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## What is a Challenge Day?

The guy in the middle of the room screamed into the handheld microphone: "OK, everybody. We're gonna play a game." The whole place exploded with shouts and high fives. I was there. And this time, I was not the guy in the middle of the room.

Challenge Day for me was the Monday after Thanksgiving. I was in an auditorium at Euclid High School with 80 young men and women selected from a diverse student population. There were also 20 adult volunteers and two Challenge Day staff: Jyoti and Vinnie.

The atmosphere was charged with more nervous anticipation than any of us preferred, but we were signed up to be together till 2:30pm. Let's get on with it. We were divided into two groups, facing each other on opposite sides of the room.

"I need everyone who is wearing socks to run to the other side of the room," Vinnie shouted. It was mayhem. It reminded me of the opening break in a billiards game. Within a few moments, however, we were all seated in a large ring of folding chairs listening to the introduction of the day, being invited to jump in fully, and promising to obey all the rules. Nobody left the room.

Kathleen McDonnell, director of Conflict Mediation Program at EHS, knew of Beacon Street's interest in addressing bullying and invited me to be a participant in another of the school's scheduled Challenge Days.

"Challenge Day, a nonprofit organization ([challengeday.org](http://challengeday.org)), conducts transformational workshops in schools in 30 states, 2 provinces of Canada, and the International School system. Their award-winning programs have been tearing down the walls of separation since 1987. The Challenge Day program provides youth, teachers, families and communities with tools to develop and sustain proactive solutions that address and prevent isolation, violence and other manifestations of social oppression. Programs inspire young people to live in a world of respect, acceptance and compassion." It looked like a worthy antidote to bullying to me.

Vinnie and Jyoti introduced themselves. You can see their photos (Meet the People/Leaders) and read their story on the web site. Within the first half-hour they had kids admitting that things could be better at EHS. Then they shared the vision of Challenge Day: "that every child lives in a world where they feel safe, loved, and celebrated." And they said the school was as close to that vision as our desire to make it so. It is up to us to *notice* how things are, *choose* how we want them to be, and then *act* in a way that will produce results.

Euclid is a big school and many of the classmates in the room were strangers to each other. Various exercises and short story-sharing episodes began to break down the inhibitions. Still, most of the faces revealed precious little of what was going on inside.

So the leaders spoke up again, for long stretches of time, often revealing circumstances in their lives when they were neither safe nor celebrated. But each of them went on to describe how they were loved out of that hellish environment, and how they keep from going back. It was as if they took turns standing in the middle of the room asking everyone: "Do you want to know a secret?" And everyone in the folding chairs leaned forward, just a little.

*For millions of young people every day, violence and alienation has become deeply ingrained in their school experience. Social isolation affects character development and can leave lasting scars. Challenge Day is doing something about it...*

Everyone agreed to confidentiality, but even if I could detail all that took place that day my words would fall miserably short of the experience. By day's end, however, the change was palpable. A student who had attempted suicide stood to address his peers and asked us to be accepted. Another student who had hung with a small crowd all day briefly

described trauma that made him an adult long before his time. A young lady publicly apologized to a classmate for what she had said about her. There were tears of relief and hugs of acceptance. The adult volunteer sitting in my seat was deeply humbled by the expressions of sorrow and gladness all around me. It had been a day of challenge and the kids had demonstrated they were up to the task.

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