

Changa Bey: Builder of Stories, Constructor of Citizens



Changa Bey comes from a long line of builders. His ancestors were carpenters, builders, woodworkers, and mechanics in Alexandria, Louisiana, before moving to Detroit as part of the Great Migration. His grandfather built the home he lived in. He has one uncle who is a master mechanic and another who is a sculpture and visual artist. The family is imbued with a driving force to create and build, leaving behind legacies for generations. Bey continues their tradition through his profession. The Upper School history teacher carefully constructs stories that accurately portray the world events that continue to shape our lives today and engages his students in deep, meaningful conversations. He wants learners to understand their places and their value within society, and graduate armed with the knowledge they need to meet the challenges of this world with confidence, embrace all its people with compassion, think critically, stand for what is good and right, and create lives of purpose and service. He's teaching students to thrive in—and protect—democracy through good citizenship. It's a hefty job, and Bey throws himself into it every day with passion and creativity.

When he was young, Bey's family owned a health food store on the westside of Detroit and he grew up seeing the blueprints his father had drawn up for the building. Inspired, he began his secondary education studies as a math major, hoping to become an architectural engineer. He was an excellent student and knew that he could make a good living as an engineer. Differential equations and a boring internship making truck transmissions showed him that his heart yearned for something different: the humanities. He realized that all of his electives were humanities courses, and he enjoyed them. Ever practical, he considered his options and analyzed the earning potential for a history or sociology degree. Then he realized that his own humanities professors were modeling the life he wanted: they traveled the world, taught, wrote books, and were "living just fine." He made the leap.

"My degree is in history and Africana studies, an interdisciplinary course that blends in a number of different social sciences with a focus on the life of Africans in the Americas, displaced due to the transatlantic slave trade," he said. "I'm a social scientist, so the

history I tend to focus on is the stories, the narratives. Historians aren't just historians, you have to incorporate anthropology, archaeology, and sociology. You're trying to put together a story, and there's a fair amount of science involved." After he graduated, he worked at the Museum of African American history in Detroit, bringing stories to life and finding his connection to that human story. He tackled a major project in Barbados, collecting oral and written histories to build a history of chattel houses that turned into a documentary. After returning from nearly a year in Barbados, he moved to Brooklyn where he worked at the Brooklyn Museum and the Lower Eastside Tenement Museum.

He eventually landed at the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis and, after a while, realized that he had maxed out his opportunities for growth in his role as assistant director of education. By that point, he and his wife, Angelique, were expecting their first child. The person who had originally hired him at the historical society called him out of the blue, offering a job as a teacher in Maplewood. Looming parenthood, new challenges, and the idea of having summers off sealed the deal, and Bey made the leap from working history professional to teacher.

His son was born on the first day of school. "My first year of teaching was a total blur," he said. "I didn't know what I was doing on any level, but a lot of what I was doing in museum education was transferable to the classroom in terms of interpreting history and getting people to look at objects and have discussions." After two years, he came to MICDS and appreciated the freedom to bring creativity to his classroom. "When I came here it all clicked because classroom management issues weren't as big of a challenge and I could come in and do my thing." Like many of our teachers, he was hired in part because he had been a working professional, not necessarily because of his teaching experience, and it's that background that he brings to his students every day. He's now in his 12th year of teaching at MICDS.

One of the ideas he hopes his students understand is that, traditionally, history has not been designed to record the life of the common man. Based on the classical definition of history, there has to be writing and some type of official record-keeping. It's a Euro-centric definition of history that doesn't take into account societies that didn't rely on writing, such as indigenous people who pass their history down through the tradition of oral storytelling. Bey was attracted to public history, which seeks to put together

>> continued on page 16

"When I came here it all clicked because classroom management issues weren't as big of a challenge and I could come in and do my thing."



"I don't want kids to value only the smart kid in class, but to look at the experiences of everyone, recognize how they contribute to their understanding, and learn why it is important to get multiple perspectives."



>> continued from page 15

the story of history through non-traditional means. "It's more than the written record," he explained. "It's material culture, archeology, and anthropology, a patchwork quilt. That always fascinated me not just because I like the story but putting together the story means I'm building something, constructing something, just like all the men in my family."

He quotes an African proverb: "Until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter." History, he points out, was designed to follow literally note-worthy people. Kings and queens have official court historians and they keep the stories alive of the most important people in that society. "What we're able to do with history now is to get the story of the common man and the common woman and what's happening on the ground. Pharaoh built the pyramids but the people all around him were creating tools and villages and rioting, and you can see where you fit into there."

History class today is probably nothing like you experienced. "The power of the history classroom now is the conversation, it's not the information," said Bey, nodding toward his smartphone that can call up dates, names, and locations with a few taps. "It's sifting through the stories and trying to make sense of it and trying to find threads and commonalities." He shares these stories in his classroom and challenges his students to dig deep, relegating dates to internet searches. "What do we do with all the ingredients now? How do we make it make sense?" he asks his students. "If you're learning history using flashcards, you're not going to get it. You'll get the pieces, but you won't have anything to eat: bread, lettuce, meat, and condiments, but you still don't have a sandwich."

Ultimately, he wants these stories to inspire connection and empathy. He wants his students to see themselves in the stories, and to see others, too. His master's work in global awareness and citizenship education narrowed his focus to democratic peace theory, which postulates that no

two democracies have ever gone to war with each other. Theoretically, to increase peace, we must increase democracy. Bey works to relate this to education, teaching students to be functional members of a democratic society. "It's about your voice, yes, but also about understanding your value to society," he said. "I want them to understand their value to themselves, to their classmates, to the classroom, and to me, as their teacher." Many people think that democracy is just about voting, Bey says, but it's also about human value, and the value of people in a society regardless of what they make. "I don't want kids to value only the smart kid in class, but to look at the experiences of everyone, recognize how they contribute to their understanding, and learn why it is important to get multiple perspectives."

Much of this happens through open, vigorous dialogue, and Bey finds inspiration from his high school English teacher. One time, as the class read *The Great Gatsby*, she wrote "money, power, and respect" on the chalkboard, which just happened to be the title of a popular rap song at the time. She had also written, "Do they come in this order?" Bey remembers that Mrs. Teague arrived ten minutes late to class, asking, "What are you talking about?" His classroom had been filled with vibrant discussion even before she came in, and then she carefully guided them through a connection to *The Great Gatsby* and how they relate to it even today. "Until I started teaching, I didn't realize what she was doing," he said. "She's a genius. Those are the types of things I like to do in the classroom. When you walk in, everything is fair game to discuss. Game on."

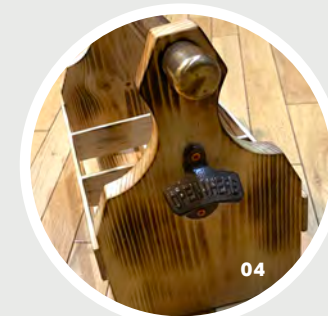
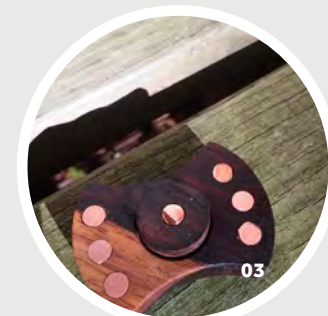
Connecting with students happens all around campus, as Bey also serves as an Upper School advisor and as a coach for boys golf and cross country. He teaches his student-athletes an understanding of what it means to be an athlete and the responsibilities that go into competing. He remembers that sports—and running in particular—were a place he found faculty, capability, and escape when he was a student, and promises his students that they'll see results through commitment, focus, and dedication. He's the faculty advisor for the Muslim Student Association, a diverse group where he's able to champion MICDS' Muslim student population and help facilitate their voice. He also offers students the Sneakerhead Club, which is actually



designed to be a service club where students can learn how to take a passion that may seem trivial and consumeristic and learn how to find purpose. Sneakerheads can connect with global organizations that are seeking to help people in places that don't have easy access to shoes.

When he's not teaching, coaching, advising, or facilitating, and beyond raising two children with Angelique, he is still building. He's constantly designing, building, and creating things out of wood, metal, leather, and thermoplastics. He runs a small business, and he teaches a woodworking and fabrications class in the MICDS Pegasus summer camp. This past summer, he designed and built beverage caddies made of wood and copper. And he's in the second round of editing a techno-thriller novel in which the protagonist is a history professor that he began writing when the pandemic started.

"If there is a gene for making stuff, my family has it," he said. MICDS is lucky to have this productive creator and builder of stories, and promoter of student dreams and civic responsibility.



01. Bey created this bespoke pandemic mask out of leather.
02. By molding plastic trays himself, Bey can create custom patterns.
03. Bey takes the fidget spinner to a new level with African mahogany and copper.
04. This beverage caddy comes with a bottle opener on the end.