



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JUNE '11



In last month's edition of *The Torch*, I highlighted three civil rights-related current events, including Kobe Bryant's petulant use of a homophobic slur. This incident was mentioned in passing, and that seemed like enough commentary at the time.

Fast forward a few weeks when the Chicago Bulls' Joakim Noah hurled the same insult at a fan. Apparently the NBA's \$100,000 fine for Kobe Bryant didn't do enough to deliver the message. In a fit of anger, Noah went right ahead and called someone *faggot*. The television cameras caught it, and here we are... again.

The scrutiny is good. Any conversations about derogatory language are worth having. Any conversations about bias based on sexual orientation are good. But these conversations need a voice of reason. I consume a lot of sports media, and while most everyone seems to agree that what Kobe Bryant and Joakim Noah did was wrong, they don't usually understand why.

As a public service to the world of sports media and our loyal Torch readers, then, I have amalgamated conversations from sports radio, ESPN, and online commentary into this representative dialogue designed to educate the world about just why the use of derogatory terms like *faggot* is not OK. You're welcome!

* * * * *

Sports World: You should never, ever engage like that with a referee or the crowd.

Me: True... but that's not the real point here. You should never, ever hurl the word *faggot* at anyone. Period.

Sports World: But that word doesn't reflect who Bryant and Noah really are.



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) JUNE '11

Me: I don't care who they really are. I care what they did.

Sports World: But they don't hate gay people.

Me: Then they most definitely should understand why it's never OK to use that word.

Sports World: But the people they said it to aren't even gay.

Me: So what? Other people heard them say it. And I can guarantee you that some of those people are gay, or know and love someone who is.

Sports World: But it was in the heat of battle. A lot of things get said in the moment.

Me: I totally, totally get this. I've spent a good chunk of my life competing in sports, and I can be a bit of a hothead. I have said some horrible, unprintable things... but I can't imagine any circumstances where I have or would ever use a gay slur. No way.

Sports World: But they apologized. What more do you want?

Me: They sort of apologized. Both Bryant and Noah said that they were sorry if anyone was offended.

Sports World: Right... so they apologized.

Me: Not really. They apologized for how people reacted, but never really took ownership for what they did. There's a difference. I want them to say that they're sorry for what they did.

Sports World: They just can't win. It's never enough.

Me: Actually, this isn't even really about them. I'm much more interested in the response and the conversations that come from this. I don't think enough people understand why it's not OK for Kobe Bryant, Joakim Noah, or anyone else to call someone a *faggot* or any other gay slur. I care more about the big picture here.

Sports World: Don't you have more important things to worry about?

Me: This is important. Like I just said; it's not just about Kobe Bryant and Joakim Noah. It's about how we as a culture use language. And even if there are more important things in the world, having an opinion on this doesn't mean that you have to ignore everything else that's going on out there.

Sports World: You can't say *anything* these days. Someone will get offended.



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) JUNE '11

Me: And actually, I think it's pretty great that we live in a time and place where we are increasingly held accountable for what we say. It's not about not offending people; it's about learning and growing as individuals and a society.

* * * * *

And to that end, learning and growing as individuals and society, I hope that this completely fantasized conversation with "Sports World" is beneficial.

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

Looking Ahead: We won't bombard you with information about next year. There are, however, three little things we would like you to know.

Team Spotlight: Plenty of civil rights teams are still doing great work late in the school year.

Activity Idea: Mix It Up at Lunch Day comes early next year: October 18. I'm offering my services in support of civil rights teams interested in making this event happen.

Pop Culture Winners and Losers: I had a tough time coming up with enough pop culture fodder for the last newsletter. No such problems this time !

Relevant Resources: New public service announcements focusing on harmful language? This can't wait until next year!

* * * * *

Brandon Baldwin – Newsletter Editor, reachable at 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.

Bill Schneider—Attorney General
Debi Lettre—Civil Rights Project Administrator
Brandon Baldwin—Schools/Curriculum Coordinator



Looking Ahead: 2011-2012 with the CRTP



It's very, very tempting to fill up the June edition of *The Torch* with all the plans and ideas we have in store for the 2011-2012 school year. We are not going to do that, though. Here's all you need to know about next year:

1. We will send you an e-mail in late August asking you if your school will have a civil rights team for the 2011-2012 school year. Please respond quickly! If you know of any changes in your e-mail address or role as faculty advisor, you can let us know now.
2. We are furiously working on the schedule for the fall trainings. We will send it to you as soon as we have it finalized. That should be soon.
3. Brandon is not only available all summer, but *actively looking for things to do*.

There; that's it! We hope that you and your civil rights teams had an excellent school year. Thank you for helping make Maine schools safer for everyone. We look forward to continuing this work next year.



Team Spotlight:

I'm especially happy to see civil rights teams actively engaged in projects and initiatives in May and June. I can't help but think of a favorite Martin Luther King quote:

"The time is always right to do the right thing."

Diversity Day at Gorham Middle School

The third annual Diversity Day at Gorham Middle School was a success. The civil rights team and advisors Sarah Rubin and Jane Alexander have created an institution so that the Diversity Day is now an expected event.

One highlight of this year's event was how it specifically addressed the issue of prejudice towards students participating in band and chorus. This may not be a civil rights issue, as defined by civil rights law, but it is definitely an issue that civil rights teams can and should address. All forms of prejudice are connected.

The civil rights team invited high school students to share their experiences with bullying, harassment, and prejudice based on their participation in band and chorus. A simple and universal truth that I have observed over and over again: when students speak about their personal experiences, audiences listen attentively. This is something worth remembering the next time you and your team are planning an event.

Job well done, Gorham Middle School. I look forward to hearing about your fourth annual Diversity Day event.

Working with Harassment Policies at Hall-Dale High School

I have had the recent pleasure of working with members of the Hall-Dale High School civil rights team on translating the school's harassment policy into language that anyone can easily understand. We went through the policy word by word, identifying any terms that would need clarification or explanation. We then gave definitions and/or offered examples for any of these identified words.

The end result is a harassment policy that any high school student could actually understand. We also generated a list of anticipated questions students might ask and some common examples of policy violations. Advisor Patience Thomas and middle



school advisor Nona Thompson are currently working with administration on how to best deliver this content.

The work is not done, but these are positive first steps in making the school's harassment policy a valuable preventative tool.

The Developing Brilliance of *8 Little Words*

Thirty-four civil rights teams have been hard at work creating artwork for the pages of *8 Little Words*. Their page contributions are excellent, and my vision of the ultimate version of this story is being realized.

I will compile and format everything this summer and share the final product at the fall trainings. You will be impressed.

Activity Idea: Mix It Up 2011!

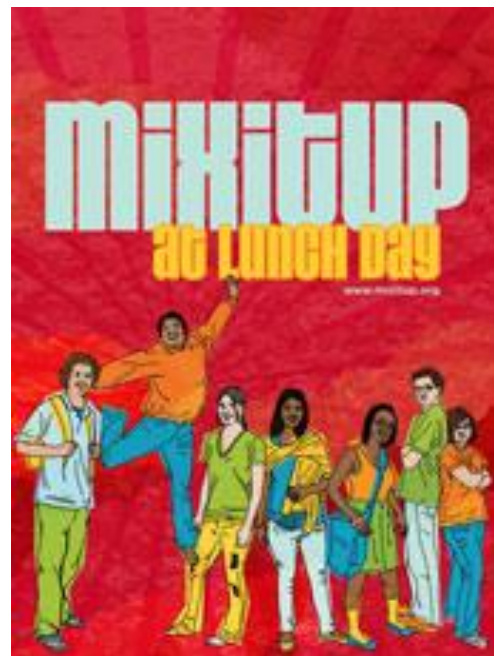
Teaching Tolerance has officially announced the date for Mix It Up at Lunch Day 2011, and it's a bit earlier than usual. This annual event will take place on October 18 instead of the customary November date.

The purpose of Mix It Up at Lunch Day is to break down social barriers by encouraging students to sit with people they don't usually sit with at lunch for just one day.

<http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up?newsletter=TT050411>

This is a great civil rights team initiative, and provides an opportunity for teams to do something meaningful and visible early in the school year. Unfortunately, many middle level and high schools have attempted Mix It Up events in the past and encountered fierce resistance. I would like to change that, because Mix It Up at Lunch Day is not only important; it's something worth celebrating.

I am making myself available on October 13, 14, 17, and 18 to travel the state and give Mix It Up pep talks to middle level and high schools with active civil rights teams planning a lunch event for October 18. The civil rights team will agree to take an active role in the organization, promotion, and support for this event.





If you are interested in having Civil Rights Team Project support for your school's Mix It Up at Lunch Day event on October 18, mark something on your calendar now. I will send out more information in late August and an official Mix It Up pep talk request form. I will accept these requests through September 15, at which time I will finalize my schedule for the days leading up to the October 18 Mix It Up at Lunch Day.

I realize that this seems very far away, but it's something worth considering now. You know what the beginning of the school year is like!

Pop Culture Watch: May

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



Beware of Performances

The Torch is not typically in the business of critiquing art, but Tania Bruguera's upcoming project, Immigrant Movement International, has potential connections with well-meaning civil rights teams. Bruguera is a performance artist. Performance art is all about pushing boundaries, to the point that it often offends and/or leaves people baffled about what exactly constitutes art these days. Whatever.

But Bruguera's next project has her blending advocacy and performance. She is going to live a year as an illegal immigrant. She's sharing a small apartment in Queens with five adults and six children, working for minimum wage without health insurance. All this to improve the image of immigrants and highlight their hardships.

Clearly, she has good intentions. But good intentions aren't always enough. Bruguera's yearlong project feels like tourism. At any point, she can stop being an immigrant. Her living the life of an immigrant for one year doesn't mean that she truly understands what it's like.

That's her privilege. Immigrants live that life because it's the best they can do. She lives that life and gets to call it art. She needs to be careful not to insult those she's advocating for.



And we need to be careful that we don't insult those we're advocating for. There is absolutely nothing we can do to replicate the experiences of anyone else; we can't make someone feel what it's like to be an immigrant, or black, or gay, or blind. We may want to, but these kinds of reenactments run the high risk of becoming advocacy that's actually insulting.



I'm Too Smart to Think This Funny

This magnet is actually for sale. There isn't much more to say.

(Except that of course it's pink.)

See the magnet for yourself at:

www.forever21.com/search.asp?keyword=too%20pretty%20to%20do%20math

Actually, there is more to say. An internet search just showed that there are also t-shirts available with the "I'm too pretty to do math" line.

Maybe it's intended to be sarcastic or ironic, but the clear gender-coding and complete lack of context for a magnet or t-shirt just reinforce ridiculously antiquated gender stereotypes. It's just another way to communicate to girls that what matters most in life is how you look.



Racially-Blind Casting: Finally, A Good Thing

Racially-blind casting sounds great, but in Hollywood it's used as justification for denying roles to racial minorities. It effectively makes characters of color invisible.



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) JUNE '11

Of course the standard defense when this happens is to highlight how the role went to the best possible actor. But isn't it interesting how the "best possible actor" never happens to be a person of color chosen to play a role originally intended as white?

Well, *Thor* changes that. The role of Norse god Heimdall went to British actor Idris Elba. Elba is black.

If you're wondering why this is OK but it's a racial travesty when a film like *The Last Airbender* effectively erases Asians from its storyline, here it is: Hollywood has a track record of featuring white performers. Colorblind casting has not gone both ways.

But it could... and *Thor* helps us see that.



If You're Going to Watch One Show about Native Americans...

Make it anything other than National Geographic's *Navajo Cops*. Why? Due to the very nature of the show, it's going to feature Native Americans behaving badly. There's going to be a lot of drunkenness and lawlessness.

But how can this be problematic when it's showing reality? The problem is that it's probably the *only* reality most Americans will get to see about Navajos and Native Americans. If there were other popular culture and media representations about Navajos and Native Americans, it wouldn't be so damaging...

It is my best guess, however, that most people who tune in to watch *Navajo Cops* probably aren't seeing other representations of Native Americans. *Navajo Cops* might be the only connection they have with Native Americans, and that sounds like a fast track to some negative stereotypes.



Relevant Resources: Addressing Language

Maybe June isn't the ideal time to share resources, but why wait until next year? Some things just can't wait until then. The new public service announcements from GLSEN and Special Olympics fall into this category. These PSAs target the use of derogatory language, probably the most prevalent civil rights issues we face in our schools.



GLSEN just released a PSA addressing the use of the expression "That's so gay" specific to trash-talking and basketball. It features NBA players Grant Hill and Jarrod Dudley.

This is part of GLSEN's larger efforts to curtail homophobia in athletics.

See the spot at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D_XLCmYoD8

**SPREAD THE WORD
TO END THE WORD**
www.r-word.org

The Special Olympics has gone next level with their "End the R-Word" campaign, creating a bold public service announcement connecting the use of the word *retard* with other hateful slurs. This is an approach that is not without controversy; conflating different forms of prejudice is always dangerous ground.

The ad is definitely successful, though, in addressing the issue of hateful and hurtful speech head on. It gets your attention.

See it at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=T549VoLca_Q



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) JUNE '11



It's worth mentioning that I have seen both of these public service announcements *on television*. The GLSEN spot has aired during the NBA playoffs and the Special Olympics spot during... I don't remember. *But they're on TV!* I'm used to seeing things like this online because I actively seek them out. It's encouraging to think that these messages are now reaching a wider audience and perhaps even some level of mainstream acceptance. We are making progress.