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Speak

“Activism can be really simple. People think you have to go to a rally or you have to go to an organization and voice your opinion, but really, activism can be as simple as stopping someone from saying a racist word, or saying “faggot”, or saying “cracker”, or just anything like that. If you just stop someone from saying that one thing, you have just become an activist.”

-Genny DiLeonardo ¹

When we were faced with the choice of what we wanted to do our documentary on, I wanted to choose a group of people who aim to change the future. People who want to make the world we live in a better place, but I also wanted to choose a group that I as a teen could relate to. This led me, of course, to the choice of teen activists; I feel that teen activists are inspiring people who, despite their young age, show a deep care for the communities they live in. Teen activists are people who see social injustice and devote their time to fixing it. They are people who, as cheesy as it sounds, are leading the way to our future and are deciding how our lives will be led in days to come.

“Fifty-nine percent of teenagers ages 12 to 17 in 1996 volunteered in the past year. These 13.3 million teen volunteers gave an estimated 3.5 hours per week, totaling 2.4 billion hours of volunteer time.”²

Facts like these and others show that teens are indeed volunteering across the country, but how is it that teens in our area are so against these hours? Community service is something that all seniors in this area hear about quite often. Though, more often in the form of complaints. When I interviewed several teens at my school, asking them what they thought about the ten hours of community service required for graduation, most of them told me that they disagreed with the mandatory hours, stating that:

*“I don’t think that community service should be mandatory to graduate, maybe for teachers to give you extra credit ... but I don’t think graduation should be based on whether or not you do community service”*³(Abir, age 18)

*“Honestly I don’t think it’s needed, a lot of kids do community service anyway, like Boy Scouts, or, my friends had Eagle Scout projects, and they needed a lot of help with it, and even though it didn’t technically count, it was still just a lot of community service done.”*⁴(Jacob, age 17)

Responses like these, as well as others similar to these are not uncommon at all. Teens don’t like being forced to do something, especially something that, as Genny DiLeonardo stated, “just needs to be done”. By making something like community service mandatory, the school district has taken most of the goodwill out of the equation. Now it’s not to be

said that the required hours are all bad, but that they, perhaps, were a bit misguided, as Mountain View High School Civics teacher, Dave Blasquez explains,

“Community service is a good idea, if the student is committed to a program. I don’t think that forced community service though, is the best way of going about doing it ... It’s a district policy. I think the district had a good idea, in encouraging students to commit themselves to the community. Because when you commit yourself to the community, you get a better understanding of the people that live in your community and the needs of your community”⁵

The mere fact that Blasquez, someone, most people would assume to be for the hours, is against them means that something must be wrong with this picture. How, as teens, are we supposed to be driven enough to complete these hours, when even the people giving them to us don’t agree? I’m sure that I’m not alone in the thought that there must be a better way. There has to be a better solution, a better alternative so that teens will actually be motivated and inspired enough to want to help their community, rather than being forced to. Teens like senior Jacob Kleitman, have come up with different possibilities to make the hours less painful,

“I think if they changed it instead of [having] to do it in the semester that you’re taking civics, to maybe forty hours over your entire high school thing, it would be a lot easier then for students to get it done. Because then they wouldn’t feel pressure to get it done at a certain time, they could just do it gradually.”⁴

Not to state the obvious, but the fact that teens like Jacob take the time to conjure up additional ways to get the hours means that it’s not the service that they dislike, but the manner in which they’re forced to serve them. Teens like Genny DiLeonardo and Evie Ortiz agree that community service is something that should be done, not because you’re forced to, but because you feel passionate about helping others. Genny expressed the fact that she volunteers because it helps the community, and it helps her, because the community can help her better by providing things that teens really want to do.

“I think it’s really important, I think it makes the community more [oriented] for them. For example, I’m in YAG, and if we didn’t ask the community for help to do dances, then they wouldn’t give them to us and we participate in all sorts of things and you just have to mix it up”¹(Genny, age 18)

In order to solve this problem of distaste towards community hours, teens need to do one of two things. The first thing is they need to find a way to make the hours more enjoyable for them. This can be done by either, completing the hours with friends, or possibly searching for a group to help before the deadline approaches. This way, the hours won't seem as long, since, as we've all heard before, "Time flies when you're having fun". The second suggestion is to think of another way to get in the community service. If teens form plans that are reasonable for both teens and the administration, then perhaps the district might be able to change its policy to better help the students to help the community. Jacob's suggestion of more hours, over a larger period of time, would benefit everyone involved in the situation. Teens would get credit, the community would get help, and the administration wouldn't be met with such resentment over the idea of community service.

Although community service is an activist topic brought up quite often in conversation between seniors, the topic of derogatory speech, though used often, is not. Walking through the halls, derogatory words cannot be escaped. It's a constant barrage of words constantly flung around, regardless of people's feelings and regardless as to who's listening. As one student from a New York high school stated,

"If I hear someone use the word 'faggot' in the hallway I will say something to them, especially if it's a freshman or a sophomore," said one Baruch student. "But I will say that that's not an appropriate word to use. I definitely hear a lot of 'that's so gay,' or 'you're a fag,' and

that's wrong because they're using it in a derogatory way. They're using it as if it's a bad thing. 'You're so stupid' is the equivalent of saying 'you're so gay' or 'that's so gay.' ”⁶

High school students, although commonly thought of as irresponsible, indifferent people, are aware of what’s right and what’s wrong. When I asked several teens in our area whether they speak out against these words, most of them said that they did. How then does that explain the number of words that are still heard in the halls?

“There are certain words that shouldn’t be said, and when you hear them, you should say something, But there’s other words that are passable I guess, like certain curse words are just part of the language ”³(Abir)

But should these words really be used in everyday language? As stated by a member of a morals forum, even a word like “bitch” can offend people due to its gender specific nature.⁷ When asked what the thought of use of the words, Jacob stated that he does use them, but can see how it can be annoying if someone uses words in an offensive manner.

“I’ve been told by random people before, “Can you not say that around me?” and that’s totally cool, I [won’t], I don’t do it to piss people off. ”⁴(Jacob)

This is where these words come from in the halls. If more people were to speak out against these words being used, then people like Jacob, wouldn’t say them because they don’t want to have people get mad. One possible solution: Whenever you hear a word

that may be offensive or hurtful to someone, ask the person who said it not to say it. They may not respond in a polite way, but then that shows that they really don't care about other people's feelings. Speaking out against negative things is a right that in this country we are promised, and it'd be a shame for something as small as seeming nit-picky to hinder us from using that right.

Though there are many obvious ways to be an activist in your area, not many teens consider the smaller yet very impacting ways they can help. Community service, although required to graduate, is a great way to help the community, while also helping teens to find something that they're interested and passionate about. In addition to that, there's the simple action of speaking out against derogatory words, words that can hurt people and can make people feel unwelcome in any environment. As Genny said, you don't have to go to rallies or protests, you can speak out against certain words, and as for community service, sometimes it just needs to get done.

Works Cited

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