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Author Dashka Slater Visits Great Valley

By Clio Roker

Dashka Slater, author of the nonfiction novel, *The 57 Bus*, was invited to visit Great Valley High School through the efforts of librarian Kelsey Bogan on November 13, 2019.

Slater discussed her work that centers around the crime and legal case of Sasha Fleischman and Richard Thomas.

On November 14, 2013, Sasha Fleischman, an eighteen-year old who was born male and now identifies as agender, was asleep on the 57 bus coming home from school in Oakland, California. During the ride, Sasha fell asleep, and it was then that sixteen-year old Richard Thomas and two older boys boarded the bus and noticed Sasha asleep in the back. What caught their eye was what appeared to be a boy dressed in a girl's skirt and a beret. After making some gibes amongst themselves, what started as mockery escalated into a dare that eventually led them to the crime of lighting Sasha's skirt on fire.

Slater's presentation revolved around the question: What is justice? This was central because Richard was a minor who now was potentially going to be tried as an adult.

Slater, who started as a criminal justice reporter in the 1990s has reported on what is fair punishment.

"What would justice look like for Sasha?" said Slater. "For me the answer is restorative justice, where there is a victim centered process" said Slater.

In her opinion, the courts should put in place specific actions in order to repair the harm done to the victim. As soon as the story broke, the people of Oakland perceived it as a hate crime and immediately demanded justice for Sasha and punishment for Richard.

"A lot of what we have in our brains is rumor, innuendo, prejudice, and what we watch on TV," said Slater.

Because the story hit so close to home, Slater felt compelled to find out what was fact and what was mere assertion so she could tell the real story. Richard had been questioned by the police, but what were the correct conclusions the draw from his statement?

"How do I begin? How do I identify what is fact?" said Slater.

Slater decided to speak with Sasha's family and Richard in order to relay the truth on both sides and uncover the real story. What started as an article, eventually the biographical novel.

Although Ms. Bogan admitted that she is not drawn to non-fiction, she was moved by Slater's work.

"It's the most empathetic book I've ever read," said Ms. Bogan.