

by Bonnie Powers, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

# The Genesis of Every Body's Restroom

"In a society that primarily considers there to be two genders [man and woman], subsequently, there are [typically] two restrooms: men's and women's."

## Is this a violation of human rights?

Wildwood alums Alex Assil, Arielle Hakman, Eloise Hess, and Darius Margalith, all graduates of the class of 2013, proposed this question as the basis for their Human Rights Action research project last year. Titled "Every Body's Restroom," they reported on the issues of sex and gender as unique identities and the implications for human rights.

### **WILDWOOD'S HUMAN RIGHTS CURRICULUM**

For all seniors at Wildwood, Human Rights: Theory and Practice is mandatory. "This course is the final unit in the humanities curriculum and introduces students to the origins of ideas about human rights," explains Tassie Hadlock-Piltz, upper school humanities teacher. To understand the foundations and philosophies, students read texts by John Locke and grapple with the idea of human nature, the search for truth, and the conscious mind. Studying

philosopher Immanuel Kant, the class explores ethics, the concept of right and wrong, and morality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings consider the intersection of human nature and civil society, looking at corruption versus the interests of the public and the common good. They also look at the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other human rights treaties.

From this basis of a historical perspective, the course looks to the contemporary experience and the structures that support human rights. "We expose students to a variety of inspirations," Tassie says. "Through readings, current events, and guest speakers, the class examines existing human rights issues such as microaggression, hunger, water rights, and assisted suicide, to name a few, and the role institutions and individuals play in addressing these violations."

The class culminates with the Human Rights Action research project, engaging students' research and fieldwork skills to develop a plan that addresses an aspect of a human rights violation.

### EVERY BODY'S RESTROOM

For the students collaborating on "Every Body's Restroom," they explored sex and gender in the context of those who consider themselves gender nonconforming and the issue that they are forced to choose between the two identities of man or woman when it comes to public restroom facilities.

"Sex and gender are completely unique identities and do not dictate one another," they write. "One's sex is merely how one exists physically, despite how one chooses to identify. ... When comparing sex and gender, it is important to keep the two separate in order to keep from making generalizations such as

'all females identify as woman.' There are many people who do not fit within these bounds ... and are the body of people that are not granted equal expression as men and women."

As they explored the human rights issue, they identified that a violation has occurred in that "there

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is no third restroom option for those who identify as gender nonconforming people." The students researched other schools and universities, conducted interviews of professionals, participated in workshops, and sent surveys to the Wildwood students, faculty, and administration.

This data provided the foundation for a proposal to Wildwood administrators recommending that the school convert some portion of existing restrooms at the middle and upper campus, specifically designated to males and females, as gender-neutral.

At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, it was announced that Wildwood transitioned the single-stall restroom in the Gallery at the middle and upper school campus from "unisex" to "gender-neutral." As a result of the Human Rights Action research project and the student-led initiative to create change on their own Wildwood campus, what had been our unisex restroom, largely limited to adult use, is now known as "Every Body's Restroom" and is

### HUMAN RIGHTS at ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

As you read in the elementary feature on page 2, 2nd grade students use systems thinking to look at a variety of organizational entities, including food systems—the deserts, where healthy food sources are scarce, and the oases, where healthy food sources are plentiful. Second grade teachers Monique Marshall and Jessica Collins also use block building to catalyze students' understanding of food systems specifically to engage them in the issues of human rights: Students design and construct 3-D models depicting each.

Noted in the article was that Wildwood students came to understand that they have access to plenty of fresh, organic produce, while their buddies at Central High do not. "That disconnect," Monique says, "naturally led these students to wonder why and added deeper context to the lesson." For these students, having their reality challenged is a first step in understanding human rights. Taking action, and being part of the solution, is another step. The class agreed that they want to help inform people—in both their neighborhood and the food deserts—to ensure equal access to healthy nutritious foods.

## HUMAN RIGHTS at MIDDLE SCHOOL

In 6th and 7th grade math, project-based learning and human rights intersect in the *Wages of the World* project. These middle school students research a manufacturer and synthesize information on corporate labor practices and sweatshops. Their investigations expose them to the disparity in the amount of money a sweatshop worker makes compared to the profits of the company.

Students create a four-part educational poster using math principles of charting, graphing, and algebraic equations, along with writing a paragraph explaining the findings and lessons learned in the project. This way of learning math emphasizes the real-world application that math can be used as a tool to bring about awareness of a global issue.

Students also present their findings using presentation software, mock-video news reports, or by designing an educational pamphlet. Together, the entire class collaborates on creating an installation art piece to bring sweatshop awareness to the Wildwood community.

open for student use, as well. To further this point and in light of the passing earlier this year of California's Assembly Bill 1266 and the more recent vote to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (as of November 2013, the bill moved to the House), and what has been a common practice in workplaces, Wildwood supports all community members to use the gender-specific restroom that is consistent with their gender identity.

This initiative affirms the diversity of our community and the value of our students' voice, work, and process. "Doing what's right to make school a safe and affirming place for every student is fundamental to the work we do here," Head of School Landis Green says.

## IN THE MEDIA

In November 2013, comedian and political satirist Stephen Colbert discussed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act on his show. In his paradoxical way, he said, jokingly, "Some bathrooms have—and this is true!—an all-gender restroom symbol."

In a September 2013 article in *Newsweek*, author E.J. Graff looked at marriage rights, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, and issues of gender diversity. She writes, "It's not OK, yet, for someone apparently born male to grow into womanhood or for someone who started life considered female to make it clear he's a man. As for the rest of us, we are still, far more than we understand, herded unnecessarily by our sex—by the stereotypes associated with how a woman or a man should act."

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She, too, reflects on the discomfort of transgender and gender-nonconforming adults on the forced shifting to their originally assigned sex in order to avoid rejection, taunting, or, worse, violence in a variety of situations. "The idea that transgender children and adults should be able to pick the bathrooms and sports teams where they feel comfortable is treated as the same kind of violation of nature that once greeted two women or two men holding hands," Graff says.

Kenji Yoshino, a two-time guest keynote speaker at Wildwood's Multicultural Symposium, is the author of a book called *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*. "Everyone covers," he writes. "To cover is to tone

down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream." Yoshino describes the discrimination of "minority cultures"—when those that are an outsider are accepted, if only they behave like an insider. And he looks at civil rights "in terms of universal liberty rather than in terms of group-based equality ... to avoid making assumptions about group cultures." He argues that the demand to cover can pose a hidden threat to our civil rights.

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### THE CULTURE AT WILDWOOD MADE THIS POSSIBLE

Alex, Arielle, Eloise, and Darius approached Melinda Tsapatsaris, assistant head of school, to discuss their proposal to initiate a gender-neutral bathroom. "They were articulate, well-researched, and professional, and [they] had obviously prepared themselves for the conversation and a compelling case," Melinda says. "I saw so

much of Wildwood in their approach—they were respectful of each other and collaborative. I saw their passion for a fundamental issue about fairness. They were authentic, reflective, and cared about their work. It is such a fundamental aspect of Wildwood to ask for student feedback, and these students acknowledged 'we do a lot right at Wildwood, but this issue needs to be corrected.'"

Melinda shares that the students thought that the Wildwood administration would resist. The Heads Leadership Team (HLT) took the proposal (in which the students presented multiple choices around converting multiple-stall vs. single-stall restrooms) and discussed the implications for facilities: The restrooms exist in a building that is a mix of 6th through 12th graders. HLT considered concerns about privacy, modesty, safety, and sexuality.

At Wildwood, it's recognized that there is an overlap between the "kid world" and the "adult world." It's more siloed at other schools. What makes the culture at Wildwood so unique and important is the respect shown to children and youth, for their perspectives matter. "Once we identified the logistical concerns, it was easy to solve them via the students' proposed recommendation of converting the Gallery restroom as a safe place for all—regardless of gender identity or gender expression," Melinda explains. She also reflects on the words of Wildwood alum Sam Nozik, '06, who said about Wildwood, "Because we can make it ours."

"It still rings true today," she says. 

