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One lawyer's quest to teach America's high schoolers about the democratic process

By Glenn Jeffers

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When Laura W. Brill started The Civics Center, a nonprofit that works with schools to preregister 16- and 17-year-olds to vote when they turn 18, she had a feeling the idea would be well received.

"There's such an incredible vacuum around high schools and involvement in voting, and there's a huge opportunity for students to register to vote before they graduate," said Brill, a founding partner of Kendall Brill & Kelly LLP in Century City. "There was virtually no one taking advantage of this opportunity. So I thought putting those two together would take hold."

The organization has expanded from its initial roots in Los Angeles and Orange counties to launching high school voter preregistration clubs in more than 25 states. In September, the group held its inaugural "High School Voter Registration Week," which registered more than 4,000 teenagers to vote in upcoming elections.

For Brill, it's about informing young people about their rights — which many still don't understand — and getting them involved in the political process, she said.

Last year, only 14% of 16- and 17-year-olds in California were preregistered to vote, Brill said. Although a state-sponsored drive in April added an additional 100,000 preregistered voters, the numbers pale in comparison to other states including Oregon and Colorado, Brill said. It didn't help that Gov. Gavin Newsom vetoed Assembly Bill 773 in October, which would have required California public schools to provide preregistration and registration information to students, Brill indicated. Newsom cited the state's April drive as part of his reason for vetoing the bill. Brill said she sees it as a lost opportunity. Nearly 3.7 million students graduate from high school every year, she said, including 400,000 from California.

"That surprised me," Brill said of the veto. "We have some good laws but very low levels of implementation."

Those lower levels affect how young people view the political process and

democracy as a whole, Brill said. She cited a Journal of Democracy report that found 30% percent of U.S. millennials don't find democracy essential.

"I haven't seen any research that says the kids growing up now are feeling any better about it," Brill said.

"If we can't get young people involved and show them that democracy can be responsive and they can have a voice, then it's going to be hard to hold onto a democracy," added Brill. "That's why it's critical that we get young people involved and show them that they can have a role."

Brill's push to get young people involved first began in 2017 when she came upon Senate Bill 113, a law Gov. Jerry Brown signed in 2014 that allows teenagers to register to vote once they turn 16. Known for her appellate work at Kendall Brill & Kelly LLP, often dealing with cases involving voting rights and election laws, Brill said she was taken aback.

"I found it so stunning," she said. "Here I was, a mother of a 16 year old, a lawyer who does voting rights related work, and I had never heard of this law."

She then came across a law in the California Education Code devoting the last two weeks in September to voting registration awareness in high schools and tasking teachers to become registration coordinators. When Brill reached out to the Secretary of State for a list of schools with coordinators, she learned 20% complied with the law statewide, she said.

So Brill started reaching out to different schools, developing a list of contacts. She started passing along information she collected on starting registration drives and complying with the laws. Soon, she was hearing from teachers. They wanted to start preregistering students, but they needed help, she said.

Brill tried to find a program that could help, but many told her they were too busy. Finally, a friend at Community Partners, a Los Angeles nonprofit that develops other organizations, offered to help establish the group if she ran it.

"It was not my aim to start something new," she said.



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Laura W. Brill, Kendall Brill & Kelly LLP

Brill launched The Civics Center in September 2018 and spent the first few months fundraising, gathering voter preregistration forms by state, developing a website, and working with schools to launch clubs and hold drives. Within months, the group's Instagram account had more than 5,000 followers. They formed partnerships with similar initiatives in other states, including the student-led Every Vote Counts in New York and the Washington, D.C.-based organizations VotoLatino and the American Constitution Society.

Perhaps the most utilized resources Brill and her team developed are the "4-week action plan," an online tutorial that teaches students and teachers how to organize a high school preregistration drive, and "Democracy in a Box," an all-in-one kit that includes stickers, clipboards, guide sheets and other day-of materials.

"They're just truly vital to these efforts," said Dylan Morrissey, a program associate with The Civics Center who helps with content development and is a litigation assistant at Kendall Brill & Kelly. "The most effective way to get high school students to register is to ask, 'Do you want a sticker?' and that opens up a conversation that turns into a voter registration."

"It's kind of the elements of doing voter registration that makes it fun and makes it feel like a community activity," added Morrissey. "It's simple to give students a sticker to get them engaged in the conversation, but then, when they're all around campus, it becomes part of the culture of the campus."

The Civics Center then took its act on the road, holding weekend workshops at universities. One such event drew in Jacquelyn Whang, an English teacher at Centennial High School in Compton. She and five of her students attended the workshop, meeting students from other schools across the state involved in voter preregistration.

The benefits for her students were two-fold, said Whang. Not only did her students launch their own club at Centennial called "The Future Voters" and hold a lunchtime drive, it got them excited about driving political change in their community.

"I saw that my kids had very mature comments about what they think should be done and what's going on," Whang said. "That was a powerful revelation for me. Listening to them and seeing what they want different in Compton, I realized the power of their voice, and I wanted to affirm them."

That's the kind of impact Brill said she wants to continue as the organization gears up for its big initiative — building a larger coalition of nonprofits and setting a goal of 1,000 schools supporting voter preregistration drives by November 2020, just in time for the general election.

"That's what we set out to do, to be part of an important conversation and make a difference," said Brill. "We're not going to get to 3.7 million high school students, but I think we'll make a serious dent and build on something that can be very long-lasting."

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