

**Handout**

# Big Paper: How Have Communities Worked to Promote Belonging and Safety?

## Example 1: Take Back the Night

Take Back the Night is a global movement that began in the 1970s with the goal of ending sexual violence and violence against women. Gender-based violence and sexual assault are forms of violence that target aspects of the victims' identity and can make it more difficult for all those who share an aspect of their identity with the victims to feel safe in public spaces. Take Back the Night events bring people together for vigils or marches that aim to raise awareness, reclaim public spaces that don't always feel safe, and share stories from survivors. Over the decades, people have organized Take Back the Night events on college campuses and communities of all sizes around the world.

A participant in a Take Back the Night event at the University of Cincinnati, Kristin Dewitt, shared the following: "I am a survivor of domestic and sexual violence. For the longest time, I held guilt and shame for what had happened to me . . . I was alone. Through hearing other people's stories, I began to heal. That is why this event is so important. Being able to share your experiences with a group of people who believe and validate you is something special. Your story may be the one to inspire others to tell theirs and start a ripple effect."<sup>1</sup>



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- What kind of power can there be in hearing people's stories and sharing your own?
- How can people use vigils and storytelling to reclaim public spaces and strengthen a sense of belonging and safety in their communities?

<sup>1</sup> Hayley Garr, "[UC hosts the second annual Take Back the Night on campus](#)," *The News Record* (University of Cincinnati), April 19, 2023.

## Example 2: Reclaiming Monuments

The summer of 2020 saw the largest protest movement in US history, as millions of people gathered across the country to call for racial justice after acts of violence toward Black Americans by police officers and other individuals. In addition to seeking substantive changes to laws, policies, and practices, protestors also called for the removal of public monuments and memorials that they say symbolize racism and white supremacy. In Richmond, Virginia, a massive, 60-foot-tall statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee dominated Monument Avenue from 1890 until its removal in 2021 in response to large-scale protests.

The following is an excerpt from a *Richmond Times-Dispatch* article:

When 14-year-old dancers Kennedy George and Ava Holloway heard that the Robert E. Lee statue on Monument Avenue was coming down, they knew they had to be there.

They headed out in their matching black ballerina skirts and pointe shoes for an impromptu photo session.

“We went to the monument to capture a joyous moment,” Kennedy said.

Kennedy and Ava have been dancing since they were 3 years old at the Central Virginia Dance Academy.

“Dance, for me, is like the better half of myself,” Kennedy said. “It’s like my alter ego. It helps express different parts of who I am.”

“I feel stronger, I feel graceful, I feel confident when I’m dancing,” Ava said.

With the backdrop of the Lee pedestal covered with graffiti behind them, Kennedy and Ava stood proudly on pointe, wearing black tutus and raising their fists in a symbol of strength.<sup>2</sup>

- What is the power of Kennedy and Ava’s statement?
- How can people use art to reclaim public spaces and increase a sense of belonging and safety in their communities?



This photo depicts two young ballerinas who participated in the protests that occurred over the summer of 2020 at the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>2</sup> Colleen Curran, “[How a photo of young ballerinas at the Lee statue became an iconic image of Black Lives Matter](#),” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 19, 2020.

## Example 3: Changing the Curriculum



Office of Senator John Liu

The following is an excerpt from a 2023 AMNY article about school curriculum changes:

[New York] State Senator John Liu (SD-16) and Assemblymember Grace Lee (AD-65) have co-sponsored a bill mandating the inclusion of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) curriculum in social studies or history courses at public elementary, middle, and high schools across New York state.

Liu said that the new curriculum would directly address the fact that “Asian Americans have been scapegoated for everything from global pandemics to economic recession to international conflicts” and the way to eradicate anti-Asian hate for the long term is by educating students “so that they understand that Asian Americans have been a part of building America as much as anybody else has been.”<sup>3</sup>

- What do you think is the relationship between the histories students learn in school and people’s ideas about who belongs in the United States today?
- How can people use history education to increase belonging and safety in their communities?

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Belle Lin, “[Here’s what the new proposed history and social studies curriculum on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander could look like](#),” AMNY.com, May 5, 2023.

## Example 4: Acts of Kindness

In 2018, a gunman killed 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the deadliest attack on Jews in US history. Mark Oppenheimer is a descendant of one of the first Jews to settle in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, where the Tree of Life Synagogue is located. He is also a writer, and he decided to write a book about how people's lives changed as a result of the mass shooting. As part of this work, he documented acts of what he calls "lovingkindness," or *hesed* in Hebrew. Some of the examples Oppenheimer shares in the book include a Lutheran man who drove across the country immediately after the attack to place handmade Stars of David with the names of the victims in front of the synagogue, an Iranian American student who raised a million dollars to give to the community, and a Jewish high school student from Squirrel Hill who helped to organize a vigil.

Dan Leger, who was shot during the attack, shares how profound it was for him to see communities coming together: "I think that one of the great things that came out of this whole experience was the falling away of walls between the Orthodox community and the more progressive community, between the Jewish community and the Christian community and the Muslim community, between communities of faith and law enforcement. . . . All those walls just went away for a while."<sup>4</sup>



DUSTIN FRANZ/AFP via Getty Images

To this day, people honor those who lost their lives in the attack by engaging in acts of kindness.

- What impact can acts of kindness have on individuals?
- How can acts of kindness increase people's sense of safety and belonging in their communities?

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, *Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood* (Knopf, 2021), 374 (Kindle edition).