

as Sumatee, and her partner as Mike. Each person in the room took a turn standing up and saying their name into the microphone. I'm not as painfully shy as I used to be, but I still had a hard time standing up in front of 200 people. When the microphone got to me, I stood up quickly and blurted my name almost inaudibly under my breath.

Then we began a number of games and exercises. Before each activity Sumatee or Mike would yell, "It's time to play a game!" and we were to respond, "I feel good, oh I feel so good, Huh!" In one of the activities we were told to find another person who was different—different ethnicity, age, sex, even a different hair color. Then we had to tell that person something about ourselves. When we were finished, we were to thank that person and find someone else. I tried to find a partner as fast as I could, afraid that I might be the last person left. We had to tell each other about our families, things that we thought made us special. I was uncomfortable, telling a stranger about my relationships with my family.

We did this for a while until suddenly we were told to find one person and stick with them. We had to sit down and talk to that person for three minutes about whatever was on our mind. We would alternate. It was kind of awkward.

The girl who was my partner and I talked about school mostly, how many people were in our families, sports, hobbies, small talk. We were supposed to look the person in the eye when we spoke to them, and that was really hard, I'm not sure why. I guess we are taught to avoid the attention of strangers.

After this exercise, Mike and Sumatee called us all over to the corner of the room. Sumatee started to tell us about herself. She told us about her childhood, about problems she had with her family, things I will not mention out of respect for her privacy. She said everyone has something that can be compared, metaphorically, to a balloon. Every time we experience something hurtful, or sad, or something that makes us angry, we blow it into that balloon, because that is what society, adults, and our own peers teach us to do. That balloon gets bigger and bigger until it is so full that we can't hold things in any longer and we take them out on other people. Or the balloon bursts, and we take it out on ourselves. We talked about the things that we are told every day, that make us want to hide our feelings, or to keep them bottled up, things that cause us to stop feeling.

Then Mike spoke. He told us about his life, his childhood, what it was like for him growing up. The things he had endured throughout his life were amazing. He talked about the things society teaches boys about being men, not being weak, emotional or, god forbid, feminine. He talked about the ways we are trained to act in order to be accepted, and the things we do to be accepted that unintentionally hurt ourselves or other people.

We then went back to our previous partners. Sumatee wanted us to tell each other about the things that really concerned us in our personal lives, things we wouldn't normally share because we're not used to opening up. I realized that most people's lives

are far from perfect, but we don't verbalize our own problems because we think that no one can relate. When you think about it, it's strange that we don't tell anyone what's going on in our lives when we are hurting. You are supposed to be able to tell your best friend anything, but I don't. I guess I feel that most people, even those I am closest to, would have a hard time dealing with some of my emotions because they can be frightening and sad to talk about. I figure that if I can't fix them myself, that no one else will be able to. But the truth is, even if nobody else can fix your life, it helps to let the pain out of your balloon.

In those six minutes I learned more about a stranger than I know about some of my closest friends. It was amazing to be able to share things with someone I had just met and to feel safe. Looking



Challenge Day cocreators Rich and Yvonne St. John-I

around, I could already see the change in attitude that had occurred since the beginning of the day. People who had walked into the room with sarcastic smugness on their faces now had tears streaming down their cheeks, and so did I.

Crossing the Line

After lunch, we were split up again, and everyone moved to one side of the room. Sumatee stood on a stool at one end of the gym. A white line ran down the center of the auditorium. Everyone was silent. This activity was to be taken seriously.

"Cross the line if you have blonde hair, cross the line if you have blue eyes, cross the line if you are an only child," Sumatee said.

People walked silently over the line, and stared back at those who had not crossed. Then the categories became more serious.

"Cross the line if you have ever been told you were stupid or not good enough by an adult. Cross the line if you have ever been made fun of for being fat. Cross the line if you have ever been told to stop acting like a girl, or to be more of a man." More than half crossed for each category. They stared back from across the line with expressionless faces. I was trying to figure out what others were thinking. Sumatee continued.

"Cross the line if you have ever been called a slut, a whore, been whistled at, catcalled, or been made to feel violated by a boy or man. Cross the line if you have ever been called gay, fag, homo, or anything degrading to your sexual orientation. Cross the line if you or someone in your family has ever been raped or sexually molested. Cross the line if you have ever been hit by someone who said 'I love you.' Cross the line if you have ever been insulted, teased, or made fun of by someone in this room." So many crossed.

At this point just about every pair of eyes in that room had begun to glaze over, and emotions were beginning to leak. Friends comforted each other, standing quietly, arms linked.

The Origins of Challenge Day

We first heard about Challenge Day when our editorial assistant Cherine Badawi announced that she was leaving us, to travel around the nation as a “leader” for these emotional, highly charged days that promised to transform youths’ lives. I volunteered as an adult facilitator for one of Cherine’s days last fall and was deeply touched by the impact the program had on the students and the space it created for them to have a life-changing experience.

Challenge Day was founded in 1987 by wife-and-husband team Yvonne and Rich St. John-Dutra. Moved by their own difficult high school experiences, they wanted to create a day that demonstrated what a school community could be.

“I was a short fat girl with braces,” says Yvonne. “I was teased and tormented, and developed an eating disorder in the seventh grade. When I came back to school thin after a summer break everybody liked me. In some ways that was more disturbing than being teased. I thought, Nobody is winning this crazy game. This is not the way it has to be.”

Yvonne and Rich wanted a school day for students to feel safe and nurtured in an environment that encouraged respect and compassion. They wanted students to have the opportunity to connect with themselves and each other, and finally to forgive and honor one another. The one-day workshop uses games, activities, small-group discussions, and icebreakers to address dozens of issues including violence, drugs, stereotypes, abuse, and racism, and to help students understand that they are not alone. Teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff members, as well as other adult volunteers, are encouraged to participate.

Challenge Day has traveled to twenty-one states and Canada. During the past fifteen years 235,300 teenagers have attended more than 2,300 days.

The nonprofit program runs during the school year. Nineteen energetic leaders from all over the country range in age from early twenties to late forties. They are Asian, Arab, African-American, and Caucasian. Seven full-time staff, three of whom are volunteers, work in the office.

Challenge Day has received international recognition. After the Columbine tragedy, Yvonne and Rich were asked to bring the Challenge Day program to Colorado schools to help the healing process. In September of 2000 Paramount Pictures made an hour-and-a-half-long, award-winning documentary, “Surviving High School,” which featured the Challenge Day program. —EP



Youth leaders from around the country at a Challenge Day National Youth Conference.



Board member Gabriel Ramos, 19, exults at a community workshop.

“Cross the line if you have ever witnessed someone being brutally beaten or killed.”

I was stunned at how many crossed for this category.

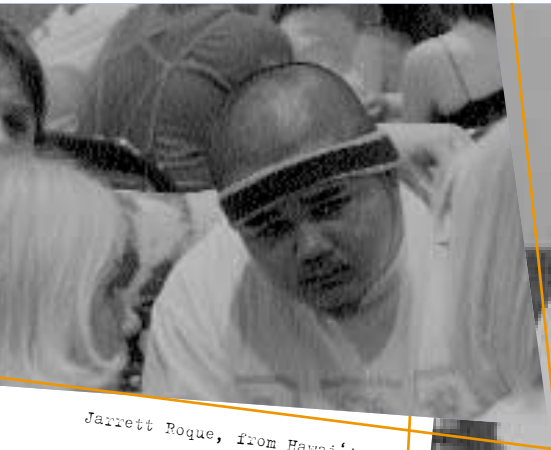
“Cross the line if you or someone in your family is or has been struggling with an addiction to prescription, or illegal drugs. Cross the line if someone in your family is an alcoholic. Cross the line if a parent or sibling has died. Cross the line if you have ever had to fall asleep to the sound of gunshots in your neighborhood. Cross the line

if you have ever felt unsafe in your own home. Cross the line if you have ever witnessed someone being brutally beaten or killed.” I was stunned at how many crossed for this category. I wanted to curl up and hide, to shut my eyes. I thought that things like this only happened on the news, not in my high school, and not to my friends.

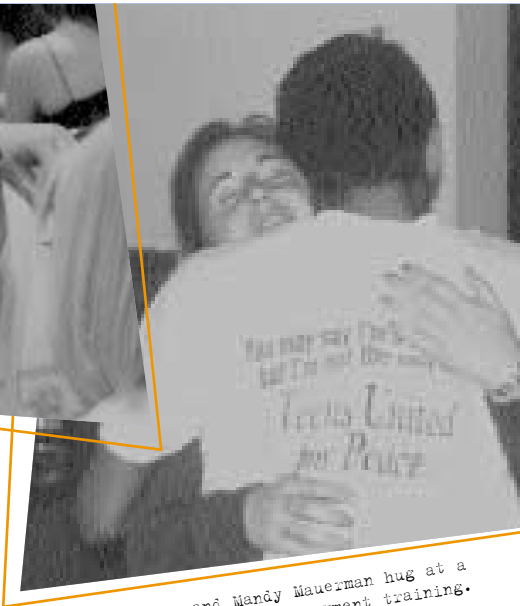
“Cross the line if you have ever lost sleep because you were worried for the safety of someone you love. Cross the line if you have ever thought seriously of, or if someone you care about has ever seriously thought of, or ever attempted, committing suicide. Cross the line if you have ever had to care for someone older than you. Cross the line if you have ever been a child.” A few stayed on the other side, and looking at them I could see why. Around my shoulders was the arm of someone I didn’t even know. I was crying. We finally all sat down.

Back in our groups, we took turns talking, crying, comforting each other, passing around a box of tissues (by the end of the day the floor was littered). The people in my group were amazing. They were so strong and passionate and real during those few minutes. They comforted me, made me feel safe and relieved, heard. It felt so good just to have people listen to me.

After we had said all that we needed to say, and finished drying our eyes, the microphone was handed over to us. People stood up and told the room what they wanted to see change on campus, what they were grateful for, what they had learned. They congratulated each other, thanked each other, apologized. Many people, girls especially, apologized



Jarrett Roque, from Hawai'i.



Gabriel Ramos and Mandy Mauerman hug at a Challenge Day leadership empowerment training.



Natalie Puljiz and Rich St. John-Dutra at a mentor/mentee training.


for talking behind the backs of others with whom they realized that day they had no reason to be enemies.

The year passed, and Challenge Day came again. This time I attended twice.

There is a boy at our school whom everyone knows, who is picked on, made fun of, and harassed every day. He's one of those kids that people will remember in fifteen years as the weirdest kid in school, a freak, a dork. He is also, it turns out, fiercely intelligent, creative, and unfalteringly kind. I learned that day he had twice attempted suicide. On Challenge Day he became the most respected person in the room. By the end of the day almost half the students in the room had apologized to him.

I decided I needed to thank him. I took the microphone and said I had enormous respect for him, that I thought he was brave, and that I hoped he would never have another reason to feel that he had to take his life, that our school and the world, was better off with him in it. He looked at me with eyes that I could not read, but I felt good.

This year Challenge Day was a little bit different. At the end of the day we taped large pieces of paper on our backs and walked around the room trying to write as many nice things on as many people's backs as we could.

When it was over I ripped that piece of paper off my back and eagerly read what people had to say about me. It is now taped to the inside of my closet door. In the lower right hand corner of that paper somebody wrote: "Ana, you are such an unbelievably beautiful person. I had no idea you were so strong. I am here for you." I was glad that I had gone, if just for that. 

Ana Bolling, 16, is a sophomore at a northern California high school. She is also (nepotism be damned) my daughter. —DB



Follow up

Students who attend a Challenge Day can participate in a series of workshops that build upon the experience. The Leadership Program is a one-day workshop for high school peer leaders. Another program trains older students to mentor younger students. The Service Program/Youth Challenge Program (YCP) offers leadership training, along with specific skills for implementing service projects throughout the year. The Bridging the Gap workshop examines the ways we separate by gender and empowers students to end this separation. Faculty Training shows teachers, administrators, and counselors how to take Challenge Day concepts into the classroom.

The program's most recent offspring is a new national movement, "Be the Change."

"It is a movement started by young people who've been a part of Challenge Day and want to challenge everybody to notice, choose, and act in ways that make the world better," says Yvonne. "Then we want to see them document their actions so that everybody can see them." A website is in the works for young people to record positive changes they have made, involving their school, business, or family.

"Our vision is that in five years we will have billboards documenting positive actions, TV shows showing what people have done, classrooms around the country documenting change, so that we can shift from being a fear-based country to one built on hope and inspiration," says Yvonne. "Our goal is to put focus on the people so that they know they are the heroes they have been waiting for." —EP

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