

# LEARNING FOR JUSTICE



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## Dialogue Across Difference

Our shared liberation requires bridging our diversity to enable collective action  
for the greater good of our communities in the South and our nation.

**New Learning for Justice Work  
in the Deep South**

# Community Justice Sites

The education of ordinary people for local autonomy is the cornerstone of LFJ's community education program. Community Justice Sites are Freedom Schools and Citizenship Schools for everyone. In these community sites for learning together, LFJ will center civic and political action education to support the SPLC's work in our states to increase power and capacity for multiracial, inclusive democracy. Programming includes:

**Civic and Political Action Learning for Everyone** to engage in dialogue and learning on what's needed for a shared commitment to justice through information sharing, critical consciousness raising, civics learning and strategic calls to action.

**Youth Learning for Justice** for teens and young adults to learn honest history, understand servant leadership and take steps toward entry into the movement for racial and social justice.

**Growing Together for Children and Families** to cultivate the values of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in children through learning activities and stories as steppingstones toward resisting hate and strengthening democracy.

Learn more at

**[learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org)**



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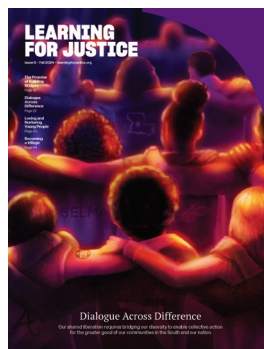
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**"For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."**

**Amanda Gorman**,  
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Introducing

# The Learning Center

**Online Civic and Political Action Learning for Everyone**

Learning for Justice's new online popular education space for everyone (adults, youth and children) offers learning for civic and political action to build an inclusive, multiracial democracy. The Learning Center continues our Community Justice Sites programming in our Southern states and extends our resources to a national audience.

When we "learn for justice," we center learning to inform our actions for change and progress in our communities. Come learn with us to strengthen democracy, counter hate and bias, and build a more just society.

Access free resources online at



**learningforjustice.org/  
learning-center**



## Perspectives



# What It Means To Learn for Justice

**Jalaya Liles Dunn** (she/her)  
Learning for Justice Director

**“Many are out of practice at coming together, committing to one another in pursuit of a shared purpose, deliberating together, deciding together, and acting together – the essential practices of democracy.” – Marshall Ganz**

Our democracy’s strength, or more plainly, the freedom for each of us to shape our lives, rests on our ability to collectively commit to one another for a shared purpose that centers our humanity. When we no longer live in this interdependence, understanding that our liberation is bound together, our collective power is divided and our democracy is weakened.

We increase our power to foster change when we are in community

with one another – deliberating, deciding and taking action. Being intentional about how we are in community together begins our practice of democracy. In his book *People, Power, Change: Organizing for Democratic Renewal*, Marshall Ganz warns that many people are “out of practice at coming together.” Ganz further explains that we strengthen our democracy through practice.

The decline in democratic practice



prompted the SPLC's Learning for Justice program to shift to a more inclusive, communal approach to teaching and learning. Our respected role from three decades in education prepares us to address the general lack of people learning as community. When we learn together, we build the movement to ensure our public schools are inclusive, safe and democratic spaces so the next generation of leaders are bequeathed a thriving democracy, not a weakened or decimated one.

In this crucial moment of coming together to strengthen our democracy, Learning for Justice's evolution is rooted in three pedagogies: a pedagogy of practicing democracy, a pedagogy of practice, and a pedagogy of justice for the oppressed. These models of teaching, and consequently learning, center how everyone can embody what it means to "learn for justice."

Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Children's Defense Fund, shared, during a celebration event, a lesson from the late Rev. C.T. Vivian, a civil rights leader. Rev. Vivian had explained that building a movement – coming together as a community around a shared vision – requires message, methods and means.

Our "means" for coming together requires a pedagogy of learning to practice democracy. We practice democracy by centering local autonomy and recognizing communities as the laboratories for democracy. In the LFJ *Teaching Hard History* podcast episode "Building Black Institutions: Autonomy, Labor and HBCUs," history professors Hasan Kwame Jeffries and Jelani Favors highlight that spaces matter in social movements. Favors explains that carefully defined spaces are where strategies and tactics are formulated and future leaders are prepared. While Favors specifically references HBCU spaces in what he calls "the second curriculum" to shape identity, idealism and race consciousness for the deconstruction of white supremacy, we need to construct a parallel third curriculum for all

community members. This space for ordinary people to learn and dissent, deliberate and engage together is our means for the practice of democracy.

Our "methods" require a pedagogy of practice. Practice begets learning; we become what we do. In his reflections on his time as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Julian Bond, the SPLC's first president, observed that SNCC's goal was to help generate "a community movement with local leadership." SNCC's organizing tactic was to sit with people to analyze the situation around them and shape the agenda for change. Our pedagogy of practice in Learning for Justice, therefore, begins with the commitment of connecting our programming and learning models to lived experiences in our communities. Learning happens by doing work directly with those closest to local struggles and affected most by injustices.

A sequence of dialogue, reconnaissance, dialogue, programming, dialogue and change are components of the methodology that drives our pedagogy of practice, ensuring that dialogue is situated at the transition points of each new stage. And as I am reminded by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, dialogue as praxis is the radical interaction of reflection and action; dialogue anchors how we practice for greater learning.

After achieving an understanding

of the prerequisite pedagogies, we can better grasp how a pedagogy of justice for the oppressed culminates "learning for justice." Our shared values and common ground define our "messaging," and both the values and messaging must be developed in collaboration with communities oppressed by injustices. Introducing the pedagogical nature of liberation is fundamental for justice through learning and action. How the most oppressed lead transformative change – in public schools, electoral representation, legislation and other systems that shape society – will manifest that our democracy is strengthened and justice actualized. The pedagogy of justice is thus constructed and demonstrated with the oppressed for the restoration of all our humanity.

So, what does it mean to "learn for justice"? Ganz emphasizes the goal for "learners to become leaders who in turn teach learners to lead." The transformational exchange between teaching and learning centered on justice is not a limited exercise. It is the democratic practice we need in every classroom, community center, place of worship, kitchen table, backyard, boardroom, group meeting and other spaces. We can no longer segment our practice of coming together and ultimately learning together for change that is meaningful to us all. Our learning must be an egalitarian and inclusive practice, presenting a revolutionary way of being in community for one another. ●

**We increase our power  
to foster change when  
we are in community  
with one another  
– deliberating, deciding  
and taking action.**

# SP LC LEARNING FOR JUSTICE

Learning for Justice is a community education program of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) that cultivates and nurtures dialogue, learning, reflection and action from those closest to and harmed most by injustices in the South.

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# History and the Power of Place



## Conversations With Civil Rights Movement Activists and Witnesses to History

Interviews by **Crystal Keels** and **Jacob Saylor** · Photography by **Sydney A. Foster**

**In this critical** election year, remember that our rights and freedoms – the ability to exercise the right to vote – were achieved through the struggles, risks and sacrifices of those who participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Stories from the ordinary people who were part of the movement, or those who witnessed historic events, remind us that we should never take for granted our rights and our responsibilities to engage in civic action and vote in every election – local and national.

In 2023 and 2024, Learning for Justice interviewed four individuals, activists and witnesses to history: Jo Ann Bland of Selma, Alabama; Charles Person of Atlanta, Georgia; Valda Harris Montgomery of Montgomery, Alabama; and Helen Sims of Belzoni, Mississippi.

These conversations emphasize the importance of learning the honest history of the movement, remind us that the torch is being passed, and encourage us to embrace our various roles in the ongoing movement for equality and justice.

The following conversations are excerpts from these interviews:

**The Strength of Ordinary People:  
A Conversation With Jo Ann Bland**

**There's Good People Out There:  
A Conversation With Charles Person**

**Listening and Learning: A Conversation  
With Valda Harris Montgomery**

**The Torch Is in Your Hands:  
A Conversation With Helen Sims**

**Crystal Keels**, Ph.D. (she/her), is Learning for Justice's analyst for learning content.

**Jacob Saylor** (he/him) is a senior video producer at the Southern Poverty Law Center.



Watch the videos of these four  
conversations at [learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org).

## The Strength of Ordinary People

# A Conversation With Jo Ann Bland

**As a child,** Jo Ann Bland participated in the Selma, Alabama, march that became known as Bloody Sunday. In this excerpt from her 2024 interview with Learning for Justice, Bland inspires us to civic action during this crucial election.

### The Movement

Well, one day we were on Broad Street – that’s the street the bridge is on – and about two blocks from the bridge, there’s this drugstore, Carter’s drugstore. When I was a kid, Carter’s had a lunch counter, and I wanted to sit at the lunch counter, but my grandmother said I couldn’t. She said, “Colored children” – that’s what we were called then – “can’t sit at the counter.”

It didn’t stop me from wanting to sit at that counter. Every time I pass by, I see those white kids sitting there, spinning around on those stools, licking those ice cream cones, and I’d be wishing it was me.

But this day, my grandmother noticed, and she leaned over my shoulder, and she pointed through the window toward the counter. She said, “When we get our freedom, you could do that too.”

I became a freedom fighter that day. I understood instantly that the freedom that Grandma and her friends were going for was the good freedom, the one that would let me sit at that counter.

I started going down to First Baptist with my sister and training with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

### Remembering Bloody Sunday

I had never experienced violence, and I wasn’t expecting violence when I got into the line. I just thought it was a regular march. We’re going to march to Montgomery. ...

I was 11 years old in 1965 on that

bridge. March 7th, 1965, to be exact. That day went down in history as Bloody Sunday. ... When it started, I was terrified, horrified to see people laying bleeding. And then the tear gas got me, so I panicked, and we were trying to get back across the bridge.

The last thing that I remember on that bridge that day was seeing this horse and this lady. And I don’t know what happened. Did the man on the horse hit her, or did he run over her with the horse? But even today, 59 years later, I could still hear the sound her head made when it hit that pavement.

The next thing I remember, I was on the city side of the bridge. I was in the back of a car, and my head was in my sister Linda’s lap, and Linda was crying. And when I became fully awake, I realized what was falling on my face were not her tears; it was my sister’s blood. She had been beaten on this bridge – 14 years old, beaten on this bridge and had wounds in her head that required 35 stitches. ... And some people were even hurt worse. Bones were broken because people were being trampled. It was horrible.

For every major tragedy in the United States, they sent in counselors, psychologists, and therapists and stuff. Nobody came to help us. Nobody even thought to come and help us. Life just went on. So, you internalized it, and it became a part of you that just stayed there, it wouldn’t go away, but you didn’t talk about it.

### History for Action Today

This [cement area] is where we left from on what is now known as Bloody Sunday. We assembled right there. And I followed John Lewis and Hosea Williams, Albert Turner and Charles Mauldin right out through there across that cement to the bridge to be beaten by law enforcement officers. And I think it’s important because when we tear down, rename, remove, new history begins, and old history is forgotten. This history is too

important to the fabric of this nation to be forgotten.

So, everyone that came to Selma, I took to that cement and made them pick up a rock. ... I say that’s a way to connect them, something tangible in their hand. ... If they take it, they need to put it where they can see it every day. Because when you see injustice committed against anyone in the whole rainbow of humanity, and you feel like you can’t do anything, go pick up that rock and take the strength of the ordinary people who stood on that same rock and made history that not only changed the South but this entire nation.

And it went from just saving that cement to a full park because ... when I was growing up, the whole playground was covered with toys. Now they have one little piece. ... So I said, “We need to put a park here, a real park with a real playground.” And then it became Foot Soldiers Park.

Now we also needed a place where we could store these oral histories. ... The importance of that I didn’t know would be like it is today. I never thought ... that one day this would happen – they would start to censor our history and rewrite it. So out of that came the educational building ... [a place that] will teach the next generation of children where we’ve been as a nation, and then they can take it from there.

[People should] know how hard fought to get the vote was. And people died. People died for us to have the rights we have today, beaten and killed. Yet some people stopped using it. ... [I try] to show them the value of their vote. If it was not valuable, why are people always trying to take it away from you?

The election coming up is a critical election for not only Alabama, but America. So, we have to get the vote out.

**Jo Ann Bland** (she/her) is a civil rights activist and founder and COO of Foot Soldiers Park.





# Our Votes Matter

New laws are being passed by many states, making it crucial to educate yourself about voting. The South's Got Now | Decidimos campaign is uniting voters in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi in a movement to show that together, we can forge the change we wish to see in our communities. Learn more by visiting [The South's Got Now](#) state-specific pages.

## What Can You Do During This Crucial Election To Bolster Democracy?

**1. Make sure you're not a victim of voter purging. Check your voter registration status.**

Many states have conducted "voter purging," an effort to delete outdated or ineligible voters, which can purge eligible voters as well and make them unable to vote.

- Check that your voter registration is still active at the SPLC's [The South's Got Now](#) page or at [usa.gov](#).
- Most state secretary of state websites allow you to check your registration and provide information.

**2. Research the whole ballot. Don't skip any part.**

Your community is affected by all races on the ballot, not just the presidential election at the top. Make sure to research the ballot initiatives in your state, as well as the state and local candidates.

- You can use [Vote Smart](#) to research information about candidates, ballot issues, voter registration and more. [Ballotpedia](#) also has information about candidates and issues,



There's Good People Out There

# A Conversation With Charles Person

**Charles Person** became active in the Civil Rights Movement as a freshman at Morehouse College and was the youngest of the original Freedom Riders of 1961. In this excerpt from his 2023 interview with Learning for Justice, Person reminds us that collective civic action is essential and so is being one of the good people out there.

## Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement

At Morehouse, the sit-ins were really in full swing. As the campaign increased and they needed more and more bodies, they finally allowed freshmen to participate. And that's when I became involved.

I remember our first march. ... We were two by two. We were singing freedom songs, silent, in a low key. We weren't yelling or screaming, and we came over the bridge into Atlanta, and I know we made an impression on the city.

After that, we started the sit-ins. We started at places that we needed to, like where the draft was collected. ... After we were successful in the Atlanta Student Movement, the Congress of Racial Equality were looking for a lot of bodies. They needed people for the Freedom Rides.

Well, we didn't know what a Freedom Ride was, but my opportunity to fight segregation at another level was intriguing. So, I applied, and for some reason they chose me.

## On Being a Freedom Rider in 1961

I was 18 and I was the youngest Freedom Rider of the first group. ...

Most people don't realize the Freedom Riders, we paid full fare. We were not subsidized by anyone else. ... Many families volunteered to keep us or protect us overnight. And it gave my mom some concern, but after the first night, and I told her, we met some of the finest people in the world, and

they gave us the best that they had.

And in my diary, I had the names and phone numbers of people I had wanted to get in touch with after the rides and thank them for their hospitality and for the love that they showed us. Well, I lost that diary in Birmingham.

When I got back from Birmingham, I get to Atlanta, and I was subpoenaed by the Justice Department. ... There's a picture ... of me being beaten. ... Well, the FBI identified all these guys and arrested them. ... Now the trial was in Montgomery because that's the county seat for crimes in that area. ... I get there, and I spend two weeks in the shenanigans of a trial because after all the testimony and all the evidence that was presented, they were exonerated.

But when I got home, I got back and the guys had been released, and my mom saw that I was depressed. And she knew I was going to stay in the movement no matter what. So she says to me, she says: "Tony, why don't you join the Army? You'll be safer in the Army than staying in the Civil Rights Movement."

During the rides we had no anticipation that we were going to be successful, but we knew we had to do something. We wanted to appear as normal people riding. We just happened to be in the seat with a person of a different race. But that was what we were trying to show the other passengers. Because what happened on several buses when Black people saw that we were not sitting in the back, they sat in the front too, or they would go into the white waiting room.

But one of the most insidious things that happened to us is that when you went into a restaurant in the bus stations. Now they had a big kitchen, and they would serve Black folks through a cubbyhole, which is

a little ... square window where the same food is coming out of the same cafeteria, and it was just like you were shoving food to an animal. I mean, that was the most demeaning things.

Some of the things we were confronted with – it's just amazing how we even dealt with them. And sometimes it brings nightmares. Sometimes it brings you to tears. But all in all, you knew that it was a worthwhile cause.

## A Message of Encouragement for Today

If you have the wherewithal, donate to certain charities. The bulk of what I contribute – other than my tithes – is to Native American causes because I didn't realize how bad it still is for many of them. But there are groups that really need your help. I mean, I'm still a member of the NAACP, but I think I had to expand my horizons, because as they get better, we all get better.

There's good people out there, and if you get to know them, you'll become one of those good people.

Yes, there are things [that] will make you angry, will make you very mad, but those are the truths of our history. But there's nothing for not loving America. Most of us would not want to live anyplace else. And I lived in a lot of places in this world, and ain't no place like home, as they say. Yeah, no place like home.

**Charles Person** (he/him) is a civil rights activist and one of the original Freedom Riders.



including school boards in some of the larger districts.

- Find who represents your community in Congress at the U.S. House of Representatives page: Find Your Representative.

### **3. Spread accurate information, both online and offline.**

Misinformation is a threat to our democracy. Here's a good rule of thumb: If you read a post online that enrages you to the point where you're sending the headline to friends and family, that is the exact post that deserves to be double-checked.

- You can also use a fact-checking site such as PolitiFact or FactCheck.org. These tools are essential during elections.
- Fake or misleading posts include images as well. You can perform a reverse image search to see where this image has shown up before and if it's been altered.

### **4. Talk to friends and family about the issues that affect you.**

People sometimes say it is unwise to talk about politics with the ones we love. However, because that love exists between you, you have a foundation to share concerns and shape opinions. Share how policy affects you personally.

### **5. You cannot strengthen democracy with cynicism. Believe that change can happen.**

Disillusionment and despair are tools for voter suppression. Those who wish to disenfranchise you want you to think your vote doesn't matter – so that you do not exercise it. No matter the election, never forfeit your vote. Your participation can help bring about the change you seek.



# A Conversation With Valda Harris Montgomery

**Valda Harris Montgomery** witnessed pivotal moments of the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery, Alabama. In this excerpt from her 2023 interview with Learning for Justice, Montgomery emphasizes the importance of learning the honest history of the movement.

## The Montgomery Bus Boycott

My eighth birthday was Dec. 1, 1955, which also happened to be the day that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. ... When people are chattering about this event that's going on, you're hearing your parents and their friends mumbling, and I'm thinking they're planning this party for me – that I'm going to be 8. Only to find out, no, that this is about the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Being so close with Martin Luther King and Mrs. King – they were our neighbors, just right down the street, and they were close family friends. So, you know, of course, we are talking and playing with their children, and you're involved with the neighbors because this is a segregated neighborhood.

So, you're watching – and the bus that comes right in front of the house – and watching that very first day, December 5, when they asked them not to ride the bus, and watching all of the neighbors on their porches, cheering because nobody was on the bus on that Monday. ... We're cheering because they're cheering, not really understanding what this is about. ... From that point on, [we] watch people actually stay off the bus, the 381/382 days. The solidarity of a group of people is something I witnessed, and I don't think I've ever seen again.

## The Freedom Riders

When the Freedom Riders came to Montgomery ... that was the leg from Nashville that was going to pick up after the bombing in Anniston, Alabama.

Now, these people are 18, 19 and 20 years of age, and they are students. Reverend James Lawson had trained them all in the nonviolent method. And so they were ready because they had already done the lunch counters and had already done the department stores and everything.

So, when they managed to get through Birmingham and came to Montgomery and were so badly attacked at the Greyhound bus station and dispersed and regrouped at Reverend Abernathy's church, and this mob surrounds the church. They are technically held hostage with the same 1,500 or so congregants that were there as well – for a prescheduled mass meeting with the leaders there, as well.

So, Martin Luther King goes into the basement, makes contact with Robert Kennedy, who was our attorney general at the time, to please send the National Guard to help get these people out of the church, because the mob is throwing tear gas and everything. ... The National Guard comes and loads the Freedom Riders onto the trucks, and they bring them here.

I was 13 years old, 4 o'clock in the morning, watching them come down the hallway into the kitchen, bloodied, battered and beaten.

Most of the time when you hear the story of the Freedom Rides in Montgomery, you hear about the attack at the church and the next thing you know, they're on a bus headed to Jackson. But there was like a three- or four-day window that they're in Montgomery and nobody knew – well, where were they?

They were here in [this] house. ... [Harris family house in Montgomery, Alabama]. That was something that I got a chance to witness. To see them so casually having fun and yet getting ready to put their life out on the line

and where they're about to head to Jackson, Mississippi. You just sit and you listen to them, and, you know, you laugh, but you also listening at the same time.

## Message to Young People

Some of the students that I have spoken with, especially during the times of George Floyd ... [said]: "I'm feeling this anger. I just want to do something." I said, "Well first, don't lose the feeling, but change the word to 'passion' instead of 'anger.'" I said, "Don't lose that feeling, because that's going to drive you forward." But you've got to organize, and you've got to organize with like-minded people ... You've got to have differences of opinion, because you want to hear everybody's point of view in order to move forward.

Look at the actual documentaries from people instead of the Hollywood movies. ... People that have lived it are looking at these movies like, "No, that didn't happen." And just a slight change will tweak history, much like being taught that Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus, and she did not. She sat in front of the *Black section* of the bus. Well, when you take out those two words, you've distorted history. And so, if they watch the actual documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize* or like *Freedom Riders*, or those that you're seeing the actual footage of these people – these are not actors. That'll help you to learn that we're not making this up.

You know, this is what happened, and when you're saying, "But that was so long ago because it was black-and-white footage," I'm talking to you, OK? It wasn't that long ago. It just happened to be filmed in black-and-white, but it was during my lifetime. That means it was not that long ago that all of this happened.

**Valda Harris Montgomery**, Ph.D. (she/her), is a retired professor and author of *Just a Neighbor*, a memoir of growing up in the Civil Rights Movement.





**6. Learn about redistricting in your state.**

After the 2020 census, legislative districts were redrawn across the country. Check redistricting in your state, as you may be in a different district from the last time you voted. Most state secretary of state websites will have polling location information.

**7. Volunteer to drive voters to the polls.**

Democracy is a collective practice. By driving others to the polling location, you secure more votes for democracy, reinforce voting as a collective responsibility and have a good time doing it! Consider starting or joining a church or civic activity group to drive community members who may need support. Seek out rideshare options as well; some have voting access programs.

**8. Become a poll worker (at [workelections.org](https://www.workelections.org)).**

Every voter should be able to have an easy and efficient experience at the polls. Elections are underfunded as is, and a shortage of poll workers can mean more closed polling places. Working the polls is one of the most effective ways to support democracy. Check to see if your county, or surrounding counties, need more volunteers. Sign up at Power the Polls.

**9. Plan to vote early.**

Early voting allows more opportunity and ease to vote – which is exactly why some state legislatures are curbing access to it as a method of voter suppression. Plan to vote early, if your state allows it. You never know what can happen on the day of, and early voting allows more time to solve any issues. Review early voting information and deadlines for Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi at The South's Got Now state pages.



# A Conversation With Helen Sims

**Helen Sims** – aka the Old Storyteller of Belzoni, Mississippi, teaches about the movement at the Rev. George Lee and Fannie Lou Hamer Civil Rights Museum. In this excerpt from her 2023 interview with Learning for Justice, Sims encourages accepting the torch that is being passed to us and embracing our roles in today's justice movement.

## Listening to the Older Folk Talk

When I was a little girl, [we] lived next door to what they call some civil rights activists. Now that's when I first got exposed, being a child, not really knowing what was going on, but I heard them talking about how they was doing to folks, you know? How they didn't want them to come in certain stores, they couldn't go to certain restaurants ... and how the Black folks had to go 'round to the back door.

So, they was talking about standing up and getting they rights to vote.

That's how I got exposed to the movement, sitting around, listening to the older folk talk about the struggle for civil rights and human rights and integrating the schools. ... So, all those different things as a young child, I would hear them talk about, and I said, "That wasn't right." ...

## Talking About Movement History

The foundation of this museum was to preserve and promote the authenticity of American, African American and Mississippi history. We do that without compromise, but we do that in a manner that anybody listening – unless you want to be offended, you get offended. We ain't going to apologize, but because we are sensitive to my nieces and nephews, and some of them is Indian, some of them is European, some of them is Mexican. So, when I go to the family reunion, I've got a loving family, and I love them and better not let nobody do nothing to them. I don't care what they got in them 'cause

that's my family.

And from this front porch and these lips ... I tell them, "It's about the choices that you make and the steps that you take."

To make a long story short, education – the truth about what happened, and who did it, not faulting nobody else for what somebody else has done, and to love everybody because the Bible and the good book says love them. ...

You've got people in history from all sides. You've got people like Fannie Lou Hamer. ... She looked at the condition of her people, and her heart went out, because to me, she was one of the greatest evangelists that God allowed to come in this world and take a breath – he used Fannie Lou Hamer to tell them, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

She told them that it didn't matter what color you were. If you was a human being in America and you had needs, Fannie Lou Hamer spoke up for you. If you came to her and you was a European, a white, Caucasian – whatever you want to call them – and you had a need, Fannie Lou Hamer went out of her way to make sure that she could help people, no matter what color they was.

Reverend George W. Lee was a minister of the gospel. He didn't choose people because they was Black. He didn't choose them because they were white. He didn't reject them because they was either one or the other. But he loved all God's people and wanted everybody to have a chance to have the power of the ballot to be able to choose who represents them.

These are the kinds of things that we want our young people to remember. These people stood up.

## The Torch Has Been Passed

In 1964 Freedom Summer, when they came from all over the world to Mississippi to speak up and stand up and even to educate people in the South, they did it because they cared about their fellow man. And the young people of today can keep that spirit alive. That torch been passed to them – it's in their hands, and I say to the young people of today, "Follow in the footsteps of those ancestors that came before you – you can't go wrong."

And to the older people that may not understand what role they can play today, these young people that's standing up for humanity do not need to stand alone, but they need our elders. ... If they need buses, trains, whatever they need, you need to be the backbone of the foundation of the new generation and ... the new frontier of the civil and human rights struggle for equal justice in America. That's what you need to do.

Don't let fear stop you from walking and standing on faith that hope lives in each of us, and we all still got a role to play. The struggle is still afoot. We are still fighting. The victory is not won yet, but we are gaining ground, and every victory that we gain, it seems like the enemy trying to take, but do not allow him to get away with it.

How do we do that? Our young people stand together all over the United States. You all begin an organization where each organization contacts another organization, where all of you come together as one unified group. And when you come together as a unified group, respect each other – because we need unity. We need to come together.

**Helen Sims** (she/her) is the Old Storyteller of the Fannie Lou Hamer and Rev. George Lee museums in Belzoni, Mississippi.



## 10. Vote!

Your choice matters, and your voice deserves to be heard. Exercise the right to vote that was denied to so many Americans before you. Remember, ordinary people struggled and risked their lives – and some were killed – to help secure our ability to exercise the right to vote. Honor them by voting in every election.

## Learn More With These Voting Resources

Being an engaged citizen involves far more than casting a vote. It also means understanding the multiple layers of the election process. Here are a few sites that provide key knowledge.

- CIRCLE, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, focuses on youth civic engagement.
- The Youth Voter Movement is a nonpartisan effort to ensure youth have a voice in the future.
- The U.S. Department of Education released a Toolkit for the Promotion of Voter Participation for Students.
- How Schools Can Prepare Students to Vote for the First Time, from *Education Week*
- StudentPIRG's Activist Toolkit provides the basic tools to run strong campaigns.
- The Civics Center student page teaches why voting is essential.
- Energizing Young Voters, from the League of Women Voters, envisions a democracy where every person participates.







# The Promise of Building Bridges

The UCLA Dialogue Across Difference Initiative offers a model to foster a culture of meaningful exchange, empathy and critical thinking in education and communities.

By **Maia Ferdman**  
and **Felicia Graham**

Illustration by **Sam Ward**

**The university should** be the quintessential place of learning, where students can question and grapple with new and challenging concepts. Many students meet others from different backgrounds and cultures for the first time at university, making its role as a place for vibrant intellectual exchange, dissent and critical thinking even more important.

A dangerous trend, however, hinders university and K-12 schools from living up to their full potential: toxic polarization. Dialogue can help us reach across our differences to counter polarization and develop the ability to navigate an increasingly fraught political environment with courage and compassion. The role of dialogue is also foundational to community engagement and learning across a range of settings.





## Toxic Polarization

Toxic polarization involves the deterioration of trust and an extreme divisiveness between opposing “sides” that in turn breeds organizational, civic and communal dysfunction. At a national level, toxic polarization manifests not only as intractable disagreement, which grinds the gears of government to a halt, but also as active dislike and even fear of the perceived “other.” Oftentimes, this “affective polarization” is not based on engagement or knowledge, but rather on distorted, generalized or caricatured views of a perceived “other.” For instance, researchers have found a large perception gap between the extreme views Republicans and Democrats *think* people in the other party hold versus what they *actually* believe. This kind of affective polarization erodes public trust in one another and in democratic processes and institutions, increases the potential for political violence, and deteriorates our individual and communal well-being.

This pernicious polarization trend has seeped into education communities across the United States. Students and school community members are active consumers of, and often participants in, divisive discourse on social media and in other public spaces. Many administrators struggle to effectively address issues that impact their communities, especially when significant differences exist among community members. Some educators express fear of bringing controversial topics into the classroom (or are barred from doing so by legislative or other restrictions). And while many students are vocal advocates of issues they care about, some are choosing to remain silent and disengaging from public discourse due to fears of saying the wrong thing, expressing controversial ideas or being canceled by their peers – in effect “retreating from the public sphere,” according to legal scholar Norm Spaulding. The result is that deep learning and meaningful discussion, the very purpose of schools and universities, is breaking down.

We see this breakdown on our campuses. The attack in Israel by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023, and the devastating war in Gaza have been force multipliers of extreme division, reducing or eliminating opportunities for dialogue – and in UCLA’s case, leading to outright violence. In a toxic climate, those who hold different political opinions are viewed as threats, implicit and explicit acts of hate increase, and political positions not only fuel intense arguments but also make people question one another’s very humanity. In this way, toxic polarization in education not only interrupts learning, it interrupts the day-to-day functioning of the university itself and stokes fear and uncertainty in the wider community. Without the capacity to

address toxic polarization, the public university ceases to serve its mission.

## The Dialogue Opportunity

Education requires a core capacity to build bridges, and universities can play a pivotal role in countering toxic dynamics. Eboo Patel, leader of Interfaith America, describes the unique potential of universities to build bridges: “Our college campuses gather people of diverse identities and divergent ideologies in a space with common activities – from biology classes to intramural badminton – that have the potential to shape cooperation. Colleges help the nation set its civic priorities ... graduate leaders who make these priorities a reality across a range of sectors, and advance a knowledge base that helps practitioners do their work better.”

The UCLA Dialogue Across Difference Initiative aims to do just this: to confront toxic polarization directly and to promote the values of intellectual engagement, curiosity, empathy, active listening and critical thinking. The initiative seeks to elevate opportunities and skills for dialogue among the campus’s many constituencies and to build a robust culture of dialogue and bridge-building, which can have important implications in communities as well.

Building a culture of dialogue is not about creating empty or sentimental exchanges. Nor is dialogue an effort to steer people away from passionate disagreement, protest or advocacy. People who are divided on politics may have intellectually valid disagreements and, in many cases, deeply visceral and personal stakes in their stances. True dialogue does not ask participants to silence or water down those political positions or moral commitments. Likewise, dialogue is not a crisis-response tool – in the heat of a traumatic moment, such as the protests and counterprotests at UCLA in April 2024, other forms of de-escalation, trust-building, security and mental health support are necessary.

Rather, dialogue as bridge-building is a long-term and sustained effort, as the Los Angeles Bridge Builders Collective describes, to “increase our individual and collective capacity to address and resolve conflict, work across differences, and lead empathically and effectively.” Dialogue does not shy away from differences, but rather confronts and negotiates them directly, skillfully and respectfully. This ability to handle conflict or difficult conversations in educational, work and community settings is essential for everyone, and as such, is built over time.

Bridging differences and fostering a culture of dialogue can have many different aims and outcomes. For example, one aim may be deepened

intellectual engagement with difficult concepts and increased critical thinking skills. While polarized discourse flattens and simplifies, dialogue has the power to complicate and add nuance. A culture of dialogue can also lead us to investigate *why* people are so divided on various political issues rather than make assumptions about others' moral character. When contentious or personal issues come up in the classroom, workplace or community, for instance, asking questions of curiosity – such as “What do you mean by X?” or “What is at stake for you?” and importantly, “What are the actual differences between us?” – can help work against the effects of polarization and broaden understanding of a given topic.

Another aim is to increase empathy and foster an environment where everyone can show up as their full selves, feel seen and connect with one another more authentically. A culture of dialogue challenges members of a community to create shared group norms that everyone buys into, to share their perspectives openly and to invest in deepened and intentional relationship-building. In education, when students and teachers feel a real sense of belonging

Dialogue does not shy away from differences, but rather confronts and negotiates them directly, skillfully and respectfully. This ability to handle conflict or difficult conversations in educational, work and community settings is essential for everyone, and as such, is built over time.

– when they feel respected, that their perspectives matter, like an equal part of the community – they are more successful learners and educators.

Finally, dialogue skills can help us be more nimble, flexible and thoughtful problem-solvers. Dialogue





can improve our dialectical thinking skills, helping us examine opposing or contradictory ideas and face complicated or even unanswerable problems with greater resilience.

Since we will all inevitably face conflict in our work and communities, learning dialogue practices can help us address and resolve conflict more effectively. And dialogue initiatives and processes can help educational, organizational and civic leaders make better decisions as they learn to incorporate the considerations and expertise of diverse constituencies.

### **Building the Muscle for Dialoguing Across Difference**

Like our body's muscles, dialogue skills require cultivation and regular exercise. At UCLA, we think of building the muscle for dialoguing across differences on three levels: engaging in, facilitating and convening dialogue. Thinking about dialogue on these levels can help demystify how to “do” dialogue in educational and community settings.

**1. Engaging Across Difference** is an essential skill set. This capacity to engage in conversations across differences does not develop intrinsically in most people; on the contrary, it can be incredibly challenging.

Conflict both activates and is exacerbated by innate cognitive biases and behaviors. For example, confirmation bias involves our automatic tendency to select and prioritize evidence that confirms our previously held beliefs; motivated reasoning is the active process of building a “case” to prove our beliefs; in-group or affinity bias is our unconscious preference for perceived members of our own group or people more similar to us; and cognitive inflexibility and rigidity describe our tendency to harden and dig in to our own positions during conflict, sometimes as a protective mechanism. These natural human tendencies have the potential to make conversations across differences stressful, unconstructive and even threatening. They can close learners off to new ideas, stunt their ability to grapple with difficult information and impede critical thinking.

Therefore, engaging across differences requires self-awareness, both about the learners' own goals and intentions for engaging and about their own biases, positionality and assumptions.

Beyond self-inquiry and awareness, engaging across differences involves developing strong communication skills. For instance, the national nonprofit Resetting the Table trains people in how to uncover and in turn prove they understand what really matters to their conversation partners.

By doing so, people sustain their partners' “receptivity,” or willingness to stay in the conversation and continue exploring each other's perspectives, even if what follows is disagreement.

Other relational skill-building efforts include: developing greater empathy or compassion, focusing on dialectical thinking and the understanding of multiple or paradoxical narratives, and developing personal relationships between groups.

**2. Facilitating Across Difference** requires multiple overlapping skill sets and abilities. Educators are facilitating classroom conversations every day; rarely, however, are they provided with the tools to manage charged classroom disagreement and conflict. Further, while teacher preparations vary across the U.S., most teacher credentialing programs (and academic preparation programs) do not require educators to engage in professional learning and implementation about facilitating dialogue. And yet, these skills are essential to advancing what Paulo Freire termed “problem posing” education, which engages both teachers and learners in inquiry about the world. Effective facilitation across difference is also key in a range of contexts in communities and across organizations where conflict may arise.

On one level, effective facilitators create and “hold space” that is conducive to honest and open inquiry as well as full and authentic participation. This might involve setting norms of conduct, as well as building participants' trust that the facilitator sees and understands them, and in turn that they have the freedom to express dissent, disagreement or confusion without fear of reprisal or shaming.

Further, facilitators provide a model: They do not shut down difficult conversations or shame people for bringing up a divergent opinion, but rather ask questions to uncover greater meaning and often reframe conflict to encourage learning and growth. Self-inquiry and awareness of their own and others' biases are crucial skills for facilitators.

To effectively facilitate conversations across differences, facilitators must be able to perceive and respond to many nuanced group dynamics. For instance: What are the differences present between participants? What is at stake for participants in the conversation? Whose perspective is being heard, and whose is not? Do the different participants truly understand one another? Are they mischaracterizing one another? An educator facilitating a classroom conversation might also ask themselves: How does this difference between students illuminate something important about

A culture of dialogue challenges members of a community to create shared group norms that everyone buys into, to share their perspectives openly and to invest in deepened and intentional relationship-building.

the subject matter? What opportunities for critical thinking does this conversation provide?

The need to facilitate conversations across differences extends beyond the classroom, and department chairs, school administrators, and organizational and community leaders would all benefit greatly from this skill.

**3. Convening Across Difference** – the capacity to hold programs, run meetings and write communications that effectively navigate the differences between stakeholders – is essential to fostering a culture of dialogue.

In education environments, conflict across differences increasingly happens outside classroom settings. PTA meetings, staff and board meetings, public events, student government events, political protests, informal student convenings and campus communications are just a few sites of conflict and polarization. Some education leaders respond by ignoring differences, saying nothing and opting for neutrality; others try to convene programming to address a conflict, but often with trepidation or employing divisive or exclusive methods. And others – as we saw in various university responses to the wave of campus protests in spring 2024 – seek to confine or restrict potentially divisive speech. According to a landscape analysis of bridging in higher education by Interfaith America, campus leaders “often feel ‘caught up’ in the culture wars. Many senior administrators also seek, but are lacking, confidential spaces to wrestle with the good faith challenges of balancing freedom of expression with diversity, equity and inclusion, even as the stress of enrollment and budget challenges undergirds most decisions.”

School administrators, event organizers, communications professionals and DEI practitioners may not necessarily need advanced facilitation skills, but they should understand their role as conveners of diverse populations, what it means to practice inclusion of diverse perspectives during contentious conversations, and how to make people feel seen and heard even when strong

differences are present. Further, these leaders and practitioners should have an understanding of how conflict functions, be versed in design elements to reduce hostility, and have a sense of what kind of additional dialogue-related resources (e.g., expert facilitation) might be needed in a given situation.

### **Dialogue Across Difference at UCLA: A Four-Pronged Approach**

To build the muscle for engaging, facilitating and convening across difference at UCLA, the Dialogue Across Difference Initiative is engaged in a four-pronged approach: student leadership, teaching, programming and training.

First, students are both the primary audience of the university and the primary drivers for change from the bottom up. The initiative is therefore providing mentorship and leadership-development skills around dialogue to student leaders and supporting them to develop their own ideas for promoting dialogue among their peers. Second, we are offering training and funding opportunities for faculty to incorporate dialogue topics and pedagogical practices into their courses. We also aim to engage the entire UCLA community through campuswide programming that models effective dialogue across real lines of difference.

Finally, the dialogue initiative is also focused on increasing training opportunities for UCLA administrators and staff to build their dialogue skills. This includes discrete capacity-building workshops for different campus audiences to learn how to engage, facilitate and convene across differences. In 2024–25 campus leaders will also deepen their capacity to teach dialogue skills to their respective audiences through “train-the-trainer” opportunities. The initiative will also regularly compile and share information about relevant bridging and dialogue resources both within and outside the UCLA campus.

The UCLA Dialogue Across Difference Initiative is one of many projects across the country that seek to counter polarization, to foster a culture of dialogue and bridge-building, and to ultimately help educational institutions achieve their bold visions. Community groups, local governments and organizations can also benefit from a model to build the skills for meaningful exchange, empathy and critical thinking. In a diverse and polarized environment, we need to invest more in the ability to approach conflict and difference with nuance, thought and skill. ●

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# Dialogue Across Difference

Dialogue skills can develop foundational  
capacity for civic engagement and collective action  
to strengthen our democracy.

By **Brandon J. Haas**

Illustration by **Sam Rodriguez**



**Differing perspectives** are a central feature of democracy, and building bridges across our differences for the common good has been a perpetual goal. However, too often in the history of the United States, compromise has meant denial of equality for Black and Indigenous people, other communities of color, and groups who were historically excluded. Recognizing that centuries of injustices have characterized our nation, bridging initiatives today must also center the ideals of inclusivity and expanding democracy.

The skills to dialogue across our differences are essential for liberatory learning and collective action in our communities. Unlike debate — in which opposing perspectives on a topic are defended to convince others of a particular viewpoint — dialogue is a joint effort that honors participants' diverse experiences and perspectives. The heart of dialogue is not in speaking to convince but rather in active listening and questioning to understand one another. Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire aptly points out, "Dialogue ... requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all)."

Difference does not solely occur across the political aisle but also within our own in-groups. Identities and experiences determine our positionality to social issues and ideas. Therefore, it is equally important to have dialogue about differences with an ally to better understand how we can jointly address a problem. Combined, intra- and intergroup dialogue helps people to recognize the interconnections necessary for understanding through dialectical thinking, holding contradictory ideas and multiple perspectives.

### **Polarization Harms Society**

To build an inclusive society, we must move beyond the structures that silo and limit us. A significant challenge, however, is the current political and social polarization — the increasing divisive movement away from the center — which can affect our ability to dialogue across difference, understand

others and be inclusive in our approach.

Young people bring a vital element to the table in approaching difficult topics: their curiosity. They are still developing an understanding of the world and how they fit within their local, national and global communities; therefore, they need a broad appreciation of social issues. However, hyper-polarization is the only context many young people today have ever known. And that hyper-polarization has affected the education landscape, with politically motivated undemocratic positions — such as anti-LGBTQ+ policies, book bans and "divisive concepts" legislation — that limit learning and young people's ability to navigate and thrive in a complex world.

During the past few years, at least 44 states have introduced legislation targeting what have been termed "divisive concepts" or other aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). These policies consistently attack education through curricular restrictions and teacher education program censorship. And anti-inclusive legislative efforts have created hostile environments for targeted groups, such as transgender and nonbinary youth and their families. These policies demonstrate the increasing divide between groups in the U.S. and the agenda of those who desperately wish to cling to power even at the expense of our democracy.

Due to increasing polarization across our nation — and local communities — people are hesitant to engage in difficult conversations. "Social issues are embedded within a (relatively new) fractured context — politically polarized and deeply divided

along lines of race and class,” notes Paula McAvoy, an education professor and researcher at North Carolina State University who focuses on the relationship between schools and democratic society. The effect of polarization is compounded when thinking of close friends and family who have opposing views.

Further, most people work and socialize mainly with those who share their perspective, thus yielding ideas that are more uncompromising. This reality makes us believe that “others” who do not agree with us are unreasonable, further shaping people’s choices in a perpetual cycle. To combat the perception gap phenomenon, author and bridge-builder Mónica Guzmán asks, “Am I making an informed decision or an uninformed assumption?” The echo chambers that we find ourselves mired in can lead us to vilify those seen as “the other,” and social media algorithms exacerbate these echo chambers, thereby stoking the fires that divide us. Guzmán further points out that “whoever is underrepresented in your life will be overrepresented in your imagination.”

The pattern continues in young people who are influenced by peers and adults caught in the unceasing rhythm. Young people are also often exposed to hyper-polarization online, including extremist content. For example, social media algorithms can prevent people from seeing more than one perspective on a topic. In turn, young people may be less likely to voice their thinking on important topics, especially if it goes against the grain of the group.

### **Dialogue Is Foundational to Democracy**

Walter Parker, professor of education at the University of Washington, defines discussion as “a kind of shared inquiry, the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views.” Entering into shared inquiry with others who hold different identities, backgrounds, perspectives and experiences provides an intentional opportunity to develop understanding, thereby opening ourselves to listening with the mutual goal of learning. Dialogue across difference is not simply for one person to change their beliefs; instead, dialogue focuses on growth and progress through newfound understanding of others. Freire explains this goal, stating: “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their situation in the world.”

Understanding of differences should encourage appreciation of diversity, “a central feature of

“Dialogue ... requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all).”

Paulo Freire

social justice,” as scholar Lee Anne Bell pointed out in the article “What Is Social Justice Education?” It is important to note that differences in power dynamics and structural hierarchies cannot be ignored as we seek to understand one another. Bell further explains: “Oppression is created and kept alive through hierarchies that rank groups in ways that give power, social and economic advantages, and institutional and cultural validity to some groups over others. Challenging hierarchy requires confronting the ideological frameworks, historical legacies, and institutional patterns and practices that unequally structure social relations.” The reality of these unequal structures and the history of injustice needs to be integral to the consideration of how we engage in and facilitate dialogue.

Dialogue is foundational for the democratic process and serves as a marker of “intrinsic equality” or the assumption that the good of all human beings is fundamentally equal, according to political scientist Robert A. Dahl. Within groups, learning and consensus-building can lead to stronger decisions because, as political scientist Diana Mutz points out, it familiarizes them with legitimate rationales of opposing views, and it normalizes political difference as part of the democratic process. In short, political tolerance is about the ways that people agree to disagree. However, understanding that there are political differences does not mean acceptance of injustice nor validation of hate and bias. Dialogue skills address differences in direct and respectful ways, centering the ability to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations and handle conflict.



# The impact of polarization reverberates across the nation. Consider the following data compiled by the Listen First Project:

## 32%

say division has made it difficult to get along with friends or family. (*Ipsos*)

## 80%

of partisans believe that the other party “poses a threat that if not stopped will destroy America as we know it.” (*NBC News*)

## 66%

say when discussing issues with those with whom they disagree, people are “quick to attack them.” Only 24% say people are “quick to listen.” (*Listen First Project*)

## 53%

say the political system is too divided to solve the nation’s problems. (*New York Times*)

### Educating for Democracy

Dialogue across difference and on critical topics allows conversations around issues of injustice in our society. Recognizing that young people want to talk about difficult issues in society is critical. In fact, it provides an opportunity to see young people come alive with engagement as they consider deep questions about the world in which they live. Having dialogue engages people with the stories of others as they listen and learn about different experiences, fostering emotional connections.

Diana Hess, professor and chair of education at University of Wisconsin-Madison, explains that democratic education “honestly addresses the political world outside of school and represents that political realm as dynamic, thereby emphasizing the ongoing transformation of society.” Successful unpacking of complex issues in society — such as understanding the structures and impact of race and racism in the U.S. — and working toward justice requires drawing on historical and contemporary contexts. But complex issues are often oversimplified in polarized settings. Masking complex concepts in two-dimensional ways can make it difficult to recognize or consider how these issues impact diverse individuals or groups in different ways.

Ashraf Esmail, director of the Center for Racial Justice at Dillard University, recognizes the importance of democratic education. Esmail puts students in charge of developing questions for learning forums and other center activities because it encourages them to make connections and develop relationships that are central to life in a democratic society. Students work on project topics that include real-world social issues that they can think about over time as they seek to better their communities by tackling injustice.

Asking authentic questions centers our humanity as we seek to learn about new topics and people. Guzmán affirms the need to approach conversations about difficult topics with such curiosity. Instead of asking “why” someone holds a particular belief or stance, ask “how did they come to this viewpoint?” This rephrasing presents an opportunity for explaining reasoning, which may be a fresh insight for consideration, especially if based on something that does not directly pertain to you. And a shift in focus may also allow you to answer, “What am I missing?” — which Guzmán points out can change the way we think about our own beliefs in concert with those of others when we treat the discussion as a tour rather than a trial.

Our identities and experiences can create biases that we may not recognize. While most people would agree with the need for equality and tend

However, understanding that there are political differences does not mean acceptance of injustice nor validation of hate and bias. Dialogue skills address differences in direct and respectful ways, centering the ability to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations and handle conflict.

to see their actions as contributing to equality in society, sometimes their actions do not align with social justice. As we work toward the ability to dialogue across our differences, consider assuming the good intentions of learners rather than approaching from a standpoint of judgment. In addition, people often prioritize intent over impact and may not intend harm. By engaging with the impact of a scenario, people can see how impact may not align with the intentions and cause harm. Helping learners understand impact and intent can shift the priority to considering the impact of actions.

### **Dialogue and Growth**

Nothing grows by remaining in a comfort zone; learning occurs when we uncover information that is new to us. Social issues can challenge deeply rooted beliefs and perspectives that are closely tied to our identities, experiences and backgrounds. And dialogue across difference can move us beyond our silos and comfort zones. When we are presented with information or perspectives that run contrary to our own, it is important that we step back and embrace the discomfort of engaging in conversations that might be difficult. If we lean into this discomfort through curiosity, growth is more likely to happen.

Bridging programs and dialogue initiatives are being developed on university campuses. And these projects hold immense potential for communities. Popular education is a process of helping people realize their power to take control of their own learning to confront injustice. This concept, developed by Freire, extends beyond education in schools to include community models and

can increase capacity and confidence for democratic participation. And dialogue skills can build foundational capacities for community education and collective action.

Freire encourages us with words that are fitting during these polarized times and as we seek to strengthen our democracy: “The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice.” ●

**Brandon Haas**, Ph.D. (he/him), is Learning for Justice's curriculum developer and a researcher and educator dedicated to equity and justice.







# Inspiring Hope: A Conversation With Maud Dahme

Maud Dahme, Holocaust survivor and educator, emphasizes the importance of survivor testimony in learning from the past and uplifts our shared humanity.

**By Jaci Jones**

Photography by **Yehyun Kim**

**As children in** the Netherlands in 1942, Maud Dahme and her sister were sent into hiding by their parents when the Germans ordered all Jews in their town to report for transport to concentration camps. The girls survived as “hidden children,” living with Christian families, and were eventually reunited with their parents, but most of their extended family were murdered in the Holocaust.

On April 5, 2024, I sat with Maud in her New Jersey home for a conversation about her life and work as an educator and advocate for Holocaust education. Perhaps it was symbolic that, upon crossing Maud’s doorstep, an earthquake struck, and for a moment we stood together in her home, surrounded by memories of the life she built after facing atrocities, laughing it off as if it were impossible for an earthquake

to happen there. What a metaphor for Maud, who, after a childhood deeply shaken and shaped by World War II, has made it her mission for the last 40 years to tell her story; the message she shares with audiences, young and old, will continue to reverberate beyond her lifetime.

## **Why Maud Tells Her Story**

For three decades after Maud’s family moved to the United States, she did not openly tell her story. “When I came to this country in 1950, I never talked [about] who I am,” she explains. “I learned to speak English, and I learned it without much of an accent. And people never asked, ‘Where are you from?’” So Maud built a life for herself, with the past at a distance, until she learned in 1981 about New Jersey creating an advisory council on Holocaust education. She felt called to speak her truth.

“I couldn’t be quiet anymore. [I realized] how important it is to share my story and for people to realize this [the Holocaust] actually happened.”

At age 88, Maud continues to educate and help ensure we learn from the past. “I think it’s so important for survivors to share their stories,” she says, “especially with our youth, because to kids, it’s a long time ago. ... But I think it’s so important for them to listen to a survivor, and they tell me too, it really brings it to life.” Maud points out that while young people have seen films or read books about the Holocaust, to have someone who lived through it share their experience helps to build empathy by personalizing the history. Conversations with survivors also give people opportunities to ask questions directly and engage in dialogue about a critical moment in our collective past. “And that continues to motivate me,” Maud says. “And while I’m on this earth, I will continue to do this as much as I can.”

Maud intentionally approaches her story from a place of resistance and resilience, to tell not only of tragedy but also of the power of everyday people who made the choice to save lives in the face of incredible danger. “I try to be very positive about something very negative,” Maud explains. “I don’t talk about the atrocities. And I think students can relate to that because what we need in the world today is kindness and respect.” Maud emphasizes how people reached across differences to help one another. “People risked their lives to save my sister and I,” she says. “That was kindness. Didn’t matter we were Jewish, they were Christians; we were human beings.”

Maud admits that her mother was upset when she learned Maud was speaking about her experiences. She recalls her mother saying: “You shouldn’t be doing that because it is going to happen again. Maybe not in your lifetime, but your children are all Jewish, and you are putting their life at risk.” And in some ways, Maud’s mother’s fears were not unfounded – antisemitism and acts of genocide





**Maud Dahme poses for a portrait at her home in New Jersey. Dahme survived the Holocaust after a Christian family hid Dahme and her sister Rita at their parents' request.**

continue to affect Jewish communities as well as others. But Maud speaks because she knows the importance of having these conversations, telling her story, so future generations know what happened and can work toward a world in which people reject such hate.

### **The Power of Place and Testimony**

In 2019, I was fortunate to be a participant in the New Jersey Education Association's Summer Seminar trip to visit Holocaust sites in Germany, Poland, Czech Republic and the Netherlands – a trip that Maud has led annually since 1998. I was already teaching about the Holocaust, but going to those sites, experiencing the places where these events happened, was transformative.

Prior to the trip, for example, when I taught about the Wannsee Conference – the place where “the Final Solution” to the Jewish question was decided by high-ranking Nazi officials – it was simply about the history. During the trip, when we visited the villa in Wannsee, just outside Berlin, Germany, I was struck by how a decision so brutal could be made in such a tranquil place. The dissonance of that moment, that place, changed the way I communicated about the

events at Wannsee. Afterward, I could bring my experience to students and say: “I stood there. I saw with my own eyes.” And that type of experiential learning enriches conversations and builds compassion in a more meaningful way.

Maud summarizes how the power of place enhances personal connection to the history and pedagogical approaches to teaching about it by explaining: “Yes, teachers have seen the films and read the books and have had a survivor come in for maybe an hour or less. But to ... experience those sites, to touch it, to smell it, is life-changing. And many teachers have also told me that after they've come back, they've done wonderful things with their students, and also they feel they can really teach it now because they've been there. ... So the students are benefiting from their teachers having been on this trip.”

The visits have also inspired educators to bring the power of place to students through field trips to historic sites in their communities, states, around the country, or even to Europe to re-create a similar experience. These place-based engagements add deeper understanding and appreciation, not

just for the history of the Holocaust but also for local histories.

Holocaust education is a core component of New Jersey K-12 education. And that is largely thanks to Maud's work with the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education and the 1994 Holocaust Education Mandate. “We will be celebrating 30 years this month [April] of the mandate in New Jersey,” Maud says. “We were one of the very first states to do this, and it has been so successful all the way, even from kindergarten to 12th grade.” Maud acknowledges that talking about the Holocaust, and World War II more generally, can be an upsetting topic. She says, “Even on the trip, we have our laugh days and our cry days ... but there's ways of communicating kindness and respect even [with] very young children.”

Holocaust education is much more than learning about the atrocities that occurred – it is about building empathy and fostering a culture of dialogue and civil discourse that allows humanity to prosper. Maud sums up that hope: “Yes, we're learning about a certain period of time, but so much happened before, which is so important also [when we ask] how does this come about? Can we learn from that? Not to repeat it. Unfortunately, in today's world, genocides continue. And I'm hoping that through the teaching of the Holocaust and people sharing their stories of what they went through, that people try to understand and really reflect and say, ‘We're going to have to change our ways.’”

### **Maud Encourages Intergenerational Dialogue**

“Nobody's free until everybody's free,” Fannie Lou Hamer said in 1971. Holocaust education can help build understanding and solidarity across communities to address today's justice issues. Maud emphasizes this purpose and encourages intergenerational dialogue to foster empathy, understanding and kindness. She acknowledges that young people often receive messages from adults that can be prejudicial. By modeling civil intergenerational dialogue, Maud

“People risked their lives to save my sister and I. That was kindness. Didn’t matter we were Jewish, they were Christians; we were human beings.”

**Maud Dahme**

hopes to influence adults as well and help to shape the way we engage with one another – by centering humanity and working toward a better future.

Through Zoom speaker engagements, especially during COVID-19, Maud asked teachers to encourage parents and caregivers to listen to her talk with children so her story would also influence the adults. Parents and caregivers need to be part of the conversation. The Holocaust, as difficult a topic as it might be, can be discussed with children as young as kindergarten. Children can understand kindness and respect and learn how to have dialogue and not continue the cycle of interpersonal prejudice and hate when interacting with others as they grow up. And parents and caregivers can learn to teach and model as well.

Maud expresses her hope that “through all of our talking as survivors, that we’re able to ... help people understand how we really have to care for each other. And my story was classic because two families

risked their lives. It didn’t matter that they were Christians, we were Jewish. [If] we were caught there, they, too, would be taken away and murdered. But we were human beings.”

#### **Maud Inspires Hope for the Future**

In summer 2023, Maud was invited back to Oldebroek, the farming community in the Netherlands where she was hidden during the war. The people in Oldebroek wanted her to discuss her experiences in the church where she had gone every Sunday with the family who had hidden her as a little girl. The visit brought Maud’s experience full circle as she reflects: “Here I stood 80 years later, more than 80 years later ... to tell my story. And it was so emotional when I first started to speak. I was choked up just thinking of what all these people sitting out there had done that I could stand here now some 80 years later and thank them. That was, I think, very emotional.”

I was moved to tears when Maud wrapped up our conversation by discussing a photo of her family. The Nazis did not succeed, as she explains: “Our family tree, [they] cut off so many branches, but our tree is growing again with new branches and new blossoms. Why? Because people cared so much and risked their lives to save us. And I’m forever thankful for that because I married, I have four children, nine grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. And our family continues to grow. And only because people cared so much and the goodness. They were good human beings.”

After the interview, Maud and I continued to talk over a cup of tea. I made sure to tell her how truly life-changing the Holocaust site visit trip was to me personally and to my practice as an educator. It fueled my passion in this field and continues to be my guiding light in the work of social justice education. Maud gave a humble smile in response and simply restated the importance of continuing to tell her story and her lifelong commitment to Holocaust education.

In the stories of people, of resistance and survival, kindness and shared humanity, survivor testimony has the power for deeper connection. Our shared humanity is an essential building block for people to dialogue across difference and engage meaningfully in a democratic society today.

A few months after our conversation, Maud was elected to serve as the chair of the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education – 40 years after being integral to its founding. Maud’s story and her legacy will be akin to aftershocks of an earthquake. And my promise to Maud is to remain steadfast in this work and continue to tell her story so it remains part of the narrative for generations to come. ●

**Jaci Jones** (she/her) is a former professional learning facilitator with Learning for Justice.



On April 5, 2024, Jaci Jones and videographer Yehyun Kim interviewed Maud Dahme at her home in New Jersey. Watch the video of this conversation at [learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org)

#### **To learn more about Maud Dahme, check out these resources:**

- *Chocolate, The Taste of Freedom: The Holocaust Memoir of a Hidden Dutch Child* by Maud Dahme
- *The Hidden Child*, an NJN Documentary
- *Classroom Closeup: Holocaust Remembrance*, Season 26, Episode 3



# Only Young Once: The Case for Dismantling the South's School-to- Prison Pipeline

We must end the long-standing maltreatment and criminalization of Black children in the education system throughout the South.

By **Delvin Davis**

Illustrations by **David Cooper**

**Whether in Meridian**, Mississippi; Jena, Louisiana; Orlando, Florida; or Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the pattern is consistent across the Deep South – a default for Black children that emphasizes harsh discipline, even at the expense of their educational futures. The Deep South has a long and disturbing history of severely disciplining Black children. This history – steeped in race and how race impacts policies and our perceptions of people – reveals a pattern in our schools that emphasizes control and punishment over care and education. This narrative connects the experiences of Black children educated in Southern schools over several generations.

## **Historical Connections:**

### **Children's Crusade March of 1963**

One of the more impactful chapters of this story is Birmingham's Children's Crusade March of 1963. Hundreds of Black youth – some as young as 6 years old – walked out of their schools







in a coordinated protest against segregation in their city, which Martin Luther King Jr. had deemed “the most segregated city in America.” This protest came a few months after Alabama Gov. George Wallace’s infamous inauguration speech declaring “segregation now ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever.” For Birmingham, segregation translated to city ordinances that challenged the dignity of Black people wanting to order a plate of food, enjoy a show, or even play a game of cards within proximity of a white person.

Birmingham’s response to the Children’s Crusade was swift and brutal. Eugene “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s commissioner of public safety, escalated events by ordering attack dogs and high-pressure fire hoses to disperse the crowd. Law enforcement filled local jails well beyond capacity with Black children – all on trivial charges of “protesting without a permit.” The imagery of children being brutalized was broadcast across national media and was forever burned into the collective memories of Alabamians and the nation.

Linda Woods, a daughter of Birmingham civil rights activist the Bishop Calvin Woods Sr., participated in the Children’s Crusade when she was just 11 years old. Weeks after her protest and subsequent arrest, she and other children who were arrested received letters stating that they were being suspended or expelled from Birmingham schools. Of note, these letters were sent by the city’s school superintendent and endorsed by three members of the board of education personally appointed by Connor.

According to Linda’s court records, Black students “were expelled without any hearing and opportunity to defend against ‘the right not to be arbitrarily expelled from the public school.’” Without any due process or a fair hearing with the school system to advocate their case, the only recourse was to fight the school suspensions in court. Fortunately, Linda and other protesters won their day in court and were able to clear and reinstate

their academic record. These Black children and their families had to fight against a system that would intentionally and systematically push them out of schools and into jails for something that should never have been criminalized.

The arbitrary school suspensions and racially disparate youth arrests from the Children’s Crusade are aspects of what we now recognize as the school-to-prison pipeline – a system of practices and policies geared toward pushing children, especially children of color, out of the education system and into the criminal legal system. Black children have been particular targets for this system, both in the days of Bull Connor’s Birmingham and in today’s Southern schools.

### **The “Superpredator Myth” and the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Decades after Bull Connor’s violent tactics, John J. DiIulio Jr., a former Princeton professor, would coin the term “superpredator” in the mid-1990s to describe his theory that thousands of historically underserved youth would soon spark a colossal crime wave across the country. The superpredator theory supported the notion that certain youth had a “moral poverty” causing them to “murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high.” According to DiIulio, “[Superpredators] are perfectly capable of committing the most heinous acts of physical violence for the most trivial reasons. ... By my estimate, we will probably need to incarcerate at least 150,000 juvenile criminals in the years just ahead. In deference to public safety, we will have little choice but to pursue genuine get-tough law-enforcement strategies against the super-predators.” Consequently, this theory buoyed a myth that Black youth were closer to criminals to be policed instead of children to be cared for.

The perceived need for “get tough” law enforcement strategies would not only permeate public opinion but also public policy, increasing investment in harsher criminal penalties and greater investment in prisons and police. Investments in law



enforcement would also manifest in public schools, as students aged 12-18 reported that 77.3% of their schools had a security guard or police officer working on campus in the 2021-22 school year, compared to 54.4% in 1998-99. For Florida specifically, the presence of law enforcement at schools nearly doubled in the 2018-19 school year after the passage of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, which mandates safe-school officers in all Florida schools. However, research also shows that Florida schools with more police officers correlate to significantly higher youth arrest rates.

Today, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education, such states as Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi have out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates that rank among the top 10 in the country. Likewise, suspensions and expulsions tend to be disproportionately enforced against Black students compared to their white counterparts, even when committing similar offenses. For the 2017-18 school year, both Alabama and Mississippi were suspending a Black child from school every 15 minutes.

Even though the massive youth crime rates that DiIulio predicted never materialized – and rates have even declined nationally over the last 20 years – the policies and practices supporting the school pushout remain intact. Examples of how school discipline disproportionately harms Black children can be found in every Southern state. In 2012, the city of Meridian, Mississippi, was forced to adjust its problematic school discipline policy after the U.S. Department of Justice said it amounted to “local police operating a taxi service between schools and juvenile detention,” leading to youth arrests for minor incidents like using the bathroom without permission and being tardy to class.

Excessive punishment was on display when six Black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana, were arrested for fighting a white classmate in 2006 after several nooses found hanging on campus riled up racial tension. The then-



Even very young Black children are in danger of being caught up in the criminalization of childhood behaviors. Kaia Rolle, a 6-year-old first grader in Orlando, Florida, was arrested and removed from school by police officers in 2019 on charges of misdemeanor battery.

LaSalle Parish District Attorney J. Reed Walters had boasted to students that he could ruin their lives with the stroke of a pen. He would end up pursuing inflated charges of attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy for the school fight, while failing to prosecute anything regarding the nooses even though an FBI investigation concluded they had “all the markings of a hate crime.” For the “Jena Six,” heightened concerns over superpredators drew a clearer connection between a basic school fight and murder charges than they did between nooses and a hate crime.

Even very young Black children are in danger of being caught up in the criminalization of childhood behaviors. Kaia Rolle, a 6-year-old first grader in Orlando, Florida, was arrested and removed from school by police officers in 2019 on charges of misdemeanor battery. In reality, Kaia had a tantrum in class – as 6-year-olds often do – but in her flailing, she ended up hitting an assistant principal. The police body camera footage of her arrest produced a viral video as she wailed her protests to the arresting officer. “No ... don’t put handcuffs on! ... Help me, help me, please! I don’t want to go to the police car! ... Please, give me a second chance,” Kaia cried. Because Florida did not have a minimum age for arrest or prosecution at the time, Kaia had no legal protections from zip tie restraints and being placed in the back of a squad car. Since then, Florida has passed the Kaia Rolle Act, which established a minimum age of 7 for arrest and prosecution but stands as the lowest threshold in the nation for states that have a minimum age.

In Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the case of Cory Jones Jr., a Black high school student robbed of his senior year for an offense he didn’t commit, reached national and international news. Cory was accused of marijuana possession in 2023 and was sent to in-school suspension for two months, then sentenced to an alternative school for 45 days, even though police would eventually charge someone else for the offense. According to Cory: “Nobody, nobody was listening to

me. I told them the truth, and nobody listened.” This describes the nature of school suspensions in Alabama, which until recently could be arbitrarily assessed without a hearing to give students a chance to present their side of the story. Fortunately, after years of advocacy, including from Cory and his father and the Southern Poverty Law Center, Alabama passed legislation this year to create a state standard for due process hearings, affording youth like Cory more protection against arbitrary school pushouts.

The history of the maltreatment of Black children in the education system throughout the South is life-altering and long-standing. However, stories like the ones of Linda Woods and Cory Jones Jr. at least give us glimpses of what changes we can make if we collectively advocate with and for them. Both Linda and Cory were Black children of Alabama pushing back against a system determined to push them out of school and into jail. Even though their childhoods are 60 years apart, their respective families and communities knew both children were worth fighting for and were able to win important victories for social change. It is well past time to end generational injustice against Black children in the education system in the Deep South, and it is our responsibility to do so. ●

**Delvin Davis** (he/him) is a senior policy analyst with the Southern Poverty Law Center.



## Read the Reports

The Southern Poverty Law Center’s *Only Young Once* research report series on the topic of youth incarceration in the Deep South includes discussion about the school-to-prison pipeline, and policy recommendations on how we could dismantle it. For example, states could emphasize funding and resources toward community-based alternatives to youth incarceration, as well as raise the minimum age of arrest to prevent incidents like what happened to Kaia Rolle from happening in the future. To date, the SPLC has released reports on Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida – each with state-level analyses to support a dialogue for reform. This is a dialogue that the South must have, both for the sake of our schools and for every Black child our schools are built to serve.









# The Heart of Facilitation in Restorative Justice

Inclusivity, understanding of power dynamics and cultural sensitivity are the heart of facilitation for effective restorative justice practices.

By **Ashanti Jones**

Illustrations by **Deena So'Oteh**

**Encounter. Repair. Transform.** These core tenets of restorative justice allow for an approach that leans into harm repair, reconciliation, collaboration and healing. The restorative justice process prioritizes the healing of all parties involved in a conflict rather than focusing on the crime-and-punishment methodology that has defined our society's idea of justice.

As a model, restorative justice is seeing immense growth and has incredible implications for addressing behaviors. And in the movement to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice as part of a comprehensive set of restorative practices can contribute to building supportive school climates and cultures that help to keep young people in schools and out of the criminal legal system.

Appropriate facilitation is a key factor that can influence the efficacy of a restorative justice practice. Restorative justice approaches may vary depending on the nature of the harm, the number of affected parties and the age of the participants. Aside from the willingness of participants to engage in the process, competent facilitation is imperative. Integrating understanding of the concepts of inclusivity, power dynamics and cultural sensitivity into the facilitation process is essential in designing a restorative justice process. These concepts are central

to facilitators navigating the tenets of restorative justice and eliciting maximum participation and effective results in restorative practices.

## **Practicing Inclusivity in Facilitation**

School discipline should be implemented equitably; however, in practice, harsh school discipline has been racially disproportional and is a driving force of the school-to-prison pipeline. As the SPLC report *Only Young Once: Alabama's Overreliance on School Pushout and For-Profit Youth Incarceration* points out, in Alabama, "Black children are more likely to be suspended from school than their white counterparts, even when committing similar offenses." Disparities in discipline also disproportionately harm students with disabilities and those experiencing poverty. Therefore, inclusivity in restorative justice must be addressed in the process and in consideration of who is served by restorative justice practices.

As an alternative to punitive discipline and reactions to conflict, restorative justice aims to challenge the status quo, and this begins with inclusivity. Restorative justice is a shared responsibility for collective healing, both individually and as a party to an experience. Facilitators need to create an inclusive environment for all parties to ensure the process



operates in fairness and is as inviting as possible for everyone. Inclusivity in this sense means creating a safe space for all parties to be heard and respected. A facilitator should engage in pre-work, which might include introducing themselves to each participant separately and before the initiation of restorative justice practices. This allows them to answer questions that participants may have, familiarize themselves with expectations of the process and gain insight into the type of restorative process that may work for the dynamic. Meeting participants in advance also helps with rapport building, which makes the restorative process easier to navigate.

Considering the timing and cadence of the restorative practice is also a part of inclusivity. We are a diverse society with several religions and holidays. If, for example, a party to the restorative process practices Islam or Judaism, you may want to refrain from scheduling sessions near prayer times or during holy days. Additionally, facilitators can use the pre-engagement period to determine what other avenues for an inclusive experience can be explored. These might include accessibility considerations. For language access, facilitators should ensure that printed materials are available in the language of the participants and their support persons, or that an interpreter is obtained if necessary. Selecting a venue that respects participants' needs, backgrounds and identities is also imperative.

### **Addressing Facilitator Bias in Restorative Justice**

After establishing a facilitation style based on the dynamic explored in the pre-work, the facilitator should next consider bias. Facilitators play a crucial role in guiding the restorative justice process, but their own biases can affect the process and outcome and must be considered.

Facilitators are human; therefore, they come to the process with myriad experiences and may hold unconscious biases. This bias can affect how they perceive people who have harmed and people who have been harmed, leading to differential treatment. They may also unconsciously steer the conversation in a way that aligns with their assumptions and favors the perspective of one party over another. Bias can cloud judgment, affect decisions and influence outcomes in a way that is inauthentic to the premise of restorative justice and the wishes of participants.

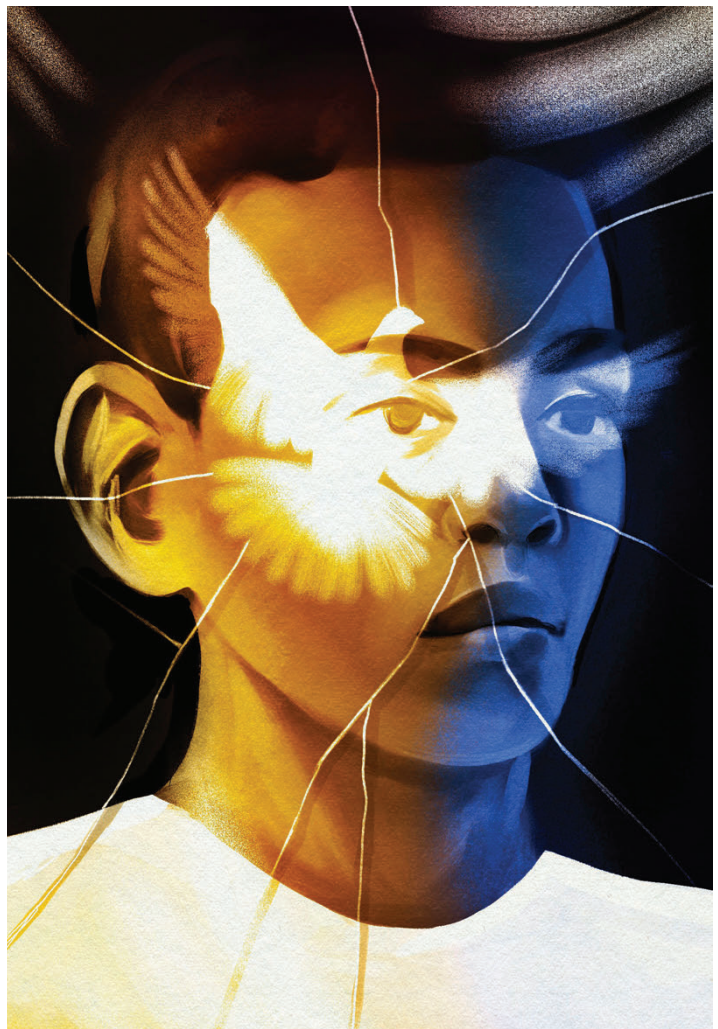
To address bias, facilitators can engage in critical self-reflection by journaling, scripting their facilitation phrases and questions, and seeking feedback. Naming potential bias in advance can help the facilitator identify it when it comes up and plan a predetermined course of action. Additionally, having a co-facilitator can be helpful, as they can step in when a bias is triggered and steer the conversation back on course. Facilitators should also

debrief sessions with other facilitators to ensure they are being fair and to gain tips and skills for better handle triggering situations in the future.

### **Considering Power Dynamics**

While a facilitator's role is considered neutral, this neutrality may not translate in the minds of the parties subject to the process. Indeed, while participants must voluntarily consent to participation in restorative justice practices, the process may feel mandatory to avoid a harsher alternative. A facilitator may, therefore, be seen as being in a position of power to determine the fate of the person who has harmed, and the desire to impress or convince the facilitator can undermine the intentions of the restorative justice process. A facilitator can mitigate this dynamic by encouraging the participants to take the lead on establishing core rules for engagement and clearly expressing their role in the process.

Furthermore, the facilitator should be mindful of the power dynamic between participants. Within the restorative justice space is a dynamic where



The restorative justice process prioritizes the healing of all parties involved in a conflict rather than focusing on the crime-and-punishment methodology that has defined our society's idea of justice.

one party is perceived as a victim, creating an inherent power imbalance. When one party holds significantly more power than another, it can skew the negotiation or decision-making process, leading to unfair resolutions. Additionally, power differentials may inhibit honest communication and prevent affected individuals from fully participating or feeling heard within the restorative justice process. The facilitator should, therefore, address those concerns and ensure the process is implemented for the benefit of all parties. To encourage participants to engage fully, facilitators can use “talking tools” to indicate who has the floor, use timers to ensure people have equal time to express themselves, and ensure they are transitioning appropriately between participants.

Restorative justice circles offer the opportunity for each party to bring people to support them as a part of the process; however, if one party has more people for support than the other, then the process can feel overwhelming and one-sided. The facilitator should ensure that an equal number of support persons is allowed to each party and that support people do not engage in the decision-making process – they are only there for the emotional support of their loved one. The facilitator must establish and enforce these boundaries for the benefit of all parties in the restorative justice process.

### **Striving for Culturally Responsive Restorative Justice**

Culture plays a significant role in shaping people's attitudes toward justice and conflict resolution. Communities may have distinct beliefs, norms and practices for addressing conflicts and understanding what constitutes justice. For example, some cultures prioritize communal harmony and collective well-being over a single punitive tactic, while others may emphasize individual autonomy.

Understanding cultural nuances is crucial for developing culturally responsive approaches to conflict resolution and understanding what participants from different backgrounds expect

as an acceptable offer of resolution. A facilitator must be mindful of cultural understanding because differences may become explicitly clear as the restorative process ends and recommendations for the next steps are made. Facilitators should respect the terms that participants agree to, even if they do not align with the facilitator's theory of justice, while striving to ensure fairness in consideration of equity and addressing power dynamics.

Lastly, facilitators must continue to develop cultural competence and recognize that cultural competence and respect for diversity are not synonymous. Cultural competence involves the ability to effectively navigate and interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, understanding their values, beliefs and communication styles. It goes beyond acknowledgment of diversity to actively incorporate cultural sensitivity and responsiveness into practices and interactions. Facilitators should actively seek out professional development opportunities and coordinate with other restorative justice practitioners to build these skills.

Effective facilitation lies at the heart of successful restorative justice practices. From fostering open communication and empathy to ensuring procedural fairness and accountability, facilitators play a pivotal role in facilitating meaningful dialogue across differences and promoting healing and reconciliation. In addition to cultural competence, among the key skills and qualities that facilitators must possess are active listening and impartiality; ongoing training and self-reflection to refine facilitation practices are also important. By embodying these qualities and strategies, facilitators can create safer and more supportive spaces for all participants to engage in dialogue, address harm and work toward meaningful resolution.

Facilitation approaches should be tailored to meet the diverse needs and contexts of participants. By embracing flexibility, adaptability and creativity, facilitators can ensure that restorative justice processes remain responsive to the unique circumstances and cultural backgrounds of those involved. The role of facilitators in restorative justice will continue to evolve and expand. Successful facilitation is an iterative process marked by continuous interrogation of positionality. By embracing research-based practices in facilitation, cultivating a deep understanding of the principles and values underlying restorative justice, and fostering collaborative partnerships within communities, facilitators can help realize the transformative potential of restorative approaches to justice. ●

**Ashanti Jones** (she/her) is a dedicated policy analyst and equity strategist with a passionate commitment to ensuring that no children are imprisoned or entangled in carceral systems.







# Loving and Nurturing Young People

The author of *Humans Who Teach* encourages us all to work together in a collective approach to nurturing young people's well-being.

By **Shamari Reid**

Illustration by **Sarah Gonzales**

**Love is often** difficult to define and challenging to make sense of in the context of social justice education. Still, many people involved in the beautiful work of teaching and learning for justice have shared extensively about the moral imperative of love in schools, even as our understandings of love differ.

Asset-based social justice pedagogies – such as culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive teaching, abolitionist pedagogy, culturally and historically responsive literacy, and the archaeology of self – all draw on a series of ideas grounded in love for young people. Many of the education scholars behind these theories have connected the foundations of their contemporary approaches to teaching and loving with James Baldwin's 1963 "A Talk to Teachers," in which Baldwin urged educators (and families) to consider what is at stake when we love our students while remaining aware of the consequences for young people (and our world) when we do not love them. Specifically, Baldwin writes about the many social ills he witnessed in the educational realities

of Black students in the absence of loving schools and approaches to teaching. Furthermore, he connects the inequities Black youth face with the lack of love they receive in schools due to their racial identity not being affirmed, thus making a point about what is at stake (Black youth thriving) when we do not engage in loving approaches to teaching Black students.

Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." This quotation speaks to King's belief that the appropriate response to hate or anti-Blackness is love of Black youth and their communities. In this way, love again is positioned as the path out of educational injustice and inequity. And although these examples center on Black youth, I believe that love can and must be present in the education of all young people.

Most educators agree that we should cultivate a deep love for students, especially given the educational injustice too many students face in

schools today. However, many of these same educators also ask, "What does love look like in education?"

## **Nurturing Young People's Well-Being**

In *Humans Who Teach*, I share my understanding of love as "that which moves us to nurture the physical, emotional, and spiritual growth of others and ourselves. That which moves us to interrupt anything and anyone that threatens the humanity of those we love. And that which can be chosen and is always an action." This definition articulates not only what love means, but also how love informs my life as a human who teaches. It draws on my experiences growing up surrounded by Black women as well as my deep dives into the work and lives of Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and a trio of Black trans women.

Having a clear understanding of love in the context of teaching and learning serves as the basis for "QuestionWork" – my reimagining of the notion of "frameworks," which can make teaching feel limited and confined. In thinking about a loving pedagogy, the approach of questions in teaching and learning instead of frames feels more useful.

Grounded in love, QuestionWork is composed of five essential questions, key among them being: "As a human who teaches, in what ways does my approach to teaching nurture the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of my students?" This question invites us as educators and family members to think about love as nurturing the well-being of young people both inside and outside of schools. And it encourages us to consider our actions, not merely our words or intentions. In thinking of ways to respond to this essential question, we must further unpack what is meant by nurturing "well-being." We can think of well-being in three ways: physical, emotional and spiritual.

Physical well-being refers to the many ways we engage in caring for our physical bodies. A few examples include resting, eating nutritious food, exercise and good hygiene practices. And nurturing the physical well-being of young people might include helping



ensure food access and advocating for accessible health care.

Emotional well-being speaks to the spaces within us that serve as the home of our thoughts, ideas and feelings. Caring for our emotional well-being could involve various forms of therapy, breathing exercises and honoring our feelings as they arise. Simply, emotional well-being involves the ways we make sure we are positioned to have healthy and positive thoughts, ideas and feelings. For example, if we do not attend to our feelings in appropriate and healthy ways, we might have negative thoughts and ideas, and those negative thoughts and ideas become the directions or messages we send to our bodies. Consequently, we engage in activities that are unhealthy or do not lead to us being and staying well. Nurturing the emotional well-being of youth could involve creating spaces in which they can make sense of their emotions and helping increase their access to mental health services.

*In **Humans Who Teach**, I share my understanding of love as “that which moves us to nurture the physical, emotional, and spiritual growth of others and ourselves. That which moves us to interrupt anything and anyone that threatens the humanity of those we love. And that which can be chosen and is always an action.”*

**All young people are worthy and deserving of love – the kind of love that moves us to nurture their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.**

Spiritual well-being is all about joy. Just as our hearts pump blood throughout our bodies, the spirit pumps joy, energy and motivation. Nurturing our spiritual well-being includes all the things that bring us joy, such as listening to music or spending time with loved ones. These things will vary for each person as we may find joy from different things.

All young people benefit when they are physically, emotionally and spiritually well. And research has shown that attending to children’s well-being fosters growth and better positions them to enjoy academic, personal and social success.

#### **Collective Action for Love**

Loving young people and nurturing their well-being is a collective responsibility for families, educators and communities. This work might not be easy, but it is possible to practice the kind of love that moves us to make sure young people are well. All our lives and communities are improved when we engage in

loving on young people together. The following recommendations can help us better support and love the children in our lives.

**Collaborate:** Often families and educators work separately toward similar goals for young people. We are stronger together, however, and young people benefit greatly when we see one another as sources of support instead of barriers.

Some of the most exceptional examples of collective love and nurturing require intentional collaboration between the many adults in young people’s lives. For example, in one public school in Brooklyn, New York, young people’s well-being is nurtured by a monthly Saturday series in which young people and their communities come together to engage in competitions and activities focused on well-being. These Saturday sessions have included movement challenges for physical well-being, yoga/meditation in the park for physical and emotional well-being, and community movie nights to enhance spiritual well-being by cultivating joy. The adults involved in the Saturday series exemplify the age-old adage, “It takes a village.” They understand that the work of loving young people is rewarding and not without challenges, but these challenges are better navigated when educators and families think deeply about the ways they intentionally collaborate to care for the young people in their lives in ways that nurture their well-being.

A collaborative community approach to love helps redistribute the workload from one group of adults in young people’s lives to all of the adults in their community. Instead of focusing on the many things that make families and educators different, it is helpful to center the shared love we have for young people and let love be our guide. Importantly, collaborations for projects need to start in the planning or ideation stage. Collective endeavors must move beyond educators and schools planning and then inviting families to help execute.



True collaboration involves everyone from the beginning.

The following are some questions that families and educators might consider as they reflect on collaborating to better collectively love on young people:

- What is the best way to communicate with other educators and family members in a young person's life?
- What is an ideal time to meet with other educators and family members in a young person's life to plan activities? This may not be during the school day, as many family members work during school hours.
- What do I know about young people's physical, emotional and spiritual needs? How might I find out what other educators and family members know about young people's needs?
- What resources do I have to contribute to activities and initiatives focused on young people's well-being? What resources do other educators and family members have for this same aim?
- How are we making sure that both educators and family members are sharing the responsibility for nurturing young people's well-being?

**Model:** Young people are always watching the adults in their lives.

They look to the adults around them to make sense of what it means to be human, how to treat others and how to treat themselves. Therefore, educators and families have the unique opportunity to model the kind of well-being and nurturing we want young people to adopt for themselves. This requires that educators and family members make sure they are nurturing themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually to the best of their abilities.

Families and educators might ask themselves the following questions as they reflect on modeling:

- How am I nurturing my physical well-being or taking care of my body?
- How am I nurturing my emotional well-being or taking care of my mind?
- How am I nurturing my spiritual well-being or ensuring that my life is filled with joy?
- How am I sharing (in explicit and transparent ways) with the young people in my life how I care for myself?

### **Community Accountability:**

As a community of adults who love young people, it is helpful to engage in collective or community accountability. This approach to accountability holds us and young

people accountable for nurturing their well-being and growth. That is, we all make it our business to check in with each other and young people often and across different spaces about the ways in which the young folks in our lives are being cared for. This looks like all of us asking ourselves:

- How are we doing with regard to caring for young people?
- How do we make sure we are sharing the same expectations with young people about the necessity of caring for their well-being?
- What feedback have we received from young people about our success with this?

The answers to these questions will differ across our respective contexts including our resources, our geographic locations, and the age of the youth in our lives. This process is also ongoing and iterative.

All young people are worthy and deserving of love – the kind of love that moves us to nurture their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. And we are better together and more effective when we work together rather than in isolation. Let us join in community as we improve the ways we love the young folks in our lives. ●

**Shamari Reid**, Ed.D. (he/him), is an assistant professor of teaching and learning at NYU and the author of the book *Humans Who Teach: A Guide for Centering Love, Justice, and Liberation in Schools*.





# Becoming a Village

This family-school-community partnerships model emphasizes a liberatory, whole-child approach and collective effort to nurturing all our children.

By **Joy Masha**

Illustrations by **Allie Sullberg**

**Embedded in the** proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” is a profound truth: The collective effort of an entire community is essential for nurturing the growth and well-being of children.

This understanding resonates throughout the family-school-community partnerships framework, which operates as a dynamic cycle and embraces the role of parents and caregivers as bridges – linking families to other families, families to educators, and families to communities in a shared endeavor. Within this framework lies a vast reservoir of potential, often overlooked and underutilized yet pivotal in propelling student success, nurturing social responsibility and fostering advocacy. The symbiotic relationship between community support and individual growth forms the basis of holistic development for the whole child. (“Family” in this context is defined inclusively and might encompass parents and caregivers, family members, foster families and all who identify as chosen family.)



## A Liberatory, Whole-Child Approach

In essence, holistic child development, as emphasized in a report from Porticus, lies in cultivating well-rounded individuals who are academically proficient, socially and emotionally competent, physically healthy and ethically responsible members of society. Understanding the whole child deepens the interconnectedness of environment, experience and community. The Learning Policy Institute highlights how students' educational outcomes are influenced by their surroundings, emphasizing the key role of safe and nurturing learning environments with rich experiences, both within and beyond schools.

Similarly, rather than focusing solely on academic achievement or cognitive development, liberation recognizes that children are multifaceted beings with diverse needs and abilities. A liberatory approach recognizes and confronts the political, social and economic barriers to development and seeks to build capacity and strategies for systems change. This approach requires a fundamental change in one's heart and mind to value individuals in their current contexts and to rebuild systems and services to support communities in reaching their collective aspirations and expectations. By acknowledging the disparities in student development outcomes based on geographic location – recognizing a child's ZIP code as a potential limitation – stakeholders in a child's growth journey are challenged to cultivate partnerships aimed at nurturing growth. We cannot wait for policy change; we have to change circumstances programmatically.

One parent eloquently expressed the sentiment underlying this liberatory, whole-child approach: "We need more people to give us permission to be a village, to be a community. You are more valuable than your circumstances. If no one shows you, you are left to learn on your own. And if you don't have the tools to learn a thing, you soak in shame. Sometimes shame is more

difficult than the circumstance." This underscores the importance of fostering supportive and inclusive community environments in which every individual is recognized for their inherent worth and empowered to contribute to the collective well-being of the village.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools® provide summer and after-school programs through a research-based and multicultural program model to foster holistic child development that supports children, youth and their families through five essential components: high-quality academic and character-building enrichment; parent and family involvement; civic engagement and social action; intergenerational servant leadership development; and nutrition, health and mental health. Within the program, children and youth are referred to as "scholars."

Many CDF Freedom Schools sites incorporate a liberatory culture of engagement that embraces family-school-community partnerships. This approach empowers all stakeholders in community-building activities: orienting each person and child to the program's village, establishing clear expectations, creating safe spaces for children and adults alike, fostering consistent communication, incorporating restorative practices and concluding our village experience in celebration.

Five components of holistic development inform a liberatory partnership framework:

**1. Physical development** encompasses growth, honing motor skills and coordination,

**A liberatory approach to family-school-community partnerships cultivates a culture of engagement that welcomes all children, families and community members – forming a cohesive village.**

and engaging in activities that contribute to overall physical health and well-being.

**2. Social development** fosters interactions with others, nurturing social skills, empathy and cooperation. This facilitates the establishment of positive relationships within family, peer groups and the broader community.

**3. Intellectual development** pertains to cognitive advancement, encompassing thinking, reasoning, problem-solving and the acquisition of new knowledge.

**4. Emotional development** entails nurturing the ability to understand and regulate emotions, fostering independence, resilience and the cultivation of healthy relationships.

**5. Spiritual development** involves the formulation of personal values, moral principles and identity. It entails supporting the development of children's personality, beliefs and sense of purpose from an early age.

By embracing holistic development, stakeholders recognize that children thrive in environments that provide for their diverse needs and abilities. A true partnership becomes a village, requiring stronger relationships, support networks and resource distribution across communities.

**From Partnerships to Village**  
Partnerships involve mutual commitment and collaboration to achieve objectives or to address



challenges. They foster innovation, cooperative action and sustainability by combining diverse perspectives, skills and resources to have greater impact than individual efforts. They also promote shared accountability and responsibility, leading to more comprehensive solutions to complex problems.

A liberatory approach to family-school-community partnerships cultivates a culture of engagement that welcomes all children, families and community members – forming a cohesive village. Parents and caregivers support one another and serve as co-educators and community advocates in collaboration with children, school and community. Essentially, families become as integral to the school as the institution itself is integral to the community. Some of the benefits of this collaboration are improved academic outcomes, enhanced social and emotional support, healthier school environments and neighborhoods, and strengthened community ties.

The village, as envisioned in this model, strives to unite rather than divide families, educators, and other community members and organizations, thereby fostering a sense of collective purpose and shared responsibility for the welfare of our children. According to researcher Jay L. Lemke, a child's growth journey is intricately shaped by the environment in which they grow and develop. This environment, however, is not a standalone entity but rather a product of the systems created by individuals and groups. It is characterized by the contributions of caring adults, diverse experiences, educational opportunities and social interactions, all of which play a pivotal role in shaping a child's identity within the community and broader society. Lemke refers to these elements as "village activities."

Conversations with families, educators and community members in the CDF Freedom Schools program make evident that the concept of a village extends beyond parental roles. As one parent says, "The burden is on

everyone, not just the teachers and parents but the neighbor and store owner." The collective responsibility is shared by all members of society.

Being a village entails meeting basic needs and providing love, accountability, education and other essential elements that contribute to children's well-being. It entails recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals. The village is a way of being that benefits the entire community – a whole child, a whole parent, a whole school and a whole community – with a focus on nurturing future generations.

### **Strategies for Effective Collaboration and Partnerships**

Cultivating partnerships within the educational and development communities requires creating inclusive environments that prioritize collaboration. Strategies for fostering collaboration involve embracing the contributions of families and leveraging the diverse strengths of all stakeholders. Consider the following recommendations for partnerships:

**Celebrating the village as a proactive choice ensures the well-being and safety of all children and affirms the transformative power of partnerships in nurturing the next generation.**



- Encourage parental and caregiver involvement. Shift thinking from a limited idea of what a good parent looks, sounds and thinks like – which often is rooted in white Eurocentric ideologies – to creating an inclusive environment, ready to receive what families have to offer and to support families in achieving shared goals.
- Foster open communication channels among parents and caregivers, educators, and school administrators, and recognize families as valuable sources of insight, expertise and support.
- Build trust and mutual respect among stakeholders. Say what you mean and mean what you say. At the beginning of the relationship, set clear expectations and keep communication consistent. Offer continuous shared learning and growth to address challenges head-on using restorative practices.
- Leverage technology for communication and engagement. Technology is advancing every day in providing users with tools for connection, information, entertainment, access and more.
- Co-develop and implement joint initiatives and programs, with active involvement from families, who contribute valuable resources and support to enhance partnerships.
- Encourage inclusive decision-making that honors the perspectives and contributions of all stakeholders.
- Equitably provide (and invite) family resources and support to help all stakeholders realize their power to enrich the community's collaborative efforts.
- Promote cultural sensitivity and diversity awareness. Identify and develop a praxis that reflects and affirms the values and worldviews of Black and other people of color as well as other historically

marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ families and people with disabilities.

When parents and caregivers are recognized as partners in their children's education and community endeavors, they can realize their power to play active roles in shaping the learning environment and fostering a thriving community.

Family-school-community partnerships can take many forms, including community meet-and-greets with job candidates for education positions; community resource and uniform drives to ensure every child feels confident and prepared for school; family entrepreneurial initiatives, in which families share their talents with the community; and community reading groups.

A good example is Harambee, which happens within the first 30 minutes of the CDF Freedom Schools' daily programming. "Harambee" is a Swahili word that means "let's pull together," reflecting the spirit of unity and collaboration cherished by the community. During Harambee, parents, caregivers and other members from the village are invited to serve as read-aloud guests. The goal is to inspire scholars to love reading, both in school and at home. These read-alouds are followed by Q&A sessions that provide opportunities for scholars to ask parents and caregivers questions. Scholars benefit from the exposure to diverse stories and role models, fostering a lifelong love of reading. Families have a positive opportunity to engage with individuals working at the site while also contributing to their scholars' educational journey. And site-based educators receive support in their work toward making reading a treasured activity.

### **A Call to Engage All Families**

As a Black woman who grew up in a Black single-headed household with three Black siblings in an anti-Black world, I can attest to the alienation experienced by Black parents and caregivers in working with

public institutions. Family-school-community partnerships have a profound ability to liberate us from limiting or discriminatory roles and responsibilities, not only for school engagement but also for the well-being of all members – especially those from historically marginalized communities.

Too often, educators overlook the wealth of knowledge and skills families offer. However, in CDF Freedom Schools, parents and caregivers are recognized for their multifaceted identities. Within our village, they actively contribute their talents, hobbies and professional skill sets to various aspects of teaching and learning, organizational development, advocacy, parent programming and more. This liberatory approach enriches the educational experience and strengthens the bonds within our community.

In the absence of the village, we function as silos: at home, at school and in community. If we truly desire strong partnerships in education, we must center the needs of children and actively engage parents, caregivers and families. The family-school-community partnership serves as the village – a collaborative endeavor encompassing the entire community's commitment to all children.

Celebrating the village as a proactive choice ensures the well-being of all children and affirms the transformative power of partnerships in nurturing the next generation. We each have the power to accept our role in a village. ●

**Joy Masha** (she/her) is a program manager at the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools, where she is dedicated to building family-school-community partnerships.







# Child Hunger Should Concern Us All

Ensuring food security for all children is a national responsibility that should cut across political divides.

By **Anthony Conwright**

Illustration by **Owen Gent**

**Child hunger** is a concern that should bridge our polarized political divide. After all, wouldn't most responsible adults in the United States agree that providing children with food is a national responsibility?

Yet, despite the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2023 report that showed an increase in food insecurity in households with children, more than a dozen U.S. states opted out of enrollment in a summer 2024 federal food program that provides funding for families during the months when children who receive breakfast and lunch in schools lose access to that food. Modeled on the pandemic-era Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) programs implemented by some states, Indian Tribal Organizations and territories – programs that successfully addressed child hunger when schools were closed due to COVID-19 – the new, permanent Summer EBT program will benefit an estimated 21 million children, but that is only around 70% of the total population of children eligible. As

Margaret Huang, president and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), points out in an opinion in *The Hill*, “[A]nother 10 million eligible kids in states that turned down the funding will face the possibility of going to bed hungry. Significantly, seven of the states that declined to participate – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas – are in the South, the region with the highest average food insecurity and poverty rates.”

Ensuring nutrition and health is fundamental to children's education and to our nation's well-being and future. This fact is one that should not divide us, and one that we should be able to discuss and address across our differences.

## **The Beginnings of School Food Programs**

Providing children with healthy food in school is based on a simple premise: The human brain requires nutrients to develop and maintain its functions. In the early 1900s,

educators noticed a relationship between nutrition and student learning and worked within their communities to organize school lunch systems.

In 1910, *The New York Times* chronicled the efforts of a school lunch committee in New York that worked to provide lunches for 3 cents (roughly 96 cents today, adjusting for inflation). The committee found that children in the “poorer parts of the city come to school ill-nourished,” and “the underfed children are those who fall behind in their class work.” A physician with the committee explained that 10% of children in school did not have an adult to give them lunch because their parents worked far from home and left so early for work that children had little or no breakfast. The committee also noted an increase in the cost of living and a family's lack of adequate food as contributing factors to a child's malnutrition. While the committee laid bare the facts of child hunger and the effects on learning, a question still loomed over the nation: What do we do about it?

The efforts to address child hunger continued unevenly in communities until 1946, when the U.S. Congress passed the National School Lunch Act. The law describes safeguarding the health and well-being of children in the U.S. by providing adequate meals as a matter of “national security.” Food is crucial for children's well-being and learning, and children's education is essential for the continued development of a nation. Since passage of the act, the federal government has taken additional strides in addressing child hunger. In 1966, Congress passed the Child Nutrition Act to expand the scope of the National School Lunch Act. The act recognized that “good nutrition” affects the capacity of children to learn and authorized the School Breakfast Program. Further amendments such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program were added to the National School Lunch Act.



However, barriers remain to ensuring children do not go hungry, including lack of political will and resistance to programs that address poverty.

### Addressing Child Hunger Today

The USDA report found that in 2022, 12.8% of U.S. households (17 million households) and 8.8% of households with children (3.3 million households) experienced food insecurity. In one of the wealthiest countries in the world – and a nation that considers child nutrition a matter of national security – millions of people, including children, experience hunger.

Among the barriers to food security for children is the fact that programs are not “universal” in nature – they are not intended to feed *all* children. To qualify for free or reduced-cost meals, families must meet income eligibility guidelines, and families must apply within their state to determine qualification. According to the USDA, in November 2022, only 55% of food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three most extensive federal nutrition assistance programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and the National School Lunch Program. Studies have cited several factors – including work requirements, the stigma of “welfare,” lack of information about eligibility and difficulty completing applications – as contributing to the lack of participation.

If all children, regardless of family income, received healthy free meals without the need to apply for them, families could bypass the stigma and barriers that affect participation in food programs. Having universal food programs would make it simply a cultural ethic that all children are guaranteed food. Reducing barriers would also further ensure the country honors its commitment to “national security” by providing all children with access to food and the security and well-being that comes with that access. As of April 2024, only eight states had universal food programs

in schools; dozens of others are only now considering similar legislation.

The Summer EBT program is another positive step in preventing child hunger. While other local and federal programs, such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), provide meals during summer, only a small percentage of eligible children participate due to barriers and gaps in services.

“The problem with those programs is that they’re at a meal site where not everyone – especially if you’re in a rural community – has access,” says Theresa Lau, senior policy counsel at the SPLC. According to Feeding America’s *Map the Meal Gap* report, 9 out of 10 high food insecurity counties are rural. “The Summer EBT program is unique,” Lau says, “because it provides a lot of flexibility and autonomy for families to make decisions on how to feed their families.” The program provides a \$120-per-child credit that is loaded onto EBT cards (eligible participants can also load funds onto existing benefit cards). Families can use the money to purchase food at local grocery stores instead of traveling to a location for in-person meal services. This allows families control of their dietary needs and supports local communities.

A 2016 summary report, examining data from prior versions of the program between 2011 and 2014, found that the Summer EBT for Children program “decreased the prevalence of the most severe food insecurity among children by one-third.” More recently, as noted by SPLC leader Huang, “Research on the temporary Pandemic EBT program found that the program decreased children’s food hardship by a third, and it lifted between 2.7 and 3.9

**Having universal food programs would make it simply a cultural ethic that all children are guaranteed food.**

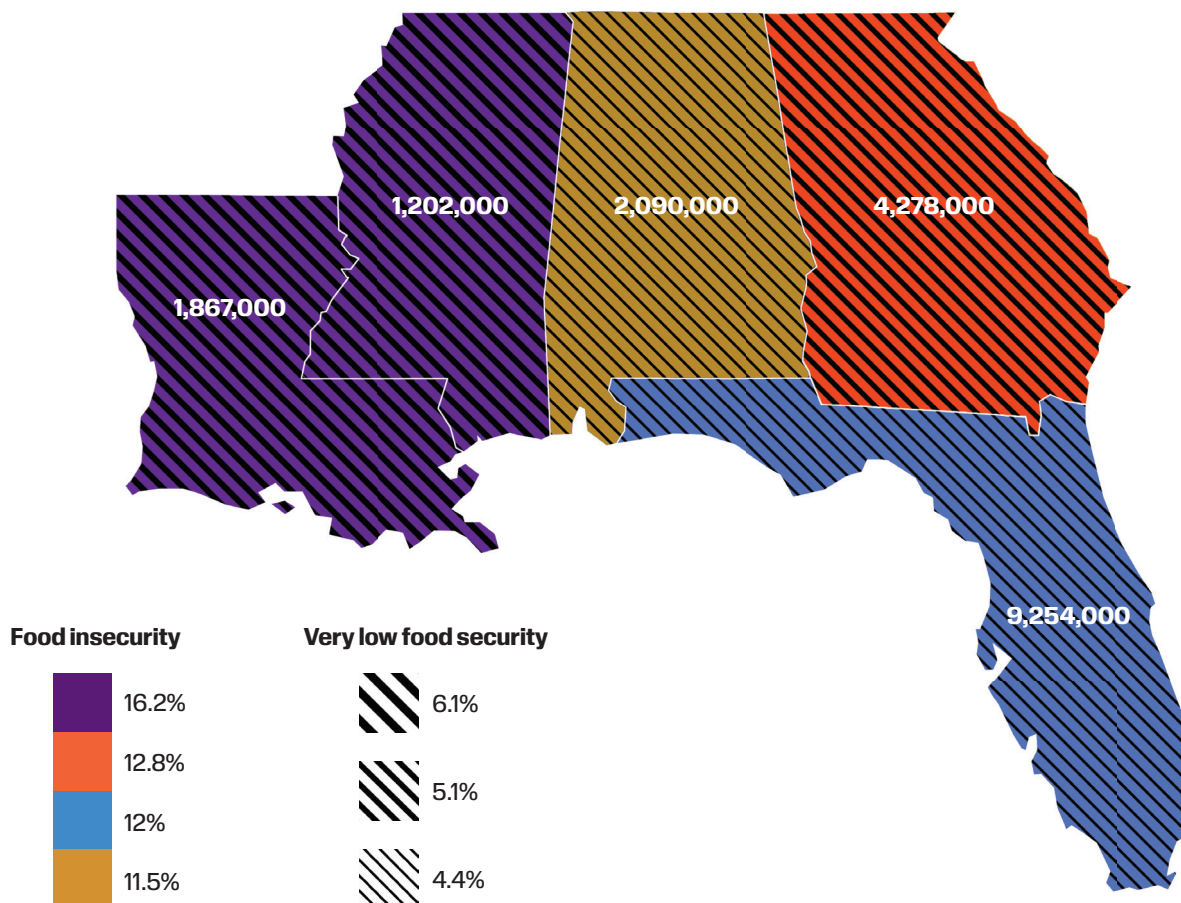
million children out of hunger. It also supported healthier diets for children, with upticks in the consumption of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.” Yet 14 states, for various stated reasons (some have indicated upfront administrative costs and logistical challenges), have chosen not to participate in the new expanded program, denying millions of dollars in aid to families who are experiencing poverty and food insecurity.

Lau, whose work focuses on federal policy around eradicating poverty, is working to expand participation in the Summer EBT program. “I am focused on making sure that members of Congress and federal stakeholders understand what is at stake,” Lau says. The implications loom large over states that opted out of the program, like Mississippi and Alabama. For decades, Mississippi has ranked among the poorest states in the country. More than half of its counties are rural (65 out of 82), 19% of its population lives in poverty and 1 in 4 children faces hunger. In Mississippi, 324,000 children would be eligible to receive Summer EBT benefits in 2024. Next door, in Alabama, 22% of children live in poverty, and 1 in 4 children faces hunger. The Summer EBT program disbursed \$63 million in benefits to 530,000 Alabama students in 2023. Approximately 545,000 children in Alabama would have been eligible to receive Summer EBT benefits in summer 2024.

The USDA released 2024’s Initial Guidance for State Implementation of Summer EBT on June 7, 2023, one day after Alabama’s legislative session ended. “A lot of folks are not aware of the different kind of budgetary pieces that are in play, as well as the overall impact,” says Jerome Dees, the SPLC’s Alabama policy director. While Alabama did not opt in to the 2024 Summer EBT, Dees is working to ensure students have access to nutrition. “The thrust of our campaign is to make sure that it is high on the radar for leaders of the state that they make this a priority,” Dees says. He is working to secure appropriations for the SPLC’s coalition partners, like food banks,

## Prevalence of Household Food Insecurity by State Population, Average 2021–23

Food insecurity rates varied across U.S. states from 2021–2023. The map data represents household statistics for each state. Alabama had the lowest food insecurity at 11.5%, while Louisiana and Mississippi had the highest at 16.2%. Very low food security ranged from 4.4% in Alabama and Florida to 6.1% in Louisiana and Mississippi.



The USDA defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. It includes two levels:

1. Low food security involves reduced quality and variety in the diet but without significant reduction in food intake.
2. Very low food security reflects disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Services using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2021, 2022, and 2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

to make sure they're in operation for summer 2025, as well as securing some funding for summer 2024.

### Together We Can Make a Difference

Information and advocacy efforts can have a positive impact. In spring 2024, the SPLC and the Hunger Free Alabama coalition's advocacy helped to secure the state's approval of \$10 million to ensure Alabama participates in the 2025 Summer EBT Program.

While the country has made strides with school food programs, we are

still struggling to protect all our children from hunger. The most vulnerable among us, families and children experiencing poverty and food insecurity, often do not have the access to advocate for themselves due to some of the same barriers to participation in food programs. Therefore, we all must make the commitment to advocate for ensuring children in the U.S. do not go hungry and families are supported. And we all have a responsibility to hold our elected officials accountable for prioritizing the well-being of all children.

Ultimately, how the nation moves forward in preventing child hunger will depend on whether we believe it is a moral imperative to ensure all children have access to food, along with other necessities such as shelter, health care and education. Amid the haranguing about the state of divisive politics in the U.S. and the need to protect children, what does it say about our commitment to our so-called "national security" if we do not offer all our children free and accessible nutrition? ●

**Anthony Conwright** (he/him) is a journalist and educator.







# American Patriotic Songs: Context and Perspective

Exploring the historical complexity of this music lets us confront the various voices, functions and stories that a single patriotic song can embody.

By **Teresa L. Reed**

Illustration by **John Jay Cabuay**

**Patriotic rituals** and songs, intended to evoke a sense of national unity and pride, are common in schools and community events across the United States. Many teachers lead daily recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance, and athletic events and ceremonial functions typically begin with a performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Patriotic songs sometimes have complex origins and histories that reflect the social and political realities of our American past — history that should be examined and taught with honesty and objectivity. These songs can teach powerful lessons about context and perspective.

All creative works bear the imprint of their cultural and historical contexts, and it is impossible to fully understand a song without having a sense of who created it and why. We must also reckon with the subjectivity we bring to the experience of a song, regardless of its creator’s original intent. When we explore this music with openness to its complexity, we confront the various voices, functions and stories that a single patriotic song can embody.

“The Star-Spangled Banner” is a perfect place to begin this exploration. Among the countless performances of the national anthem, two are especially iconic. In August 1969, Jimi Hendrix played an unforgettable rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Woodstock. Hendrix used his electric guitar to perform what many saw as a scathing commentary on U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He interspersed the phrases of the national anthem with sounds that mimicked exploding bombs, pealing sirens and the melancholy strains of taps. The context of the historical time, venue and audience have led to interpretations of this performance as being anti-war dissent. In 1991, Whitney Houston performed the national anthem to widespread acclaim for her inspiring and flawless vocal delivery at the Super Bowl XXV halftime show dedicated to honoring troops in the Gulf War. While Hendrix’s performance is often considered a protest, Houston’s is viewed as a tribute. The complexity of historical perspective can encourage dialogue, not only about the creative work and its performance but also the context of audience and intention.

Composed in 1814 by Francis Scott Key during the War of 1812, the lyrics that became the national anthem were written as a poem that was later set to music and renamed “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In 1931, more than a hundred years later, at a time following World War I and the beginnings of the Great Depression, the song was adopted as the national anthem. Key’s song reflected a romanticized moment of the American past before the Civil War, which made it appealing in the efforts to energize a narrative of unity.

When Key wrote of the “land of the free and the home of the brave” in 1814, most African American people were enslaved. Key described himself as a reluctant and benevolent enslaver, and he expressed doubt that people of African descent had the capacity to participate as equals in American democracy. A largely forgotten third verse in “The Star-Spangled Banner” is an indication of Key’s mindset:

*No refuge could save the hireling  
and slave*

*From the terror of flight or the gloom  
of the grave,*

*And the Star-Spangled Banner in  
triumph doth wave*

*O’er the land of the free and the home  
of the brave.*

Key voiced his conviction that emancipation for enslaved people would result in their ruin. As a founding member of the American Colonization Society, Key believed that the “Negro problem” could be solved by shipping Black people back to Africa.

John Brown (1800-59), a younger contemporary of Key’s, embraced a radically different solution to the slavery problem. While Key favored expelling African American people from the U.S., Brown favored abolition and equality. Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in October 1859 was a failed attempt to overthrow slavery, but his valiant efforts were celebrated in a song with these lyrics:



*John Brown's body lies a-mouldering  
in the grave*

*While weep the sons of bondage whom  
he ventured all to save*

*But though he sleeps, his life was lost  
while struggling for the slave*

*His soul is marching on.*

During the Civil War, Union soldiers popularized this version of the song, but Confederates used the same tune to insert pro-slavery lyrics. Julia Ward Howe, an abolitionist, finally adapted the tune to the lyrics of what is now known as the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” with its familiar refrain, “Glory, glory, hallelujah, his truth is marching on!”

“The Star-Spangled Banner” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic” both show how the issue of enslavement weighed on the 19th-century national consciousness. Twentieth-century patriotic music embodies stories of our nation’s continuing struggle with racial and ethnic differences. Along with anti-Black racism, intense hatred of the “other” took many forms. Immigrants fleeing Europe for the U.S., for example, often sought safety from discrimination by concealing their ethnic identities. In the 1890s, Israel Baline moved with his family to the U.S. after an antisemitic mob destroyed their home. He grew up in New York, and by his early 20s, he had replaced his Jewish birth name with “Irving Berlin.”

Berlin joined the ranks of patriotic songwriters with his release of “God Bless America,” the original version of which he penned in 1918 while serving in the military during World War I. It was singer Kate Smith, however, who popularized the modern version of “God Bless America” in 1938 when she performed it live on her national broadcast.

In the early 20th century, antebellum norms of racial inequality took on new forms, and anti-Black racism created new pathways to commercial success. Like many of her generation, Smith capitalized on this reality, with widely



known performances of anti-Black tunes. Sadly, Smith was not unique in the practice of anti-Black expression in popular culture. Well into the middle of the century, American popular songs were replete with racial stereotypes – particularly in the U.S. minstrel tradition, the first form of mass popular entertainment in the nation – in lyrics usually intended to be lighthearted and funny.

Bert Williams is perhaps the most well known of the African American artists who adapted these racist norms to their own use. Others included Bob Cole and John Rosamond Johnson (discussed later as co-creator of the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing”). These Black artists, following the practice white minstrel performers used, blackened their own skin with burnt cork, widened their lips, and adapted the self-deprecating, caricatured conventions of minstrelsy to achieve commercial gain at a time when most doorways to prosperity were closed to African Americans.

“God Bless America” was the sentiment of a Jewish songwriter who, through deliberate assimilation, found refuge, access, opportunity and upward mobility that were not possible for him in his native Russia. The song resonated with people who had access to the American dream. This dream, however, was out of reach for many Americans of color. In 1938 – the same year that Berlin and Smith confirmed the place of “God Bless America” among the canon of patriotic songs – the Federal Housing Administration erected a barrier that would thwart economic opportunity for African Americans for generations to come. Its 1938 Underwriting Manual sanctioned restrictive housing covenants favoring white homeownership. The federal government’s facilitation of redlined communities, together with its systematically race-based lending practices, prevented many African American people from homeownership and its attendant economic benefits. From

We need to understand that patriotic songs are not simply celebrations of national greatness; they are products of a complex society constructed on a foundation of racial inequality.

Reconstruction well into the 1960s, many African American people faced danger when attempting to exercise their right to vote, and they had no equal protection under the law. Those who dared to advance themselves and build their communities often faced violence and oppression as reactions to their efforts at self-uplift.

Woody Guthrie recognized the class disparities in the U.S., and his “This Land Is Your Land,” written in 1940 and recorded in 1944, was said to have been in protest to Berlin’s “God Bless America.” According to anthropology professor and folklorist Nick Spitzer, the original title of Guthrie’s tune was “God Bless America for Me.” Its lyrics addressed class discrimination, hunger and poverty, and its refrain asserts that “this land was made for you and me.” Although Guthrie’s song underscored the plight of many Depression-era Americans, it was initially unclear that he considered Indigenous Americans, African Americans and other people of color to be rightful co-owners of the land in question. Evidence suggests that Guthrie’s views on race evolved over time. According to author Scott Borchert, Woody Guthrie “like many whites from the same background ... was casually racist as a young man, and sometimes performed degrading minstrel songs during his early years on the radio.” Borchert explains that Guthrie’s sensitivity evolved to the point where he eventually became an outspoken opponent of bigotry.

Black people have held stubbornly to our nation’s frequently broken promises. This stalwart hope emerges in the lyrics of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” also known as the “Black National Anthem.” John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954) and James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) composed the song in 1900 for children at the Jacksonville, Florida, school where the two brothers taught. For nearly 125 years, the song has resonated with Afro-descendant people who find its message aligned with both the harsh reality of Blackness in the U.S. and a persistent hope in what our country can be:

*Lift every voice and sing*

*Til earth and heaven ring*

*Ring with the harmony of Liberty.*

*Let our rejoicing rise,*

*High as the list’ning skies,*

*Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.*

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.*

*Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.*

*Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,*

*Let us march on till victory is won.*

The ideals of liberty, freedom and bravery emerge as salient themes in the Black National Anthem just as they do in other patriotic songs.

We need to understand that patriotic songs are not simply celebrations of national greatness; they are products of a complex society constructed on a foundation of racial inequality. Music and other creative spheres are contested spaces where different experiences, beliefs, values and perspectives can clash and compete for prominence as narrative.

The current wave of anti-DEI legislation in many states across the U.S. is grounded in the racist desire to view American people as a monolith, even though history bears out that the opposite is true. As this brief

exploration shows, with “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as powerful evidence, American patriotism has never been one-size-fits-all.

Educators and community leaders can facilitate dialogues across difference by using these songs to teach honest history. They should challenge young people to think critically about the narratives associated with these songs and help students realize their power to interrogate those narratives. Most importantly, they should help young people develop the enduring understanding that context, experience and perspective all shape the complex, fluid and multifarious nature of American identity.

**Teresa L. Reed**, Ph.D. (she/her) is the dean of the School of Music at the University of Louisville.





# Protect LGBTQ+ Progress Toward Equality

Recognizing that LGBTQ+ equality is interconnected with the fundamental rights of all people is essential in strengthening our shared democracy.

By **Tim Kennedy** and **Harry Chiu**

Illustration by **Sunny Paulk**



**The LGBTQ+ equality** movement in the United States has made extraordinary progress in the past few decades. While LGBTQ+ people have always existed, the freedom to live openly and equally, to have visible representation, is powerful and relatively new in our society.

But that life-affirming progress is at risk because of increasing threats from discriminatory anti-LGBTQ+ state laws and policies. LGBTQ+ equality was hard-won and is still fragile. And for LGBTQ+ people of color, the injustices of racism compound the harm, especially amid political efforts to control bodily autonomy, including reproductive rights and gender identity.

LGBTQ+ people are family members, friends and colleagues who want the

same rights to marry who we love, live freely without discrimination for who we are, raise our children in safety, and be a part of our communities and our nation. Our lives and rights to equality and dignity cannot be reduced to a culture war or political wedge issue to be exploited.

#### **Hard-Won Gains in the Journey to Equality**

An illustrative example of the road to change is “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT), the former federal policy that allowed LGBTQ+ individuals in the military only if they concealed their sexuality. The policy went into effect in 1994 and was touted by supporters as progress, replacing an outright ban on LGBTQ+ service members. As a compromise, DADT allowed LGBTQ+ people to serve in the military – as long as they remained silent and invisible.

By the time the law was officially repealed in 2011 (and after the injustice of thousands of LGBTQ+ service members discharged over the 17 years of DADT), requiring LGBTQ+ service members to hide in order to serve their country was considered a violation of equal rights and an affront to integrity. But the change in mindset didn’t evolve on its own; years of legal, advocacy and education efforts finally resulted in LGBTQ+ people serving openly in our military.

The trajectory of DADT has been repeated across multiple fronts. Marriage equality has gone from a distant dream a generation ago to the law of the land. Employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity has been outlawed. DADT’s repeal marked the beginning of a decade of enormous



legal gains for LGBTQ+ people. The most significant recent milestone in the fight for LGBTQ+ equality was the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide and affirmed that the right to marry is a fundamental liberty that cannot be denied based on sexual orientation. The victory was the culmination of decades of advocacy and legal battles, as well as a cultural movement for acceptance and recognition of LGBTQ+ relationships.

Another pivotal moment was the Supreme Court's decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* in 2020, which ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. *Bostock* extended crucial workplace protections to LGBTQ+ individuals, ensuring that they could not be fired or otherwise discriminated against in the workplace because of their identity.

**“As a Black, queer man raised in the South for the majority of my life, queer visibility has been a life-sustaining force.”**

**David Hodge**

While these milestones concerned the rights of adults, for young people they signaled that LGBTQ+ discrimination was unacceptable – and provided hope for a future in which LGBTQ+ people's rights would be unequivocally respected nationwide. These advancements in equality have been transformative; for many young people, what it feels like to grow up queer has changed dramatically.

“As a Black, queer man raised in the South for the majority of my life, queer visibility has been a life-sustaining force,” says David Hodge, JEDI training specialist at the Southern Poverty Law Center. “It takes courage to ‘be’ when one is at odds with the world around them. In the decades since I reached adulthood, society has expanded representation more broadly than I could have imagined in my wildest dreams.”

### **Pushbacks and Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation**

Even as a new generation shares in the glimmers of hope from the hard-won gains in equality, those recent rights have come under attack. The Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, rolling back decades of women's rights to safe abortion, reminds us that LGBTQ+ people's rights are not secure.

In recent years, the pushback against LGBTQ+ equality and visibility has intensified. One of the most notable examples is Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act, often referred to as the “Don't Say Gay” law. Enacted in 2022, the law restricts discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in school classrooms. Civil rights activists point out that the law stigmatizes LGBTQ+ youth and families and deprives them of support and protection while erasing LGBTQ+ representation from the educational environment. The Florida legislation has prompted similar bills in other states, part of a broader discriminatory push against LGBTQ+ inclusion in society.

Transgender rights activist Nikole Parker explained the motivation for her work in Florida in a 2023 interview with Learning for Justice: “Growing up, I always thought I would have to hide my identity forever. I knew this journey to living authentically would be difficult, but I didn't know the loneliness, trauma and overt discrimination I would experience. I choose to advocate and use my voice for those who have been silenced, those who feel they have no power,

because I've been there. In a world where we are constantly told we are everything but human, I want to be someone who will always unapologetically remind people that transgender individuals are human beings who deserve dignity and respect like everyone else.”

Despite research and pleas from advocates that anti-LGBTQ+ legislation endangers the mental health and lives of young people, politically motivated anti-inclusion agendas continue to spread, especially targeting transgender youth. Several states have passed laws restricting gender-affirming care and requiring students to use bathrooms and locker rooms corresponding to their sex assigned at birth rather than their gender identity. Efforts to ban transgender students from participating in sports teams aligned with their gender identity have proliferated – and are widely criticized for discriminating against and harming trans youth. The impact of these measures can be profound, creating an environment of fear and exclusion and erasing crucial LGBTQ+ visibility in communities and schools.

But inclusivity has incredible potential to benefit all young people, creating affirming spaces that celebrate our diversity. Hodge urges us to embrace that inclusivity, stating, “Queer youth, especially queer youth of color, deserve to live in a world that loves them back enough to show them possibility models and gives them a sense that they can contribute to society in powerful ways as well.”

### **Protecting Equality Is Essential to Democracy**

Community efforts that build the capacity for dialogue and increase civic knowledge, skills and disposition, especially in the Deep South, can positively impact the movement for equality and justice. Spaces that encourage learning and understanding are essential for combating hate and strengthening democracy.

A vital part of strengthening democracy is ensuring all people share in fundamental rights and

equality so they can thrive. To marry, have families, serve our country, and experience dignity and equal treatment at work, school and in our communities are basic human rights that we should all advocate to ensure for ourselves, our neighbors and all people.

Participation in democracy is a responsibility, whether we are advocates for change, candidates for office or voters in elections. In “Civics for Democracy,” Jalaya Liles

Dunn, Learning for Justice’s director, emphasized our civic responsibility to our nation and to one another: “Each plea for democracy illustrates how, across generations, we have strived for representation. We push for it, challenge it and shape it. Civics is a collective action, practiced in community and centering the well-being of the collective.”

And as we learn together in community and work to build a

stronger democracy, recognizing that the rights of LGBTQ+ people are interconnected with human rights of all people is essential. ●

**Tim Kennedy** (he/him) is a writer, editor and communications specialist with experience at Learning for Justice and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).

**Harry Chiu** (he/him) is the Lynn Walker Huntley Social Justice Fellow at the Southern Education Foundation and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).

## Know Your Rights

### LGBTQ+ Children in Public Schools

- Students have a right to express their gender as they wish. While students must follow gender-neutral dress codes – e.g., no profanity on T-shirts – they cannot be forced to comply with gender-specific guidelines. The same is true of hair length, makeup, prom attire, jewelry, footwear, etc. Guidelines based on a student’s sex assigned at birth violate a student’s rights to freedom from discrimination. As long as one student can wear an outfit without breaking rules, so can another.
- Students have a right to be free of harassment and to have harassment treated seriously. Public schools must treat harassment or bullying that targets LGBTQ+ students and students of LGBTQ+ families with the same seriousness they would use in a case of harassment against any other child. Students should report harassment or threats to a principal or counselor. This puts the school on notice that they can be held legally responsible for not protecting students.
- Students have a right to form Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). If your school permits other student clubs, it should allow students to form and publicize a GSA.
- LGBTQ+ students have a right to attend proms, field trips and dances.

Students cannot be denied equal access to school events or school learning opportunities because of their identity. Students also have the right to take a date of any gender to school dances as long as their date satisfies all attendance eligibility rules, such as age limits.

- LGBTQ+ students have a right to be “out.” Educators can always ask students to stop disruptive speech – in the classroom during a lecture, for instance. But schools cannot tell a student not to talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity while at school.
- Students have a right to express LGBTQ+ pride. If your school’s dress code allows students to wear T-shirts with slogans or pictures, it’s unlawful for your school to ask a student to not wear a shirt simply because it endorses LGBTQ+ pride or makes a statement about their LGBTQ+ identity.
- Some states and cities explicitly protect the right of transgender students to use restrooms and locker rooms consistent with their gender identity. Several courts have also ruled that excluding transgender boys and girls from using the same restrooms as other boys and girls violates federal law. This is an area that is changing a great deal right now.

### LGBTQ+ Educators

- Educators have a right to express their gender as they wish. Discipline and discrimination based on an educator’s sex assigned at birth violate their right to be free from discrimination based on sex. As long as one teacher can wear something without breaking rules, so can another.
- Educators have a right to be free of employment discrimination based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Public schools cannot subject educators to employment discipline or otherwise treat them differently because they disapprove of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Intentionally discriminating against educators or any other employees on these bases violates Title VII.
- Educators have a right to be free of workplace harassment and to have such harassment treated seriously. Public schools must treat harassment that targets LGBTQ+ educators with the same seriousness they would use in a case of harassment against any other employee. Ignoring harassment and bullying is a violation of Title VII. Further, workplace harassment based on gender identity and/or sexual orientation is prohibited under Title VII, and public schools must respond promptly to such harassment if they are aware of it.



# Children Are a Rainforest of Potential

A conversation with Georgia educator Katie Rinderle, who was fired for reading a children's book about acceptance.

### By Learning for Justice and Katie Rinderle

**Katie Rinderle** taught for over a decade in Cobb County, Georgia. In 2023, she was fired for reading the illustrated children's book *My Shadow Is Purple* by Scott Stuart to her fifth-grade class – a book her students had selected. Rinderle recently took time for a conversation with Learning for Justice to give us a glimpse into the heart of a committed educator.

#### Tell us what teaching means to you.

From a young age, I've believed in the power of education as a pathway to freedom in a world where injustice and inequity persist. When I first stepped into the classroom, I understood that being an educator meant igniting a fire within each student.

For over 10 years, my classroom has been a space where children discover their voices, become critical thinkers, grow in empathy and learn to actively



engage with society. This safe, student-centered space for learning has been the heart from where I teach.

Being a teacher means getting to know each student, understanding their unique backgrounds and inspiring them to love learning and personal growth. I strongly believe in every student's potential to make a positive impact on society. But it's not a one-person show. Creating an environment where children thrive demands a collective approach within the classroom setting, and it is our greatest responsibility as educators to create welcoming spaces that amplify diverse voices and support the whole child physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and academically.

#### **What values guide you as an educator?**

My primary goal is to support and guide students toward success while being deeply aware of the societal challenges they face. I listen to their experiences with racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, bullying and other forms of discrimination. I want them to value each other and see how

they can be agents of positive change.

Education is an ongoing journey of self-discovery. My role is to help students understand the world and their place in it, encouraging them to think independently and develop their own perspectives. Through engaging in dialogue with their peers, analyzing various resources, and questioning everything, including me, they experience the most powerful and authentic learning – the kind that transforms both students and teachers alike.

By honoring their identities and teaching from culturally sustaining and inclusive perspectives, we create a nurturing environment where students feel a deep sense of belonging and connection. This approach promotes overall well-being, builds empathy and understanding, addresses root causes of violence, and prevents social isolation and bullying.

When I look into my students' eyes, I see their unique strengths and qualities – their creativity, imagination and intelligence. They are a rainforest of potential. I teach

to provide a safe space where they are not just accepted but celebrated for everything that makes them special and unique, exactly the person they are meant to be.

#### **In reflecting on recent events, what would you share with families and other educators?**

I became an educator because I believe education can create meaningful change. To me, teaching is a verb, an act of love, justice and empowerment.

Today's education system can feel like a dystopian novel, but we must acknowledge reality with courage. We are in an era of transformation, a time of profound and necessary change. We must not only envision the type of learning experience we want for our children and families, but we must also actively question injustice and work for positive change to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive. ●

**Katie Rinderle** (she/her) is a Georgia-based educator and advocate for inclusive education that centers the well-being of all children.

## **Advocate for Inclusive Education**

**Inclusive education promotes schools that are affirming and safe for all children, represents diverse identities in curricula and policies, and is intentional in creating equitable opportunities for all children to learn and thrive. The following recommendations can help you to advocate for inclusive education in your community.**

- Build strong relationships with educators. Discuss with teachers and administrators the best ways to communicate. Let educators know you support inclusive practices.
- Advocate for young people and educators with administrators and district staff and in your community. State your public support for inclusive

learning to express solidarity with young people and educators.

- Show up and speak up at school board meetings. Support educators who are advocating for inclusive education at board meetings.
- Participate in parent and family organizations such as your school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Identify and engage allies in the school and community. Work with educators to build coalitions and support students who are advocating for more inclusive schools.
- Support young people by encouraging school administrators and educators to honor students' identities. Encourage symbols of equity and

allyship throughout the school to create physical reminders that school should be an affirming space for all students.

- Know your child's rights and your rights as a parent with regard to schools and students' education. Research some basic information on your rights.
- Contact your state legislators. The Intercultural Development Research Association's (IDRA) guide "How To Meet With Your Elected Official" is a helpful starting point for preparing to talk to a legislator.





# Fireflies

When 10-year-old Kaden wonders whether he's gay, he turns to his older brother, who offers the love and acceptance all caring adults should give to a child.

By **Deslin Chapman**

Kaden sat on the back steps of the farmhouse. In the growing dark, fireflies danced, and he remembered chasing them in the yard when he was little. A memory flashed in his mind of Dad, laughing as Kaden toddled after his older brothers, Zain and Adil, among the fireflies.

Tears stung Kaden's eyes. *What would Dad think?* Dad had been a Marine, and he'd expect his boys to be honest and brave. But Kaden didn't feel brave. He was 10 now, and he felt like he was getting to know himself. But was he strong enough to be himself? He had so many questions.

The fireflies blinked like stars, and Kaden imagined they were sending him a message in their patterns across the backyard: *Talk to Zain*. His oldest brother had just come home and was with Mom and Nani. He knew they were all worried about him.

Kaden had always shared everything with his brothers. *But should I share this? Now? What if...?* he wondered, and fears of rejection flooded his mind, making his stomach hurt. All the mean things he'd heard from other kids, all the hateful things some adults said; he heard them. He angrily wiped at the tears on his cheeks. *You don't have to say anything*, he reminded himself. But keeping the truth inside made him feel so alone.

*But what if...?*

The back door shut quietly, and Kaden closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Hey, kiddo," Zain said as he stepped down and sat beside Kaden. "Nani says you've been out here a while." Zain looked up at the stars and waited a moment before asking, "Something you want to talk about?"

Kaden glanced at his brother. Zain had the same dark hair and strong face like Dad. At 22, he was everything Kaden wanted to be. Kaden looked down and bit his lip.

"You know, when it feels hard to talk, it helps to remember that if we say things, they can be more manageable," Zain said in his gentle big-brother tone. "Anything you're feeling is human; others have felt them. And you can talk about them."

Kaden met his brother's gaze and made his decision. He stepped down onto the grass, feeling braver among the fireflies. When he spoke, the words tumbled out in a rush. "We were watching TV, and Omar and Kevin were saying how they thought Kamala Khan was cute. You know, in *Ms. Marvel*. They were just, like, saying she was pretty. And ... and ..." He stumbled over his words, then took a breath. "And I thought she was pretty, I did. But I also thought the guy on the show, he ... he was nice, too," he finished in a whisper.

Zain nodded. "I think I know what you're trying to say," he said gently. "But tell me. For yourself."

"I think I might like boys." Kaden paused, then looked directly at his brother. "Am I gay? I think I might be," he said.

Zain stood and walked over, then placed a hand on Kaden's shoulder. "Thanks for trusting me. Who a person's attracted to, their sexual orientation, is part of who they are. It's all right to question. It's OK to not have yourself all figured out right now. Take the time you need. And if you are gay, that's all right. We're here for you. You're going to be OK."

Kaden squinted, studying Zain. "You wouldn't mind having a gay brother?" he asked.

"There's nothing about you that could ever change us, you and me being brothers," Zain answered. "I'll always love you."

The weight of fear eased, and Kaden hugged Zain. "You think Mom and Adil will be OK too? And Nani?"

"You know Mom loves you 'more than anything in the whole multiverse,'" Zain quoted their mom. And they both laughed. "And Adil and Nani are always on your side. We've got you, kiddo." Then Zain grew serious. "What else are you wondering?" he asked.

And the last *what if* worry echoed in Kaden's mind. "What would Dad think?" He asked his last fear in a whisper that seemed so loud. Dad had passed away a few years earlier, and Kaden was afraid his dad would have been disappointed.

Zain sat back down on the steps, and Kaden sat next to him. "I'm sorry you didn't have as much time with Dad," Zain said. Then he smiled. "Dad loved you, and he will always love you. You were little and didn't get to know him. But he knew you. And he'd be proud of who you are; I sure am."

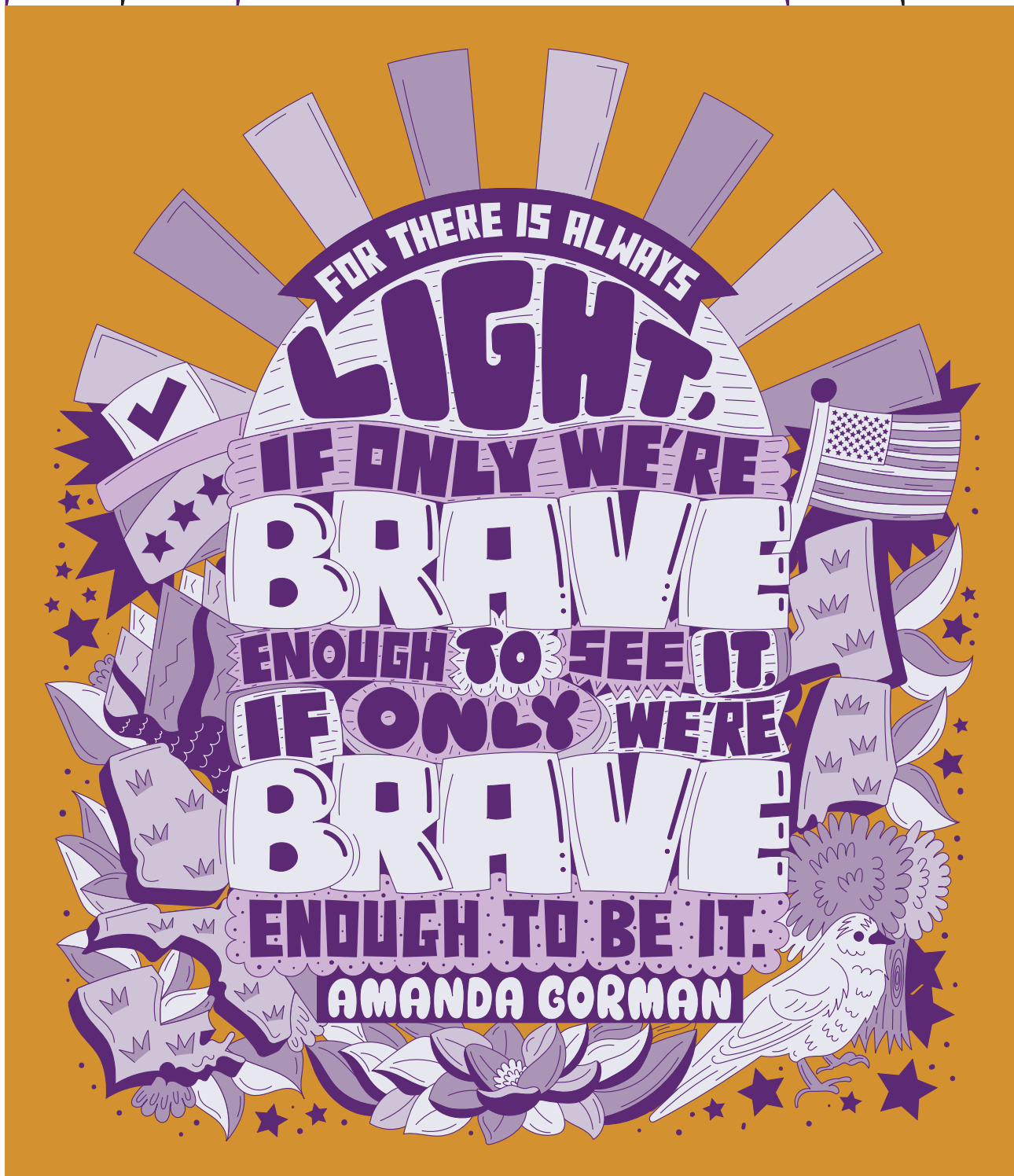
Kaden leaned his head against his brother's shoulder. "Thanks," he said. They sat in silence for a moment, watching the fireflies.

Zain wrapped an arm around Kaden. "I wish the world was easier, that everyone would be accepting, and that you wouldn't have to figure out who you can be open with," Zain said, his voice full of caring. "But know that you are loved, you are not alone, and there will be people who accept you. Be yourself and be proud of who you are. I'm always here for you."

Kaden nodded. And in the flickering of the fireflies, he imagined another message, this one from Dad: *You are loved.* ●

**Deslin Chapman** (she/her) is the deputy director of Curriculum & Content at Learning for Justice.





**Amanda Gorman** is an award-winning writer and activist and the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history. She delivered her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the 2021 inauguration of President Joe Biden.

Learning for Justice One World posters are also available online to print and display. Enjoy!

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