Poisonous priorities

A few days ago, a retired Chicago schoolteacher named Bea Lumpkin dressed herself in multiple layers of protective gear — including medical-grade gloves for her hands and beekeeper-style headgear so enveloping that only her eyes showed behind her face shield — and then made her way outdoors to drop her 2020 election ballot into a street-corner mailbox.

Lumpkin's effort was captured for the cameras, and went viral, for good reason: She is 102 years old and, having voted in every presidential contest since Franklin Roosevelt beat Wendell Willkie in 1940, she was determined to keep her streak alive — even in the wake of a pandemic that imperils super-seniors like herself. As CNN later reported, Bea spent the next few days relentlessly tracking the progress of her ballot online, staying connected until she received confirmation that it had been received and counted. Now she proudly wears an “I Voted” sticker.

The story comes as no surprise to those who know about her early life and career in New York City, for Bea Shapiro — as she was known then — graduated from Hunter College with a bachelor's degree in history back in 1939. Then she proceeded, as did many of her classmates, to pursue a life of social activism, embracing the Hunter motto: mihi cura future — “the care of the future is mine.”

Bea, born in the Bronx to two struggling immigrant garment workers, was a lifelong advocate for justice naturally. Her mother labored at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Greenwich Village but was pregnant, and fortunately at home, when the notorious fire there cost the lives of 146 laborers, mostly women and girls. Bea went on to work at a Brooklyn laundry, where she quickly organized its workers into a union. During World War II, serving as an electronics technician in Buffalo, she became a labor and tenants' rights activist. Her next activism was upheld by a local judge when her one-time affiliation with the Communist Party was read into the record.

Later, alongside her African-American husband, steelworker Frank Lumpkin, Bea fought Jim Crow laws, launched a new career as a school librarian, and became a tenured professor at Malcolm X College in Chicago. She wrote a 1999 book about her husband’s struggle to recover $3,000 in lost pensions from a bankrupt Wisconsin Steel plant. And in 2013, she produced an unapologetic autobiogaphy chronicling her proud life as a radical activist: “Joy in the Struggle: My Life and Love.”

If Bea Lumpkin can vote, so can you

Not an unimpressive legacy for a poor, first-generation American. But no real surprise. As our unofficial college slogan goes: “You can always find a Hunter girl. But you can’t find a Hunter guy.”

Now, contrast Lumpkin’s 80-year-long fight for civil and voter rights with the message on a recently unearthed, similarly viral video, in which the 20-something activist Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point U.S.A., all but advocated for voter suppression: “The COVID-19 pandemic had forced the shutdown of so many college campuses that some 500,000 likely progressive students registered to vote near their schools might well be disenfranchised this year.”

“So, please keep the campuses closed,” Kirk urged. “Like, it’s a great thing.”

Bea Shapiro Lumpkin would disagree. And her story animates Hunter College’s ongoing work to make sure that today’s students — even those studying remotely while our own campus remains largely closed — stay engaged on the issues and fully prepared to exercise the franchise.

Hunter’s student government, for example, used Instagram to conduct a virtual voter registration drive, and is now engaged in a vigorous get-out-the-vote campaign. Students who worked through the summer on completing the census are now being successfully recruited to serve as poll workers. Two of our alumnae, even running for office this cycle.

The pandemic has not curtailed outreach. A recent Hunter online discussion of Gen Z activism brought organizers and undergraduates together to stress the urgent need to participate, especially in an age plagued by anxiety and disparity.

New York City, community students like CUNY’s must be sure to vote in their home districts — or secure their absentee ballots ASAP from the Board of Elections website. Local students enrolled (and registered to vote) at out-of-town campuses that may be closed: secure mail-in-ballots from the state where you still sent cast ballots as soon as you can.

As Lumpkin put it to CNN: “The most important reason to vote in this election is that there’s so much at stake for so many. More than any other vote I’ve cast, because of the great challenge to the survival of democracy.”

Whatever side of the political spectrum you identify with, much should be true: If this woman can risk her very life to vote at age 102, every student can vote as if their own lives depended on it.

Hunter is the president of Hunter College.