



In Middle School, It's All About Communication

By Gwyneth MacMurtrie, Morven Park's Director of Education

This February, the Morven Park education team heads back to middle school! In our middle school programs, *Kitchen Table* and *Stars and Stripes*, we ask students to understand different points of view while defending their own perspective. Most importantly, students learn how to confidently communicate when varying viewpoints are in play and how to effectively deliberate in order to reach a consensus.

Kitchen Table is our longest-running civics program. The idea was conceived when Morven Park staff imagined the conversations that might have taken place around the actual kitchen table in the Davis Mansion. Think about the conversations you have had with family and friends around your kitchen table. Does everyone always agree? Has anyone had a change of heart because of new information introduced during a conversation? When talking about an issue, do you see where both sides are coming from? This is what we ask 7th graders to think about as we introduce them to the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era.

First, a little background. In the late 1800s, the country was emerging from the Gilded Age, a time of rapid economic growth. "Gilding" means applying a fine layer of gold over a cheaper material such as wood. During the Gilded Age, titans of industry such as the Vanderbilt family (railroads), Andrew Carnegie (steel), and J.P. Morgan (banking) expanded their fortunes when new technologies allowed them to provide products and services more easily and cheaply. America's progress looked great on the surface, but many problems lurked underneath the shiny exterior. Poor wages, unsafe working conditions, and misuse of environmental resources were rampant, causing everyday citizens to finally confront these issues and try to develop solutions. Enter the Progressive Era (1880s-1920s), a time of great political and social change, and a focal point for the *Kitchen Table* exercise.



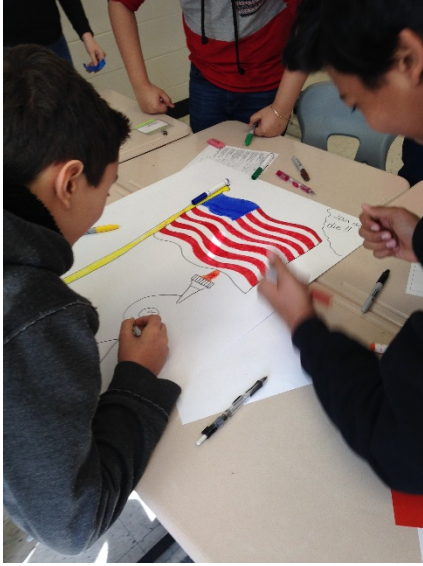
Middle schoolers participating in the *Kitchen Table* program.
Photo credit: Melanie Neubaum

During *Kitchen Table*, students receive reading material on either labor rights or environmental conservation, both hot button social and political issues of the Progressive Era. The information given to them balances the needs of businesses with that of laborers and the environment. After reviewing the information, students are asked to consider two divergent solutions from the time period and identify the pros and cons of each. They must decide which solution they want to support and then prepare for deliberation.

During deliberation, two sides work to find consensus. This does not mean there cannot be passion or disagreement, but both sides should be able to understand the opposing viewpoint. Students participating in *Kitchen Table* are asked to advocate on behalf of the businesses, the workers, and the environment, in order to see the importance and value of all sides. Even if every student favors the same side, they often find they have differing opinions on how to solve the issue and must work toward compromise. Throughout the deliberation, students are asked to wear a bowler hat (a symbol from the Progressive Era) and display their viewpoint via a button attached to the hat. Periodically, we ask them to swap their button for another one, and—just like that they must be ready to defend another group's interests and come to terms with another viewpoint from the era, whether they initially agreed with it or not.

Our other popular middle school program, *Stars and Stripes*, focuses on communicating through visual messages such as symbols and propaganda. Students assemble puzzles portraying six different historic events and learn how each puzzle image represents a reason why America chose to remain neutral at the start of World War I, but

later joined the war effort. To ensure they understand the significance of the events depicted on the puzzles, students are asked to draft a telegram describing the event using 10 words or less. They are also asked to use colored slips of paper on their nametags to identify their position—neutrality or participation in the war.



Middle schoolers creating their own propaganda pieces as part of the Stars and Stripes program.

All of this leads up to a discussion about propaganda, featuring digital copies of actual WWI posters found in the Davis Mansion collection. Students learn what propaganda is (and isn't), how it is used, and key visual tools employed by artists to convey messages. As they learn about the visual imagery that was used to sway opinions on the war, they too are asked to vote (within their groups) on America's level of involvement in WWI and create their own propaganda piece to support their decision.

As adults, we realize that communicating effectively and persuasively takes time and practice to perfect. In *Kitchen Table* and *Stars and Stripes*, we provide the safety of an historic backdrop to practice these skills. The middle schoolers who participate in these Morven Park civics programs are learning various communication techniques and deliberation tactics, all while building confidence in themselves. These skills will come into play not only when we see them again in 8th grade, but also as they prepare for high school and progress into adulthood.