

Day 4 ELA II Sessions

Martin Luther King Jr.: Defender of the Dream

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As a young African American boy growing up in the South, Martin Luther King Jr. witnessed and experienced discrimination. Martin knew that it was unfair, and it made him sad. As a young boy, he could not have known that he would grow up to become one of the most famous and respected civil rights activists and leaders in American history. In his short life, he would challenge discrimination and change laws and attitudes. He would bring people of all races together, and this nation would become a better place because of him.

Martin was born in 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Martin had an older sister, Willie Christine, and a younger brother, Alfred Daniel. He lived in a loving home with his parents, his brother and sister, and his grandparents. Martin's father, Martin Luther King Sr., was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Martin was a member of his father's church.

Just like Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, and Mary Bethune, Martin was born during a time when African American people in the United States did not have equal rights. Segregation kept people apart and prevented African Americans from being full and equal members of society.

Martin was a very bright boy. He began attending school when he was five years old. He was a student at Oglethorpe Elementary School. After elementary school, Martin attended Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta.

Because he was such a good student, Martin skipped two grades. At just fifteen years of age, Martin became a student at Morehouse College. Students usually start college at age seventeen or eighteen, so Martin was very young to be a college student. At first, Martin considered becoming a doctor or a lawyer, but he later changed his mind and decided to become a minister like his father and grandfather before him.⁵

After graduating from Morehouse, Martin attended Crozer Theological Seminary. There his studies prepared him for his work as a minister. Martin completed his education at Boston University. He received his doctorate when he was just twenty-five years old.

Martin had not only gained a doctorate in Boston, he had also gained a wife—a beautiful young lady named Coretta Scott. Coretta had been studying music at the New England Conservatory in Boston. Upon receiving his doctorate, Martin and Coretta moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he became the minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Martin was now ready to begin the career he had prepared for.

As a young teenager riding city buses in the South, Martin had experienced the same discrimination that Rosa Parks had experienced. African Americans had to sit at the back of the bus, and if the bus was full, the driver would ask a person of color to stand up so that a white person could sit down. Martin thought it was humiliating. And so, as well as being a pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, Martin decided that he would become a civil rights

activist.

When Rosa Parks challenged racial segregation in the Montgomery city bus system, and a bus boycott began, Martin was asked to be the leader of this movement. The African American community stood together under his leadership. They refused to ride the buses until they were able to choose a seat freely.

The boycott lasted more than a year. People walked, rode bicycles, and rode in car pools to get to work. Martin led the boycott. Martin and his fellow activists were threatened and intimidated. But they did not back down. Finally, the United States Supreme Court, the most powerful court in the country, ruled that bus segregation was illegal and had to stop. At that moment, Martin became one of the most important people in the American civil rights movement. In fact, Martin became its leader.

Martin was prepared to be the leader of the civil rights movement even though he knew he was putting himself and his family in danger. There were many people who did not like the changes he and his fellow activists wanted. For his part, despite the dangers, he insisted that those involved in the civil rights movement remain peaceful and never use force. Martin believed that an organized, nonviolent movement that protested against inequality with thoughtful words—not fists and guns—would succeed. He greatly admired others who used nonviolence to protest.

Martin and sixty other ministers and activists founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This was an excellent way to organize members of African American churches throughout the country. They all worked together to try to bring about social changes that would improve the lives of all Americans. They also set out to register African Americans in the South to vote so that they could use the power of their vote to bring about change.

In his first speech to this group, Martin said, “We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.”

And so, it began. African Americans living in southern states where segregation was legal began to protest. Young African American students began to hold sit-ins at lunch counters that would not serve them. Many people of different races supported the civil rights movement. People rode buses from state to state and protested in places that practiced segregation. Over and over again, they “sat in” at lunch counters, waiting rooms, and college campuses. Many people were arrested for taking part in these peaceful protests.

Martin and his family moved to Atlanta, where he worked with his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Both Martin’s father and grandfather were ministers who had, during their lifetimes, worked for equal rights for African Americans.

The civil rights movement kept going. Martin and others continued to demonstrate peacefully and to lead marches. During one demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin was sent to jail. There he wrote his famous “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.” In this letter, he explained that it was his view that whereas just, or fair, laws must be obeyed, unjust, or unfair, laws, such as segregation laws, must be ignored.

The following year, Martin led a march on Washington, D.C., to pressure the government into changing segregation laws in southern states. More than two hundred thousand people walked from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. There in front of the Memorial, Martin delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. He said that he hoped for a day when people would be judged not by the color of their skin, “but by the content of their character.”

Later, Martin was given one of the highest awards anyone can achieve: the Nobel Peace Prize. With this award came \$54,000 in prize money, which he donated to a number of civil rights groups.

Martin often felt threatened. He often feared for his own safety and that of his family. In his lifetime, Martin was jailed thirty times. But he was a peaceful warrior who fought with words. Sadly, in 1968, this courageous man was killed.

This terrible tragedy happened in Memphis, Tennessee. Martin had gone to that city to support workers who were not being treated fairly. Martin seemed to have had a feeling that he would not live to see the changes he so wanted. The night before he died, Martin told a crowd gathered to hear him speak, “I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.”

Because of Martin Luther King Jr. and those people involved in the civil rights movement, a law was passed called the Civil Rights Act, which banned segregation. This was followed by a law called the Voting Rights Act which removed any restrictions on the right to vote for African Americans. Martin Luther King Jr. had led the way for a better, brighter future for all people.

Almost twenty years after his death, the United States Congress decided the third Monday in January would become a federal holiday in Martin’s honor. On this day, we remember this extraordinary man for all that he achieved. This day is now celebrated as a national day of service where all people are encouraged to and ways to help others, just as Martin did during his life.

There is also a monument not far from the Lincoln Memorial, from which Martin delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. It opened to the public in August 2011. It is the first monument on the Mall to honor an African American. The young boy who experienced discrimination grew up to become a national hero.

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