Here’s what you can read about in the April edition of *The Torch*:

**From the Teams:**

Despite the many snow days, check out a sampling of the diverse projects and initiatives being shared by our participating elementary, middle level and high school teams across the state.

**From the Advisors:**

This month we profile Amanda Atkinson-Lewis, a civil rights team co-advisor at Riverton Elementary School.

**From the Office:**

We’ve got information about the 2018 CRTP Statewide Conference we’re planning for Friday, May 18 in Augusta! Get excited!!

**From the Director:**

The Director has decided that rather than write another single-perspective, one-dimensional column, he’d prefer a more informal conversation. Welcome Stacie Bourassa and our first-ever “Let’s think and talk about...” feature!

*We help schools think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.*
At **Bangor High School**, the civil rights team used Valentine’s Day as an opportunity to spread some civil rights messaging in their school community. The team created inclusive Valentine’s Day cards, stating that regardless of their race or skin color, national origin or ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender or gender identity, or sexual orientation, all Bangor High School students are loved. Every student and adult received this colorful message with a Hershey’s Kiss. That’s 1450 deliveries!

**Hey, Bangor High School civil rights team... you must be exhausted! Creating 1450 Valentines and then handling the logistics of getting them out to everyone in your school is hard work. It’s worth it, though, because everyone got the message that they are included at Bangor High School. (And thanks to their advisor, Stephanie Hendrix, for sharing.)**

At **Bath Middle School**, the civil rights team has taken an active role in helping students understand their school harassment policy. They started by rewording it into student-friendly language, and with administrative approval are now sharing their version with the school. It appears on classroom signs they’ve created and distributed, and will be included in the student handbook next year. They are also creating advisory activities to help understand the differences between bullying and harassment.

**Hey, Bath Middle School civil rights team... the school harassment policy is a great resource for engaging your school community. The policy can be so much more than just an enforcement tool... it can be a teaching tool. By helping all students to understand the policy, including what it means and why it exists, you are promoting a school culture where everyone belongs. (And thanks to their advisor, Ashley Valentine, for sharing.)**

At **Biddeford High School, Buckfield Jr./Sr. High School, and Narraguagus Jr./Sr. High School in Harrington** the civil rights teams each participated in the Civil Rights Team Project traveling workshop, “The Silence of Our Friends.” In these workshops, students thought about how school communities can effectively respond to public incidents of hate. In small groups they rotated through six stations, considering and discussing real-life scenarios from other school communities. In the end, they reconvened as one group and shared what they had learned, compiling a list of recommendations and best practice for effective response.

**Hey, participating civil rights teams... thanks for giving your time and attention to such an important issue. You really engaged with the content, and I hope that the experience was useful for you in thinking about your roles, as individuals and civil rights teams, in responding to public incidents of hate. We will not be silent! (And thanks to all of their advisors for arranging these workshops.)**

---

*We help schools think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.*
In Falmouth, when the Footlights Theater received some nasty anti-Semitic phone calls about their performance of a Holocaust survival-themed play, the civil rights teams from Falmouth Middle and High Schools responded with some positivity. Both teams sent letters offering their support and thanking the theater for addressing such an important topic. The theater’s director, Michael Tobin, appreciated the letters so much he shared them with the cast and read them to the audience before each performance.

Hey, Falmouth civil rights teams... our fifth expectation of civil rights teams is that they respond to public incidents of bias, and that’s exactly what you did. What wonderful letters you wrote! You’ve made the world a little bit better, and offered some encouragement to others who are engaged in this work. (And thanks to their advisors, Pat Wright and Kathy Zema at the middle school, and Erin O’Halloran and Ashley Pullen at the high school, for sharing.)

At Leroy H. Smith School in Winterport, the civil rights team hosted its third annual Welcome Week. The week’s activities included:

- The civil rights team hanging a laminated banner in the school’s entryway, welcoming people of all races and skin colors, national origins and ancestries, religions, disabilities, genders, and family structures.
- The civil rights team reading civil rights- and welcoming-themed picture books (including some provided by our friends at the Maine Humanities Council) aloud in classrooms.
- A door decorating contest where each grade was assigned one of the six civil rights categories to incorporate into the theme of welcoming everyone. (See a few pictured on page 4!)
- Students adding individual leaves to the civil rights team’s tree-themed bulletin board with the message that “Our roots may be different, but we all grow together.”
- Mirrors hung around the school with welcoming messages like “You are welcome here” posted directly below.

We help schools think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.
The week was a great success, and the team is already thinking about ways to make the fourth annual event even better. (Next year: guest speakers!)

At Narragansett Elementary School in Gorham, the civil rights team wrote and filmed a video about gender stereotypes. The introduction clearly defines stereotypes and explains that they are “harmful because they make a person feel like they are not valued for who they are.” The film then repeats a pattern: students holding a paper sign with a gender stereotype written on it, real life images to counter the stereotype, and then students enthusiastically tearing up the signs. Their voiceover narration clearly explains each stereotype and how it’s inaccurate. The civil rights team shared the video, along with the book Henry Holton Takes the Ice by Sandra Bradley, and led discussions about gender stereotypes in classroom presentations.

You can check out the 5:20 video right here.

From the Teams:

Hey, Narragansett civil rights team... I really like direct you are in questioning these stereotypes. You clearly had a lot of fun destroying them! It’s great that you’re now using the video to start important conversations, too. Keep challenging the stereotypes and your school community! (And thanks to their advisors, Jennifer Whitehead and Carlie Marsters, for sharing.)

Hey, Leroy Smith civil rights team... Welcome Week just keeps getting better and better. You do such a good job creating opportunities for students to really engage with this theme. By having every student participate, you are reinforcing the message that all students should feel welcome in your school, and that all students have something to contribute. I look forward to this every year now, and I bet it’s the same for the students in your school! (And thanks to their advisors, Kim Raymond and Hannah Boss, for sharing.)

Welcome Week classroom door displays
This month we’re featuring Amanda Atkinson-Lewis, a School Social Worker at Riverton Elementary in Portland. Amanda has been co-advising the civil rights team there for five years!

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

I love hearing the students’ viewpoints, opinions, and ideas about how we can help our school think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. Just when I think I don’t have any more energy to do this work (due to the heaviness of it AND the amount of work I have to do in my role at the school), we have an incredible conversation as a civil rights team that renews my energy and excitement to do this work with the kids. I have learned not to underestimate the ability of these 5th graders to grasp and understand heavy topics, and to have such clear and strong opinions that seem totally right on to me!

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

Do I have to pick just one?? A few years ago, there was a Halal Market in Portland that was vandalized. Our team wrote letters of support to the owners of the store and I got to deliver those letters directly to the store. That was a pretty awesome experience. Also a few years ago, our team was featured in an article about the Civil Rights Team Project. The kids were so proud of their work and were psyched to be in the newspaper. This year, we did a poster campaign about not using the ‘R-word’ and the word ‘gay’ as insults. I loved hearing how strongly the kids felt that this issue needed to be addressed, and the school’s reception of the posters was great.

“T’ve learned not to underestimate the ability of these 5th graders to grasp and understand heavy topics...”

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

At the beginning of the year, we went through each of the categories and voted on what we thought was the issue that needed the most attention in our school. We landed on sexual orientation and disabilities, specifically tied to how common it is to hear some students use ‘gay’ and ‘retarded’ as insults.

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

These kids!! You should hear what they have to say about these issues and how strongly they feel about them. Totally inspiring and gives me lots of hope for the future.

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

Don’t bite off more than you can chew (which I am TOTALLY guilty of!). Keep things as simple as you can, perhaps by focusing on one specific issue or project at a time. I feel so strongly about all of these issues, that I can sometimes overcomplicate things for myself as an advisor by trying to tackle ALL of the issues by doing too many projects.

We help schools think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation.
2018 Statewide Conference

The annual Civil Rights Team Project Statewide Conference is taking shape for May 18 at the Augusta Civic Center. This year, we’re rebranding the event as a celebration to better represent our focus on student voices from inside the Civil Rights Team Project, including:

- The winners of our visual arts and writing contests, who created and submitted original work to highlight the idea that Every student should feel safe, welcome, and respected in our school communities. They will be sharing their work during the day’s introduction.

- Facilitated workshops with civil rights teams from Holbrook Middle School and Narraguagus Jr./Sr. High School. All middle level students will attend Holbrook’s workshop, STOP. THINK. YOUR WORDS MATTER. A Response to Bias-Based Language. All high school students will attend Narraguagus’ workshop, Positively Responding to Pushback on Projects.

- CRT Spotlight workshops, where four civil rights teams give five-minute mini-presentations on something they did during the 2017-2018 school year.

While the conference is a celebration of the great work we do inside the Civil Rights Team Project, we also think it’s an important opportunity to share some of the interesting ways people are engaging in similar work outside of our school communities. To that end, then, the conference will also include some special outside guests and features:

- Shay Stewart-Bouley is the Executive Director of Community Change, Inc., a racial justice organization in Boston, and the founder and lead blogger of Black Girl in Maine. All students will attend her workshop, Authentic Dialogues: Talking about Racism and How to Take a Stand Against Hate, to think and talk about how we can combat racism and start important conversations on addressing racism and difference. We have enjoyed her writing and work for years, and are excited to have her with us for this event!

- The Race Card Project encourages people to condense their observations and experiences with race into one sentence with just six words. We’ll have blank index cards and a display ready for workshop attendees to engage in this thought-provoking activity, adding their voices to the 50,000+ others who have already participated in this national campaign.

- The Maine Gay Men’s Chorus will offer a celebratory conclusion to the day’s events. The chorus, founded in 1992, will perform civil rights-themed songs and share individual testimonials of what the chorus has meant to them personally.

We’re expecting nearly 1,000 attendees at this year’s event! We anticipate a day of rich connections, reflection, and inspiration for the days to come, to both celebrate this school year and push the Project towards a successful 2018-2019. We look forward to sharing this experience with so many students, and including it in the June edition of The Torch!
Brandon Baldwin: Good morning, Stacie! I’m excited for our first “Let’s think and talk about...” experiment.

Stacie Bourassa: Me, too!

BB: Great. Let’s think and talk about... Black Panther! It has officially blown up. It was the #1 movie in America for five weeks, and the worldwide gross is now at $1.3 billion, making it the third highest-grossing film of all time. We have to talk about this, right?

SB: I honestly don’t want to think or talk about anything more right now! I can’t think of a film I’ve seen that I would recommend to THE WORLD over this one.

BB: And we’ve been talking about it a lot here in the office. Let’s jump right in with what we liked about it. I’ll start with the obvious: we got to see a black superhero carry his own movie. He wasn’t a sidekick. He wasn’t supporting someone else. He was the star of the show.

SB: I was also struck with the thought that this character isn’t new to 2018... Black Panther has been in existence for many years in the pop culture background. It had me wondering about why 2018 was the year to bring his story into the mainstream.

BB: Right. The character was created in the 1960s during the burgeoning black pride movement. And Wesley Snipes was maybe going to have his own Black Panther movie some years ago, but it didn’t come together. I also think it’s interesting to note that there have been lots of other Marvel movies, featuring white heroes, before this one... what took so long?

SB: Never before has a “superhero movie” let me forget what it was. I’m not sure what took so long, but I trust the success of this movie means we won’t be waiting much longer for more films like it.

BB: I do think that our current cultural conversations about race gave this film a certain weight that transcended the traditional trappings of a superhero movie. Of course it’s interesting that while much of America is uncomfortable with these conversations, they are enthusiastically embracing this film. But let’s zoom in on the idea that you forgot you were watching a superhero movie. I had the same experience. What were you thinking about?

SB: Something about it just felt so... real. The story, the details within, and the characters that brought it to life communicated a weight and purpose of the film that is, in my experience, unique in this genre. And, the issues the people of Wakanda struggle with throughout are in no way fantastical. Black Panther just felt like it was so much more—almost as though the superhero vein was merely the director’s path to telling a deeper story.
BB: It’s like Ryan Coogler said, “OK, this might be the one time we get to see a black superhero story, so I’m not going to waste that opportunity on the traditional narrative of how he came to power and defeated some sinister plan for world domination.” Instead, he chose to make the central conflict one of ideas between the hero, T-Challa/Black Panther, and villain, Erik Killmonger. They disagree on Wakanda’s role in the world. Erik pushes, hard, for Wakanda to abandon its isolationist stance and connect with the struggle of black people around the world.

SB: I don’t know about you, but I found myself identifying with both Erik and T-Challa’s characters quite a lot. Even as I found myself disagreeing with Killmonger’s approach, I kept coming back to his intent. Oftentimes, it’s easy as a viewer to pick out the “bad guy,” but I loved that this movie really reinforced what I believe to be true: people are not simply good or bad.

BB: Erik is simultaneously sympathetic and repugnant. How often do we get that in a movie villain? His character really represents the complexity of the entire film. I couldn’t help but think of the real world parallels with the Civil Rights Movement, too. While BP and Killmonger aren’t necessarily meant to represent Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, I think that there’s a connection there, with individuals embodying differing viewpoints on how to best achieve black liberation.

SB: And I didn’t expect it (again, superhero movie!) but I had a moment when Killmonger delivers one of his final lines during his death scene, “Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. Because they knew death was better than bondage.” To feel what I did during his delivery... it’s hard to put into meaningful words. My ancestors immigrated to America on ships, but by choice, for a better life. It is so important that we continue to infuse these conversations about race and racism into every aspect of our present day, and especially in mainstream media, so as to never forget the past and its want to be repeated.

BB: I had to pinch myself with that line! I couldn’t help but look around me and marvel at the fact that a packed house of white folks in Central Maine just digested that line. I can’t imagine what this film means to black audiences. Of course it’s about representation and the powerful experience of seeing yourself on screen, but it’s also about big ideas connected to identity. To what extent is there a worldwide black community? How would the world perhaps be different if African-Americans weren’t robbed of their ancestry? From a popularity and ideas perspective, I wonder if Black Panther is the Roots of the 2010’s... but that’s another conversation.

SB: You mentioned representation above, and I just have to highlight that this film smashes the Bechdel Test! Nakia, Okoye, Shuri, Ramonda— I was overwhelmed by the number of inspiring women in this film. And none of them ever takes a back seat to the leading men of the film. Nakia is fiercely independent, Okoye leads an army... of women, Shuri is a technological genius, and Ramonda has the respect of the land. Each plays a vital role, and each is given her due credit.

BB: I think that Black Panther could serve as a model for future films in how it treats gender. Yes, the main characters are men, but the women are fully realized characters with their own lives. You know... sort of like real life.

SB: And I guess that is what I truly loved most about this fictional, superhero, fantasy tale... how much truer to life it seemed to be than any big blockbuster that came before it. Keep them coming, Ryan Coogler, and others. (And hey, Marvel... maybe, just maybe, you could do a film with a female lead?)

BB: I think, and really hope, that Hollywood is finally learning that characters and stories that reflect the diversity of the viewing audience can make money. Wakanda forever, right?

SB: Wakanda, forever!