Passion WITH A PURPOSE

A LOOK INTO PARKER’S UPPER SCHOOL GLOBAL ISSUES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE CLASS

BY TIFFANY YU
Book learning is incredibly important—from world literature to ancient Greek philosophy to parabolic functions—but some topics require a departure from the classroom. There are lived realities—such as income disparities, homelessness, and hunger—that, without direct experience, one cannot claim to fully understand.

Parker’s Upper School Global Issues and Social Justice class is designed around the idea that there are approaches beyond the textbook that can develop one’s grasp of persistent social problems such as these. Upper School social studies teacher Phil Trotter uses field trips, hands-on community outreach, and guest speakers to broaden his students’ views of complex topics such as poverty and immigration.

Experience is particularly crucial when it comes to gaining a deeper understanding via others’ perspectives on multilayered and sometimes contentious issues. For example, in the class’ unit on immigration and border issues, students are challenged to begin by asking their peers and other people in the San Diego community how they feel about these subjects.

“We seem to be caught in the confines of a classroom, and even in front of a computer. To go out there to gauge how people feel about a topic is really important.”

—Phil Trotter, Upper School social studies teacher

In addition to venturing out into San Diego to collect viewpoints, students are fortunate to have some perspectives come to them. The Social Justice class attracts a fascinating roster of guest speakers to campus, including Josue Rodriguez ’16, who returned to his alma mater to discuss how immigration issues have affected his family, and Rev. Bill Jenkins, director of the Christ Ministry Center at United Methodist, who spoke about the challenges and the joys of helping to settle 5,000 Haitian refugees who came through the San Diego/Tijuana border in the last year.

Having broadened their grasp of opinions surrounding a social issue, students are then ready to immerse themselves in the neighborhoods for which these challenges are a daily reality. In the immigration unit, the field component takes them to Jacumba Hot Springs, California, an hour and a half east of San Diego. In this small border town, where many migrants are known to cross into the United States, students take a midnight hike up the tallest mountain in the area to
visiting the communities and meeting the people whose lives are affected by immigration.

The documentary got rave reviews and has been shown at local film festivals including the Border Film Festival and the Latino Film Festival of San Diego. It was featured on many educational blogs and websites, including the National Association of Independent Schools’ Inspiration Lab blog, which encourages exploration by sharing stories about inspired learning in independent schools.

The documentary is an excellent depiction of the students’ use of Thomas Aquinas’ principle of see-judge-act, a method of study used in Trotter’s class that develops critical judgment skills and allows students to understand a situation through reflection before taking action.

Trotter believes this method of study produces more thoughtful students who have a deeper and more personal understanding of global issues. In addition to immigration, his class covers homelessness, hunger, women’s rights, the death penalty, and animal rights. Students also suggest topics that interest them. The sequence of interviews, guest speakers, field trips, and time for reflection and action is built into each topic.

Each student is also required to complete a six-week service internship in which he or she dedicates time to enriching the community beyond Parker. In the past, students have helped to tutor students at Kit Carson Elementary, volunteered at food banks, or helped beautify community

The effect is significant. “I have been to the border at designated border crossings numerous times and [have] seen plenty of pictures and videos of the wall,” wrote Ashkon Aghassi, Class of 2018, in a reflective blog entry about the Jacumba trip. “But something about walking along the wall impacted me more than the other experiences.”

The goal of the trip is not to find solutions for immigration issues in America, but to better comprehend the complexities inherent in them.

“One thing is for sure: I’ve been to the border on many occasions and have seen pictures and videos of the wall. But there’s something about walking along the wall that left a greater impact on me compared to the other experiences.”

As part of the class, students develop independent projects to show what they have learned, from their preliminary peer interviews to their trips, such as the one to a border community.

These projects have the potential to be profound. In 2016, students created a moving documentary called “Si Supieras—If You Knew.” Directed by Adam Linssen ’16 and Ben Clark ’17, it examined the U.S. immigration climate during the 2016 presidential election. Interviews introduce viewers to people who risked everything and crossed the border, people who have been deported, and people who remember those who lost their lives trying to cross. At the end of the film, students reflect on how it is difficult to form a stance on border issues after visiting the communities and meeting the people whose lives are affected by immigration.

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gardens. Students in this class also manage the Social Justice Garden at Parker on the Linda Vista Campus. While learning about environmental issues, students cultivate the soil and plant vegetables that are later donated to the Linda Vista Food Bank.

Parker alumnus Evan Stewart ’17 said that Trotter’s Social Justice class opened his eyes to local issues that affected his community. In March 2017, Stewart and fellow students from the Lower, Middle, and Upper Schools spent an evening learning about homelessness in San Diego, an event that brought together a panel of speakers and passionate community volunteers to discuss why they are committed to ending homelessness.

“I had always known homelessness was a very complex issue that is not easy to solve,” Evan said. “But this night taught me even more about how difficult a topic it is. Also, I better understand that every homeless person has their own story and that you can’t look down on someone else just because they are less fortunate than you, but rather you have to do everything you can to help them.”

Evan said he was motivated to speak with local politicians about homelessness, stressing the importance of providing affordable housing for the needy.

Trotter said Parker “does a great job preparing our students for college and the real world,” adding that “students have a better sense of who they are, what makes their life meaningful and how they can be conscientious citizens.”

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