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Breaking bread & barriers

‘Resistance dinner’ at Mission High sets the table for next wave of political activism

By Justin Phillips 29 Jan 2017

“I had this childhood dream of being president,” Damaris Bonner told me as we stood outside Mission High School’s cafeteria.

The thought made her laugh, the same way an adult laughs about having wanted to be a movie star or a professional athlete.

Damaris is a high school senior. At 17, childhood for her wasn’t that long ago.

“With voters electing people like Donald Trump, I don’t know if I want that anymore,” Damaris explained. “I could change more by learning the law. I want to be a lawyer.”

Damaris was one of the youth leaders at a dinner hosted by Nourish/ Resist, a group of social justice-minded people of color using food as a platform for change. Mission High students called the meal a “resistance dinner” and the mantra was “hate won’t feed us.”

The dinner was Jan. 19, the last night Barack Obama was in office.

Servings of salad, turkey kofta, butternut squash and couscous preceded an evening filled with workshops on various forms of political activism. The participants all planned to protest the next day’s inauguration.

While Damaris talked, it was clear she was making sense of a world most adults are struggling to understand, including myself.

I felt fortunate to have my political awakening during a time when the country elected, and then re-elected Obama. I was able to vote for a man who looked like me. He looked like my uncle. My barber. The deacon at my church.

Damaris and her friends are discovering their own political voices at the start of Donald Trump’s presidency. They watched, for the first time with a sense of understanding, a campaign many people found filled with racist, misogynistic and xenophobic moments.

“Everyone says my generation is active, but in reality, not everybody is,” Damaris said. “A lot of us are fearful about speaking out. We can’t be that way anymore.”

The dinner was spearheaded by the Mission High students. The teens told the Nourish/Resist team beforehand what tools they needed to combat hate and injustice in society.

It turns out the answer was simply a platform and attention from the right people.

The ugliness of the campaign was a call to arms for Damaris and people like her. There was no one moment when she realized her voice could make a difference. Instead, it was culmination of moments that did it.

Looking back, the same should have happened to me.

I was 14 years old the first time a police officer pointed a gun at me.

I was 15 the first time a patrol unit stopped me and asked where I was walking.

At 17, I had already experienced handcuffs for “matching a description.”

I wrote the incidents off as a part of life. I learned to expect them on days when the hood of my pullover was a little too low, or my friends and I were dribbling a basketball up the street a little too late at night. I’m not sure. In the weeks leading up to Obama’s victory in 2008, I remember bracing for America to enter some sort of postracial era. I was hopeful there would be an enlightened conversation about skin color in America during his administration.

The Know Your Rights breakout session during the dinner taught participants about nonviolent direct action to be used during marches and protests.

I sat in and listened to Derrlyn Tom, a teacher at Mission High and lifelong activist, walk teens through an entire interaction with a police officer during a protest, from introduction to potential arrest.

“If the police don’t know you know your rights, they’re not always going to offer them to you,” Tom told the group. “You have to insist.”

I took personal notes during the session, and later during my conversation with Damaris, I saw she already knew much of what I found informative.

“I’ve known Damaris for a couple years now. She’s an incredible leader,” said Shakirah Simley, co-organizer of Noursh/Resist.

Simley, like myself, was one of the adults who marveled at the youths’ participation in the event.

“As a black woman, seeing young black women like Damaris come up gives me a lot of hope,” she said. “I wasn’t as secure and confident as she is at that age.”

Simley said the goal is to eventually have a world filled with teens like Damaris and her classmates.

“We’re shifting economic and political power to young people and people of color. We’re not just trotting them out. We putting them in positions to succeed,” she said.

Damaris led a session during the dinner with another student where they discussed their short- and longterm goals for youth power. Short term, the teens planned to protest the inauguration. Long term, they wanted to set up a youth activists’ network throughout San Francisco.

Damaris said it isn’t always easy getting her classmates to pay attention to politics or to even have an opinion on what’s happening around them.

I admitted to her that I would have been one of the teens who complained about having to get out and protest. I told her I was never inspired the way they were, despite having the necessary life experiences.

“It’s the discussions like this that make it easier for young people to speak out,” Damaris said.

I was nothing like the teens at Nourish/Resist when I was in high school. That’s why I trust them with my future.

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