

# Mission Hill School News

## Letter from Child Street

### Special Edition: **Race at Mission Hill**, Part I

*(This week's newsletter will focus on thoughts about race. Look for part II next week)*

Dear Mission Hill School Families, Friends, Staff and Students,

He walks out of his classroom to his locker. We make eye contact for a moment in the hallway. He opens his locker, takes a piece of paper out of it and re-enters his classroom. The purpose of his leaving the classroom seems clear and we don't talk, only see one another.

I think about him as a Black boy in our school, in Boston, in America. I see him as a young middle school boy getting his class work from his locker. I also see him as a 13 year old, soon to be a high schooler who walks the streets of Boston, a city where false identification happens with potentially dangerous implications, and harmful race-based assumptions are made. Yet, our city with its history

soaked in racism, is in some ways more racially progressive than many other cities.

For so long American parents and grandparents have raised children to live within the boundaries of a society with social norms heavily influenced by race (and class). A person's race in America can define a person's power to speak and in what manner to speak. It can define what words will be heard, how a message will be interpreted, connections to others, access to communicate to large groups of people, who is viewed as smart and what is beautiful.

It is not enough to teach our children about the origin of these ideas and/or how to exist in such a world. We also have to do our part to change the way things are.

Being an agent of change was one of several threads that ran through the North Dakota Study Group in Detroit. Mission Hill staff had an opportunity to think about race as it relates to our roles in education and to our selves personally. We talked about race in mixed racial groupings and in single race groupings called affinity groups. The conversations we began in Detroit continue here in Boston.

As we consider teaching the whole child, we must see race as part of a child's identity. At the same time we must see our own full selves and consider the teaching we do as a result.

How do we move forward? We begin to learn from our children. They often see the true character of people, regardless of the factors

we adults impose on them. We begin to talk openly and respectfully about race, sharing our questions and experiences without judgment. We begin to take actions when we determine that things are not right. We begin to normalize expanding joy, accomplishment and quality of life for people no matter how the color of their skin makes us feel.

*~Ayla Gavins*

### REMINDERS

#### **March**

Fri. 3/8, Portfolio Breakfast for 7<sup>th</sup>  
& 8<sup>th</sup> Grade students and families:  
8:00-9:00 am

Thu. 3/14, Family Council 5:45  
3/14-15, Family Conferences

Mon. 3/18, No School

Fri. 3/22, Family Council

Movie Night: 6:00 at MHS

Thu. 3/28, Family Breakfast:

Ancient Greece

Fri. 3/29, No School

#### **April**

Thu. 4/11, Science Fair

4/15-19, Spring Break

Fri. 4/26, Morning Walk & Talk  
with Ayla

## From the Classrooms

### 3 and 4 year-olds

#### Room 108

I remember way back when I was a young teacher and someone asked me about teaching children of color. I thought the question was weird. I remember answering that I teach all children the same no matter what their race. Twenty-five years later, I know that was an ignorant answer. As a young teacher, I hadn't learned yet, to use Lisa Delpit's phrase, about "teaching other people's children". I haven't figured it all out – who has? However, working at Mission Hill School I have learned some things - primarily that I am ignorant in some areas, and that it is my job to be aware of it and to do my best to learn. I know that race is complicated. I know that gaining the trust of a family is a critical part of the equation, and that learning from the families – who are the experts on their own children – is key. I am grateful to my colleagues who have taught me about race – in issues big and small. Early on, for example, a little African-American girl in my class called another little girl "ashy". I didn't respond, because I didn't know what she was saying. I didn't understand it was an insult. Amina was nearby and clued me in. She helped the situation in the midst of my ignorance. There have been times, too, when I have pulled a white colleague aside about comments he/she made – ignorant comments about race. Although necessary, those conversations are

never easy. I am thankful for the conversations about race that we started while we were together at North Dakota Study Group. It reminded me of the race conversations we had as a staff in the early years at Mission Hill. I am grateful that these conversations are coming to surface again. I am also grateful that in my own family we have grown more diverse over the years, and that my sons Zack and CJ are growing up with cousins who are Thai, Jamaican, Haitian and Jewish – as well as Irish. Maybe they'll be a step ahead of where I was as at their age.

~Geraldyn Bywater McLaughlin

"When you talk about Detroit, talk about all the good things that are happening here." This plea resonated in my ears as the North Dakota Study Group attendees listened to a panel of Detroiters representing various organizations working to improve their city.

The young woman's plea is food for thought. When you think and speak of Detroit, what do you envision and say? Here is what I've discovered: Detroiters are a proud, enduring and focused people. Organizations have evolved to improve ecology, build community, provide access to fresh and healthy foods and create schools that go above and beyond the school day to teach students, not only the academics but the social skills for living.

Catherine Ferguson Academy is one such school. The school was created specifically for pregnant teenage girls who were basically cast off as "hopeless" but has had

such wonderful success that non-pregnant teenage girls have asked to be part of this community and have been welcome. These girls are able to return to school two weeks after giving birth and bring their babies with them! An early education center is part of the academy, welcoming babies as young as a few weeks old. Teenage moms get to continue their education and spend time throughout the school day with their children, learn to garden and grow food and take care of animals in the barn located on school property. Some of the girls have had an international experience traveling to Ethiopia and South Africa for an interchange of cultural learning and farming techniques.

The academy has a goal for 2013: to build an intentional community. When speaking to their principal, Dr. Andrews, the girls wanted a place where their children could go out and play without fear and the community would look after each other. The school has acquired 12 acres of land one-half mile from the school site. On this land there will be housing for the girls, commercial space for them to start their own businesses, crater gardens, crops for the community to access and a space/home for 'elders', adults who will be able to teach the girls how to care for themselves and their children, in simple and large ways, such as making jams, making clothes, and constructing the residences.

Catherine Ferguson Academy –

one of the many good things happening in Detroit.

~Donna Winder

## Kindergarten

### Room 106

I started studying at Wheelock College when I was 18 years old. I hadn't been away from home for very long. I was happy for my newfound independence, but struggling with missing everything I was familiar with. In my first year at Wheelock I wrote five papers on culture and identity. Almost all my teachers encouraged me to be metacognitively aware of my thinking about my own self in regard to race and culture.

I came to realize that the hardest transition for me was that I had left a country where people of color were the majority. People of color were present on billboards, ads in magazines, held positions in government, and owned companies. When I came to Boston, that was not my experience. Students of color were few and far between at Wheelock. The college made great efforts to change that over the next couple of years.

I remember Multicultural Teaching and Learning specifically. In that class I learned that children around the age of three or four start to develop concepts of race. (Katz) This class really helped me to understand that not only was it important for me as an adult to think about my identity, but it was also important for young children as well.

*See page 6 for Resources for further reading*

~Kathy Clunis D'Andrea

### Room 107

"Privilege is the opportunity to not think about who you are". While many are "privileged" according to this definition, the state is not as detrimental as the lack of awareness of its existence. I walked away from NDSG asking, "Who gets to say what children deserve a quality education?" There is a consistent imbalance in resources, and ultimately quality, of education available that is often delineated along socioeconomic standing. It would be negligent to leave out how these lines correlate to race and thereby bring back into consciousness an era where separate never meant equal and how today's less affluent communities are still being affected.

It is said that the squeakiest wheel gets the most oil. But what is the fate of those who don't know enough to make noise, to demand what is rightfully theirs? What happens when a conscious decision is made to ignore the painful pleas for change of those most affected? In many cases the people in power with larger agendas are the ones ignoring the squeaky wheels in hopes that they will become corroded, broken down, inadequate and can ultimately arguably be replaced. This is the case with many educational systems, not just in Detroit, but also in places closer to home. The savvy will get their agendas mobilized and met by those in power, while those who

are less well connected will continue to march blindly into battle as they fight the insurmountable giants. Agents of child-centered change continue to be ignored while our students suffer. However we must not be dismayed, but continue to fight on because "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes".

~Jada Brown  
& JoAnn Hawkesworth

### Room 109

*Column on race coming next week*

## Grades One & Two

### Room 204

*Column on race coming next week*

### Room 205

A crucial part of the North Dakota Study Group experience this year was to visit various sites in Detroit where people work hard to transform education and communities. I visited the Catherine Ferguson Academy, a charter high school that provides education and parenting resources for pregnant and parenting young women. We met with the principal to learn the school's founding history, visions, successes and challenges. When I was listening to Ms. Andrews speak about her work at Catherine Ferguson, two words kept lingering in my mind, even after returned to Boston: commitment and empowerment.

The Catherine Ferguson Academy is committed to

providing education and life skills for their students to support and care for themselves and their children. The school's mission is to empower students to face the challenges and responsibilities of being the best they can be. This reminds me of my work at Mission Hill. I am committed to empowering my students to reach their full potential, to strive for social justice, and to take their place in society. But how do I do that? In a society filled with inequities and social injustice, resulting from racism in particular, how do I, as a minority, support my students in developing awareness of prejudice and racism, and prepare them to become change agents and fight oppression? At NDSG, I realized how important it is to be aware of our students' historical backgrounds before we can actively promote multicultural education that will allow them to develop a positive sense of their own personal cultural identities. To do this, we must first establish our personal cultural identities, as educators and parents. If culture is the lens through which we view and interpret the world and our everyday experiences, then cultural identity is how an individual identifies which lens to use to perceive. I invite you to identify your lens or lenses and share them with your child.

~Brenda Lau

When the staff attended the North Dakota Study Group several weeks ago, I was with a

group that visited Nsorma Institute. This K-8 school has many similarities to Mission Hill. They are a small school- about 178 students. Their classes have approximately 20 students. Their staff participates in many of the decisions made about the school. They too believe that "...a teacher is actually a guide who provides nurturing, love, information and experience that aids the learner in growing into knowledge of the individual and collective self." I could not help but be excited to spend the afternoon in a school that sounded so similar to our beloved Mission Hill.

One major difference about Nsorma Institute is that it is an Afro-centric school meaning they "emphasize and promote emphasis on African culture and the contributions of Africans to the development of western civilization". Their entire school community is comprised of staff and students of African descent. (They don't turn away Caucasian students; it is just that none have ever applied.)

While I was roaming the hallways and visiting an enthusiastic kindergarten class I couldn't help but wonder, what must it be like for all members of this community to have the understanding of shared experiences as people of African descent. That got me thinking about how this can enhance a child's time at school. What does it mean when students and adults share cultural norms? How does this affect the child's experience at school? This also got me thinking about what this means at

Mission Hill when teachers and children don't share that commonality. Again, how does this affect a child's experience at school? I want to continue to explore this and its implications.

Even before our return from the North Dakota Study Group, our staff made commitments to continuing conversations around race. Not only am I looking forward to continuing these conversations, I am also interested in talking about how race affects the way we teach and the effects on our students.

~Amina Michel-Lord

#### **Room 217**

*Column on race coming next week*

### **Grades Three & Four**

#### **Room 207**

*Column on race coming next week*

#### **Room 216**

Conversations about race are always important to have, especially in the education field. I grew up attending white middle class schools where reading books like *The Help* and *To Kill Mockingbird* was the educators' way of exposing students to race. While this does not make me a cultured person through this limited lens of racial diversity, it gives perspective on what exposure to various races was like as a young person in suburban Massachusetts. I also attended college in rural Virginia, which

was not rich in diverse culture. Both places were limited in diversity; thus they did not allow for much multicultural discussion about race. While I understood what the phrase 'racial diversity' meant, it is a different meaning entirely to live within a racially diverse culture. As a young, white teacher new to Mission Hill School, it is both educational and imperative to see and immerse myself within the diverse cultures within staff and student body.

~Erica Switzer

### Grades Five & Six

#### Room 210

*Column on race coming next week*

#### Room 215

After North Dakota Study Group the topic of race came up as a discussion in professional development. Race is one lens that people can use to view other people, and situations. As teachers, race isn't something that can or should be ignored because it is part of everyone. For some people it is a very important part of their identity and they are closely connected to it while others may not feel the same. Reflecting on my own experience, race was never a topic talked about growing up, which was confusing to me since I am part of a bi-racial, family who equally honor two different religions. As I got older I asked a lot of questions and I didn't feel right choosing one race or one religion over the other.

Since this is my lens, I make an effort never to assume where a student or family is from, but rather ask questions that help me get to know the student and family better. It is important to recognize that although the topic of race is huge and important there are other factors that go into a person's identity and it is our job as teachers to get to know the whole child.

~Sarah DeCruz

### Grades Seven & Eight

#### Room 213

*Column on race coming next week*

#### Room 214

*Column on race coming next week.*

*Resources for further reading, from Kathy D'Andrea, Room 106:*

Derman-Sparks, L., & The ABC Task Force. 1989. *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children.* Washington, DC

NAEYC. Whitney, T. 1999. *Kids like us: Using persona dolls in the classroom.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Katz, P.A. 1976. *The acquisition of racial attitudes in children.* In *Towards the elimination of racism*, ed. P.A. Katz, 125-54. New York: Pergamon.

### Hot Topics

#### Transportation Survey

Please remember to complete and return the transportation

survey that was sent home last week. Responses will be kept confidential. If you have more than one child at Mission Hill, please complete one for each child. Results of the survey will be used to examine how students' journeys to school can be made safer, healthier, and more efficient. ***For every survey completed, \$1 will be donated to Mission Hill School.*** For questions or the link to an online version of the survey, please email [Christinakim93@gmail.com](mailto:Christinakim93@gmail.com). Thank you for your help!

#### Courtney's Corner

Check out Courtney's Corner for information on various programs and resources for you and your family.

#### Rincón de Courtney

Mira la información que esta fuera en el "Rincón de Courtney" para información sobre varios programas y recursos para ti y tu familia.

#### 70+ Days of Summer

Where will your child be spending the summer? Camp registration has started and we will continue to inform you about the opportunities for your children but don't forget to fill out the "Summer Is Coming" survey and return it to Courtney in Room 114. She's your direct connection for all your camp needs.

#### 70 + Días de verano

Dónde va a pasar el verano su hijo(a)? Los campos de verano ya han empezado su proceso de admisión así que continuaremos informándoles sobre las oportunidades para sus hijos. No olviden completar la encuesta titulada "Ya viene el verano" (Summer is Coming) y devolverla a Courtney en el salón 114. Ella es su

conexión directa con los campos de verano.

### **August Scholars**

Current 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students can apply for a FREE 3 week academically focused summer program July 22-August 9. Breakfast, lunch and transportation provided. Choose from tennis, music, performance and dance in the afternoons in addition to field trips throughout the city. Return applications to Courtney by Wednesday March 20<sup>th</sup>.

### **TEEP**

Current 6<sup>th</sup> graders can apply for a FREE 5 week summer program with mornings focused on music, art, math and language arts and afternoons spent engaged in project work or field trips around the city. Once enrolled in TEEP there are year-round activities and high school and college prep programs. See Courtney for an application, due ASAP.

***Join the Mission Hill School Family Forum!*** The Mission Hill School Family Forum is an initiative by school parents and caregivers FOR school parents and caregivers, a place to forge connections in and across classroom communities. Staff is welcome, too.

To join the group:

(1) Request to join by sending an email to MHS Family Forum moderators Naama or Neathery ([mizzgee@yahoo.com](mailto:mizzgee@yahoo.com) or [neathery99@gmail.com](mailto:neathery99@gmail.com))

Or,

(2) Visit the Mission Hill School Family Forum site, take a look at

the homepage, and click the "Join This Group" link to submit a request that way:

<http://tinyurl.com/MHSconnects>

Please help to grow the forum as a community asset by bringing this invitation to the attention of your MHS friends. It's always a good time to be in touch!



### **Mission Hill School**

*A Boston Public Pilot School*

Deborah Meier, Founder

Ayla Gavins, Principal

20 Child Street

Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

617.635.6384 (office)

617.635.6419 (fax)

[www.missionhillschool.org](http://www.missionhillschool.org)