

5-2012

## Torch (May/June 2012)

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Civil Rights Team Project

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### Recommended Citation

Baldwin, Brandon and Civil Rights Team Project, "Torch (May/June 2012)" (2012). *Torch: The Civil Rights Team Project Newsletter*. 53.

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**em·pa·thy** noun [em-puh-thee]

**the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.**

I have written at least three different introductions to this version of *The Torch*, and I don't like any of them. Writer's block is setting in; I have so much to say about the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and empathy, but I can't find the words to say it.

So... I decided that maybe a poem is the solution.

### **For Trayvon**

I don't know what it is  
that makes me try to understand  
what he must have felt  
and what so many others feel

The closet full of hoodies  
signposts of an accumulated identity  
years in the making  
a scrapbook on hangers:  
Baldwin Boat Company,  
Middlebury and Lawrence,  
places I've been,  
interests and causes,  
and an unused plastic hanger  
reserves a spot  
for a slogan or insignia  
of who I might become



I slide one on.

like Trayvon  
we have this in common

only we don't  
our hood-framed faces  
his black  
mine white  
and the limits of empathy

my hoodie  
just a sweatshirt  
something I wear  
when I'm cold  
or wanting comfort  
his carrying a weight  
beyond cotton  
or a polyester blend

perhaps to avoid the suspicious eyes  
of a nation  
on neighborhood watch  
standing its ground  
against some vague threat  
he flips up his hood  
earbuds in  
takes refuge  
hides  
in his own private cave  
where he can be himself  
and not the menace  
some will see

we don't know what happened

but I know that while I try  
to understand  
I know  
that it would never  
could never  
ever  
ever  
be me



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the hoodie goes back  
in the closet  
hanging  
waiting  
to be worn again

I don't know what it is  
that makes me try to understand  
but I keep trying it on  
to see  
if it fits

And here's what you can expect in this month's newsletter:

**Team Spotlight:** Lots of highlights from STAND UP to Bullying Week.

**Activity Ideas:** You've still got six weeks. Make some connections!

**Talking to Myself:**

**Pop Culture Winners and Losers:** More positive than negative!

**Relevant Resources:** Experiments! Surveys! Free posters!

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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:

STAND UP to Bullying Week

The first-ever Civil Rights Team Project-sponsored STAND UP to Bullying Week was a great success!



I visited sixteen elementary, middle level, and high schools to support the work of civil rights teams in encouraging their peers to stand up for safer schools. Our week was inspired by International STAND UP to Bullying Day.

I saw a lot of pink in the sixteen schools I visited. This was no accident:

The color [pink] is based on a campaign started by Travis Price and David Shepherd, two senior students who took a stand against a freshmen student being bullied for wearing a pink shirt. This act of leadership provides a great example for those who are "on the fence" about displaying their own personal stance against bullying.

Like Travis Price and David Shepherd before them, our civil rights teams provided a great example for their schools. Here are some of the many highlights of civil rights team action and activities from STAND UP to Bullying Week:

- The team at Bucksport High School created professional looking posters featuring school celebrities encouraging students to "GO PINK" in advance of STAND UP Week. They also sponsored an activity where students took small papers and wrote what they'd say to help someone who is being bullied. The team collected these slips and paper and created a collage for display in the school's entryway.
- At Cony High School, the civil rights team created a bullying survey in advance of STAND UP Week. They shared some of the results while introducing my presentation. Later in the week they recognized students and adults for positive bystander behaviors with their STAND UP Awards. Even the cafeteria contributed to the week's event, serving up cake with a special pink frosting.
- Fort Fairfield's middle and high school civil rights teams worked together and held a community potluck supper. It was a well-attended feast. One of the middle school team members wrote a song about the harmful potential of words, got a friend to sing it, and played it after my presentation. The high school went the extra mile and made it easy for everyone to wear pink, handing out shirts and



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bandanas for anyone who wanted them. Both teams got some good media attention, too: television and newspaper coverage.

- When the civil rights team at Hall-Dale Middle School said that they'd make STAND UP to Bullying fortune cookies for every student in the school, I thought it sounded great... *if they could do it*. Well, they did! The kids baked, folded, and stuffed enough fortune cookies so that everyone in the school got one. (I may have had a few myself. Yummy.) The cookies were stuffed with 36 different STAND UP messages like "You don't have to go along with your friends," and "Make the first move. Be kind first!!" The week's events culminated with a Friday night "wear pink" dance.
- Jay Elementary put the focus on celebrating student individuality by encouraging students to dress up and express their different interests and hobbies. They also sponsored classroom visits from educators at Safe Voices and Rape Response Crisis.
- At Lake Region Middle School students were challenged to personalize their own commitment to "stomping out" bullying on a footprint cutout. The civil rights team collected the footprints and created a display. The team also offered daily tips for bystanders on how they could stand up to bullying on the school's daily televised news.
- At the Mary Hurd School, the civil rights team opened the week at Monday's Morning Meeting with a skit about a group of students who stood up for another student. They also did classroom presentations where they shared the inspiration for the week, including the YouTube video "The Pink Shirt Campaign," a stop-motion animated feature starring stuffed animals.
- Maranacook Community Middle School's civil rights team was busy making and showing movies. They filmed skits about standing up and showed them to students. They also filmed students, grades K-12, talking about bullying issues, created a DVD, and shared it at a staff meeting.
- Messalonskee Middle celebrated STAND UP to Bullying three weeks after the official event, but this highlights something I say all the time: there's never a wrong time to do the right thing. Students read PSAs every morning and shared statistics about bullying. They also created a travelling poster display that was featured in the school's library for two weeks before hitting the road and touring other district schools.
- Washburn District High School's civil rights team created quite a buzz when they donned sign boards for a full day of school. The boards included information and statistics related to the week's theme. The students observed a day of silence and

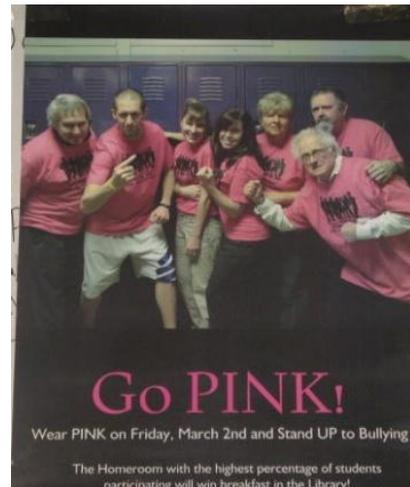


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let the boards speak for themselves. This clever launch-off generated lots of interest and conversation... even inquiries about joining the team!

- At Bruce M. Whittier Middle School, the team kicked off the week's events by placing meaningful and relevant quotes, images, and comic strips on every school locker. A majority of these locker tags remained in place through the week. The team also selected harassment-related short stories and created a discussion guides and questions for use in advisor groups.

Our first-ever STAND UP to Bullying Week was a great success. Congratulations to the civil rights teams for making it into an event.





## Activity Idea: Creating Meaningful Connections



I know what the end of the school year is like... but I also know that you still have *six weeks left*. This may not be the ideal time to launch major school-wide initiatives, but six weeks is enough time to accomplish something meaningful.

The key to making these six weeks meaningful is choosing the right project. Here are some recommendations, then:

### **1. Reach out to other schools without civil rights teams.**

The time for a school to think about starting a civil rights team next year is now. You and your team can help push that process. Active and involved civil rights team members believe in the CRTP so much that they become quite enthusiastic about getting new teams up and running. They want to see teams in the schools they once attended and the schools they will be attending in the future. Help them make it happen!

Your civil rights team members can request an audience with administration or staff and share why they think the school needs a team. They can highlight some of their activities and initiatives from this school year. They can recruit potential faculty advisors. The most important thing is that they students are an active part of the process; their voice carries more weight.

Some of our students feel so passionately about the CRTP and their civil rights team that they really take to a project like this. It's their opportunity to share something with the schools they've already attended or create a future for themselves in their next school.

If you and your team would like some help in this process, feel free to contact me.

### **2. Reach out to other civil rights teams in your school unit.**

The transitions from one school to another are inherently risky for civil rights team membership. Oftentimes students who participate in one school will not continue their participation when they enter a new school.

Why not? Maybe it's fear. Maybe it's a sense of being overwhelmed. Maybe it's just not thinking about it. We can address all of these potential contributing factors by



connecting our graduating civil rights team members with the team at their future school *this year*. Make it familiar and you increase the odds that they'll participate.

Civil rights teams at the receiving schools, then, can work on recruiting future participants now. This can be accomplished in any number of ways; what's important is that prospective participants feel comfortable. Meeting the advisor, seeing the team, talking about what they do; it will help students see that the civil rights team at their next school is a lot like the one they're on now. That connection will make them much more likely to participate.

### **3. Reach out to next year's civil rights team.**

Your 2011-2012 version of the civil rights team can connect with next year's team. It isn't nearly as creepy as that previous sentence might sound, either; some of us do this sort of thing all the time. We get ideas for the future, we write them down somewhere. We feel something, we record it. We know that if we don't preserve it now, it might be lost forever, and *we don't want that*.

(I have a document cleverly titled "Ideas for 2012-2013" that is full of notes, nuggets, and nothings. It will play a huge role in planning the direction of the CRTP next year.)

Your 2011-2012 civil rights team probably won't record their thoughts and feelings on their own, but you can encourage and even formalize this process. They can write goals for themselves for next year. They can write letters to next year's team members. They can reflect on successes and failures. They can create a time capsule.

They can do *something* so that next year is connected with this year. Create it, collect it, keep it, and then (this is crucial) revisit it next year.

\* \* \* \* \*

It can be entirely tempting to think that the school year is over, especially from a civil rights perspective. It doesn't have to be. Work on creating some sort of connections in the time that you have left and you can expand the civil rights opportunities for your students.



## Talking to Myself: Thoughts on the Law

Have you heard the news? Augusta and Washington are getting serious about bullying in our schools. The legislature seems poised to pass LD 1237, “An Act to Prohibit Bullying and Cyberbullying in Schools.” President Obama recently voiced his support for Safe Schools Improvement Act and the Student Non-Discrimination Act.

Here’s a collection of random back-and-forth thoughts I’ve had in response to these pieces of proposed legislation.

- Anything that puts bullying and bias behaviors in the news is good. We need awareness, and we need to see that our elected officials care about these issues.
- Oh, please. This is just Augusta and Washington weighing in something they don’t even understand. Merely symbolic.
- Even if it is symbolic... it’s a statement.
- You can pass law after law after law, but the reality is that education and educational policy are issues of local control.
- The laws will set clear expectations for local entities that they will have to meet.
- The Maine Human Rights Act was amended in 2005 to include sexual orientation. As a result of this change, school harassment policies should now include protections based on sexual orientation. A memo from the former Commissioner of Education Susan Gendron reminded superintendents of this change in 2010. I still go to schools today where they haven’t yet added sexual orientation to their harassment policies. *They have had seven years to meet that expectation.*
- That’s not a problem with the expectation, though. The problem is with the administration and oversight. Besides, there are probably plenty of schools who did meet that expectation and have included sexual orientation in their policies.
- Just having the words in the policies and actually providing protection for people are two totally different things, though.
- Yes... and no. I think that any laws that make people actually say the words race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and other protected categories are useful.



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You know otherwise, some places will never even say the words. Just getting them to say the words is a victory.

- But the laws don't do anything. They're only as good as the people who implement and enforce them. Safe schools are created by people in the schools, not politicians.
- But the laws help guide the people in the schools.
- You can have the best laws on the planet, but if people don't implement them, it doesn't matter.
- You can have the best people on the planet, but they need guidance and structure.
- Does this remind you of that paper we had to write in college, "The Rule of Law vs. The Rule of Man?"
- It does! Political Science 101!
- Yes. We had to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the rule of law and the rule of man. Do you remember our conclusion?
- I don't, but I think we can agree today that you really need both. Good laws can make a difference in our schools by providing structure and support...
- But we need good people to make sure the spirit of those laws is actually carried out.
- That's a pretty tortured conclusion, but I think it works!
- Good enough for me. Let's go get some ice cream.





## Pop Culture Watch: March and April

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



### Challenging African Stereotypes

This short video from Mama Hope features four young African men talking about how Hollywood might stereotype them. I don't know a lot about Mama Hope and what they do, but you don't have to to appreciate this video. It shows how talking about stereotypes is an important first step in challenging them.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSElmEmEjb4&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSElmEmEjb4&feature=player_embedded)



**THE *Mis-*ADVENTURES OF AWKWARD BLACK GIRL**



### Bypassing Mainstream Media

*The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* could signal a sea change in the diversification of popular media. It's not a movie or tv show; it's a web series. Creator Issa Rae was frustrated with depictions of black women in traditional popular media, especially television; she didn't see anyone out there like herself. Her solution, then, was to write, direct, and act in her own series, bypassing traditional media completely.

The end result can be very, very funny. It can also be very, very inappropriate. (Don't even think about sharing this with your civil rights team.)

In a recent interview with NPR, Rae spoke about her title character:

I think the fact that she is black but the concepts are universal speaks volumes... just because she's a black female lead doesn't mean you can't relate to her. And I think that that speaks more to mainstream media because there just is this sort of

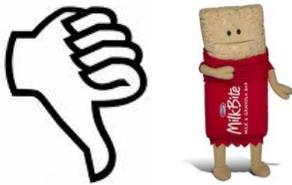


perception that, you know, if a black person is in the lead, then it has to be for black people. It has to only relate to them.

She's right, and that's what elevates *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* to something that is truly groundbreaking and important.

You can watch all twelve web episodes at:

<http://awkwardblackgirl.com/>



## **Mixed Race Granola Bars?**

The new ad campaign for MilkBite granola bars is trying to be clever, but it's just creepy. The ads feature a seemingly depressed cereal bar named Mel who is suffering because of his mixed identity; he is both cereal and milk.

Watch and listen closely, and you'll see that these ads are playing with issues of race. They perpetuate the idea that people of multiple racial backgrounds are tortured souls who don't belong anywhere.

There's nothing tragic about mixed race identity in 2012. These ads fail:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=gK6yayjgios](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gK6yayjgios)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdRe\\_jtcqY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdRe_jtcqY)



## Relevant Resources: Two Kinds of Research



### AC 360: Kids on Race

Anderson Cooper and CNN have an ongoing series called “Kids and Race.” The series features experiments designed to measure children’s hidden and unconscious racial bias.

Like most everything on television news, “Kids on Race” can be sensational and simplistic. You certainly won’t see their studies cited in an academic journal. Their focus isn’t necessarily good science; it’s good television, and so there is a natural emphasis on anecdotal evidence and sound bites.

But the series is interesting, and anything that encourages people to talk honestly about race can’t be all that bad, especially when it addresses a concept that most people aren’t even aware of: implicit bias.

It’s imperfect, but still compelling.

[http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/category/kids-on-race/?hpt=ac\\_ac3](http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/category/kids-on-race/?hpt=ac_ac3)



### 70,000+ Maine Students Have Something to Say

The compiled results for Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) for 2011 are now available. If you’ve been working in schools for any amount of time, you probably know the survey. You have probably distributed sharpened #2 pencils and assured them that the survey is anonymous. Most of the questions focus on tobacco, alcohol, and drugs, but there are questions about other public health issues, too, including school safety.



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The MIYHS survey always makes for interesting reading. It is the accumulated voice of over 70,000 Maine students. I highly recommend it. Here are some relevant tidbits for our work with civil rights teams with answers for grades 9-12, 7-8, and 5-6.

**Students who *did not agree* with the statement, “I feel safe in my school.”**

- 9-12: 11.9%
- 7-8: 13.9%
- 5-6: 11.0%

**Students who answered that their school enforces rules fairly “always” or “most of the time.”**

- 9-12: 46.3%
- 7-8: 56.4%
- 5-6: NA

**Students who thought there is a “very good chance” or “pretty good chance” that they would be seen as cool if they defended someone who was being verbally abused at school.**

- 9-12: 27.5%
- 7-8: 25.6%
- 5-6: NA

You can access summaries and more detailed reports of the MYIHS survey at:

[www.maine.gov/dhhs/osa/data/miyhs/admin.htm](http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/osa/data/miyhs/admin.htm)



## Relevant Resources: A Freebie!



### Free Posters: Choosing to Participate

The Smithsonian, Facing History, and Teaching Tolerance form an educational supergroup and offer free posters on respect, inclusion, and civic engagement? Sign me up!

Except that I can't sign up. The series of 11 free posters is only available to the first 10,000 school-based educators who sign up.

You should be one of them. Get on this.

[www.tolerance.org/choosing-to-participate](http://www.tolerance.org/choosing-to-participate)

(There is also some supporting curriculum. This is more than just a bunch of posters.)