Thematic Unit: Democracy and Civic Engagement

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Introduction to our Thematic Unit: Democracy and Civic Engagement

Voice of Witness (VOW) is developing programming focusing on Navigating Democracy: Resistance and Belonging through Storytelling. As part of this theme, we're introducing a curricular unit on democracy and civic engagement.

Democracy is a complex concept that can raise more questions than answers for students. The goal of this unit is to provide students with an accessible way to learn more about this topic through the lens of personal narrative from a range of voices.

The first lesson gives students an opportunity to define "democracy" while activating existing knowledge, creating a collective class understanding of the topic.

The next three lessons feature oral history excerpts from the VOW book series, including *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*, *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma's Military Regime*, and *Mi María: Surviving the Storm, Voices from Puerto Rico*. The span of these stories creates a picture of democracy that goes beyond political parties or voting; this makes space for students to view democracy through the lens of community power, voice, belonging, and resistance.

The final lesson is a larger oral history project that centers student agency and civic engagement. This is a chance for students to interview community members about issues close to them. It also includes an opportunity to share their work via KQED's Youth Media Challenge.

Our hope is that this accessible, shorter-form unit can provide classrooms with a step-by-step guide to discussing this topic that goes beyond the election season. Deeper learning through personal narrative can engage students in larger themes around democracy that go beyond the textbook or ballot box and inspire them to be active participants in building a better future. This is particularly vital in the face of growing educational censorship, voter suppression, and anti-democratic efforts in the US.

With respect,
The Voice of Witness Education Team

Lesson Plan: Defining and Identifying Democracy

Time needed: 1 class period.

Materials:
- Text:
  - Dictionary
  - United Nations OHCHR: Democracy and Human Rights
- Handouts
  - Definition Squares

Objective:
- Students will create a definition of democracy that deepens their understanding of the concept as an idea and institution.

Related Curriculum Standards:
RI.9-10.2, RI.9-10.7 RI.11-12.7.; RH.9-10.3; RH.9-10.4; RH.9-10.9.

Essential Question(s):
- How do we define democracy?
- How do we recognize democracy?

Overview
In this lesson, students will use prior knowledge and research to create a definition of "democracy" that deepens their understanding of the term as a concept and an institution.

Activating Prior Knowledge (5 minutes)
Invite students to share what they already understand of the term "democracy." Write their answers on the board, encouraging the use of examples to describe what they know.
Research and Reflection (15 minutes)
Step 1: Pass out copies of the Definition Square handout along with dictionaries or a printed dictionary definition of "democracy." **Step 2:** Have students read the dictionary definition of "democracy," followed by the United Nations OHCHR page on democracy and human rights.

Step 3: In pairs or individually, students should spend time crafting a definition of "democracy" that combines their prior knowledge, the dictionary definition, and the OHCHR connection to human rights. This definition should be written in the first square.

Step 4: Students should fill out the second square using "democracy" in a sentence and share this with a partner.

Making Examples (10 minutes)

Facilitate a class discussion about what democracy looks like and common misconceptions about the term. Have students fill in the final two squares as they participate and listen to the discussion.

Examples of: Clear voting procedures, access to information, participation in civic processes
Misconceptions: The Democratic Party (many parties can be part of democracy), single power, voting as the only form of civic engagement

Discussion questions:

- What are big examples of democracy?
- What are everyday examples of democracy in action?
- What do people think is democracy, but may not be true?
- What does democracy need to thrive (be successful)?

Recognizing Democracy (10 minutes)

To provide context for the narratives included in this unit, explain to the students that the following stories are all examples of what can happen in a democratic society, or what happens when a democracy fails.

Step 1: In pairs, have students discuss their current understanding of democracy and what it looks like. Ask them to consider the following question: *How can we recognize democracy is working?*

Step 2: In pairs, have students discuss the other side: *How do we know when a democracy has failed its people?*

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Have students finish the following sentence with one word:

Democracy is _____.

Lesson Plan: Civil Rights in a Democracy

Time needed: 1 class period.

Materials:
- Text:
  - Adama Bah's narrative excerpt from *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*
  - Department of Justice: The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001
- Handouts
  - Shortlist of Civil Rights

Objective:
- Students will analyze US civil rights through the lens of a personal narrative.
- Students will be able to describe the role of civil rights in a democracy.

Related Curriculum Standards:
RH.9-10.3; RH.9-10.4; RH.9-10.9.

Essential Question(s):
- How are civil rights related to democracy?
- How does personal narrative help us understand civil rights within a democracy?

Overview
In this lesson, students will read an oral history narrative that describes an experience of civil rights being ignored or violated due to a claim of security in a democratic society. Students will have the opportunity to discuss this experience, the justifications given, and their own understanding of what can and should happen under a democracy.

Examining Civil Rights (10 minutes)
Pass out copies of the Shortlist of Civil Rights handout. Students should read this list individually, and make space for clarifying questions as they read.
Narrative Reading (15 minutes)
Pass out copies of Adama Bah's narrative excerpt. Students should read the narrative while highlighting or annotating key moments, keeping the following questions in mind: • What is surprising or challenging in this reading? • Where do you see Adama's civil rights being upheld or violated in this reading?

Justifications and Exemptions (20 minutes)
Step 1: As a class, read the Department of Justice: The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 out loud together. **Step 2:** In pairs or small groups, students should refer back to Adama Bah's narrative and find moments where the USA PATRIOT Act may have been evoked to justify her experience. **Step 3:** As a class, facilitate a discussion around the following questions: • What is the role of civil rights in a democracy? • Where did we see Adama's civil rights being upheld or violated? • How does the USA PATRIOT Act justify an experience like Adama's? • Are there other moments in history you can think of where people have experienced similar situations like Adama?
Exit Ticket (5 minutes)
Ask students to journal to the following question: *What laws, procedures, and/or practices help you feel safe in a democracy?*

VOICE OF WITNESS

Adama Bah's narrative excerpt from *Patriot Acts: Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustice*

On March 24, 2005, Adama Bah, a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl, awoke at dawn to discover nearly a dozen armed FBI agents inside her family's apartment in East Harlem. They arrested her and her father, Mamadou Bah, and transported them to separate detention facilities. A government document leaked to the press claimed that Adama was a potential suicide bomber but failed to provide any evidence to support this claim. Released after six weeks in detention, Adama was forced to live under partial house arrest with an ankle bracelet, a government-enforced curfew, and a court-issued gag order that prohibited her from speaking about her case. In August of 2006, Adama's father was deported back to Guinea, Africa. Adama, who had traveled to the United States with her parents from Guinea as a child, also found herself facing deportation. She would spend the next few years fighting for asylum and struggling to support her family in the United States and Guinea.

I was thirteen when 9/11 happened. Every teacher came in late, and they sat us in a humongous circle. My teacher said, "I have to talk to you guys. For those of you who are from New York, I want you to brace yourselves. I have some bad news. Sometimes things happen in life that we don't understand." She started telling us about God and how to be patient and steadfast. And then she said, "The Twin Towers were hit today."

I remember freaking out, panicking, trying to reach my family. When she called us back for a second meeting, that's when she announced that a Muslim might have done it, and that there might be hatred against Muslims. When I heard that, I was like, "Wait, what do you mean? We all did it? We didn't plot it. I don't have nothing to do with it. Why are we all getting the blame for it?" So many thoughts went through my head that time: *Who is this Osama bin Laden guy? What is he up to? Why would he do this? This is against Islam.* None of us knew who bin Laden was. We were making jokes about the guy. My friends said, "Your name is very close to his name: Adama, Osama."

Then the morning of March 24, 2005, my family and I were in the house sleeping. Someone knocked on the door, and my mom went and opened it. These men barged in, waking us up. I always sleep with the blanket over my head. They pull the blanket off my head, I look up, I see a man. He said, "You've got to get out!" I'm like, *What the hell, what's going on?*

I saw about ten to fifteen people in our apartment and right outside our door in the hallway. They were mostly men, but there were two women. Some had FBI jackets, and others were from the police department and the Department of Homeland Security. We were all forced out of the bed and told to sit in the living room. They were going through papers, throwing stuff around, yelling and talking to each other, then whispering. I heard them yelling at my mother in the background, and my mom can't speak much English, and they were pulling her into the kitchen, yelling at her, "We're going to deport you and your whole family!"

Then I saw my dad walking in, in handcuffs. They had gone to the mosque to get him. It was the scariest thing you could ever see; I had just never seen my father so powerless.

I said, "Where am I going to go? Am I going with my dad?" I put on my jacket. They let me put my headscarf and abaya on. Then one of the women took out handcuffs. I panicked so badly, I was stuttering, "What did I do? Where are we going?"

There were two Escalades driving with us. I was looking around, paying attention. I recognized the Brooklyn Bridge, I recognized a lot of landmarks, but I didn't recognize the building where my father and I were taken. We got out of the car and we walked past a security booth where the cars drive up to, before taking a ramp beneath the building to the parking lot. Once we were inside the building, they put me in my own cell. It was white, with a bench. No bars. No windows. There was a door that had a tiny glass pane, and I could see who was out there. I just saw a bunch of computers and tables, and people walking back and forth and talking.

I don't know how long I was in there.

I was taken out of my cell to be interrogated. Nobody told me who they were. It was just me and a man, sitting where all the computers were. Nobody else was around me. There was a guy all the way down at the other end with my dad, but that's about it. He asked me questions like, "What's your name? What's your age? What's your date of birth? Where were you born?" They knew I was born in Guinea. Then he asked, "What is your citizenship status?" He asked me all these questions about my citizenship status. Then after a while, he said, "You know you're not here legally, right? You know why you're here today, right? You weren't born in this country. You know you're not American?"

For a second, I was just so mad at my parents. It was as if one of the biggest secrets in the world had just been revealed to me. I don't know if it was to protect them or if it was to protect me, but that was the biggest secret someone could ever hold.

The guy's attitude didn't change when he realized I didn't know what was going on. He was nasty the whole time. He just sat there explaining the process to me. Later he said, "We have to fingerprint you." When we were done with the fingerprints, they took a picture of me. I was then sitting on a bench in the main entrance when this young lady walked in. Her name was Tashnuba. I had seen her at the mosque before, but I didn't know her personally. I just recognized her face and knew her name. I said "Hi," but in my heart, I started panicking, thinking, *What the hell is she doing here? Who am I gonna see next?*

Finally I was brought to another room. This room had a table, a chair on one side, and two chairs on the other side. A federal agent walked in. She said, "I need to talk to you about something." The questions she was asking had nothing to do with immigration. They were terrorism questions. She asked me about people from London, about people from all over the world.

The male interrogator told me that the religious study group Tashnuba was part of had been started by a guy who was wanted by the FBI. I had no idea if that was true or not. The study group at the mosque was all women. So it was women learning about religion, women's empowerment, why we cover, how we do the prayer, when to pray, things like that. It was more for converts and new people who had just come into Islam. There was nothing about jihad or anything like that. I wasn't part of the group, but Tashnuba was. We were the same age, sixteen.

Then they asked me about Tashnuba. They asked me about her name, they asked me about her family, but I told them, "I don't know her."

They said, "Tashnuba wrote you on this list."

I said, "What list?"

They said, "She signed you up to be a suicide bomber."

I said, "Are you serious? Why would she do that? She doesn't seem like that type of person." They were trying to make me seem like I was wrong about who I knew and who I didn't know. They took me out of the interrogation room briefly, because my dad wanted to talk to me. They had him sign papers consenting to let them talk to me because I was underage. We didn't know that we were supposed to have lawyers. The FBI never told us that.

Back in the interrogation room, they told me Tashnuba and I were going to leave. I said, "Where's my dad, can I say bye to him?" They said, "He left already."

I asked, "When am I going to see him? Where am I going?" They told me to stop with the questions. They brought Tashnuba and handcuffed us both, hands behind the back. The cuffs were very tight, and I remember they left marks.

Tashnuba and I, all by ourselves, got in this elevator. We went up, and we went into this large room that was divided into smaller holding cells. The cells didn't have bars but were enclosed with glass. They put us into our own cell. From there, we saw a bunch of men in one of the other cells, all yelling and screaming and talking, all in orange jumpsuits. Tashnuba and I just looked at each other.

She said to me, "You put me on a list?"

I said, "No! They said you put me on a list." We both realized they had been trying to set us up. So they didn't have anything on us. They'd come for her early in the morning, too. They didn't detain her parents, they just detained her. Later I found out why they'd taken my dad. After I'd been reported as a a suicide bomber, the FBI started investigating my whole family. That's how they found out about my dad being here without papers.

Lesson Plan: Censorship and Exile

Time needed: 1 class period.

Materials:
- Text:
  - Ma Su Mon's narrative excerpt from *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivor's of Burma's Military Regime*
- Handouts
  - Compare/contrast handout
  - Blackout poetry handout

Objective:
- Students will analyze the differences between a military regime and a democracy.
- Students will creatively represent the experience of fighting for democracy through poetry.

Related Curriculum Standards:
RH.9-10.3; RH.9-10.4; RH.9-10.9; W.9- 10.2, 11-12.2; L.9-10.3, 11-12.3.

Essential Question(s):
- What happens when democracy fails, or no longer exists?
- What role does freedom of speech play in a democracy?

Overview
In this lesson, students will read an oral history narrative that describes life under a military regime and what democracy does and doesn't look like, using one specific international context. Students will have the opportunity to dive into the emotions within their narrator's experience and represent their own experience of power and powerlessness through poetry.

Narrative Reading (15 minutes)
Pass out copies of Ma Su Mon's narrative excerpt. Students should read the narrative while highlighting or annotating key moments, keeping the following questions in mind: • What does Ma Su Mon believe democracy looks like? • How does her experience under her country's military rule differ from your experience in the US?
Compare and Contrast (15 minutes)

Pass out copies of the Compare/Contrast handout. Individually or in pairs, students should refer back to the previous lesson and their definition of democracy to help them find similarities and differences between their experience in the US and Ma Su Mon's experience in Burma. The following questions can help guide them in filling out the handout:

- What kinds of demonstrations have you seen in the US?
- What are the results of those demonstrations?
- What kind of access do you have to news, information, and opinions in the US?
- What kind of power do you feel that you have in the US?
- What are rights and privileges you (or adults in your community) have access to in the US? (examples: rights to movement, identification, voting, publishing, etc.)

Justifications and Exemptions (15 minutes)

Step 1: Pass out copies of the Blackout Poetry handout.

Step 2: Individually, students should reflect on the Compare and Contrast activity with the following questions:

- *How do I (and/or my community) experience power and powerlessness within the US?*
- *How did Ma Su Mon experience power and powerlessness within her government?*

Step 3: Students should carefully blackout (or cross out) words in their narrative excerpt until they can form a cohesive poem that best answers the reflection questions.

Step 4: Students should copy over the final version of their poem in the available space.

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Ask students to journal to the following question:

What kind of power do I hold within our democracy?

VOICE OF WITNESS

Ma Su Mon's narrative excerpt from *Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma's Military Regime*

Ma Su Mon became involved in Burma's democracy movement in 1996, when the ruling military junta shut down all of the nation's universities for four years. She began studying at the National League for Democracy (NLD) office, where she met "Auntie"—Daw Aung San Suu Kyi—and was inspired to become a full youth member of the opposition group. As a result of her involvement with the NLD, Ma Su Mon was arrested by military intelligence officers and taken to Insein Prison, where she was subjected to cruel treatment, deprived of adequate food, and held in solitary confinement for eleven months. She was twenty-two years old. Since her release, she has become a journalist and is now living in Thailand, where she is pursuing her master's degree in communications and a career in journalism.

In 1988, I was ten years old. I was a fifth standard student. My father brought me to see some demonstrations nearby, where a lot of people were gathered, and they were shouting slogans, speaking their minds. I felt happy. But then I could see that my father and my mom felt worried about us; three of my brothers had gone out in the morning, and they were involved in something. We had heard that there was shooting and that the army killed some protestors. I can remember some parts of what happened, but not everything. I think maybe at the time, everyone thought that we could get democracy, but we didn't know what democracy was.

At the time, I thought democracy was just a big thing my father could bring to our home. I didn't know; I just felt happy. We were all shouting, "Okay, now we can get democracy!" When we would play, we would play demonstrations because we saw this kind of thing in front of us.

When I passed high school, I was only interested in education. My goal was to be a lecturer at a university. But when I was a first-year university student in 1996, there were student demonstrations at our university. Though I didn't know anything about politics at the time, I followed the older students, my seniors, when they started demonstrating and protesting for democracy. Then the government closed the university without reason.

I knew it was dangerous to protest, but when I started there were a lot of students and many people surrounding us who gave us water and food. I thought it would be fun. I was really happy to continue demonstrating with my seniors and to shout, "We want to study, open the university!" We were demonstrating at the Hledan Junction, a very famous place in front of Rangoon University, near Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's house. At the time, all of the people from different universities were gathering there. When they shouted, we shouted. Then something happened in front of me. I saw the police come and beat our student leaders. This was really my first experience seeing people beaten in front of me. We had to run. Some of the student leaders pulled me along because I was young and I didn't know where to go. We went to hide, and later we heard on the radio that the police had arrested a lot of student leaders. Some of them had been beaten very badly, almost to death. General Khin Nyunt announced that the military was just protecting the security of our country.

The government closed the universities from 1996 to 2000. They said they didn't want to open them again because of security concerns, because they were worried that demonstrations would happen again. They arrested all of the students who were active in the political movement. I felt really upset, and I was also worried about my future—I was afraid I'd never be able to study

again. None of my college friends knew what to do either, so we started to look for a place where we could get some kind of education. I think I was lucky, because some of my friends who were National League for Democracy (NLD) members invited us to go to their headquarters, where they had a library and also English training for youth.

I was really amazed when we went to the office. There was so much activity, and some of the members there were important people who might inspire us. Everything was really different from our university classes. We were so happy at the NLD office and we kept returning to study more. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi made a big library in the office. We could find books that had been banned by the government, like history and educational books. There were some books by famous Burmese writers; some of them were in prison or had already died.

When I became a full member of the NLD, I was just doing very simple things at first. But things changed after March 13, 2000, when we celebrated Human Rights Day in Burma. March 13 is the day in 1988 that the student Phone Maw died while participating in pro-democracy protests. The '88 uprising happened because of this.

The NLD had a ceremony for Myanmar Human Rights Day, and we also had a poetry and picture competition. I wrote about my university experience in Burma, about how I was very worried about not being able to continue my education. I wrote that the military government's oppression made me want to fully participate in the political movement; I realized that politics was the new university in my life. My poem won and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi handed me the prize at the ceremony.

After I went home for the Burmese New Year the next month, someone knocked on the door of my house. I think there were more than twenty people, but some of them stayed outside. Some of them were in uniform, like the local police. There were military intelligence (MI) people—they never wear a uniform. They have walkie-talkies and very short hair.

They just entered my room and started searching everywhere. They found some papers—some official statements and the document from when I won the poetry prize. They took everything. I was really afraid at the time, really nervous. I couldn't stand on my two feet. I knew that I would be arrested one day if I was involved in political activities, so that's why I knew to ask one question before they searched my room: "Do you have any permission to enter my room?"

"Oh, you're very clever, you're bright. Who taught you this kind of question—did your Auntie teach you that?" They made fun of me like that. But I knew the law—they needed to show a warrant to search my room, but they were just doing whatever they wanted.

It took about twenty-five minutes for the military officers to collect all of my papers. They had my mom and the local township authorities sign a paper saying they knew and approved that they were taking me from my home. They blindfolded me, and they were very rough when they put me in the car.

When they took me to the military intelligence compound, there were maybe a hundred people there who had been arrested and brought in for interrogation. I could see the others—some of my friends had been arrested—but we couldn't talk to each other.

They interrogated me for one month. For the first week it was day and night, but after one week, they only questioned me once in a while. They compared the things different political prisoners said and tried to confuse us. "Your friends said you did this, it was you." But we always denied it, whether we had done it or not.

I was twenty-two years old when I entered the prison. The man who slapped me was maybe my father's age—maybe I was his daughter's age. They only slapped me, and just once, but they did more horrible things to other people—you can't imagine. They beat monks and even pregnant women, and after they beat them, the women had miscarriages. We could not understand their minds; I don't think they were human any more. Maybe the prison officers just wanted to do their duty, but I think they really hated us.

One morning the prison staff came to us and said, "You should prepare to leave this cell." We thought they were sending us to receive a sentence, or to another prison. But they released all of us who had been arrested on the same day—more than a hundred people. It had been almost one year.

We were really excited when we went outside the prison, because a lot of people had gathered to watch us. There were international journalists waiting to take pictures and ask questions. The officials were smiling for the camera. I felt confused. They gathered us in front of the prison and one of the highest-ranking military intelligence officers gave us a lecture. He said we should not talk to the foreign press about this issue. He said, "We kept you because of security concerns. But we treated you very well, right?" Then they gave us another lecture, explaining again that they had arrested us because of a security concern.

The government can do whatever it wants. They arrested us without reason, and they released us without reason. We can't be sure about tomorrow, whether they will arrest us again or not. We don't know about the future.

Lesson Plan: Community Resources

Time needed: 1 class period.

Materials:

- Media and Text:
  - Windy Díaz Díaz's narrative excerpt from *Mi María: Surviving the Storm, Voices from Puerto Rico*
  - Describe, Infer, Synthesize (DIS) image: Sources of Help
- Handouts
  - Describe, Infer, Synthesize (DIS) handout: Sources of Help
  - The Real Upstanders table

Objective:

- Students will be able to identify community action and its role within (or despite) a democracy.
- Students will be able to articulate how different entities responded to a crisis and identify ways in which they can help their own communities.

Related Curriculum Standards:
RI.9-10.1; W.9-10.10; SL.9-10.1; L.9-10.1; RH.9-10.9.

Essential Question(s):

- What role does community action play within a democracy?
- What are our government's weaknesses and strengths when it comes to disaster preparedness?

Overview
In this lesson, students will be able to identify the sources of assistance in disaster relief, including federal and local government, military, artists, organizers, community members, etc. Students will evaluate the extent to which community needs are being met by each group.

Image Analysis (15 minutes)
Step 1: Project or display Discussion Image: Sources of Help and pass out copies of the Describe, Infer, Synthesize (DIS) worksheet. **Step 2:** Model creating descriptions of the image. Give students a few minutes to examine the image and write down every detail, including expressions, text, and positioning. **Step 3:** Ask students to share their descriptions. Make a list on the board.

Step 4: Ask students to make inferences based on what they see, using evidence from the image or their own background knowledge. Ask students to judge the mood or tone of the image as well.

Step 5: Have students respond to the prompt: *According to this artist, who supported the community of Puerto Rico after the hurricane? Who didn't? How would you imagine each character in the political cartoon provided (or didn't provide) support?*

Narrative Reading (15 minutes)

Pass out copies of Windy Díaz Díaz's narrative excerpt. Students should read the excerpt while highlighting or annotating key moments, keeping the following questions in mind:

- What kinds of needs does Windy identify in her community?
- How does she and her community coordinate help to address those needs? Who or where does that support come from?
- How effective is community coordination in providing help? How does it compare to other sources of help?

The Real Upstanders (15 minutes)

Step 1: Pass out copies of the The Real Upstanders table. Explain that an upstander is someone who acts against injustice and works towards positive change.

Step 2: In pairs or small groups, have students work together to identify upstanders from Windy's narrative that fit into each category.

Step 3: Ask students to share out their examples with the whole class.

Step 4: As a class, discuss the following question: *Who were the real upstanders in Windy's story? Who let her and her community down? Why do you think this happened?*

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Ask students to journal to the following question:

What is the role of my community in democracy?

Windy Díaz Díaz's narrative excerpt from *Mi María: Surviving the Storm | Voices from Puerto Rico*

Windy's full name is Fredeswinda. "It means storm," she explains, when we first meet in her home in San Lorenzo, which is located in a mountainous region in the southeast. She has flowers, plants, and herbs growing in containers on wheels so she can easily move them herself from her wheelchair. Windy is in her fifties. In 1986, she had an accident at work, but that was only the beginning of her multiple health problems. Her health continued to deteriorate, and when we meet with her in November 2019, she had been in a wheelchair for almost ten years. She lives alone, but a neighbor comes to check on her daily and clean once a week. Windy's dog, Chispy, a ten-year-old, fifty-pound white bull terrier, keeps her company and follows her everywhere.

When María was coming, I wasn't too worried. We're on an island; I'd lived through hurricanes before, so I knew what to expect. When Hurricane Hugo came in 1989 and Hurricane Georges came in 1998, I showed my son how to deal with any hurricane or severe tropical weather. This time with María, I didn't tell my son until the last moment because I didn't want him to worry. Finally, I called him, and I said, "Honey, this is coming." He was upset. He said, "Mom, I can come to Puerto Rico. I can help you." I told him, "Remember, I'm always prepared. I have my plans A, B, C, and D." I have to be prepared because I don't have a generator or anything, so I always have a system.

My neighbors helped me put up the aluminum shutters to protect the windows. I prepared my desk. The radio was there and a whole bunch of batteries. I had little battery-operated lights in the corners of all the rooms. I have two electric wheelchairs. The one I usually use has lights for nighttime, which also helps when the power is out. I pulled out my extra wheelchair and put it in a corner of the kitchen in case I needed it. I made sure both were charged.

It was almost 10 p.m. I could hear the winds. The sound was like howling, like a ghost in the middle of the night. I could hear all the trees breaking and falling outside. My dog could sense that the storm was bad. She wanted my attention. I said to her, "This is María. This is the storm." The winds got bigger, stronger, so I went to the middle of the hallway, which is in the middle of the house so it's the most protected. I wanted to get down lower, but if I get on the floor, I can't get up easily. My dog was trying to protect me. She stood up, putting her front paws on my knees, but she's so heavy that I couldn't let her stay there.

At about two in the morning the storm started changing. It was so silent. We say in Puerto Rico that when the hurricane comes, you hear big, big sounds. When you don't hear anything, the eye of the hurricane is here. Some people think that because the sound is gone, the storm is over. They open their doors. But it's not safe. I say, "People, don't go out! Close your doors because you don't know what's going to happen." There was the calm, the eye of the hurricane, and then all of a sudden the winds came back. They came from the other direction and it was worse.

Two days after the hurricane, my dog was licking my leg, almost as if to say, "What's going on with you here?" I looked down to check and saw that I had a bruise from when I'd fallen. But there was nothing I could do at the time. The ramp from my house was blocked, and because there was no phone signal, there was no way to call a doctor. In general, I was feeling bad. I couldn't breathe well. I had equipment for oxygen at night, but you need power to run it. I also had an asthma

treatment, but you need power for that too. Luckily, that could run off a car battery and one of my neighbors brought me to his car to give me a therapy.

My other neighbors who had a generator also helped charge my wheelchair. It takes at least five or six hours to charge. My neighbors would come at ten at night to take it and bring it back around six in the morning. Once it's charged it will last for about four days. I only had a little cash, but I still gave them five dollars. They didn't want to take the money. I said, "I know you need it for gas for the generator and you're helping me. Please, take it."

Most people tried to help each other. One of the most important things I always say to God is "I need to help others." I'm in a wheelchair, but I'm still here. I thought, *I'm going to help the mamás.* It was the same week of the hurricane and the kids in the neighborhood had no school and nothing to do. I thought I could help keep the kids busy and it would help the mamás to know that their kids were here and having fun. I used to be a teacher, so I asked all the kids in the neighborhood, "Who wants to take classes? I'll teach you—English, mathematics, whatever." The kids talked to their moms and it was all arranged. They would come three times a week, stay from nine in the morning to one in the afternoon, and bring their lunches and water with them. In the end, there were about ten kids who came—boys and girls, ages five to ten.

Nobody from the government checked on me. No one came, no one helped, no one. In San Lorenzo, there are hardly any wheelchair-accessible areas or ramps, and the officials don't have a list of people who have disabilities. There are a few of us, but they don't know who is disabled and where we live. They can't get to us if there is an emergency. I didn't know if they had shelters we could've gone to because they didn't contact me. I felt invisible. I felt vulnerable. I felt angry.

It was bad for me. I was without running water for a month. Electricity was a problem. I couldn't use my computer. I couldn't call anyone. I didn't have contact with my family, with my son. I couldn't go out. I was trapped. People were trying to clear the streets, so branches and debris had been piled up in front of my house. Nobody came to clear the tree blocking the ramp.

About five weeks after the hurricane, a woman from the city offices came to see if I needed a generator. She said, "We have a generator. Do you need it? We could give it to you, it's available." It would have been good to have power for the oxygen treatment at night because of my right lung, but I said, "Honey, I need it, but maybe a sick child or a person who is bedridden needs it more. Give it to them." This woman didn't come in an official capacity. She only came because she knew me.

The lack of government response was devastating. Days, even weeks after the hurricane, the government did not help. I have a deep instinct inside me that tells me this is wrong. People with medical conditions, with handicaps, in wheelchairs, the elderly—the government didn't help. How many people died? How much of the money that came to Puerto Rico was given to help people with handicaps? The army was over at the mall to give out food. Tell me, how—in the wheelchair—can I go to pick up food? The mayor's office didn't come around here to see if I needed help. That was the root of my anger. The mayors have money. Why don't they use it to help people in wheelchairs? People with problems? They help the "important" people, but the people in need—they kick our butts. I felt forgotten. I *was* forgotten. Not by my family or neighbors, no. But by the people who are supposed to take care of the community—the mayor and the government.

People like me have to help others. Because no one shows us how to help ourselves. For example, in an earthquake, what's the first thing you're supposed to do? People say, "Move, drop to the ground, take cover under your desk. How are people in a wheelchair supposed to do that?" So, I'm writing a little book called "The Vision of the Hurricane from Wheels." It's to show others in wheelchairs or with medical conditions how to prepare for an emergency. I actually gave a workshop in San Juan about that and about how emergency workers can better support people with disabilities like me. Emergency people from San Juan were there and so were people from San Lorenzo's City Hall. The mayor and the civic workers of San Lorenzo all know me because I taught them how to deal with wheelchairs and the special transportation vehicles that they have for people with disabilities—how to load and unload the wheelchairs, so they aren't damaged. I'm educating them on the challenges people with disabilities face and on how to treat us properly. That's the teacher in me. I love to teach.

I want to help others see that María was a big, big deal. When María came, Puerto Rico was devastated, but the island still stands up and helps others. Right now Puerto Rico is helping the Bahamas. A person can stand up, but an island can also stand up with heart and courage.

Oral History Project: Civic Engagement

Time needed: Flexible, 4-week outline is included below.

Materials:

- Audio recording device (most smartphones have audio recording capability)
- Audio editing software (Soundtrap, Podcastle, Spotify for Podcasters, Audacity, etc.)
- Resources for individual lessons are linked in the project calendar below

Objective:

By conducting their own oral history interviews, students can make personal connections to the issues discussed during elections and can add their voices to broader conversations about democracy and social change all year-round outside of elections. Students will ask members of their community or family to share their experiences around a topic of their choice. Encourage students to consider popular platforms for presidential campaigns—immigration, gun control, civil rights, climate change—as well as local issues such as gentrification, food security, neighborhood safety, and homelessness. The topics chosen can span a broad range, as the main objective is for students to locate a person in their life with a story about a topic they care about.

Students will write their own interview questions and will learn skills for creating safe, brave spaces for their narrators to tell their stories. Creating the podcast and including an introduction and reflection allows space for students to synthesize the information and experiences they learned from their narrator, as well as experiment with technology to edit the audio. If desired, students can share their oral history podcasts with the larger student community by submitting their work to KQED's Call for Change challenge.

Related Curriculum Standards:

RI.9-10.1, 2, 7; W.9-10.4, 7, 8, 10; SL.9-10.1, 3; L.9-10.1, 2, 6; RH.9-10.1, 6, 9.

Essential Question(s):

- What issues need amplifying in our community?
- How can we make a difference through local elections, civic processes, and advocacy?

Project Timeline

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Week 1: **Project Brainstorm and Preparation**	Project launch: Introduce oral history as a way to let people tell their own stories about the social and political issues discussed in the media	Interview Topic Brainstorm: What issues are important to you? What issues do you (or people you know) have personal experience with?	Brainstorm and contact potential narrators Distribute consent form
Week 2: **Interview Skills**	Model Interview Discuss interview skills and how to create a 'safe and brave' space for storytelling	Writing Interview Questions Handout Generate open-ended interview questions	Finalize question list HOMEWORK: Conduct interview and bring audio recording to class!
Week 3: **Editing**	Edit interview audio	Write narrative introduction and reflection	Record narrative introduction and reflection
Week 4: **Sharing and Reflecting**	Finalize editing, adding background music if desired	Share projects with class or school community. Option to submit to KQED's Call for Change challenge	Reflect on project

Helpful Interview Tips

1. **Make sure you have all your necessary materials and location ready.**
   Bring a reliable recording device (camera, phone, StoryCorps app, etc) and make sure there is enough memory to store your recording. Be sure to record in a quiet space with minimal distractions/sounds, preferably one that the narrator is already comfortable with.

2. **Give your narrator your undivided attention.**
   Genuine interest and active listening are essential to a successful interview. Your narrator will appreciate the effort!

3. **Do not interrupt your narrator because you have thought of a great question.**
   If your narrator is in the middle of a story or finishing a thought, do not interrupt. You will probably be able to ask that great question as a follow-up sometime during the interview.

4. **Do not let periods of silence fluster you.**
   Sometimes we become uncomfortable with silence and leap into those silences with a comment or question. Silences during an interview can be useful as your narrator is thinking about something or is considering sharing a particular story. Give them time.

5. **Stay open and be yourself.**
   Oral history interviews can go in directions that you cannot always anticipate. That is part of the fun! Go with the flow and stay open to what is happening in the moment. Expressing your personality and sense of humor during the interview will inspire your narrator to express theirs.

6. **Let your narrator lead.**
   Your questions are there as a guide, not a script. Once you get your narrator talking, that is all that matters. Listen deeply and use that moment to hear what they want to share. Ask follow-up questions such as "tell me more about..." "What did you mean when you said..." "why do you feel..." to get a better sense of what they are really saying beyond your assumption of what they mean. Your own interview questions give you a sense of what you want to learn but sometimes just listening openly will give you that anyway without driving the conversation yourself.