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Changemakers: Harpers Ferry History Prompts Social Awareness

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Abstract

The day after the mass shooting at the Orlando gay nightclub Pulse was a Monday, and I was thoroughly unable to process my emotions or ponder the repercussions of the massacre upon walking into work that morning. I oscillated between bewilderment, grief, hopelessness, anger. My heart was tender. I chose silence as a defense mechanism.

[excerpt]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Changemakers: Harpers Ferry History Prompts

Social Awareness

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

By [Annika Jensen '18](#)

The day after the mass shooting at the Orlando gay nightclub Pulse was a Monday, and I was thoroughly unable to process my emotions or ponder the repercussions of the massacre upon walking into work that morning. I oscillated between bewilderment, grief, hopelessness, anger. My heart was tender. I chose silence as a defense mechanism.

In the midst of a traumatic year of violence, a year of being roused early many mornings by my phone buzzing with news updates about another terrorist attack or another shooting, this event had affected me the most profoundly, striking me full of emotion and affecting my day-to-day life more so than any other tragedy in the previous months. I fumbled through the motions of getting dressed, making my coffee, brushing my teeth in a state of overwhelm. I carried an emptiness when I led the day's student group, about twenty campers exploring nearby parks and battlefields, across the B&O Railroad Bridge into lower town, and while my supervisor was getting them oriented with park rules and guidelines I felt I was in mourning.



Photo by the author

We have a student activity, affectionately dubbed “change,” in which we ask the kids to think about the changes they want to make in their worlds, using the story of John Brown’s dedication to a life of abolitionist efforts at the age of 12 to inspire them, and in the past weeks I had been impressed and encouraged by the answers I had received from our Jr. NYLC (National Youth

Leaders Conference) scholars, ages 10-13. Examples included changes such as eliminating bullying, reducing peer pressure and drug use, stopping deforestation, and aiding in the refugee crisis, among others. While I had been pleased with these answers, their importance did not strike me until that Monday, the morning after the Pulse shooting.

The grief I was experiencing did not lessen, but the looming despair and anger and fear was assuaged, if but a little bit, when the first camper spoke up and said that she wanted people to stop discriminating against one another. It was a simple answer, a broad one with a nearly unfathomable solution, but it demonstrated to me that these kids were not in the dark. They were not the ignorant millennial illustration that the dying boomer newspapers love to print. Rather, they had an idea of what tumult and violence was plaguing their world, and while they may not have had feasible solutions for fixing it, they were conscious.

Another student raised his hand; "I want to stop ISIS," he said. Another idealism without a tangible solution, but when asked why he was passionate about making this change, he cited human rights motivations rather than the typical fear-mongering or trigger-happy rhetoric of defeating terrorism.

At the end of the day we had the chance to address current events directly. We had taken the campers through John Brown's raid, the Civil War, the founding and history of Storer College, and the Niagara Movement, so social justice was fresh on their minds. When my supervisor mentioned the previous day's shooting, they were all aware not just that the event had occurred but that it was encumbered with powerful and disturbing ramifications. They knew as well as I that this would be difficult to discuss.

My supervisor asked them about discrimination: who would like to share an example of a time you or a friend have been the victim of prejudice? No hands were raised. We continued to pry, saying it could be racial prejudice, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, all of the above. Still, no hands were raised. The complexity of the issue of discrimination was festering in an air of reservation.

"I'll share an example," I said, just to get the ball rolling. A part of me was still dragged down in yesterday's news. I told them about my best friend from college, a gay woman, and how she was once told that she wasn't worth the blood in her body; I mentioned that she found comfort and acceptance at gay clubs, just like Pulse, and that the previous day's shooting made me afraid because it forced me before the reality that someone would be willing to take her life simply because of who she loved.

The campers were quiet, but one hand slowly began to rise; it belonged to a girl who had been fairly outspoken and engaged in discussion all day. She told us that she had two moms and was often bullied because of it. What she did not mention was perhaps more stark than what she did, however. She did not go into detail about what people said to her or exactly how she was

treated for having gay parents, nor did she tell us how she felt about the shooting in Orlando; she did not talk about her own sexuality; she did not mention the legality of gay marriage or its reception in the United States. While she remained quiet on these issues, we could tell they were not absent from her mind.

The campers that visited the park that day, as well as the Jr. NYLC scholars, have shown a dedication to and higher awareness of social issues than many might expect from them. These kids are not just reading headlines from a newspaper but are experiencing in their daily lives, for better or for worse, contemporary societal challenges that have been shaped by the many influential figures in Harpers Ferry history. Many are students of color, half are young women, some are members of the LGBTQ+ community, and others are immigrants or first generation Americans. All, however, display an admirable understanding of the current world, whether their opinions align with my own or not.



Photo by the author

That Monday I realized the significance of discussing change with students. The problems that they saw—the ways in which they were oppressed—and how they intended to solve them, are no less legitimate than those discussed on the floor of the Capitol or in the U.N. Headquarters. They have every right to determine the course of the world because they understand the value

of human relationships and studying the past. From their journey from John Brown's raid to the Civil Rights Movement, these students have learned how one individual can catalyze human history.

I left work that day with my heart a little lighter.

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