

Thoughts on the Duty and Power of Citizenship

Dear Educator,

The American stories that move us start with ordinary people who are compelled to change their country: a group of shopkeepers and blacksmiths who met at Liberty Trees to overthrow an empire; a young lawyer from Springfield who saved the Union and freed a people; a group of women who said, “I’m as smart as he is, so I should vote,” and revised the Constitution; a seamstress who refused to move and thus launched the civil rights movement. Today, many young people who love their country are giving up their summer vacations and spring breaks to help rebuild towns devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

In America, change doesn’t start in Washington, DC; ordinary citizens bring it to Washington, DC. This is what I have learned in my own life—lasting change starts from the bottom, not the top.

*The most important political office is that of private citizen.
—Justice Louis Brandeis*

When I was twenty-three years old, I got this crazy idea that I wanted to be a community organizer. It was an idea that came from the stories my mother and my grandparents would tell me about the civil rights movement—stories about young people sitting at lunch counters, riding on buses, and marching for freedom. I thought that this could be my way to help fight the injustices and the inequalities that still exist in our country.

I wrote letters to every organization in the country, and finally a small group of churches in Chicago gave me a job organizing neighborhoods devastated by steel-plant closings in the early 1980s. The churches paid me just \$12,000 a year plus \$1,000 to buy a beat-up car.

I spent weeks organizing our very first community meeting about gang violence. We invited the police. We made phone calls, went to churches, and passed out flyers. The night of the meeting, we arranged rows and rows of chairs. We waited. Then a group of older people walked into the hall, and an old lady asked, “Is this where the bingo game is?”

The meeting was a disaster, and the volunteers were ready to quit. I looked outside and saw some young boys playing in a vacant lot, tossing stones at a boarded-up apartment building. I turned to the volunteers, and I said to them, “Before you quit, I want you to answer one question. Who will fight for those boys if not us? Who will give them a fair shot if we leave?” We didn’t reach every child, but we did help some.

The American story shows us that citizens are the catalyst for change. These are ordinary people who long for something better. Every day, this is the power that you as teachers hold in the classroom. You have the responsibility and privilege of guiding our young people to understand that challenges are met and injustices overcome because citizens just like them are standing up and demanding change. If you inspire them to act, then America will be transformed for the better, and the role of citizen will remain the most important political office in America.

This is what we can teach our young people together. Let’s turn the page and begin.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Barack Obama", written in a cursive style.

*Barack Obama is a U.S. Senator from Illinois and the author of *The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams from My Father*.*