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## Civics 101

By *Victor Harbison*



Victor Harbison's students hitting the streets in South Bend, Indiana.

*Victor Harbison teaches civics and history at Gage Park High School in Chicago, where he also sponsors the school newspaper. In 2000, he became the first National Board-certified high school history teacher in Chicago and he has worked on several educational reform projects during his career. Gage Park faces the all-too-common challenges of an urban school: test scores are so low that only 8% of students meet state standards; only 47% of its students graduate; and 97.4% of them live in poverty. Victor will help this blog keep education on its radar after the departure of long-time teacher and contributor **Will Okun**.*

Can you imagine how much fun it is to teach high school civics in the fall of 2008? Never let anyone tell you that young people can't be involved and inspired—even in a tough school like ours. I see it everyday, thanks to the best non-partisan civics education organization in Chicago, the **Mikva Challenge**.

Before working with Mikva, I was like most teachers: use the book, quiz once a week, test every 5 weeks. Maybe, for variety, some essays or research papers. Pretty standard stuff.

Mikva's approach could be called "participatory civics." Imagine the difference between having a student read a candidate's health care proposal and take a quiz on it versus having that student read the proposal, then knock

on a voter's door in a swing state and explain it. After one student did just that, she told me: "I was so nervous. What if I mess it up? It could cost John McCain a vote. A real vote."



**Working on the McCain campaign.**

Once I started working with Mikva, my students showed...energy. Enthusiasm. All that you don't usually see when handing out the next reading assignment. Finally, I made the connection. I used to think that teens weren't ready to act, that they needed more "background" or "context." I was wrong, Mikva was right, and it has made all the difference in my classroom.

Today, my students regularly share their insights and critiques of the campaigns' political strategies. Several of them have appreciated the tech side of Obama's campaign. One student said, "What is amazing is the **iPhone app** you can download from the Obama website. It can turn my phone into a one-man campaign office. That is the future of campaigning."

Thanks to Mikva, my students did boots-on-the-ground work during the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primaries. They've worked for the campaigns of Giuliani, Clinton, McCain, Obama, Huckabee, Romney and Edwards. They've traveled to Wisconsin and Indiana—for most of them, this was their first time outside the Chicago area. (Here I was thinking it was a plain old Holiday Inn, and the kids were beyond thrilled.)

After every event, Mikva organizes a debriefing. One of the most talked-about encounters for my students took place in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where they'd been canvassing for the Obama campaign. At one house, the elderly woman who opened the door reacted joyously: "I am so glad young people are involved in politics. I love Obama. I hope he wins. I am so happy you are here." When asked if she would vote for Obama, she said no. "My priest told me that he [Obama] supports gay marriage and abortion, so I can't vote for him. But I hope he wins."

This sparked a lively debate, in part about the separation of church and state. "I don't think it was right for a priest to tell an old woman how to vote," said one. Another responded, "It seems like she asked her priest for advice, and that seems fair. I think the priest just shared his point of view."



**Canvassing in Kenosha.**

Education professionals like to talk about “authentic” learning or “graduation by exhibition.” Mikva makes those concepts a reality, and it makes a world of difference to my students. (Thanks, again, to Mikva, two dozen of them will be working a 14-hour shift on Election Day—and earning \$170 each, a small fortune for them—so I took them to a local library for early voting. You should have seen the faces of these first-time voters. It made my day.)

In addition to campaign work, the Mikva Challenge also sponsors community civics projects that are researched, designed and lobbied for by students. Our year-long project this year is to get a memorial built in our community commemorating the 1966 **equal housing marches** led by Dr. M.L. King, Jr.

While we’re still in the research phase, I brought in a historian and a participant in the marches to talk with my students.

First, **Rick Perlstein**, author of “**Nixonland**,” spoke about the marches and their impact on housing issues in Chicago. Afterwards, one student asked him about the chances of getting the memorial built. Perlstein replied, “You guys are lucky. Dr. King is like Santa Claus to politicians. Democrat or Republican, every politician would want to be on the side of supporting a memorial for Dr. King.” My students told me later that this made them feel more confident that they could actually make the project happen.

Then, Don Rose, who was the press liaison for Dr. King in Chicago and helped organize the Chicago Freedom Movement, also met with my students. This was their opportunity to learn history without reading a book. One student asked, “If you could choose a site for the memorial, where do you think it should go?” Rose replied, “The corner of 59th and Kedzie. That’s where it all started. If you could find out the exact location of the real estate office [it is long gone], that’s where I would place a marker.”

This exchange has led to some great ideas from my students about finding the site of that real estate office. One student suggested looking at old video footage from local news stations. Others said they could look in old telephone books or newspapers. All I know is that I would be pulling teeth if I had made this activity a research paper or multiple-choice exam. But because it is “their” project in “their” neighborhood, my kids are willing to do research I could never have gotten them to do otherwise.

Those of you who are interested in learning more about Mikva's work, or even supporting it, can click [here](#).



Outside the school at 6 a.m. leaving for South Bend.