

SLCAN News & Views

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For more information about SLCAN, visit www.slcan.org.

Truth, History and Thanksgiving

By Yvonne Day

As November approached in my twins' first year in preschool, I began thinking about the Thanksgiving holiday and what I had learned in school. I remember a photo of me in Kindergarten wearing either a feather headdress or a buckled hat I made myself out of construction paper. I wish I could remember the script of that Thanksgiving "pageant." It probably was similar to the version many children in this country learn: "The Pilgrims came over on the Mayflower in 1620. They met a nice Indian named Squanto who taught them how to grow food. The next year after the harvest, the Pilgrims invited the Indians to share their feast—the first Thanksgiving. They celebrated their new friendship."

Even after I learned that the relationship between the pilgrims and Native Americans was not as amicable as my textbooks depicted, I still believed that some of what I learned about Thanksgiving was true. I only learned as an adult that this Thanksgiving tale is inaccurate, right down to the buckles on the pilgrim shoes.

Why do most people feel comfortable with the inaccurate description of what took place on the very first Thanksgiving? Why do we teach our children this mythology? In addition to simply not knowing any better, I believe that shame about our country's racist history fuels the ignorance. As a person of European descent, I know Thanksgiving fiction is just one of many histories I was not taught regarding racial domination in America. Believing in pilgrims that were generous and appreciative is more comfortable than the truth. But even when we know the truth of our history's past and how covering it up

serves to uphold a racist society, what is the best way to explain it to our children?

One step toward providing the next generation with a better understanding of our country's formation is to include Native American perspectives and experiences in lessons about Thanksgiving. I plan to teach my kids that while Thanksgiving is a celebration for some, it is at the same time a day of sadness and mourning for Native Americans. The first Thanksgiving is also symbolic of the beginning of the genocide of more than 100 million Native Americans. The real shame is not acknowledging this loss of Native American life, land, and culture.

The search for age-appropriate ways to discuss the complexities of genocide, Native American identity and culture, and the frequent misrepresentation of American history with my children led me to the resources below.

RESOURCES

- Oyate: Deconstructing the Myths of "The First Thanksgiving" • <http://www.oyate.org/resources/shortthanks.html>
- Oyate: A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children • <http://www.oyate.org/brokenflute.html>
- Fourth World Documentation Project: Teaching About Thanksgiving • <http://www.2020tech.com/thanks/temp.html>
- Teaching Tolerance: ABCs of Native American Heritage Month • <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=750>

"Today is a time of celebrating for you—a time of looking back to the first days of white people in America. But it is not a time of celebrating for me. It is with a heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my People. When the Pilgrims arrived, we, the Wampanoags, welcomed them with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end. That before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a tribe. That we and other Indians living near the settlers would be killed by their guns or dead from diseases that we caught from them. Let us always remember, the Indian is and was just as human as the white people.

Although our way of life is almost gone, we, the Wampanoags, still walk the lands of Massachusetts. What has happened cannot be changed. But today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America where people and nature once again are important."

—Speaker at the 1970 Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, ceremony to mark the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrim's arrival.

Source: Fourth World Documentation Project: Teaching About Thanksgiving

Social Justice Academy at San Leandro High

By Mia Ousley

Social Justice is the focus of education for about 35 sophomores at San Leandro High School this year... and it will remain their focus until their graduation in 2010.

The Social Justice Academy during this, its first semester, keeps the kids together for half of their daily classes. The students have the appearance and behavior of average high school students but show an above-average classroom participation rate. Ironically, these students were among the most at-risk and poor-performing students in their freshman year.

“The mission of the Social Justice Academy is to empower students to make positive changes in their communities,” says the Academy’s Coordinator, Ari Dolid. “We intend to improve San Leandro and to develop leaders and lifelong learners who can be drawn on as a valuable source of active citizenship to support growth in San Leandro.”

Just how does it work? The program began with the teachers and students going on a retreat before school started to initiate bonding. Then their two morning classes are spent together: First period is the “Social Justice” elective and second period is “English” with a social justice focus. Their afternoons they split up for their last two classes of the day. This is the pattern they’ll follow until graduation, the morning devoted to classes focused on social justice, the afternoon with the rest of their required high school curriculum.

“The Social Justice elective class is basically a survey course of major issues that the kids face,” Dolid said. The first unit was an exploration of racism and an understanding of how the issue works on an individual, cultural, and institutional level. Currently the class is exploring classism—sexism and agism will follow—by reading from *Nickeled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich’s expose of her attempts to live on minimum wage across the United States.

“We link this with English,” said Dolid, “so we’re reading from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” Maya Angelou’s memoirs of her childhood rape, sexual abuse, and other traumas.

In the spring the classes will be “World History” and “Forensics” (speech and debate), again with a social justice focus. Throughout the year each student will also do a service project related to the curriculum, this year with a theme focusing on peer education.

Dolid formed the idea for the Social Justice Academy two years ago when he first arrived at San Leandro High from New York.

Social Justice Academy Core Beliefs

Through analysis of the roots of problems, systemic change can be made in any community.

Change must be based off of the needs of a community.

Change can only come about when a group of change agents within a community act together openly with the members of that particular community.

In order to create change, you must be personally responsible for your own actions and participation in your community.

People can only thrive in conditions that conspire to help them succeed.

People can learn and succeed no matter what background, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or economic background.

Success is defined by the individual, not by society.

He felt the most at-risk students showed a lot of useful social skills, but not necessarily in a positive way, instead using these skills to deflect doing school work that is not applicable to their real lives. “On a day-to-day basis they’re told what to do and how to do it,” said Dolid. “We thought if we could teach them a way to empower themselves they could make a change in their own high school community and community at large.”

He and teacher Jill Synnott started having conversations,

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Social Justice Academy

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eventually getting the principal involved. They received \$250,000 in grants from the California Dept. of Education. This led to a year of planning—and recruiting 35 students from among the most at-risk of last year’s freshman class—to the program starting this fall.

So just who are “at-risk” kids? This program’s definition meant any student:

- who is not connecting with curriculum and so is getting bad grades;
- or who has a home environment that makes it difficult to achieve at school;
- or who has gone through severe trauma;
- or who might be on the fringes of a gang.

All interested ninth-graders filled out an application last year and went through an interview. They were asked why they were interested and how they thought it would help them. Then they were asked to tell about a person they admired who made change. The applicants were also asked to name one issue that occurred on campus and what they would possibly do about it.

“We fully understood they didn’t have the background of social justice to know how to make change,” said Dolid, “and not many of them keyed to deeper issues or had really strong ideas.” But he also noted that the issues most prevalent on campus are the most complex and most difficult to solve. “We know these students are exposed to these issues on a daily basis and this is their life; we wanted to bring their life into school.”

Dolid and Synnott decided on a strategy of integrating community service into the curriculum. “Lots of research has been done showing that service learning improves the socio-emotional skill sets of students so that they’re better able to connect with curriculum they are studying in school,” Dolid said. “It has tended to work very well with at-risk students in order to reconnect them with their curriculum.”

The first thing in September, the students met with about 15 local and national-based organizations to discuss major needs of the community. Afterward, the students determined what they saw as the biggest needs and what they’d like to work on. “Our hope is that over the course of the year the community partners will come in every so often to work with students on the project,” said Dolid. Dolid is currently teaching with Nancy Jo Turner while Synnott is on maternity leave.

Social Justice Academy Goals

Communication

To understand and clearly and confidently express ideas, opinions, information, attitudes, and feelings to and from diverse audiences, through a variety of media.

Critical Thinking

To draw conclusions, solve problems or create through analysis, reflection, interpretation, reasoning and evaluation.

Personal Responsibility

To be self-aware; to identify, access and utilize skills, knowledge and resources towards development as a life-long learner, and to be accountable to one’s self.

Social Responsibility

To effectively work and lead in groups, families, and communities by actively demonstrating respect and accountability.

Interview With City Councilmember Michael Gregory

By Margarita Lacabe

Councilmember Michael Gregory represents District 1, a U-shaped district that includes most of Bay-o-Vista, downtown, Estudillo Estates south of San Leandro Creek, and the area between East 14th and the railroad tracks between Estudillo and 139th Avenue. He's been on the job for less than a year, but has already started to make his imprint with his indomitable energy and enthusiasm. I spoke to Michael Gregory about his experiences on the City Council and his vision. His answers didn't quite conform to my questions, but they definitely illustrated what's on his mind.

The first thing on his mind is the heaviness of his Council position, the fact that the decisions he makes there will affect people not only in San Leandro, but also regionally. He gives as an example his support for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD); the success of this strategy may be a catalyst for other cities to revisit their development plans.

Michael sees San Leandro as a village, an island within the Bay Area, with a community that shows ownership of their town. His visceral response to the biggest challenges in San Leandro are, is how do we maintain the small town character and community spirit of San Leandro and at the same time modernize. He sees smart growth and a City Council that can work well together with

city staff as part of the solution. He is very enthusiastic about the TOD and thinks land owners will be encouraged to invest in the community.

He is also very proud of Shape Up San Leandro, a program that encourages making small incremental changes in the health habits of San Leandro citizens to prevent future health problems. Michael is very enthusiastic about the people and groups that are collaborating—representatives from the city, the school district, and businesses. The program is still in its pre-launch stages, but Michael feels it will inspire people and bring them together.

As a parent of children who attended the San Leandro School District, he believes the city and the schools need to find more ways to work together such as joint use projects.

His full-time job is with the Red Cross and disaster preparedness in San Leandro is also on his mind. He'd like to see neighborhoods organize annual disaster simulations so that everyone knows what to do in the case of a disaster. This will also encourage neighbors to meet and increase community spirit, but most importantly, it could help save lives, as in the case of a large earthquake without enough first responders to help everyone in need.

His final message to the community is get involved. This city is small enough that you can easily make a difference. He advises if you don't like a commission, start one of your own.



Connect with community, participate in stimulating discussion, and learn more about important social and political issues at SLCAN's monthly film series.

GARBAGE! THE REVOLUTION STARTS AT HOME THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6 • 7pm at Zocalo Coffeehouse

This new documentary candidly portrays the threat to our environment as the McDonald family tracks their waste output for three months. As they discover where their garbage goes and at what cost to the environment, the household engages the audience with an 'open-door reality-check.' Meticulous tracking of consumption and waste, right down to the children's lunchboxes result in not only candid comments, but also some rather enlightening and even humorous moments. www.garbagerevolution.com