

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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Advocacy

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Throughout the course of my graduate studies, I have had the pleasure to work with various individuals and groups in town who are affecting change. From groups who are addressing water quality around Kansas to those that advocate for mental health rights at state and federal levels, I have witnessed the changes that people can make when institutions and systems fail them. Even though I knew that advocacy was woven into two of the competencies for community psychology practice (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012), I found myself having a difficult time recognizing local efforts as being “advocacy” efforts as per the examples I would read about.

There seemed to be a discrepancy between the academic world and the “real world,” for I found that class readings and discussions about advocacy tended to be theoretical and seemed to view advocacy as an event— something that happens one time and is done. I knew this was not the case from historical movements I had been exposed to; many times advocates worked with marginalized groups for long periods of time. Additionally, I knew that some work was being done to involve youth and young adults to be advocates for themselves and for others (Guariso et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2004). However, the literature we had been reading in classes skipped over the particular methods used to engage the younger generations of concerned citizens and to foster their development as advocates. Between the lead up to the presidential election and its

results, campus speakers and various national and local organizations have reminded me that despite the vague “book” definitions of advocacy, there are practical examples of advocates everywhere even if they are not trained community psychologists.

One of the definitions of advocacy paints the experience as an “active promotion of a cause or principle” (Community Tool Box, 2016). Many articles read in classes discussed the work of advocates according to the definition provided in the Community Tool Box and even picked up on the multiple stages of advocacy work that are mentioned there as well.

We read about a healthy food initiative in Baltimore (Shin et al., 2015), the removal of alcohol distributors and substance advertisements in Los Angeles (Themba, 1999), and attempts to change handgun ownership legislation (Anestis et al., 2015). These and other articles discussed how working with multiple levels of decision makers and stakeholders is important and that steps were made to work with various allies and opponents to create change. How these “small wins” were made, however, were not fully disclosed within these examples. The fact that many of these advocacy examples were decontextualized from their initial issues made these real examples almost seem hypothetical. Further, even if youth were involved in the advocacy and policy change process, youth seemed to be a mere part of an article’s methods section.

Indeed, youth as advocates should be highlighted more often when they are involved, as young people have taken the spotlight in the outcome of the national election. Given the rather negative press youth have received since the election, there seems to be a lot of work needed to heal young people through the advocacy process and to reaffirm that positive changes can occur. Arguably, this can really only happen *when* youth advocate for causes they believe in and their work is properly documented.



When I started to look at current advocacy efforts nationally and locally, I was better able to see how advocacy works. In fact, I started being able to pin point the specific steps of advocacy planning and action through the real life examples in the news and around me. One effort I became familiar with came from a campus speaker who is not a community psychologist but whose actions are bold and seek to involve young people. Her name was Bree Newsome, and she was the woman who scaled the flagpole at the South Carolina State Capitol to remove the Confederate flag. In fact, her actions [inspired artists across the country to recreate her image as a superhero](#), a symbol of how powerful advocates can be in inspiring others.

Although she has been involved in various advocacy efforts over the years, Bree's campus talk focused on the continual work for racial justice. From her website and her presentation, some of Bree's goals seem to be: to inspire young people to join in advocacy efforts early on ("Everyone can be an agent of change... Everyone is a leader."); and to one day bring an end to racial discrimination and oppression ("Recognize the humanity in others... We live in a time where poverty [and racism] does not have to exist. We all have a collective responsibility."). Bree provided some of the research into the issue of America's racial and racist history while also interweaving her own family's past into the timeline. Her candid way of talking about the horrific details of this tragic history was paralleled by a look at more modern instances of hatred (i.e. the shooting of AME worshippers in South Carolina and police brutality against Black individuals). She named some of her allies in the mission to climb the flagpole, including concerned white citizens, local religious leaders, youth citizen groups, and NAACP

branches. She and others planned on facing opposition (particularly law enforcement) and had a script for all to follow.

Ultimately, her act of civil disobedience led to her arrest, but Bree was prepared to take that risk on behalf of the cause. Bree talked about many of the planning stages leading up to that day and for the days following, which involved connecting with other social justice groups in a show of solidarity in the anti-racist and anti-white supremacy movements. As I sat in the audience, I realized, “Ah ha! *This* is what advocacy looks like!” Given the context of a recent Black Lives Matter picnic with the Wichita Police Department and the ongoing killings of Black men and women at the hands of police, Bree’s talk gave me the background information I needed to better understand how my class readings were applied in reality. Her appeal to young people was encouraging, for she had “faith [that] things can change in the future,” and she recognized that teenagers and young adults now have a lot of that faith.

Regardless of the faith that youth have in their ability to change the world, I will be curious to see if research focuses on engaging young people as advocates in their communities in concrete ways. Outside of the academic realm, I have seen some organizations implement forms of youth engagement that start to delve into the ways in which young people can protect others’ rights and opinions and to speak up when they see something wrong. By seeing youth out in the communities showing up to and participating in events they believe in, I am encouraged that the younger generation will continue to be engaged in the issues they care about.

What I personally want to see, however, is how community psychologists can work with youth according to the two advocacy competencies: assisting youth in creating sustainable collaborative change in systems and to campaign for policy changes that affect them. Detailing the specific and concrete steps in getting youth involved as advocates will be critical not only for

the field but also for the non-community psychologist (i.e. how to identify potential advocates among youth, how to teach them the tools they need as advocates, involving youth in the planning process, detailing what specific goals and outcomes youth as advocates achieve). Additionally, providing context to the problems youth attempt to correct can help to provide the motivation for change and other support from allies previously excluded. From a prevention standpoint, many of the issues and conflicts brought up by Bree Newsome can be lessened and hopefully eliminated one day by bringing young people into the advocacy realm. This is not to say that researchers have not involved youth as advocates in the past, but given the work that non-community psychologists have done with youth, I think the field can supplement in the training and documenting of young advocates in the years to come.

I think advocacy is an especially critical competency at this time, and it seems as if advocates will have an even tougher road to travel in the near future. There will be a lot of push-back, a lot of counter-protests, and a lot of hatred that will continue to be uncovered. But by engaging youth early, our country can have a more positive, loving, and healthy future. With more brave speakers like Bree, we are on our way towards a better future, too. Given that there are real world examples of advocacy already happening, detailing them and applying the terminologies and planning stages found within community psychology to such examples can help to make advocacy a much more vivid and personal experience for those learning about the field. Doing this with youth-led initiatives have the possibility to likewise be innovative and pave the way for brighter years ahead.

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This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.