

READING

What Difference Can a Word Make?

What encourages people to act on behalf of others? Do words have the power to influence the choices people make?

Raphael Lemkin witnessed a “crime without a name” in the early twentieth century and believed that giving that crime a name, *genocide*, was an essential step toward preventing it from occurring again in the future. In 2014, two New Jersey high-school students began a campaign to promote a word, *upstander*, that gave a name to a behavior that is crucial for building stronger communities and a more humane world. The students, Monica Mahal and Sarah Decker, explain:

Students can easily recognize the bully, the “bad guy,” the one throwing the punches . . . and most can point out the bystanders, the individuals in the shadows, watching and doing nothing . . . so who are the upstanders?

An upstander is an individual who sees wrong and acts, and the most important part is that anyone can become one. Many . . . call the act of standing up “positive bystander intervention,” but this misses the point. A person who takes a stand against an act of injustice or intolerance is not a “positive bystander,” they are an UPstander. The word itself has the ability to empower students to make an active change in their schools, in an effort to build communities that support difference and unify against intolerance.

The concept of an upstander is critical to the well-being of our society. During bullying prevention movements in our school, the term upstander was used on a casual basis. While we were typing up a speech, huddled in a coffee shop on a cold winter day, the word upstander continued to appear on the screen with the distinct red squiggly line beneath it. The message was clear: there is an error.

We both double checked our spelling, still to no avail of eliminating the spell check notification. At that moment we realized that this groundbreaking term, one that has inspired our own local community to eschew intolerance, is technically not an official English word. Since then, we have been determined to give upstander its deserved spot in the dictionary.

Getting a word in the dictionary involves two key steps: increasing its usage and proving its prevalence in publications. The term upstander is used in diplomacy, particularly by

UN Ambassador Samantha Power; in non-profit organizations, such as Facing History and Ourselves; and especially in tolerance movements. We seek to form a united front to bring awareness of this cause to the Oxford and Webster dictionaries. To do so, we have created a Change.org petition to gather support for the upstander movement. . . .

Each one of us has the power and courage to rise as upstanders, to stand up against injustice. To change our communities, our countries, and even our world. Defining the term upstander will add legitimacy to this role, and serve as a concept that our society should strive to embrace. Together as upstanders, we can change the course of human history towards a future of mindful, active global citizens.¹

Mahal and Decker's petition gathered hundreds of signatures online, and their campaign caught the attention of several New Jersey lawmakers. In June 2015, the New Jersey legislature approved a resolution that declared the state's support for the campaign to include *upstander* in both the Oxford and the Merriam-Webster dictionaries. Soon the dictionary publishers responded in a blog post:

Oxford University Press frequently receives requests from members of the public to add a particular word to our dictionaries, but an official legislative resolution supporting a word's inclusion may be unprecedented. Nonetheless, that is what happened on June 29, 2015, when the New Jersey State Senate approved a resolution "urging Merriam-Webster, Inc. and the Oxford University Press to include the word *upstander* in their dictionaries." The resolution was the culmination of a years-long effort which arose from an anti-bullying campaign by New Jersey high school students . . .

The New Jersey Senate resolution traces this usage to Samantha Power, current US Ambassador to the United Nations and author of the book *A Problem from Hell: America & the Age of Genocide*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. In discussing the topic of her book, Power used the term *upstander* to describe individuals who spoke out against genocide, like Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during the Armenian genocide, and Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term *genocide* after World War II. It wasn't long before this strand of meaning was adopted by others and extended from the specific context of genocide to those who stand up for others in the face of any type of prejudice or injustice, including bullying in schools. In 2004, for example, a Holocaust survivor named Lisl Bogart used the term in a presentation to Florida schoolchildren about her experiences during the war:

"I want to ask you today to be upstanders and not bystanders. When you see another student being picked on for being different, stand up for him. When you hear a student

¹ Sarah Decker and Monica Mahal, "Define Upstander," Not in Our Town blog, entry posted October 22, 2014, accessed October 16, 2015.

being called names, stand up for her. Don't be a silent bystander. Be an upstander." (2004 Palm Beach Post 19 December)²

The Oxford University Press added *upstander* to its list of words for potential inclusion in February 2014 and began to monitor how frequently the word was used in publications and public speeches. In December 2016, *upstander* was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a result of the campaign begun by Mahal and Decker.

² Oxford Dictionaries, "Legislation meets lexicography: the campaign for dictionary recognition of the word 'upstander,'" OxfordWords (blog), entry posted July 24, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015.

Connection Questions

1. What does the word *upstander* mean? Where did it come from?
2. How did Monica Mahal and Sarah Decker discover that *upstander* was not in the dictionary? Why did they decide to start a campaign to add the word to the dictionary?
3. What difference might it make to have the word *upstander* included in the dictionary?
4. Raphael Lemkin believed that new words are created when new social phenomena “strike at our consciousness.” How can coining new words help us understand difficult problems in the world? What is the role of language in dealing with social ills? How do innovations in language educate those who use the language?