

4-1-2006

Student Profiles: Atheni Asihel, Loyola University Chicago

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Recommended Citation

Sires, Nellie (2006) "Student Profiles: Atheni Asihel, Loyola University Chicago," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 29, Article 24.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol29/iss1/24>

Student Profile

From Eritrea to Chicago: Activism Runs in the Family

By Nellie Sires

One of the most vocal student leaders is junior international studies and history major Atheni Asihel. Atheni was born in Fairfax, VA to Andy Asihel and Almaz Beyene, political asylum immigrants from the African country of Eritrea.

"My parents have been politically active their whole lives, obviously [a result of] growing up in a country fighting for its independence. They left Eritrea because my father would have been killed for his activism," she says. The effects of her political bloodline became evident as early as elementary school, St. Thomas More. Atheni was on student government starting in sixth grade and helped found various student clubs.

Atheni continued her involvement into high school at Bishop Dennis J. O'Connell, where she was class president her freshmen year and remained in student council throughout all four years. "Our high school is very community orientated. The main thing we do is called super dance, which is the largest high school charity event in the nation. We raise money for cystic fibrosis." Atheni helped with the organization of super dance through student council, as well as being an athlete. She did cross country her sophomore, junior and senior years. She became captain of the team senior year.

Atheni spent the spring break of her sophomore year in the Dominican Republic, helping to roof homes and create a vegetable garden in the tiny impoverished town of Banica. "We would go to mass all the time," she said. "The people that you meet were so amazing, they live in poverty, but they were happy people that were extremely caring and so welcoming to us."

The trip sparked her interest in the Peace Corps and Foreign Service, both of which she plans to do after she grad-



photo: Katie Reed

Atheni Asihel Loyola University Chicago

uates from college. Her college search led her to Loyola Chicago because of the Jesuit mission and an interest in the unknown city of Chicago. "I really fell in love with the Jesuit mission: developing the whole person and the promise of Loyola and having a commitment to leading an extraordinary life and service to others," she said. "I wanted to be around other people who wanted to develop as a whole person... [And] I had never been to Chicago"

Atheni hit the ground running her freshmen year, becoming immediately involved with student government as freshmen class representative. Through Unified Student Government (USG) she

served on the dean's advisory council and other committees. She went beyond her government work as she was very involved on her floor in Mertz residence hall. She helped to organize outings to strengthen community, as well as setting up secret Santa and Valentine's events for her floor mates. Her dedication to service continued through the bi-weekly trips to the soup kitchens that Mertz offered its students. "I really like that about Loyola; before you go out on a Friday night you go and help out at a soup kitchen."

Her work continued in her sophomore year: again a class representative on USG, an organizer of Loyola's participation in the Skyscraper Challenge (a Chicago wide call to college students to climb the Sears tower to raise money for Tsunami relief) and an aid to friend Adam Cebulski in his effort to start a Habitat for Humanity chapter on campus.

Junior year she was elected vice president of public relations for USG where she co-organized a leadership retreat for all student leaders on campus. Atheni was also a primary organizer of Masquerade for Aid, the Loyola Chicago hurricane relief effort. She is currently working on a spring semester speaker series on globalization which would give Loyola students an opportunity to have a dialogue about the greatest issue facing the current collegiate generation.

Atheni says: "I think that [college students] should be taking on every issue that there is. I think we are the most able part of society. I'd like to see more politically active students that are willing to take a role in their own government and their own lives... apathy kills." ■

Nellie Sires is a sophomore and a communications major at Loyola University Chicago.