

THE TORCH

CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

June 2008

Newsletter Editor: Brandon Baldwin



We Say Hello, We Say Goodbye (Kind of)

BY THOM HARNETT

With great and appropriate fanfare, we have spent portions of the last two *Torches* welcoming our new employee, Brandon Baldwin to the CRTP Team. Brandon's tasks are many, and as you read recently, he will be taking over responsibility of producing *The Torch*, the official publication of the CRTP and the way that our office stays in touch with the civil rights teams and civil rights teams stay in touch with one another. Brandon's arrival comes with a tinge of sadness to me as the Director of the CRTP. Don't get me wrong. I am thrilled to have Brandon here as he is an incredible asset to our program. At the same time however, Brandon taking the helm of *The Torch* means a goodbye of sorts to Amy Homans. While Amy will remain with the CRTP as an invaluable trainer, she is letting go of the day to day operation of *The Torch*. I cannot let that go unrecognized. Amy created *The Torch* from whole cloth and put her indelible mark on it with every issue. Debi and I always waited with anxiousness to see what great ideas and stories Amy would come up with for each new issue. Amy never disappointed us and from what we hear from faculty advisors and team

members, she never disappointed them either.

On a personal note, Amy has been a dear friend of mine for many, many years and I will miss the more consistent contact we would have while she was working on *The Torch*. While our level of contact might change, what will not change is my level of respect for Amy's work and gratitude for her outstanding efforts on *The Torch*.

THANK YOU AMY!

Congratulations, Thom!

Our own Thom Harnett was recently honored with a Maine Initiatives Watering Can Award for his outstanding work with the Maine Civil Rights Team Project. The "The Social Landscape Artist Award" goes to a person, couple, family, and/or group who has significantly changed the social landscape in Maine through work on the root causes of economic, environmental, or social problems by devising creative solutions, influencing others to take action, shifting public thinking or policy, or having an impact on the lives of Maine people and its environment. We all know that the award is well deserved!



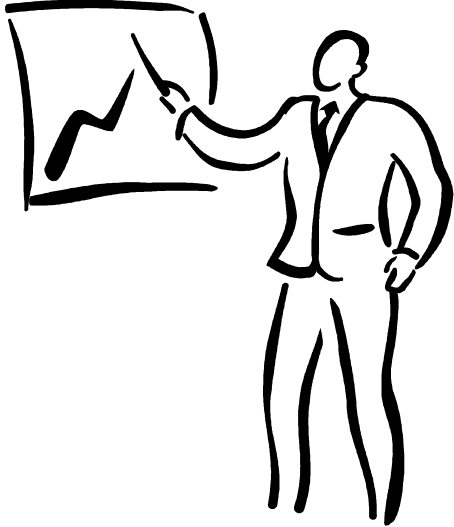
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Survey Results Are In!



Our online survey was a great success: more than 50 of you took the time to respond and gave us some valuable information. In some ways we were using this survey as a test run for your technological proficiency: we have big plans to launch the Civil Rights Team Project online next year. Your quick response to our survey suggests that this will be a valuable and well-used tool. For those of you who didn't respond to the survey and might be intimidated by technology, relax. We will make things as simple as possible and plan on spending some of our faculty advisor time doing technology training.

The survey results told us something important about our monthly newsletter, *The Torch*: you love it. Our survey respondents read it, share it, and use it. An overwhelming majority of survey respondents would like to see more information on available resources and ideas for activities that you can use with your teams and schools. We hear you, and you can expect more.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the survey and your assistance in helping us do a better job.

Summer Reading

In a very recent previous life I taught young adult literature. You can probably imagine that I've created an occasional summer reading list: I see no reason why that should stop now with my new position with the Civil Rights Team Project. There are several exciting trends in young adult literature that are worth paying attention to: (1) there are more and more graphic novels that are gaining appreciation as true literature; (2) more multicultural authors are writing young adult literature; and (3) young adult literature is gaining an adult following as the quality and complexity of the genre continues to improve.

Keeping all three of those trends in mind, I highly recommend two multicultural graphic novels that are suitable for both adolescent and adult readers, and are perfect summer reading fare.

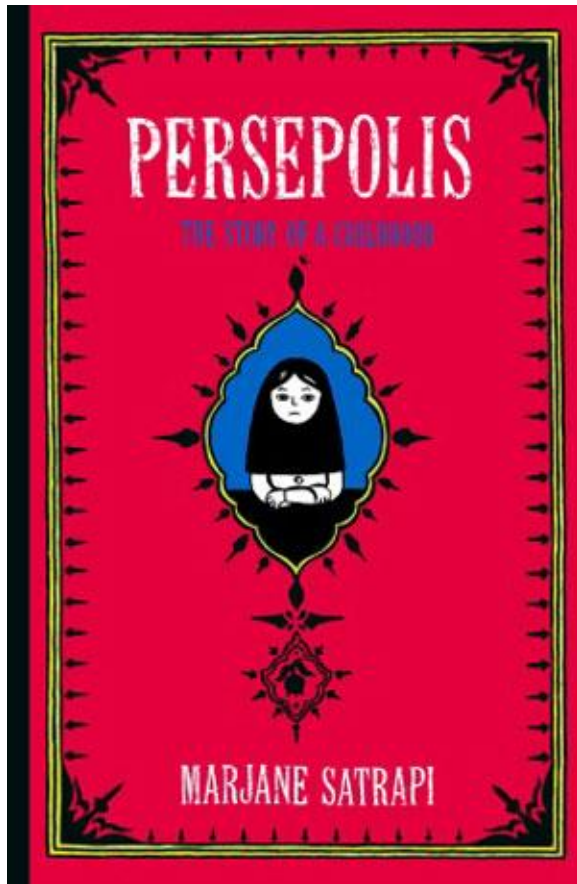


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***Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, by Marjane Satrapi**

How much do you really know about Iran? If you're like me, it's probably pretty limited. Does Iran have nuclear weapons? (That's up for debate.) Is that the country with the really anti-American president with the hard to remember name? (You mean Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? Yes.) Isn't that Shamou guy from Iran? (He sure is!)

Persepolis is like a crash course in modern Iranian history, but it's no history book. This is the memoir from an Iranian girl coming of age during the Islamic Revolution. She struggles with many of the same issues American adolescents face today, but because of the setting her travails

take on a more serious tone. Readers will easily identify with young Marjane's desire to rebel, but the setting makes this story transcend the simple "youth in rebellion" subgenre. When Marjane rebels, she refuses to wear the government mandated veil, risking imprisonment and interrogation. When she defies her parents, she sneaks out of the house and joins revolutionary protests in the streets against the Islamic regime.

This combination of the universal coming-of-age story with the unique circumstances of setting is reminiscent of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. *Persepolis* is also an important story as it helps American readers understand the Islamic Revolution, fundamentalist regimes, and the seeds of conflict between Iran, Iraq, and the Western world. Perhaps the biggest accomplishment of this wonderful novel, though, is how it puts a human face on the people of Iran, an important accomplishment as tensions and rhetoric between the United States and Iran escalate.

To preview this simply and starkly drawn tale, go to:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/pantheon/graphicnovels/persepolis.html>

The animated feature film version of *Persepolis*, which was nominated for an Academy Award, releases on DVD on June 24th. (Of course we all know that the movie is never as good as the book!) For a preview, go to:

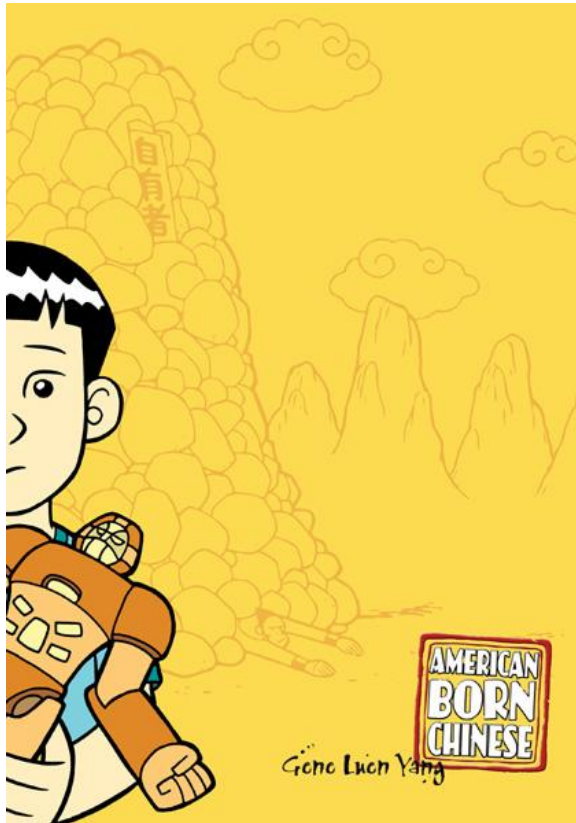
<http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/persepolis/>

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***American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang**

A few years ago I attended a workshop called “What’s New in Young Adult Literature”. One book was getting all the buzz: *American Born Chinese*. It had been nominated for the National Book Award and recently won the American Library Association’s Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature. These awards always raise eyebrows, but *American Born Chinese* got extra attention, as it was the first graphic novel to receive such recognition.

Is all the attention well-deserved? Absolutely. In beautifully drawn, full color pictures, Yang skillfully interweaves three separate strands of story. He tells the ancient Chinese myth of the Monkey King,

the story of two Chinese-American friends struggling to find an identity in public school, and the sitcom-style story of the intentionally stereotyped Chin-Kee, whose sole purpose in life seems to be embarrassing his American cousin. Each story works well on its own, but together they serve as a moving and meaningful portrayal of what life must be like for ethnic Americans trying to assimilate into a dominant culture. As the author explains, “with *American Born Chinese*, I’m trying to say something about my experiences growing up as an Asian-American.” Ultimately, he arrives at the conclusion that he should accept who he really is: important advice for all teen readers trying to create an identity.

Disclaimer: The stereotype of the Chin-Kee character is ugly. That is the author’s intent, as the character is meant to call attention to negative Asian stereotypes. The character is so ridiculous it becomes humorous, but young readers may laugh without knowing why it’s humorous. They may not see Chin-Kee as a stereotype, and may laugh at his silliness rather than the ridiculousness of the stereotype. If you plan on sharing this book with students and team members, read it first and help them understand the author’s intent in creating the Chin-Kee character.

To preview this wonderful book, go to:

<http://www.firstsecondbooks.com/abc.html>

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Winterport's Wagner Middle School Shows Appreciation for Bus Drivers

The following comes from Wagner Middle School's faculty advisors Karen Boynton and Cindy Moran:

The team sponsored a Bus Driver Appreciation Day on April 17, 2008. Team members put up a banner for all students in the school to sign, made certificates of appreciation, and put together gift bags for each First Student bus driver. Drivers were then invited into the school for a school wide assembly shortly before dismissal. The drivers received an enthusiastic round of applause and were presented with the banner and tokens of appreciation by team members. A nice thank you letter was received from the drivers which acknowledged how nice it was to feel appreciated and respected.

What a great idea! The hard-working bus drivers in our schools rarely get the credit they deserve. They do so much more than just transport children to and from school. Think about it: the bus driver is frequently the first school employee new students meet on their first day of school. We also know that bus drivers are valuable allies for civil rights teams. A majority of students start and end their school day on the bus. Sometimes we forget about the buses in our discussions about hot spots of activity in our schools.



The contents of Wagner's "bus driver appreciation bags," which were given to each of the district's bus drivers during a schoolwide assembly.



A Wagner Middle School civil rights team member shows her school's appreciation to one of the district's bus drivers.

The Wagner Middle School also did grade level assemblies on the issue of cyberbullying, an increasing problem for many of our schools. Adults are sometimes intimidated by the technologies and terminologies our students are using: they've gone way past e-mail. It's important that we don't hide from this topic, though. Expect more on the topic of cyberbullying next fall, including some useful web resources and tips on how to address the issue.

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Regional Gatherings In Lieu of State Conference

Many of you were rightly disappointed with the cancellation of the May conference: we were disappointed, too. The conference serves as a wonderful end of the year celebration of our successes, and serves as an important reminder to us all that we're part of a statewide project. Many of you have found ways to celebrate your accomplishments on the local level, creating alternatives in lieu of the conference.

In Gardiner: Elementary, middle, and high school teams got together at the Johnson Hall Performing Arts Center. Civil rights team members enjoyed creating a banner, eating some cake, and the participatory percussion experience that is Shamou.

In Brownville: Four of the district's elementary and middle schools met for a full-day celebration. This successful gathering was profiled in the *Bangor Daily News* on May 27th.

<http://bangornews.com/news/t/news.aspx?articleid=164951&zoneid=500>

In Livermore Falls: The middle school had a schoolwide civil rights day on June 6th. The day included workshop-style sessions on group labeling in the school, cyberbullying, and issues of general fairness. The day culminated with yet another Shamou performance, featuring students who had the opportunity to work with him beforehand.

In Bar Harbor: Five local elementary teams gathered at Sand Beach for a spectacular beach field day. The Connors

Emerson, Mount Desert, Pemetic, Tremont, and Trenton elementary schools enjoyed perfect weather and some wonderful activities. They first received the "Mix It Up" treatment for team assignments and then tackled five beach-specific challenges with their new teams. Photos follow. (The goofy-looking guy in the red shorts is your new Schools and Curriculum Coordinator, and no, he is NOT picking his nose.)



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An Outgoing Senior Says Good-Bye to the CRTP

BY MARY CALLAWAY, PRESIDENT,
OLD TOWN HIGH SCHOOL CIVIL
RIGHTS TEAM, 2006-2008

The Maine Civil Rights Team Project has been a major part of my life over the past three years. As a sophomore I joined my team, not knowing quite what to expect. By junior year I had been elected to lead the team, and in my senior year I was re-elected for a second year as civil rights team facilitator. I've grown to love each and every person on my team as a sort of family. Like a family we stick together when the outside forces seem determined to break us up. If the school board objects to one of our projects, we go together to the meeting. When only a few of us are actually doing the presentation, the rest of the team is sitting in solidarity, a silent but nonetheless influential source of encouragement. When students or faculty mock our work or tease us for being involved in the civil rights team, we rally together and assure each other that we are doing the right thing, even if it isn't always the popular thing. When we go through struggles we bring our concerns, emotions, and thoughts to our brothers and sisters on the team, and we help each other through the tough times. When good things happen for a member of our family, we all share in a sense of pride for that person. We work together on the team, and maintain close friendships even when the meetings have ended.

Like any family we also have our struggles. Sometimes we get angry at each other for forgetting to finish a task, missing a meeting, or bringing up an irrelevant topic.

Sometimes we feel that we've had too much of each other, and sometimes our work makes us so stressed that we lash out at those who care the most for us. But, like the family we are, we learn to deal with our little problems and move on to seeing the bigger picture.

The Civil Rights Team Project has created the opportunity for students who are passionate advocates for civil rights and social justice to come together in a safe environment in which we can be ourselves, teach our peers, and make real change in our school. As a member of this team I have learned that determination and courage are essential to making change. Without a clear goal and the drive and courage to work toward achieving that goal, no progress can be made. No matter what obstacles stand in our way we must press on, because in the end there are only two options. We can have change, or we can accept the status quo. When the status quo allows people to be bullied, mocked, or made to feel inferior, change is the only acceptable option. Without dedicated and determined leaders, making this change is not possible.

It is not easy to defend unpopular opinions. Throughout history every great mover and shaker has come up against immeasurable criticism and mockery. It is hard to endure the snide comments and rude jokes made by our classmates, but we look to those in our civil rights team family for guidance, support, and encouragement. To stand in front of four hundred students and ask them to share their experiences and feelings is no easy task. Without confidence in one's abilities and one's message, it is difficult to do such a thing. The civil rights team has empowered me to be a courageous and confident advocate for civil rights. I've

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accomplished more than I could have ever imagined had I not been involved in the team. I've spoken in front of my student body, made endless phone calls to people I had never met, presented to my school board, led a diversity workshop, and addressed the entire faculty of my high school. Without the support and encouragement of my team I would not have had the confidence to do these things.

As I leave my civil rights team family to go to college, I feel a version of the same sadness and confusion that accompanies moving out of my real family. On one hand I am looking forward to being on my own and having new experiences, but on the other hand I am scared to leave the comfort of my home and the people who have made it such a wonderful place to be. I know that there will be many more opportunities to be involved in social activism, and I know that I will be a part of many more organizations that work for social change, but I can't quite imagine going a week without seeing the faces of my civil rights team family. It will be strange to not bring an announcement to Mrs. King, our ever helpful and accommodating office secretary, every Monday and hear over the loudspeaker in the afternoon, "There will be a civil rights team meeting after school today in the cafeteria. Please be sure to attend." It will be hard to know that I can't just pop into the guidance office and have a long discussion with our team advisor, Colleen Fitzgerald. I'll miss the after school meetings, our skittles, the conferences, our discussions, and our important niche in the Old Town High School community.

I am so fortunate to have known all of the people who have been part of my civil rights team experience. I want to say thank you to

my sisters Maggie, Gabi, Jessie, Emily, Vanessa, Julie, Spring, and Chris for their amazing strength and their passion for the important work that they do. To my brothers Zaq, Cody, Cody, Brad, Alex, and Brian, I want to say thank you for always being there to contribute your endless ideas and offer your encouragement. To Noelle, officially our guidance intern, but really more of a friend, thank you for understanding my sarcasm and for giving me a vision of where I could be in the next six years. Congratulations on getting a job and your very own desk and phone! To Thom Harnett and Brandon Baldwin, thank you for the ongoing support and your belief in our team, and for showing me that there are actually ways to make a living doing what I love to do. Finally, a giant hug and a heart-felt thank you to Ms. Fitzgerald, our faculty advisor, who has never lost faith in us, who has never said no to our outrageous and often seemingly impossible initiatives, and who has been a huge inspiration and comfort to me throughout my high school years. I will miss you all incredibly next year, and I hope to be able to help with next year's projects in any way that I can.

The Civil Rights Team Project is a remarkable initiative that deserves the utmost praise for its ability to bring students together with the goal of making school safe for all students and faculty. I am honored to have been a part of a project that is making change and touching the lives of students in our state. In elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools across Maine there are students who care deeply about issues relating to civil rights. Thanks to the Civil Rights Team Project, we have found our voices. I plan to take my voice, my confidence, and my determination out into the world as I embark upon the next leg of

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my life's journey. Thank you to everyone involved in the development, funding, and facilitation of the Maine Civil Rights Team Project; your courage and dedication have helped me become the person that I am today.

Editor's Note: After seeing her team's impressive work in organizing their second annual Diversity Day at OTHS, I had to ask Mary for a contribution to The Torch. I thought that something from a graduating senior, a reflection on the civil rights team experience, would make for an appropriate end of year piece.

It's worth remembering that the Civil Rights Team Project is a positive presence in our schools and our communities, but it's also a rewarding experience for the participants. Mary has certainly had a wonderful civil rights team experience. In my brief tenure here she has impressed me enormously. We all wish her well in her future, and feel confident that she's someone who will make a positive difference wherever she goes.

Save the Dates!

Debi has booked all the dates for faculty and student fall trainings. Here they are:

Faculty Trainings

October 3rd, Wells Common, Orono
October 6th, Keeley's, Portland
October 9th, Calumet Club, Augusta

Student/Team Trainings

October 28th & 29th, Brewer Armory
November 4th, 5th & 6th, Keeley's, Portland

November 20th, Keddy's, Presque Isle
December 8th & 9th, Augusta Civic Center

More details will follow, but you can mark your calendars now.

Also, I feel compelled to comment on the upcoming summer. Summer of course means a glorious summer vacation for many of us. It's a great time to re-energize. Don't be afraid to contact me here in the Augusta office. With no schools in session, I suddenly have a lot of time on my hands.

Please, please, please contact me with ideas and requests for what I should be working on. This summer will probably be the best-ever time for enlisting my aid in any upcoming projects. I'm available... and I'm not too proud to beg.

Brandon Baldwin
626-8548
brandon.baldwin@maine.gov



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 high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.

G. Steven Rowe --- Attorney General
Thomas A. Harnett—Director, Civil Rights Education & Enforcement Unit
Debi Lettre, Civil Rights Project Administrator
Brandon Baldwin, Schools/Curriculum Coordinator