The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History

COHORT 6

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Photographing Community: A Student Lens on Democracy

When I started my position as Director of Education at The Weitzman Museum less than 2 years ago, I set a goal to leverage the museum's historic location and themes to impact civic engagement. I asked myself, how could we use our unique resources as a cultural institution to help our youth feel motivated and empowered to elicit change? We need models for civil discourse and civic engagement, two essential muscles for the health of our democracy; two essential muscles which we have allowed to atrophy.

The Weitzman literally sits at the birthplace of democracy. I can practically see the Liberty Bell from my cubicle! Our institutional goal is to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for reflection, dialogue, and action in the pursuit of a more just and compassionate America. I knew that we could make an impact in our local community this year with the goal of expanding this reach in years to come.

At around the time I started at The Weitzman, I connected with a film producer, Sam Ball. Sam's production company, Citizen Films, collaborates with civic institutions and community-based organizations to create documentary stories, and help produce story-based public engagement campaigns that advance the concept of community citizenship. Citizen Film's newest project will be released on PBS in 2026 and is called American Creed: Citizen Power. It looks at how communities around the United States express foundational democratic ideals. Prior to the series launch, teens and young adults everywhere are taking photos exploring a range of essential American themes. The work that Sam and his partners were doing across the country were a perfect fit for my educational goals, and so – I worked with Central High School, a local public school, examining questions of identity, citizenship, community, and care, inspired by Sam's work and the work of his partners, National Writing Project, and Working Assumptions.

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Being a Civic Spirit fellow this summer helped ground my work with the students in primary source material and also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of our democracy. The summer fellowship and subsequent We the Educator series was the perfect complement to bringing this project to fruition. Audi Hecht helped me created a series of lessons where students analyzed primary sources. We created lesson plans that would help my students grapple with the following questions:

- What does citizenship mean?
- What are the responsibilities of a citizen to their country and what are the responsibilities of a country to its citizens?
- Where do I find community?
- How do I care for my community and how does my community care for me?

Following four sessions which included self-reflection, analyzing multi-media primary sources including text, photography, and film, students then went into their own communities and documented where they saw the intersection of citizenship, community, and care. They chose one work of photography and then wrote an artist statement to accompany their work. Their work is currently on view at The Weitzman Museum.

Prior to opening to the public students had an opening reception in which I spoke, their teacher spoke, and 4 students spoke about their experience with this project. In addition, their work can be seen on our website. Please see below the website link, the remarks I made at our opening reception, along with the students and teachers remarks.

It was a moving evening and more importantly, this project gave students a rare opportunity to think critically about their own communities and their country, and to imagine a better tomorrow.

To view the online exhibit of "Photographing Community: A Student Lens on Democracy," click here!