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[Building bridges in polarized communities: How do we model civic dialogue in divided spaces?](#)

The 13th Amendment can feel a bit old and dusty in an American History classroom. While a worthy celebration of the liberation of African Americans from the American sin of slavery, this now 155 year old addition to the Constitution is something that is often related to the “why do I have to learn this?” mantra of bored history students everywhere. But from the arcane language of the 19th century comes an opportunity to engage students in meaningful and relevant conversations about the roots of structural racism and the crisis of mass incarceration that plagues our country. Most students, and frankly, most teachers, simply assume the 13th Amendment freed the 4 million enslaved people in America. Lost in the traditional teaching of this lesson is the single line in the amendment that allows for continued slavery and servitude for “...punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted...” These 11 words are partially responsible for the criminal justice crisis that’s unfolded ever since.

Full disclosure, I’m as guilty as anyone for glossing over this opportunity to make meaningful connections with students, but when I watched the award winning documentary *13th: From Slave to Criminal with One Amendment* by filmmaker Ava DuVernay, I knew I had an opportunity for something that is too often elusive in history: a chance to bridge past and present and foster meaningful community engagement and dialogue with my students. With an experienced teaching colleague, we planned an evening event called “Critical Conversations.” Using the documentary as a central shared tool, we ate, watched the movie and then dove in. We invited our local sheriff, a conservative white man and longstanding pillar of the community along with a young African American man, newly elected to our local school board. These two helped us frame the discussion about mass incarceration in two worlds: that of law enforcement and policing *and* race and poverty.

There were several cathartic moments from the evening. The first was as witnesses. My students were able to see two very different and equally relevant world views on display as we discussed the film and its implications in our community. Our sheriff defended his officers and the often thankless work they do in policing. He was also passionate in his condemnation of racial profiling by police but helped my students understand the inherent challenges of policing communities whose populations don’t have the resources they deserve or the futures they need. Our board member was equally passionate about growing up black and male in a society that crushes these men under the bigotry of low expectations. He too condemned

profiling in our police forces but explained the insidious nature of systemic racism and white privilege in ways that only a young man who'd lived it could. Simply seeing and hearing these two world views in the same space was novel for my students. Their experience is typically shaped in their homes or distilled through literature and well-meaning educators. Rarely do they hear from those whose lives are shaped by the forces that seem abstract and academic.

The evening also engaged and ignited the awkward curiosity that is frequently dormant in traditional classrooms. Matters of race, privilege, gun control, and corrupt cops are taboo in many schools and classrooms. Teachers and administrators are conditioned towards caution, and kids are expected to either avoid the hard conversations or be overly sensitive and careful. Our guests generously gave students permission to ask questions safely. Political correctness, while serving a valuable purpose, has made vital conversations harder to have. Around race specifically, being able to ask questions--especially of people who don't share our values or life experience--can be uncomfortable at best, and at worst, unsafe. Here, however, were two community leaders giving students permission to bravely ask questions, even if they didn't have "correct" language.

Finally, the evening was a powerful demonstration of civil dialogue. The sheriff and the board member, coming from very different backgrounds and life experiences, spoke to one another with respect; they demonstrated an ability to "agree to disagree" and they parted as friends. Cable news, social media, and the political classes thrive on polarization and conflict. Our students are conditioned to think that all political or social discussion is laced with anger and intransigence. In this event, however, two people with very different positions and very passionate views came together and engaged each other, challenged each other, and tried to change each other, and they did so without vitriol and spite. This is the style of deliberative discussion our founders envisioned in civil society, and this is exactly the kind of civic engagement I hope all my students experience.

Article Submitted by:

Paul Schneider, Social Studies Teacher

University High School, Central Valley School District

pschneider@cvsd.org



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