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Torch (January/February 2012)

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Civil Rights Team Project

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THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JAN/FEB '12



I'd like to share an observation with you that will ultimately morph into an appreciative thank-you. I sent out my first communications for the 2011-2012 school year weeks before the official start in August/September, and I promptly heard back from a lot of you. Obviously you were at school and thinking about work, even though the calendar said that you were still on vacation.

I have also paid attention to the time stamps on your e-mails this year. Much of your correspondence happens in the early morning before the start of school, in the evening and night hours after the work day is officially over, or during the weekends. I even hear from you during your vacations.

Now that I'm outside of the classroom, it's easy to forget the all-encompassing, non-stop nature of the work that is education. You bring your work home with you. The school day and the school week don't stop just because the bell rings.

You and all of your colleagues in education do so much. That *you* take on even more responsibilities and work as a civil rights team advisor impresses me over and over again. The next time I hear someone questioning the commitment or motives of our teachers, I should share one of your late Tuesday night or Saturday morning e-mails.

The time stamp doesn't lie. Thank you.



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JAN/FEB '12

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

Team Spotlight: Civil rights season in our schools is in full swing! Many civil rights teams are hitting their stride. There's plenty to report here as the teams at Gardiner Area High School, Gorham Middle School, Bonny Eagle High School, and Lawrence High School are doing some great work.

Activity Ideas: We've got two significant events in January: the Martin Luther King holiday and GLSEN's No Name-Calling Week. Here are two activities that connect.

Talking to Myself: I easily take the role of someone who is freaking out about cyberbullying in our schools.

Pop Culture Winners and Losers: Movies! Music! Comedy! I mean, "Comedy!"

Relevant Resources: Where else can you read about warning labels and signs and a research report on sexual harassment in our schools? That's right: *only here*.

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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:

And We're Off!



The fall trainings are done and many of you and your civil rights teams have moved beyond the introductory part of the year. You have turned your attention to the most important of our series of five expectations. You are now officially *addressing school issues*.

***The Laramie Project* at Gardiner Area High School**

At Gardiner Area High School, the civil rights team and drama club teamed up to bring *The Laramie Project* to town. This was a natural pairing for many reasons. The play's treatment of the aftermath of a hate crime in Laramie, Wyoming is a complex portrayal of bias and how it affects different communities. But there were also some practical reasons why this pairing made sense. Many of the civil rights team members are also active in the drama program. They also share the same advisor, Christina Benedict.

It's hard to imagine a civil rights team taking on such a significant project alone. But collaboration opens doors, and in Gardiner, the doors opened for three successful showings of this play. The civil rights team helped publicize the event and ran concessions. Their name was very much attached to the production, and many team members were even more directly involved as actors and crew.

I spoke with Christina after the show. She seemed most excited by the wide showing of support for the production. We agreed that it's very hard to imagine a play like *The Laramie Project* showing at GAHS even ten years ago. Progress in making our schools more safe, welcoming, and respectful can feel like slow work, but landmark occasions can remind us that progress is happening. Congratulations to the GAHS civil rights team for their success with *The Laramie Project*, but also for their years of work that laid the groundwork to make such an event possible in the first place.

Diversity Day at Gorham Middle School

Gorham Middle School started the school year with only five civil rights team members. That didn't stop them from conducting their fourth annual Diversity Day event. This year's event marked the first time they held the event in the fall.



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JAN/FEB '12

Student civil rights teams were a huge part of the day's events. The GMS team selected the topics to be addressed and invited workshop presenters to address those topics. Presenters included members of the GMS team, alumni who now attend the high school, and outside groups from Bonny Eagle High School, Massabesic High School, and Windham High School. Students conducted workshops on stereotypes based on clothing, autism, disabilities, and cliques in middle and high school.

The team ended the day with a whole-school presentation where they explained what the civil rights team is, their role in the school, and why students should join. But this was no boring speech; they took the mic and spat rhymes. (They did a rap.)

Advisors Sarah Rubin and Jane Alexandrin report that the day was a huge success. It may have been difficult doing the event so early in the year, but they relied heavily on their past experiences and handed over more responsibilities to the kids. Traditionally Diversity Day events are something the civil rights team builds *towards*; by moving the day to the beginning of the year, though, the GMS team can build *from* this event.

And they already are building from this day's success. The team now averages ten students per meeting.

Bonny Eagle High School Deconstructs the Gender Box

The civil rights team from Bonny Eagle High School, in conjunction with the schools' RSVP (Reducing Sexism and Violence Program) group, offered a workshop on gender stereotypes at the Gorham Middle School Diversity Day event. Participants were asked to share the qualities that make someone an "ideal male" and "ideal female." These qualities were written inside of a box, thus introducing the concept of the gender box.

Students also reflected on the words they sometimes hear used to describe males and females who don't reflect those gender box qualities. Ultimately, the activity shows how limiting our definitions of gender can be, and how these culturally-driven ideals are ridiculous and impossible.

The Bonny Eagle contingency had already done this workshop at their school's Freshmen Orientation Day. Let this serve as an example, then, of how your team can develop a workshop and then use it on multiple occasions. It's a smart investment for your civil rights team.

The Bonny Eagle High School civil rights team and advisors Beth Hayden and Matt Drewette-Card deserve credit for answering the call and volunteering to present in Gorham. Great work collaborating!

(And if *you* want to collaborate with other teams, just send your question or request to Brandon and he'll post it in the biweekly *Connections* e-mail. It worked for GMS!)



NO H8 Week at Lawrence High School

The Lawrence High School civil rights team had a successful first-ever NO H8 Week in early December. (H8, of course, for the uninitiated, is short for *hate*. You knew that.)

The week-long event had the civil rights team asking their classmates to participate by:

- Completing the sentence starter “Diversity is...” on a white board in the shape of a speech bubble and then taking their pictures. (These white boards have vaulted to the top of my work shopping list.)
- Anonymously listing the best and worst things about the school’s culture.
- Signing a variety of pledges: to speak up against hate, to keep track of what you say, to be yourself no matter what, etc.

Student participation in the week’s events was packaged and presented in a Friday morning assembly featuring the civil rights team, their advisor Darla Linville, and me. This assembly included a powerful YouTube video, information on why it’s important to address bullying and harassment in our schools, sharing of student responses to the prompts, thanks to participating students, and a video slideshow retrospective.

I spoke for just 30 minutes about “Bias, Hate, and You.” Because of the great work that civil rights team had done in framing those issues, my job was made easy. I have never presented to a student audience that was so *ready* to hear what I had to say.

I think that there are a host of reasons why the LHS civil rights team had such a successful NO H8 Week event:

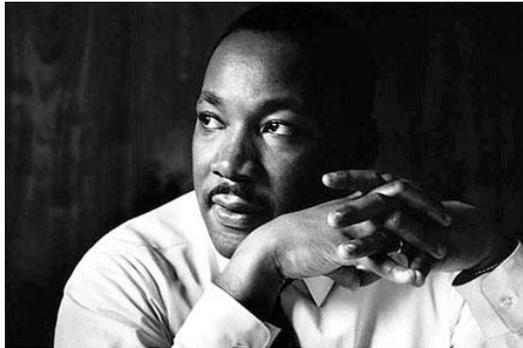
- The civil rights team was active and visible every single day for a whole week. This included taking the stage during a whole-school assembly and addressing their peers.
- The team gave other students the opportunity to participate and offer their voices and perspectives to the week’s events.
- They focused on bias. They used the words race, gender, religion, ability, gender expression, sexual orientation, and social class.
- I played a supporting role. I was not the event; I was there supporting the event.

What really excites me about NO H8 Week is the fact that I will be visiting so many schools this year that will be following a similar model with their plans for Martin Luther King Day, No Name-Calling Week, and STAND UP to Bullying Week events.

This is the new model for success, and the early returns are good.



Activity Ideas: Take Advantage of These Events!



Making the MLK Holiday Mean Something

The upcoming Martin Luther King holiday is the perfect opportunity to share some of his words and ideas with your civil rights team.

First off, a word of caution: King is only relevant if we *make him relevant*. “Civil rights” isn’t enough of a connection. Remember this year’s focus question:

- How is this increasing safety right here in our school?

We shouldn’t be celebrating King for the sake of celebrating King. We have to use King’s life and work to help students understand something about school issues.

King was a prodigious writer and speaker; the internet is loaded with his quotes. We can highlight King’s ideas and make them relevant to our teams by studying some of these quotes.

Here are seven of my personal favorite Martin Luther King quotes that are understandable and usable for students of all ages...

1. “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”
2. "Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."
3. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”



4. "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."
5. "Life's most urgent question is: what are you doing for others?"
6. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."
7. "The time is always right to do the right thing."

What do you do with these quotes? I suggest sharing them with the team and then allowing opportunities for reflection. You could go over each quote as a whole group (in which case I recommend spreading them out over multiple meetings). You could randomly give out individual quotes to your team members. You could hand out all seven quotes and have team members select the one they find most meaningful.

Whatever you do, here are some questions to help guide reflection and discussion, arranged in order of age appropriateness from younger to older:

- What does this quote mean?
- What does this quote have to do with the civil rights team?
- How could our school benefit from this piece of wisdom?
- Can you think of a specific time here in school when this quote would have been appropriate?
- How does this quote relate to you personally?

The structure on this activity is intentionally loose. I think that *any combination* of the King quotes and these questions is worth your time.

No Name-Calling Week

A classic civil rights team activity asks team members to pay attention to and sometimes even record instances of name-calling and bias-based language. For one week they serve as witnesses, and when you meet again you've got plenty to discuss... if they remember to do the activity, and if they come equipped with specific information.

Here is a simple twist on this activity that almost any student should be able to handle, and with GLSEN's No Name-Calling Week coming up on January 23-27, now is the perfect time to do it!



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JAN/FEB '12

Start by having a little chat with your team about name-calling. How often do they hear it? Where? Focus them towards bias-based name-calling, especially with middle level and high school teams. What kinds of name-calling do they typically hear?

Choose your focus. It can be all name-calling, bias-based name-calling and language, or even a specific type of name-calling (i.e. based on sexual orientation) or a specific word (*retard* and *retarded*). Whatever you choose to focus on, make sure there is a reasonable chance that students will actually hear it before your next meeting.

Ask your students to pay attention to this kind of name-calling and language and what happens after the words are said. Specifically, they are to notice and remember every time that someone speaks up in response to the language. It can be anyone; student or adult. Team members should count the number of times someone says something to address the use of language.

At your next meeting, team members should report how many times they witnessed someone saying something in response to the name-calling you had them focus their attention on. You can then discuss these questions...

- What did people say in response?
- What happened as a result of this?
- What messages were communicated through this response?
- Were there times when no one said anything in response?
- What messages were communicated through this silence?
- Were there differences in how students and adults responded?

And of course, finally:

- What can we do with this information?

Usually with No Name-Calling activities we focus on prevention, but the reality in our schools is that bad things will be said. This activity asks students to think about what happens *afterwards*. The words get said... now what?

More information on GLSEN's No Name-Calling Week event is available at:

www.nonamecallingweek.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home.html



Talking to Myself: On Cyberbullying

This time around I take the role of someone who is really panicked by cyberbullying. I have met this person multiple times...

PANICKED PERSON: Aaaagh! Cyberbullying!

BRANDON: Well, let's not freak out. Let's talk about this.

PANICKED PERSON: OK. I just don't get it. Kids these days...

BRANDON: Stop right there. This won't be a discussion about what's wrong with kids these days. Kids today aren't so different from kids in the past. Older generations are always baffled by youth.

PANICKED PERSON: I think that this generation is different.

BRANDON: They're more like an adolescent version of you... with a cell phone.

PANICKED PERSON: But the cell phones! The technology! It's destroying what it means to be human!

BRANDON: People say that about every new technology, and yet we're still here. Plato was convinced that the advent of *writing* would destroy humanity. Change is constant.

PANICKED PERSON: But cyberbullying is such a big problem! We need new policies! New laws!

BRANDON: Maybe. Maybe not. We've got school policies and laws that can be used to address cyberbullying. They may not actually include the word cyberbullying...

PANICKED PERSON: Well, why not? Cyberbullying is such a serious problem!

BRANDON: I agree. It is a serious problem. But the problem isn't the *cyber*. It's the *behavior*. The behavior doesn't become something different just because of the medium. Threats transmitted through a text message are threats. Name-calling on someone's Facebook page is name-calling. We have to focus on the behavior.

PANICKED PERSON: So cyberbullying is really just bullying?

BRANDON: I think that's a good way to look at it.



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JAN/FEB '12

PANICKED PERSON: So if we just address bullying, then we're addressing cyberbullying?

BRANDON: Yes and no. We should focus on the behavior, but we also have to address why these behaviors are so much easier online. We have to try and understand the psychology of cyberbullying, which leads us to discussions about anonymity, invisibility, and deindividuation.

PANICKED PERSON: Great! How about you come to our school to talk about this?

BRANDON: Sorry. I used to address issues of cyberbullying. I don't anymore.

PANICKED PERSON: Why not?! It's such a serious problem!

BRANDON: It is a serious problem, but it's only peripherally connected with the mission of the Civil Rights Team Project.

PANICKED PERSON: But it's a school safety issue!

BRANDON: Agreed... but is it a bias issue?

PANICKED PERSON: All bullying is a bias issue.

BRANDON: No. The purpose of the Project is to focus on issues of race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, physical and mental disability, gender, and sexual orientation. My experiences with cyberbullying usually do not involve bias.

PANICKED PERSON: So does that mean that civil rights teams shouldn't address it?

BRANDON: No, but teams should be really careful. They need to keep their focus on bias behaviors. But there can be overlap. There are incidents in schools that are examples of both cyberbullying and bias behavior. In fact, bias behavior is made easier with cybertechnologies. Again, we're back to anonymity, invisibility, and deindividuation.

PANICKED PERSON: So civil rights teams can address cyberbullying?

BRANDON: Of course they can, but they should be careful and keep the focus on bias.

PANICKED PERSON: This chat feels really self-conscious, as if you're writing it for an audience or something.

BRANDON: No comment. I have to go now...



Pop Culture Watch: November and December

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



Racism Gets Arty

Florence and the Machine is taking heat for racist imagery in their recently released video for “No Light, No Light.” They deserve it.

The video features the very white lead singer Florence Welch getting haunted by a writhing and generally menacing looking black man who is practicing some sort of voodoo with pins and dolls and lots of candles. Oh, and it's later revealed that he's actually Asian and in blackface.

Anyway, poor Florence falls out of a window and has a very, very long fall into a Christian church, where a group of white choirboys are there to catch her. Close call, but our heroine is saved!

Clearly this is meant to be symbolic and artistic, but that doesn't excuse what amounts to a very racist plot line: scary black guy out to get the white heroine until she is saved by the purity of white Christianity. That reads like a plot summary of what is widely considered the most racist film in American history, *Birth of a Nation*. (And how racist was *Birth of a Nation*? It brought back the KKK soon after its release in 1919.)

Look: we understand that there is a long history of symbolism behind colors. White represents purity and innocence. Black represents evil. But using that symbolism in the form of *actual people* and then coupling it with religion seems inexcusable in 2011.

Oh, but the fans of Florence and the Machine sure are making a lot of excuses for the “No Light, No Light” video. *It's art*.

Understood. It may be symbolism and it may be art, but that doesn't mean it can't be racist, too.

See the video at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGH-4jQZRcc



An Auspicious Trailer!

I wish this weren't such a big deal, but Pixar Studios just released their full-length trailer for their next film, *Brave*. Scheduled for release in summer of 2012, this will be Pixar's thirteenth full-length film.

And it's the first one to feature a female lead. I have had my eye on this film for a long, long time.

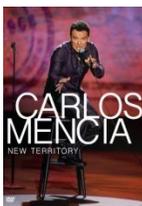
The trailer suggests that it won't be your traditional Disney storyline about a princess who gets saved by some guy. It looks like we might get treated to a strong female character who can carry the story on her own. Not only is the film titled *Brave*, but this is clearly describing our hero, Princess Merida. She gets to *do stuff*.

Films featuring strong female leads are rare. Pixar's first attempt is late, but it looks like they might get it right. Here's to hoping that they deliver on the trailer's promise, and that *Brave* is a critical and box office success. That's the only way things ever really change.

Start getting excited for *Brave* at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYgoVgPy6Uk (short teaser)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEHWDA_6e3M (full-length trailer)



Carlos Mencia Dusts Off an Old Racist Joke in *New Territory*

Wait a second... did I hear comedian Carlos Mencia making a joke comparing Barack Obama to Curious George on Comedy Central recently? I wasn't 100% sure, and I only



overheard it during a promo for his upcoming special, *New Territory*. I went online to see what I could discover, and...

Oh, yes. He made that joke, and it's even worse in context. He goes out of his way to explain that he knows it's racist, and he really shouldn't say it, but... Obama looks like Curious George.

Obama does not look like Curious George. Even if he were two feet tall with a prehensile tail, though, this joke would be unacceptable. You have to know something about the long history of linking black people to monkeys and then decide that any jokes that enter this realm are off limits.

Of course "off limits" is exactly how Mencia makes his living. He fancies himself bold and shocking, a guy who will go where others don't dare to go. What this effectively hides is a complete lack of creativity in his joke-telling; the Obama joke is just a modern spin on an old racist trope.

Mencia's joke is as clever and daring as farting in church.

If you must see it...

<http://comedians.jokes.com/carlos-mencia/videos/carlos-mencia---barack-obama-joke>



***Red Tails* Coming to Theaters**

A big-budget film about the Tuskegee Airmen? That's a good thing.

Is it any good? Who knows? But it seems like it's worth mentioning in *The Torch*. Also, Terrence Howard is in it, and Terrence Howard is awesome.

In theaters January 20! See the trailer at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvaiMudYkOE



Relevant Resources: Warning! These are Good!



www.warninglabelgenerator.com



www.warningsigngenerator.com

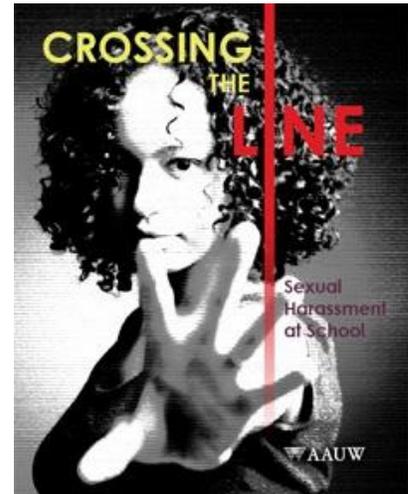


THE Resource on Sexual Harassment in Schools

Whenever I need a statistic or information about sexual harassment in schools, I go to the American Association of University Women (AAUW). Their *Hostile Hallways* has been an invaluable tool for me and many others; it has been the go-to source for years.

But there have been two problems with the AAUW's research findings in years past:

1. They are not prodigious in publishing. The first *Hostile Hallways* report came out in 1993. The last one was 2001.
2. It's not exactly easy to get your hands on a copy of this research.



Of course this is all leading up to an exciting announcement...

The AAUW has just published their newest research and findings on sexual harassment in our schools, *Crossing the Line*, and it's readily available online.

I highly encourage you to check it out. The research consistently shows that sexual harassment is all-too-common and a serious issue in our schools. Many of the findings are very familiar to anyone who knows anything about bias behaviors in our schools:

- Almost half of surveyed students said that had been sexually harassed in school in the last year (48%).
- The most common form of sexual harassment is verbal.
- For students who admitted to harassing others, the most common reasons given were that it's not a big deal or they were just trying to be funny.
- Only 9% of students who were sexually harassed reported it to an adult at school.

The percentages might differ, but these findings hold true for bias-based behaviors, too. Sexual harassment is not necessarily a civil rights issue or the purview of the Civil Rights Team Project, but the behaviors often involve bias based on gender or sexual orientation. For instance...

- 56% of girls have been sexually harassed in school compared to 40% of boys.
- 18% of students have been called *gay* or *lesbian* in a negative way.
- Boys are most likely to identify being called gay as the most troubling form of sexual harassment.



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) JAN/FEB '12

These are just a few relevant tidbits from AAUW research that highlight the crossover nature of sexual harassment and bias-based behaviors. Sexual harassment may not be our focus, but there's plenty of relevant information for you and your civil rights teams in *Crossing the Line*.

You can access the executive summary and full report at:

www.aauw.org/learn/research/crossingtheline.cfm