

## Mary Beth Akre, M.F.A.

*Associate Professor of Fine Arts*



The most important way in which I live justice at Loyola is through my students. It only takes one step to start on the path to justice. Students in my Design courses are asked to create a collage that reflects an issue of social justice. It engages students in both a reflective and active way. "What is justice?" and "What matters to you?" become questions of discernment. Research and development of a visual idea present challenges to students in an artistic and humanitarian way. One collage, one step, can inspire students to understand and advocate for justice in the world.

The collage begins with the design concept of unity. To a designer, unity means arranging all of the elements into a harmonious whole. To achieve unity, designers use Gestalt grouping principles of visual organization, which suggest that humans perceive the whole before they see parts, an idea that reinforces itself in the content of the project. We are all humans first, and differences are seen only after understanding our similarities. By learning, reflecting, and finally advocating about an issue of social justice, students see their connections to others in the world. They are part of the whole, part of the bigger picture of humanity.

The most difficult part of the project is selecting one idea

of social justice. I ask my students: “What matters to you?” Many do not even know what matters to them or understand things outside of their immediate world at Loyola or their home. Being attentive to issues in their local, national, or world community is a major step in the path to advocacy and justice. I ask my students to choose to see, and to choose to be aware.

Students collect images, arrange, and edit. As they work, I continue to challenge them to speak with clarity and with passion. I ask them to define what advocacy means to them and to imagine how they might be able to advocate through their artwork. One simple and immediate way is to exhibit the work around campus, which allows viewers to engage in a visual dialogue. Students advocate by forcing viewers to see, react, reflect, and think. Justice comes from advocacy, and images of social justice throughout history have been powerful tools for change.

Students see the effect their collages have on others and how their work can make a difference. It reinforces them, affirms their ideas, and inspires them to continue on the path towards justice. One step, one simple collage in a Design course hopefully leads to a lifetime of justice and advocacy.