News



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by Jocelyn A. Sideco

View Author Profile
jocelyn@ingoodcompany.net.co

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High school ministry feels like a circus of balancing acts, death-defying moments and loud-colored costumes. Teens strive to understand the complexities of artificial intelligence and the human genome. Teens throw themselves hard and fast toward competing bodies in order to have the most points at the end of a certain measure of time. Teens celebrate and showcase their school spirit through dressing up for fancy dances or theme days like Twin Day or '80s Day.

With what we know about adolescent brain development, we educators try to create experiences and environments that encourage healthy risk-taking as the prefrontal cortex continues to mature and offer agility to plan, prioritize and control impulses.

These same teens are the ones hesitant to step out of their comfort zone whether it be a belief or a behavior. These teens rarely step away from their social group unless told or asked to do so. These teens also demand concrete proof to the ways of the world instead of going out on a limb to entertain God's mysterious ways.

It is in this context that I want to introduce you to two teenagers whose courage, charisma and activism encourage, motivate and challenge me and my current mind-set on the status quo.

Bria Smith: 18-year-old high school senior I had the pleasure of hosting for our recent Bay Area Teach-in for Justice. Bria is a mix of spirited performative extrovert, influential social media personality, and limited teenager who openly makes herself vulnerable for the cause of gun reform.

I first heard about Bria on the Nancy Podcast where she and Emma Gonzalez from the March for Our Lives movement spoke about the summer tour they took to over 25 states meeting at over 60 community meetings and events to shed light on the teen demand for gun reform.

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Bria, who is black and from Milwaukee, spoke clearly and passionately about growing into becoming an activist whose voice needed to take up space. About 170 students from over 10 Bay Area high schools sat at the edges of their seats as she inspired them to speak up, speak out and speak often. I was close to tears looking at

the crowd of brown, black and white teens thirsty for this deep well of truth, empowerment and wisdom.

Two

Johnny Hultzapple: 17-year-old high school student I have not had the pleasure of meeting but was introduced to when a fellow colleague shared his Jan. 30 opinion article found in the Colorado Times Recorder. Johnny spoke up and spoke out to the Denver Archdiocese for hosting anti-LGBTQ activist and proponent of conversion therapy, Andrew Comiskey. (See "Anti-LGBTQ Catholic Conference In Denver Draws Ire From Progressives" for the controversy.)

Johnny writes, "I AM a gay person. I AM a homosexual; and there is absolutely nothing perverted about me. In Genesis 1:26, God says, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' Based on Christian belief, humans are made in the likeness of God. I believe this includes STRAIGHT, GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER or QUEER individuals. LGBTQ people are made in the image and likeness of God.

Days after Hultzapple's opinion article was published, Jason Salzman of the Colorado Times Reporter writes a news article entitled, "Overwhelming 'Love And Support' For High School Student Who Spoke Out Against Catholic 'Conversion Therapy' Initiative ." Salzman reports, "The intense response to Johnny Hultzapple's essay caused the Colorado Times Recorder's website to crash last week, ultimately bringing a quarter million viewers to read the article."

People like Bria and Johnny make speaking up look easy.

I justify why I do not speak up, speak out, and take up as much room as these two do: "their brains are still developing," I think to myself. I give myself permission to reason away their courage as they take on institutions like American gun lobbies or the Catholic Church. I think to myself, "If they only knew how risky speaking out is. They will quickly learn that there are extreme consequences for these impulses."

But I am [thankfully] hugely mistaken. Bria is free when she shares her story, her passions, her no-nonsense directness. She may feel like the only voice of reason in her experience of racist America, but I witnessed those faces in the auditorium. They were enamored, thrilled and sensed that she understood them. Johnny stands tall accepting who he is as a loved human being in the face of an institution of "faith"

and does not cower to compromises laden with insults. Instead, so many people went out of their way to commend him and share the platform to renounce the archaic ways of the institution of the church, especially when the church misses the most obvious, grounding truth and invitation: dignity and love.

As a Catholic educator, how can I get out of the way of this kind of courage and allow them to breathe new life into our world, into our church?

I turn, once again to the Gospel. This Sunday's story retells the moment when Simon Peter reluctant trusts Jesus's command to set their nets out for a catch. He says, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." Peter's reluctance resonates with my often tired and lackadaisical approach to "fighting for peace and justice" when I experience obstacle after obstacle or defeat after defeat. And yet, he does it, his faith bears fish, he repents, Jesus accepts him and encourages him not to be afraid, then Peter and his companions leave everything and follow Jesus.

May Peter and these teens continue to be an example of courage for all of us so that we may follow Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a retreat leader, spiritual director and innovative minister who specializes in mission-centered ministry. She directs the Community Service and Social Justice office at St. Ignatius College Preparatory in San Francisco. Visit her online ecumenical ministry, In Good Company, at ingoodcompany.net.co or email her at jocelyn@ingoodcompany.net.co.]

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