

**Jon Greenberg: A Civic Hero Inspiring Civic Heroes**

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Salty tears formed rivulets down my cheeks, and as the flow increased my vision gradually blurred. I cried for myself, for the inequalities of society, and for the admiration I felt for the people surrounding me. For the previous seventeen years I felt *different*, an alien among my own friends and country, different from the adults who control my world; I was continuously immersed in racial assumptions and stereotypes. Yet for the first time, I *belonged*. Those negative clouds of doom that cascade monsoons of hopelessness parted. Bound in a community of support and respect, I had hope that the world could become a better place. I was inspired. Jon Greenberg taught me to be hopeful, courageous, and determined. He opened my eyes to the parts of society that I was too scared to notice while showing me how to accept myself and discard my self-hate. Greenberg taught not for himself but for the peace of the world and the improvement of our community. But above all Greenberg exemplified his lessons through his own civic courage. As a founding teacher of The Center School, Greenberg stood up against classism, racism and sexism even in the face of opposition by one family, the Seattle Public Schools and its Superintendent, José Banda. Sadly in sticking to his beliefs, Greenberg was (and is) subjected to legal persecution, personal and professional attacks, job demotion, censure, and the threat of a loss of livelihood.

In 2001, The Center School, an arts-integrated high school was founded as an alternative school in the Seattle Public Schools. Jon Greenberg, a humanities and poetry teacher, became one of the founders of the small school, developing a social justice curriculum for high school seniors. A Seattle native from Queen Anne, Greenberg

attended Franklin High School from 1987-1991 as part of the school district's cross-city, bus integration movement. At Franklin, a school located in racially diverse south Seattle, Greenberg began to notice economical, racial, and gender disparities among his peers. Despite the school's sizeable population of students of color, the advanced honors courses were filled predominantly with white students. Segregation was not apparent by the numbers on paper, but could be felt throughout the student body. After graduating, Greenberg attended Macalester College followed by Grinnell College where he discovered his ambition to become a teacher who could help students grow and become empowered members of their communities. Upon graduating, Greenberg worked for a number of student programs and schools including Wediko Children's Services, a residential treatment program for students who were survivors of a variety of traumas and difficult circumstances, McKinley Middle School, a public middle school in Boston for students who failed out of mainstream Boston Public Schools, and Colegio Santa Francisca Romana, a private all-girls Catholic school in Bogota, Colombia. It was during these years that Greenberg observed disadvantages and social inequalities that were prevalent among many of his students, whether they are racially, gender, socially and/or economically based. After receiving his masters from Seattle University, Greenberg became a founding teacher of The Center School, coach of the cross-country team and an instructor of the Social Studies Methods Course for Seattle University's master in teaching program. Jon Greenberg was poised and ready to make a difference in the community (Greenberg).

For ten years, Jon Greenberg taught his Citizenship and Social Justice course with units addressing classism, racism and sexism. As his former student, I can testify that his

lessons changed my life. It seemed as if I had an epiphany during each class, as I would return from school overflowing with new insights to explain to anyone who was willing to listen. Greenberg expertly constructed lessons so that everyone could feel comfortable to speak their views, even if they weren't consistent with that of the majority. His class was a sanctuary where all students could be present, feel accepted and share their experiences. Greenberg knew exactly what to say that would make taboo topics such as race less intimidating and hostile, mediating any disagreements that came along the way. I often wished that everyone in the entire world could take his class and emerge to be enlightened global citizens, just as his Center School students emerged upon graduating. Awareness is the first step to end any of the "isms" and his students graduated with such fresh awareness that they were eager to go out and share it.

In order to increase awareness as a class, we addressed the controversial topics through discussions, guest speakers, and readings in an environment that was nurturing and understanding. Greenberg took heavy topics and showed us how we could articulate our thoughts without fear of backlash, ostracism or aversion. For once I felt like everyone in a classroom really listened to each student, seeking to understand while developing honest friendships along the way. A classroom is just one piece of the big picture, but each enlightened person affects another circle of people until major impacts can be felt throughout the community. The classroom then extends into the society and eventually the entire world. I was inspired and hopeful that a community, country and world free of classism, racism and sexism could actually exist. Yet Greenberg didn't just stop with his students' growth and learning inside the classroom, but instead continued to teach his students how to apply knowledge and skills to make an impact on the greater

Seattle community and state of Washington. He fluently showed us how to make impactful public testimonies, taking the class to Olympia to meet with our representatives and senators. With his leadership, we attended a Seattle City Council meeting to express our opinions about how the city budget should be formed to best benefit the community. We wrote petitions and sent letters to city council members including Tim Burgess, who later came into our class as guest speakers. Greenberg first guided us to gain new understandings of the injustices of our community and then gave us the tools on how we could take the power into our own hands and make change. His own civic courage was spread to each of his students and for ten years, he mobilized youth not only to care about injustice but also to make change. Greenberg thus improved the community by raising and inspiring the next generation of leaders working to solve civil injustices.

With great courage, to educate about controversial issues, comes great risk, and Greenberg risked legal persecution, censure and job demotion among many other attacks. It is not possible to talk about controversial issues without some disagreement and unfortunately in February of 2013, my class was abruptly notified that any discussion surrounding race and gender had to halt as the curriculum and my teacher were under investigation. One family filed a complaint claiming that Greenberg was fostering an intimidating environment, and suddenly Greenberg was under investigation. One week later, the school district announced that the race and gender curriculum could resume, but with the removal of core activities from Courageous Conversations, a curriculum to increase cultural competency. Stemming from one complaint from one white family who objected to any discussion of race in the classroom, Greenberg's inspirational lessons and civic courage were stifled and he was under legal fire. The family demanded zero

conversations surrounding race and criticized Greenberg's teaching style and lessons (Large). Outraged over the skewed investigation in which no other students besides the complainant were interviewed as witnesses, students passed a petition around each classroom of the school, wrote letters to the school district and flooded school board meetings in an effort to reinstate the curriculum. From this, the parents of the complainant filed yet another complaint, this time asserting that their child was being harassed by Greenberg in retaliation. A second investigation ensued resulting in the finding that Greenberg did not harass the student, but did allow the petition to be circulated in the classroom. The school district then punished Greenberg and called for his transfer from The Center School to Hamilton International middle school, effectively ceasing the inspirational Citizenship and Social Justice class for all future students. Greenberg risked his job to teach about social change and acceptance and he was punished for it (Connelly, "Center School").

Despite losing his own job by discussing controversial issues, Greenberg inspired students with lessons on social activism. By informing his students and providing them with resources, Greenberg became a well-known leader who impacted the community. Students who felt powerless found their voice as they testified in front of City Council and received acknowledgements. County Council Chair Larry Gossett and Councilman Larry Phillips wrote:

His students' impassioned and creative in-person testimony, usually in support of human services funding, and their written follow up to council members, are always an inspiration... In a word, Mr. Greenberg is educating our next generation of leaders, and teaching them to be active, critical thinkers. This kind

of young leader is desperately needed in our community. (Connelly, “County Council”)

Greenberg, as a leader for social equality, was a critical player for improving racial disparities, specifically in the Seattle Public Schools community. The same day that the school district announced the removal of the Courageous Curriculum component of the race unit, an article was published in *The Huffington Post* regarding an ongoing investigation by the U.S Education Department as to whether the Seattle Public School district “discriminates against black students by subjecting them to tougher and more frequent discipline than white students” (Myers). Unfortunately the school district was punishing a much-needed educator on racial equality just when they needed the help with their own racial practices.

As the news spread of the school district’s decision, future, current and former students of Greenberg applied their knowledge of civic courage to stand up not only for Greenberg but also for his belief in social equality. By the model set by Greenberg, students gave impassioned testimonies in school board meetings and in letters to the board members. By the words of a former student Milu Yewondwossen:

Jon Greenberg remains a valiant ally in the struggle to attenuate the power of white supremacy, and, at another side patriarchy, androcentrism, misogyny...The “Race Unit” and “Feminism Unit” remain the only courses I have ever taken where I have wept tears, tears because I was learning more about myself while slowly killing my own self-hatred, and no less concomitantly the hatred of the female. Any class where a kid has the opportunity to weep tears because he or she is learning is a class worthy enough to be retained.

Mike McGinn, mayor at the time of the investigation, agreed. Later that year in June, the mayor's award was given to The Center School for the Citizenship and Social Justice Curriculum at a time when inequality persists in schools (Minard).

Greenberg did not only exhibit civic courage by fighting for social justice, but he also created a whole new generation of civic heroes by teaching his students how to become advocates for the community. He is a civic hero for standing up for issues of race, gender and class even when faced by opposition and when continuing the conversation on controversial issues was dangerous. Even when his job and reputation were under investigation, Greenberg continued to change the community with words and actions of inspiration. As a civic hero, Greenberg not only encouraged me to accept myself as both a person of color and a woman, but also ignited my passion for social change, providing me with the tools so that I too, could become a civic hero. Although his class no longer exists, Greenberg continues to fight for his beliefs where all persons, no matter race, gender or class, are treated fairly and respectfully. Through his actions, Greenberg continues to spread knowledge and advocate for equality in the Seattle community. Only now, he has a faithful team of young civic heroes to help spread the message by continuing the conversation and fighting for justice all around the community as well as the world.

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