

Americans Who Tell the Truth

Show US Who You Are

Purpose:

The primary goal of this project is to give a voice to youth with the intent of using their work as a way to initiate a dialogue about diverse identities and the power of the arts to help inspire that conversation. Additionally, the project will give teachers the tools to use the arts as a valuable interdisciplinary tool to bring explorations of history, economics, cultural identity, and landscape to the school curriculum.

Reading Assignment:

Connie Carter's Blog: A Symphony of Courageous Action

<https://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/blog/a-symphony-of-courageous-action>

Essential Question:

How do art and narrative/story combine to open discussions to reach understanding?

Lesson Description:

Students will create their self-portraits and write companion narratives about an event, person, and/or belief that helped them become who they are today. Portraits and narratives will be displayed at venues that will promote and allow conversation and discussion about identity, actions, and the common good.

Activity:

Portrait Painting:

1. View portrait painting video by Robert Shetterly (in process of being made)
2. With guidance from an art teacher, create your portrait.

Narrative Writing:

1. Brainstorm components of identity.
2. Think about all of those parts of you, respond to following prompts:
 - Describe something you want people to know about you – something that isn't apparent from just meeting you. It could be something you are passionate about or something tragic or wonderful that has happened to you that shapes the way you live your life or a behavior that none but those closest to you would see
 - Write about a feeling, thought, idea that you have never shared with anyone. Take some time with this and travel to your real inner thoughts and feelings. Be willing to risk and let yourself be vulnerable.
3. Share these with the class if comfortable.
4. Begin to write your narrative, using the following prompt:

How did you get to be who you are today? Talk about the critical events, people, thoughts that have shaped you into the wonderful human being you are at this moment. Go deep and write from your heart.

Share examples below:

Just by people looking at my name, many ideas speculate in their heads. 'She must've immigrated here' 'Damn terrorist,' these are many of the sayings people who aren't familiar of me usually think. But it's most definitely not true. I have been made fun of and threatened just because of my ethnicity and religion. Not that many years ago, I felt the need to prove myself when I felt vulnerable and out of place. I shaped myself to who they wanted me to be. Sad to say, but that is true. However, soon enough, something changed. My family noticed my peculiar need to fit the average 'American girl,' and sensed an embarrassment of my background. One righteous day, I learned my wrongdoings. I saw my supposedly 'group of friends' making fun of this girl just for being Somali. I was, ashamed to admit, with them. When I saw the girl have such sorrow and fear in her eyes, I knew I had to interfere. I may have lost those poor excuses for friends, but I gained some self respect.

After that experience, I started hanging out with people who enjoyed my company and didn't care of my background/beliefs. I praised the fact that I was a Somali American Muslim. Not your average girl is it. Being different, being you, it is a beautiful thing to accomplish. It may have taken being called 'towel head' and 'smelly Somalian,' but I sure pulled through, and I couldn't be happier.

In 7th grade I went on my first Operation Breaking Stereotypes exchange to the Bronx. I wasn't really sure what I was expecting, and what happened was not at all what I had had in mind. Once we arrived in New York we took a subway train into the Bronx. Once in the Bronx we walked a few blocks to the St. Anne's church. As we entered into the church and met everyone I quickly realized that we were probably the only white people in the building. As far as we knew we were the only white people in the whole city. Growing up in Maine you don't get much diversity, and white has always been the majority. Travel to the Bronx and all of a sudden you become the minority and that's a scary feeling. As the exchange went on I realized how similar we all were and how, when you think about it, race really has nothing to do with anything. We were just people getting to know each other. We had forgotten about the fact that we were different races. It didn't matter. We had become friends, and that's what mattered.

Before the exchange I had never even thought about my skin color and how it affected me. So what? I was white. After the exchange I realized just how white I really was. I now know all the advantages being white gives me, and how unfair some of those advantages are. It was an eye opener and I know that I'm a better person because of it. Although I'm in the majority most of the time, I will never forget how I felt for those few days when I was the minority and I will never forget how that's changed me for the better.

Discussion/Suggested Lesson Expansion:

1. Share writings and portraits with the class or with the school or community. Discuss how these stories allow access to a better understanding of a person.
2. Brainstorm other locations to display "Show US Who You Are" and ways to engage community conversations, e.g. libraries, conferences, state buildings.
3. Expand this lesson to include more students, other schools, and other age groups.