

Wendy Kopp Answers Your Questions • The Real Story Behind Corps Member Selection • How Alums Are Changing Oakland's Schools

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY DOUBLE ISSUE

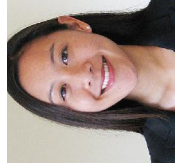
One Day

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TEACH FOR AMERICA TURNS 20

Getting back in touch with your inner outrage



Dear fellow alumni,

In 1990, when the first Teach For America corps members were heading into classrooms in six regions across the country, I was starting my freshman year of high school in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pa.

I went to public school, but my school had an AstroTurf football stadium and a planetarium. Standardized tests weren't high-stakes events in my district. There was no cramming, no pressure. I don't even remember being told about the tests until a few days before, when teachers would remind us to bring No. 2 pencils and something to read. I remember the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* running a large photo every year with rows of National Merit finalists and scholars from my school. My understanding of the achievement gap was pretty much limited to *Stand and Deliver*.

During a college freshman seminar on race, class, and schools, I was jolted awake—like many others—by Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*. The injustices that children in some of New York City's poorest communities faced were outrageous to me. I started tutoring in a housing project near my campus and continued mentoring students after I graduated and moved to New York City.

A few years later, I joined the corps. Talk about outrage. For the next two years, I was constantly furious—at the system's shortcomings, at my own inadequacies as a new teacher, at the extreme challenges my kids faced, and, just as often, at my kids. It turns out, you accomplish a lot when you're mad. My students made big gains, started a literary magazine, and began genuinely to love poetry.

But in the months after I finished the corps, something strange happened. I calmed down. When I talked about my teaching experience to others, I mostly discussed the successes and breakthroughs. Listening to me one night, my dad said, "Don't you remember crying every night your first year?" It wasn't every night, but he was right: My story was starting to sound a little like a feel-good movie. I talked about my students winning second place in the Bronx-wide poetry slam as a point of pride. I didn't mention that we should have won first, but our star performer let the whole team down—squandering months of after-school practice—by skipping the finals for a gang fight. I had never been so

angry or disappointed in my life, but I don't often talk about that part.

Last year I read a powerful story in the journal *Guernica* by an alum author named Michael Copperman (Delta '02). Four years after his teaching commitment, he had gone back to the Delta on an invitation to address the incoming corps. He planned to tell them a story he'd told many times before, about a student named Jacqueline Garner. She had entered his classroom reading at a fourth grade level and left at an eleventh grade level, winning the schoolwide reading contest by a wide margin.

On his way to the ceremony, he decided to drive through the old neighborhood. He was stunned to find Jacqueline's house gone, burned to the ground. He had no idea what had happened to her.

"I'd made Jacqueline into a success story," Copperman wrote, "the girl from the poor family who made good on the opportunity of my classroom. In my telling, I'd reached her, lifted her from her small circumstances into a bright, boundless future. I'd made her an anecdote, and so forgotten her."

It's natural to sand down the raw edges of our corps years and repackaging them into something neater, a story to tell. But we lose something in doing so. I think the question we all face as alumni is this: How do we stay connected to the sense of outrage and urgency that fueled our work as corps members?

Teach For America celebrates its 20th anniversary in a year when education has, at long last, taken center stage in America's public and political consciousness. It seems appropriate to ask—as we move forward in our careers and start families, and as life gets more complicated—how do we stay in touch with the reasons our students can't wait another day, or week, or year for things to get a whole lot better? Perhaps it's as simple as continuing to ask ourselves that question—not once, but many times throughout our lives—and renewing our commitment to answering it.

Warm regards,

Ting Yu

N.Y. '03

Editor in Chief

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want to talk about anger or social issues, but they are interested in entertainment," he says. Each cycle of the program culminates in a play, for which students take on business roles (such as budget manager and advertising strategist) as well as creative roles (such as playwright and performer). Last summer the group performed an excerpt from *Julius Caesar*, among other pieces, at Philadelphia's venerable Painted Bride Arts Center, set in the middle of the city's arts district. Turnout was high. "We could have held the show at a community center, but I

Willette Whittaker was struck by how naturally Rogers interacts with his students. "He has this wonderful and engaging personality. You can tell he really cares."

wanted them to see this was the real deal," Rogers says. "The goal is for them to say, 'Hey, I can do this!'"

Willette Whittaker, who invited Rogers to run Greatness Is in You! for visiting high-schoolers at the Community College of Philadelphia, was struck by how naturally Rogers interacts with his students: "He has this wonderful and engaging personality," she says. "You can tell he really cares."

Even though program participants were drawn from impoverished areas of North and Southwest Philadelphia, where graduation rates are among the lowest in the city, Whittaker reports that 95 percent of the students Rogers mentored in that class went on to earn high-school diplomas. The majority went on to higher education.

Nandi Benson was one such student. When she attended the CCP program as a high-school student, 88 percent of her classmates were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and few entered four-year universities. Benson bucked the trend and enrolled at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she earned a B.S.



Kareem Rogers says strong mentors in his youth showed him the path to success. Today, he's returning the favor for young people in his hometown.

in child development. Today she's the head teacher at a child-care center and plans to open her own facility one day.

"If I had to describe my experience in one word, I would say 'phenomenal,'" Benson says. "The Greatness Is in You! never left me." She says her stage experience gave her confidence—not just about acting, but about expressing her thoughts and feelings. Once in college, she joined a sorority and a choir—two things she "never would have felt comfortable doing before"—and she has put the program's lessons about self-presentation to use while networking. "The program helped me to see that I can speak out in a positive way," she says. "I can share my ideas; I can ask for help." She also made a budget based on the financial training she received working on the play.

Benson says that many young people flounder because they don't get enough support from their parents and communities. "If you don't get encouragement, you won't have faith in your own abilities, and then you'll think, 'Why should I even try?'" she says. "When you look at high-school drop-outs—those are all people who thought 'Why should I even try?'"

Benson, on the other hand, didn't give in to hopelessness. "It just took that little bit of encouragement from Mr. Rogers to give me the push I needed," she says. ★

INNOVATOR

Not Just Black and White

Patricia Espiritu Halagao (Bay Area '92) designs curricula for Hawaii's "invisible majority"

By Tracy Walsh

At Waipahu High School in Oahu, the vast majority of students are Filipino Americans, descendants of plantation workers who braved fierce prejudice and endured backbreaking labor when they migrated to Hawaii at the turn of the 20th century. So when high-school teacher Kristen King (Hawaii '08) invited her students to have a conversation about race, she assumed they would talk about their own history.

What they said surprised her. "I asked them what they knew about racism and stereotypes, and all they talked about were clashes between African Americans and whites. It was shocking, because there aren't any [African Americans or whites] in my class." Indeed, less than 2 percent of students at Waipahu are either white or black, while Filipino American students outnumber both by a factor of 25 to 1. "It was all some experience they had read about in a textbook and which they didn't seem to connect to their lives," King notes. "When I told them about how Filipinos used to be barred from entering hotels, they were absolutely stunned."

King is working to remedy that by using "A Century of Challenge and Change," a multimedia middle-grades curriculum designed by Dr. Patricia Espiritu Halagao (Bay Area



Students at Waipahu High School, where a corps member recently introduced Patricia Espiritu Halagao's "Century of Challenge and Change" curriculum.

online at jleepney.com, has been used in Washington state, Hawaii, California, and Maryland.

Halagao started thinking about these issues as an elementary-school teacher in Oakland, when she taught classes of Cambodians and Latinos who "didn't see anyone who looked like them in their textbooks," she recalls. She cofounded her first venture, a Filipino American education program called Pinoy Teach, as a doctoral student at

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the University of Washington. ("Pinoy" is an informal term for "Filipino.") As part of the program, she trained undergraduates—many of whom had no background in education—to go into local schools and teach middle-school students. "It's funny how I used Teach For America as an inspiration and a model," she recalls. "All of these students never thought they could teach, but once they get in the classroom, they say, 'Wow! I could be a teacher!'"

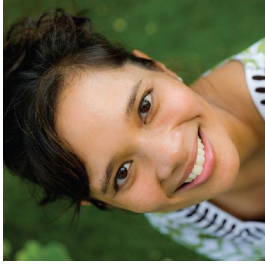
The venture, which was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, targeted schools in Seattle and the largely white suburb of Bellevue. "Not all of the students were Filipino, and neither were the teachers," Halagao says. "But

"Not all the students were Filipino, and neither were the teachers. But the things we're doing—investigating history, making connections, looking at things from different perspectives—are relevant to all students."

the things we're doing—investigating history, making connections, looking at things from different perspectives—are relevant to all students."

Halagao, now a professor at the University of Hawaii, integrated her Pinoy Teach work with her "Century of Challenge and Change" curriculum, which she designed at the Smithsonian's behest. The curriculum is, in Halagao's words, "an online, accessible, one-stop shop," which features lesson plans, assignments, activities, and interactives. Two omnipresent tween guides, Marissa and Jordan—named after Halagao's children and illustrated by a Disney cartoonist—lead students through lessons on Pacific geography, historic immigration patterns, and the Spanish-American War, as well as debates on more abstract topics. "Can a country be a democracy and an imperialist nation?" Marissa asks at one point.

Halagao continues to look forward. This summer she launched the



Professor Patricia Espiritu Halagao developed a curriculum on Filipino American history at the behest of the Smithsonian Institution.

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