



Celebrating



## #8 The March to Equality

by Bob Kann

*Through this project, history came alive for my third graders. We learned the story of Milwaukee's fair housing movement, and prepared artwork for A@L's Gallery Night and Day exhibit. We attended community events and my students were able to shake hands with former NAACP commandos and hug Ms. Margaret Rozga, civil rights activist. It was amazing to experience this history with them. I am forever grateful... This has been the single most meaningful project I have taught in 21 years.*

*-Edith Dennison, Doerfler Elementary School*

How do citizens work for change when faced with injustice? Beginning on August 28, 1967, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council and Commandos, along with community leaders and supporters, marched for over 200 consecutive nights to demand an end to housing segregation in Milwaukee. This movement led to the passage of the Fair Housing Act on April 11, 1968, which protects people from discrimination when buying or renting a home.

Fifty years later, community organizers and leaders planned a series of events throughout Milwaukee to commemorate the Fair Housing marches. Arts @ Large chose to participate in the tributes by hosting a related exhibition at their gallery which would evolve from the activities of several artists who would work with students in four Milwaukee schools. Artist educator Jeff Zimpel was hired to oversee the project and co-curate the exhibit with high school students. Jeff attended several of the planning meetings for the 50th anniversary, studied the Fair Housing and Civil Rights Movements, and spoke with educators and activists to educate himself about the marches and their historical context. He synthesized what he had learned to organize the A@L project and exhibit around four themes:

The following are excerpts from an interview with Artist Jeff Zimpel.

**The Lines:** I really saw the project as breaking down into the line. There was a lot of technical information about redlining, and about racially restrictive covenants and how the lines between protesters and anti-protesters, lines between neighborhoods in the city, lines that came about like a freeway carving through a city and what that does to create some lines that may be invisible but were incredibly meaningful.

**The Words:** You had these charismatic speakers like Vel Phillips and James Groppi and then some of the student organizers who had practice{speaking}. And the age-old traditional protests songs, so lyrics became a very powerful part of this. So another category was the word.

**The March:** The March would describe the importance of 200 Nights and Days of marching and what the effects of that were on the city and also the getting up doing it.

The Connections: And finally, {the connection} what this project was bringing to the table. Our specific exhibition at Arts @ Large was the connection. The A@L team wanted me to co-curate this project with students, and so on top of the schoolwork that we were doing in different classrooms, they wanted me to work with students after school in the A@L space to co-curate the exhibition that would happen much later on.

The connection was the bringing together of the work from the first three categories and turning it into an exhibition.

### The Lines

Bayview High School freshmen worked with a social studies teacher on the theme of “lines” as it related to the March to Equality. Jeff’s goal was to teach students how racial tension and racial complexity in the city were related to discriminatory housing practices and somehow to synthesize what they’d learned and express it artistically with “lines” tying their learning together. He concluded that embroidery was the optimal the arts medium to use because it’s made up out of lines and can readily make imagery come alive.

With the help of a skilled artist working in embroidery along with Arts Integration Support Teacher and screen printing expert Steve VandeZande, students would translate their ideas into an embroidery artifact. In the course of the project, students learned that their classmates traveled to Bayview High School from all over Milwaukee and some even from beyond Milwaukee’s city limits. Combining what they learned about redlining {the discriminatory practice of denying services (typically financial) to residents of certain areas based on their race or ethnicity} with their own geographic diversity, they screen printed a map of Milwaukee County onto white T-shirts. This was the base for the embroidery. They had located their neighborhoods on the map, and their embroidery ventured out on that map from the location of their neighborhood to other parts of the T-shirt. Students added logos for their neighborhoods, Black Lives Matter symbols, scenes from their homes, and other features reflecting their thoughts on their lives and how it connected to the redlining history project. The embroidery was a way to imagine those fixed toxic housing lines and give them a way to weave them into something different. These T-shirts were hung on a wall and displayed at the gallery exhibit.

Jeff commented, "What was specifically exciting for me is when we translated their ideas into an embroidery artifact. What was fascinating was that embroidery is such a such an intimate, quiet, slow process, especially for people who haven't done it before. They were basically processing this stuff out loud in their small clusters of embroiderers. ...The Milwaukee County map becomes almost like a strange line grid, and the lines are a very symbolic way to understand something as complex and abstract as a city. And that actually is part of the history of why things like redlining came about. And so embroidery became this way of kind of taking hold of lines, and then spinning them into something creative, something hopeful, something empowering."



Another part of the process was for the Bayview students to begin a dialogue with local representatives by writing letters to them throughout the project. The students each identified their local representatives. Because students came from all over the city, many different representatives were included. Just as protestors from the March to Equality voiced concerns with government officials, the Bayview students would voice their questions to the representatives about the history of the March to Equality, how the redlining impacted their neighborhoods then and now, and how the march ultimately affected the entire city. Instead of sending these letters to the representatives, however, the students understood that their letters were meant to be displayed at the exhibition at the A@L Gallery. Representatives would be invited to attend the event.

### The Words

The “words” category was assigned to third-grade teacher Edith Denniston’s classroom from Doerfler Elementary School. Jeff explained why the “words” theme was explored in this class, “... Because words are their whole life as third graders. They're starting to really get a handle on vocabulary and the power of vocabulary, and they're always ready and willing to tell you about the words that they think are important that they're learning.”

Jeff decided that song lyrics would be a way to breathe life into learning for students about the history of the March to Equality because the music of the times was so topical and so charged that it might be a way invite the third graders into the history through the power of words and how by putting them to music, people can be moved.

Students began exploring words through a kind of typography where they’d take a word like “march” and turn it into bubble letters, a lettering style where the letters are enlarged and look puffy and bloated like bubbles. Then while listening to different songs from social justice movements, Jeff asked them to use their pencils, colored pencils, and markers to make the word “move” according to what they were hearing. Students responded by added legs to the drawings of the words and suddenly the word “march” actually looked like marchers. They subsequently played with other words related to the March to Equality like freedom and justice. Jeff posted their drawings on the walls of the classroom, and the students would have “gallery walks” at the end of every session discussing what they were viewing.

Jeff and the teacher helped the students connect the meanings of the words to their own lives in a kind of personal reflection process. Through the course of the project, Edith Dennison also read students a children’s book about Father James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council, which was used to teach them about the history of the March to Equality. Students would later relate to Jeff what they were hearing and learning from the book, and, with preparation from their teacher, ask him questions prompted by listening to the book.

Early in the process, the students latched onto the song “We Shall Not Be Moved.” This was an important and powerful song of the Civil Rights Movement, and very accessible to the students. The students sang the song while working with Jeff, and often sang the song while he was gone. The song was such a big hit that the teacher asked Jeff to introduce them to other social justice songs from the sixties, which he did. Eventually, it was decided that they would perform “We Shall Not Be Moved” for the Gallery Night opening of the March to Equality exhibition. For several months and with guidance from their music teacher, they practiced singing it. They sang and were accompanied by a Djembe drum to create a beat for the song.

Jeff had informed the third graders that he was also working with several groups of high school students on the March to Equality project. The younger students were very curious about what the older students were doing, and so Jeff showed them some of the self-portraits students from Escuela Verde High School had created. When the third graders saw the portraits, they exclaimed, “Why aren’t we doing that? We should be doing that. I want to do that.” Although Jeff initially had thought the skills required to create the self-portraits were beyond the third graders, but he reconsidered, had them make their own self-portraits weaving their typography into these creations, and decided it would be cool to incorporate these portraits into the gallery exhibit hanging next to the oil portraits the high school students created.

Their classroom began to look like an artists’ workshop as the third graders employed multimedia to create their self-portraits. Each session, designated student photographers documented the process. They’d photograph their peers writing out the words like “freedom” and adding flourishes to it. They’d give a memory card with their photographs to other students who were operating a projector. Using Adobe Illustrator, they’d project the image of their classmates on a wall that had been prepped with paper. They’d trace each image so that after several months of working together, every student’s image had been traced on paper. Students took their own images back, and they added words, flourishes, and illustrations to create unbelievable self-portraits.

The self-portraits were informed by a portrait of Vel Phillips, one of the leaders of the March to Equality who Jeff had painted and whose painting hung in the classroom throughout the project as a model for what the students were trying to create. The portrait was filled with typography and had a logo of the 50th anniversary of the March to Equality. Jeff had previously corresponded with Vel Phillips and saved the note she had sent him. She had a beautiful handwriting, and Jeff projected the way she wrote “onward” onto this portrait he had made of her.

The students were “totally inspired” by this monumental figure. They wanted to know if she would be present at the Gallery opening (which they would attend), and Jeff explained she had passed away. They were intrigued by her handwriting because it was such expressive cursive. This inspired several students to be very thoughtful about what how their own handwriting would appear on the portraits. These students were exploring how they could communicate their ideas through cursive and printing.



The third graders also were asked to reflect upon what they were doing throughout the project. They wrote about what they'd learned from the book on Father Groppi and what they were learning about the lyrics of the protest songs. They wrote about justice, injustice, and freedom. They wanted people to see what they'd written, and so their writings were displayed at the gallery exhibition right next to letters from marchers who had participated in the March to Equality. The third graders had become a part of this history.

### The March

Students from Escuela Verde High School who were taking a class ("workshop") on social activism led by advisor Zaynab Baalbaki were assigned the "march" theme. This yearlong workshop addressed the school's focus on social justice and challenged students to activate themselves to fight for justice in their community. Through the workshop, students learned the role of youth in social movements and the power of their own voices. The students had studied the history of marches and different methodologies for protests, and so were particularly well-suited to engage in the March to Equality project. Ms. Baalbaki collaborated with Jeff Zimpel and the students throughout the project.

During the spring of 2018, Jeff had attended a photography exhibit at the Haggerty Museum called "Resistance, Protest, and Resilience." This exhibit featured photographs from select twentieth-century movements and events that triggered important social and political changes. Nearly a quarter of the photos displayed were from the fair housing marches in Milwaukee. Inspired by the exhibit, Jeff decided the Escuela Verde students would create photo essays for their projects and eventually the A@L Gallery exhibit.

Each student was given a camera to use for the entirety of the project. Over a period of several months, they attended photography workshops learning how to compose photographs, how to be "invisible" during an event to allow them to position themselves close to a subject, and they studied the lives and techniques of photographers who were featured in the Haggerty Museum exhibit. Students began to photograph their meetings together and their lives outside of school to try to capture the climate of the times in which they were living.

Jeff took students on a field trip to see the photography exhibit he had attended at the Haggerty Museum. Fred Reed, one of the NAACP commandos who had protected the activists during the March to Equality and who was one of the featured subjects in the Haggerty photography exhibit, met with students at the Haggerty in the gallery where he often was pictured in the photos. The students were inspired by the photographs and their meeting with Fred Reed. With the skills they'd acquired in the photography workshops and inspiration from the Haggerty experience, they were primed to compose photo essays that would tell their own stories as they related to the March to Equality.

## The Connections

The culmination of the project was an exhibition at the A@L gallery bringing together the work of the participating students from Doerfler Elementary School, and Bayview and Escuela Verde High Schools. Their creations would be interspersed with photographs, artifacts, and music related to the March to Equality. To create the exhibit, Jeff co-curated the project with 10 students from Escuela Verde who met with him weekly after school at the A@L gallery. Brianna Seipel, A@L Communications and Curation Specialist also played a significant role in teaching the students about the logistics of setting up a show, exhibition design, gallery layout, marketing, and visitor experience.

In one of the early planning sessions, the students studied the portraits of President Barack Obama and Michele Obama, which had recently been unveiled in Washington DC. They explored questions like “How did the artist solve the problem of incorporating crucial ideas into what would be a historical portrait? Why would somebody choose to paint in oil? How long do oil paintings last if they are well preserved?” The students decided that in addition to planning the exhibit, they would contribute their own artifacts. Stunned by the notion that an oil painting could last 1,000 years, they decided they would create oil paintings, too.

Rather than having Jeff teach them how to paint, however, they insisted he paint alongside them. In the collective spirit they had developed working together over several months, the students and Jeff worked on several paintings together so that the result was that each painting was the composite work of the entire group. Jeff later characterized the results as “mind blowing.” He described one of the paintings as follows:

"One of the students had a pretty interesting background. She's half Native American and half Puerto Rican, so she took symbols from both. Behind the portrait that takes up most of the canvas, there's a little icon of a paw print related to her indigenous roots peeking behind her head, and there are slight references to the Puerto Rican flag. And peeking through the right-hand corner is the LGBTQ flag. It creates this vibrancy around her, but it's also loaded with what she's thinking about and what she thinks matters over time."

Informed by their review of the work on the March to Equality from the third graders and high school students, the “connections” group expanded their vision for the exhibit to include saying “thank you” to the activists from the March to Equality for their determination to fight for justice. Hence, paintings and archival photographs of the marchers were central to the exhibition to recognize their efforts.

They also decided to impress upon targeted elected officials the importance of the fair housing protests and highlight its relevance for education today. They wrote letters to Mayor Tom Barrett and Walker’s Point Alderman Jose Perez describing what they’d been working on and why the March to Equality should be remembered.



## The Exhibit\*\*

The exhibit at the Arts @ Large Gallery was called “Recognition & Re-Ignition: A 50-year look at Milwaukee Youth, Leadership, and the Spirit of Protest.” Opening Night was April 20, 2018. The exhibit featured the vision and insight of today’s MPS students, who recognized this history through 4 different lenses: The Lines, The Words, The March, and The Connections. From the history and lingering imprint of racial restricted covenants to the importance of photojournalism and protest songs, the student-artists investigated the essential people, places, and ideas through a wide range of styles and technique.

In the exhibit, the young artists displayed their understanding of this history by comparing it to their own times and lives. A re-ignition of the spirit of protest was displayed in the form of artwork, performance, and installation.

The embroidered shirts created by the Bayview High School students were hung up on one wall. If you’d looked across the room, you’d see a sea of white shirts with little spots of color peppered throughout them. It drew the viewers in for closer examination where they’d find powerful symbols communicating the students’ reflections about the history of redlining and how it related to their lives today.

Music had been an integral component of the project. It often served as a backdrop in classrooms when they were working with Jeff. In this spirit, songs of justice provided the background ambiance during the exhibition opening. Throughout the project, students from the three participating schools had contributed to a combined playlist of social justice songs which also was displayed at the exhibit.

The response to the third graders rendition of “We Shall Not Be Moved” was electric and exuberant with loud cheering and scores of recording devices capturing the moment. They performed on a stage next to another wall in the gallery which displayed their self-portraits and their reflections on what they’d learned in the project.

The self-portraits created by the students from Escuela Verde were situated next to the portraits of the younger students. iPad stands displayed the high school students’ photo essays. These connected some of the historical photographs in the exhibit with the photographs the students took of themselves as they were preparing the exhibit.

The Jewish Museum Milwaukee contributed a redline map of Milwaukee which also was displayed. The daughter of one of the marchers from the 1967 march provided the NAACP Youth Council shirt her father had worn during the march. The Wisconsin Historical Society contributed a shirt a commando had worn during the movement. This was a particularly powerful visual because, in contrast to the white embroidered T-shirts displayed by the Bayview High School students, this T-shirt was torn and ragged. Since marchers had been beaten up and targets of thrown objects during the protests, these shirts were dramatic wearable historical artifacts.

The Gallery Night opening attracted a large and diverse crowd. Margaret Rozga, an activist in the March to Equality, was the first of many speakers who spoke about the importance of those marches. The students and their families wandered throughout the gallery as did some of the marchers from the 1967 march and their families.

The impact of the learning and the activities of the students who'd participated in the March to Equality project were powerfully displayed during the evening. They'd acquired a deep admiration for the courage and commitment of the marchers. At Gallery Night, the older students showed their gratitude through videos thanking the activists from the march, videos they did on their own rather than something that had been suggested by their teachers or Jeff Zimpel. The younger students couldn't find the right words to express their appreciations, so they simply hugged the adults they admired. One of the many impacts of the sacrifices of the Fair Housing marchers was to touch the hearts and spirits of another generation of Milwaukee youth fifty years later.

\*\*Students from Bradley Technical High School also were supposed to contribute to the exhibit, and so studied poetry with artist Ed Wingard. For various reasons, this project did not work out. However, one of the students showed up unexpectedly at the gallery opening and read his poem to the audience.





## About the Author

Bob Kann grew up in Skokie, Illinois, but it happened so long ago that he remembers nothing of the event.

As a child, he loved sports above all else and could perform a standing back flip by the age of nine. His mother worried that reading nothing but sports books would stunt Bob's intellectual growth, but his older brother assured her that he would eventually read books on other topics (he did). Little did any of them know that he also would write several books including a book about a baseball player and another about an athlete who competed in several sports. Listening to his father's tales about growing up during the Depression, driving at the age of twelve to make deliveries for his father's store, and other stories of the south side of Chicago planted the seeds for Bob's later passion for storytelling.

Bob attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, became a teacher, received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later a Professor of Education at UW-Parkside and UW-Stevens Point. Shortly after becoming a professor, Bob realized he liked making his students laugh more than he liked teaching them. He recognized that what he wanted to next undertake was simultaneously entertaining children and adults since this seemed limitlessly interesting and creative.

In 1982, Bob became a storyteller, juggler, and magician who began performing for children and families throughout the United States. In 1985, he realized that being a former teacher/professor turned entertainer, he had unique insights into the relationship between entertainment and education. Hence, he began teaching graduate classes and presenting keynotes and workshops for educators and nonprofit organizations on topics related to humor, storytelling, creativity, and motivation. (Coincidentally, A@L CEO Emeritus contracted with Bob to perform at the PumpHouse Regional Arts Center in LaCrosse, WI at the beginning of his career. Bob continued providing great educational programming at various organizations where Sullivan worked and subsequently was one of the first artists to work with Arts @ Large in 2001.)

As a free-lancer for more than thirty years, Bob has developed many interests which have led him to produce storytelling tapes and write books for children, design curriculum for teachers, collect and write historical stories for nonprofit organizations, and apply his research skills as a consultant for social service agencies.

Bob believes it's easier to climb the ladder of success when it's lying flat on the ground. He usually can be found reading his favorite book on levitation. He simply can't put it down.