

## **Affinity, Advocacy, Activism: Spokane Youth of Color Coalition**

Spokane, Washington, U.S.A

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Columbia University

**Project Leader:** Ilina Logani, United States of America, Columbia University in the City of New York

### **Additional Student Participants:**

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### **Project Goals:**

Affinity, Advocacy, Activism: Spokane Youth of Color Coalition aims to be part affinity space, part advocacy group for youth of color in Spokane, Washington. A predominantly white and conservative small Eastern Washington city, Spokane is notorious in the Pacific Northwest for its history of hostility and violence towards its few community members of color, with youth of color being especially vulnerable to racial animus. Affinity, Advocacy, Activism will combat the sense of isolation and lack of resources experienced by Spokane youth of color by holding bimonthly meetings open to youth of color in Spokane.

One meeting each month will create a virtual affinity space for youth of color to gather, combat racial isolationism, and engage in community joy in an environment centered around the ideals of affirmation and self-worth. The second monthly meeting will be centered around advocacy workshops, oriented around themes of self-advocacy and community engagement. These workshops will be hosted by professional community members and will span topics such as financial literacy, college application support, resources for LGBTQ+ youth, conflict resolution skills, and coalition-building tips. Our aim is to train students in dialogue, intercommunity bridge-building, coalition generation, and leadership.

Finally, we will engage with the broader Spokane through a monthly podcast that engages with the social landscapes of Eastern Washington as told through the perspectives of its youth of color. The podcast will feature interviews with community leaders, educators, and historians in Eastern Washington, and will include informational segments related to Spokane's histories with policing, criminal justice, redlining, etc.

### **Project Inspirations:**

In the summer of 2020, facing growing frustration at the lack of activism in their local community, project members Aaliyah Bains and Ilina Logani decided to bring together a coalition of youth of color to bring change to their former high school, where they had experienced years of a racially hostile environment. Throughout the ensuing year and a half, as they worked with school administrators to forge a safer environment for its students and faculty of color, Aaliyah and Ilina received dozens of messages from youth of color across the region expressing similar experiences and asking how to build a similar movement within their own schools. The two realized that Spokane lacked a culture of mentorship for youth of color to rely on when facing racism in their communities.

As such, the two of them began to plan a new initiative--Affinity, Advocacy, Activism--working with community leaders Michaela Brown and Aiden Sanders (representatives respectively of JustLead Washington and Excelerate Success) to secure financial support and training to facilitate this group. They hope this space becomes the genesis of a culture of youth advocacy and activism in Spokane as well as a community-building and tool-sharing resource among the city's youth of color.

### **Why does this issue exist?**

Having grown up and gone to school in Spokane, Washington—a town where 90% of its residents are White--Aaliyah and Ilina understand firsthand the damaging effects of racial isolation and hostility to the development, confidence, and sense of safety and self-worth to youth of color. A key aspect of the problem is the lack of deliberate community for youth of color in Spokane to gather and share their experiences, as well as the lack of centralized resources for Spokane's BIPOC youth to make sense of and heal from the racial trauma in the region and to begin to organize together to combat it.

Having mentors that match a student's race and share similar experiences with them is crucial to BIPOC youth's academic and developmental success: it raises self-reported "personal effort, happiness in class, and college aspirations" and is a key driver of "intellectual and personal self-confidence" among youth of color.

(Pitt and Packard, "Activating Diversity"; Egalite and Kisida, "The Effects of Teacher Match"). The lack of access to mentorship and community for youth of color in Spokane continues to actively harm those in crucial academic and social developmental stages.

Students across Spokane have reported to project members feelings of loneliness and isolation, feelings of invisibility, and fears of being ignored or retaliated against if they speak up in the face of racism in their schools. Underlying these emotions, however, was a shared sense of relief at finally having a group of young advocates with similar stories to feel seen by. One former student thanked us profusely for providing for him a sense of community for the first time: "For 19 years I've carried on my shoulders the racism I endured in my four years. Because of your group, I found the strength to tell my story."

### **Why this population?**

Our project members are strong advocates for homegrown advocacy: the most effective, tangible, and generative change, we believe, comes from those who are intimately familiar with and have personal stake in the communities they are attempting to make better. The population of youth of color in Spokane, Washington is a population that our project members have once belonged to and continue to care deeply about. We are also connected, through our past advocacy efforts, with community leaders who are invested in supporting youth of color in Spokane: professors at the local Gonzaga University, leaders of the Spokane Education Association, and Equity and Leadership Facilitators at the Organization JustLead Washington. Given both our personal and professional experiences with advocacy in the community, our project members feel that we are highly equipped to drive change in Spokane.

### **Defining Peace:**

Within a young community that has experienced extensive racial hostility and violence, peace is defined by an inner sense of belonging in one's community: a feeling of safety among those with shared experiences, of support from older mentors, and of trust in the long slow work of change. It is defined by a deeply rooted sense of self-worth in spite of--and, perhaps, because of--one's experiences.

Intercommunity peace, on the other hand, is defined by a balance of resources, power, and respect. It comes when both parties at stake feel they have space at the metaphorical table to advocate for their own needs and the tools necessary to communicate with and fully understand one another.

### **Contributing to Short-term and Long-term Peace:**

In the short term, our project will contribute to intra-community peace by ensuring that youth of color in Spokane have access to an affirming group with shared experiences and resources. The mere gathering of stories and dialogue will be enough to begin this healing and peace-generating process: affinity groups have been shown to help minoritized youth develop healthy self-identity and build important social networks. The youth of color we have already polled via social media have expressed keen interest in the affinity space we are building and are intent on helping build the coalition from the ground up.

The educational element of our organization will build long-term intercommunity peace. With advocacy workshops providing training in activism and leadership to interested youth of color, our organization will begin to develop a culture within Spokane of conscientious skills-based advocacy. Achieving peace is not a spontaneous, arbitrary process: it takes time, careful dialogue, coalition-building skills, and effective leadership. Providing youth of color with the necessary tools and resources to engage with activism in this deliberate, step-by-step manner will foster peace between White and non-White populations in Spokane. Training our youth of color to self-advocate for space at institutional tables and challenge racism without fear will not only help drive their self-worth but will also encourage better dialogue between young Spokane members of color and their White peers. At the same time, the project's podcast will also help drive long-term intercommunity peace: in calling broader Spokane community members of all races to be interviewed for this podcast, we will be engaging in a dialogue between all impacted members of the community to build shared understanding and respect.