

2-1-2016

Torch (February 2016)

Brandon Baldwin

Civil Rights Team Project

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/torch>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baldwin, Brandon and Civil Rights Team Project, "Torch (February 2016)" (2016). *Torch: The Civil Rights Team Project Newsletter*. 72.

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/torch/72>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Items From the Collection at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Torch: The Civil Rights Team Project Newsletter by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.



The Civil Rights Team Project

We get schools to think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.



Here's what you can read about in the February edition of *The Torch*:

From the Teams: News from some of our teams about what they've been doing.

From the Advisors: An advisor profile of Warsaw Middle School's Justin Jacques and Marie Jones.

From the Office: The biggest news from our office will be coming soon, but for now we'll give you a preview about what's happening with us and No Name-Calling Week.

Remembering Peter Rees: We don't usually add new sections to our newsletter, but Peter Rees was someone special. We'll miss him here in the CRTP.

From the News: We are ready to talk politics in the CRTP... just read this first.

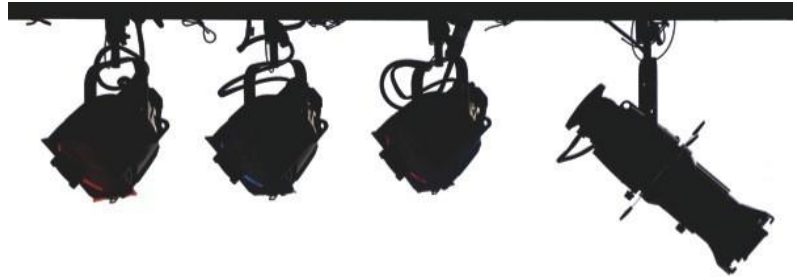
* * * * *

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 elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

Brandon Baldwin—Program Manager, Newsletter Editor
Debi Lettre Goodheart—Civil Rights Project Administrator
Janet Mills—Attorney General



From the Teams:



At **Lyman Moore Middle School** in Portland, the civil rights team is working hard to establish their identity in their first year. They decided to adopt an official civil rights team quote. Through a quote vote activity similar to what we did at the student trainings, the team asked their classmates which quote they should adopt. They selected seven quote options, shared them with the school, and had students vote on their favorite. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent" is now the official Lyman Moore civil rights team quote! They have already incorporated it into their civil rights team flag, designed by a civil rights team member, and plan to use it in their upcoming initiatives.

Hey, Lyman Moore civil rights team... you are doing some great work in creating your team identity and sharing it with your school. Having your classmates vote on your team quote was really smart. It invests everyone in what you do. They picked a great quote, too. We look forward to hearing about how your team refuses to be silent about the issues that matter in your school community. (And thanks to their advisors, Sarah Carlson, Cori Modisette, and Catherine Siegel for sharing!)

At **Madison Area Memorial High School**, the civil rights team has successfully lobbied for a change to a single graduation gown color. In years past, students were assigned a color based on their gender. The civil rights team identified this as an important civil rights issue as graduation might force non-gender conforming students into an uncomfortable position. The civil rights team put together a proposal for a single graduation gown color and a gender-neutral dress code. They added a sash to the gown to incorporate both of their school colors and formalize the occasion for everyone. They presented this to the senior class and school faculty. Not everyone was for the change initially, but after the civil rights team explained the reasoning for the changes, most have embraced the idea. The superintendent ultimately made the decision to switch to a single graduation gown color and a gender-neutral dress code for the event.

Hey, Madison Area Memorial High School civil rights team... you did it! This is exciting because it's such a tangible thing that you've accomplished. Graduation is an important moment in students' lives, and you've helped to make that occasion more safe, welcoming, and respectful for all students, but especially gender non-conforming students. This is an important change.

At **Southern Aroostook Community School** in Dyer Brook, the civil rights team honored the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. with a whole-school assembly and activities for students in grades 6-12. The team shared their mission statement, excerpts



from King’s speeches, and a slide show. They also created four stations for interactive activities, including:

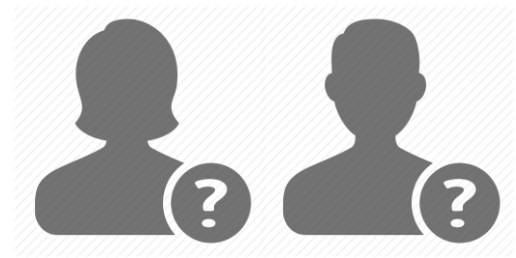
- a graffiti wall where students shared their dreams for the future
- a mural where students identified civil rights issue in our school and society
- a quiz about Martin Luther King, Jr.
- a quote vote where students voted for their favorite of four King quotes

The team took time to review each of these four activities and concluded the assembly be encouraging students to check out other civil rights team initiatives in their school and attend a future meeting.

Hey, Southern Aroostook civil rights team... it’s tempting to think that because of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, we don’t have to think and talk about issues of racism or other forms of bias anymore. It’s important to connect the past with issues of bias that exist in today’s world. You are helping students in your school make these connections. You created an interactive and engaging experience that encourages your school community to see that the work is not done... but King’s legacy lives on through civil rights teams like yours. (And thanks to their advisors, Meag Brooks, Erin McGuan, and Jessica Walker for sharing!)

From the Advisors:

This is a first for *The Torch*, as we’re featuring co-advisors. Justin Jacques and Marie Jones advise the civil rights team at Warsaw Middle School in Pittsfield. Justin is in his third year of advising. Marie is in her second year.



1. What do you like about being a civil rights team advisor?

Justin: I enjoy many things about the civil rights team. I like working with kids from a variety of grades (we are a 5-8 school), all with unique perspective on civil rights issues. I like knowing that there will be socially responsible, intelligent young people going out into the world with open minds and open hearts. I also enjoy the challenge and the rewards – we may not always reach the audience we are after, but we will never stop trying. It also makes it all the sweeter when we do get through to people...teenaged or adult.

Marie: I love working with our kids as we all struggle to understand and hopefully teach about the various civil rights issues we face. These kids are at an age when they fiercely believe in the concept of justice, and at the same time they are awakening to the



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) FEB '16

fact that the world is not always a nice place. Their passion inspires me and reminds me of why we do this work.

2. What is your favorite moment or memory associated with the CRTP?

Marie: Awareness Week! This fall our kids planned a week to get the school talking about bias-based behavior and thinking. Each day we focused on a different category, for instance Monday was Disability Awareness Day. We hung a banner that read “At Warsaw we respect everyone’s...” and then each day added a new banner with the day’s focus behind it. Our civil rights team also hung posters, read quotes at morning announcements and provided videos, activities, and discussion questions for each advisor/advisee group in the mornings. Our kids really got the civil rights buzz going at our school!

Justin: My favorite moments and memories of the civil rights team are all the times I’ve watched a seventh or eighth grade student become really passionate about an issue. This often results in them speaking up about the issue, and taking charge during projects and discussions. Students usually feel empowered when they are knowledgeable and respected, and watching them take ownership of these projects is something truly awesome to witness.

3. What do you see as the biggest civil rights issue in your school?

Justin and Marie: This year, we’ve had a couple of civil rights-related issues that have been new (for us) to deal with. Typically, our biggest two areas of concern are mental and physical disabilities and sexual orientation/identity – usually stemming from careless use of language. This year, however, we’ve seen two other issues – a number of students have been using the word *nigga* – this had been difficult to fight due to it stemming from a young black student. This creates a situation where other kids think it’s OK to use. We’ve had to attempt to do some educating of the impact of the word, but I’m not sure how much has taken. The other issue is that there have been some negative sentiments about Islam due to misunderstandings about ISIS, the attacks in France, and refugees. We’ve been actively fighting that not only as a civil rights issue, but also as a seventh grade team of teachers.

4. What do you like about your civil rights team this year?

Marie: Something I really like about this year is how our civil rights team has grown. We have a fairly large, active core group that has done an excellent job promoting the ideals of the civil rights team throughout the school. The team as a whole is larger (about 25-ish strong), we have more boys in the group, and we have outstanding leadership in the older grades. The proactive nature of the group has allowed us to get more accomplished this year.



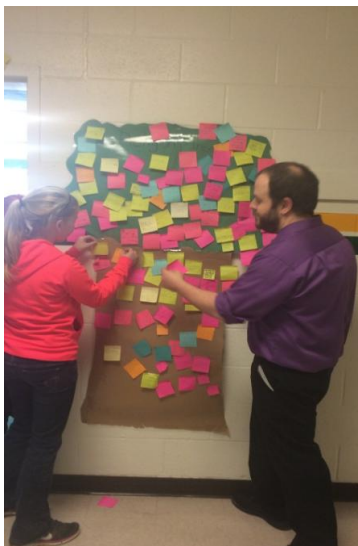
5. What makes you optimistic about our work in the future?

Justin: There are several things that make me optimistic about the future! One thing is a growing presence in the school. With each passing year that I have been advisor to our civil rights team, we have done a little bit more and spread our message a little more effectively. We are honing our practices and skills to ensure that we are only going to progress and get better at what we do. By increasing our presence in the school, we have also increased the amount of members on our team, including getting more boys onto the team. Our administration has shown themselves to be supporting, and we are going to have an entire week dedicated to civil rights awareness next year. Lastly, we have a bunch of good plans for projects going forward – a civil rights-related “fair,” a monthly news-style broadcast, and much more.

6. What advice or wisdom could you offer to other civil rights team advisors?

Justin and Marie: Here’s a list of some of the things we think are good advice!

- Have a co-advisor.
- Multiple meeting times, short and long.
- Frequent, open communication with administration.
- A designated CRT space (i.e, bulletin board, etc.).
- Put the onus on the students.
- Try new things and don’t get down if you fail the first time.
- Cultivate student leadership at the older grades.
- Be responsive to the issues specific to your school.
- Help students select roles during projects that are suited to their strengths.
- Stay current, and don’t overstress when students are misinformed by their parents or peers.





From the Office:

New Teams!

The Civil Rights Team Project is already growing in 2016. We have new civil rights team in Calais Middle and High School, Islesboro Central School, and Ocean Avenue Elementary School in Portland. Welcome!



No Name-Calling Week

We've worked with ten schools in planning civil rights team-sponsored No Name-Calling Week events in January and February that specifically address the issue of bias-based name-calling and insults. This is part of our ongoing efforts to coordinate school presentations with civil rights team initiatives. The civil rights teams in these schools are doing great work, and I'm supporting their events with a school presentation on "The Power of Words." You'll read more these events in the April edition of *The Torch*!





Remembering Peter Rees

On December 9, we lost a longtime friend of the Civil Rights Team Project when Peter Rees died at age 82. Peter was the community advisor for the civil rights team at Trenton Elementary School. He had been active in the Civil Rights Team Project for many years, serving as a Regional Coordinator in the early 2000's and a community advisor with the Connors Emerson civil rights team in Bar Harbor before moving to Trenton and becoming the community advisor there. He was also active and involved in GLSEN's Downeast Maine Chapter.

I've asked people from the Civil Rights Team Project, past and present, to share some stories and memories about Peter so that we can honor his life and work here in the pages of *The Torch*. I'd also like to contribute my own...

Back in November I received word of a student who had encountered some difficulty in starting a gay-straight alliance (GSA) in his school. New student groups first required school board approval, and in the process of presenting to the board, he was subjected to some pretty terrible questions and comments. They ultimately approved the GSA, but it wasn't an especially welcoming process.

I wanted to talk about it, so I alerted Peter about the incident and asked him what he thought. He was properly horrified. But he didn't want to talk about it; he wanted to *do something about it*. Peter went to work, contacting and connecting people in different circles all around the state, moving forward in organizing a panel to present on issues of LGBT safety at the next annual school board conference. As he said in closing one of his many e-mails on this issue, "School board members need some reality education!"

You could always count on Peter for some reality education.

At our student trainings this fall we asked our middle level and high school students to brainstorm some guidelines for being good allies in the world of civil rights, emphasizing that we really wanted actions, not adjectives, *because allies are defined by what they do*.

That was Peter. I don't think I ever heard him use the word *ally* to describe himself, but that's exactly what he was. Peter was all about the action part of allyship; he made things happen.

Darylen Cote, Regional Coordinator, Civil Rights Team Project, 1997-2005

The first time I met Peter I was planning a community education program here in Aroostook County, the first of several, for a broad audience. His was the first name I heard when searching for help to work toward a safer, more welcoming community for



LGBTQ people. At that time he was working at MDI as a school psychologist and had made some amazing changes there, and in the town of Bar Harbor. He was so supportive and enthusiastic, that he even recruited the amazing school nurse (Cookie Horner), the principal, and a member of the City Council to come North with him to talk about how they went about making the administrative changes in their school and community that signaled to LGBTQ students and community members that MDI/Bar Harbor were places that they could live and thrive.

From that point, Peter never hesitated when I asked for help, whether it was starting a PFLAG group, establishing a phoneline for LGBTQ youth, or working on an event for the Civil Rights Team Project. He was not only an endless fount of information, he delivered it with style. He listened, and consequently his advice was on point. He never hesitated to make the 4-hour trek up here from his home to provide training or make a presentation. On many of those occasions he stayed at our home and enjoyed with gusto the meals we shared. Good company, good conversation, a good man! He made a difference.

Nancy Eddy, civil rights team advisor, Trenton Elementary School

Peter has been an active civil rights team community advisor for many years. His gentle wisdom, sense of humor and incredible ability to connect with children of all ages stand out in my memory as I hold him in my heart. Peter brought historical perspective to our weekly meetings which captivated students as they reflected on what they experience with prejudice and hatred today. He helped us to stay positive and keep plugging along with our mission of acceptance and kindness for all. He would often print off color copies of posters for our school. A day does not pass when I am not reminded of Peter as I enter our school to see,

THIS SCHOOL WELCOMES:

students of all races, ethnicities and nationalities

students with diverse abilities

students who are LGBT

student who are English language learners

students of all religions

students from all socio-economic backgrounds

students of all body types

.....YOU

Thank you Peter, your voice will forever echo in our hearts and minds as we continue to strive for acceptance of *everyone*.



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) FEB '16

Thom Harnett, Director, Civil Rights Team Project, 1997-2000 and 2001-2011

Peter Rees and I worked together for many years. We spent a lot of time in schools Downeast and in other parts of Maine. Peter cared passionately about young people. One of his mantras was “Be who you truly are because it is no fun trying to be somebody else.” Of course, Peter also knew that “being one’s self” could be pretty tough in school, particularly when others told you they do not like who you were. Nonetheless, Peter defended and protected the rights of young people to be who they were because he knew the pain and suffering caused by hiding and presenting false images. Peter regularly let everyone involved in schools know that nobody had the right to treat others badly because of who they were or to make anybody feel *less than*; less deserving of respect than others, less deserving of compassion, less deserving of dignity, or less deserving of safety. On these points, Peter had no room for compromise. Peter’s message was simple yet always delivered with clarity and compassion. Peter was a gentle and persistent warrior.



Peter Rees and Thom Harnett

I was also able to spend time with Peter outside of schools and it was there I saw the other side of a perfectly formed coin. One day after a training I went to Peter’s for lunch with Peter and his wife Phyllis. Walking into their home was like walking into a Rube Goldberg exhibit. Like Rube, Peter designed seemingly complicated gadgets that performed simple tasks; tasks that Phyllis was less able to perform, like turning lights off and on, opening and closing doors, and playing music. Peter’s creations made Phyllis’s days less challenging, more welcoming, more accessible, and more dignified. It was beautiful to see and was exactly what he did helping youth, often those dealing with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity who were just looking for acceptance. He too helped them by making their lives in school less challenging, more welcoming, more accessible, and more dignified.

I was lucky to have known Peter Rees. I will miss him.

Carol Rosinski, civil rights team advisor at Connors Emerson School, Bar Harbor

In the early days of the Civil Rights Team Project, Peter Rees was my community advisor at the Connors Emerson School in Bar Harbor. Later, when he built a home in Trenton, he moved on to helping out at the Trenton Elementary School.



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) FEB '16

My last contact with Peter was in October 2015 for our advisor training for civil rights teams. He rode the school bus to the training with us. I made a special point of sitting next to him because he was such a good conversationalist. We discussed issues of the day and his upcoming move to be nearer to his daughter. As always, he was cheerful and full of energy.

During the training, Brandon asked us to choose the decade in which we became interested in civil rights issues. (The choices were the 1960's, 1970's, 1980's, 1990's, 2000's, or 2010's). Peter and I were the only members of the 1960's group. At first, I was embarrassed to say that I became involved in the 1960's. I was tempted to be dishonest and say it was the 1970's or 1980's. I was afraid people would view me as "old." I decided to disavow my ageist attitude and join the 1960's group with Peter. I'm so glad I did, as I now feel honored and proud to have been standing with such an esteemed and important man as Peter Rees.

Colleen Rost-Banik, Regional Coordinator, Civil Rights Team Project, 2002-2006

I worked with Peter Rees on the Civil Rights Team Project from 2002-2006. As a team of Civil Rights Team Project Regional Coordinators throughout the state, I got to know Peter through our monthly meetings. Peter, always seeing hope and promise for a better tomorrow, had an infectious smile that spread across his face.

One of my favorite things that Peter did during our work together was create a skit that narrated a timeline of activists and advocates for equal rights: from religious freedom, abolition, and indigenous rights to labor rights, women's suffrage, and an end to segregation and other Jim Crow inspired norms; from rights for people with disabilities and LGBTQ rights to the rights of youth to feel safe and respected in school. This timeline put into perspective the gains that have been made over time but also that the fight for civil rights is never complete. The skit Peter wrote inspired youth and adults alike to join with the long line of advocates who have worked so diligently for equality and freedom for all people. Peter's life work could easily be captured on this timeline as his words and actions tirelessly focused on changing the norms of society and educating Maine's youth so that all people can experience the equality and freedom that civil rights afford.



From the News:

We Are Ready to Talk Politics!

Remember this from the December newsletter?

The Dilemma with Politics

It's been difficult, almost impossible, figuring out what to write about in this "From the News" section for this December newsletter. Civil rights issues have *dominated* the news for the last few months... but all of these issues have been intertwined with politics. The general rule in the Civil Rights Team Project is that we don't talk politics.

But there's a dilemma with this sort of blanket ban on all things political. A lot of us have questions. Everything seems politicized now, so what can we talk about? How can we be good allies and advocates, and true to our civil rights focus, if we have to avoid anything with even a hint of politics to it? Is there a responsible way for us to talk about political issues?

These are good questions... and questions we're not quite ready to address here. We'll have a thoughtful, clear set of answers (and even some guidelines) ready for you in the next edition of *The Torch*, though. Thank you for your patience.

We are ready to address these questions. Here, then, are the promised set of answers and guidelines.

Some General Guidelines

1. *We should not talk about political parties or ideologies.*

Even if we're not intending to have a political discussion, as soon as we mention a political party or ideology, we risk alienating some percentage of our audience. Not only is this problematic; it's not very practical for the short and long term prospects of our civil rights teams in creating change in our schools and communities.

We should promote the idea that our work is non-partisan. The Civil Rights Team Project's focus is that all our students should feel safe, welcome, and respected in school. This has been our focus for nineteen years, under varied political leadership; it doesn't belong to any political party or ideology.





2. We should not talk about political candidates or politicians by name.

Political candidates and politicians are connected with political parties and elections. Again, a focus on an individual candidate or elected official carries the risk of alienating some percentage of our audience.

3. We probably should not talk about political issues that are (or may be) up for a vote.

Anything that's up for a vote can be so partisan and polarizing that it becomes almost impossible to talk about it and avoid the pitfalls of talking about political parties, ideologies, and politicians. As a general guideline, then, we should not talk about these issues, but we must also leave room for exceptions. Some political issues directly affect whether students feel safe, welcome, and respected in our school communities. The more local the issue, the more likely this is to be true. If political issues and conversations around these issues lead to students in our school communities feeling less than safe, welcome, and respected, we can talk about *that*. We just need to keep our focus there, and be very careful to avoid any sort of political advocacy.

How to Work Within These Guidelines

These guidelines might seem like a blanket ban on addressing political issues, but there is considerable space to talk about civil rights issues that may arise in the political arena.

A hypothetical incident will help us think about how the Civil Rights Team Project can engage in political issues appropriately. Imagine this: Politician X is in the news for some comments and policy proposals that make people of Identity Y feel less than safe, welcome, and respected.

What is an appropriate Civil Rights Team Project response? It depends on who is doing it and who the audience is.

From Our Office

The Civil Rights Team Project office will not respond. We are a part of the government and work with schools and students all around the state. It would be inappropriate and unprofessional for us to exert any political influence; we therefore avoid anything that might be seen as political. We don't talk about political parties and ideologies, politicians, or political issues. This means you won't read about this hypothetical incident in the newsletter or online through any postings on Edmodo. It won't be part of the fall trainings or the spring conference.

What *will* we do? We will pay attention to what happened and what happens in response. We will commit the Civil Rights Team Project to thinking and talking more



THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) FEB '16

about Identity Y and what we can do to make sure that people of Identity Y feel safe, welcome, and respected in our school communities.

With Your Civil Rights Teams

You or your students could raise this incident for discussion at your next civil rights team meeting, and you have some leeway in discussing it internally. It's worth noting that the Civil Rights Team Project expects civil rights teams to learn about issues of bias and identify issues of bias in our school communities. Everyone who is on the civil rights team is there by choice; they probably want to talk about these issues. It makes sense for teams to think and talk about what's happening in the news, because what's said and done in the world of politics influences what we hear and see happening in our schools and communities.

So how should the conversation go? Reference our guidelines. Focus in on the behavior. How are the comments and policy proposals related to civil rights? The conversation should shift away from Politician X and their political affiliation. Talk about how the behavior might affect people of Identity Y. Look at the larger issue of bias related to Identity Y. Is this an issue? Is this an issue in our school communities?

The point of these internal conversations is to educate. Our focus is not political advocacy. Adult advisors should keep their political opinions out of the conversation entirely. Talking about what you and the civil rights team think about Politician X is not important. Talking about the impact of Politician X's statement and their proposed policies is important.

Civil Rights Team Initiatives in Your School Community

Your civil rights team may decide that the conversation around this incident shouldn't be limited to just the civil rights team. Civil rights teams should be active, visible, and vocal. We expect teams to address issues of bias in their school communities and respond to public incidents of bias.

In terms of addressing the issue of bias: bias exists in our political arena because it exists in our society. This incident may not feel like an immediate and pressing issue in your school community, but recognize *it is an issue*. And recognize that you could use this occasion to identify the fact that your civil rights team could be talking more about Identity Y and bias related to Identity Y in the future. You can address these issues without talking about this incident and politics in general.

It's possible, though, that a response to Politician X's comments and policy proposals does feel like an immediate and pressing issue in your school community. It could be because everyone is talking about it. It could be because you see and hear an uptick in bias-based behavior directed towards people of Identity Y. It could be because you have



THE TORCH

(CRTP NEWSLETTER) FEB '16

a significant population of students of Identity Y who feel less than safe, welcome, and respected right now. If so, your civil rights team can respond to the incident by addressing it with your school community. Just remember that the school community includes people of all political orientations and ideologies. It is especially important to depoliticize the team's response and focus on the behavior, as the civil rights team (and by extension, the Civil Rights Team Project) is not a political advocacy group. You may want to mention this. Be clear about why you're responding. Again, focus on the behavior and how it makes people of Identity Y feel less than safe, welcome, and respected.

We hope that these guidelines help you and your civil rights teams moving forward. Please remember that you can always contact us for guidance, too.