



Editor's note: The following guest piece was written by Melissa Tracy, a National Board Certified high school social studies teacher at Odyssey Charter School and the Charter Network's 2021 Teacher of the Year.

I was fortunate to have an advocate, a singular experience that offered me a sense of safety and confidence as a high school student that I lacked elsewhere and taught me a powerful lesson about the value of the pursuit of education. My advocate, Mr. Messenger, was my student government adviser. He encouraged me to join Youth in Government (YIG), a national program of the YMCA that involves thousands of teens nationwide in state-organized, model government programs. The motto of YIG is simple but powerful, "Democracy must be learned by each generation." The program culminates with teens serving as delegates at their state conference, debating bills on the floor of the legislature.

When Mr. Messenger first reached out to me in tenth grade, I was living in a cramped motel room with my family. For the past three years, we had lived in a series of motels after being evicted from our apartment for failing to pay rent. We lived day to day. I distinctly recall feeling embarrassed that I didn't have an address, a phone, or new clothes like my affluent peers. My heart sank when I found out that the cost to participate in Youth in Government: \$750.00. Saddened that I couldn't afford the program, I stopped attending the weekly meetings.

Fortunately, Mr. Messenger did not give up on me. He identified and secured a full scholarship for me. Mr. Messenger's simple gesture profoundly impacted my life trajectory. To this day, he probably has no idea about the difference he made in my life.

Consequently, I went on to participate in YIG for three years, learning firsthand the difficulties of lobbying, delegating, and writing bills. Most importantly, I evolved from being an incredibly shy and insecure student, to a young adult with a strong and powerful voice! Upon graduation, I attended Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. During my senior year, Hurricane Katrina hit, flooding my community, my home, and Tulane's campus. After spending my fall semester at the University of Delaware, I returned to the city that I loved and taught in high-needs schools throughout New Orleans.

Many of my students at that time had lost everything. Their struggles resonated with me, and I quickly realized that while I couldn't change my students' home lives, I could provide some stability in their school lives and equip them with academic tools to be successful in life. I am forever grateful for these past experiences, and credit them for giving me a strong sense of compassion, and an unabating interest in supporting all of my students. In essence, I teach because I know personally the power of advocacy in a student's life. As teachers, we have the incredible ability to be change agents- to compel our students, especially our disadvantaged students, to reimagine a bright future full of possibility.

Unsurprisingly, when I began teaching, I founded the first YIG delegation at a public school at Conrad Schools of Science. For the past twelve years, I have advised 500+ students in Youth in Government and Model United Nations, having chaperoned over 25 three-day field trips, including trips to the United Nations in New York City. I am deeply committed to being the next Mr. Messenger, to being that teacher who exposes her students to opportunities like student government. Most recently, my focus has shifted to amplifying the voice of students beyond my school campus. Last winter I was one of the main adults who planned the first annual state-wide and student-led Youth Environmental Summit (YES!), a collaborative partnership of Delaware non-profit organizations, businesses, students, public, and private schools (300+ students). It included a mix of workshops, student-led lightning talks, keynote speakers and exhibitors. The idea originated to give students a voice on issues such as climate change, water quality, biodiversity, and zero waste. The day-long summit took place in Dover in February 2020. My passion for being an advocate for my students drove my development as an educator and continues to inspire me in my role today. I was given the world when an educator supported me, and my greatest ambition is to pay that forward.