

Students Lead Annual Diversity Conference Liz Torrey, Apr 5 2017



On Friday, March 31 and Saturday, April 1, St. Andrew's held its annual student-led Equity Conference. This year's conference theme, "Leadership Through Proximity", was inspired by [civil rights leader Bryan Stevenson's visit to campus in January](#); in his address to the School community during that visit, Stevenson repeatedly urged us to "get proximate" to each other in order to promote the understanding and healing necessary to combat systemic inequality.

On Friday night, students and faculty listened to remarks by Director of Diversity Education Giselle Furlonge and a spoken word poetry performance by Joycelin Farmer '17. Students and faculty then broke into affinity group and other small group discussions, many of which were based around the School's [identity affinity groups](#). On Saturday morning, student Diversity Stewards led workshops on a multitude of topics. Third and IV Form students participated in a [Race to the Wall exercise](#) in the Old Gym, while V Form students joined senior leaders and Assistant Head for Leadership Ana Ramirez for leadership training in Engelhard Hall. In the Roach house, six LGBTQ students and faculty shared their experiences as members of both St. Andrew's community and the queer community, while Headmaster Tad Roach himself led a session in his office on the relationships between free speech, civility and diversity in the 21st century. Other Saturday workshops included a [Fishbowl activity](#), a Lift Your Mask activity (in which students create physical masks to explore their visible and invisible identities and how these identities impact their daily lives), Diversity Stewards leadership training, and a workshop on the "power of deep listening", which was led by visiting poet [Devi Lockwood](#). Saturday's workshops were capped off by closing remarks by VI Form students Camille Seeley '17, Charlotte Berl '17, and Will Imbrie-Moore '17.

Below are excerpts from the student and faculty opening and closing remarks:

Giselle Furlonge, Director of Diversity Education

In January, Bryan Stevenson asked us to get close to those people and causes that are different from us, those people or causes that are different from us, those people or causes that make us uncomfortable. He compelled us to do so in order to change ourselves for the better and to make the world around us more equitable, more just. In the last seven weeks since [my daughter] Devi was born, I have come to think of proximity as a critical aspect of both motherhood and leadership. I need to get close to this confusing, unpredictable, amazing, beautiful little being in order to begin to understand her and meet her needs. We all need to get close to something—an idea, a cause, a worldview—or a person who is different from you in order to be a more compassionate and empathetic member of this world.

This year's Equity Conference theme is about "proximate leadership." Okay, so what does that even mean? John Kotter of the Harvard Business Review writes that, "The function of leadership is to produce change," and that "setting the direction of that change is fundamental to leadership." To me, leadership is more than the production of change alone. An effective leader practices humility, sensitivity, openness, and persistence. Leadership is about closeness. It is about putting yourself in an uncomfortable position, and setting that new direction. *What direction will you set?* Whether that means attending an affinity group meeting for the first time, or confronting your own unconscious bias, it is incumbent upon all of us to approach what makes us uncomfortable. I, along with the student organizers of this year's conference, want to ask you:

How close are you willing to get to your own biases?

What causes and people are you willing to get close to?

What kind of leader will that proximity allow you to become?

Charlotte Berl '17

My first thoughts when I came to St. Andrew's were not about figuring out how I would define and come to understand myself in a new place with new people, but instead about how these new people would define me. I was more worried about how to fit in, and did not realize I was about to embark on an incredible journey of self-understanding and a much deeper and more compassionate understanding of others.

As I learned pretty quickly, this School is filled with a passion for activism. (We are taught and allowed and encouraged to be focused on causes greater than ourselves.) This was so liberating! I joined Girls Collaborative, and while I knew I had always considered myself a feminist, being surrounded by a group of women so passionate for themselves empowered me. For the first time in my life, I was having deep conversations about important issues.

There have been so many experiences at St. Andrew's that have changed and defined my understanding of my identity since my sophomore year. Going to the Women's March this year was one of them. The thing that struck me most was the diverse lives of the speakers. Each woman had a different story, a different experience, and a different message they were trying to get across. Yet despite these differences, we all came together to support one another in an expression of self-love and acceptance.

Part of what makes our experience at St. Andrew's so special is opportunities like this. I hope you all continue to push yourself to keep thinking about what makes you, you—but more importantly, that you continue to have the courage to find your own voice and acceptance of yourself while also understanding the needs, fears, and uniqueness of others.

Camille Seeley '17

When I first came to St. Andrew's as a freshman, I was incredibly eager to engage in deep and sophisticated discussions concerning race and the realities of racism.... St. Andrew's felt like the place where I could finally engage in these discussions in a community as open-minded and eager as I thought I was... However, I soon felt that there was this implicit message that they were only for people who had gone to conferences, or who were involved in diversity groups, or those who had been identified by faculty as having the potential for understanding the complexity of those issues. I felt isolated from the topics I was passionate about.

In the winter of my sophomore year at St. Andrew's, a group of students wanted to attend a march in Washington, D.C. protesting police brutality. The trip was open to anyone who wanted to attend. As soon as I heard about the opportunity, I already had my mind made up. There was no decision to make. I was going.... I've always been someone who knows what they aspire to do but struggles to put her aspirations and hopes into action. I saw this march as my chance to do this—an opportunity to share my voice and my stance. I could finally become a part of the interests I had felt so isolated from. I was going to be present and active in the movement rather than logically discussing the issues in a controlled classroom environment. That decision marked a critical moment for me. That day at the march I found the will to do what was important to me without having worrying about others' permission.

After the march, I found the confidence to get involved in the diversity education programs here. I stopped waiting around for a formal invitation at the table, and instead I pulled up a chair.

Everyone here has the potential to make an impact - no matter how small or large. It may feel hard to find a way in or be recognized, but what I'm trying to say is that your passion and interest is enough. So, now, I look to all of you—as under-formers, rising and fellow seniors. What do you want to pursue? What is it that you want to contribute to this school? At what table will you pull up a chair?

Will Imbrie-Moore '17

You might be asking yourself: what does this privileged, white, straight male know about diversity? Well, when I came here almost four years ago and heard St. Andreans discussing the importance of diversity, I was asking myself the same question.

To answer it, I want to talk about inheritance. From the moment they are born, everyone in this country and in the world inherits the legacy of hundreds of years of their predecessors, and we inherit the privilege—or lack of privilege—that comes with it.

From kindergarten to eighth grade, I went to school with a class that was entirely white. Being surrounded almost exclusively by people who looked exactly like me was my normal... On school breaks, I visited my grandparents' house to hear my grandmother tell me, with pride, about our ancestors who fought in the American Revolution... On other breaks, we visited my mother's parents, in southern Delaware—just a few miles from Bryan Stevenson's childhood home. But for my mother growing up in the 1960s, those few miles between their neighborhoods made a world of difference. While my mother grew up with immeasurable privilege—including the privilege to come to St. Andrew's—the black community of southern Delaware was isolated and neglected.

Only now, years later, have I thought up some of the questions I should've asked my grandparents as they told me stories of my family's privileged past. How did my Revolutionary ancestors treat the Native Americans that were here before them? Would generations of Imbrie ministers have allowed people of color to pray in their churches? What about the women of my family's history—where are their stories? And the question that scares me the most: generations ago, did the Moore family of Delaware have slaves?

Those are questions that I carry with me every day as part of the legacy that is an unavoidable part of my identity—it's in my name, in how I look, and how I was raised.

It is only in accepting that privilege, and using it to lift up others, that we can leave a better, more just legacy for the future.

The first and most important thing we can do is to be someone that people of every identity know will have their backs... We can't change the legacy of injustice that precedes us, but we can use our privilege to change the present, and the future. If you're willing to be someone that underprivileged communities can count on, then maybe someday your ancestors will finally have a legacy they are proud of.