

# Youth in Front: Supporting Youth-Led Social Action

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“By the time I was fifteen years old, I had been in jail nine times.”

—Lynda Blackmon Lowery

I have been sharing that opening line from Lynda Blackmon Lowery’s memoir, *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom*, since I first heard Ms. Lowery say it last fall in Lowndes County, Alabama.

Lowery is best known as the youngest participant to have completed the three-day voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. She was near the front of the line on March 7 for the first attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, a day later known as Bloody Sunday, and she was beaten so severely she needed 35 stitches in her head. Even after that experience, she wanted to continue on the march. “I wanted Governor George Wallace to see what he had done to a 14-year-old who was no threat to nobody,” Lowery said in an interview with Facing History and Ourselves last winter.<sup>1</sup>

What is less known about Lowery’s experience, as reflected in the first line of her book, is that she was involved in a long-term strategy that involved scores of high school students participating in daily voting rights protests, with wave after wave being arrested until the jails were full. This is the context for how she was jailed nine times—as part of a coordinated effort with young people at the center advocating for voting rights.

Lowery and her peers got involved in fighting for the right to vote, even though as teenagers, they knew they would be too young to go to the polls if their efforts succeeded. But they under-

stood the power of the vote and what it represented.

When students meet Lowery in person, as happened in Memphis at the kickoff of Facing History’s student-led voting initiative in March 2018, they are drawn to her story, her vitality, and her ability to connect with them. Her story helps us convey to students the roles young people have historically played in social movements. These roles include as leaders, strategists, front-line activists, and behind-the-scenes supporters.

## Supporting Youth Leadership Today

For over 20 years, the Memphis region of Facing History and Ourselves has run a Student Leadership Group (SLG) program. What started with one high school now includes students from 17 very diverse high schools. Each year students are trained in topics that include how to facilitate difficult conversations, confront bullying and ostracism, learn from upstanders in history, and become a civically informed leader today. The highlights of each year’s program are two teach-ins in which the students lead a community-wide lesson and discussion. Recent topics have ranged from what it means to be an American and questions

about immigration, American identity, and values; the history and legacy of lynching; and most recently, Freedom Summer and the history of the struggle for Voting Rights. More about that later.

Students invite adults from their lives to the teach-in and what results is one of the most diverse cross-sections of Memphis in an intergenerational conversation. Students work together with their peers from different backgrounds to facilitate small-group discussions. The opportunity to work with Memphis students they otherwise would not get to know on such a deep level is one of the aspects of the program the students report appreciating the most.

During the 2016–2017 school year, something remarkable happened with our student leadership group that made us realize we could do more. Students in the Facing History elective course and the student leadership group at Overton High School discovered an all-but-forgotten lynching that occurred in Memphis in 1917. The students had been assigned to research what happened to African Americans when they crossed the color line. In their research, they learned that a man named Ell Persons was lynched for a murder for which there was no trial or evidence that he was involved. He was burned alive while an estimated 5,000 people watched.

When the students came to class the next day, they couldn’t let it go. They recognized why it was important that this man be remembered, why it matters to tell the truth about the past, and



Students Uniting Memphis (of Overton High School), Facing History and Ourselves, and the Shelby County Historical Commission dedicate a historic marker to commemorate E.L. Persons on the 100th anniversary of his lynching. (Anna Kathryn Word, May 21, 2017)

how it could be an important step toward greater justice and racial reconciliation. So they decided to raise awareness and money to erect a historic marker at the site of the lynching. The students worked with a variety of community organizations including Facing History and did indeed dedicate the marker on the 100th anniversary in 2017. (For more information about the students' efforts, read "Acknowledging the Past to Shape the Present," [www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-12/acknowledging-past-shape-present](http://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-12/acknowledging-past-shape-present).)

Supporting our student leaders in a specific social action campaign that included coordinating efforts with students from other schools was new to us. In the past, Facing History had helped students develop their voice, civic agency, and commitment to "choosing

to participate" in their own communities.

But what if we could do more? Based on our experience supporting students in memorializing E.L. Persons, we knew we were in a position to help students work as a collective toward a common goal. We also knew that as an organization that teaches civics, we had an opportunity to help students learn more about the democratic process in a unique way—connecting history and youth leadership in the past to participating in democracy today.

### A Youth-Led Voting Initiative

Which brings us back to Lynda Lowery, who helped us kick-off our student-led voting initiative in March 2018. At the time of the kickoff, we knew three things:

1. The initiative would focus on increasing voting participation.

Whether that meant reducing barriers to voting or registering new voters, we didn't yet know. Ultimately, the goal would be to focus on one aspect of voter engagement.

2. Students would come up with the strategy and tactics, and once the overall plan was conceptualized, it would allow for student voice, leadership, and creativity throughout the process.
3. It would be non-partisan and not endorse any political candidates.

The April SLG teach-in that followed this kick-off meeting focused on voting rights, as a way to both share the history and provide a community forum to identify the issues related to voting that most resonated with participants. Students led



Students from public, religious, and private high schools met in Memphis for the Student Leadership Group conference in August 2018. ©Focht

an investigation of Freedom Summer and brainstormed the barriers to voting and the root causes. After exploring why people don't vote, students then asked participants to identify the issue they would advocate for through voting or other means, in order to understand why people *do* vote. Education equity, combating racism, and juvenile justice were the top priorities.

During this period, our staff also met with activists and organizations in Memphis working on increasing voting, so that we could better understand the ongoing efforts and the resources that might be available to students. Part of this exploration allowed us to think about what kind of impact students could have in one semester. We soon realized that many groups focus on voter registration, yet we knew that registered voters don't always vote. So we made

the decision that—however the students decided to go about it—the overall goal would be to *re-engage* voters: to target people who are eligible and registered to vote but who have not been voting.

### Planning the First Student Gathering

Each year, Facing History convenes the student leadership group in August during the first week of school. We wanted to have the voter re-engagement initiative's basic framework ready to introduce to this group of 60 students, so we invited interested SLG members to participate in a July think tank to prepare for the convening.

The Youth Participatory Politics Research Network, led by Danielle Allen at Harvard, was a great source of information for us. The Ten Questions for Changemakers became our guid-

ing framework (see the sidebar on p. 258), which we planned to apply both in exploring historical case studies of youth activism and guiding campaign development.

For two days in mid-July, we brought together 10 students, an SLG alumnus who had been involved in the Ell Persons marker project, a Facing History SLG teacher sponsor from one of the participating high schools, and several staff. We intentionally created a safe and reflective space where staff, teachers, and students participated together, while reiterating that the students would ultimately decide the strategy and tactics for the campaign within the parameter of voter re-engagement.

We began the think tank by exploring case studies of youth activism and the historic struggle for voting rights, using the Ten Questions for Changemakers.

And then we applied what we had learned to the question of how students could go about re-engaging voters. We started by considering the reasons why people don't vote. After a close read of a report from The Democracy Project, "Reversing a Crisis in Confidence," a bipartisan report from the University of Pennsylvania that highlights why people are disengaged from voting and the political process, we found that issues such as racism, institutions fail us, and big money in politics are key factors.<sup>2</sup> This generated a robust discussion among the students.

Sage, a senior at Central High School, noted that people often talk about how they don't like the choices of candidates running for office so they don't vote. She posited that if more people voted they could actually get better candidates and ensure they would be people who would work for them.

James, a senior at Kingsbury, talked about the importance of listening and developing relationships. He noted that people will feel more committed and invested if you spend the time to get to

know them and listen. He compared it to the people who come to your door trying to get you to go to church: You might say you will go, just to make them go away, because you don't really know them or feel obligated. But if they take the time to connect and listen, then it is harder to not follow through because you don't want to let them down.

By the end of the July think tank, students came up with their strategy to re-engage voters: Persuasion. Their key tactics would be personal relationships, education, and FOMO (fear of missing out). The name of the campaign would be Engage Memphis, with social media handles #Engage901Vote (901 is the local area code) and @engagememphis.

On August 10th, 60 Facing History student leaders from public, religious, and private high schools attended the SLG conference, where their peers introduced the Engage Memphis campaign and they learned about the history of voting rights through the Freedom Summer case study. The grounding in historical context was inspiring. One student reflected, "I was struck by how

people can see past themselves to help others"; and another noted, "There is true strength in numbers and unity."

Using the Ten Questions helped shape and sharpen students' action plans as they considered, in their school groups, "Why does it matter to me?" and "How do we make it easy for others to get involved?" As they move into the fall, these school-based SLGs will use a students-only online platform from Facing History to collaborate across the city and get resources related to the campaign.

Because we wanted to help students track and quantify their efforts, and concretely garner commitment from the people they were persuading, we created a voter pledge which students will track online, tying back to the key question, "How do we make it easy and engaging for others to get involved?"

People can complete the pledge in three ways—a paper handout, an online form, or through a QR code on social media, and they will be encouraged to share that they took the pledge on social media.

## Ten Questions for Changemakers

Political philosopher Danielle Allen describes democracy as "a combination of ideals and institutions that work to put power in the hands of ordinary people." Allen suggests that when people choose to take action to strengthen their communities, they should consider 10 important questions. She and her colleagues at Harvard's Youth Participatory Politics Research Network write: "Whether you're creating your first Facebook page to support a cause you care about, or seeking to engage your friends, associates, and even strangers in a new platform aimed to achieve civic ends, these 10 questions will help frame your decisions. Use them to share your strategy and check whether you're doing everything in your power to achieve maximum impact."<sup>1</sup>

### Ten Questions for Participatory Politics

1. Why does it matter to me?
2. How much [about myself] should I share?
3. How do I make it about more than myself?
4. Where do we start?
5. How can we make it easy and engaging?
6. How do [we] get wisdom from crowds?
7. How do [we] handle the downside of crowds?
8. Does raising voices count as [civic and] political action?
9. How do we get from voice to change?
10. How can we find allies?

#### Note

1. "Why the 10 Questions?" Harvard University Youth Participatory Politics Research Network, <https://yppactionframe.fas.harvard.edu/action-frame-0>.

## VOTER PLEDGE: CHOOSE TO VOTE

I choose to vote.  
I choose to vote for the youth.  
I choose to vote for my community.  
I choose to vote for a future where  
all can thrive.  
I choose to vote for my parents,  
neighbors, and future generations.  
I choose to use my voice to  
empower those who cannot speak  
for themselves.

**I choose to vote because my  
vote is my voice.**

### Putting Plans into Action

The students formally launched the campaign on September 28th at the Engage Memphis Youth Summit (which was sponsored by Facing History in partnership with BRIDGES, a youth leadership organization). About 300 students have now joined the campaign to connect issues the youth care about to re-engage voters. Facing History also facilitated a teacher workshop to introduce the his-

tory and civic participation lessons that we used in the student convenings, so that teachers can engage still more students in thinking about the historic fight for the right to vote and the importance of participating in democracy today.

This project has been an iterative process—starting with a small group of students, and sharing the same content and concepts with larger and still larger groups, fine-tuning and learning as we go. Students have been our teachers in this journey. We were heartened by how many students have already begun to think differently about the importance of voting and how they can get involved. Many expressed similar sentiments:

“I came in thinking that voting was not as important, and I am leaving with a better understanding of its impact.”

“I came in thinking that voting wasn’t really important to me. I leave thinking our vote matters.”

“I came in thinking that voting

didn’t apply to me because I’m too young. I’m leaving feeling like I need to start thinking about voting because it’s important to my future.”

**“I came thinking this would be hard. I leave knowing it’s possible.”**

#### Note

1. “Why I Marched for Civil Rights at 15 with Martin Luther King, Jr.,” an interview with Lynda Blackmon Lowery by Stacey Perlman, *Facing Today*, A Facing History Blog, <http://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/why-i-marched-for-civil-rights-at-15-with-martin-luther-king-jr>.
2. The Democracy Project, “Reversing a Crisis in Confidence,” *Penn Today*, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/democracy-project-reversing-crisis-confidence>.

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## Facing History’s Approach to Civic Education



Founded in 1976, Facing History and Ourselves is dedicated to providing teachers with professional development, best-in-class educational resources, and follow-up support in order to help students become upstanders: students who have chosen to be civically engaged, to teach and lead their peers, and to have a voice on contemporary issues. As students engage with Facing History, they learn to conduct rigorous investigations of difficult histories and address complex topics at the core of our national civic dialogue, including the rise of hate groups, the dangers of stereotyping, and the fragility of democracy itself. Facing History’s approach helps teachers to promote academic and civic outcomes through a pedagogy that combines intellectual rigor, emotional engagement, and ethical reflection. For more information about Facing History’s professional learning opportunities, educator resources, and research base, please visit [facinghistory.org](http://facinghistory.org).