

writing our hope

a 'zine of creative nonfiction by teenagers
on themes of hope, tolerance and equality



Supplement Two
Common Ground High School

Writing Our Hope is a publication of
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High school students and college undergrads may submit.

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For more information, contact:

Foster Dickson
Booker T. Washington Magnet High School
632 S. Union Street, Montgomery, AL 36104
334-269-3617
foster.dickson@mps.k12.al.us

The Staff

Supplement Editor and Faculty Adviser: Foster Dickson
Regularly scheduled issues of the 'zine have student editors.

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A Note on Editorial Decisions

With respect to some sensitive issues of language, the original student editors and I discussed the matter of racial epithets and other slurs, which will inevitably appear in some writings on these themes of tolerance and equality. We decided that it was preferable to include the authors' own words, especially when they are describing real-life episodes that they have witnessed and chosen to describe. We will put such words in quotation marks. It is a sad fact that these derogatory terms exist, but reacting to them (and the ideas behind them) is a part of what we are doing with this publication. Therefore, we have chosen not to excise slurs for the purpose of political correctness or censorship. We have chosen not to deny the existence of such words, but to call them (and the people who use them) out into the open to be scrutinized. We truly hope that our honest treatment of this real matter will be respected and regarded as we intend.

Similarly, linguists and other scholars have not yet agreed upon whether to capitalize the commonly used racial terms like "white" or "black" when referring to Caucasians or African Americans. Editorially, we have chosen to capitalize all such terms: White, Black, Hispanic and Asian. We regard these terms as proper nouns referring to specific groups and will capitalize them as such, in the same way that regions of America like the South or the Northeast are capitalized.

We're proud of *Writing Our Hope* and we hope that you enjoy being challenged by what you read here.

Editor's Introduction

For some reason, when the terms *tolerance* and *equality* come up for this project, most students who submit their writing seem to interpret them in light of racial issues. But the ideas of tolerance and equality extend beyond just race to issues of gender, economic status, family lineage, geography, educational attainment, as well as access to a healthy environment and healthy food.

I have never been to Common Ground High School in Connecticut, but their website's description of the school compelled me to pursue including them in *Writing Our Hope*. After producing several issues worth of material that deal almost solely with racial issues, I wanted to include students from this school that approaches social justice through environmentalism. Race is an important issue in America, and in the world, but the matter of the environment transcends racial, national, and identity boundaries. It affects us all: the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink . . . these are things no person can live without. I was curious how the teachers at Common Ground approached this subject: how is the environmental movement – the “green” movement – a levelizing force? What would their students write if asked to address the project's themes of hope, tolerance and equality?

The results varied. Joan Malerba-Foran, an English teacher at Common Ground, engaged her students to address these topics, and the nine student contributors whose works appear in this supplement cover topics such as grocery shopping and animal rights, expectations of President Obama and current uses of the N-word, womens' self-image and dealing with depression, and of course environmentalism and the planet we live on.

Overall, their writings contain some unexpected statements. These are students on the forefront of progressive ideas about life

and society. And progress and hope, and the idea that we all share some things in common, move society forward. Regardless of any one person's ideals or leanings, we can find "common ground" in the notion that we all have to work to do to improve our quality of life.

Joel Tolman

About Common Ground High School

I have been looking, this week, for signs of hope. It's spring at Common Ground, so they aren't hard to find.

In our makeshift greenhouse, herb seedlings climb unsteadily toward the light – coaxed by three of our students, anxious as new parents. This group is among a large handful of student entrepreneurship teams, all starting small business ventures based on produce from our urban farm.

Common Ground students are in a hothouse of sorts themselves. This time of year, students come to school each day, college admissions letters held high. Each year, about 90% of our students get accepted – even though most arrive as freshman a couple of years behind in their core classes. We keep telling them that they are college material, and it seems to sink in. One teacher recently caught students talking hopefully in the hallway; one announced, “Before CG, I didn't have goals. Now I know I'm going to be the first in my family to get into college.”

Last Friday, hope was a more quiet presence in our school. Eighty-four of our 150 students chose to mark our Day of Silence, supporting those who feel they cannot speak up because of their sexual identity. At the end of the day, the entire school community gathered to break our silence. One student – for whom a day without speech was a particularly difficult task – stood up from among his peers. “To those of you in the GSA, if you're gay or lesbian or bi or whatever, just be yourself, because we're all trying to be somebody, and we need to be ourselves.”

Common Ground is an unusual place, perhaps unique: an urban environmental high school, preparing students for college and environmental leadership. Our students take courses with

names like Biodiversity, Architecture, Environmental Justice, and Food & The Environment. They are planting a Shakespeare garden in which to perform *King Lear*, and are exploring West Rock State Park in their PE classes. They stay after school for Environmental Leadership and paid work in our gardens, as well as African Dance and SAT prep. Their days contain enough of the usual high school fare – class rings, state testing, messy break-ups – that other daily sights prompt a double-take. Are those organic salad greens from our garden served out at school lunch? Solar panels on the roof? A rooster crowing outside the classroom?

Students from other New Haven schools like to make fun of our students on the bus, calling Common Ground a “farm school.” Our students know better. As our name hints, Common Ground is also the second home for an unlikely community of students, teachers, and families. For such a small place, Common Ground is home to remarkably varied students – a biodiversity hotspot, sort of like a tropical rainforest. If you asked these students who they are, the range of their answers might surprise you: we are suburban kids, eager to get out of a school where everyone looks like us; we are Puerto Rican kids, at home with chickens and the sound of Spanish in the classrooms; we are city kids, learning why asthma rates in our neighborhood are sky-high, and figuring out what to do about it; we are the quiet kid in the back of the class, finding our voice somewhere a smaller and safer than our last school; we are future environmental lawyers, and public health nurses, and businesspeople with a conscience.

These students look around and realize that it is perhaps possible: “just be yourself, because we’re all trying to be somebody, and we need to be ourselves.”

Those words are, perhaps, our sturdiest cause for hope.

Joel Tolman is the Director of Development & Community Engagement and also teaches social studies at Common Ground High School.

Tyquan Miller

Environmental Awareness: One at a Time

I think that the single most important societal problem is the lack of environmental awareness. It seems that not enough people take the issues concerning the environment as seriously as they need to. The truth about the current state of the environment and its future is being pushed away from societal concerns; these issues are not being given their fair or equal time before the public. While some grasp the failure and ultimate consequences of our environmental actions, a majority still refuse to accept the truth and address this accelerating issue. I think that it's not too late to reverse the negative impacts to which we have contributed, but in order for that to be accomplished everyone must first be informed on the matter and then deliberate alternate options.

Environmental awareness could be added into school curricula to give grammar school children ideas about the environment that they will be inheriting. I am involved in the Connecticut Envirothon Competition, a high school club dedicated to educating students on various events. We study issues concerning wildlife, forestry, aquatics, soils, and current world events such as global warming. These studies would have a greater impact on the lives of the general public if they took place in earlier grades rather than starting in high schools. I was also a counselor for the Common Ground Ecology Camp, a program whose purpose is to educate children (ages five through twelve) on many aspects of the environment. One of the many games we played in the camp consisted of the counselors explaining to the children how almost everything they use can be recycled. The person who gathered the most recyclables correctly had the cleanest area and was declared the winner of the game.

The environment is a major factor in how a society functions and thinks. If our government was more involved in listening to the public's worries and gave us an equal or fair voice in determining the issues that would be researched, that would have a major effect on the way society interacts with the environment. Having access to internet networks and other forms of communication is an excellent way to globalize the issue; plus, it would create a stronger influence in places other than our own country. With funding and enough people taking interest in environmental education, there could be more demand for positive organizations in the communities. They could help educate residents on their specific neighborhood, on how important it is to have awareness of their environment, changing one block at a time.

I think that the lack of environmental awareness is the single most important societal problem. People have the right to know the state of their environment and how they can be involved in changing it for the benefit of their generation and others to come. The lack of awareness is a problem because without knowledge of our environment, we will not see its current state; reform actions will be delayed and then it will take a longer time to reverse the negative process; in some cases it may not even be possible. I am part of a school that helps me become aware of just how important our actions are when we do *anything* in our daily lives. I think that if we made this information equally available to all schools, we could begin impacting the world for the better one class, one block, one community and one nation at a time.

Tamica Cray

Dead Limbs

Bent at odd angles,
My arms hung frozen and dead in place,
Hugging another I am trying to survive.
No water, polluted Earth.
I am the seed burst into tree,
Uncared for by humanity.

Give Them a Home or Put Them Down

In the United States, millions of healthy cats and dogs are killed each year. One reason for this is that animal shelters are unable to provide a warm, safe home. Another reason is that some animals in shelters are very ill. It is estimated that 15 million cats and dogs are killed each year. I am highly against this “murdering” of animals. I have a deep love and respect for animals. Animals are not that different from you and me. Animals cannot speak as we do, but they still have feelings. They know when they hurt. Animals have every right to live with a dignity similar to our own.

Our Earth is home for both humans and animals, and we need those animals. They help produce food and resources. We do not use shelter animals for food, but they are still useful in other ways. For example, they are our friends, they protect us, and they bring us joy when we are sick or when we are feeling lonely. At my high school, Common Ground, teachers instruct us on how to be environmentally friendly. We learn how to cultivate the land and take care of farm animals. Through this experience, I take pride in helping animals. Doing small things, like feeding or looking after someone’s pet; respecting them brings me happiness.

Death occurs for most shelter animals through lethal injections or the use of a type of carbon-based gas. Many doctors and shelter workers say that the needles cause no pain at all and are humane. In addition, gas chambers are supposed to bring instant death to animals. That is not true. The needles have side effects when used improperly. Additionally, sometimes shelter animals do not die from the carbon monoxide in the gas chambers. The words “gas chambers” cannot help but remind me of how the Jew-

ish people were suffocated inside concentration camps. And on a smaller scale but just as painfully, one minute shelter animals are fine and the next minute, toxic gas seeps inside their bodies and shuts them down.

Animal shelter deaths do not just affect animals; they affect the people who have to kill them and watch at the same time. They also affect animal lovers around the world. Imagine that you are in the place of an animal inside a shelter. Wouldn't you want to have a loving family to support you? In Edgar County Animal Shelter, 94% of dogs that enter it die within seven days. About eighty thousand animals are "put to sleep" in nearby Mecklenburg county. 70 percent of the animals that enter Charlotte's animal shelter are killed. In North Carolina, 35% to 40% of animals in shelters are killed. These death tolls are very high. Do you know what is worse then these death tools? They are steadily increasing.

I do believe that this problem is stoppable. One thing that the average person and animal shelter employees can do is vaccinate and sterilize animals. Animal births are skyrocketing. By lowering animal births, we will lower the number of animals sent to shelters. This can reduce the percentage of animal death rates. The International City/County Management Association's job is to donate and assist animal shelters. What they do is good, but the problem is that they are not getting that many donations. The minimum donation is four dollars. However, they receive amounts such as \$1.42 to \$2.80. If people could donate more money to them, or if the state could budget more money to the animal shelters, that would be beneficial. Another solution could be expanding the animal shelters we already have. By doing this, more animals will be able to be held. There will be more room and not as many animals will die. Maybe a law could get passed to ban animal annihilation. The state and animal shelters would have to make a deal somehow. Schools could probably raise fundraisers that can provide money for shelters. Or, commercial advertise-

ments could be created. The commercial could have a slide show that demonstrates how shelter animals lose their lives. Shelter workers could influence those who are watching the broadcasts. All it takes is a little persuasion. Maybe playing depressing music while showing pictures of lonesome animals could change the minds of people around the world.

Killing shelter animals is wrong, and it is wrong for many reasons. Not only is it cruelty, but most have done nothing to deserve the death penalty. Further, there are statistics showing the devastating number of preventable animal deaths. If we work together to find them, other solutions that can provide safety and protection for all the animals inside almost every shelter.

It's Not Just One Word Anymore

There are many words historically identifying African Americans, such as “darkie,” “blackie,” “Negro” and “nigger.” These words have existed from the slave days to the present. No matter how or why the labels are given, ultimately they are used negatively and even as insults. The word “nigger” is arguably the most negative of the group. This word is like a mind game—it makes people wonder, it makes them confused, and it makes them angry. It is a word that causes people to react, and I would argue that people actually overreact because this word is not only protected through freedom of speech, but it is protected by history. The way the younger generation spells and uses this word today has evolved a negative meaning into a positive, community-building force.

Introducing this word “nigger” and showing the benefit of using it can be difficult, but there is a side to this word that can bring positive outcomes to a community.

The use of the “N-word” really has benefited the African American. This word has multiple meanings today; it's not just one word anymore. The word is not a racially biased word today unless one is being ignorant and means it that way: the problem there is the person. The word's meaning is determined by how people use it not by the racial background of the original “nigger.” Many use the word with love and affection, which has made the youth come together as one. It has built communities by bringing people together. The youth have overcome a word that was once historically a racial term by using it every day in their lives, which blocks out the shameful and painful history of racism.

As a young adult who is surrounded by this word, I know it is not used intentionally as a racial insult or meaning any harm to anyone. But since the word's background has scared so many

people, it is automatically heard as a racial term. In Kevin Cato's article, "Nigger: Language, History, and Modern Day Discourse," scholar Randall Kennedy states: "The word nigger creates an obsession for people because of its historical meaning." But today the word has many different meanings. Some say "nigga" in a loving and affectionate way; it depends on how you use it. Cato writes, "Nigger can mean many different things depending upon, among other variables, intonation, the location of interaction, and the relationship between the speaker and those to whom he is speaking."

The word is no longer purely negative. This word is developing into a different meaning. In Cato's article, Kennedy argues that "the black person is reclaiming the word and redefining it in order to strip nigger of its original meaning." This word "nigga" has a much deeper meaning, according to Cato: "In the African American community, the word nigga (not nigger) brings out feelings of pride." He also states that there is a "transformation that is taking place among African Americans as well as among other racial groups." The word is slowly changing; nevertheless its history is being covered up with white-out but that is the different way "nigga" is being used. Is it really targeting African Americans in a racial way anymore? Cato writes, "It's not necessarily a more hurtful slur in any given episode." If the word is developing into something that is not a racial term, and more and more people are using it, then it is building communities between people. From Cato: "... using the word nigger among a group of white friends? . . . aren't any black people around . . . no attempt to be part of that community except in a larger sense." The word simply has built community within different ethnicities.

However, there are still people who believe that the word is not acceptable. They feel that it is no good, and it hides racism. Melvin Griffin, an elder African American who works at Common Ground High School and who hears the word every day, still believes it brings no positive value and should be put away.

Someday he may see and understand how the word has changed over the many years.

When the word “nigga” comes from a different ethnicity, it doesn’t always have to be the so-called racially charged word “nigger.” Cato writes that it “has become an almost universal greeting among young urban blacks.” This word should be studied and people should not act on what they hear; they need to know how it’s being used. Try to put the “nigger” aside and see that this is not the same word. According to Cato, “it has to be understood contextually; continual use of the word by blacks will make it less offensive.” Would people stop looking at this word in a negative way and start seeing that words are alive and that a word’s meaning can change with in a certain time? Why are certain people still blamed for history? Cato mentions, “It is just a word and blacks should not be prisoners of the past or the ugly words which originated in the past.”

The “N-word” has gone through an evolution in meanings. The young people today have changed and made this word into something different. They have taken it back and redefined it as a word that brings people together. The youth have overcome this word today by giving it a new meaning. It is no longer a symbol of inequality but a sound of freedom.

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Tyquan Miller

Where I'm From . . .

I am from the fear of unawareness and disrespect,
From confident findings of generations before me.

I am a mix of races that my mother has placed here for me,
From the giving and acceptance of where I am.

I am from a belief: services on early Sunday mornings,
From the great man my grandma says gave his life for me,
From not just getting by, but striving beyond the rest.
I am from the familiar hands that set down the foundation of our lives.

I am from the countries that suffer internal disasters,
From diversity and the importance of life,
How you feel and what catches the eyes' attention,
From passion, affection, relaxation, love, and morals.

I am from where a beginning can end just as fast as it started,
From education and community advocacy,
Deep, thick roots that live from distinct knowledge,
From microphones, guitars, drums, and headphones.

I am from positive influences, independent movements,
From rough times and cold hearts, pain and pleasure,
Economic crisis, terrorists' threats, and Constitutional contradiction.
I am from a place where my opinion is more than a lingering thought.

I am from my beloved mother, who gives me shelter,
From my mother who places herself beneath my feet.

I am from my mother who nurtures me:
From her I gain my self control and independence.

I am from a mother who has blessed me with her experience.

I am from her death bed, holding her hand as she slowly dies,
From her being thrashed by men throughout her life,
Watching my mom suffer through what others say are minor problems.
I am from her struggling: she had me herself.
From my mother I was born to address her pain.

I am only one from her billions of children.
From us all, she chose a select few.
From her stress, I was born and found my purpose.
From her I will die when she is done fighting back.
I am from her love—
I am from her life—
From her pain—
I am her bastard son—
I am from my loving mother—

—Earth.

Annessa Jackson

What Makes You Better?

What makes you better than I?

What have I done to be lesser?

I go to school and I am quite educated

for a child my age. Is it because

I'm younger or is it because I lack

some of the knowledge you have already consumed?

What makes you better?

What makes you so bright?

Though the world goes round and

we all practically live in the same

town, I'm no good for you—

you who may think you're too good

to hang around a person who may look lesser.

Explain to me—

what makes you better than I?

Samantha O'Brien

It Will Be Worthwhile

Why do people care so much about labels and categories? *Is she African American? Is he Hispanic? White? Asian? Is that a man or a woman?* People should be proud of who they are and from where they have come, but that pride should not give them rank and power over others simply because of “who they are.” We all need to be less worried about the outside of a person’s physical appearance and more concerned with their inner qualities, such as the intelligence of their mind and heart. The only category that people should be put into is that of “human”: this gives us all the same starting line in life. Yet when it comes to judging others by their appearance, whether a person is seen as male or female is one of the strongest influences of how that person will be perceived and thus treated.

Historically, men were born with the privilege to work; it used to be considered a right but once it was recognized for what it truly was. Changes in our thinking led to changes in the laws. To get to these changes, women had to work and prove themselves under difficult conditions. Working to prove one’s self takes more strength than just receiving the benefit. Women have come far when it comes to being part of a community and nation. Women have one past, from receiving the right to vote to being candidates for the highest government offices. Many of these women work, raise families, and care for households. Our country could not run without these strong women. Women need to recognize that the hard life, any inferior feelings placed on them, and the juggle of work and family all make them stronger.

Unfortunately, many young women today are receiving messages that make them *seem* equal but are affirming the negative, long-held view that women are weak. I am thinking specifically

of how women are “sold” in America. Have you looked closely at magazine and television advertisements and the billboards along the side of the roads? Have you listened to popular song lyrics and watched videos? Have you viewed YouTube clips? My last question is this: How did it go so wrong? Many women who are seen in the magazines and on the billboards, and women who are spoken of in song lyrics, may think that this is the only way for them to become known. They also hope to make a lot of money. But if you look closely, you will see that many of these images portray women in a negative way in today’s society. In videos seen on MTV, VH-1, and other commercial channels, one does not see women as strong but rather as objects. If they do portray strength, it is in a “manly fashion”: they are using violence.

Women need to realize how far they have come in the last century, but there is still much farther to go. For every Hillary Clinton there are dozens of MTV booty-licious babes. Women need ways to show their intelligence and how hard-working they can be so that they can be seen as strong, equal members in our society. It is a battle women are fighting—the war has not yet been won. But the fact that children and grandchildren will live in a more equal society will make the sacrifices worthwhile.

David Spears

Why Aren't They?

First I ring up a “regular” apple: it costs \$1.25 a pound. Then I ring up an organic apple: it costs \$1.55 a pound. Next I ring up a large order of “regular” produce and the total comes to \$105.00. Last, I ring up the order for a medium-sized order of organic produce. Total? If you followed the pattern and guessed that the final bill would be considerably higher for nearly half the amount of organic produce you got my point: \$155!

It is my job at our local organic grocery store to tend to my cash register by ringing up orders, taking the money, and giving out change. What isn't in my job description are the less-than-subtle reality I face daily. I noticed on my first day at work that the organic produce was expensive—very expensive—but that many people of diverse ethnicities and carrying different billfolds were able to walk out with a full shopping cart of food. This astonished me. Normally, I think of health food stores as being frequented by well-off Caucasian shoppers. What I came to realize was that the acceptance of EBT cards (used by welfare recipients) has made purchasing organic food accessible to multiple economic classes.

Still, the gap among races in every facet of life exists, and it is unfortunate that mostly Caucasians shop at health food stores because that means, to me, those other races aren't eating as healthily. The city I live in is multicultural and diverse in every way imaginable. Yet, that diversity is not represented in the health food store. This case is true in the health food store just outside my community. In this small area I will call “Smalltownville” (I shall not use the name since I do not have their permission.) there is a health food store. Whenever I ride by it on the weekend, I see mainly Caucasian shoppers entering and exiting this establishment, plus a few Asian shoppers. I do not think that this store offers the EBT

terminal. I am not specifically lobbying for more EBT terminals; however, I am lobbying for *any* way to make healthy, organic produce more affordable. Further, I am not saying that no Caucasians use EBT cards, and this isn't to say that non-white people can never afford healthy groceries. I ride to places like the Smalltownville health store or a warehouse-style food mart like Trader Joe's and, as a cashier, I wonder about all the other races of people who live in the areas surrounding the stores. Don't they know about healthy food choices in the specialty stores?

There is a huge deficit of non-Caucasian shoppers in health food stores in my area but the EBT card is lessening the deficit. However, more shoppers need to be motivated to purchase organic produce. It doesn't take a critical eye to notice most non-white people will not be the majority of shoppers. It takes more people like me who are out on a regular basis riding through the town, people who will have their jaws drop and eyes widen because they are pierced by the gloomy reality that not everyone knows about—or can afford—healthy food on a daily basis. The vehicle of equal opportunity is riding further and further away from those who have an equal need—and an equal right—to fresh, healthy produce. I'm not saying that EBT card terminals must be in every health food store. I'm asking this simple question: Why aren't they?

Charee Anderson

No Depression Is Welcome

Many teenagers and adults around the world suffer from depression but may not know how to get help. During adolescence and adulthood, we go through changes, which are a part of human nature. For some people, depression comes with those changes. In my experience, it felt like I was depressed for a very long time. In high school, my depression really started to attack me. At one point in my teenage growth whenever someone would say something to me, not to hurt my feelings but just playing around, I would get angry. I would think about the one thing that was said to me, and it would affect my whole day. For instance, someone would say something about my shape or size and my self-esteem would decrease.

During my freshmen and sophomore years of high school, a boy or girl would say, "Charee you're so skinny! You need to eat." Then he or she would laugh. I would hide the way I felt and laugh a little but then I would say, "I know, trust me, I eat a lot. I just have a fast metabolism." Deep inside I felt like garbage, like no one would accept me for who I am. I would let this get to me and I wouldn't be able to concentrate. I would cry because my self-esteem was so low that I wouldn't accept myself. I am trying to say that when your self-esteem is so low, anything that you find offensive can get you depressed.

Another thing that depressed me was when I felt a boy couldn't care less about me. I felt this way when he would tell me that he liked me but wouldn't show it. I thought he should spend time with me, talk to me on the phone or even make an effort to come and give me a hug. I felt like something was wrong with my appearance; was it my big forehead or was I too skinny?

My issue with depression was that I wouldn't try and solve

it. I would come and look depressed when doing everything, such as eating, cleaning the kitchen, talking, and even while looking at things. I would walk around like it was the end of the world and I wanted to fight or kill someone. I had so much hatred that I looked like I was stressed and never had any sleep. To not think about how I felt, I would turn on music, watch TV, or just read my bible. These were some of my sources for calming down. At home I felt attacked whenever being corrected. I even thought "How would people feel if I weren't on Earth?" One thing I was good at was hiding my emotions.

I would go to school and work and try to make everybody feel good and make them laugh. I didn't want anyone to feel my pain. But I know for sure that whenever we're alone, depression can come and control our thoughts to make us feel like nothing. One website devoted to teen depression – teendepression.org – states that statistics show that between 10% and 15% of teens may have symptoms of depression at anytime. Some of the symptoms are excessive sleeping, change in eating habits, or an obsession with death. It is a shame to know that as teens and adults we have to go through this but it's a sad truth.

I have grown above my depression. I have gotten tired of it and figured that life is too short. I would like to enjoy it doing things such as shopping, eating and going places that make me feel good. I have done this by sharing my feelings with friends and family, which made me feel better because I had gotten it off of my chest. I also was working very hard at my job and this provided me with money to please my needs and wants during my daily dilemma. I also bond with my family more and stay to myself sometimes but not as much as I used to. I brush a lot of things off now and try to put them behind me. By reaching this goal it has been a big relief; it's like a breath of fresh air. People who are not struggling with depression can support the teens and adults struggling with depression by having community outreach groups, where we talk about our issues and ways of solving it. There could be activi-

ties and programs for entertainment and self-expression. We can also have an art club for drawing, painting, and sculpting things about how we're feeling. This would be very beneficial for people dealing with depression.

What do you think about this? Do you think it's a good idea to have community outreach groups for people with depression? I think it will be very beneficial towards teens and adults around the world. I think this because I believe it will give teens and adults the opportunity to express the way they feel and then we can come up with solutions to these problems we face daily.

Samantha O'Brien

All Together

In today's society, there are many challenges that have to be faced; among the greatest are global warming and pollution. There are too many people who are oblivious to the fact that the world is heating up and filling up right before our eyes. Some people do not realize how powerfully they affect the organisms that live around them. There are so many animals that cannot advocate for themselves and are becoming threatened and nearly extinct. There are only 22,000 to 40,000 polar bears left in the world (endangeredpolarbear.com) and they are not the only species that are feeling the heat. A 2003 study published in the magazine *Nature* stated that 80% of some 1,500 samples of wildlife showed signs of stress from climate change (healthplan.com/articles).

I think that more people need to realize that there are many alternatives for renewable energy. Some are solar, water, and wind power, and also battery-powered cars and trucks can make a huge difference in our environment. Recycling is a simple way to keep items like paper, cans, bottles, and batteries out of landfills. I also think that if the government created programs to make people more aware of the problem, and also made the solutions affordable and accessible, our goal to end global warming would be a realistic feat. Required community service in schools would be a wonderful way to teach students responsibility, and if that time was spent taking care of our environment our neighborhoods and communities would be a much nicer place to live.

Young people in particular have to become more aware of these growing issues. Schools need to teach their students more about these problems so that they can carry it over in their everyday lives. The only way to reach these steps toward improvement is to make the information on how to fix the problem accessible

to everyone. Communities also need to recognize that it is our responsibility to take care of the environment for future generations. If our generation can leave the Earth a little better than we found it, our children can live in a healthier and more beautiful world. Every person can make a difference, but we can only make a change together.

Aisha Gambrell

An Open Letter to Barack Obama

Dear President Obama,
First of all, I want to congratulate you on winning the presidential campaign. You have forever changed history by becoming the first African American to run for President and win. I have to honestly say that, even though I am only sixteen years old, I would have never thought that I would see the day when an African American would become President. I always knew it was possible, but I would have never imagined that it would occur in my lifetime. It means a great deal for me personally, being a mixed child as well: my mother is Cherokee, African American and Puerto Rican; my father is Cherokee and Portuguese. It has been hard for me to prove myself; either I wasn't black enough, Puerto Rican enough, or . . . I constantly had to prove to people that it shouldn't be about what race I am, or what I was raised as, but about the work I do, how well I do it, and my experience and skills. You have made that so much easier. I've always felt I could do anything I put my mind to, but you have put everything into perspective. Now I feel like I can be the first multiracial astronaut, Nobel Prize winner, or even the first multiracial female President of the United States of America.

I am absolutely astonished, amazed and proud. I want to say how much of an impact you have had on my school. Common Ground is a small, environmental-based public charter school, and we followed the political campaign like no other school has ever done before. It was absolutely incredible; we would come to school the day after the debates between you and Senator John McCain and talk about them as if we were there that night. We would sit around our lunch tables and discuss it at lunch. Then, on Election Day, every single student over 18 went out and voted. I

felt pride seeing the students and faculty walking around with their “I Voted!” stickers on. Even though I wasn’t (and still am not) old enough to vote, I felt the same sense of pride that all the voters had because I made sure all my friends and family members went out and voted: mission accomplished. The day after Election Day was even better because everyone came to school with Obama hats, shirts, pins, stickers . . . the whole nine! A group of friends and I even came up with a temporary tattoo that read: Yes we can, Yes we did! Obama ’09.

Now Mr. President, it’s time to get down to business. I know you are getting ready to be a very busy man, but here are just a couple of things I hope you can fix—or begin to fix—in your first term; you can finish them in your second term. The first problem would have to be the war in Iraq. As you know, we have bitten off more than we can chew when it comes to this war. We’ve spent more money towards this war than any other war, or anything else for that matter, in the history of the United States. We’ve had more soldiers die in this war than in any other war that America has started or fought in. I really wish you could come up with a plan to get our troops out of there before it gets any worse. Another issue is our crashing economy. I can say that this has hit my family hard. My mom has no income for she is very ill and cannot work. My father works at his own laundromat, but it doesn’t pay very well. My father also gets disability checks, which my sister and I get a small portion of. However, we are barely scraping by. I went on an out-of-state college trip to Pennsylvania last summer that cost \$350.00. That hurt my family financially because we didn’t have the funds, but my mom and dad wanted me to experience something new.

It has been downhill from there. My parents pay \$850 a month for rent, \$200 or \$300 for electricity, and my dad has to pay on his car. By this time, all the money my dad makes is gone. There are times when we don’t have food in the house. Our phone got cut off five months ago because we couldn’t pay the bill. Things

have been so bad that my sister and I didn't have a Christmas holiday; no one in my family did. My father was supposed to have gotten his car re-registered in December, but he hasn't had the money to do so. One morning my dad and I were pulled over by a cop because my dad's car was unregistered. We did keep our car and I made it to school that morning, but I felt like this is my fault because if I hadn't gone on that trip, my parents would have been able to keep up with our expenses. I'm working on getting a job at Common Ground so I can help out around the house more. It may not be much, but it'll be enough to help pay bills. If there is *any* way you can help my family, as well as the millions of other families in the U.S. get out of our debt and be a bit better off, I would greatly appreciate it.

I know that was probably a bit overwhelming, but I'm going to end on a higher note. I want to thank you in advance for taking the time out to read my letter. I know you're very busy but it means so much to me. If you ever have any spare time, would you mind writing a response back? That would be greatly appreciated. I would love to keep in contact with you on any other conflicts that may arise. Please relay my congratulations back to Mrs. Obama, Malia, and Sasha, and good luck on coming to a decision on the first dog.

Warmest Regards,
Aisha Gambrell

**To secure a place at the 2009 presidential inauguration, several dozen Common Ground students wrote letters sharing their expectations for an Obama presidency. A panel of teachers judged which of the letters most clearly and powerfully expressed students' hopes for the next four years. On Martin Luther King Day, Common Ground's bus – loaded with eleven winning students (Aisha among them), three teachers, and a stow-away photographer – left New Haven to participate in one of the most consequential events of our lifetimes. — Joel Tolman*

Joan Malerba-Foran

Many Voices

Almost twenty years ago, my life changed dramatically. I became infected with a then little-known virus called Lyme disease. Everyone knows about it now, but not then. I went misdiagnosed and untreated for two years. During that time, I lost the things that made up my life one by one: my job, my ability to drive, my relationship, my short-term memory, and quite nearly my mind. What sustained me when all seemed lost was poetry. I sought shelter in Frost's dark forests; I waded into whirlpools of Whitman; I leaned against Jane Kenyon for comfort and Donald Hall for support. I wrapped myself in words. And this led me to college for my Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing at the age of 44. I graduated in the spring of 2003 with no formal teaching experience; however, I had the great fortune to be hired at James Hillhouse High School in New Haven, Connecticut. It is a large, urban public school and it bristles with activity. Although I was new to teaching, decades of debilitating pain had left me experienced in patience and perseverance. I taught for four years under the direction of Althea Norcott, an administrator who offered me every opportunity to grow as a global citizen, something my working-class background and years of illness had not afforded. Through her recommendation, I was awarded a scholarship to study Shakespeare and poetry in Oxford, England. Additionally, she helped me obtain a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship to study oral tradition in Ghana, West Africa.

It was in Ghana that I made the hardest decision I've made thus far in my teaching career: I decided to make a life-style change. There I was, traveling through Accra, Kumasi, Bolgatanga, Tamale, and Cape Coast. There I was, sitting under a Baobab tree drinking bottled water, dousing myself with bug spray, taking

my malaria medication, trying *not* to use my left hand (although I am left-handed), and walking, walking, walking, walking everywhere when I thought, “This is how I want to live. I want to be part of the cycle-of-life again.” So on one of the three-days-a-week when the electricity was working and I had access to an internet café, I emailed my pending resignation to Hillhouse High School. There I was, far from home, on a continent thirteen hours away by jet, jobless for . . . for . . . for what?!

I’ll make the ending brief: there was a job waiting for me when I returned to Connecticut six weeks later. Common Ground High School had an unexpected opening, my sister (also a teacher) found out about the opening and brought my resume to Director Oliver Barton and Dean of Students Liz Cox. After an interview, I was hired for this environmental and ecology-based high school. Barely two miles down the road from my previous school, I stepped into a school containing outdoor classrooms, experiential as well as academic learning, chickens and roosters, herb and vegetable gardens, hikes up the ridge and home-cooked meals. It is suggestive of the life I led in Ghana.

Two of the many benefits of this school are its size and its diversity: the 150 students span a wide economic and ethnic spectrum. They come by bicycle, city bus, taxi cab, and car. They leave—although it gets harder each year to get them off the property—only after a full school day interspersed with community service, farming duties, recycling chores, cooking in the kitchen, organizing on-site field trips, job shadows, presentations to the community, talent shows, and any one of two dozen after-school clubs and activities. I mention all this because four months ago I walked up to several dozen students and said, “Write something for me that has to do with the issue of equality and/or tolerance.” That was all I said. The writing in this journal reflects work that students did as a personal challenge. They brainstormed, wrote, revised while doing all their other course work.

One of the things that continues to impress me about our

students is the ownership they take for their future. I think that comes from the level of involvement they have in *shaping* their future. Our students don't just drink water, they taste it. They don't just watch birds, they identify them. They are as comfortable in a classroom as in a museum as in a theatre as in a meadow. I have the pleasure of directing them toward their future. It isn't difficult; they're moving in that direction anyway. My job is to smooth the road, not to be a speed bump. At Common Ground High School we have the type of student who makes an educator's job exciting because they already aren't taking the easier road. As Robert Frost would say, they take "the road less traveled" and it is making all the difference. They are leading double and triple lives; they are speaking in many voices.

I will end by stating that several pieces our students presented were too "raw" to be included. They were powerful performance pieces, the kind of searing rap that shatters the façade of racial equality. Of course as a Language Arts educator and as a writer, I support the artistic right to freedom of expression, and my student artists are free to express themselves in all their anger and puzzlement. However, I agree with the decision not to publish pieces that explore subjects that are thoroughly adult in nature. Freedom of expression does not mean freedom from consequences, and the wide distribution of this journal means that we cannot guarantee an appropriate age-base for those pieces.

Lastly, we at Common Ground High School extend our deepest appreciation to Foster Dickson for letting our students' many voices be heard.



Above: Joan Malerba-Foran in Ghana
Below: Joan Malerba-Foran today





Above: Common Ground's logo
Below: Joel Tolman,
Director of Development and Community Engagement



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