

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Learning Advocacy: A Youth's Perspective

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Abstract

High school can be a difficult place to begin advocating for social justice...especially for a student. This article follows the struggles of one high school student in creating allies for social justice, and in learning how to become an effective communicator in this work.

Rachel Samuels is currently in her first year at Stanford University. While attending Air Academy High School in Colorado Springs, she created the club, Social Action Youth (SAY) at the beginning of her sophomore year, and she is the President of the Gay-Straight Alliance (Spectrum). She has attended the White Privilege Conference since 2008, serving as a Student Leader for the Youth Action Project, and more recently as a Presenter in 2012. She has also presented at the Pedagogy of Privilege Conference at the University of Denver (2011). In addition to participating in school activities and conferences, Rachel has been trained to be an advocate at TESSA, where she volunteers.

“Rachel, do you think this is racist?” my white friend, a fellow ninth-grader, asked me one Halloween, at school, where 80 percent of the population is white. I evaluated his costume: an Arab robe complete with a headscarf. I nodded in response, not quite trusting myself to say anything. I’m not proud of what happened next, but it happened nonetheless. What should have been a calm dialogue evolved into an all-out screaming match in the middle of the hallway. As he yelled about why his costume wasn’t racist, I yelled right back about how offensive it was. I’m not sure how the battle ended, but I nearly gave up on social justice advocacy right then and there. I had not raised awareness; I had not acquired peace; I had only turned myself into a source of entertainment.

I could have vowed to avoid the sensitive topic of race from that moment on, making my life a whole lot easier. That’s the benefit of white privilege, right? I have the ability to just walk away. However, I made a promise to myself instead: to learn how to communicate in a more effective and mature manner.

In the spring of 2010, I attended the White Privilege Conference as a participant in the Youth Leadership Conference. Throughout the conference, I learned plenty of new factual information, furthering my understanding of racial intricacies and intersections of privilege. I met some wonderful people who inspired me to take home what I had learned about social justice.

At the start of sophomore year, I created a club called Social Action Youth, or SAY, to offer a place to start discussions about race. Rather than only making my point in the hallways, I could invite people to come to the club meetings. I started out a

bit rough, since I was on my own. I filled meetings with statistics and intense videos to make a point about “how racist our society really is.” I learned that this technique didn’t bode well for many attending members. My approach was too heavy, too vehement to present at an optional lunchtime experience. My friends came to support me instead of to partake in the conversations, and everyone else seemed to enjoy the complimentary doughnuts more than the discussions. I had advanced from shouting bouts to uni-directional meetings. I could spew facts and examples, but I couldn’t quite connect with my peers on a personal level. It isn’t difficult to lecture; there isn’t much challenge in a setting that allows only one voice. Likewise, there isn’t much growth listening to a lecture, either. How can we learn if we cannot participate?

I returned to the WPC in 2011 as a leader for the Youth Action Project. As a facilitator, I turned my attention toward learning how to better understand my own position as a social justice advocate. I knew the facts; I just had to learn how to use them effectively. It was challenging to acquire a more empathetic approach instead of my usual logical tactics. I sought to become an advocate whom others wanted to approach, rather than a maverick to whom others could not relate.

Before junior year, I was invited to present at The Pedagogy of Privilege Conference at the University of Denver. I explained my challenges in working with other students. While I had overcome some administrative obstacles, I wasn’t quite satisfied with my impact at school. After months of meetings with my administration concerning the official approval of SAY, they finally allowed me the privileges of a school-sponsored club. I had advanced on an institutional level; however, my title as a

“club leader” or a “conference presenter” held no weight in a high school hallway. My friends still made racist jokes and stereotypical comments.

My second year with SAY produced occasional moments of magic. There was one particular meeting for which I happened to be ill prepared. I hadn’t managed to put together a video, or an article, or a lecture. As a spur-of-the-moment decision, I decided to have a conversation about the N-word. I figured this topic would be relevant, since we were reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in AP Language. Instead of leading the meeting at the front of the room, I arranged everyone in a circle, pulled up a chair, and asked one question:

“What do you think of the N-word?”

We engaged in a more elaborate discussion that day than we had at any other meeting. We talked about historical burdens; we mentioned the benefits and detriments of using it in classical novels; we connected on a personal level. At the end of our allotted time, I felt more effective than I ever had before, and I had barely said seven words. This is what it felt like to be a social justice advocate. I sparked a discussion, but I didn’t direct the entire meeting; I listened instead. By stepping back and trusting my peers to provide their own input, I sensed how to be a better communicator. It took more listening than talking.

Uncharacteristically for my school, we had a similar discussion in AP Lang the following day. The young man who had donned that Arabian attire as a frosh raised his hand and explained what he had learned the previous day in SAY: he contrasted the literary merit of *Huckleberry Finn* with the

societal and personal implications of using the N-word. I had been a part of making an impact in the classroom.

That year, I created a mantra for myself: I would rather make progress than make a point.

Upon returning to the WPC in 2012, this time as a presenter, I appreciated presentations such as that of Dr. Charlene Teters, a Spokane Indian artist, educator, and activist. She was one of the many WPC participants who found peace within her work. With that peace, she has been able to connect with others on a deeper level. This, I have realized, is my ultimate goal.

After three years of SAY at my school, I have noticed a growing maturity within my class. I’m not quite sure if this is in direct correlation with the club, but I notice my peers thinking more deeply about comments they would normally have disregarded. By listening more, I seem to better represent the change I desire, since people approach me much more often to inquire about racial topics. At a recent WPC, one Youth participant even told me that she had never seen someone so calm in this work. This particular comment encouraged me to continue to challenge myself and to strive for justice on an even more profound level.

I have since had several opportunities to create workshops and presentations about my challenges in bringing social action to a rather unwelcoming environment. It’s been the hardest task of my high school career, but the small moments of connection make it all worthwhile.