

Black History Month

Freedom is never given, it is won
— A. A. Brown



Heroes of the Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s challenged racism in America and made the country a more just and humane society for all. Below are a few of its many heroes.



Rosa Parks

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, an African-American seamstress, left work and boarded a bus for home. As the bus became crowded, the bus driver ordered Parks to give up her seat to a white passenger. Montgomery's buses were segregated, with the seats in the front reserved for "whites only." Blacks had to sit at the back of the bus. But if the bus was crowded and all the "whites only" seats were filled, black people were expected to give up their seats—a black person sitting while a white person stood would never be tolerated in the racist South. Rosa had had enough of such humiliation, and refused to give up her seat. "I felt I had a right to stay where I was," she said. "I wanted this particular driver to know that we were being treated unfairly as individuals and as a people." The bus driver had her arrested.

Martin Luther King, Jr., heard about Parks's brave defiance and launched a boycott of Montgomery buses. The 17,000 black residents of Montgomery pulled together and kept the boycott going for more than a year. Finally, the Supreme Court intervened and declared segregation on buses unconstitutional. Rosa Parks and the boycotters defeated the racist system, and she became known as "the mother of the civil rights movement."



Martin Luther King, Jr.

It wasn't just that Martin Luther King became the leader of the civil rights movement that made him so extraordinary—it was the way in which he led the movement. King advocated civil disobedience, the non-violent resistance against unjust laws: "Non-violence is a powerful and just weapon which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it." Civil rights activists organized demonstrations, marches, boycotts, strikes, and voter-registration drives, and refused to obey laws that they knew were wrong and unjust. These peaceful forms of protest were often met with vicious threats, arrests, beatings, and worse. King emphasized how important it was that the civil rights movement did not sink to the level of the racists and hate mongers they fought against: "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred," he urged. "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline." King's philosophy of "tough-mindedness and tenderheartedness" was not only highly effective, but it gave the civil rights movement an inspiring moral authority and grace.

(Continued on page 10)