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Pajamas for Change

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Pajamas for Change

Abstract

I created a protest called the "Where Are the Children Project" to bring attention to the immigrant children held in detention centers. Throughout the project I was able to see how much others cared about helping these children gain better living conditions, and I was able to learn about leadership and resistance. My values helped drive me into action, and the importance of what I was working towards helped me become more confident. After months of protests, the Homestead Detention Center where reports of maltreatment had been especially high was closed, but my work to improve the rights of immigrants still continues.

Keywords

Protest, Immigration, child detention, Where Are the Children

Disciplines

Immigration Law | Politics and Social Change

Comments

Honorable mention for the 2020 Georges Lieber Essay Content on Resistance.

Pajamas for Change

The rain came down relentlessly, but I was already soaked to the bone. I was more worried about keeping the petition papers in my hand dry than I was about myself. As I walked around the puddles in the gravel paths of the National Mall, I watched people looking up at my work, the clotheslines of children's pajamas, swaying in the wind.

A reporter approached me, inquiring what had inspired me to lead this protest, and what I hoped to accomplish.

"We are here today to show our representatives that we are outraged by this racist policy, and we are not going away," I replied. "I started this because there needs to be a change."

The volunteers and I split up along the paths, clipboards, papers, and pens at the ready. I stood on the corner of the display excited to talk to anyone coming off the subway. As their faces appeared from the underground stairwell, I could see shock and interest in their expressions. I set to work, informing others of why I, and so many others who had volunteered, were here today. We were spreading the message of the horrors certain immigrant children are illegally facing, and I was a leader to help guide their drive.

Back in June 2018, President Trump announced the zero-tolerance immigration policy, that would separate children from their parents. As the news released more information of the inhumane manner in which these children were being treated, outrage, including mine, built throughout the country. At first it seemed that the children would soon be reunited with their loved ones. There was so much anger about what was happening, I believed public opinion would sway the powers that be. There was the Flores Agreement that restricted the length of time immigrant children could be held in custody to 20 days. There were new court orders giving

timelines of how long the children could be kept apart from their families. Yet there were still suffering children. In addition to this I discovered that the US was holding over 15, 000 unaccompanied migrant children in detention centers, in addition to the hundreds who had been separated from their families. Many people said this policy would not be able to carry on and that there would be a change soon. But the imminent change never arrived, and children were left, forgotten, in cages.

After a few months, I came to the realization that unless people kept fighting, there would never be a change. In September, the congregation that I attend, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia held a service on “Advancing Just Migration for All.” Earlier that year, in April, three students from my congregation and I chose to attend a youth conference at the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office on the same topic. It was because of this experience that I was asked if I would like to participate in the service. I chose to address the issue of detainment of immigrant children and the separation of immigrant children from their families, an issue that was starting to be forgotten but was still unresolved.

I have always been hesitant with other people and terrified of public speaking, but this was far too important for me to remain silent. I wanted everyone to understand the scale and importance of the injustice that these children were forced to endure. I spoke about the reports of abuse, and neglect that the children were put through, as well as the numbers of children who were being mistreated, some to the point of death. Many people were voicing the opinions that these practices showed resemblance to the concentration camps used in the Holocaust. Despite this, I watched in bewilderment as the story was overlooked by the unending news cycle. I wanted to keep people fighting back against this policy, and educate others on what was happening.

To best accomplish my goals to educate and inspire my audience to fight for change I created a visual component as well as a speech. I collected 126 children's pajamas and hung them on clotheslines around the room to represent the children who were being held in detention. I encouraged my audience to sign their name to support the enforcement of the Flores Agreement which went into effect in 1987 and states that immigrant children cannot be held in detention for more than twenty days. The response I received was astonishing. Many people were very moved by the display and eager to do more to help. Many congregation members who had donated used pajamas from their children to my display, told me it was easy to see their children's pajamas and visualize their own children forced through the terrible conditions I was describing. I was encouraged by how many people wanted to do more and glad to see that there was still resistance against this terrible reality.

After the event, a member of the Howard County Human Rights Commission invited me to present at their annual kickoff event. I was happy to help spread my message to more people, although nervous that I would have to present again. I was able to collect a few more pajamas before the event to increase the clotheslines we had around the room. Once again, I was awed by the reactions to my speech. I wanted to do as much as possible to keep working to help spread the word of what was happening to these children, and why they need our help. This presentation was very different from the first that I gave. Although my topic was the same, the audience was much more informed on the issue since it had been a major human rights concern all year. People were much more willing to contribute to the resistance of this policy in a meaningful way because of how much they already were concerned for human rights. However, very few people had taken any action at this point.

From this I learned that resistance must be organized. Any effective resistance project must have these parts: there must be many people working together, there must be a clear and concise message, and there must be an outlet provided by a leader through which demands can be heard. Without these things there is no path to change. It is essential that there is a way to make resistance easier, so that more and more people will become involved.

There were many people who were willing to do more and who had the same goals as I did, but we were not resisting in a successful manner. We had no clear message, no way to show our support for the highly mistreated immigrant children, and almost no connection to each other at all, no *one* person to bring our voices and ideas together. I wanted our voices to be heard, so with help from Nadine Bernard and Howard County Indivisible Immigration Action Team, the “Where are the Children Project” was born. The goals of the project were to reach a broader audience by showcasing a display of pajamas on the National Mall, help inform people about the atrocities committed against immigrant children, and collect signatures on a petition to close the Homestead Detention Center. The last goal was chosen due to the high number of reports of the maltreatment of migrant children, the fact that the Homestead Detention Center was profiting from detaining children, and that we wanted to include more people by providing a tangible goal in resisting this unjust policy.

The planning of the project was much more difficult than I could have ever expected. From getting permits to collecting materials, every aspect took hours of work. We set our goal for how many pajamas we were hoping to collect at 1,000, and decided that we would also need around 2,000 dollars to pay for posts, rope, banners, signs, permits, and tools. We were able to collect all we needed within a few months through fundraising at my congregation, school, and community. By June 9th, the day of the event, we had more than 1,500 pajamas ready to hang on

clotheslines. We had a rehearsal so that we were able to estimate how long it would take to set up and take down the display, preparing us for the smooth execution of the plan on June 9th. In other protests making a personal story for audience members to relate to seemed to be the most effective approach. We created signs inviting people to consider the impact should one of these 15,000 children be their own; inviting them to consider that one of their siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, sons, daughters were killed while being detained. This is a harsh but important reality for many immigrant families in our country, a reality many of our audience members would be privileged enough not to have as their own.

On June 9th, 2019 the "Where Are the Children Project " put up clotheslines of over 1,500 pajamas on the National Mall, along with banners and informative signs. Throughout the day volunteers helped to collect signatures and explain why we were there. Despite the unrelenting rain, we were able to collect around 1000 signatures on the petition to close the Homestead Detention Center. These signatures strengthened, and drove our next steps.

Later that week I was able to advocate for immigrants again. Several clergy members of different faiths and I gave a speech on the steps of the United Methodist Building, picked for its history of inclusion and social justice. The attendees were motivated and excited to deliver the petition to shut down the Homestead Detention Center. We then marched to Nancy Pelosi's office, and I spoke with a staffer, helping to spread awareness of the support for the detained immigrant children in our country. This helped bring this issue back into the eyes of the House of Representatives. Finally, we marched to Health and Human Services, delivering our petition to those who have the power to make a difference for the children trapped in Homestead.

This project had three main effects. The first was how it helped to inspire others. Many people, especially immigrants were very excited and grateful to see that people were fighting to

end this racist policy; they expressed that this project was giving them hope. This project combined many people's efforts and talents, which gave us energy and resources to make our voices heard. I was amazed to see how many people were inspired to do more, and I was very grateful for the positive response we received.

The most important effect was on the children in the Homestead Detention Center. After months of protests and petitions, Health and Human services closed the Homestead Detention Center, and the US Congress did not renew their contract. All immigrant children in the detention center were either reunited with their families or moved to a different detention center with higher standards of care. While I believe that this is a major victory for immigrant children and families, our work is far from complete.

This leads me to the last effect: the last effect was on me. This event helped me to meet new people such as leaders in social justice, and I realized how my leadership qualities are able to help bring about what I consider to be positive change. A guiding principle in my life is that I believe all people should be free to live their own, self-determined life. As long as there are people in this country who are being denied that right, I feel that I have work to do. What I experienced in this project moved me from reluctant leadership to becoming confident that I could motivate others and make a change. By resisting letting this issue be absorbed into the background, resisting the injustices pulling on my conscience, and helping gather people and resources to work towards actionable change has helped change my perspective about my ambitions. It has led me to understand that this is not the end of the road, and my drive and commitment to this issue has taught me that I am a leader, that my personal values can help end suffering the suffering of others, and that I want to continue resisting injustice.

I was able to see how willing or unwilling many people were to be a part of a resistance movement. This gave me insight into how people resist in different ways and how there are different levels of resistance when fighting for any issue or belief. At the lowest levels are people who will sign petitions or write letters to their congressman. These are actions that can be done in a few minutes and have an effect, but usually are only done when there are other people helping to organize. Most people involved in resistance fit into this category and they are essential to building a resistance project. These are the people who can help show that you have public opinion on your side, a group of people who want a change.

At a higher level of resistance are people willing to participate in resistance activities, such as attending protests or volunteering. These are people who are willing to complete actions that take effort and determination, accomplished over a few days or weeks. They help to bring more people into a movement and can convince others. They help to expand the movement but do not decide the goal, demands, or steps of how to resist.

Lastly, there are people who are truly dedicated to resistance of a policy, dedicated to an issue. These are people who are constantly fighting for the same cause and end up as leaders because they have strong beliefs about what needs to be done and have grand, long-term strategies for how to accomplish their goals. When there is a loss, they don't give up; when there is a victory, they keep pushing onward. What is key is that these people are necessary for there to be any resistance at all. They create opportunities through their own resistance that allow others to join the fight. They are the people who write the petition for a million people to sign, the ones who organize protests for others to show that they care, and the people to sacrifice their energy and lives to a cause. They fight to see a change, and their passion is what prompts others to follow. I found that, in fighting for immigrant children, I am in this category.

I became a leader of the “Where are the Children Project” because I feel that the abuse of migrant children is an injustice that cannot continue. When I started this project with a speech at my community Unitarian Universalist congregation, I had no intention to become a leader, but my drive to attain justice *made* me a leader. The more I learned about the separation of immigrant families, the more I was inspired to work to fight back against the government and these policies. The more I did to push back against the separation of immigrant families, the more I wanted others to understand and to fight for justice. I became a leader because I felt that I could not sit by and watch injustice take place before me. I felt an obligation to work toward a better country for everyone and that I was in a position where I could make a difference.

As a white man, I feel an increased obligation to resist unjust policies, especially ideas that promote racism and sexism. My position in society allows me greater access to resources and more attention when I raise an issue. When a government is unjust, it is always against the least fortunate and the most vulnerable groups of people, and that is not by random chance. These are the people who already do not have a say in the government and who are targeted because, too often, no one will stand up for them.

During the Holocaust, people were targeted based on race and ethnic background. The Nazi Party created ideas of racial superiority, and abused those ideas to divide Germany. They murdered those who disagreed and resisted so that they could keep power and continue to abuse the power they had. Although not to the same scale, there are many similarities between what happened in the Holocaust and what is happening to immigrant families today. These similarities have caused outrage and sparked movements, such as the Never Again Action group, which is a group of Jewish activists who have organized protests across the country to support immigrants. Our government is working to divide us and attack those who are least privileged. Immigrant

children are put into camps where there are reports of abuse and neglect. Several children have already died. The echoes of the past are hauntingly familiar.

There were many brave leaders of Germany who fought back against the Nazi party and sought to unify the country rather than divide it. However, they worked without enough support from low-level leaders and citizens. Many of these leaders were tortured and killed in concentration camps. Their murders were partly enabled by the lack of a movement of supporters backing them and working to resist the threads of division the Nazi party was sewing. If the Nazis had feared revolution when they killed opposing leaders, it would have been much more difficult for them to commit and get away with those murders. By standing united, Germany may have had more of a chance of surviving the post World War One economic crisis, which would have helped prevent the horrors of the Holocaust. The leaders that risked and gave their lives to do what was right then, inspire me to do more when I see injustice today. The role of resistance to injustice falls upon all of us; we cannot sit back and leave our leaders to sort out the fundamental problems of our society.

The mistakes of the past can help guide us toward a better future, but only if we choose to recognize and act upon the signs of history repeating itself. I think that I must act to resist what is happening to migrant children, because when their voices are silenced and ignored, mine may carry through. I believe that what makes resistance important to me is my belief that everyone should have a right to self-determination, and I will keep working to achieve that goal. Beyond this I think that resistance should be practiced by everyone, because it is what keeps a government in check and politicians listening to their constituents, because it keeps people thinking about their values and beliefs, involved in their community, and ready to resist instead of standby.

Resistance is the essence of democracy. Democracy is the idea that everyone has a say in the government. When a country has over three hundred million people there will be people who do not have a say in the government's actions and policies. There will be policies that do not reflect the ideas of the general public. Resistance against the government is the only way to counteract these problems. Resistance helps make our voices heard. When the government upholds things that are wrong or unjust, it must be overturned through resistance. Resistance is what sparks change. No matter how many people disagree with an idea or policy, if no one is willing to speak up consistently then there will be no change. Public opinion does not affect policy until those opinions are voiced.

I think everyone should practice resistance because resistance means that you want a change and are willing to pursue your beliefs. Resistance lets people create the world they want to see, instead of merely hoping for a good result; it gives people a say in their government and society. There is no guarantee that a resistance movement will be successful, but there is no hope for change when no one tries. I think that people who resist are showing what they care about and what they want to see. People who constantly exemplify resistance think of what they want to see in the world and then fight to make that happen. When they accomplish a change they do not stop, but keep pushing forward to make sure the next step is reached. I admire people like this for their determination and passion to altering what they see as problematic in society. Resistance helps people understand their own values, because they are forced to decide what they want to see in the world.

From what I have learned from my values and experiences, I have been able to find the importance of resistance in my life and been able to define what resistance means to me. I believe that resistance is not just about letting others know you disagree. True resistance is about

never giving up. My resistance started when I found what I believed in; standing up for others is a passion that I will never let die. When policies do not change, neither will I. I will keep fighting, keep pressure on elected officials, keep leading others in resistance, and keep working to make sure that the people in need are able to hear my voice and know that someone still cares. With every movement there are many parts: we may win one battle and lose the next, but as long as we are still fighting, the movement is not finished. When I lose, I will try again; when I win, I will keep going. There is always more to be done, and I will try to never turn my back on someone in need of help.