

Americans Who Tell the Truth

The Samantha Smith Challenge Building Bridges of Understanding Guidelines 2023-2024

KEY DATES

OCTOBER 25, 2023	Registration opens for SSC
JANUARY 15 - MARCH 29, 2024	Connect with Americans Who Tell the Truth Zoom, in person, connect with portrait subjects
MARCH 1, 2024	Registration deadline for SSC
APRIL 30, 2024	Teachers confirm participation in Samantha Smith Challenge Celebration and/or community connection, submit participation reports
MAY 22, 2024	Samantha Smith Challenge Celebration



WHY THE SAMANTHA SMITH CHALLENGE?

As Americans Who Tell the Truth reflects on Samantha Smith, her journey and her impact, what we see so clearly is her courage to turn her fear into compassionate understanding. She had a willingness to listen, learn others' stories, and find the truth. How do we build bridges of understanding with people we have been told are different? The answer, put simply by Samantha, "be friends by just getting to know each other better...."

AWTT included Samantha Smith's portrait to honor her initiative as she saw a crisis—the Cold War and the nuclear arms race—and did something to make the world better, connecting across real and perceived differences. Samantha left us a legacy. Encourage young citizens to listen, get to know each other, and work for the

common good. Honor Samantha and join this year's **Samantha Smith Challenge**.

Samantha's Story

In December 1982, ten-year-old Samantha Smith of Manchester, Maine, asked her mother if there was going to be a war. She said, "I asked my mother who would start a war and why. She showed me a news magazine with a story about America and Russia, one that had a picture of the new Russian leader, Yuri Andropov, on the cover. We read it together. It seemed that the people in both Russia and America were worried that the other country would start a nuclear war. It all seemed so dumb to me. I had learned about the awful things that had happened during World War II, so I thought that nobody would ever want to have another war. I told Mom that she should write to Mr. Andropov to find out who was causing all the trouble. She said, 'Why don't you write to him?' So I did."

From that one question, a peace-making venture unfolded that brought Russian and American students together building a bridge of understanding and appreciation of one another. Learning the truth, they built connections instead of armies. Sadly, in August 1985, both Samantha and her father were killed in a plane crash. But Samantha's memory lives on in her courageous example.

Following this example of **seeking truth by listening, learning, and building connections**, the **Samantha Smith Challenge** shows students that, no matter what age, they can be part of solving the challenges and problems they see and create the world we all deserve.

Samantha's journey began 41 years ago when she wrote a letter to Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov asking him to, "Please tell me how you are going to help to not have war." Just a year later she was an eleven-year-old teaching adults and children how seeking truth and taking a first step can lead to hope for peace and understanding. Her progress from concern to seeking truth, building connections, and finding hope began with courageous engagement and a series of small steps and decisions—something each of us can do!

The Samantha Smith Challenge encourages every student and classroom to take the journey of truth; listen, learn, build understanding, and act together for the common good.

AWTT suggests that these [Guiding Principles from the Maine Learning Results](#) might guide all students across our country. The Samantha Smith Challenge creates ways for educators to make these principles come alive for their students.

[Watch this capsule of Samantha Smith's journey](#)

Engaged and Passionate Students Learn More! Building Bridges of Understanding

A note for educators:

AWTT realizes that teachers incorporate the Samantha Smith Challenge into their classrooms in many ways. We know that teachers know their students and their learning needs best. Some educators use this as a group project, some as a challenge for individual students, and some for the entire class. Likewise, some educators will do this as a short-term activity, and some will use it as a focus for the year. We have designed this project to accommodate any of those options. Although we offer a sequence of steps, please know that you are the ones who decide if you need to take shortcuts, expand certain ideas, or just decide to follow this plan as presented. We want you to engage in ways that work for you and look forward to hearing about your amazing work.

Prepare for the Challenge:

*The following activities will help prepare students for the Challenge.
Do them all or choose what supports your plan.*

1. Consider these essential questions:

What does it mean to be a Truth Teller?
Why is truth important in our world?
What causes truth to be compromised?
How do the CREATIVE ARTS move people to engagement and action?

2. Discuss the following ideas of Truth:

- **Foundational Truths:** The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution express our ideals of equality and justice, which are defined truths of our nation.
- **Truth and Trust:** Unless people try to tell each other the truth as they know it, they cannot trust each other. And, obviously, any relationship, personal or public, fails without trust.

- **True Challenges:** Unless we are willing to name the true causes of a problem, we cannot fix it. For instance, if we deny that the burning of fossil fuels plays a role in climate change, we will not be able to avert climate catastrophe.
- **True Knowledge:** If we don't teach our true history, its shame as well as its nobility, we cannot know who we are. People who don't know themselves are dangerous to themselves and to others because they act from ignorance and self-serving myths.

3. Complete the Lesson: [Who are AWTT Truth Tellers?](#)

4. Complete: [Introductory Lesson for Speaking Truth to Youth videos](#)

5. Consider the power of music...

"Music opens the heart so the mind can learn." – Noel Paul Stookey

What music moves you?

What music moves you to action, to work for the common good?

Identify two songs that open your heart, engage your mind, and move you to action.

Listen here for a couple of songs to get you started.

[*It's Who We Are*](#) by AWTT Truth Teller Reggie Harris

[*Stand Together*](#) by AWTT Truth Tellers Emma's Revolution

And of course, [Taylor Swift - Only the Young \(Featured in Miss Americana / Lyric Video\)](#)

Check out this link: [Music to Life](#)

Accept the challenge!

STEP ONE

Learn to listen

To build bridges of understanding, it is important to practice empathy and active listening. Here are some quick examples of how to do that. These are skills that students will need, to be able to understand all sides of the issue they explore and to be able to act in ways for the common good.

[Brené Brown on Empathy](#)

[Active Listening: Katie Owens at TEDxYouth@Conejo](#)

For more information about storytelling and sharing and building empathy, check out the extensive resources of [Narrative 4](#).

STEP TWO

Ask students to choose an issue that is important to them.

Individual students, a group, or an entire class should pick a meaningful issue – a problem in their community, state, country or the world that matters to them and that they are motivated to help solve.

Possible approaches to choosing an issue:

- Have the class brainstorm together.
- Present an issue that you know is of concern in the community.
- Invite a panel of community members to talk with your class about community concerns/issues.
- Go to the AWTT website for ideas. Use the Themes filtering tool on the [Portrait Galleries page](#) to focus in on particular issues, or read about issues that are of concern to specific portrait subjects.

STEP THREE

Discovery! Do research and find the facts about the issue.

Suggestions

- Students generate a list of questions about all the things they don't know or understand about their chosen topics.

- Individually or in teams, students find answers to the questions and become fact-gathering machines!
- Go to the [Portrait Galleries on the AWTT](#) website and explore by themes. See if the student-chosen issue is represented there. If so, read about the portrait subjects who have addressed that issue. Use them as starting points.
- Use the resources listed beside the portraits.
- Go to the [Speaking Truth To Youth](#) section of the AWTT website and listen to Truth Tellers who have been involved in your chosen issue.
- Contact AWTT if there is a living portrait subject with whom your students may want to connect. Many of them are happy to speak with students!
(connie@americanswhotellthetruth.org)
- Interview local stakeholders (people concerned about the issue).
 - Why is this issue important to them?
 - What connection does this issue have to their identity?
 - What are they doing to address the issue?
 - What is their strategy/plan for making a long-term difference?
 - What are the obstacles to improving this issue?
 - What else needs to be done?
 - How can we help?

STEP FOUR

Create the message or the action!

- Who is the **audience** for your message/action? Parents? Teachers? Lawmakers? Other students? People in your community?
- Decide the **purpose** of your message or action!
 - Consider the following possibilities:
 - Help people in their communities to re-imagine where they live.
 - Provoke local authorities by calling out an injustice in the community.
 - Inspire people to join the fight against climate change, homelessness, inequality, etc.
 - Shed light on a practice or event most people don't know or don't understand.
 - Encourage or challenge people in power who are doing good/not good work.
- Tell the **story** of your issue – some suggestions:
 - Start by stating the issue as a question, e.g.,
 - Why are there homeless people in my community?
 - What should the minimum wage be?
 - What kind of energy can take us sustainably into the future?
 - How can our school/town reduce its carbon footprint?
 - What can we do to address bullying in our school?

- Check out storytelling suggestions from [This I Believe](#) in association with National Public Radio
- Pick one incident or critical moment and tell it as a first person story (as though you are someone directly affected by the issue).

STEP FIVE

Bring your message and action to life!

Use the Arts! Remember ... Use the power of the arts to make your message come alive!

- The arts create a context for conversation.
 - The creative arts cause people to ask questions that need to be asked.
 - The creative arts help people feel, open hearts and minds to understanding, motivate them to act.
- Make paintings, original musical compositions, essays, theater skits or any other form of creative expression that communicates the identified concern and responds to the academic needs of your classroom. (*Some students may choose their medium while others may be working in a specific class that teaches drawing or painting, theater or film-making, where the medium will be defined by the teacher.*)
- Check out some examples of delivering messages of truth and hope using the creative arts
 - "[Lost Voices](#)" (Button Poetry video) .
 - [One Person](#) by Monte Selby and the 2017 SSC Participants
 - And, a little Hanson: [I Was Born](#)
 - [Hope](#) by Jason Robert Brown
- Get a response!! Contact the target audience/s and schedule an exhibit, performance, forum or other method of presentation, connection, march, or happening. Build a bridge of understanding!

AND FINALLY...

Submit your project participation reports by April 30, 2024 to connie@americanswhotellthetruth.org

Join the Samantha Smith Challenge Celebration and share your project with other Samantha Smith Challenge participants. Consider creating a Samantha Smith Challenge Celebration in your community to broaden awareness of your issue and build bridges of understanding that lead to action for the common good.

Look for May Celebration details or suggestions about how to create a Community Celebration - coming soon.