

2021 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

# Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

■ CHRIS DIER



**H**istory can be defined in part by who tells it.

The late H. Councill Trenholm, legendary African American Executive Director of the American Teachers Association (ATA), believed that equally important, is how it's told. This year's H. Councill Trenholm award recipient, Chris Dier, embraces the who, how and why. Dier, a U.S. History teacher at New Orleans' Benjamin Franklin High School, was named 2020's State of Louisiana Teacher of the Year for good reason.

Like H. Councill Trenholm, Dier's teaching philosophy is to tell America's story with a focus on recognizing and respecting the diversity of his young charges. Chris Dier makes the connection to how history impacts ones present and future by reaching the hearts of his students and inspiring them to enact change in their own lives, in their community, and globally.

Dier empowers youth by demonstrating that history is a powerful tool to affect change, and to become their own personal change agents. By putting a human face on this country's glorious, yet often tragic history, he creates vivid pictures for an increasingly tech savvy, while too frequently cynical, generation.

Dier ensures students from marginalized communities are consistently made part of the dominant American narrative. His classroom not only builds empathy, but allows those previously unheard to be part of the larger conversation.

Dier runs history class as a "social laboratory", challenging students to confront pre-conceived notions of race and identity, while simultaneously pushing young people to redefine notions of themselves. Incorporating literature not often standard in American History curricula, the benefits of diversity and the dangers of discrimination are covered in one 40-minute period, with kids intellectually engaged beyond the last bell. By emphasizing identity, introducing underrepresented perspectives, and connecting history to today, his students gain an understanding of the roots and complexities of structural injustice and realize their power to change it. This inspires students to organize to courageously push for change.

Students read oral histories from Mexican-American Holocaust survivors; study the Nazis persecution

of persons with disabilities, but the focus isn't solely "Oppression Therapy". Students journey from the self-determination of Black Wall Street in 1921 Tulsa, to the revolutionary art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Dier puts the success stories front and center, and links the past to the present. He connects systemic racism under Jim Crow to modern law enforcement practices; compares Stonewall-era LGBTQ activism to the present-day #blacklivesmatter movement; and how Civil Rights legislation in the 1960's opened doors for Asian immigration to our shores. Dier sponsors a weekly club where students informally gather to discuss contemporary solutions to past issues. The connections drawn are unreal.

In 2020, he was awarded a fellowship from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) to draft culturally responsive social studies curriculum, and currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Louisiana Association of Educators.

History's easy to embrace when one's aware of their place in it. Chris Dier is certainly making history in "The Big Easy"... we guarantee.

