

# THE RISE OF THE STUDENT ACTIVIST

By Katie Wahal, Director of Communications at New Garden Friends School



A national wave of student-led activism is sweeping the country. Students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. began speaking out following the tragic school shooting that killed 17 students and faculty in February. These students have used social media to transform their pain and outrage into a national movement and have inspired countless others to join the fight to change gun laws.

Greensboro has a rich history of effective student engagement. On Saturday, students here in Greensboro and throughout the United States demanded that action is taken to protect school students from gun violence. Students from New Garden Friends School participated in the day. When the Parkland tragedy occurred, a group of NGFS Upper School students were already enrolled in “The History of Social Movements & Protests,” a class which gives students an opportunity to examine different approaches to activism and discuss topical issues. These students became engaged and motivated as they saw a movement emerge that was started and is continuing to be driven forward, by their peers. “I think our students have been shocked to see how effective the students in Parkland have been,” says Upper School history teacher Peter Kalajian, “We talk about how once you can vote, you can have a say on these and other issues; now we’re seeing young people have a great voice in this country. It has given our students a view of what’s possible. High school students will soon be voters and representatives should be listening to them.”

As interest in the March grew, others in our school community wanted to stand in support of these energetic young people. A group of parents, staff, and students gathered together downtown to attend the March collectively. Head of School Kim Freedman says, “We support the students who are seeking to make their schools places of peace and safety; places where freedom from gun violence is a given, and where their focus can be upon their work as learners, future voters, and agents of change.” A cold, wet day in Greensboro did not deter students from attending the rally. Two 8th-grade alumnae of New Garden Friends School helped organize the March and spoke on-stage to the cheers of their former teachers and a school community they had grown up with.

“Young people are natural activists. They have strong opinions; they are passionate about issues and have a lot to say, if adults are willing to listen”. The effectiveness of social media to spread their message is a medium still foreign to many adults and is giving these students a platform to let their voices be heard. A platform they are already very familiar with.

New Garden Friends School, along with all Quaker schools, actively promotes the nonviolent resolution of conflict. Quaker schools offer educational programs that encourage the creation of connected communities in a climate of equality and respect. These principals require that we listen for truth in the words of others, regardless of age or status.

When asked why they chose to participate in the March, the high school students said, “all students should be able to feel safe at school.” A prerequisite for students to exercise their imaginations and intellects requires safety — physical safety to provide a consistent and welcoming learning space, and emotional safety to allow students to share themselves and their opinions without fear of reprisal, retribution, or ridicule. As students throughout the United States continue to make their voices heard on issues of gun violence, the goal of simple safety is a priority that should be shared by every school.



Photo by H.Scott Hoffmann/  
News & Record



New Garden  
FRIENDS SCHOOL

*New Garden Friends School seeks to be an inclusive, innovative educational community guided by Quaker beliefs and committed to honoring and developing each person's gifts.*