Finding Our Humanity
by Christine Horan, Middle School Teacher

Middle School is aptly named. For adolescents, it’s a time of being in the middle of myriad changes – from emotional, to physical, to psychological, to intellectual. Their sense of who they are as individuals, as members of a community, as global citizens, and the relationship between those ideas is challenged every day by the demands of new roles and expectations. As they become young adults, they see themselves and the world through new critical eyes.

Students’ social and emotional learning becomes even more important in adolescence as they strive to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve reasonable goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible, ethical decisions. In a school setting, the study of humanities is one lens through which students can explore who they are, who they want to be, and what they stand for.

Humanities has been described as the study of the human experience, encompassing philosophy, literature, religion, art, music, history, and the social sciences. As students delve into a wide range of subjects through a curriculum that is challenging, engaging, and meaningful, they learn to ask probing questions, develop critical thinking skills, nurture their creativity, and explore the world by examining the perspective of others.

During the 2017-2018 school year, the seventh- and eighth-grade students engaged in a study of World War II with an in-depth look not only at the history, but also the human response to the Holocaust and its timeless impact on the world. In addition to learning the facts through primary sources, we grappled with the dichotomy of individuality and conformity, free will and determinism, and justice and revenge as we dissected, discussed, and debated the range of human responses to such an enormous atrocity.

We ended the year by examining the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 in response to WWII, for both its historical significance and for its importance in the world today. We took a thorough look at the current refugee crisis around the world and considered where we stand today as a society in our quest for social justice. We thought deeply about our own actions and responsibilities. The final piece of our work, making connections to our own lives and the world we live in, is what makes studying humanities in a Quaker school unique.

By rooting our studies in the Quaker belief that there is truth and goodness in each person, we are challenged to consider the experiences and perspectives of everyone, not just those who come out on the right side of history or those whose beliefs align with our own. This kind of education, one that not only asks us to understand the human experience and the world we live in, but pushes us to respond, creates students who leave CFS as positive agents of change as they write the next chapter in our human experience.
...we are challenged to consider the experiences and perspectives of everyone...