

FOLLOWING THEIR FOOTSTEPS

Activists today stand on the shoulders of legends of the past

Traditionally, activism refers to direct, determined campaigning for social or political change. But, almost all of the words in that definition are vague enough to be stretched and pulled to fit a wide variety of types of action, ranging from writing a letter to a politician, to boycotting products to march demonstrations. Therefore, many people define activism in the ways that they have seen it or in ways they feel pertain to them.

“Before everything happened here, my view of activism was physical action... and actually physically appearing to make change,” senior Emma Gonzalez said. “But, now I see that activism can come in so many different forms. It’s working to change minds and change people in power for an issue they believe in.”

It is indisputable, though, that activism has a rich and deep history in American society. Since the days of rebellion by the Sons of Liberty and other revolutionaries working to break away from Great Britain, disobedience for the purpose of changing society is ingrained in the American persona, forever intertwined.

“One of the major traits of American history is individualism,” AP U.S. History teacher Lisa Hitchcock said. “We have seen activism since the beginning of our history... our fundamental beliefs in democracy and free speech fosters this. When the troops were being trained in the Revolutionary War, they did something that no one else ever did: they questioned orders. That’s the American way — to question why things are the way it is and to not blindly follow anyone.”

Traditional sociopolitics are often cited as the fight for equality from marginalized groups. Of course, “marginalized” is a broad term. Protests against “the man” have become a distinct part of American society.

“Our founding fathers knew how important activism and change was,” Hitchcock said. “That’s why our Constitution is built the way it was... because they knew that eventually change was necessary.”

Immediately after the Revolutionary War, rebellion and civil disobedience were still prominent factors in achieving that change. Bacon’s Rebellion was an uprising

of indentured servants who did not receive the land that they were promised; Shay’s Rebellion included veterans rising up against what they felt was economic and civil injustice. One can trace this kind of rebellion of oppressed groups throughout American history, each activism movement using different tactics to get their message across.

In the 1950s, African American civil rights activists participated in demonstrations, including marches, rallies, picketing and sit-ins to demonstrate their discontent with racial inequality and persistence for change. They also used literature in the form of persuasive letters, such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “A Letter from Birmingham Jail,” to fight for their cause.

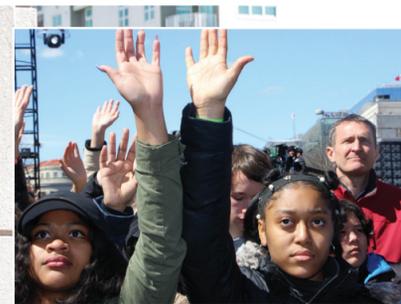
Anti-war activists in the 1960s during America’s involvement in the Vietnam War protested in many different ways. Many famous artists participated in these demonstrations, releasing songs like Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction” and Phil Ochs’ “What Are You Fighting For.” Combined with public demonstrations, this cultural revolution allowed the growth of the anti-war sentiment and eventually contributed to the government’s decision to leave the war.

More recently, LGBT activists advocated for acceptance through the gay rights movement. Activists fought for both political equality under the law through lobbying and marching and for social equality through placement of gay content in magazines, films, literature and other forms of media. As an extension of the LGBT rights movement, multiple organizations were created to combat the outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s, many of which were protesting insufficient healthcare for AIDS patients.

Each of these reform movements, as well as the hundreds more that have taken place throughout America’s history, are focused on different issues and yet still use very similar methods in order to get their messages across. Similarly to the tactics used with the women’s suffrage and the abolition movement, many of them have come to work together to fight for their goals in unison, pooling their resources in order to achieve a more effective outcome. Today, many activist movements follow in



Standing up. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy at MSD, students, teachers and community leaders gathered outside a Fort Lauderdale courthouse to rally for gun control measures. Photo by Suzanna Barna



Hands up. Demonstrators at the March For Our Lives in Washington D.C. raise their hands in solidarity with student activist Alex King to show unity in the face of adversity. Photo by Emma Dowd



Talking it out. MSD students, including senior Chris Grady meet with state legislators and national media outlets in the Florida Capitol building in Tallahassee. Photo by Suzanna Barna



Listen and Learn. Juniors Riika Kothur and Sindhu Kolla listen to Florida state legislators in an effort to lobby for change and more sensible state-level gun regulations. Photo by Suzanna Barna

the footsteps of the past movements and mimic their actions.

“I think it’s important for groups to remain autonomous,” junior Sarah Chadwick said. “But, also, communication is important, and if you can work together to reach a goal, that’s a win-win.”

These movements also look back at other campaigns in the past throughout history for guidance on how to make their political action actually realize results. Through studying the plight of activists in the past, they are able to edit strategies to enact change in the future.

“In a way, I think past activism is kind

of a guidebook for us now in terms of what people did for public protests and things of that sort,” Chadwick said. “Where these movements lie, those are really the foundations of every movement. Beyond that, it’s just really important to see the significance of what change-makers did in history, which inspires us to do things today.”

The question, therefore, is how to get people to support an activist movement? What in the past has worked? And, what today can be done better?

“The purpose of a reform movement usually is to get the majority to support

the minority, which can be difficult,” AP Government teacher Jeffrey Foster said. “If you can get people to see your facts, if you have the right people in your movement to get people inspired to join the fight and see that your belief system is just, they are going to support it.”

In the age of technology, this method has been revolutionized, specifically by one thing: social media. Whether it be by Twitter, Instagram or Tumblr, social media has allowed for the galvanization of groups around the world for a cause that began with one singular moment.

The #MeToo movement, which fights

for the end of sexual assault and rape culture in America, was born out of a social media hashtag, and spread to become a significant movement after months of it spreading across Twitter. The reveal of multiple celebrities’ sexual misconduct on social media led to real world changes, including firing and lawsuits. Most significantly, though, it led to real accountability of abusers.

“[Technology] is a positive thing in the way that you can contact a student in China or Africa and share your ideas; you can video conference and get together so much more easily with social media,”

Hitchcock said. “But, you also have to be careful about misinformation and confirmation bias. It’s so easy to just find what you want to see on social media... but you have to look at all sides of an issue and make conscious decisions.”

With this new technology, an eclectic type of activism has arisen. Take the movement against gun violence: activists marched at the March For Our Lives, walked out of school, called out politicians in tweets, used songs like “This is America” by Childish Gambino and “Found/Tonight” and sat outside the offices of representatives — all things they learned

from previous campaigns for social change.

Both in early American history and now, it has often been the youth who begin the fight for social change. Whether it be through writing, tweeting or marching, grassroots activism by those who see ailments in their communities is what leads to actual change. It is a bottom-up process and one that could take decades to see results, but persistence, perseverance and proficiency in the facts allows for the society to eventually address and correct injustice, making for a better society as a whole. Story by Rebecca Schneid

CHANGE OVER TIME

Activists spark change throughout history



1776

Revolutionaries in America create the Declaration of Independence to become a sovereign nation.



1848

Suffragettes, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, convene in Seneca Falls, New York to address women’s rights.



1865

Abolitionists celebrate a major victory as slavery is abolished with the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.



1920

White women are guaranteed the right to vote when the 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is ratified.



1963

Civil rights activists and followers of Martin Luther King Jr. join forces and march on Washington, D.C., to fight for equal rights.



1969

The Beatles release “Give Peace a Chance,” a song that encompasses the opposition to the war in Vietnam.



1989

The burning of an American flag was protected under the First Amendment in Texas v. Johnson, redefining free expression.



1992

Californians protest police brutality with riots following the acquittal of police officers involved in the arrest of Rodney King.



2015

The landmark Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges establishes the legality of same-sex marriage in America.



2018

In the wake of the massacre at MSD, activists march in a student-led movement for gun control.

