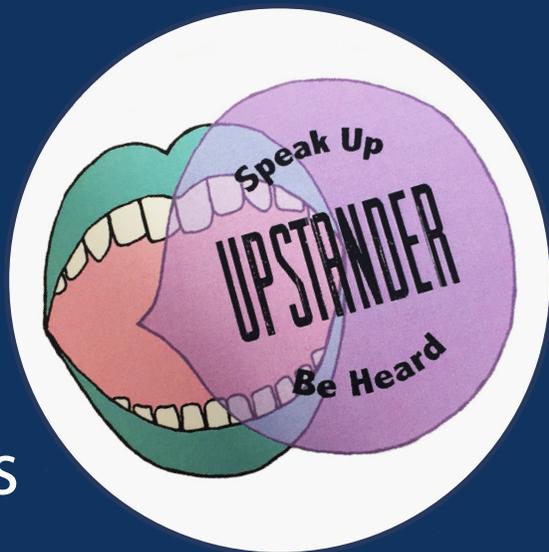


# Finding Hope in Genocide Studies



By Lauren Brownlee

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When I tell people that I teach Genocide Studies to high school juniors and seniors, I always get one of two responses: either people say “What a light subject!” sarcastically or they just come out and say “How depressing!” In truth, although the material can often be upsetting, the course is not. The goal of the course states, “Students will develop a deep understanding of the causes and impact of genocide. They will be able to reflect on their own responsibility to be upstanders against hate and discrimination and will gain a toolkit and opportunities to become agents of change.” The course is designed to help students develop into confident genocide preventers, and that sense of empowerment makes the students feel optimistic about the light of the future even as they immerse themselves in the darkness of the past.

The class empowers students by making the material personal. I begin each day of class

with a journal question that connects that day’s content to the students’ lives. Questions range from “What are you most sure of?” to “What does religion mean to you?” to “What is power? What power do you have?” These questions help students to understand that the choices that perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and upstanders make leading up to and during a genocide are connected to the kinds of questions that the students face in their own lives. We then note the impact of the choices that people make, which illuminates the power of the individual. At the end of the first quarter, the students have a “Bearing Witness Project” in which they each find a current event that reminds them of what they have learned about the Nazi consolidation of power and share the connection that they have noted with people outside of the class. This activity early in the year establishes for students that rather than being spectators of historical material, they are capable of being agents of change.



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Once the students invest in the idea of being the change they wish to see in the world, Genocide Studies also provides them with the tools to make change. As students learn about citizenship and government as it relates to the Holocaust, we also discuss our own government systems and the rights and responsibility of citizens. We review the ways that citizens, including those too young to vote, can make their voices heard by their representatives, including letter writing, meetings, and social media. After we study the Holocaust, we have a unit on what measures were taken after the Holocaust to ensure that genocide would never happen again. Students are introduced to the myriad systems that are in place nationally and internationally to try to make “Never Again” a reality. They become experts in genocide prevention.

As with all material, students are able to best retain this information when they apply it. Each year students are asked to design a project in the spring in which they share what they have learned with our school community as a whole. One year students put together a workshop on allyship and developed role play scenarios for students and teachers to practice. The following year students created a teach-in about Syrian refugees, why the situation in Syria could be defined as genocide, and what students could do to make a difference. In the year of the 2016 election, students in the class put on an assembly for Genocide Prevention and Awareness Month in April about how the student body could stand up against hate, and they distributed an upstander pledge they wrote and a “Speak Up” sticker they designed. Outside of the group project, Genocide Studies students have often hosted letter writing sessions for students to write to their representatives to

encourage them to speak up about current events that have the potential to develop into genocide. The final exam is a letter to the politician of each student’s choice with an explanation of how that politician can work to prevent genocide. The final step of the exam is students addressing the envelopes to mail their letters. All of these initiatives build students’ confidence as genocide preventers and agents of change.

I know that these aspects of the class help make students more optimistic about the future because they share that in their feedback. Last year instead of going to the Holocaust Museum for our annual class field trip, we lobbied the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in support of a Genocide and Mass Atrocities Prevention Act. The next day in class when students shared their greatest takeaways, they were consistent: “The most important thing that I took away from our field trip on Tuesday was the immense power of the younger generation to make a change in our world.” “Something I took away from Tuesday was how powerful our phone calls and letter writing truly is in terms of reaching out to the senators and it truly showed me how powerful the youth is.” “I realized how powerful our generation is when it comes to change. Our advocacy for what we believe in can really make a difference.” End-of-the

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year reflections each year reflect similarly encouraging sentiments: "I now know how to properly be an advocate. I have the tools I need to be a Social Justice Warrior and fight for positive change in the world." "I can teach my children who will teach their children the warning signs of a genocide and that we are all human no matter their wealth or the color of their skin. I can teach the people I will meet throughout my life about how little the United States has acted and hopefully one of those people I meet will be the next politician and can change the world and save thousands." "I have learned to think, not react. But most importantly, in this class I have gained confidence. I have learned that my voice matters in this class, and it matters

*"I have learned that my voice matters in this class, and it matters in this world."*

in this world." With a clarity and confidence, these students are more optimistic about the future because they know they can shape it.

Optimism is not seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. It is seeing opportunities where others can see only challenges. Genocide Studies teaches students about the challenges and deep pain of the world, but it also gives them the tools to create opportunities on behalf of those in need of

solidarity. Maya Angelou wrote, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Genocide Studies serves as a case study on how students can feel optimistic about even the darkest of content when their light is being reflected back to them. ●



**Lauren Brownlee and students from her Genocide Studies class.**

*Lauren Brownlee is Director of Social Action at Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart and a member of the Board of Trustees at Sandy Spring Friends School. This year she is serving as Visiting Scholar for CSEE. Lauren welcomes emails at [lbrownlee@stoneridgeschool.org](mailto:lbrownlee@stoneridgeschool.org) to continue the conversations about optimism.*