



# THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) MARCH '09



## “YES!”



This is the answer to the question so many of you have been asking lately: the spring statewide conference is ON. We are working hard to put together a wonderful slate of workshops and events, and you should have already received your registration materials from Debi. Respond promptly, and we can't wait to see you here in Augusta!

In other news, check out some of the great events that took place here in Maine in the month of March:

- A documentary and radio project exhibit on Malaga Island in Portland
- A community cultural celebration, “The Beat of the Cultures”, in Naples
- An educational workshop on “Preparing Teachers to Work in Multicultural Classrooms” in Biddeford
- Film screening of Persepolis (as featured in a previous Torch!) in Augusta
- Maine Jewish Film Festival screenings in Portland, Biddeford, Lewiston, and Waterville
- Wabanaki Arts Festival in Brunswick

Why do we highlight these events now? Only to let you know what you're missing by not checking out the “Upcoming Events” section on [www.civilrightsteams.org](http://www.civilrightsteams.org)! This is only a partial list of the many civil rights-related offerings throughout our state. Log in and stay updated; you never know what you could be missing...

-Brandon Baldwin, Newsletter Editor

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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.*

**Janet T. Mills — Attorney General**

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**Brandon Baldwin — Schools/Curriculum Coordinator & Newsletter Editor**



## Special Olympics: Abolish the R-Word

Good. It's prime time that this campaign got started. We've seen the Abolish the N-Word and ThinkB4USpeak campaigns targeting racist and homophobic speech; now it's time to look at people's use of "retard" and "retarded". These words are especially popular in schools, sometimes used with cruel intent, sometimes not. Either way, the word is hurtful and offensive.

The Special Olympics are launching a campaign against the r-word, complete with an online pledge, user generated videos, and a newsletter. There also seems to be a movement for a day to end use of the r-word on March 31st, although not connected to this campaign.

Our mentally disabled students can be the subjects of ruthless harassment in school. The language other students use, even in casual conversation, is an important part of creating this hostile environment. As the Special Olympics campaign says:

Our choice of language frames how we think about others.  
It is time to respect and value people with intellectual disabilities.  
It is time to accept and welcome us as your friends and neighbors.  
Change the conversation... stop using the r-word!



## Eryka Wilson: My Story

*Editor's Note: Our office has had the privilege recently of working with Cony High School civil rights team member Eryka Wilson. Her willingness to honestly express the many ways she is constantly made to feel different in school should come as an eye-opening experience for all of us. We'd like to thank Eryka for sharing her story here:*



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My name is Eryka Wilson and I am a young African-American. I am sixteen years old and have lived in Maine all of my life. When I was younger the thought of me being a different race and how that would affect my life never really crossed my mind. When I entered high school the sweet innocence of junior high quickly faded away. Suddenly it was like everything about me was related to my skin color; from the kind of hair I have to the color of the jewelry I wore.

All of this hit me when I was just starting high school. By the end of my freshmen year I was more than ready to transfer to another school. In my sophomore year I started in a new school for what I thought would be a fresh start. Everything was all right at first and since I was a well liked kid and had many friends, I thought that the racial issue had come to an end. About half way into the year, more and more comments were being made about me being "black." Not knowing what to say or how to act, I would make a wise comment and join in with the rest of the group in nervous laughter. I thought this was something I would just have to deal with for the rest of my life. Time went on and I continued to take what I know now as harassment. Around this time I decided that it would benefit me to join the school's Civil Rights Team. I wanted the education and the topics that were discussed more than piqued my interests. I was an active member and enjoyed every minute of it.

At the end of March, a group of people and I were hanging out waiting for a show to start at school. I was joking around with one of my friends, and said to him "Let's play kick your butt!" Little did I know I was about to get a response that would change the way I felt about my life and myself. The answer I got back, from another student that was sitting and watching my friend and I, was "Let's play kill the black person." With no reaction besides my eyes filling with tears I ran into the locker rooms not knowing whether to be scared or extremely angry. Days passed before I even considered doing anything about it. Finally I started thinking more and more about what had happened, what would happen if I did report it and what kind of effect all of this would have on my social life. A week or so passed and I decided that the first thing I could do was to report it to my Civil Rights advisor. When she got word of this she did not want to push me, but rather strongly advised me to report it to the Vice-Principal. I took her advice and I knew that taking that action would open a new pathway for me.

I am a junior now at the same school and have been more active within the Civil Rights Team than I have ever been before. I can also testify that I am more passionate about **all** Civil Rights topics. The increase in activism and passion has not come so easily however. I have spent many nights crying over the ignorance of others and worrying what types of things I would have to endure the next day at school. It finally got to the point where I would just break down and cry to my mother about how I could no longer take going to school another day. I would spend my time at school agonizing about what I was going to have said to me, or what I might overhear. I have never felt so unsafe, and that was a sign for me. The issues I was dealing with were not only destroying my emotional health but my physical health as well. I started to become very ill, where I could not go to



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school because I was simply so emotionally exhausted that I was struggling to stay awake in my classes. My tiredness and emotional state caused my grades to drop.

After yet another breakdown one night over someone else's ill-mannered thoughts and comments, I had had enough. I was determined to get something done about the issue. I wanted instant change. I was not going to take one more second of harassment. The next day I had calmed down and came to my senses and realized that change is never instant. I knew that if I wanted change and I wanted it to come about in the right way, it would take time. I started with speaking to the school's administration and explaining to them what actually goes in their hallways. The result of the various meetings I attended was a student panel. This panel consisted of a variety of students with personal civil rights issues, and I was one of them. Together we spoke to the school's entire faculty about our lives in school on a daily basis and how certain things that the faculty allows to happen, affects our lives. As a group we all asked for the teachers to step up and speak up towards our efforts of change. This was a start to a long road of change, and the purpose of my story. I am here to tell you that change is in effect and no matter how long it takes I am sticking with it.

To be a voice is greater than silence. That is what I am asking of those who read this, to stand up and say something for what you know is right. Showing someone that what they just said is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in any manner, is one of the best things you could do for us as students who struggle. High school is a hard enough time for an "average" teenager, we're finding ourselves, expressing ourselves, and more importantly we're accepting ourselves. No student should be denied the privilege of expressing themselves and they should not have to deal with those who are not allowing them to accept themselves. In close, I do not have much else to say but, to the teachers, your voice is more powerful than you know. To the students, your voice is the one that matters. All I have to ask of you is this; just speak.

## How Did I Not Know About This?



**MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL**  
HOME OF THE HARRIET P. HENRY CENTER FOR THE BOOK

I think that as educators we all have moments where we ask ourselves this question. We stumble across something so perfect, so brilliant, that we're left wondering how we could have ever lived without it.

How's that for an intro? Of course I recently had this moment while doing some research at the Maine Arts Commission on potential speakers/performers. My research



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brought me to the Maine Humanities Council, and in that classic internet research phenomenon where one thing leads to another, I discovered:

- A link for the Maine Philanthropy Center, a potential resource for grant money
- An updated list of picture books for young children featuring Francophone cultures
- The *Born to Read* Diversity Initiative

These are valuable for many reasons. First off, with the current state of school budgets, many of you have been asking about money. It would be nice to direct your attention to some potential sources, and it looks like this might help. We have a few potential funding sources listed on the Moodle site in the resource guide, but it's something we want to expand.

Secondly, I have become very interested in the history of the Ku Klux Klan here in Maine. This is an important part of Maine's unfortunate history: one that deserves our attention. Of course most of the Klan's venom was directed towards French Canadians and Catholics, thus the relevance of the reading list. Expect something in the future on the history of the Klan in Maine, as well as something on Maine's Franco-American history and heritage.

Finally, the Born to Read Diversity Initiative was the item that made me ask the question up above in the title. As a former literature teacher who is now doing civil rights work, how could I not know about this? Not important... now that I know about it I'm promoting it. Just look at the description of the program's three major projects:

*Many Eyes, Many Voices: Talking About Difference through Children's Literature:* A statewide, literature-based training program to encourage child care providers, teachers, volunteer readers and parents to engage young children in meaningful conversation about the differences.

*Caregivers in a Changing World:* A reading and discussion series for child care providers and volunteer readers. Regional seminars led by skilled facilitators bring child care providers and volunteer readers together to discuss the themes of diversity and inclusion in children's literature.

*New Mainers Book Project:* High-quality children's picture books created from the stories and experiences of Maine's refugee communities to preserve and present their cultural heritage, and to promote their English language literacy.

These are worth checking out! In fact, it might be worth spending some quality time at the Maine Humanities Council website. I certainly will be, and if I find anything worth sharing, you can expect to hear about it.



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Check out the Maine Humanities Council's website at:

<http://mainehumanities.org/index.php>

For a list of the picture books featuring Francophone cultures, go to:

<http://mainehumanities.org/programs/btr-marchoglists.html>

To learn more about the Maine Humanities Council's literacy/diversity programs, go to:

<http://mainehumanities.org/programs/btr-diversity.html>

## What Is THIS?



OK... this is an advertisement for Beck's modeling clay, a European version of Play-Doh. Across the bottom of the ad it reads "Let the kids create a better world."

It's easy to see what they're going for, and it's a nice idea, but the execution is awful. Wouldn't it be nice if we could all live in a world where black and white got along? Absolutely... but why use the Ku Klux Klan in anything that envisions a better world, let alone promotes a message of love and acceptance?





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Think about this advertisement more and it becomes even more disturbing. It seems to suggest that one bouquet of flowers could serve as some sort of peace offering between America's most notorious hate group and their principle targets. No amount of flowers or apologies can erase the horrors of the KKK and the damage they have done to black America. The better world isn't one where the KKK and black Americans can just get along; the better world is the one where the KKK doesn't exist.

And the idea that Ku Klux Klan imagery is somehow supposed to be cute? Beyond disgusting; there is nothing cute about murder, lynchings, and racial hatred. It completely desensitizes us to history and meaning intertwined with the imagery.

But does everyone get it? Does everyone see and understand why this image is so inappropriate, regardless of the intent? It's hard not to think of the recent controversy surrounding PETA members donning KKK costumes in a misguided protest against pure breed standards at the Westminster Dog Show last month. It makes you wonder.

In fact, this would make a great activity and conversation starter for you and your team. Show the picture, ask them what the ad is going for, and whether or not it works. Simple questions, but a great opportunity to dissect images and what they really mean, as well as offer a concrete example of how intent and effect can be two very different things.

If you'd like a clean copy of this activity to share with your middle or high school team, go online and check out the *March Torch* blog. You can get it there.

## Great Web Resources on Race and Racism!

While doing some research on race and racism I recently came across a couple of great interactive websites that take a very scientific approach to analyzing race. Perhaps those last words make you uncomfortable: the scientific approach to analyzing race has traditionally been justification for racism. The eugenics movement of the early 20th Century is a prime example. We are all familiar with the photos of pseudo-scientists measuring skull sizes, and how the eugenics movement helped usher in the horrors of racial ideology in Nazi Germany.

But there are recent examples, too. There was great controversy over *The Bell Curve*, where Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray suggested, if not argued, that differences between black and white IQ scores are genetically based. And less than two years ago James D. Watson, Nobel Prize winner for his groundbreaking work on DNA, went on record as saying that data shows Africans to be of inferior intellect.

Science has not always progressed the cause of anti-prejudice, but that seems to be changing. Anthropologists are making important discoveries about race, mostly focused



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on the idea that racial differences are largely imagined. This runs contrary to what most people know, or think they know, about race. But consider the following:

People are remarkably alike. There is more genetic variation between two fruit flies than two people.

There is no consensus on how many different races there supposedly are.

Race does not account for genetic differences between people.

This makes you wonder: why do we place so much emphasis and importance on race when the science indicates that it doesn't even really exist? This is a great question, and one with no easy answers. Even if race is something that is largely imagined, racism is very real. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley explains, "[Racism] is not about how you look; it is about how people assign meaning to how you look."

Several great web resources highlight the role of science in analyzing and understanding race. They question why people ascribe so much meaning to something that means so little, but they also go to great lengths to emphasize the fact that racism is a powerful force. These resources are too smart to simply preach a color-blind mentality; they understand that the world doesn't work that way, and that a color-blind mentality is to be blind to the realities of race and racism that our society has constructed.

The first web resource is a segment from National Public Radio. It is an interview with Nina Jablonski, an anthropologist from Penn State University who is challenging many people's assumptions about race. Listen to this seven minute segment (or read the text) at:

[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100057939](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100057939)

The next two web resources come with our highest recommendation. They are very interactive and great places for students to learn information about race. They are full of information and activities. (We were engaged in these sites for hours upon discovering them!)



The first is a website created to accompany the PBS series Race: The Power of an Illusion. The title says it all: while race may be an illusion, it still holds great power. There are information and activities that help answer six core questions people have about race, including where the concept came from and why it's so hard to talk about it.





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Spend some time on this website and you'll wish you'd seen this series when it aired several years ago:

[www.pbs.org/race/ooo\\_General/ooo\\_oo-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/ooo_General/ooo_oo-Home.htm)



The final website is the one I'm most excited about. It's the work of the American Anthropological Association, and part of a larger project called Race: Are We So Different? The site examines race through three different lenses: history, human variation, and lived experience.

The most exciting part of this is the traveling exhibit that is currently touring the country. It may be very far in the future, but it's worth noting that the exhibit will be in Boston at the Museum of Science in early 2011. Check out the website and I guarantee you'll be thinking of how you can get your team down to Boston in two years!

<http://understandingrace.org/home.html>

## Mt. Ararat Responds to Offensive "Joke" Pills

When the Mt. Ararat High School civil rights team became aware of some joke pills they deemed offensive and homophobic, they decided to do something about it. Faculty advisor Gillian Watt learned about the "Gay Away" pills and brought them to last week's meeting. The team got together with the school's gay-straight alliance and drafted a letter that they plan on sending to Hallmark soon.

To see the pills, made by Laughrat, Inc., click here. But be warned: they are *offensive*.)

[www.laughrat.com/popup.php?img=102\\_PROD\\_Gay%20Away.jpg&pid=102](http://www.laughrat.com/popup.php?img=102_PROD_Gay%20Away.jpg&pid=102)

Here is a copy of the letter written by Mt. Ararat's civil rights team and gay-straight alliance:

To Whom It May Concern:

A few weeks ago one of your products, called "Gay Away," was passed around a classroom and confiscated by a teacher at Mt. Ararat High School in Topsham. The product is a joke candy medicine designed to "cure gayness" and is produced



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by Laughrat Inc. The teacher was very concerned with the presence of this bigoted candy and brought it to the attention of us, the Mt. Ararat High School Civil Rights Team and the Mt. Ararat High School Gay-Straight Alliance.

The “Beliefs and Values” section of the Hallmark Company website states that Hallmark products “must enrich people’s lives” and states that Hallmark is committed to “high standards of ethics and integrity.” Endorsing Gay Away and other similarly insulting Laughrat products is a direct violation of these principles. Homosexuality is *not* a disease and this product is highly offensive and morally deficient.

When visiting your store to confirm the presence of this candy, our advisor was surprised and appalled to discover not only that Gay Away was sold in your store, but also that the product was located in the candy section typically marketed towards highly impressionable children. This is unacceptable. By selling Gay Away in your store, you are telling these children that bigotry and “comedy” at the expense of minorities is okay. This doesn’t seem to align with the Hallmark principles.

We (and many of us are longtime consumers of Hallmark products) are offended and hesitant to continue our support of your store. We suggest that you review your Hallmark principles as well as your personal ethics and ask yourselves if Gay Away really coincides with your store’s mission and if it really belongs in your store. If you choose to continue selling this product, you will lose our business and our respect.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

The Mt. Ararat High School Civil Rights Team and Gay-Straight Alliance

The action taken by Mt. Ararat’s civil rights team is a wonderful example of how a team can get involved with issues outside of the school and in the community. In the future, if you or your team become aware of any prejudiced and offensive products, you can take action and try to enact change. We always want our students to get involved and speak up when they see something wrong; there’s no reason why that has to be limited to what happens in school.

For more information about Mt. Ararat’s stand against these pills, feel free to contact me and I’ll connect you with the Mt. Ararat High School civil rights team.