

# Own Stories

High schools in 41 states aren't required to teach ethnic studies—the two young women behind *Diversify Our Narrative* are endeavoring to change that

OF ALL THE BOOKS THAT Jasmine Nguyen's teachers assigned in her four years at Canyon High School, only one was written by a person of color.

"I read ... *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*—and it was optional!" Nguyen says. "In my history courses, things were from a very ... whitewashed lens. I didn't realize that there were other narratives out there."

At Westlake High School, Nguyen's friend Katelin Zhou experienced a similar lack of curricular diversity. Their home state of California is one of about 41 states without an ethnic studies requirement for K-12 students or standards requiring multi-cultural perspectives in core classes. (California, for example, simply encourages schools to offer a "course of study in ethnic studies" from its model curriculum.)

"We weren't exposed to the idea of race in high school, so I felt very disconnected from my Chinese American culture," Zhou says. "At the same time, I experienced a lot of microaggressions from my white peers, so I felt I needed to hide who I was."

Inspired by their conversations about racial justice in the wake of nationwide Black Lives Matter protests, Nguyen and Zhou launched a petition calling for schools to have "at least one book in every English/literature and comprehension class be by a person of color."

More than 77,000 people (and counting) have signed their petition. Nguyen and Zhou realized that many of their community members also desired educational reform, so the two founded *Diversify Our Narrative* as freshmen at Stanford University.

Jasmine Nguyen (left) and Katelin Zhou were inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests.

"Learning about ... the effects of U.S. imperialism ... [taught] me personally, what does it mean to be Vietnamese in the face of white supremacy?" Nguyen says. "I thought, why didn't I learn this before? That's where my anger and hurt came in, as well as a desire to change things for high schoolers who come next."

The movement for more diverse curricula in the U.S. began in the late 1960s and early '70s with student groups such as the Third World Liberation Front and the Association for Ethnic Studies; today, K-12 student organizations have joined the fight. More than 6,000 high school and college students are members of a *Diversify Our Narrative* chapter. Their Instagram page boasts more than 220,000 followers, and they note it's had more than 40 million views.

"When we offer minority students color-blind lessons about U.S. society, it negates their lived experiences, in which they know they live in a racialized world," says Daniel HoSang, an associate professor of ethnicity, race, and migration and American studies at Yale University. "Better curricula are also necessary for white students to understand the history they share."

In California, *Diversify Our Narrative* collaborated with state Assembly member Jose Medina to introduce AB 101. The bill, which passed the legislature in September and now awaits the governor's signature, would make ethnic studies a requirement

in the state's high schools.

"Assembly member Medina has been working with an entire coalition of student advocates ... to include their voice," says Julianne Cravotto, a legislative aide. "The need for this bill is something we've been hearing from students over and over again."

Nguyen and Zhou advise a team of 12 students who create and compile resources for teachers. Erin Miller, an instructor in AP literature (and Nguyen's former teacher), is one of some 2,000 educators who use *Diversify Our Narrative's* lesson plans.

"What Jasmine started pushed me to implement literature that wasn't just [by] a white dude," Miller says, laughing. "The lessons they're putting together make you feel comfortable teaching material that might be brand-new to you."

Last winter, the organization partnered with the NFL Players Association to create a 12-day anti-racist book campaign. Now they are working on a collaboration with the National Women's Soccer League.

"Being able to understand your history is so powerful," Nguyen says. "That's why we fight the way we fight."

—KATHERINE OUNG

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