The Five Freedoms Project Leadership Academy
Kim Carter, New Hampshire

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States

"M y religion is very important to me. The school I used to go to had a lot of students, but I felt invisible. Religion wasn't something we could talk about there. When I went to a school that let me bring my religion to my work, I felt like I could be a whole person again."

"At the school I went to before, kids would get detention for talking about religion. I'm glad to be at a school where I can ask the questions that I wanted to ask. I recently researched evolution and creationism, and presented what I found at a School Board meeting."

"When we were new students at the school, the older students weren't very respectful to us. The new students got together, talked about it and called a community meeting to discuss respect. Things are better now."

These are comments from students telling their stories in a fishbowl at the first inaugural Five Freedoms Project Leadership Academy, held July 7 – 11, 2008, at the newly opened Newseum in Washington, D.C. A total of forty principals from around the country, representing urban, suburban and rural schools, K – 12, gathered for a week to explore the Five Freedoms Project five-part framework to leading change and to delve into the implications of the five First Amendment liberties. If there was ever a critical venue to explore the Five Freedoms Project, it is now Ramadan (approximately Sept. 1 through Sept. 30), a perfect opportunity to act on Ms. Almontaser’s advice to build bridges with your students or friends or neighbors who may be celebrating this month. Ramadan Mubarak!

My Reflection
Sarah Childers, Indiana

I wonder if Ms. Almontaser or her students have had negative experiences due to their dress, names and/or ethnicity. If their community publicly attacks KGIA, then what goes on in private?

I can speak to the prevalence of fear and bias against Muslims. Cowards who preferred to strike anonymously, firebombed my local mosque five years ago. In consideration of that event, what threats might have KGIA received, or Ms. Almontaser herself?

For a time, I chose to wear the hijab, or headscarf, on a daily basis as a symbol of my Muslim faith. I no longer do, except at services, largely because I personally no longer agree with the practice as a mandate, though I maintain full respect for those who choose to wear it. But to be diverse enough with myself, there is an aspect to my choice that is about acceptance, feeling different, to the extent of receiving hostile glances, being judged and living with fear.

I often feel pain at my choice, the easy road, compared to that of my Muslim sisters who continue to endure abuse for their chosen religious practice. Despite that, I am all the more dedicated to supporting the freedoms guaranteed us all to practice (or not) as we choose.

My sisters and me on Eid, 2005

Left to Right: Sadia (Pakistan), Wati (Malaysia), Zulfa (Columbia) (Somalia) and me (USA).

Although I am white with blonde hair and blue eyes, when I don a hijab, I become the “other,” to many people, the enemy. As I wore the hijab, I realized how differently people looked at me (or often averted their eyes from me), treated me, spoke to me, identified me. My family was judged along with me. Without my hijab, my family is “normal” and white. But during the time period I wore it, our car was vandalized twice while parked in public places. I was scared that our children might be targeted next. Today, as I walk bare-headed and blonde, I was scared that our children might be targeted during the time period I wore it, our car was vandalized twice while parked in public places. I was scared that our children might be targeted during the time period I wore it, our car was vandalized twice while parked in public places.

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It mattered within the inner halls of these same steps when segregation played itself out and I have to ask myself: if race doesn’t matter, why have we let history repeat itself? And most importantly, what is my role in changing it?

Race matters.
It matters every time my partner and I go out into the world:
One black man with one white one, and I have to ask if race doesn’t matter:

why do I sometimes see the face of indifference?
Race matters
It matters then and today, I believe it matters still.
To believe otherwise am I not denying my own history?
Are we not denying our collective struggle?
Our connected story?
I am not color blind for to believe that I am denotes same-
ness. Denies not only who I am as a white man
with a story and a heritage of his own,
worth with the same struggles and triumphs as yours,
but a man unique in this difference.

I am not color blind for to believe that I am denies who you are.
Your story.
Your heritage.
And the legacy you wish to leave.
And if I could leave you with one final thought: in my life and especially in my work as well as my relationships with the rest of you, will this difference be something to loathe and hate? Or instead, will it be something that needs to be embraced and celebrated. Today I choose the latter.

Greg Peters can be contacted at gpeter@scrs.org

The Five Freedoms Project: Entry Points
The Five Freedoms Project believes that America’s young people need educators who can do more than raise test scores; they need leaders who spark student learning by creating schools in which everyone has voice, value and visibility. We also believe our democracy needs individuals with more than a vague awareness of the First Amendment’s five freedoms (religion, speech, press, assembly and petition); it needs a new generation of citizens who utilize those rights in order to follow their consciences, speak out for justice and organize for change.

For more information visit fivefreedoms.org or nsrfharmony.org/connections.html

The Five Freedoms Project: for public schools, Academy members also visited the Nebraska’s seven floors of exhibits (newseum.org) and the National Archives and attended Os Guinness’s talk on his newly released book, The Case for Civility.

By the Academy’s closing moves, this already passionate and committed group of educators had renewed their energy and enthusiasm for democratic practices in their schools, enlarged their repertoire of tools and strategies for leading change that ensures all voices are honored and valued and connected to a community of learners who share their commitments.

“I used to think I was listening to everyone, but now I know I was just listening to myself.”
“T used to think the emphasis on testing limited the possibilities for student voice, but now I know student voice can and will be heard!”
“I used to think I was in a desert, but now I know I’m not.”
“I used to think our issues were unique, but now I know we’re all in this together.”

The week of the Academy was just the beginning, the Five Freedoms Project aspires to support all those involved in democratic schooling and to build a network of people committed to ensuring all young people are seen and heard. I hope you’ll consider joining us!

Kim Carter can be contacted at kimedee@gmail.com

For more information visit fivefreedoms.org or nsrfharmony.org/connections.html

Director’s Report
(continued from page 10)

The new school year is an opportunity to renew our friendships – critical as well as collegial. Those of us in NSRF enter the new school year looking for our groups, our peeps, our Critical Friendship Groups. There is anticipation for the first meet – what test will we read? Which protocol will we use? Whose student will we learn more about? How will I become a better learner and teacher? How will I foster equity? Will I need to interrupt inequity? What will be different and what the same? What child will I reach? Who will reach me?

I always love the beginning of school – even though it’s the end of summer and autumn is upon us, for school people, September feels like a new beginning. As I enter this school year I wonder if hope that my practice will be different – more equitable, more aware. I continue to consider the role privilege plays in my life and in the lives of the people I work with. I wonder how NSRF will continue to critically examine the role of privilege and equity in our work and how we will work to achieve our mission through the joint constructs of critical friendship and facilitative leadership.

My mother always taught me that on the first day of school, for good luck, you were supposed to both leave the house and enter the schoolhouse with your right foot first. The consequences for disobeying this superstition would be dire yet urnamed. I still do it every year, and by the time this edition of Connections hits your mailbox, I will have done it again. Good luck to all of you and to all of our children as we embark on another critical school year.

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Steven Straull can be contacted at stevenstraull@gmail.com

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