day it's a mystery." (James Martin and theologians agree.) Christianity appears to be something of an experiment in free will.

"The Christian belief is that ultimately it was Jesus Christ who became that

* Habib applied to the Jesuits and was accepted in 2019. He received permission to defer for a year so he could serve out the remainder of his term as lieutenant governor.

bridge, that connection, so we can understand this mystery of God. God became man, so man can become God. That's the theory, the argument, the central claim of Christianity … In 10 years, I will come back and correct the record on all this when I really learn what's going on."

His leg shattered by a cannonball, Inigo de Loyola read about Christian saints while convalescing and thought, "I could do that." *Jesuit Institute*

CHOOSING CHRISTIANITY is one thing, devoting your life to Catholic priesthood is another. The sins of the church over centuries are well known, from the execution of non-believers, to the sexual abuse of children.

Habib says he contorted himself wrestling with those issues.

The short answer is that he found beauty in the church's history, goodness in its works of mercy and service to the poor, and truth in its intellectualism, particularly the Jesuit version.

Inigo de Loyola was a swashbuckling soldier from the Basque region of Spain, born a year before Columbus sailed for the New World. At 30, Inigo was a long-haired, vain, hot-headed lady's man, with a police record for brawling. While recovering after a cannon ball shattered his leg, he took to reading about Christian saints. After a while, he thought, I could do that.

He began seeking a mystical life. He made a pilgrimage to an abbey, where he dramatically laid his armor and sword before a statue of the Virgin Mary. He experienced a sense of God one day that pushed him much deeper into study. He and six friends, including the missionary later known as St. Francis Xavier, joined in a vow of poverty and chastity. They were the first Jesuits.

Inigo became Ignatius and he crafted the foundation of the Jesuit order, marrying the mystique of the monk with that of the chivalrous knight. If you ask a Jesuit for the central edict of their faith, they'll likely say "finding God in all things." It was a simple but revolutionary view. Rather than withdrawing to religion behind church and monastery walls, Ignatius believed that everything in life is important to your relationship with God. There are no taboo parts. The world is your monastery.

The second-most important creed of Jesuit life, Father Martin says, is probably

Ignatius's new ideas on prayer drew suspicions at first and he was thrown in jail by the Inquisition. *Jesuits in Britain*

"contemplative in action."* It drove priests to slog through the Amazon jungle and canoe down North American rivers to spread the Gospel. "The road is our home," said an early companion of Ignatius. "We ought not to be content with being hearers, but doers," said St. Aloysius Gonzaga, who died, at 23, after ministering to plague victims in 1591. Early Jesuits started Rome's first orphanage and founded a house for reformed prostitutes.

But "action" means more than adventuresome missionaries. Jesuits grappled with paleontology, physics, astronomy and more. Thirty-five craters on the moon are named for Jesuit scientists.

In the U.S., Jesuits are best known as educators. They run 28 colleges and universities, including Georgetown and Boston College, and closer to home, Gonzaga and Seattle University.

Gonzaga University is named for St. Aloysius Gonzaga, a nobleman turned Jesuit. He died at 23 while ministering to plague victims. A statue at the school depicts his service. *Gonzaga University*

After growing up in an Islamic culture, and "having the privilege of meeting the world's greatest Buddhist twice," Habib says Catholicism is the faith he freely chose. "I wasn't a cradle Catholic. I came to the church in my 20s because of an attraction, because of a falling in love."

And intellect sealed the deal to fill the God-shaped hole in his heart.

"Because any romantic relationship can be in a honeymoon phase only so long and physical only so long, it also has to be a joining of the minds as well as a joining of the bodies of star-gazed—wait, no, star-crossed—no, starry-eyed lovers," he says, laughing at his malaprops.

"That's the problem with someone choosing a celibate lifestyle. We lose all our romantic metaphors."

Yes, Jesuits joined in inquisitions. Robert Bellarmine, the Jesuit saint and namesake of a Tacoma prep school, was one of the judges who condemned Giordano Bruno as a heretic. Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 for a rash of blasphemies.

* On the Jesuit's reputation for independence, Martin likes to quote an Italian saying that translates to, "Three Jesuits, four opinions!" He also says, "If you've met one Jesuit, you've met one Jesuit."

Like Copernicus, he believed in heliocentrism—that the earth revolves around the sun. But what church prelates likely found more heretical (trial records were lost) was Bruno's insistence that "all the stars were worlds," with their own planets. That conflicted with the church's need for the Earth to be the center of the universe.

Habib notes that the church, and its Jesuits, have embraced other precepts of science, such as evolution. "The church has a very long history," he says. "It's going to have mixed records on everything."

He calls the clergy's sexual abuse of children "human evil that's unspeakable. I think what we've seen whether it's Boy Scouts, girl's gymnastics teams, or foster care systems, is that where there is power, that power itself—something radical Christ taught—is corrupting."

In an Easter week ritual of humility, Pope Francis has washed and kissed the feet of prison inmates, including Muslims. *L'Osservatore Romano*

The cover-ups, and belief that the church could handle its problems, were diseases of pride, he says, the original sin.

Habib is greatly encouraged by Pope Francis, the first pontiff from the Jesuit order. Francis has said the whole culture of clericalism needs to change, from the Holy See all the way down to the country vicar.

The Jesuits appear a good political fit, if you will, for Habib. Because Jesuits find God in all things, they tend to be inclusive. Once called a "hard left" priest by conservative TV personality Bill O'Reilly, James Martin, the "Colbert chaplain," gave a benediction at the 2020 Democratic National Convention. Martin prayed for the nation to open its heart to those most in need: unemployed parents, abused and underpaid women, Black men and women fearing for their lives, immigrants longing for safety, homeless people looking for a meal, bullied LGBTQ teens, the unborn child in the womb, and the inmate on death row.

IT'S A FAMOUSLY LONG road to being ordained a Jesuit priest, typically taking 10 years or more. Habib moved to a Jesuit novitiate in Southern California five months before his term in Olympia ended, but like many state officials he was able to conduct necessary business remotely.

In the novitiate, he'll get an *ordo*, or schedule for the day, with everything planned down to the minute. He won't have to think about sending an email, or calling someone. He'll immerse himself in prayer and ritual, including what Jesuits

Habib with other novices. Les Carpenter harkens back to their days in his ancient Chevy, for a little Christian trash-talk about Habib. "I do pray that he'll see the light and become an Episcopalian. I think we can use him better. But not everyone is ready to upgrade." *Jesuits West*

call "the 30-day retreat," a period of meditation prescribed by Ignatius in his manual, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

"He'll have a dramatic change of life, from being lieutenant governor of Washington to being told he's cleaning the bathroom the wrong way," Father Martin told *The New York Times*.

His mother agreed: "I actually joked with him that I wanted to see how that vow of obedience was going to work for him. More power to the Jesuits, I have to say."

Habib doesn't see it as a shrinking of his world. "I see it as a shrinking of my *self*," he told *The New York Times*. "When the focus is not as much on my brand, my messaging, my re-election, my fund-raising process, my legislative agenda, you create more space for God to operate on you."

Old friend Les Carpenter has a theory on why Habib's course seems to baffle some and ruffle others. He was a heroic success, doing what few could. But he laid down his intellectual armor and privilege for a spiritual life, a leap taken by a number of saints. In a culture that celebrates money, sex and liberty, his choosing poverty, chastity and obedience seems not only contrarian, but un-American—even threatening to our social fabric.

"And that's one of the reasons why Cyrus is such a pebble in the shoe of American society," Carpenter says. "He was set to be a hero, but he chose the path of the saint instead. It's very Christian, but it's not very American."

Jesuits West, the novitiate in Culver City, California, welcomed Habib and five others in a Mass of Investiture at the end of August 2020. Investiture is an ancient rite when candidates take another step and get "n.S.J." (or "nSJ") after their names, indicating they are formally novices in the Society of Jesus, as the Jesuit order is known.

"He threw himself into it," said a Jesuit classmate of John Spellman's, "so when he left you knew he…had concluded, 'This is not what the Lord is calling me to do.' " *Washington State Archives*

His path, to this point, is not quite unparalleled in Washington politics. John Spellman had gone from valedictorian at Seattle University to a novitiate in Oregon in 1949. "Spellman impressed everyone he encountered at the novitiate," wrote John C. Hughes in a biography of the state's last Republican governor. But Spellman had doubts after nine months. He quietly left the novitiate one morning. He went on to Georgetown Law School and political fame, elected governor in 1980.

But how could you bet against Kamyar Cyrus Habib, the cancer-survivor, published photographer, and climber of Mount Kilimanjaro? On that trek, as now, he knew others would be watching, and looking up to him. In the final stretch to Uhuru Peak, at 19,341 feet, he became ill, and had to rest and gather himself every 10 steps. Still, he pushed on, because "the only thing I feared more than death was public humiliation."

When he climbed Kilimanjaro, Habib was a "city guy, not a seasoned outdoorsman," said Kristina Brown, executive director of the Lieutenant Governor's Office, who trekked with her boss to the summit. *Office of the Lt. Gov.*

Clergy burnout is very real, says the Rev. Les Carpenter, Habib's old friend. And many don't make it past their first five years in ministry.

But he's never doubted Habib. "Oh yeah, that dude is totally going to be priested. No one has ever been able to stop Cyrus. And now he's on God's side. It's a whole new ballgame."

**Bob Young**
**Legacy Washington**
**February 2021**

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