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Youth Activists: Be Proud of Who You Are, and Never Stop Fighting



by Licelot (Lee) Caraballo, Aidan Donahue, and Thaina Merlain

“You still have your voice. You still have people power. Continue to fight for what you believe in.”

Given the results of the election, what are the highest priorities for you in your activism, and what advice would you give to other student and adult activists?



Thaina:

What I would tell other adult and student activists now is: don't stop fighting for what you believe in. The election results don't mean that the volume goes down on all of our voices, and the power of our communities becomes diminished. You still have your voice. You still have people power. Continue to fight for what you believe in. Even though the person in power is opposite to the things that we believe in, it's not over. You should still keep marching on, because change doesn't stop here. Keep going.

And another big thing to prioritize is breaking stereotypes. Because I feel like a lot of these things come up because of stereotypes – like “Illegal immigrants are rapists,” and “Muslims are terrorists.” That's all just the people thinking that because one thing happened, you can label everyone under that. But not all Mexicans fall under the title of rapist

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Issue 45
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and murderer, and not all Muslims fall under the title of terrorism and hatred and extremism.

We encounter different kinds of people every day. I know in the school I go to, I encounter different kinds of people every day – Mexicans, Muslims, Black people, White people, and none of them are the same. No two people you will ever find are the exact same. So, as people, we should begin to break the stereotypes that we've built in our society to begin to see people differently. And I feel like that's another thing that will allow us to move forward, is seeing people in a different light than we've seen them in the past.

Lee:

Our [campaign for ethnic studies](#) was based on that idea of breaking stereotypes. In the Providence Public School System, 91 percent of our students are of color, but when they go to school they feel embarrassed or shameful because of their background. If you grow up and you speak your native language and follow your traditions at home but you don't feel proud of that outside of home, then you are feeling like that doesn't belong in society, that society rejects that. So we don't want that to happen, but the stereotypes make them feel even worse. I think that in order to break the stereotypes and to break that embarrassment that prevents people from feeling proud of their own culture or background, we need to have these conversations with them. So the purpose of ethnic studies was to provide a true history that wasn't provided in schools, which was mainly Eurocentric, European history, and didn't provide 91 percent of the students with their true history. So, we wanted to provide that history and then reflect on how that has contributed to our society today, how they can understand and feel proud of where they come from, and how they can correct other people from saying negative things when it comes to their own culture.

Aidan:

For me, the priority becomes getting as many people involved as possible. There are lots of people who say, "My vote doesn't matter." But then you have three of those people, that turns into ten of those people, that turns into 1,000 of those people, and it grows and it grows and it grows, until you have more of the population saying, "My vote – my voice doesn't matter." Then you have the minority of people actually going out voting and lobbying, then people who did vote see that and say, "Why should I vote, if this is going to happen?" But I love to flip that, because this is exactly why you should vote. This is exactly why you should become involved – find something that you can fight for. It's

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getting those people to recognize that if we come together, that your voice does matter.

Thaina:

I agree with Aidan in the sense that the reason a lot of people are saying that their vote doesn't matter, their voice doesn't matter, is because they think, "Things are going to happen the way they're supposed to happen no matter what I do." I feel like that's the reason why bad things happen, because people decide to step down when they feel like they don't matter or they will not be significant.

I feel like one of the big reasons why Donald Trump is president is because a lot of the people thought that they didn't matter or they couldn't really make a choice. But I feel like making people more aware that it's better to choose than to not, because in choosing not to, you're giving that voice to someone else. And maybe that someone else has terrible ways of thinking, and you probably have a better way of coming at things. But because you gave that voice away, you let other people take that place that you should have had yourself.

Now that Donald Trump is president, I feel like this is a wake-up call, because our society has been very comfortable for too long. And when you're very comfortable, that's when you don't realize the bad things that are going around you. I feel like when he takes power, a lot of people will begin to realize: I need to get stuff done. I need to start moving in a direction that I've been delaying for a very long time. And maybe his election, maybe our society will learn to grow, because it's been very dormant for a while. And now, people will begin to realize that what they say does matter in society and it will matter in society.

You are all high school seniors. If you were going to talk to some younger student activists right now – let's say, freshmen, as they look toward the next four years – what would you like to pass on to them?

Thaina:

For me, I would say educate themselves first. Like if they're an activist, educate themselves on the problem, but also figure out what they want from whatever they're standing up for. Because we always see what we don't want, but we never talk about what we want. I know in the past year we've seen a lot of protests all throughout the country and all we see is a bunch of people protesting for things that they don't want. They don't want their brothers to be killed. They don't want police brutality anymore. Sometimes younger kids are in those too, but some of those younger kids, they don't really know what it's about and they just go out

there just to go out there, and they don't really know what it is that they want. They just see all the negatives and they don't really see a solution for it. So, I would say, figure out the problem first and how you would go out and create a solution for that, because I feel like that's one thing we miss. We always notice a problem, but we never see past that problem. We never seek for a solution. And educate themselves. It's better to start while you're young. You become more powerful when you start when you're young.

Lee:

Also, people are saying this a lot, and I guess it's kind of cliché, but: know where you come from and know what aspects of your environment, your community growing up have made you the person you are today. Because I feel like most of my peers are going through difficult times because of the violence that has arisen suddenly after the election towards African Americans or Hispanics or other immigrants from all sorts of backgrounds. Honestly, it makes me mad and I feel like it doesn't have to be like this.

So I would also say: feel proud of who you are. Don't feel ashamed, and speak up if you feel like you have been violated or disrespected in such a way – never stay quiet about that. And also, communicate that issue, that problem to your peers, your parents, to the people of your community. Because I feel like – as Thaina said – everybody rejects the problem. Maybe they can identify it, but they won't address it with anyone. They won't do anything to eradicate it, to find a solution. So, be brave enough and actually willing to do something to change it.

I feel like there are always going to be people that are going to be racist and are going to discriminate against others and are going to be homophobic, but there is a chance to address this in society in general, in your community and your school and the environment that you're in. Never stop addressing those things, because I feel like it's always going to be present. So, try your best to say, "Hey, no. This is wrong."

Thaina:

I feel like a big piece of that, piggybacking off of what Lee said, is to be aware of your identity. I know younger kids are still growing into their identity, but I feel like when you know who you are and you understand who you are and you're comfortable with who you are, then that is very effective, especially if you're an activist, because you will never let someone else tell you different. You will never let someone else take that identity from you. When you don't know who you are, it's harder for you to stand up for something, because you don't know what to stand

for. You're like, "Should I stand here? Should I stand there? Where do I put my feet?" It is very important, especially in activism, and especially now with Donald Trump enforcing these stereotypes. And people agree with it as well, because they have that very closed mindset. If you don't know who you are, you will tend to accept those stereotypes for yourself, because you never felt as though that you could have gone beyond that, and I feel like that's very important.

Aidan:

The morning after the election, I was having a conversation with my father and he shared with me that there is this Jewish reporter that he follows who was retweeting all of these anti-Semitic comments he's been getting during the election. What my father says to me after that is: "I hope I raise my voice to be better than that and to stand up to that." For me, I guess I realize – I'm White, I'm straight, I'm male. But that doesn't mean that I can't help somebody who isn't White, straight, or male, who does not have the advantages I do. And for a big part that becomes to not only recognize the advantage you have, and to not feel ashamed for the advantage you have but help those that don't have that advantage. Help those that need the help.

Any final thoughts?

Aidan:

Change takes time. Sometimes it's a day, an hour, sometimes it's years. But change takes time, and keep at it, because if we stop even for a moment, all that change that we've worked towards doesn't mean anything. Because if we stop at all – an object in motion likes to stay in motion. An object at rest likes to stay at rest. Things need to keep going. There is momentum built and we can't let it go away, because as soon as that momentum goes away, then again, it becomes harder for us to get things done.

The other thing is: even if you don't want to be involved, become informed. Because I do understand that there is not a lot of time, but if you can take minutes out of your day to read something – find a new source you like, find a new source that is maybe the exact opposite of what you like, and read both, because at that point you're looking at two different views on the same topic. And whether you agree with the other one or not, it becomes more about understanding. It's where we have to find that common ground. There are some things you are going to have to settle for. And that doesn't mean don't fight for those things. But at some point you have to recognize that it's better instead of butting heads constantly, to work something out.

Thaina:

I would say to all those out there who are negatively affected by this election and by the results of it, I would say to keep an open mind and be optimistic, because the road doesn't end here. It keeps going. And he is not the first terrible leader. He is not going to be the last. So, if we know how to deal with him, if we know how to deal with all those who support him, then this will just be nothing for us when another terrible leader comes through.

I know we're going to miss the good leader we've had for eight years and we've got to test different waters now. But for all leaders in education, for all activists: keep going, because the work doesn't stop here. Another thing is that during the entire election, Donald Trump has been very bold and very disrespectful in how he speaks. One thing I want to say is: do not ever let anyone become comfortable with disrespecting you. I know with his election now, with him being in power, people feel as though anything is okay to say, anything disrespectful or rude is okay to just be said. And I would say, know who you are and stand up for who you are at all times, because the minute you let that go is the minute you give it to someone else to trample all over it. So, yeah, keep going. That's my thing.

Lee:

I totally agree with Thaina. I feel like if you do not exercise your voice, your rights, then you will just be giving the advantage to your oppressor. Okay, I'm going to say the cliché thing again: just know who you are, know where you stand and don't ever, ever be afraid of standing up. Because nothing bad is going to happen if you don't let it, if you're strong enough to not let it happen. Just keep believing in what you believe, have conviction, be strong about it, inspire others as much as you can.

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