

Civil Rights Biography:

Rosa Parks

Name: _____



Rosa Parks was not trying to do anything amazing that evening when she refused to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She knew that the bus had separate sections for “coloreds” and whites, but she was already sitting in the appropriate section. When more white people got on the bus, the driver told her she had to give up her seat. She was tired. She had just finished a long day of work. She didn’t think about being a hero, she just didn’t want to get up.

Rosa’s decision to stay seated caused a lot of people to stop and think. She was arrested for not getting up when the driver asked her to, and many thought that arresting her was not fair. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a boycott of the bus system in Montgomery to show that people were not happy with the way Rosa, and other “coloreds” were being treated. For 382 days, people walked or gave each other rides in cars so that the bus company would lose so much business that it would have to give in and change their unfair policies. It took more than a year, but the boycott was successful.

Even though the bus boycott was the first time Parks gained publicity, it was not her first fight for civil rights. She and her husband, Raymond, both joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) after they settled in Montgomery, Alabama. After Rosa was arrested on the bus, they helped form the Montgomery Improvement Association. Together with its leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., they organized and participated in the bus boycott, and eventually had Rosa’s criminal charges dropped by a Supreme Court Decision. Because of their efforts, making people of different races sit in separate areas on public transportation was outlawed.

Pathways to Freedom is a special program for teenagers that Rosa started after her husband died in 1977. Her non-profit company, the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, pays for the teens to travel the United States by bus and visit historical sites. While on the road, they learn about the civil rights movement and how it affected American history. President Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996, and Congress presented her with a gold medal in 1999. Rosa Parks died in 2005. In her 92 years of life, she touched many other lives, working against racism and toward a world where people could be treated with equality.

Think About It

1. Rosa Parks was not trying to be a hero when she stayed seated. Have you ever done anything that someone later thought was heroic or inspirational?
2. If you had lived in Montgomery at the time of the boycott, would you have been willing to walk everywhere instead of riding the bus? Why, or why not?
3. Some people used their personal cars to shuttle people to and from work during the boycott. If you were a white person with a car, would you have used your car to take “coloreds” to and from work? Why, or why not?
4. What do you think was Rosa’s greatest accomplishment? Why?