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Why are the Florida students leading on guns? Because kids make great activists.

They have moral authority and won't accept the status quo.

By Sally Kohn February 23 Follow @sallykohn

Sally Kohn is a CNN political commentator and author of the forthcoming book "The Opposite Of Hate."

In the late 1960s, Fred Hampton rose to prominence as the leader of the Black Panther Party in Chicago. A powerful speaker and charismatic figure, Hampton racked up groundbreaking and concrete accomplishments early on. He negotiated a peace accord between the city's violent and powerful street gangs; started a program for neighborhoods to monitor police abuse; and o[illegible]eized community projects including five branches of the Panther's Free Breakfast for Children program, a community medical center and door-to-door health services across Chicago. On Dec. 4, 1969, when Chicago authorities working with the FBI conducted a heavily armed raid of his apartment at 4 a.m., Hampton was sleeping. When the government shot and killed Fred Hampton, he was just 21 years old.

There's a whiff of surprise and condescension in the way that some Americans, in the media and in general, are responding to the wave of student activism in the wake of the school shooting in Parkland, Fla. Writing in the New Yorker, for instance, Troy Patterson described the Stoneman Douglas student activists as "telegenic" and "polished" and "articulate" and suggested that one of the students, David Hogg, "offered a media presence without exact precedent." Which is of course to an extent true — this moment is unlike any other in the history of the gun debate. "In the long annals of American mass shootings, it's difficult to find a corollary to the students' immediate and organized action," agrees Benjamin Hart of New York Magazine. Yet what is also true is that we as a nation tend to suffer from a profound myopia with respect to the history that has come before. And within that much longer record, the Stoneman Douglas students are following in the footsteps of a long history of youth leadership in movements for social change — leadership that has historically been both bold and successful.

For instance, in 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks — at age 42 — would refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, 15-[illegible]-old Claudette Colvin did it first. Colvin paid her bus fare and sat down in the "whites only" section and, when ordered by the bus driver to get up, refused. Police boarded the bus, handcuffed Colvin and threw her in jail. It was Colvin who paved the way for what would end up being a powerfully effective spark in the history of the civil rights movement. But as Colvin explained years later, NAACP leaders ultimately decided to have Parks replicate Colvin's tactic because the older leaders wanted "an adult"

as the figurehead of the moment. "They didn't think teenagers would be reliable," Colvin theorized. And yet it's precisely because of their youth that leaders like Colvin are often movement innovators.

A precondition to making change in the world around us is noticing injustice in the way things are and refusing to accept that this is the way they must be. That restless rebelliousness that has left so many parents and teachers frustrated is also the essential superpower of youth. Adults who are too often accustomed in acquiescing to the status quo are the ones who end up schooled by young people who notice the absurdities of flagrant injustice and dare to ask "Why?" In addition, young people are important avatars for our moral core, for the values we aspire to live up to. We want to save the planet for them. And make college more affordable for them. And it's one thing when an adult evokes the idea that legislators and voters should act in ways that will make their children and grandchildren proud of them. It's infinitely more powerful when those children and grandchildren show up and voice those demands.

There are other reasons young people often make effective activists. They have a good amount of free time, are willing to be creative with their tactics and try new things, and are skilled in cutting-edge methods of communication — as we're certainly seeing now with the Parkland students on social media.

It's for these reasons that young people have indeed been effective leaders in movements for justice throughout history. In 1903, it was 400 children who staged a three-week march from Philadelphia to Theodore Roosevelt's summer home in New York to bring attention to the abuses of child labor. British feminist Emmeline Pankhurst was 14 years old when she first joined the suffragette movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was 25 when she attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, which set the stage for the Seneca Falls Convention she organized eight years later in New York. Stephen Biko was 21 when he fou l the South African Students' Organization to combat apartheid. Gandhi was 24 when he founded the Natal Indian Congress. The opposition to the Vietnam War was led by students. Pioneering gay and transgender rights activist Sylvia Rivera was 18 when she helped lead the Stonewall riots. In the 1960s, the Red Power movement was a vocal and active American Indian rights organization led entirely by youth.

The Little Rock Nine, who integrated a high school in Arkansas in 1957, were high school students. Ruby Bridges faced daily protests and threats when she integrated an all-white elementary school in Louisiana when she was just 6 years old. In 1960, at age 20, Diane Nash helped conceive of and organize sit-ins across America. Nash then organized the Freedom Rides for voting rights with, among others, a young John Lewis. When Lewis had his skull fractured by Alabama State Troopers during the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, he was 25 years old. And when Martin Luther King Jr. led the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, he was just 26. That they were willing to take such risks, and keep literally and figuratively marching indignantly forward in the face of them, was undoubtedly also a province of their youth.

Still today we see young people constantly leading the way for justice — whether they're Black Lives Matter activists or the "dreamers" pushing the fight for immigration reform. So it's startling to see some react to the activism of the Stoneman Douglas students as though it's something new. On Twitter, activist Bree Newsome referred to the "amount of state violence and police repression that Black youth & student organizers have faced in the past 5 years." In her thread, Newsome wrote it's "interes g to observe the difference in public reaction when student protesters are predominately Black & speaking out against racism."

As Newsome also says, that's not a criticism of the Parkland kids but of the dynamic at play. The Stoneman Douglas youth got media attention because violence was committed against them. Black and Latino youth are not getting that same attention. And in fact, though black youth organized peaceful protest after protest in Ferguson, Mo., Baltimore and elsewhere, the media only covered their grievances when a fraction of the protesters turned violent. This feels like an extension of what is often called "missing white girl syndrome" — how the media, and by extension American society in general, disproportionately pays more attention to violence committed *against* white people while disproportionately shining a light on violence committed *by* people of color — despite the fact that white people commit most crime. We also seem to celebrate mostly white affluent youth leaders more, too.

None of this is a reason to discount the profound and powerful leadership of the Stoneman Douglas students, but rather reason to put their leadership in context as continuous with a great history of youth leadership for justice past and present, leadership that has and continues to make a profound and positive impact on the world around us whether we see it or not. While the right has made a point of attacking young Black Lives Matter activists in racialized terms (i.e., "thugs") and young undocumented activists in anti-immigrant terms ("illegals"), the best attack they can muster against the #NeverAgain leaders is that they're kids. As if that means they're stupid or reckless or disqualified for leadership. In reality, they are unfettered by the stupid complacency of the adults in charge and their reckless disregard for gun violence, conditions that should disqualify *them* for leadership. In the history of social change in America and around the world, youth has always been a blessing — the blessing to believe that another way is possible and to insist on change, in spite of any barriers. Yes, kids can be impulsive. And when that impulse is toward more fairness and peace and liberty for all, that impulse is not only just but timeless.

"There is a certain enthusiasm in liberty, that makes human nature rise above itself in acts of bravery and heroism," Alexander Hamilton once wrote. He was 20 years old.

61 Comments

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