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Developing Youth Voices

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DEVELOPING YOUTH VOICES

BY MARYAM AHRANJANI

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor recently visited Albuquerque on a book tour for her children's book *!Solo Pregunta!* I attended the talk along with hundreds of local teachers and students, including dozens of law students. Her message was profoundly simple – if you are curious about something different about someone else, just ask. She was inspired to write the book as a child. Diagnosed at a young age with Type 1 diabetes, she learned to inject herself with insulin to regulate her blood sugar levels. One day a woman who saw her zipping up her needle and supplies in a bathroom insinuated that she was a drug user. She

realized that people often make assumptions about one another instead of just taking the simple step of asking.

In any case, the message of her book is simple, but actually harder to do for some of us than others. Having worked with thousands of underrepresented, low-income high school students around the country for the past twenty years through the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project, my experience is that most young people from groups underrepresented in higher education benefit from cultivation of their voices. While more privileged students are told –

explicitly and implicitly – that their voices matter, thereby giving them the confidence to exercise them, other students do not receive the same messages.

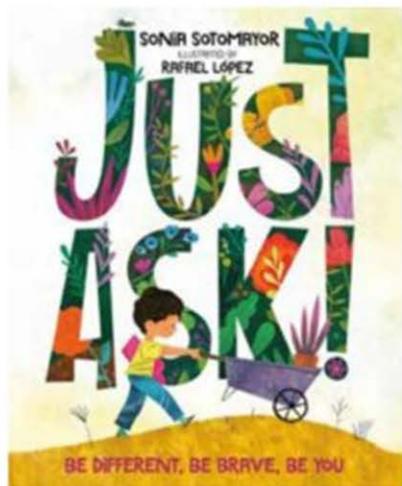
The Marshall-Brennan Project began in 1999 as an experiment. Then-American University Washington College of Law Constitutional Law Professor Jamie Raskin (now U.S. Representative Raskin) found that he could not singlehandedly address all the inquiries he received from students wondering whether their constitutional rights were violated. Together with colleague Professor Stephen Wermiel and a hardworking research assistant named Zack Rosenberg, they cooked up a scheme to connect anxious, public interested-minded law students with children hungry for mentors and civic knowledge in Washington, DC. Like Justice Sotomayor's book, the premise also is simple. There's a dearth of constitutional knowledge in many parts of our country, particularly in low-income communities of color, and there's a surplus of energy and idealism in law students. The Project matches those two populations and provides both with the tools to find their voices.

In Secretary Arne Duncan's recent book *How Schools Work*, he tells the story of a young

activist named D'Angelo McDade. D'Angelo served as a Peace Warrior, a group of students trained in conflict resolution,

at his high school on Chicago's West Side. He and classmate Alex King, another Peace Warrior, connected with the young activists from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida to help organize the March for Our Lives in March 2018 in DC. Standing in the crowd with my six-year-old son on my shoulders, I heard from D'Angelo, Alex, and other young people and was moved to tears by the clarity of vision and voice of the young collaborators.

The Marshall-Brennan Project seeks to force multiply voices like D'Angelo's. By studying how the U.S. Constitution works, learning cases in the textbooks (*We the Students* and *Youth Justice in America*, which we specifically designed for the Project) to show how its





protections apply to young people, providing opportunities to develop critical thinking and oral advocacy skills, and providing relatable mentors who encourage them to seek higher education, the Project inspires students to speak up about the things that are important to them. All the students learn and deliver an appellate moot court problem dealing with a range of issues that vary from year to year, including free speech, searches and seizures, equal protection, and self-incrimination.

Over the years, Marshall-Brennan students across the country have organized and led peaceful walk-outs, created online school newspapers to provide an outlet for information sharing, and created school constitutions. They routinely stun their Marshall-Brennan fellows - the law students selected to teach in the classrooms - with their acute insights and ability to transform the rights about which they learn into concrete action.

The Project has an even more profound effect on the law student teaching fellows. Isaac Lopez, a second year law student at the University of New Mexico School of Law and Marshall-Brennan Fellow at Highland High school, was incredibly nervous to stand in front of a group of teenagers. His co-teacher, Jessica Martinez, has a background

in politics, having worked on national campaigns and as a staffer for elected officials. The two of them have one another's backs, lift one another up, and challenge one another to delve more deeply into the material for their students' - and their own - benefit.

Isaac and Jessica recently told me that they draw strength from their students - if they can compete in a moot court competition, so can Jessica and Isaac. Working with their students on developing their voices has inspired them to develop their own by competing in the 2020 McGee Civil Rights Moot Court Competition. And I, in turn, am inspired by both groups of students to use my voice and resources to elevate theirs.

Youth voices have paved the way on issues of great societal import from civil rights to climate change to gun control. Adults have a responsibility to cultivate and listen to those wise voices.

For more information about the Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project, visit www.wcl.american.edu/impact/initiatives-programs/marshallbrennan/20th-anniversary/ 