Milwaukee Marshall High School

COHORT 6

Theodore Frank, Teacher

My goal when I applied for the Civic Spirit cohort was to be a better teacher in US History because it was a subject I was unfamiliar with teaching. The in-person trip to NYC was transformative because it was an opportunity to explore living history in one of the cities that was instrumental in the formation of the United States. Not only was I able to learn about the city, but I was presented with the opportunity to learn from world-class professors and from other teachers who had a vastly different experience than mine, teaching in primarily religious schools.

My Civic Spirit project was to add a guest speaker to my classroom on a regular basis. I was able to get a local librarian who was able to teach my students about the genealogy resources at Milwaukee Public Libraries in December. These resources include access to records of slave ships. This information is personal to my students, as 90% of my students are of African descent. Unfortunately, this presentation did not go as well with the students as I had hoped it would which reminded me of a valuable lesson. Though I thought the students would be interested in being able to do family research, the presentation delivery was not as student-friendly as they would have liked. It also reminded me to prepare my students for guest speakers by having them research some background on the topic so they were better able to ask questions during the Q and A portion of the presentation, instead of relying on what was talked about during the speech.

In early April, we hosted our second speaker. She was a classroom educator from Our Climate Our Future, an environmental education group that creates classroom materials about social justice. She was engaging with the students and provided information about registering to vote, but her organization is primarily about social justice. She also volunteered to host a voter registration drive at the school, which she did a few days after her presentation. The drive occurred within a week of a previous registration drive. This speaker taught me that if the content is not specifically pertinent to my students, some will not pay as much attention as

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others. Many of my students are 16 and cannot register or vote in the upcoming presidential election. They are encouraged to be active participants in the civil process, even if they cannot vote, but many are not interested if they are not allowed to participate. My students asked a few more questions, and they paid more attention to this speaker, but her speech was also more polished than our first speaker and her presentation was written with students in mind.

My third speaker was provided by the Pulitzer Center and our speaker, Lais Martins, was much closer to my students in age and experience. Not only was the tone of her presentation more in line with what my students were interested in, but they genuinely engaged with her. She spoke about her role as an independent journalist in Brazil where she chronicled the stories of victims of gun violence. This was personal to some of my students, as they know victims of gun violence, living in Milwaukee. My students were better prepared as a result, and the session lasted for an entire hour. The questions they asked were also much better, and the interactions did not seem forced like they did during the previous session.

I will be continuing my Civic Spirit project next year and adding more speakers. The lessons I take away from this experience are that the speakers should resemble my students in some way to increase engagement, to pre-teach the content the speaker will be speaking on prior to the date of the presentation, and to ask my students who they would like as a speaker (within reason, or at least what field they would like a speaker to represent). I also learned that obtaining a speaker is difficult. I had plenty of non-response inquiries when I was looking for a speaker. Starting in August for an October speaker will work better than trying to get one in October for an October presentation. I will also be casting a wider net in an attempt to get more speakers, instead of just focusing on the current topics in my class, and looking at both sides of the political spectrum will increase my opportunities to bring this series to my students. This wider approach will be helpful in obtaining speakers on a monthly basis.

This year I primarily focused on the Civic Skills pillar of Civic Spirit's Three Pillars. Many of my students expressed the feeling of being marginalized. Focusing on Civic Skills will help them increase their Civic Belonging because it will help them use their skills in order to belong. The speaker series exemplifies this because it had my students interact with a research librarian and provided them access to programs they were unaware of at the local library. The librarian also presented ways for them to research and potentially connect with their past and where their family originated. The voting registration speaker encouraged them to participate in the voting process. The additional content she provided me about the environment will provide additional opportunities for my students to connect with issues that will have an impact on their lives. The journalist showed them that people who may be marginalized need to be given a voice so they are heard.

I feel I am a better teacher as a result of being involved with Civic Spirit. I am more knowledgeable, I have more resources when teaching US History than I did before this year, and I gained several new classroom activities as a result of the program.