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2018 NJCTE Spring Conference Attendees

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Conflict on March 24th

by Liz deBeer and NJCTE Spring Conference Attendees

March 24, 2018:

A protest, a conference, a conflict.

It seems impossible to capture the emotions in hindsight to describe the ensuing conflict we felt when we realized we would miss the protest: the outpouring to show our outrage, disbelief, numbness ... what words to describe the feeling teachers, parents – humans! – felt after another school massacre? Finally, youth were speaking up and people seemed to be listening. We wanted to be a part of it.

But the conflict.

The NJCTE English Spring Conference, planned a year in advance, fell on the same date as the national March for Our Lives protest, organized by the Parkland Shooting survivors. That student-led demonstration, in support of stronger gun violence prevention laws, was later reported as the largest single-day protest recorded in Washington, D.C, along with many smaller demonstrations around the country, including multiple ones in New Jersey.

Many of us on the board of NJCTE were torn and yearned to be on the streets too. Our conference plans were locked in with speakers booked and a venue reserved, but we could not ignore the rising voices of students and teachers who were marching to end school gun violence.

The executive board brainstormed and opted to create a graffiti wall at the conference – a huge sheet of paper where participants wrote their views on gun violence in schools, including these comments:

“Children should be writing essays: Not Eulogies.”

“I don’t want to be scared dropping off my 10-year-old brother to school. Let us Learn. Let us Live.”

“We are fighting with you!”

“Arm me with Books!
Arm me with Compassion!
Arm me with Empathy!”

“There is hope for the future – just look at all the people marching in D.C. today!”

“Dare to dream of a world where your voices are loved and strong and not silenced by senseless violence. Words have the power to change the world. Never again!”

“Rise UP! Wise UP! Eyes UP! #neveragain”

“Our Lives Are Worth MORE Than Your Guns #NeverAgain”

“Raise awareness about mental health.”

“In addition to Parkland, remember the kids in Trenton, Newark, Camden, Chicago and cities across the country. #NeverAgain”

“Kids need to feel safe in school so they can learn to be effective citizens – teach them activism so their voices will be heard.”

Conference attendees also wrote letters of compassion and support which we sent to survivors of Parkland, FL, Valentine’s Day shooting, Some wrote blogs in the NJCTE WordPress blog: “Fear is NOT in Our Curriculum” (<https://njcte.wordpress.com/2018/03/30/fear-is-not-in-our-curriculum/>) as well as “A Child Shall Lead Them, March for Safe Schools” (<https://njcte.wordpress.com/2018/03/09/a-child-shall-lead-them-march-for-safe-schools/>) and Make Schools Safe Places for Teaching and Learning: Follow the Kids!” (<https://njcte.wordpress.com/2018/04/18/make-schools-safe-places-for-teaching-and-learning-follow-the-kids/>).

Today, we are still demonstrating, still struggling to augment the voices of teachers and youth who demand safer schools - a safer society. Since the Parkland clamor for #NeverAgain, we have witnessed the Santa Fe High School shooting in Texas, Huffman High School in Birmingham, Alabama, and other school shootings and gun violence around the country, in suburbs and cities.

But we have also witnessed the political activism inspired by Parkland survivors such as David Hogg, Emma Gonzalez, and Cameron Kasky, who led “die-ins” and protests as well as voter registration drives, among other things (including impressive twitter retorts that earned thousands of retweets.)

Their words echo with each retweet, YouTube, and popular article. Emma Gonzalez, a recent high school graduate, also spoke up for us, the teachers, in a March 15, 2018, *Seventeen Magazine* interview: “Teachers do not need to be armed with guns to protect their classes, they need to be armed with a solid education in order to teach their classes. That’s the only thing that needs to be in their job description.” (<https://www.seventeen.com/life/school/a19433627/emma-gonzalez-quotes/>)

Actually, there are a few other things to add to our job description, including faith in our students’ voices, who yearn for a better world.



Graffiti Wall – NJCTE Conference on March 24, 2018.

Liz deBeer, a former ELA instructor at Point Pleasant Beach High School, currently teaches classes and professional development at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, NJ. She also tutors and is the editor of this journal.