

COMMENTARY

A Little Awareness—and Support—Go a Long Way

By TIM MARTIN AND JORDAN PUGH, Co-directors
High Road Academy, Laurel

Unless you have a direct connection, you may not realize October is Learning Disabilities Awareness Month. It's a time to recognize individuals with learning disabilities, how that may affect their families and what we can do to make our society more inclusive.

As co-directors of the High Road Academy in Laurel, a school that serves about 70 students in grades 5 through 12 with exceptionalities including but not limited to autism and ADHD, we believe—and have seen—that every child has the ability to reach his or her full potential. They can grow into productive adults who contribute greatly to our community. With 30 years of collective experience, it's something we've witnessed firsthand time and time again.

To help individuals with learning disabilities thrive, there must be awareness. It's important that parents and especially educators create a system in which those who need extra support can access it. General education teachers are often the doorway to a child with learning disabilities being diagnosed and receiving a tailored education. If they recognize the signs, that child might get the help they need far sooner than if they don't.

It's true that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Parents also need to know when to campaign for more attention to their child. They are often their child's biggest advocate.

Part of the Catapult Learning family of schools, the High Road Academy in Laurel can be a resource for districts, parents and children. Our team takes a holistic approach to supporting our students in developing academically, behaviorally and socially. Our staff includes educators, counselors, psychologists and occupational therapists dedicated to fostering an environment where students with special needs can thrive. We also work very closely with families to ensure they have the tools they need.

We also believe in fostering an environment of well-being and engaging in partnerships that create opportunities for our students. For example, our staff works with the team at Prince George's Community College to offer a workforce development program that prepares our students for jobs and careers when they leave us. Beyond the basics, our school also features a backyard sanctuary—complete with a pond and garden—created, maintained and enjoyed by our students.

The old saying holds true: It takes a village, and the more people who are aware of learning disabilities and the true potential individuals who are affected have, the stronger we are as a society. All of us can do our part to make this a more inclusive community where everyone reaches their full potential.



Tim Martin, Co-director



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF HIGH ROAD ACADEMY

Marion Wright Edelman

President, Children's Defense Fund



ChildWatch:

The Land of the Free

This week marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Black Power salute given by Olympic medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos as the American anthem played during their medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games. Their quiet nonviolent protest earned them loud and widespread criticism, death threats and suspension from the U.S. track team. Tommie Smith later said: "We were just human beings who saw a need to bring attention to the inequality in our country . . . I don't like the idea of people looking at it as negative. There was nothing but a raised fist in the air and a bowed head, acknowledging the American flag—not symbolizing a hatred for it." But the reaction to their stance has clear parallels fifty years later.

The start of this year's football season and Nike's decision to feature Colin Kaepernick in an advertising campaign reignited the debate over whether athletes should be castigated for respectfully kneeling or engaging in silent nonviolent protest during the national anthem to protest racial and social injustice in America. The debate also raises other questions about whether the national anthem itself is beyond free expression of speech and reproach—and whether "The Star Spangled Banner" has ever been a universal symbol of a "land of the free" for all. After all its author Francis Scott Key embodied some of the profoundly unjust contradictions endemic to our young nation, especially the role of slavery in a nation allegedly founded on the premise of all men being created equal. Where were we women and people of color and Native Americans whose lands were stolen and pillaged by White settlers?

Key was born three years after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence into a wealthy slave-owning family in Maryland. He owned slaves himself and freed some but not all during his lifetime. A deeply religious man, he argued against slave trafficking and once asked, "Where else, except in slavery, was ever such

a bed of torture prepared by man for man?" But instead of fighting to end slavery in our land Key was a founder and officer of the American Colonization Society which encouraged free Blacks in America to emigrate to Africa. That organization included some members who believed slavery was wrong but also many who were simply alarmed by the growing numbers of freed and former slaves. They shared an inability to envision or embrace an America where free Blacks and Whites could peacefully coexist together.

As a lawyer working in Washington, D.C. who was eventually appointed U.S. Attorney for Washington by President Andrew Jackson, Key represented pro bono several slaves suing for their freedom but he also represented slaveowners suing to have runaway "property" returned. And Key was the prosecutor in one of the most sensational cases of his time which began when 18-year-old slave Arthur Bowen stumbled into his White mistress's bedroom carrying an ax after a night of drinking. Although he did not threaten or attack anyone, he was quickly arrested on charges of attempted murder. Outrage over his "crime" led to several nights of race riots in Washington. Key sought the death penalty for Arthur although Arthur's mistress said from the beginning she did not think he meant to hurt her and later successfully pleaded for Arthur's pardon.

Key then gained national attention by prosecuting White doctor Reuben Crandall for sedition and inciting insurrection during the rioting after Arthur's arrest—arguing that Crandall was an abolitionist who hoped to provoke violence by distributing antislavery literature. During that trial Crandall's defense attorneys quoted some of Key's own writings about the evils of slavery, but a Washington Post feature on the case explains that Key doubled down and "appealed to the all-white jury's sense of supremacy: 'Are you willing, gentlemen, to abandon your country; to permit it to be taken

from you, and occupied by the Abolitionist, according to whose taste it is to associate and amalgamate with the Negro?'" Crandall was acquitted but he died soon after of tuberculosis contracted while he was in jail for eight months awaiting trial. It's small wonder that during Key's lifetime antislavery advocates already viewed his famous lyrics with skepticism and argued the "home of the brave" was actually the "home of the oppressed."

Key also argued vehemently against the War of 1812 because of his religious beliefs but served anyway and was part of a delegation negotiating a prisoner exchange when he found himself on a ship in Baltimore harbor watching the pivotal overnight battle that moved him to write a poem about what he had seen. Those words set to the tune of a popular drinking song ultimately became "The Star Spangled Banner." Today the most commonly sung first verse seems to glorify the battle without capturing any of Key's earlier antiwar ambivalence. It is one more example of the contradictions inherent in our national anthem and national life.

More than two hundred years after it was written many Americans believe the anthem remains a symbol of contradictions still so present in our national life. This brings us full circle to the current debate over whether kneeling during the anthem is a respectful and appropriate way to call attention to the ways our nation still falls short of its professed ideals. As I wrote last year, as one of many, many hundreds of thousands of people who protested, went to jail, marched, sat and—yes—knelt during the Civil Rights Movement, I applaud athletes and anyone using their visible public platform to nonviolently protest still-present racial and gender injustice as a result of our national birth defects embodied in Native American genocide, slavery and exclusion of women and non-propertied White men from the electoral process.

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Marc Morial

President and CEO, National Urban League



To Be Equal:

Enough is Enough. VOTE! History Will Not Look Kindly on 21st Century Jim Crow

After years of preclearance and expansion of voting access, by 2013 African American registration and turnout rates had finally reached near-parity with white registration and turnout rates. African Americans were poised to act as a major electoral force. But, on the day after the Supreme Court issued *Shelby County v. Holder*, eliminating preclearance obligations, a leader of the party that newly dominated the legislature announced an intention to enact what he characterized as an "omnibus" election law. Before enacting that law, the legislature requested data on the use, by race, of a number of voting practices. Upon receipt of the race data, the General Assembly enacted legislation that restricted voting and registration in five different ways, all of which disproportionately affected African Americans.—

Judge Diana Gribbon Motz, 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, *NAACP v. North Carolina*

The National Urban League has been at the forefront of the fight for voting rights for decades. At the national and state level we and our network of 90 affiliates in the Urban League Movement have advocated for access to the ballot, condemned efforts at voter suppression and fought for our rights in the courts and in the streets.

My predecessor, Whitney M. Young, stood proudly with the other Big Six civil rights leaders beside President Lyndon Johnson as he signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Our rights are more threatened than at any time since that moment. That's why the Urban League Movement is engaged in a voter education and civic

participation campaign called "Enough is Enough. VOTE!"

I could quote statistics showing how voter registration and voter participation rates rose steadily from the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 until 2013, when the Supreme Court gutted the Act with its decision in *Shelby v. Holder*. That is generally how we measure the success of the Act.

But to quote Congressman John Lewis, who very nearly lost his life in the battle for the Voting Rights Act, "increasing the voter rolls was not the central purpose of the legislation. It was intended to stop state-sponsored terrorism, intimidation, and unjust, humiliating practices—literacy tests, poll taxes, and even lynching—which led people of color to fear registering and voting on Election Day."

It is no coincidence, and no accident, that the push to dismantle voting rights intensified after the election of 2008—the first time in United States history when the Black voting rate equaled the white rate.

That's exactly when Georgia, for example, tried to enact its controversial exact-match policy—which allows the state to reject voter registrations if so much as a hyphen is out of place. Under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, however, the policy was rejected.

Despite the Justice Department's determination that "flawed system frequently subjects a disproportionate number of African-American, Asian, and/or Hispanic voters to . . . erroneous burdens on the right to register to vote," Georgia is now on its third attempt to enact "exact match," and is being sued for the second time.

In 2018, voters in at least eight states will face more stringent voting laws than they did in the last federal election. Overall, voters in 23 states will face tougher restrictions than they did in 2010. Tens of thousands of registered voters were deterred from voting by these racially discriminatory voter-suppression tactics.

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander wrote, "The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears voluntary. People choose to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told."

So it is with voter suppression laws. They purport to target people who supposedly can't be bothered to acquire photo identification, or who supposedly misspell their own names—never mind that it is overwhelmingly voters of color who lack the documentation to acquire required identification, or whose names are likely to be misspelled by overwhelmingly white county elections workers.

Poll taxes and literacy tests didn't explicitly mention race, either. History will look no more kindly on the 21st Century Jim Crow.

Ultimately, these efforts to suppress voters of color are mere sandbags against the rising current of an increasingly racially diverse electorate. They may delay but never halt our progress toward equality. But only if we press on, continue to wage battles in the courts and in our communities, continue shining a light on discrimination and speaking truth to power.

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