



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '11



Until I turned 25, I was convinced that I was the victim of a gross injustice. I had to pay more for auto insurance strictly on account of my gender. Of course it wasn't just gender, as my premiums went down at age 25, but I knew I was being profiled and I didn't like it.

I didn't care what the statistics said. And I certainly didn't care that whenever I got behind the wheel, my individual behavior supported everything the statistics said: that young male drivers are dangerous. I understood all that; I just didn't like it.

I can hardly even imagine how I would have responded to the recent European Court of Justice ruling that different insurance premiums for men and women based on their gender violate the European Union's commitment to the principle of gender equality. Insurance companies will have unisex rates by the end of 2012.

But this isn't really about gender discrimination. (And believe me, today I don't think for *one second* that I'm the victim of gender discrimination, or that males have it bad.) This is about the laziness of stereotypes and profiling.

We all know that insurance companies charge higher premiums for male drivers because the statistics show us that male drivers are more likely to cause accidents and crashes. The statistics don't lie. Those statistics then become common knowledge, and we end up with the stereotype that male drivers are more dangerous. Since male drivers therefore pay more for auto insurance, they have effectively been profiled.

Time to share a great quote from author Chimamanda Adichie: "The problem with stereotypes isn't that they're untrue, but that they're incomplete." Most stereotypes are based on some degree of basic truth. The statistics very much support the stereotype that male drivers, and especially *young* male drivers, are dangerous. They are twice as likely as female drivers to be involved in fatal accidents (even when adjusted for the fact that males do much more driving than females). There's the truth in that stereotype.



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But it's an incomplete truth. Males may statistically be more dangerous drivers, but it's not necessarily true *because they are male*. Consider the following information, all taken from the fascinating book *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do*, by Tom Vanderbilt:

- Males are much more likely to drive motorcycles, which are 18 times more likely to be involved in fatal crashes.
- Males are much more likely to drive pickup trucks, which are the most dangerous four wheel vehicle.
- Males are much less likely to wear seatbelts or protective helmets.
- Males are much more likely to drive under the influence of alcohol.
- Males are less likely to drive with passengers, including children. Having another passenger in the car, and especially children, makes for safer driving.
- Males are more likely to drive at night.
- Males drivers sleep less than female drivers; overtired drivers are more likely to be involved in fatal crashes.

Consider all this information. The most dangerous driver is not necessarily male. The most dangerous driver is a drunk and overtired motorcyclist who takes to the roads late at night without a helmet. Of course this worst-case scenario amalgam of a dangerous driver is probably male.

The stereotype, then, serves as a shortcut. It would be far more effective to profile drivers based on all these (and other) listed risk factors. But it's much easier to see that all those risk factors are correlated more with male drivers, and arrive at the profile of male drivers as more dangerous. As George Clooney says in *Up in the Air* "I'm like my mother. I stereotype; it's faster."

It is faster, and oftentimes, accurate. But it's not always accurate. And it's almost always incomplete. *That's the danger of stereotypes*. Things are almost always more complicated than they appear. It's always tempting to succumb to the allure of easy stereotypes, but those stereotypes must be questioned. A closer look will usually reveal how incomplete and potentially inaccurate they really are.

For an absolutely fascinating piece about how dog breeds are profiled and stereotyped, go and read Malcolm Gladwell's piece from *The New Yorker*, "Troublemakers."

www.gladwell.com/2006/2006_02_06_a_pitbull.html

Special Note: There is a *significant* chance that the information shared in this *Torch* intro will be included in a workshop at next year's fall trainings on stereotyping. I think it would be interesting, and I've already done some good research.

We shall see.



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Here's what you can expect in this month's newsletter:

Team Spotlight: Three middle level teams get the spotlight this month.

Activity Ideas: Find ways to gather stories from your school. They are incredibly useful resources for your civil rights team.

Pop Culture Winners and Losers: A book, a ubiquitous joke, a terrible commercial.

Relevant Resources: The Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA) has a great education program that is relevant, local, *and* free.

Upcoming Events: Maine's colleges and universities have plenty going on.

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

Bill Schneider—Attorney General

Debi Lettre—Civil Rights Project Administrator

Brandon Baldwin—Schools/Curriculum Coordinator



Team Spotlight:

For the second consecutive month, we are featuring multiple schools here. This is great evidence of the fact that so many great things are happening with our civil rights teams. You are engaging your schools in important issues of school climate. Our fourth expectation, the hardest and most important one, that you address school issues, is being met. Keep up the good work, everyone.



Working Together

The Messalonskee Middle School civil rights team and I co-presented on the school's community read selection, *Falcon Quinn and the Black Mirror*. The community read project is an effort to get as many students and adults as possible to read the same book and then talk about it. Think of it as a super-sized book group.

And this book is perfect for civil rights issues, as it's all about those conflicting forces of adolescence: fitting in and appreciating our individuality. The book's author, Jennifer Finney Boylan, visited the school earlier that month. The civil rights team and I wanted to examine some of the themes and think about how they related to Messalonskee.

Members of the civil rights team shared:

- A simple stand-up activity asking if students sit at the same table every day at lunch
- Relevant selections from the *Falcon Quinn*
- Anonymous quotes taken from MMS students related to diversity and identity
- A poem
- Recognition for students exhibiting positive behavior in the last month

I included a showing of *The Sneetches* and some theory on adolescent development to shed some light on why fitting in is so important in middle school. With minimal communication and coordinated planning, we put something together that really felt cohesive.

Much credit to the Messalonskee Middle School civil rights team and their advisors, Jon Moody and Martha Quimby. Our presentation is a great example of how civil rights teams should attach themselves to events that are already scheduled and happening. We don't always need to create events from scratch. Civil rights teams can participate in orientations, health fairs, parent nights, pep rallies, and anything else that's going on.



Harassment Policies

The civil rights team at Waterville Junior High School created an activity to educate and inform students about the school's harassment policies. Civil rights team members went in pairs to all of the school's advisor groups and led students through an activity that had them match harassment incidents with protected categories in the policy.

This was a great way to bring the policy to the attention of students, but also a way to show them that some common behaviors constitute harassment. One student was overheard saying, "I didn't know we have a harassment policy." For that alone, this activity was worth doing.

We'd love to hear from any other teams who have worked with school harassment policies. We're also looking ahead to next year and thinking that the beginning of the school year is the ideal time to work with policies. This would of course require some advanced planning towards the end of this school year. Expect an activity idea later in the spring. We'd love to see every civil rights team in the state work with administration in making sure that everyone understands their school harassment policies.

Getting Involved with Bullying Awareness Day

The civil rights team at Thomaston Grammar School successfully sponsored their first-ever Bullying Awareness Day in February. Their sponsorship of this day was more than just them attaching their name to it. They used this day as an opportunity to increase their presence, so that the day was an effective mix of adult experts and student voices.

The team created posters publicizing the day's events that prominently highlighted the civil rights team as the sponsors. They created a skit on cyberbullying that they used to open the day's events, so that they civil rights team was actively visible right from the start. They even conducted a workshop on the Maine Civil Rights Act to supplement workshops on issues of cyberbullying, cyber-safety, and bystander behavior from outside experts.

A great challenge with these kinds of big day events is finding the right mix of adult expertise and student voices. We never want these days to become the strict providence of adults who come in, say their piece, and then disappear. The student voices make the events relevant and provide the continuity required for real change. But we also know that it's a lot to ask of students to organize their own day of events; we can't expect them to do everything.

The Thomaston Grammar School civil rights team and advisors Colleen Kreps and Susan Watts did a great job of getting the team past simple sponsorship in the school's Bullying Awareness Day; they were active participants.



Activity Idea: Harness the Power of Stories



A key role for civil rights teams to play is in showing that civil rights issues are relevant in your school. There's a tendency for students and adults to think of civil rights issues as happening somewhere else. Far too often have we heard "We don't have those issues *here*."

Just like every other school, you *do* have those issues. Hard evidence that proves this is especially valuable, and always worth having on hand.

So... what are you doing to make sure you always have this evidence?

Many schools and teams rely on survey results. This data can be informative, but the numbers eschew empathy and emotion. To make the information really relevant, it can't be of an anonymous nature.

Think of this in terms of Holocaust education. There is the number of 10,000,000 dead, but that number alone does little to communicate the horror of what happened. It is necessary to put a human face on that horror, thus the popularity of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and other resources in Holocaust education. People need to care.

Perhaps the best way to get people to care is through sharing stories. Statistics are important, but we also need to share stories of bias and prejudice in our school communities. Collect stories and have them on hand: they are exceptionally valuable tools.

But how do you collect these stories? Here are four ideas inspired by civil rights teams:

1. Whitefield Elementary School had every single student in the school write about their experiences with bullying and harassment. This generated hundreds of stories. The civil rights team went through them and selected some for use in a presentation to parents. Schools can easily do something like this: assign a simple writing prompt for everyone to do, and then select the most powerful stories.

2. The Mt. Ararat High School civil rights team asked students to voluntarily share their experiences with bias and prejudice. They could attach their name or submit



anonymously. They received enough quality submissions that they then used these stories in future programming. Your civil rights team could seek submissions.

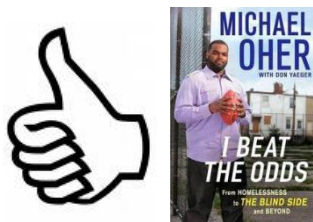
3. The Bangor High School civil rights team, inspired by the online phenomenon of PostSecret, had students write anonymous postcards about secrets they held. Many of these secrets were related to civil rights issues. They created an impressive collage out of the postcards. Your civil rights team could sponsor something like this with a targeted prompt, encourage artistry, and then create a wonderful pastiche or share selected examples.

4. Back in the day, when I was a civil rights team advisor, our team was always on the lookout for hateful and hurtful graffiti. Whenever we found some, we were sure to take pictures. Each one of these pictures told a story, and taken collectively, served as powerful evidence of bias and prejudice in our school. Get a camera and take some pictures.

These are just four ideas. You can probably come up with more. The most important thing is that you and your team have ready access to evidence of civil rights issues in your school. Accumulated statistics and numbers are good, but nothing can compare to the emotional impact of a single story. Get out there and find a way to get those stories.

Pop Culture Watch: February

The Pop Culture Watch is where we offer our opinions on what's going on in popular culture from a civil rights perspective!



The Other Side of *The Blind Side*

Last year's hype surrounding *The Blind Side* always bothered me. *The Blind Side* was ostensibly the incredible story of NFL athlete Michael Oher. It was really the feel-good story of white woman Leigh Anne Tuohy and her family adopting a homeless black man-child and making him into an incredible athlete. The hype culminated in Sandra Bullock taking home the Oscar for Best Actress.

The problem with *The Blind Side* was how it relegated Michael Oher to a supporting role in the story of his own life. It ignored Oher's agency and individuality in overcoming



obstacles and adversity. It was so eager to feature a white protagonist in a feel-good Hollywood story that *The Blind Side* missed the real story.

Think I'm being too harsh? Then why did Oher feel compelled to tell his own story? Why does he criticize the film for portraying him as dumb? Does anyone out there really think that this future professional football player couldn't understand the concept of blocking until Sandra Bullock explained it to him?

I Beat the Odds properly puts Oher in the starring role in his own life. Let's hope people are as interested in his story as that of the white woman who supposedly saved him. It's a better story.



This Joke Isn't *Getting* Old; It *Is* Old

If the same joke is repeated over and over again, is it still funny? The reason I ask is because of a tired joke relying on gender stereotypes. Basically, it asserts that any self-respecting man would never, ever carry around anything that might be confused with a purse. It doesn't matter if it's practical, or European, or called by another name; the joke dictates that the carrier is somehow less of a man... because of what he carries.

I can date this joke. It comes from a *Seinfeld* episode in 1998, where Jerry gets a European carryall, but everyone keeps calling it a purse.

That makes this joke 13 years old. It's entering adolescence!

And like many adolescents, it isn't subtle. In fact, it's becoming ubiquitous. It was in *The Hangover*. It got its own Miller Lite "Man Up" commercial. It's currently part of a Brut ad campaign telling us that "some men just need to be slapped." (Yes, really.) And I saw it recently on a promo for a sitcom on CMT called *Working Class*. The odds are pretty good you've been exposed to this joke, too.

Enough already. The idea that you can define someone's gender by what they carry is not only ridiculous, but completely lacking in creativity.

Want to see a piece of pop culture with the *right* attitude about this? Right here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJZk9izakuM&feature=channel



And Stalking Awareness Month was in January...

Virgin Mobile just launched an ad campaign that seems to tout their new smart phones' capabilities to aid potential stalkers. Of course it's tongue in cheek, but they seem hopelessly unaware of how cybertechnologies really have facilitated stalking and other forms of relationship aggression.

But that's only one aspect of why these ads are a major civil rights fail. Gender most definitely plays into this. In the two ads, the stalker is a young woman obsessing over her first date with some guy. It's played for laughs, and the stereotype of the relationship-obsessed girl is a big part of it. I can't imagine a parallel universe where they would have reversed the genders of the two characters and made this ad. It would have been considered too creepy.

The ad ends with text saying "That's crazy." The young woman is clearly unstable, and it's just crazy that the phone can do all these things! Great... making light of mental illness.

These ads are terrible for so many reasons. They encourage us to laugh at things that, in real life, just aren't funny.

See the Virgin Mobile ads at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=f12gqM5tvvo

and

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dt-OLBdaeJM&feature=related



Relevant Resources:



The Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault is best known for its support services. Response is important, especially for targets and victims. But just like the Civil Rights Team Project, MECASA knows that true change comes from preventative work and education.

I have often crossed paths with educators from Maine's regional sexual assault service centers, and we've even worked together here and there, but for some reason the CRTP and MECASA have never had any formal connections. But that's about to change.

Through a series of fortuitous circumstances, I recently sat down with Destie Hohman Sprague, MECASA's Program Coordinator, and began work on formalizing and facilitating contact between civil rights teams and regional sexual assault support systems. The result is this...

- You are *officially encouraged* to contact your regional sexual assault support service centers to take full advantage of their educational outreach programs.

Perhaps you're wondering just what they have to offer; after all, sexual assault might seem like a peripheral issue for student civil rights teams. But these educational outreach programs are aimed at prevention, and they take a broad approach in addressing societal factors that contribute to a culture of sexual assault. Specifically, they have sessions addressing:

- Internet and Online Safety
- Harassment and Bullying
- Sexual Harassment
- Media Literacy
- Gender Bias and Stereotypes
- Bystander Behavior

These are directly relevant topics for civil rights teams. Wherever you are in the state, there are educators from one of nine regional sexual assault support centers who are ready and willing to come to your school to offer age-appropriate curriculum, developed in consultation with the Department of Education and aligned with the Maine Learning Result standards, for elementary, middle level, and high school students. And...

They're free.



That should effectively seal the deal, right there. If you have an upcoming event and you're looking for workshop presenters, contact your local sexual assault service center. Or bring them in for classroom presentations. Or do something else. Just know that they are an excellent local resource.

There are nine MECASA member centers located in Augusta, Bangor, Bath/Brunswick, Ellsworth, Farmington, Lewiston/Auburn, Portland, Presque Isle, and South Paris. That covers the whole state. (And if you think that you're not covered wherever you are, you should also know that they travel.)

I have attached a separate document giving contact information for the nine MECASA member centers. Simply direct your communications to the "Program Educators." They are expecting you!

You can also get more information about the MECASA member centers at:

www.mecasa.org/links.html

Upcoming Events:

Wednesdays, now through May: The Holocaust and Human Rights Center presents Series 360

Augusta, UMA, Michael Klahr Center, various times, free and open to the public.

A series of films, lectures, and roundtable discussions with the theme of Digging in the Ruins of History: Memory and the Nazi Holocaust.

Check out this impressive program of events at:

<http://www.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fbit.ly%2FeLJPog&h=928co>

March 3-June 12: Susan Hiller's "The J. Street Project" Art Exhibit

Waterville, Colby College Museum of Art, free and open to the public.

(Also an opening reception and dance performance on March 3 at 4:30 pm)





The J. Street Project documents all the places in Germany whose names still show evidence of their former Jewish inhabitants. Includes 303 photographs, a 67 minute video, and a map and book documenting the sites.

For more information, go to:

http://www.colby.edu/academics_cs/museum/exhibitions/upcoming-exhibitions.cfm

March 11: Between Two Worlds: The Immigrant's Price for a Better Life

Portland, USM, Luther Bonney Hall, Talbot Lecture Hall, 7:30 pm, free and open to the public

The University of Southern Maine Women and Gender Studies program celebrates Women's History Month with a lecture from award-winning novelist and CUNY professor Elizabeth Nunez.

For more information, go to:

<http://blogs.usm.maine.edu/publicaffairs/archives/6589>

March 16: The Afro-Semitic Experience Concert

Bangor, UMA Bangor, 124 Eastport Hall, 4:00 pm, free and open to the public

The Afro-Semitic Experience is a band of African American and American Jewish musicians dedicated to preserving, promoting, and expanding the rich cultural and musical heritage of the Jewish and African Diasporas.

For more information, call 621-3256 or go to:

<http://uma.edu/afrosemxp.html>

March 30: "Standards of Beauty" Performance Lecture

Biddeford, UNE, Ketchum Library, St. Francis Room, 7:00 pm, free.

Reanae McNeal incorporates poetry, stories, and song in this performance lecture examining standards of beauty imposed on women and the dynamics of colorism, hair, physical features, and size.

For more information, go to:

www.une.edu/calendar/display.cfm?customel_datapageid_298012=407100



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April 9: A WALK TO REMEMBER 2011

Augusta, UMA, Holocaust and Human Rights Center, times TBA

This event, co-sponsored by the HHRC and Peace and Love Proclaimers, will commemorate the Rwandan genocide of 1994. The day's events will feature remarks, a walk, film, candlelight remembrance, and a moment of silence.

For more information contact the HHRC at 621-3530 or infohhrc@maine.edu

April 11: You and the Effort to End Genocide in Darfur: Turning Bystanders Into Upstanders

Portland, USM, Hannaford Lecture Hall, Abromson Community Education Center, 7:00 pm, free and open to the public, free parking in the adjacent garage

Also simulcast to University of Maine at Augusta, Jewett Auditorium

The 2011 Douglas M. Schair Memorial Lecture on Genocide and Human Rights presents author and human rights activist John Prendergast.