

# Americans Who Tell the Truth

**How do the Speaking Truth to Youth (STTY) videos shed a light on what fuels courage and activism?**

**Purpose:**

**Hear directly from AWTT portrait subjects about what led them to be activists, what guides them, and what advice they have for youth.**

Listen to at least three “interviews” to learn about their activist journeys.

**Reading Assignment:**

**AWTT artist Robert Shetterly’s states**

*“Good art takes time.... It was my determination that slowly building a community, portrait by portrait, of Americans who have fought for racial, economic, social and environmental justice would be the most persuasive and educationally useful thing I could do. Their power may be their invitation to a moment of contemplation, the permission they give viewers to stop and think, to agree or disagree, at the same time requiring that they acknowledge the humanity of the person represented before them. If the art can embody the truth of the person, the viewer may be willing to consider the truth of the subject’s words.*

**The Power of Art** (from the AWTT Website)

Robert Shetterly’s portraits of American truth-tellers, painted on wood panels, measure 36 inches tall by 30 inches wide. He uses brushes, palette knives and his fingers to complete each painting and a dental pick to etch the quote into the surface. Pause to look at the face, the eyes. Take a moment to read the quote. The portraits are the opposite of hot takes or quick opinions. They invite you to ponder a person, their words, the issues that inspire their life’s journey, work, activism, and imagination. And then they welcome you into that vital conversation -- across time and space -- about what it means to be an American citizen.

Art can transform the way a message is articulated and received. The medium of art is aesthetic, visual, and visceral. Non-verbal. It doesn't attack the viewer but invites inquiry and participation. It gives the viewer space to think, feel, react and respond ... or not. The viewer becomes the active participant. The portraits in particular try to present a person who emanates integrity, along with a statement about justice and compassion. They try to present an image of trustworthiness. They hope to elicit a response of integrity and trust and consideration of the issue in return.

**Essential Question:**

How do people find and sustain moral courage and the passion for truth and justice?

**Lesson Description:**

Open your activist mind!  
Check out three or four (or all) of these videos.

**First, consider the art!**

1. Before you watch a Speaking Truth to Youth video, do the following for each video you select:  
 Look at the portrait (link to each portrait is in the video description)  
 Record your impressions of each portrait and video in the chart below.
  - i. Facial expression
  - ii. Colors used
  - iii. What is this person saying to you

Portrait	Expressions	Colors Used	My Impressions
E.g. Maulian Dana	Kind, but serious	Green, purple, dark hair	Approachable, warm, ready to inform me

**Now, watch each video.**

1. Compare your reactions to the video to your reactions to the portrait.

- a. How are they similar?
  - b. How are they different?
2. Go to the AWTT website ([www.americanswhotellthetruth](http://www.americanswhotellthetruth)) and read the biography of each of your chosen portrait subjects.
  3. Select one of the portraits. What qualities of the person did the artist capture in the portrait?
  4. Choose a video interview quotation that you find powerful, perhaps a quotation you think should accompany the quotation currently on the portrait.
  5. After watching the video, what question do you have?

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Why are these people called truth tellers?
- Does speaking the truth make you an activist? Why or why not?
- How did the artist capture the idea of activism?
- What events or people in their youth do these portrait subjects have in common as motivators to become activists?
- What common ideas or behaviors continue to guide them?
- What is something unique about each one?

### **It's Your Turn! Let the Art Inspire Action!**

1. Which piece of advice speaks to you? Why?
2. Which issue speaks to you? Why?
  - a. Climate change
  - b. Racial justice and equity
  - c. Workers' rights
  - d. LGBTQ rights
  - e. Equity in education
  - f. Equity in athletics
  - g. Something else...
3. What problems do you see that need a solution?
4. Choose a problem/s to address.
5. What are some potential paths to solutions?
6. What is your first step? Take it!

