



Welcome to the best year ever with the Civil Rights Team Project. The first page of the first newsletter of the 2012-2013 school year seems like the perfect place to highlight our new and improved mission statement. That's right: our mission statement had some work done over the summer.

Here is the old version:

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.

And the new version:

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 schools.

The changes are subtle. Here's a footnoted version with detailed explanations of the changes:

The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of elementary¹, middle level,² and high school students by³ reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment⁴ in schools.⁵



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1. I like the idea of putting elementary school students first in this list because that's where the Civil Rights Team Project should start.
2. I'm bringing back the Oxford comma! (Grammar dorks, rejoice! Everyone else, roll your eyes and/or furrow your brow!)
3. This is the most important change in the mission statement. The word *and* has been switched to *by*. I feel that the original mission statement did not accurately reflect the values or intent of the Civil Rights Team Project. It suggested that we were out to increase school safety *and* reduce bias behaviors; that these were two separate goals. The purpose of the CRTP, though, has always been to increase school safety *by* reducing bias behaviors. These are not separate goals; they are interconnected, and one is the product of the other.

The original mission statement made it too easy for the CRTP to become a generic school safety program, and that's not what it is. We are housed in the Attorney General's Office for a reason: to address the bias that leads to violations of the Maine Civil Rights Act. We create safe schools *by* addressing issues of bias.

4. This is the second most important change. The original version read "bias-motivated harassment and violence." The new version reads "bias-motivated behaviors and harassment." I dropped the specific mention of violence and included the more inclusive term *bias behaviors*.

Here's why: violence and harassment *sounds* extreme. It makes it far too easy to think, "Oh, we don't have those problems here." Bias behaviors, though, include common, everyday behaviors that exist in all our schools. These common, everyday behaviors directly affect school climate and can lead to more serious incidents of bias. If the CRTP focuses more on these common, everyday bias behaviors, we will simultaneously create safer schools and prevent serious civil rights violations. By focusing on the smaller stuff instead of the worst and most extreme, we are creating a more inclusive and effective program.

5. I would just like to point out that the new version is five words shorter.

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I'm confident that our new mission statement will help direct the Civil Rights Team Project to bigger and better things. Expect to see and hear more about the process and philosophy that led to these changes at the fall trainings...



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Here's what you can expect in this month's newsletter:

Team Spotlight: I'm delighted that our very first Torch for the new school year already features civil rights team activity!

Activity Ideas: Let's call this the scarecrow project. Sounds interesting, doesn't it?

Talking to Myself: A comparison of two horrific summer shootings leads to some civil rights conclusions.

Pop Culture Winners and Losers: Finally, a place where you can read about spoken word poetry, pens, and Slim Jim.

Relevant Resources: Yet again, Teaching Tolerance unveils valuable resources that I recommend without reservations.

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This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.

Bill Schneider—Attorney General

Debi Lettre—Civil Rights Project Administrator

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Team Spotlight:

Not Messing Around

The civil rights team at Wiscasset Middle School may have set a record for “Earliest Accomplishment in the School Year.” This is not an official award, mind you, and there is the real possibility that some team has accomplished something earlier, of course. It’s just my way of highlighting that the team did something meaningful *in August*.

On the first day of school, every student at WMS received a civil rights team bookmark. The bookmark featured a statement of principle from the civil rights team and the school’s harassment policy.

Brilliant. The civil rights team announced their presence on the first day of school, and it was more than just a “here we are” announcement; it also included the important “here’s what we do” component. The team is off to a great start and addressing two of our five expectations for civil rights teams:

2. Increase the team’s profile. (Giving a bookmark to every student in the school.)
4. Address school issues. (Highlighting the school’s harassment policy.)

The team met with advisor Kyle Beeton before the school year even started. This level of dedication is what makes you and your civil rights teams such a pleasure to work with.

Great start, Wiscasset Middle School!



HEY! I want to hear about what you and your civil rights teams and CRTP affiliated groups are doing! If and when you accomplish something, small or large, let me know about it. It might just end up in the newsletter.



Activity Idea: CRT Scarecrow

This could be the most fun your civil rights team has this year, and it's a great way to announce your presence to the school.

Fall is approaching/here. Embrace it! Have your civil rights team create a scarecrow. The scarecrow can effectively represent your civil rights team and Civil Rights Team Project's mission and philosophy. It could be the anti-bias scarecrow, or the respect scarecrow. (If you're a true civil rights team, it should *not* be the anti-bullying scarecrow.)

An actual scarecrow somewhere in your school would generate plenty of publicity. It could truly represent your team, too. You could pair it with the Civil Rights Team Project mission statement, your school's harassment policy, or selected core values from your school/district.

Clearly, this is a project idea that is perfect for elementary school. If it's done with a sense of humor, though, in a way that doesn't detract from the serious message, it should work with middle level and high school students, too. (And I can easily imagine linking this to homecoming events in some way.)

A civil rights scarecrow would be a great opening project for your team. It would help you accomplish two of the CRTP's expectations for civil rights teams:

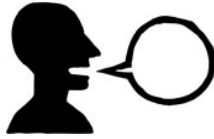
1. Come together as a team.
2. Increase the team's profile.

Depending on the content, the scarecrow could even address school issues, our fourth expectation.

Get creative. Get some attention. Get your team working on something. Create a civil rights team scarecrow, and send me pictures.

(And if my scarecrow picture is too creepy, I'm sorry.)





Talking to Myself: About Oak Creek

This summer was marred by two horrific acts of American violence:

- On July 20, during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*, James Eagan Holmes opened fire in a crowded theater, killing 12 people and injuring 58 more.
- On August 5, white supremacist Wade Michael Page began shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak, Creek Wisconsin, killing six and wounding four others before fatally shooting himself.

I can't help but compare the media treatment of these two tragedies and the American public's response. It seems like the Aurora shooting is striking more of a chord with the media and the public, and I don't think it's because of the higher body count. I think that much of America has a hard time identifying with the Sikh victims in Oak Creek.

In comparing the response to the two tragedies, it's hard not to be cynical. But here's a poem that tries to find something constructive that can come from comparing the Aurora and Oak Creek shootings.

Aurora and Oak Creek

That could have been me
in Aurora
because I wanted to see *The Dark Knight Rises*

That could not have been me
in Oak Creek
because I'm not Sikh

If you sat in a theater
the week after Aurora
and thought
"Could I be next?"

If you had that fear
irrational or not
then perhaps
just then
for a moment
fleeting and soon forgotten



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You understood something about Oak Creek
and our Sikh brothers and sisters

And you held something
with your popcorn and your soda

You held something
that minority America
knows like an old uncle
or the familiar loop
before the film
telling you to please turn off your cell phones



Pop Culture Watch: Summer of 2012

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



Putting "Colorblind" in the Right Light

This is so good it gives me chills.

It's a spoken word poetry piece from Jason Chu.

A little background: The prestigious La Jolla Playhouse put on a musical adaption of Hans Christian Andersen's "the Nightengale." The story takes place in ancient China, but the producers decided to feature a multicultural cast. The leads are played by white actors, and of the twelve roles, Asian actors have two minor parts.

Chu's piece criticizes La Jolla's "colorblind" casting decisions and frames this issue in the larger context of the invisibility of Asian faces in pop culture.

This is the best piece of anti-bias pop culture I've seen in a long time:

www.grandmasterchu.com/?p=405

(And here's a nice companion piece on Hollywood's history of casting white actors in Asian roles: www.salon.com/2012/05/14/whitewashing_a_history/singleton .)



Bic Decides that Women Need Their Own Pens

Hey, female readers. I bet you're all celebrating Bic's new "for her" line of pens. Finally, a pen designed specifically for the unique needs of the female writer! Features include:



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- Elegant design - just for her!
- Thin barrel to fit a women's hand

By elegant design, of course they mean... PINK! Wrap your tiny woman hands around those pens! Women of the world, write!

(If you're a first-time *Torch* reader, let me introduce you to my sense of humor. It can be brutally sarcastic.)

Bic, what are you thinking? A specific line of pens for women? Really? It's fine to make pens that are smaller. It's fine to make pens that are pink. *It's fine to make pens that are both.* But why label them as being for women? There are women who are getting along just fine with the "regular" line of Bic products. There are men who might like a slimmer, more pink pen. The creation of a line of pens "for her," though, just reinforces the idea that men and women are oh-so-different. Ridiculous.

(If you want to be amused, go to amazon, search for "Bic for her," and read the product reviews. People are lambasting this product in a delightfully snarky way.)



Slim Jim Is Out to Save Men

Slim Jim has decided that there's nothing more masculine than eating beef jerky and meat sticks. In fact, their new advertising campaign highlights the important role Slim Jims play in countering the constant attacks us men are subjected to in this emasculating culture of salads, Shakespeare, and minivans.

Of course this is all meant to be funny, but humor stems from elements of truth. Based on the number of ad campaigns that derive humor from this idea that masculinity is under constant assault, people must believe that it's at least somewhat true. Where it becomes damaging is when these standards are used to police male behaviors; something we see happening in schools a lot.

So I get the joke, and I get that it is a joke... but I also think that ad campaigns like this help create a very narrow definition of masculinity. This man will pass on the Slim Jims, thank you.

You can watch the ads here in the "videos" section: www.slimjim.com



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I'm Paying Attention... But Is It Any Good?

My first thoughts on NBC's new show *The New Normal*: it certainly seems like a rip-off of *Modern Family* (even the title). I have no idea if it's any good or not. But why do we care about it here? Because it features a gay couple who want to be parents.

NBC's Salt Lake City affiliate has a problem with that, and they aren't airing the show.

To which Ellen Barkin, a cast member on the show, said:

Yes, it is [an affiliate's] right to ban something, but I do think it's a form of censorship. I don't understand why a show that I happen to love, like *Law and Order: SVU*, is in family viewing time. Why that show, that I hope nobody is allowing a 10-year-old to watch, is acceptable but a show about a very loving, committed same sex couple wanting to raise a child, why that is explicit and offensive and rape, murder, child slavery in very graphic detail is not...And whether you agree that KSL should ban the show and let your children watch a TV show where they use words like "anal tearing" and "vaginal tearing" and "child slavery," that's OK...but watching two men kiss each other and cry because they've decided to raise a child together... I don't get it.

Neither do I.

The New Normal may or may not be worth watching, but I will definitely be paying attention to this story and how the show is received.

You can see an extended preview here:

www.nbc.com/the-new-normal



Relevant Resources: Teaching Tolerance, Again

Teaching Tolerance consistently creates useful anti-bias resources for educators. New and improved for 2012 are two hugely relevant and useful online guides.

The first is called *Speak Up at School: How to Respond to Everyday Prejudice, Bias, and Stereotypes*. *Speak Up* is like an online/print version of the Civil Rights Team Project in-service training: Challenging Bias and Harassment in Our Schools. It focuses on the common, everyday bias behaviors I highlighted in the introduction for this edition of *The Torch*. This is a great resource for educators whether they are connected with the Civil Rights Team Project or not.

www.tolerance.org/speak-up-at-school

The second guide is called *Responding to Hate and Bias at School*. Whereas the first guide is more preventative and focused on the common and everyday incidences of bias, *Responding* is about what schools can do when something big happens. Our fifth expectation of civil rights teams is that you “Respond when things go wrong.” If and when there’s a public incident of bias in your school and community, it’s important that students have opportunities to respond. The civil rights team offers students voice and opportunity.

There’s a good chance that your team won’t have to respond to anything this year, but they might. It makes sense for you to have a copy of this Teaching Tolerance guide ready. It’s a good resource.

www.tolerance.org/hate-and-bias

