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Torch (August 2015)

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Civil Rights Team Project

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The Civil Rights Team Project

We get schools to think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.



Here's what you can read about in the August edition of *The Torch*:

From the Teams: It's only August, so there's nothing to share here.

From the Advisors: A new and exciting feature in *The Torch* where we profile one of our wonderful civil rights team advisors.

From the Office: Three weeks in Indianapolis and coming back to the crunch.

From the News: We have to talk about what happened in Charleston in June.

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This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

Brandon Baldwin—Program Manager, Newsletter Editor
Debi Lettre Goodheart—Civil Rights Project Administrator
Janet Mills—Attorney General



From the Teams:

This is where we shine the spotlight on our civil rights teams and what they're doing in our schools. We specifically like to highlight the ways our teams are fulfilling our unofficial mission statement of getting schools to think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.



Look forward to reading about some wonderful project initiatives, small and large, that are truly making a difference in our schools.

From the Advisors:

This is the first of a new *Torch* feature where we ask a civil rights team advisor six questions and share their responses with you.



We're starting with the recently retired Irene Austin, who was a school counselor and civil rights team advisor at Park Avenue Elementary School in Auburn for four years.

1. What do you like about being a civil rights team advisor?

Being a co-advisor of the Civil Rights Team allowed me to work with students in a really different way. I was in a position of empowering students to do the work of educating their peers and other school community constituents about civil rights issues. Learning along with the kids (I had never been an advisor before nor had I worked in a school with a CRT) was a powerful experience for me. What I really liked was the infectious energy and enthusiasm of the kids to learn and to educate others. It was like throwing a rock into a pond – the kids' activities and initiatives sent out ripples into the school community, and having the students being the catalysts to deliver the CRT messages was a way for the messages to be heard in a different voice – from the kids, not the adults. I also liked working with another staff member, my co-advisor. Co-facilitating meant neither one of us had sole responsibility for leading or organizing, and together we could get really creative as we each brought our perspectives and ideas to the task.



2. What is your favorite moment or memory associated with the CRTP?

It is hard to choose just one, so I will have to narrow it down to three. This past year our team was invited to participate in the school's annual Multicultural Day. The team had a session with 4th grade students. They broke into four groups and planned activities to rotate small groups through. The activities were using a Chinese alphabet to make their names on scrolls, learning the manners of eating in Japan and then trying to eat noodles with chopsticks, a matching game using bias and civil rights team questions, and bias scenarios. We felt so proud watching them deliver this entirely on their own! They learned a lot and also got some nice kudos from the students they worked with. Another activity when I felt so impressed with them was on Mix It Up Days when the team would go out at recess for Kindergarten, first, and second graders and lead them in group cooperative games. They were fabulous with the younger students doing parachute games and other games with beach balls.

And I felt especially proud when a small group of CRT members volunteered to come to a PTO meeting and present to the parents about the work of the CRT in our school. I was really touched at how much they cared about their efforts and wanted the parents to understand, even leading the parents in an activity they had done at training. And one of the students who got up to speak and sounded so poised was a girl who had never wanted to do any public speaking or presentation in earlier CRT activities; she wowed us all!

3. What do you see as the biggest civil rights issue in your school?

I was lucky to work in a school with quite a bit of diversity. Park Avenue has the Auburn school district's ELL program, and about a fourth to a third of the student population are English language learners, with 20 languages represented. I think the school does a lot to raise awareness of multicultural issues such as religion and culture. I think what we saw as issues still needing work were gender and learning ability; the teasing and bias reported was usually more about language like *retard*, *idiot*, *loser*, *dumb*, *gay*, *homo*, *lesbo* – you get the picture.

4. What do you like about your civil rights team this year?

This past year the team was so on fire to do the work of the CRT! If we had to cancel a meeting for some reason, and this may have been once or twice, the kids would actually groan and lament. They were extremely faithful about attending weekly meetings, which were during their lunch/recess time, a big social time. Many were even willing to



do work for CRT initiatives outside of the weekly meeting time. The team members were unflagging and wanted to work right up to the last week of school!

5. What makes you optimistic about our work in the future?

The kids are getting it! They understand so much more about bias and its effects, and they want to take action. The Civil Rights Team gives them education, awareness, and a chance to be a voice and be heard. I have seen quite a few members gain a lot of confidence as they have had to speak in front of classes, present small group activities, or run Mix It Up at Lunch Days. Not only do they “get it,” they want to keep going. Our students who transitioned to middle school were very outspoken about the need for a team and were instrumental in reinstating a team there. The kids are excited and ready to lead!! That is exciting!

6. What advice or wisdom could you offer to other civil rights team advisors?

I had to learn to listen closely to the kids – they have great ideas and don't always need us to come up with initiatives. They are very good at taking an idea and running with it. Also, definitely co-lead with another staff member, and make time for a weekly or every other week planning time.





From the Office:

New Teams!

We've got some new civil rights teams joining us for the 2015-2016 school year, including Biddeford High School, Casco Bay High School in Portland, Hermon High School (upgrading from an affiliate status), Lyman Moore Middle School in Portland, Madison Area Memorial High School (upgrading from an affiliate status), Nokomis High School in Newport, Old Town High School, and Southern Aroostook Community School in Dyer Brook. Welcome!



We'll still waiting to hear back from some other schools that we hope to feature in this space in the next edition of *The Torch*.

Summer Seminar

I spent three weeks this summer in Indianapolis at IUPUI participating in a summer seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities on "Muslim American Identities, Past and Present." Sixteen of us, all educators from around the country, explored the question of what it means to be Muslim and American. The seminar was led by Edward Curtis, Professor of Religious Studies at IUPUI.

And it was wonderful. Rather than list everything about this experience that I loved, I'll just share a few things with you:

- I *could* attempt to dazzle you with my newly-acquired knowledge. (For instance, did you know that probably 10% of the African slaves who were brought to America were Muslim? Or that many of the bars and liquor stores in Toledo are owned and run by Muslims? Or that Mos Def starts each of his albums by dedication to Allah in Arabic?) But I won't...
- I *will* tell you about my research project, though. Seminar participants were responsible for original research. I wanted to work on something that I could use in my future work, so I focused on Islamophobia in Maine post-9/11. The fourteen violations of the Maine Civil Rights Act targeting Muslims signal an alarming trend in our state (especially when you consider that hate crimes are underreported and that Maine's Muslim population is around 6000). There is something powerful about hearing these stories, especially together.
- I am considering possibilities for how I might share my research or use it to create something bigger.



- If you are an educator, you should think about applying for one of the 2016 NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) summer seminars or institutes! I would definitely recommend the seminar on Muslim identities, but it won't be available next year. (It might be back for 2017, though.) I'm sure there will be other great options. (You can check out last summer's offerings [right here!](#)) As soon as I have information about the options for the summer of 2016, I will share it with the Civil Rights Team Project and encourage our educators to participate.

Getting Ready!

This is the most exciting (and frantic) time of year here with the Civil Rights Team Project. We update records, welcome new schools, and plan and prepare for a busy fall training schedule, with advisor trainings starting in mid-September and student team trainings in mid-October. We are loving and looking forward to all of it.

From the News:

Ten Thoughts Regarding Charleston, SC

Just as our school year was ending, on June 17 nine black Americans lost their lives at the hand of a white supremacist shooter in Charleston, South Carolina. The nine victims were worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Their names: Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons Sr., Sharonda Singleton, and Myra Thompson. This is something we need to think and talk about.



1. I won't use the shooter's name in this entire piece. I know his name, though. I had to look up the names of his nine victims. I'm not exactly sure what this means, if anything... but it just feels wrong.
2. It's amazing how far some people will go to deny that this was about race. A white man with a visible history of racist behavior attended a service at a historically black church and murdered nine black Americans... and yet some people perform mental gymnastics so that they can tell themselves that this was really about something else. Are we really that uncomfortable talking about race?
3. A lot of online comments focused on the fact that this shooting was particularly horrifying because it happened in a church. I don't disagree with that... I just hope that we'd see the same level of sympathy if it had happened in a synagogue, or a mosque, or a temple. Would we?



4. A high school classmate of the shooter said that his history of racist comments was just him “joking around.” Think of how often we hear this in our schools... the “just joking around” defense. This is not to suggest that anyone who tells bias-based jokes is going to commit a violent hate crime, but jokes have meaning.

5. Every year I hear about the confederate flag in some Maine school. Let’s make it disappear. No more excuses about freedom of speech, or redneck and rural pride, or southern heritage, or what it means to the people who wear it and show it.

What matters most is that this flag is a symbol that has been adopted by white supremacist groups, and the Charleston shooting is now another part of its hateful legacy. You don’t just pick and choose what it means. Symbols have meaning.

6. Bree Newsome, the woman who was arrested for scaling the flag pole and removing the confederate flag from outside of the South Carolina statehouse, is an American hero.

7. This is not just about South Carolina and “The South.” Racist behavior happens everywhere, including right here in Maine. Last year, in a well publicized incident, a truck full of young white men shouted the n-word at a black woman and her family in the streets of Portland. These incidents may differ in terms of their extremity, but they come from the same place: a culture that values whiteness over blackness. Racial bias is not just a Southern problem. It’s an American problem.

8. It’s too easy to view the shooter as *disturbed*, or *troubled*, or a *bad seed*, or a *lone wolf*, or whatever terminology people use so that they can view this as an isolated incident. It’s comforting to think that the shooter was operating outside of our cultural norms, because then we never have to examine the culture. But racism is very much learned behavior. The problem is not that the shooter was isolated from American culture. The problem is that he was influenced by it.

9. Of course this isn’t the first time a black church has been attacked in our country’s history... not even close. The most well-known attack happened 52 years ago when a bomb exploded at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a stirring eulogy, searching for some sort of message and meaning in their deaths.

They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.

Read that again. Is he talking about 1963, or 2015?



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) AUG '15

10. I didn't want to write this. It's exhausting. It's hard. But it can't compare to how exhausting and hard it must be for people of color to confront this horror. I'll never know what that's like.

I do know that self-reflection is a necessary step towards redemption. I hope that America, and Maine, and our schools, and the Civil Rights Team Project, and *all of us*, take the time to think and talk about this.

Because we need redemption, and we all need to be a part of that redemption.