

## **Civic Keynote by Marlon Rajan**

**Delivered March 25, 2018 in Joe's Pub at The Public Theater**

Good afternoon, everyone! My name is Marlon Rajan. I am a senior at the NYC LAB High School for Collaborative Studies and a youth organizer with the NYCLU's Teen Activist Project (also known as TAP). I am here today to share with you my experience in community organizing as a teen in New York City, and I hope that you too can organize yourselves around whatever issues you may be passionate about.

As a queer person of color in New York City, I believe it is so important to bring people together as so many of us face countless attacks on our identities and our rights under the current administration. But my interest in politics and advocacy began with Columbia University's Empowering Youth in Politics program. I attended it during my freshman year at LAB, and the graduate students taught me what I needed to know about the various branches of government - enough to understand how politics and elections worked in our country. At the end of that program, I presented a project on gun control to Barnard professors - specifically calling for change to the Stand Your Ground law in Florida, which allows defendants to use force without retreating. That law was determined to be unconstitutional in July of 2017 - I feel like my project may have helped contribute to that decision somehow.

Since then, I have been involved in several other programs with various organizations to keep myself engaged in what is happening in the city and around the country. I have been in NYCLU's Teen Activist Project for two years. TAP began as the Teen Health Initiative in 1997, with the mission of removing barriers that stop young people from accessing health services and information, and today has expanded to work on a wide range of NYCLU advocacy issues.

In TAP, there is a core group of 25 high schoolers that come from all five boroughs and represent diverse and intersecting identities. Each one of us is trained on issues like minors' rights to confidential health care, immigration, LGBTQ+ rights in schools, and ending the school to prison pipeline. We facilitate workshops around these issues to schools across NYC, speak at New York City Council hearings, and lobby at the state capitol in Albany to ensure that our voices are being heard. Last year, I had the opportunity to speak about the problems with New York's current Human Rights Law in public schools at Albany for NYCLU's Day of Action. What started as a smaller youth program has since grown and provides over a hundred young people in New York City with the opportunity to mobilize around social justice.

I find power in my participation. In addition to being a part of the TAP program, I became the leader of my schools' Gender and Sexuality Alliance this year. I took part in the YW's FemSem program on intersectional feminism. I participated in the Parkland Shooting walkout on March 14th, which was documented on NYCLU's Instagram story. Yesterday, I helped mobilize LAB's GSA and Stop Slut Shaming clubs for the March For Our Lives. By continuously and unapologetically being involved in organizing opportunities for youth action, I feel that I am proving that the future is worth investing in. When Trump was inaugurated, many people decided that the only option was to leave the states. Everywhere I turned people were making 'backup plans' to flee to family and friends in other countries. I responded in the opposite way - January 20th proved to me that I was going to stay here. I am not going to leave the millions that do not have the privilege of a 'backup plan.' I refuse to accept that it is over. More change is yet to come. My generation will rise through this rift and we will bring about a new age. When I turn 18 in four days, the first thing I am going to do is register to vote.

The first step towards creating change is showing up. If you want, you can bring other people with you, but you do not have to. After the Pulse shootings, I attended Willing Participant's meeting on organizing a public performance in response. The name of their community is exactly what it means to make a change: be a willing participant. Committing yourself to be a part of the headcount is worth something. There is power in numbers. If you never show up, you'll never be there to listen. So show up. Bring yourself, like you brought yourself here today. Really listen to what people are saying. Mark that you are attending on the Facebook page. Use the hashtag. Tag yourself on Instagram. Post a 280-character statement. Then, engage. Apply yourself. Sure, I am physically present in weekly meetings with the NYCLU, but I also take what I learn and I spread it. I take stacks of Know Your Rights pamphlets to my school and distribute them to classrooms. I help make foldable zines to distribute around the city. I follow queer artists on social media. I use the opportunities I am given to sometimes pass the mic to people who are underrepresented. Why engage? Because of yesterday. The turnout was thousands more than expected. Emma Gonzalez spoke out, said her experience in Parkland should be the last experience, and that's why yesterday happened. For every issue you're passionate about, there's a chance for a global movement. Our country is full of people with big hearts; we have wonderful organizations who are doing good work. Even small groups are doing big things. If you have an interest, you can find a place and a way to contribute.

Being someone who actively participates in our modern world is not so hard. You do not have to be the organizer or the founder to make a difference. Dismantle the idea that only adults are the experts. Youth are knowledge creators and are often the closest to the problem. The first step towards change is showing up. From there, you can go anywhere.

Thank you to The Public Theater and their Civic Salons for inviting me to speak with you all today.