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The Torch (February 2017)

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The Civil Rights Team Project

We help schools 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: Civil rights teams have battled an endless string of snow days to get things done this winter. Here's a sampling of what they're doing.

From the Advisors: Our advisor profile features Greely High School's co-advisors, Heather Perkinson and Peter Scott.

From the Office: We've got information about the statewide conference we're planning for the spring!

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

Brandon Baldwin—Program Manager, Newsletter Editor
Janet Mills—Attorney General



From the Teams:

At the **Albert S. Hall School** in Waterville, the civil rights team decided they had to do something in response to the news of several swastikas

spray-painted at the Quarry Road Recreation Area. The team got together and created a card to send the Beth Israel Congregation, their local synagogue. The card featured hand-drawn hearts and notes of support:

- Shalom! We love you!
- We are ONE!
- We stand strong TOGETHER!
- AHAVAH!!
- The Albert S. Hall civil rights team supports... YOU!

They sent the card as quickly as they could to the synagogue, where it currently hangs.

Hey, Albert S. Hall civil rights team... it's important that when hatred shows itself in our community, we respond. Your small act of compassion and solidarity with greater Waterville's Jewish community is an important reminder to all of us: we must never, ever be silent. You've made us all proud. (And thank you to their advisors, Cathy Lovendahl and Gi Reed, for sharing.)

At **Cony Middle and High School** in Augusta, the middle level and high school civil rights teams partnered with the school's Seeds of Peace group and Gay-Straight-Trans-Alliance (GSTA) to present Diversity Day in January. The day's program included:

- A keynote with Steve Wessler, who used focus group work to raise issues of gender and sexual harassment at Cony.
- Students inspired by the [My Name, My Identity](#) campaign to write and share their own stories of how their names and their identities are connected.
- A participatory session featuring the [Ad Council's "We Are America" PSA](#) to challenge students to think about American identity.
- A panel with some of ELL students, sharing stories of the countries they emigrated from and how they eventually arrived in Augusta.
- The opportunity for students to sign a pledge showing their intent to honor all people by learning their proper names and more about their identities.

Their advisors report that the day was a great success, and 100% student-generated.



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Hey Cony civil rights teams... you did it! I know how much work goes into planning an all-day event like your Diversity Day. Any all-day event is worth celebrating, but it looks like you created something with real meaning, too. Diversity Day events should always be about learning to value the diversity we have in the world, and especially in our school communities. You successfully explored big ideas through a local lens. (And thanks to their advisors, Rici Justice and April Fenton, for sharing.)

At the **Elm Street School** in Mechanic Falls, the civil rights team has made it clear that their school accepts people from all types of families. They carefully chose pictures of families representing a range of races or skin colors, national origins and ancestries, religions, disabilities, genders and gender identities, sexual orientations, and family structures. The pictures were put on posters with the words “All families are safe, welcome, and respected at our school!” and hung up around the school.

Hey Elm Street School civil rights team... it looks like you really liked the theme from our student trainings this year! Looking at families is a great way to engage people in thinking about civil rights issues. Families are diverse in the same way that people are diverse. Thanks to your efforts, every family that sets foot inside your school will feel like they belong. (And thanks to their advisor, Kayla Marston, for sharing.)

At **Lincoln Middle School** in Portland, the new civil rights team wasted no time in addressing school issues. In talking about the civil rights issues they observe in their school, the team brought up the casual use of language that could potentially offend, hurt, or belittle other students. Their advisor shared the Duke University “We Don’t Say” campaign, and they decided to create their own version, which would double as introductory bulletin board for the civil rights team. Their finished product features bold graphics, a reminder that “WORDS HAVE POWER,” a reference to the Duke University campaign that served as their inspiration, and their own personal examples of words they don’t say and the reasons why.

Hey, Lincoln Middle School civil rights team... I love that this was your first project! You are one of our newest teams. It would have been fine for you to take some time to get to know each other, create a team identity, and then think about how you wanted to introduce yourselves to the school... but you had a good idea ready to go. Why wait? Completing this project helped you come together as a team, and it’s *certainly* an effective way to introduce your civil rights team to your school community. (And thanks to their advisor, Meghan Rooks, for sharing.)

At the **Mast Landing School** in Freeport, when the civil rights team heard that there was an incident of harassment related to race and ancestry in their school, they wanted to do something in response. Advisors shared with them details of the incident, without names. What came next was unexpected. The students worked together as a team and wrote rap lyrics that address issues of bystander behavior, identity, harassment, and community. A sample:



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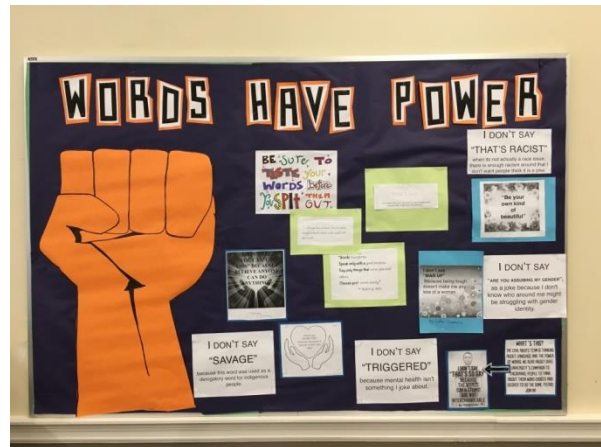
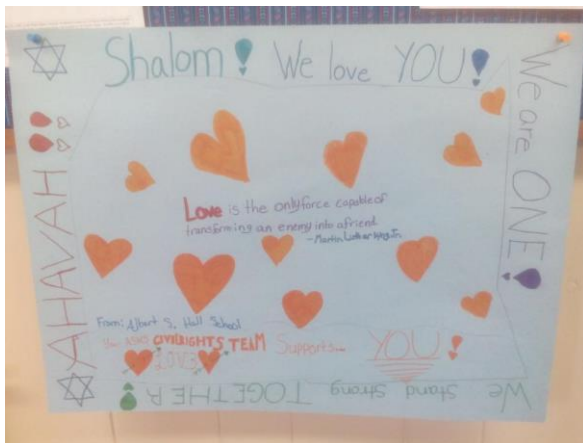
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Name calling, violence
 Don't make that awkward silence
 Threat or an insult
 My race ain't even a fault
 Mockery or imitating
 Friendship is just what I'm craving
 I'm proud of my origin
 That's how I wake up each mornin'

They performed their rap in front of the whole school, with four civil rights team members giving solo lyrics, and everyone joining in on the chorus.

Hey, Mast Landing civil rights team... as a lover of 90s hip hop, I'm impressed. These lyrics are good! They are more than just good, though. They're *about something*: the school community you want for everyone at Mast Landing. The fact that you wrote this and performed it is wonderful, but more important than that is why you did it. (And thanks to their advisors, Jona Chase and Natasha Jimenez, for sharing.)

Below: the Albert S. Hall School crt card to Beth Israel Congregation, the Lincoln Middle School crt bulletin board, and the Elm Street School crt posters on family diversity.





From the Advisors:



This month we're featuring Heather Perkinson and Peter Scott, the civil rights team advisors at Greely High School in Cumberland. Heather is the school librarian and in her fifth year of advising the team at Greely. She also advised a team at Oak Hill High School for three years. Peter is a school social worker and is in his sixth year of advising.

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

Heather: I love helping students to have an impact on their school community. The thing I like most is when they realize that a project or event they've organized has had an effect on the students and staff at our school; has actually caused discussion, changed attitudes, or encouraged people who may have felt marginalized to feel more included. I love having a co-advisor to work with—we each have our strengths and these make us a great team. Peter is very empathetic and sensitive to how people will perceive our work, he also has an amazing skill to get students and other staff members to step up and contribute, to work outside their comfort zone, or to see that they have a strength that can help our community.

Peter: I admire our team members' passions for positively contributing and impacting our complicated world. It is often heartwarming to arrive at a meeting and to see eager faces that have come together to honor and stand for our common humanity. The kids are the best part—their energy, creativity and kindness in dedicating their often precious free time to civil rights work. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention my co-advisor Heather. It has been an honor to work alongside a woman so connected to kids (and kids connected to her). Heather has a powerful, smart, quiet, funny, and savvy leadership style that is inspiring and unique.

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

Peter: When during the second year of our newly established team (and after significant team crisis response work) the student president of the team volunteered to speak in front of many hundreds of people and television cameras! Our president bravely and articulately read a CRT statement of tolerance to our school and the world beyond despite being a relatively shy person! I was very, very proud at that moment!

This year, Heather opened her library to our CRT and supporters for a 20 plus person reading of a Martin Luther King, Jr. speech which was attended by a couple hundred of our students and staff! It was a moment for me to look out over the crowd of hushed and tuned-in youth who may otherwise not have given much thought to this amazing holiday and all that it stands for.



Heather: Having kids reenact the MLK speech given after the Selma march was definitely one of my proudest moments, too, but I'm also very proud of our work with the Special Olympics. My second year here at Greely, a young sophomore with very strong leadership skills who wasn't necessarily recognized by teachers as being a strong student, took on the task of organizing our participation in End-the-R Word Day. She worked with the folks from SO and got us t-shirts, bracelets, a banner, and stickers. She also organized the pledge tables and used social media to build enthusiasm. Late that day, when I was closing up the library, a very harried looking mom rushed in and said, "Are you Mrs. Perkinson?" When I said I was (worrying that she was upset with me about an overdue book notice), she said, "I just want to thank you for the R-Word thing you did today—my older son came home wearing one of those bracelets and explained what it was to my middle schooler, who has Down Syndrome. It meant so much to our family." I like to think that our work with SO and End the R-Word paved the way to our really strong Unified Basketball program, which is so well supported and loved by everyone in the school—we even had a fan bus full of students go to one of their playoff games.

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

Peter: Students assuming that we really don't have civil rights issues at our school. Some students have overlooked concerns or not experienced concerns themselves and may need encouragement to look more closely or through a different lens. Implicit bias and overt biases are with us—as they are in many communities.

Heather: I agree with Peter—people in our community have really complacent attitudes about civil rights issues up until there's a problem; then they react as if it came out of nowhere. We also have a big issue with rigid social groups that are defined by characteristics like athletic participation, socio-economic status, and lately, political values.

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

Peter: Over the last two years we have become more diverse—it shows that our team is a safe venue to be who you are and speak your voice. I remain hopeful (I think?) that our new co-captain model (we have three—as opposed to president, VP, etc.) is proving productive for our larger team and the initiatives we are undertaking. Very recently, I'm enjoying the sense of comfort that students seem to provide one another in challenging times and also the seeming quest for more information and input from us as advisors as complex civil rights issues increasingly become headline news.

Heather: I love that we are led by a group of very bright and creative young women, but that we also have lots of participation from young men. We are indeed a very diverse group (for Cumberland!) and I treasure the variety of perspectives we get from all of our team members.



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

Peter: Heather's passion for this, and the students who seem to rise to the top of our discussions each year in terms of their commitment to this work. I have no doubt that graduates of our CRT will take their passions for justice into their adult lives, as I've witnessed this very cool phenomenon.

Heather: I am especially heartened by the way our staff and faculty have come around over the course of the past five years. They really understand and support our mission and have seen concrete evidence of the value of our team—we've made believers out of them!

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

Peter: Get a co-advisor! When times get tough... they have your back. When you have a meeting or are out for a day... they can cover. When you need to get more organized... they'll rescue you. When you need to speak truth to power... your vocal strength is doubled! When a meeting becomes a bit raucous... they can settle things down. When you have outdated tech skills... they've got you covered! When you are a social worker... they are a librarian! This is peaceful-power!

Heather: Absolutely don't try to do this alone—find someone who balances you out and who you enjoy working with and do whatever it takes to get them on the team with you! You will double the power of your team. I also highly recommend using Brandon's strengths to support you—he does really well in a meeting with administrators, he's great for coming up with ideas to cope with a crisis, and he has lots of resources he can share. Don't sweat the ill-attended meetings, just make sure you offer snacks at the next one. We've found that having an agenda for meetings is crucial and that students often need something concrete to do or work on. Lately we've had meetings with our smaller group of captains to plan the larger group meetings and that has been somewhat successful. If you can find a time to meet during the school day, that is ideal but it is possible to survive without that as long as you have enough people to cope with the fluctuations in attendance caused by other extracurricular commitments.





From the Office:

New Teams

We don't have any new registrations with the Civil Rights Team Project to report, but there have been lots of inquiries.

We also had 28 people signed up for our New Advisor Orientation on February 10th in Augusta. We predict that there will be plenty of good news in this section of the April edition of *The Torch*.



Statewide Conference

Our plan for the statewide conference on May 22nd is coming together! Like last year, we plan on featuring student voices from the Civil Rights Team Project and bringing in some exciting outside voices. Here's what to expect...

Student civil rights team voices will be featured throughout the day:

- Middle level and high school winners of our visual arts contest and writing contest will have the opportunity to share their work at the conference. Both contests ask participants to consider why it matters what words and terms we use to describe people's identities, an extension of our "What's in a Name?" theme from the student trainings last fall.
- Multiple civil rights teams will offer five minute mini-presentations highlighting something they did during the school year.
- One middle level and one high school civil rights team will facilitate an entire workshop on a civil rights topic of their choice.

We are currently accepting submissions and proposals and will have more information on the individuals and civil rights teams chosen to be featured at the conference later this spring.

For outside guests at the conference, we'll have Jerome Bennett, Maine Inside Out, and Random Ideas. And just who are they?

- Jerome Bennett is the Minority Disproportionate Contact Coordinator at the Maine Department of Corrections. He will deliver our concluding keynote.
- [Random Ideas](#) is an all-girl punk band of 18 year old triplets. They've already been featured in *Down East Magazine* and played on *207*, and recently released their first album, *We Met in the Womb*. Before they take over the world, Kinsey,

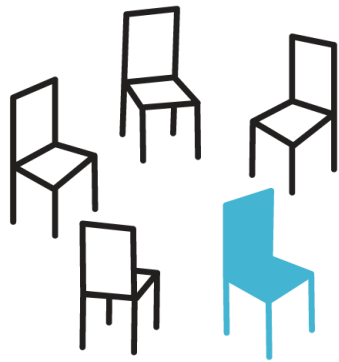


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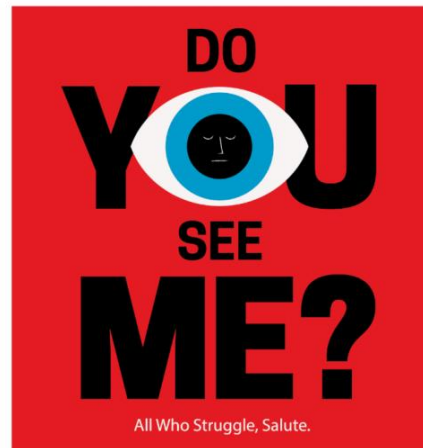
Lexi, and Meghan Johnson will share their high energy punk rock and socially conscious lyrics at the conference.



- [Maine Inside Out](#) (MIO) initiates dialogue, develops leadership, and builds community across boundaries with collaborative original theater, inside and outside correctional facilities. MIO is committed to dismantling all forms of oppression and building a movement for transformative justice in our communities. At the statewide conference, they will share an original performance, *Do You See Me? All Who Struggle, Salute*, created by MIO participants around the state involved in MIO's community programs. Following the performance, there will be a community dialogue.



MAINE **inside out**



We look forward to featuring student voices from the CRTP and welcoming Jerome Bennett, Random Ideas, and Maine Inside Out to our statewide conference!