Listen Witness Amplify
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Listen Witness Amplify North Carolina was a multicultural project that engaged eight high school social justice interns and one graduate student residential educator with twenty senior citizens to address the ongoing legacies of school segregation by law in eastern North Carolina. The high school social justice interns from African American communities in eastern North Carolina spent two weeks in residence learning about the history of racial politics at the local, state and national level so that they would be prepared to interview the senior citizens who were former students, teachers, and/or administrators in eastern North Carolina segregated schools and tell their stories.

This project was made possible by the generous material support and in-kind donations of a number of community organizations and businesses. In order to have the high school student social justice interns in residence for two weeks, we needed to provide them with room, board, and transportation in addition to educational, social, and cultural programming. For room, a local hostel who believed in our mission, Hostel Stella Maris, graciously provided us with an in-kind donation of over $1300 in reduced cost lodging. For board, a local chef with a mission to give back to the community, James Bain of Epic Food Company, worked with us one-on-one, not only providing us with both full access to restaurant catering services and customizing menu options, but also providing us with an in-kind donation of over $1,900 in reduced cost catering and meal preparation services. A local grocery store, The Fresh Market, kindly provided us with a $50 gift card. Through a grant application to provide our high school social justice interns with a stipend to offset lost wages from participating in the program, the Middlebury College Academic Outreach Endowment made a $2400 donation. The Middlebury College Innovation Hub provided a stipend to help offset the living expenses of the student team, contributing $1,000. A number of community institutions, including Price Cathedral AME Zion Church, Saint Luke AME Zion Church, Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church, and the Omega Resource Center, waived their facility rental charge to allow us to use their space to host interviews and ceremonies at no cost, amounting to over $1150 in in-kind contributions. Several museums and concerts provided us with complimentary admission including the Lumina Festival Poetry Slam at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, the Cameron Art Museum, Airlie Gardens, and the Cape Fear Museum, with in all amounted to a $262 donation. An anonymous donor allowed us to borrow their 15-passenger van, a material support valued at $2000. Finally, nearly thirty community members gave off their time to make this project possible and their volunteer labor is valued at $1780. In all, Listen Witness Amplify was made possible by the generous support of the Davis Foundation along with over $16,000 of in-kind donations, contributions, and support.

The inspiration for this project came from me witnessing my former elementary school become racially re-segregated. We chose to work with a youth empowerment association, Youth Leadership Institute of North Carolina, Incorporated (Youth LINC) because the founder, Diane Emerson Ph.D., conducted her dissertation research on one of our target high school alumni populations, Williston Senior High School in Wilmington, NC. We chose to work with Marva Robinson of the Williston Alumni and Community Choir because their organization continues to use music to bring together alumni of Williston, along with other segregated African American high schools in meaningful community engagement. Later on, we developed partnerships with the Charles H. Darden Senior High School Alumni Association as well as the Williston Senior High School Alumni Associations in order to tap into their networks and recruit their respective alumni as interview participants. In addition, we partnered with several local churches, including Ephesus Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Saint Luke African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion),
and the Wilson District of the Eastern North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion church, allowing us to share our invitation for alumni of segregated African American schools in eastern North Carolina to be interviewed via in person appearances by our student team during their announcements. Finally, we recruited one graduate student in peace and justice studies, Kimberly Howell, as a residential educator. She worked with our high school students, provided programming for social and emotional learning as well training in best practices of oral history.

The legacies of school segregation by law in eastern North Carolina are still ongoing because the voices of African American communities were neither heard nor heard during the desegregation and integration process. Rather, too often African American community schools which had educated young people for over a century, such as Williston and Darden high schools, were closed without community consent and children of these communities were bussed to formerly all-white schools where their presence was at best tolerated and at worse met with violence. In the case of Wilmington’s African American community, the peaceful protest of the closing of Williston Senior High School and the death of Reverend Martin Luther King Junior were met with such extreme white rage that the national guard was summoned to put an end to the onslaught of racially motivated violence. Thus, in eastern North Carolina, the school desegregation process was largely vindictive with African American communities bearing the brunt costs.

Yet, the voices of eastern African American communities were not only silenced by their contemporaries, but along by historians in their telling of the story of desegregation and integration in North Carolina. Their telling of this story amounts to a systematic miseducation. The result is that the children of generations X, millennial, and Z in eastern North Carolina are largely ignorant of the historical memories and experiences of African Americans who attended segregated schools and participated in the desegregation and integration process. The consequence is that, especially at the early childhood level, racial politics are systematically being used to re-segregate the public schools of eastern North Carolina. Although segregated African American community schools served for generations to provide rigorous educational training as social and emotional learning through cultures of care, today access to integrated schools is important for African American children because access to integrated schools in childhood is a major predictor of access to formerly all-white social networks and institutions of power in adulthood. In eastern North Carolina, school choice and neighborhood school policies as well as other mechanisms facilitating the privatization of the public schools have historically perpetuated and continue to perpetuate the racial segregation of public education. The benefits of school desegregation for African Americans are typically experienced over multiple generations, such that physical access to desegregated facilities, equal access to educational resources, and equal educational outcomes are gained in the first, second, and third generations, respectively. The result of the systematic re-segregation of eastern North Carolina public schools is thus that multigenerational process toward equal educational and subsequent career outcomes is lost.

Although multigenerational engagement was fundamental to the project, some of the challenges with working with our host sites came from working across generational lines. As a millennial, I am very comfortable using technology to cut out human contact and facilitate major communications. However, in order to accommodate my community partners, many of whom were baby boomers, I was challenged to amend my typical modes of communication to serve their needs. In some instances where I might have preferred to host a meeting over video chat, our meeting was instead held via telephone conference call. In other instances, in which I might have preferred to make an announcement via social media, instead I made by announcement by visiting a local church and speaking in person on their morning announcements. Although reminding people about their interviews via text or email might have been fastest, out of respect we picked up the phone and reminded people about their interviews via personal telephone call or voicemail. Consciously accommodating our community partners paid dividends because through these
meaningful communications we were able to establish additional community partnerships as we gained credibility in the community. In all, communicating across generational lines was a worthwhile challenge that shaped the project for the better.

Peace is disruptive. In the American context, we are too often complacent about institutional racism; cycles of oppression that systematically exclude people based on differences of hair and hue. The consequence of this complacency is that history is repeating itself. In the context of public education, battles fought for equal access to public education are being waged again as public schools across the country are becoming increasingly re-segregated. In post Jim-Crow America, we can only find peace if we intentionally choose to be uncomfortable. We must dig up our buried histories of murder, mayhem, and betrayal; mourn the lives that were stolen; and vow that our children will know their names. Peace is the harvest, yet the soil is rocky with generations sins against the innocent justified on the basis of race. Thus, we must first do the hard work of plowing and tilling the soil so that we might reap a harvest of peace.

Listen Witness Amplify (LWA) unearthed some of the buried histories of how African American communities in eastern North Carolina were and continue to be affected by ongoing legacies of school segregation by law. Through our high school residential social justice summer program we engaged a group of eight high school students in oral history as well as educational, social, and cultural enrichment. The high school social justice interns interviewed older adults who attended, taught, and/or were administrators of segregated high schools in Eastern North Carolina and then gave speeches to educate to the broader community. LWA contributed to short term peace by empowering black youth as storytellers and empowering black senior citizens as teachers and elders. Through this multigenerational education and empowerment, LWA shared these stories of black communities in North Carolina affected by historic and modern policies created to maintain racially segregated public schools. LWA contributed to long term peace placing these stories in historical archives such as the Freeman Roundhouse Museum and the North Carolina Room Historical Archive. By making these stories a part of the state’s history, these stories will continue to build understanding and breaking down racial barriers among North Carolinians and thus making eastern NC a more peaceful place for generations to come.

My project changed me in that it finally forced me to ask for help. Initially, when I pursued this project without other students on my team, I thought I could wear all the hats and be the program director, grant writer, contract negotiator, curriculum designer, lead teacher, bookkeeper, event planner, chaperone, and so on. Yet, out of exhaustion I soon was forced to reconcile with my own fallibility and ask for help from both my teaching partner as well as members of the community. Listen Witness Amplify taught me that no matter how much I might want to I cannot save the world all by myself.

Listen Witness Amplify addressed the ongoing legacies of school segregation by law in eastern North Carolina by empowering black community youth as storytellers and black community senior citizens as teachers and elders. Through this project, I learned that empowering the people of a community to reclaim their shared history is the only genuine path to disrupt cycles of oppression and forge peace. -Christine McDow
High School Social Justice Interns Exploring and Discussing the North Carolina Room Historical Archive

High School Social Justice Interns Serving Meals at “Helping Us Make Progress” Free Community Lunch

High School Social Justice Intern Conducting an Interview with a Segregated School Alumnus