



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) FEB '09

Letter from the Editor:

Changes are upon us. There are some visible changes in this month's version of *The Torch*. We're using an exciting new font and no longer writing in two columns. And of course there's a new name in the Attorney General slot as we welcome Janet T. Mills to the Office of the Attorney General.

But for *The Torch*, there are even bigger changes. They may not be so obvious to you because you're reading this much like you have in previous months. We'd like to change that, though. We are envisioning a more instant and interactive newsletter. For more than a month we've been posting *The Torch* online. Everything you have here has already been available online. Some of the articles you read here are a month old, and with some of the content, it matters. Articles about the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards aren't exactly old news, but the MEA grant that needs to be submitted by March 5th is certainly moving in that direction.

We want the CRTP to be ahead of the game. We want to make you aware of events before they happen, and the online blog is the ideal way to make that happen. The online format also allows for a higher level of interaction: links, video clips, and discussion forums are just one convenient click away.

So I would like to extend an invitation to all of you to go online and read *The Torch* in its new and most natural form. The online format has allowed us to greatly expand its scope and capacities: take full advantage!

To read the February newsletter in all its glory, or to check out the constantly updated March Torch blog, go to our Moodle site at www.civilrightsteams.org!

Brandon Baldwin, Newsletter Editor

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.

Janet T. Mills — Attorney General

Thomas A. Harnett — Director, Civil Rights Education & Enforcement Unit

Debi Lettre — Civil Rights Project Administrator

Brandon Baldwin — Schools/Curriculum Coordinator & Newsletter Editor



Oscar Nominees Strong on Civil Rights Issues

The Academy Awards nominees were just announced, and civil rights team advisors should be smiling. The Best Picture contenders for 2008 feature three films with strong civil rights credentials: *Milk*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *The Reader* all have a future on our Moodle site's resource list.

We plan on reviewing each of these films before the 81st Academy Awards. Here is our first review...



The Reader: The Thoughtful Contender

This film is like every Holocaust film you've ever seen, but with one key difference, and it is that difference that makes this film resonate deeply. *The Reader* starts with a romance between a fifteen year old Michael Burke and a mysterious older woman, Hannah Schmitz. It is obvious that their romance is destined for failure, but the abrupt ending nonetheless surprises the young Burke. She leaves without warning, without good-bye, and he, of course, is heartbroken.

Fast-forward ten years. Burke is a high achieving student in law school. His class attends a prominent trial of six women, former SS guards accused of war crimes. Burke is stunned to discover his former lover is one of the accused.

To continue with the plot synopses would reveal too much. This is a film about secrets, the past, and their impact on the present.



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Where this film is like other Holocaust films is in its split tone. The first half of the film is characterized by Burke's youth and innocence. We know that this is only setting us up for the second half, where the film takes a darker tone, marked by tragedy. This is typical of most Holocaust films: they show how life was before in order to show what was lost, and what will never be regained, after.

But *The Reader* is very different from most Holocaust films in that the events take place entirely *after* the Holocaust. This is not so much a film about the Holocaust as it is a film about the *effects* of the Holocaust. Germany was especially active in redressing the wrongs of the past. They effectively eliminated the Nazi Party, banned the swastika, tried officials for war crimes, paid reparations to forced laborers... but these were all legal responses to the horrors of the Holocaust. What happened across Europe in the 1930's and 1940's exists outside of the law: the law isn't enough to address the horror and inhumanity of these events.

And so Europe, and especially Germany, was left to grapple with its conscience. There were victims, active participants, vocal opponents, silent bystanders: all left with unanswerable questions about what happened, seeking meaning and trying to understand their role in something so monstrous it can only be described as meaningless.

The Reader is not your traditional Holocaust film in that it lacks the traditional imagery we have come to associate with the Holocaust. The only shots we get of concentration camps come when Burke visits a long abandoned camp. This works in the film's favor. The horrors are so profound they cannot be replicated on the screen. Instead, you are left with your imagination, and as old horror movies demonstrate, what's left to the imagination is far worse than explicit imagery.

The Reader is an intelligent film, posing questions about the past and how none of us are able to escape it. There are no happy endings here, but ultimately the film arrives at one single truth, buried underneath the layers of secrets: to arrive at any sort of reconciliation with the past, we must face it.

The film has obvious civil rights connections as a Holocaust film, but it is this deeper theme of facing the ugliness and atrocities of our world, our existence, and especially ourselves, that rings truest. As civil rights team advisors we must continually challenge ourselves and our teams to shine the light in the darkest corners, even when it's difficult and uncomfortable to do so; or, perhaps especially when it's difficult and uncomfortable to do so.

This thought-provoking film is highly recommended for FA's. Unfortunately, because of the sexual relationship between the two main characters, it can't be recommended for student viewing.

(At our online blog you could watch the preview for *The Reader* right here.)



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***Slumdog Millionaire*: The Movie That Makes You Stand Up and Cheer**

The movie generating the most buzz in 2008 is *Slumdog Millionaire*, and its success seems almost as unlikely as its premise. The film opens with Dev Patel, an Indian teen who grew up in the Mumbai slums, about to answer the final question on India's version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Because of his unlikely success, he is arrested for suspicion of cheating. With the interrogations we get flashbacks of Dev's hard life that help explain how he is able to answer the questions on the game show correctly.

For sure, this is a total gimmick. But it doesn't matter. Movies that are this utterly likable are rare. Dev is the ultimate underdog; his mere survival in the Mumbai underworld is an eye-opening experience for American viewers. In spite of his horrible circumstances, Dev retains his humanity and has a good heart.

The same could be said for the movie itself. While many are calling this the feel good movie of the year, don't be deceived. The movie dwells in some dark and dangerous territory. Abject poverty, murder, religious persecution, child abuse, slavery, prostitution: this is not stuff of typical "feel good" films, but they are all important elements in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Nonetheless, the film rises above these circumstances. It certainly doesn't ignore them; rather, it uses them to make Dev the most unlikely of winners.

It's also worth noting that the film has an almost manic intensity to it. Its charm comes from its energy. Few films match its energy level. (The ones that do: *Amelie*, *Run Lola Run*, and *City of God*, are all foreign films. Go figure.) While the subject matter is frequently dark and gritty, the telling of the story is bright and colorful, bursting with life.

The miracle of *Slumdog Millionaire* is that it's so accessible. This is a film about India, starring unknown Indian actors, told in English and Hindi, with an unflinching look at



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how children cope with miserable poverty and living conditions. American audiences are abuzz over this?

They are, and since this film is so accessible, it has great potential from a civil rights perspective. A disclaimer: I know very little about India. I can't speak for the authenticity of the film in its presentation of the Mumbai slums and Indian society. Regardless, the film could be useful in starting conversations about class, socioeconomics, religion, and gender, but that's not the real value of *Slumdog Millionaire*. The real value of the film is that it hasn't been whitewashed and Americanized, and audiences are still watching and enjoying it. How many films feature tan-skinned South Asians? How many films feature tan-skinned South Asians who are well-developed characters and aren't terrorists or convenience store employees? South Asians are in films to scare us or make us laugh, but rarely are they presented as complex characters or real people. *Slumdog Millionaire* is the exception, and it's just another reason to cheer for it.

(At our online blog you could watch the preview for *Slumdog Millionaire* right here.)

* Job well done if you said one of the Harold and Kumar films. If you came up with one of the Van Wilder films... not so good.



***Milk*: Finally, a Film that Celebrates and Normalizes Gay Life**

I think that *Milk* is the most groundbreaking film of 2008. Think of every film you've ever seen with gay characters. I can almost guarantee that gay life was portrayed in one of two ways:



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1. A source of humor and jokes
2. A problem or a source of problems

The films covered in that first category can be very problematic. They generally enforce stereotypes people have about GLBTQ populations and send out the message that these people are to be laughed at. The second category includes some good, even great films: *Philadelphia*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Brokeback Mountain*. But being gay is generally presented as problematic for the characters in these films. It's the source of the conflict, and granted, this may accurately reflect the lives of many GLBTQ people living in a homophobic world, but where's the joy, the beauty, the fun?

It's in *Milk*, the first mainstream movie I can think of that celebrates gay life and views it not as an obstacle or source of conflict, but as something wonderful and beautiful. By taking this viewpoint, *Milk* helps normalize gay life in the American experience.

Milk of course tells the story of Harvey Milk, the nation's first openly gay politician elected to public office. The film chronicles his multiple campaigns for city council in San Francisco in the 1970's, and ends with his assassination at the hands of another city politician. But the film is so much more than a biopic focused on his life. It's also about the rise of the gay pride and power movement.

Watching the film, I couldn't help but be angry over the fact that I hadn't learned more about the gay pride and gay power movements of the late 60's and 70's. Why hadn't I ever heard of the Stonewall Riots? Anita Bryant and the Save Our Children Coalition? Or Harvey Milk himself? It's disappointing to think that GLBT history is so regularly ignored. Even a look through my favorite multicultural texts (*A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, *A Different Mirror* by Ronald Takaki, and *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen) revealed almost nothing for GLBT history.

Why aren't students learning about the struggles of the GLBT population for equal rights?

It's a question you can't help but wonder as you watch *Milk*. The seamless editing of news footage into the film helps emphasize the fact that everything you're seeing really happened. It gives the film a certain weightiness to it, but it's tempered by the joy of the lives you see onscreen. It's an important film achievement.

* * * * *

(At our online blog you could watch the preview for *Milk* right here.)

Check out the impressive and interactive website for *Milk* at:

www.filminfocus.com/milk



February 27, 2009: Recent Travels and Activities

Ever since I've hit the phone and started in on my effort to contact every FA in the state, I have had more requests for travel and school visits. (If you haven't heard from me yet, be patient. It's slow work.)

Because of this, we now have some new programs we can share with you, your teams, and your schools. Here are some of my recent activities and travels:

The Cyberbullying Issue

We keep getting requests for information and resources on cyberbullying. It's an issue that seems to become more and more salient, but there also seems to be a lack of quality resources out there. We recently got a request from Seabasticook Valley Middle School faculty advisor Kitty Mitchell to do a presentation on the human consequences of cyberbullying. It was time to create something ourselves.

So... we now have a 45-60 minute presentation on the human consequences of cyberbullying appropriate for middle or high school level audiences. It can be done in small group settings (most ideal) or large group assemblies. It relies heavily on social psychology, looking at why people are so willing to engage in cyberbullying behaviors.

Feel free to contact us if you have any interest in this program.

Civil Rights Team Film Festival in Milo

Milo Elementary School recently played host for a civil rights film festival that included teams from Brownville Elementary, Suzanne M. Smith Elementary School, and Penquis Valley School. Faculty advisors Sue Davis, BJ Bowden, and Heather Webb brought their teams together for an event that featured many films from our Moodle website. Students viewed short films on a variety of civil rights topics and had opportunities to respond and discuss what they saw.

This film festival got me thinking: what a great idea. It's a wonderful way to get multiple teams together for a regional event. It's an even better way to challenge your civil rights team members to think about important issues in an engaging medium.

But there's an element of work in organizing such activities (much credit to the FA's for their work on this event). I like the idea of a film festival so much, though, that I intend to pre-package a set of films, discussion guides, and activities that FA's can readily use with their teams. Expect it.



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The Sneetches, Assembly-Style

Whenever I go to a school many of the civil rights team members identify me as “The Sneetches Guy”. This next piece of news probably won’t help me shed that moniker. Several weeks ago in Aroostook County I did *Sneetches* assemblies with age levels ranging from third graders to high school seniors. I’m available to bring *The Sneetches* on the road and have students cast a critical eye on their school and ask the simple question: How do we treat those who are somehow different? The assembly is most productive when followed with small group discussions.

Gender Stereotypes in Employment Activity

Finally, there’s an activity I created for use at the Mill Pond School’s recent civil rights day. (Kudos to the school’s assistant principal and FA Mary Harbison for devoting a full day to civil rights issues!) The activity looks at gender stereotypes and how they relate to employment. It’s a very active and engaging activity that helps bring to light an area of discrimination that is almost invisible to many of us. The activity takes about 45-60 minutes.

While planning an upcoming event with Hall-Dale Middle School’s FA Nona Thompson, I recently had the pleasure of facilitating this activity with her team, and it provided many opportunities for thoughtful discussion. The activity would work well with any age level. If you’d like me to come in and conduct this activity with your team, let me know.

(You can access this activity online at our Moodle site.)



Landmark PBS Series Coming in April!

The word "landmark" is probably used too often, but it seems like the only appropriate adjective in describing *We Shall Remain*, the upcoming American Experience series about Native American history on PBS. It will be the longest and most expensive series American Experience has ever produced. Exact times are not yet available, but it will air in April.

The series seeks to illuminate Native American history through five different episodes highlighting different individuals and aspects of Native history: After the Mayflower, Tecumseh's Vision, Trail of Tears, Geronimo, and Wounded Knee. The television series is only one part of the overall project, featuring extensive online content as well.



For more information, go to the *We Shall Remain* website at:

www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/

February 17, 2009: It Only Takes One Word

An inspirational poem on the power of language from Houlton High School CRT member Nelson M., a sophomore...

It only takes one word.
One word to help.
One word to hurt.

One word to encourage.
One word to put down.

It only takes one word.

Words can make the difference.
Think about it.

* * *

Nelson read his poem at a recent all-school assembly I had the privilege of presenting at. The assembly was titled "Beyond Word Choice" and featured a skit from the CRT, as well as practical advice and a call to action for students to address hate speech whenever and wherever it happens.

Here's to getting our CRT members to create art (in all of its many forms) that addresses the civil rights issues they care about. Perhaps someday we will sponsor some competitions for you and your teams...



Making Valentine's Day More Inclusive



One of the things that I always remember from school was the ultimate awkwardness of Valentine's Day. It never mattered if the school sponsored events or did nothing; inevitably, some students got flowers and chocolates and cards, while some got nothing.

The civil rights team at the Hartland Consolidated School is creating a more inclusive school environment by making a Valentine's Day card for every student in the school. Faculty advisor Jenn Finnemore distributed class lists and materials today, giving the team about a week to pull it together. It's a labor-intensive process, making an individualized card for each of the school's 160 pre-K through fourth graders. But the idea of every student in the school receiving something for Valentine's Day should be ample motivation.

Since exclusion is perhaps the major civil rights related issue with elementary school students, this is an intelligent and effective way to break down social barriers and eliminate the very real possibility of any student feeling completely left out of Valentine's celebrations. (Gift giving and card exchanging always has the potential to create a highly visible display of the school's social haves and have-nots.)

The project also has the added benefit of getting the civil rights team some positive publicity. Each card will be signed from the civil rights team.



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Here's an easy project that will help lessen the social stigma attached to such celebrations as Valentine's Day. All it takes is a supply of art materials, a block of time, and a little individual initiative, and your team can have a very tangible result.



Miley Cyrus and Her Celebrity Racist Slip-Up



Following an all-too-common storyline, Miley Cyrus just hit the news for all the wrong reasons. A photograph of her and her friends making themselves appear “Asian” by slanting their eyes has leaked online. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that there is a young Asian man also posing in the photograph.



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At this point it's unclear what exactly is happening. We don't know the context, but is there any acceptable context? Is there any possible way that this can't be an insensitive and racist gesture?

Her classic celebrity non-apology does little to help matters. On her blog, Cyrus wrote:
"I've also been told there are some people upset about some pictures taken of me with friends making goofy faces! Well, I'm sorry if those people looked at those pics and took them wrong and out of context!

In NO way was I making fun of any ethnicity! I was simply making a goofy face. When did that become newsworthy...

You guys know me and have been by my side every step of the way! You guys know my heart and know the most important things to me are my friends, family, fans, and GOD! In NO WAY do I want to disappoint any of you! But, when I have made mistakes in the past, I feel like I've owned up to them and apologized."

So... she's just making goofy faces? Interesting how her and five of her friends are making the exact same goofy face. And in my many years of photographing kids, there are the inevitable "goofy shots" that kids love to pose for: I can't remember one kid who made that sort of goofy face.

This is not good. Unfortunately, millions of young kids worship the ground Miley Cyrus walks on. It's disturbing to think that the perfect image Disney has crafted for her could be tainted by racism.

(Thoughts or comments on the Cyrus controversy? Please post on our online discussion forum at the Moodle website.)

Two Images of Attending School

Have you seen this yet? It has been circulating online, and was brought to my attention by East Auburn Community School FA Susan Weiss. It's simply two images, but when you look at them side by side, they take on a deeper meaning.

The first image is a Normal Rockwell painting, *The Problem We All Deal With*, which depicts young Ruby Bridges attending kindergarten on November 14, 1960, desegregating the New Orleans public schools.

The second image is Sasha Obama on her first day of school in Washington, D.C.

The connecting thread is the police escort for both girls. Less than 50 years ago Bridges needed an escort for her protection. The same may be true for the Obama girls, but only because their daddy is president. Incredible.



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U.S. Senator Mary L. Landrieu of Louisiana made the connection between Ruby Bridges and the Obama girls in a press statement. Read it at:

<http://landrieu.senate.gov/releases/09/2009121244.html>

The Anti-Defamation League created a lesson plan on school desegregation using the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and *The Problem We All Live With*. Get it at:

www.adl.org/education/brown_2004/lesson1.asp

Grant Money Available!

In the span of two work days two people have contacted me with information about grant money available to you and your teams. They both look like great opportunities, and with the current state of school budgets, they're certainly worth a look. Many of you have mentioned that budget freezes have rendered travel impossible, but this money could allow your team a field trip or some other project. Check 'em out!

MEA Human, Civil Rights and Cultural Affairs Grants

Members of the Maine Education Association are eligible for grants up to \$250 for project ideas that help students understand human and civil rights issues. This sounds tailor-made for civil rights teams! The application deadline is March 5h.

(Get the flier and information at our Moodle website.)

DonorsChoose.org

The website's slogan pretty much says it all: You submit a project, Donors choose to



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help, You & Your Students send thanks. Yes, it's that simple. It's a nonprofit that connects public school teachers with donors looking to support classroom learning. It's worth a look...

Thanks to Ann Sullivan and Amy Homans for bringing these to our attention!

www.donorschoose.org

Super Bowl XLIII and NFL Black Head Coaches



It's Monday, January 26, and that means one thing: Super Bowl hype hits full stride today, and won't stop until kickoff on Sunday. The big civil rights story two years ago was the storyline of Tony Dungie and Lovie Smith, the first two black head coaches to lead their teams to the Super Bowl. This year's Super Bowl showdown between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Arizona Cardinals features another black head coach, the Steelers' Mike Tomlin.

Recent Super Bowls have cast light on what seems to be an NFL success story: after years of discrimination, black candidates seem to be getting their chances to coach at the professional level. As of now, six of the NFL's thirty-two head coaches are black. Consider the legacy of black head coaches in the NFL and this seems particularly



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impressive: it is a legacy that began as recently as 1989 when Art Shell became the first black head coach in the modern era, and a legacy that includes only eleven coaches.

The NFL does not have a rich history of minority hirings in positions of power, but it seems to be changing. Much credit is given to the Rooney Rule, adopted in 2003, which requires teams to interview at least one minority candidate before filling head coaching positions. This might seem like a token gesture, but the league's hiring patterns suggest otherwise; seven black head coaches have been hired since the inception of the Rooney Rule, including three since the end of the 2008 regular season.

This is not to suggest that the NFL is free of discrimination, or that it is a shining example of an equal opportunity employer, but it seems clear that progress is being made. Compare the NFL to college football and this becomes obvious. Of the 120 major college football programs, only seven have black head coaches. As recently as 1992, there were zero.

Numbers like these are a useful way to understand the concept of institutionalized racism and ways to overcome to it. There are probably examples of qualified black head coaching candidates who didn't get hired because of direct racism: an NFL owner or program may have been unwilling to hire a black candidate because of his skin color. It is more likely, though, that the lack of minorities in these prominent positions is the result of institutional barriers. There is a lack of history of black head coaching candidates; the direct racism of the past has created a system of disadvantage today.

But the NFL has demonstrated that there are ways to overcome institutional racism. It requires an understanding that racism is something more than bigoted individuals, acting out of hatred and prejudice. It's easy to see racism that way, but increasingly unrealistic. The good news is that once we see racism as patterns of behavior and institutional barriers, we can enact measures that help balance, and perhaps one day even eliminate its harmful effects.

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Check out Michael Cunningham's column from the Sun-Sentinel about the NFL's progress in hiring black candidates for head coaching positions:

www.chicagotribune.com/topic/sports/football/15003000.topic