

Alabama Appleseed's Shay Farley Receives King Spirit Honors Award and Launches Struggle to Protect Rights of Poultry Workers

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This week the country honored our foremost hero of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The holiday not only commemorates a remarkable life and a transformative era, but it is now a day when Americans rededicate ourselves to volunteerism while joining together to build the society we hope to live in. At Appleseed, we consider volunteerism for justice and equality our core mission every day.

All of Appleseed also joins in celebrating an award given Monday to one of our own, Alabama Appleseed attorney Shay Farley, whom the Montgomery Advertiser selected as the Montgomery, Alabama young professional who continues Dr. King's dream of racial and social equality.

In awarding Farley the 2011 King Spirit Honors Award, the front page article noted some of Farley's accomplishments at Alabama Appleseed, which include:

- Extensive and ultimately successful work to establish a new landlord-tenant law that strengthens protections for tenants.
- Advocacy for payday loan reform and work to create a coalition to educate the public about the dangers of borrowing from payday lenders.
- Work on behalf of the state's Latino population, including leading the Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice.

In an interview with the newspaper, Farley said she left school ready to dedicate herself to making a difference for those who are disadvantaged, unconcerned that social justice work would limit her potential earnings.

"I found myself focusing on the issues lying beneath the surface of my clients' legal needs."

Farley said she frequently asks herself: "If not me, then who? If I believe in something enough, shouldn't I be part of it? "

Appleseed's Executive Director Betsy Cavendish praised Farley's contributions to Alabama Appleseed as a means of continuing King's legacy: "Shay's award is a wonderful reminder that the days of change did not end with Dr. King's passing," said Cavendish. "We at Appleseed – our Centers and their staffs, our board members, our volunteers, our donors and our national staff — are a part of the ongoing effort to ensure that the American promise as a land of opportunity and justice is fulfilled. Shay richly deserved this award for her spirit of positive change and the effective work she leads."

Alabama Appleseed's Executive Director John Pickens also praised Farley's work and dedication. "Shay's work embodies the ideals, aspirations, and dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the five and a half years Shay has been with us, she has been very instrumental in helping us fulfill our mission to identify root causes of injustice and inequality and to develop and advocate for solutions that will improve the lives of all Alabamians. All of us at Alabama Appleseed are very proud of what Shay has accomplished

and are most pleased that her hard work and dedication to the cause of justice has been publicly recognized,” Pickens stated.

While continuing a number of ongoing projects, Farley is now turning her attention to Alabama Appleseed’s latest project: the Poultry Plant Worker Safety Initiative. This new effort in collaboration with the Southern Poverty Law Center will involve researching the extent of injuries and other injustices, including discrimination or wage violations, suffered by poultry workers. The research is based on: collecting data through worker interviews and surveys; assessing the accuracy of governmental safety records when compared to worker survey responses; and determining whether systemic changes are needed to protect workers adequately.

More than 80,000 workers in Alabama — mainly African-American or Latino — work for poultry processors or in industries that support these plants. The state’s 40 processing plants, which gross \$9 billion annually, account for 10 percent of the state’s economy. Despite processing’s prominent place in Alabama’s economy, Farley said independent monitoring or oversight of the industry is lacking and there have been no industry-wide investigations of working conditions in the state’s plants.

Farley said she proposed the idea for researching working conditions in the poultry processing industry in Alabama after learning of Nebraska Appleseed’s investigation of worker safety problems in Nebraska’s meatpacking plants, which were detailed in the report: “The Speed Kills You.”

She already had some knowledge of working conditions in Alabama’s poultry plants from a client she once worked with who was crippled by her work as a de-boner in a poultry processing plant.

Following its research, Alabama Appleseed will consider action and advocacy steps to ensure change happens, perhaps crafting a legislative strategy to drive policy and legal reforms to improve safety conditions; developing and disseminating workers’ rights pamphlets; enlisting support of pro bono legal partners to represent workers who have suffered injuries, harassment, or denial of pay; or pushing for adoption of stronger federal legislation to protect workers.