

SPEAK UP: What's the Role of Advocacy in Civic Engagement?

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In April 1994, an awful part of history repeated itself. 800,000 people died tragically and brutally in the course of 100 days. The Rwandan Genocide stands as one of the most heinous human rights catastrophes in the history of the world, and it happened only 10 years ago. But how could such an atrocity take place again? How could the world forget the horror of the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide? How could we make the same mistake again?

Ignorance and Apathy. In 1994, the average American did not know where Rwanda was, let alone care about what was happening within the tiny African country. Thus when peacekeeping troops were requested, there was no pressure on the United States' government or any other government to provide them and the massacre was allowed to continue. If ignorance and apathy are to blame for the Rwandan genocide and countless other preventable tragedies, what is the solution? The answer is Civic Engagement.

As Bonner Scholars we share several common commitments. During my four years as Bonner Scholar, the common commitment that has been most important to me has been Civic Engagement. I had the distinct privilege to serve with both the Virginia Office of Volunteerism (VOV) and the Virginia Office of Newcomer Services (ONS), both divisions of the Department of Social Services. Throughout my time with both offices, I experienced the frustration and overwhelming dimensions of state government. Most enlightening however were the lessons I learned about citizenship.

Having an insider's perspective to state and local government, I can tell you every vote counts. Jobs, policies, budget expenditures and ideologies can be changed with one trip to the ballot box. Everyone hears the numbers of unemployed, the amounts of debt, the low percentages of citizens that vote. As Bonner scholars we see the faces and stories behind those numbers. But we often forget that we can change the numbers by exercising our rights and duties as a citizen and thus change those lives for the better. My first service site, the Virginia Office of Volunteerism was closed because lawmakers needed to cut a tight budget. VOV was cut because it was seen as unnecessary. The legislature saved an insignificant amount of money, but five people lost their jobs, Virginia volunteers lost a valuable resource and I lost my service site.

VOV was closed because no one spoke up.

In the Virginia Office of Newcomer Services, which assists in the resettlement of refugees, I saw the long, arduous process refugees face from countries such as Rwanda in trying to resettle and have the chance for a better life. Their trip to the United States can be delayed years by policy decisions, unrelated conflicts, unwelcoming communities. Upon arrival, refugees can face harsh realities without the proper supportive systems in place to welcome them to their new home. Refugees suffer because no one speaks up. Yet they come yearning for citizenship in a country where it means something.

And here, it does mean something. Advocacy is not just a political thing. It is a justice thing.

Through my service I learned that civic engagement is not about candidates and elections, it is about families, and children and people that survive off hope alone. As I stated before, as Bonner Scholars we see the needs and we should be leading the change both in action and in advocacy. All politicians are not unfeeling. They are not all selfish and self-centered. They are all, however, representatives. They will advocate for what the majority want. It is our job to show people that what they want, extends outside the context of their individual worlds. It is our job to show them the richness a child brings to the world, the gift a refugee gives to a community. It is our duty to show the world its potential.

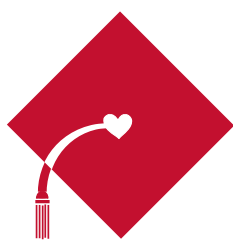
I began with a lesson from history and I shall close with one too. During the Holocaust, Pastor Martin Niemöller wrote this of his experience:

"First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me."

I serve because I am selfish. I volunteer because of the feeling of satisfaction and joy it gives me. I volunteer in the hopes that in speaking up for those without a voice, there will be someone there to speak up for me. Too many have been silenced for too long.

Break the silence, speak up.

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Daniel Cellucci, a Bonner Scholar at the University of Richmond (Richmond, VA), calls attention to the atrocity of genocide in Rwanda and his work in a Virginia state government office to raise the need for "speaking up" for justice through both service and advocacy.