

Civil Rights Biography: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Name: _____



Every January, schools and many government offices close down to honor the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Students appreciate Martin Luther King Day and many other holidays mostly because they give them a break from school. However, there is a deeper reason to be thankful on MLK Day. Let's look at King's inspirational character, his accomplishments, and the ways in which he improved our country and our lives.

Born on January 15, 1929, King was the third generation of men in his family to graduate with honor from Morehouse College. He distinguished himself for his academic and theological excellence at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, and then went on to earn his doctorate from Boston University. He met and married Coretta Scott in Boston, and together they raised two daughters and two sons. King became the pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954.

Upset by the unjust way African Americans were treated, King decided to become actively involved in fighting for their civil rights. He was an executive member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, often known today by the initials: NAACP. When Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, King was asked to be the leader of a non-violent bus boycott that lasted 382 days. In spite of dangerous attacks on his church, his home, and his family, King never lost his faith or his determination. Though his home was bombed and he was arrested, he fearlessly led the fight. The boycott was successful, ending the separation of races on public transportation, and making the whole nation aware of the need for civil rights reform.

Elected as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King used the peaceful methods of another important human rights activist, Mahatma Gandhi, combined with his own Christian faith, to promote equal rights for people of all races. He traveled around the country, giving over 2,500 speeches and writing articles and books. He organized opportunities for African Americans to register to vote.

Dr. King's most famous speech was in front of 250,000 people who gathered after a peaceful march on Washington, D.C. In his speech, King spoke of his dream that his descendants would one day live in a world where they would be judged by their accomplishments rather than by the color of their skin. His inspirational words are still some of the most quoted today. He met with Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. His work caused him to be arrested by some, and honored by others. When King was just 35 years old, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He donated the money earned from the prize right back into the fight for civil rights.

Had Dr. King been able to live out his full life, there is no doubt he would have continued to be a force of change for civil rights. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by an assassin's bullet. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. died on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was preparing to lead another protest march for the rights of workers who were being treated unfairly. Each January, we celebrate his birthday in order to honor his dream, and remember all that he did to protect the rights of the people of the United States.

Think About It

1. Do you think the things that Dr. King was fighting for were important? Why, or why not?
2. Would it be fair if your teacher treated people in your classroom with brown eyes differently than people with blue eyes? Why, or why not?
3. People sometimes still do not get along because of their differences. Think of a time that someone was treated unfairly because of their race or culture. What should have been done differently?