

**Celebration Speech by Megan Elizabeth Lebow,
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Before I came to graduate school, I spent a few years as a middle school teacher in the South Bronx. When I was teaching my students geography, I was approached by one of my students. She came up to me with her map and asked, “Where’s Ar-Kansas?” “Arkansas?” I asked her, hiding my smile. “No,” she said pointing at her list of states, “Ar-Kansas.” I took the paper from her, and in an attempt to correct her mistake, explained, “I know it looks like Ar-Kansas, but it’s actually pronounced Arkansas. Despite my unhesitating explanation and relative wealth of geographic knowledge, she looked me square in the eye and said, “Ms. Lebow, I’ve never heard of Arkansas. I’m pretty sure it’s Ar-Kansas.”

Though my student’s limited background knowledge and inarguably difficult age may make her seem like a particularly tough sell, this sort of disbelief is actually fairly common. When people believe they have prior factual knowledge, new information is often hard to accept. I imagine many of us would be forced to admit to only hesitant acceptance the time we first learned that Pluto is not a planet or that the Donner Party didn’t resort to cannibalism.

This failing doesn’t always result in easily dismissible, amusing anecdotes. During my tenure as a teacher, I had countless arguments with adults who adamantly believed that my students’ parents didn’t care about their kids. And I spent many trying hours attempting to convince people that, despite learning disabilities and, in some cases, gang involvement, on some level, all of my students

truly wanted to learn. My firsthand knowledge and evidence was only occasionally enough to overcome the ignorance of a mind that had long been made up.

For those of us embarking on careers in research or in public service, this problem poses a particular challenge. Not only do we have to find a way to deal with ignorance, or perhaps simply misplaced strength of conviction, but we actually have to go a step further. We have to convince those same people who think that they know the way that the things will always be of the way that they could be. We have to persuade them of the world's ever-present potential for change. And because evidence of this potential can only be generated once enough people have been swayed, we must do all this relying mostly on the strength of our beliefs.

Those of you who have spent time in a community doing direct service can attest to how important these experiences are in supporting your enthusiasm for potential change. I feel comfortable telling skeptics what kids are capable of because I spent time observing it firsthand. Though it can be surprisingly difficult to convince a thirteen year old of Arkansas' correct pronunciation, to me, the effort was worthwhile for two reasons. One, because I could imagine the future unpleasantness that might ensue when my student eventually met an Arkansan, and two, because I ultimately knew myself to be correct. Outside of middle school classrooms, the stakes are usually higher. You're generally faced with more seasoned opposition and less tangible evidence. But it is up to all of us to develop unrelenting strength of conviction, to leverage our experiences and harness our passions, so that we can do our part in generating necessary change.

