

ParentMap 2017 Superhero Jesse Hagopian: The Change Agent

Wednesday, April 5 2017, 11:19 AM

PARENTING/MINDFULNESS

ParentMap 2017 Superhero Jesse Hagopian: The Change Agent

A Q&A with a Garfield High School teacher

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER

PUBLISHED ON: MARCH 31, 2017



Jesse Hagopian was a new teacher in one of the most impoverished and segregated schools in America when he looked out his classroom



window and saw smoke rising from the Pentagon. It was Sept. 11, 2001 — a day that cemented Hagopian's personal mission to fight inequality.



“What really scared me was how quickly the government could mobilize untold millions

*Jesse Hagopian with former students.
Photo credit: Will Austin*

for war [in the wake of Sept. 11], but could not pay to fix the hole in my classroom's roof,” he says. He saw the same skewed priorities when the Great Recession hit. Hagopian, who had returned to his hometown of Seattle after teaching for three years in Washington, D.C., was among the 5 percent of teachers laid off by [Seattle Public Schools \(SPS\)](#) in 2009.

“The government spent trillions to bail out banks, but kids, schools, teachers — these were not important,” he says.

While unemployed, Hagopian, his wife and their 1-year-old went on a public health education trip to Haiti; the family arrived days before a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck on Jan. 12, 2010.

“We were there for five days before we were evacuated,” he says. The hotel the family was staying at was converted into a clinic; the local hospital had collapsed. “We were breaking chairs to make splints,” he says. “I still struggle to recount and deal with the PTSD from watching people die and seeing children with severe injuries.”

The quake's death toll of more than a quarter million people shouldn't have been that high, says Hagopian, but weak infrastructure and extreme poverty combined to create Haiti's

infrastructure and extreme poverty combined to create that devastation. "I want to eradicate the poverty that made that earthquake so deadly," he says.

To do that, Hagopian focuses his efforts on education. Rehired by SPS in 2010 to teach history at [Garfield High School](#), where he himself graduated, Hagopian advises the school's Black Student Union. He's also an organizer for the [Social Equality Educators \(SEE\)](#), a Seattle Education Association group that focuses on social justice within the union and in the classroom.

In addition to this, Hagopian serves on the editorial board of *Rethinking Schools*, a magazine by and for teachers that shares math, science and arts lessons with social justice themes. He's also edited the book *More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing*; appeared on NBC's *Education Nation* and *PBS NewsHour*; and given a TEDx talk about alternatives to standardized testing.

"We need to make education less about preparing for the next high-stakes test and eliminating wrong answer choices, and make it more about issues in students' own lives," he says. "We need to truly start valuing the diversity of students in Seattle public schools."

With this aim in mind, Hagopian helped organize the Garfield teachers' 2013 boycott of the MAP standardized test. The boycott eventually included seven other SPS schools.

More recently, Hagopian and SEE organized Black Lives Matter at School. They planned this day of solidarity last fall after threats of violence resulted in the cancellation of an event at John Muir Elementary School designed to dispel stereotypes about black

men. In response, SEE planned Black Lives Matter — a day when teachers wore “Black Lives Matter” shirts and taught lessons on institutional racism.

SEE expected a few dozen teachers throughout the district to participate. Instead, thousands of teachers were joined by staff and students in “Black Lives Matter” shirts. Schools throughout the district hosted rallies, while teachers shared lessons on institutional racism.

“Families flocked to schools, setting up tables with materials talking about race,” Hagopian says. “They raised issues like the suspension-rates disparity in the district, and called for ethnic studies in the curriculum.” Black Lives Matter at School received national attention and inspired similar events in other cities, including Philadelphia and New York.

Also, last year, Hagopian established the Black Education Matters Student Activist Award using money he received in a settlement with the City of Seattle (a police officer was caught on video pepper-spraying Hagopian at a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event in 2015). To date, he’s awarded three \$1,000 prizes to student activists, with applications [currently open for this spring’s award](#).

Hagopian’s ultimate goal, he says, is to motivate students to make change: “We need to strengthen public schools to really empower all our students to use their education not just for personal gain, but to transform their communities.”

MEET OUR OTHER 2017 SUPERHEROES!

QWhat did you want to be when you grew up?

A baseball player. Teacher might have been at the very bottom of the list.

QWhat's the most misunderstood part of your job?

I think the immense challenge of creating a room that respects and empowers all students with abilities beyond what can be tested. Most of what I do isn't about a score on an exam — it's teaching them to be more kind and collaborative, and to solve problems together.

QWhat book saved you or changed your life?

Several. Malcolm X's autobiography, *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol, and Angela Davis' autobiography were crucial. Those three books, when I read them in college, made me want to pursue the path I'm on.

QIf you could have one superhero power, what would it be and why?

When I was a kid, I thought controlling time — to be able to go

back and solve problems before they started. Today, I want the power to help kids solve problems in the classroom.

Q On a rainy Pacific Northwest morning, what gets you motivated and out of bed?

My kids [Hagopian has two sons, ages 8 and 4] are the biggest motivator, whether literally — jumping on me, demanding I get up — or just their immense smiles. They make me want to get up and see what they'll do.

Q If you could dine with anyone, alive or dead, who would that be and why?

I'm very inspired by Angela Davis. I've been following her work for so long on reforming the

justice system. I'd love to get a chance to meet her.

Someone I'm really intrigued with is Emmett Till's mom, Mamie Till. [Emmett] was lynched in the South [in 1955]. His mom was a Chicago public school teacher. Her decision to show the world what they did helped catalyze the civil rights movement. She was also an activist for education and teachers' rights. She fought unfair standardized tests that were used to keep black teachers from getting full-time employment status. She helped transform the world.

As a musician, I would love to get to meet Billie Holiday. She transformed music with her approach to rhythm, but she also

used her platform to speak out on social issues. She used “Strange Fruit” to launch her solo career against all advice, and it emboldened so many others.

READ NEXT



Should My Child Go to Public or Private School?



High School, High Stakes



The Rise of Science Fairs (And Why They Matter)

RELATED TOPICS

- [SUPERHEROES](#)
- [CIVIL RIGHTS](#)
- [PRINT STORIES](#)
- [Q & A](#)
- [SCHOOLS](#)
- [TEACHERS](#)

Share this article with your friends!



ABOUT AUTHOR



BY GEMMA ALEXANDER

Gemma Alexander is a Seattle-based freelance writer with two daughters. When she is not writing for ParentMap, she [blogs about books and travel](#) and spends too much time on Twitter.

Too Young to Vote: Local Teens Seek Change With...

How to Take Your Kid to a Political March, Parade or Other Large...

[OTHER ARTICLES BY THIS AUTHOR](#)

LEAVE A COMMENT

HIDE COMMENTS



SIGN UP

Get the latest adventures, tips, tools, getaways and giveaways delivered to your inbox.

CHOOSE YOUR REGION

- Seattle Area
- Eastside
- South Sound
- North Sound
- National

POPULAR NOW

1 What to Expect From This Year's MamaCon



2 7 Upcycled Storage Solutions to Organize Your Home



3 10 Spring and Earth Day Crafts and Activities for Kids



4 13 Mother's Day Gifts That Kids Can Make



5 The Best Perk at This New Seattle Co-Working Space?



HAPPENING

APR
5 **Seattle Center Whirligig!**

APR
6 **Skagit Valley Tulip Festival**

APR
6 **Wild Week of Play**

APR 6 **Nordic Stories at the Nordic Heritage Museum**

APR 6 **Free First Thursday at Participating Museums**

[VIEW FULL CALENDAR](#)