

Day 4 ELA II Sessions

P-5

Rosa Parks: The Mother of the Civil Rights

Movement

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Rosa Parks: The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement

Rosa Louise Parks was born a long time ago, in 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her family name was McCauley. Rosa and her family were African American. Rosa grew up on a small farm with her brother, mother, and grandparents.

Rosa was a happy child. She loved her family. However, Rosa lived at a time and in a place where African Americans faced discrimination. This was especially true in the South, where Rosa lived, because in that part of the United States there was segregation. Because of segregation, African Americans and white people did not go to the same schools, eat at the same restaurants, or go to the same movie theaters. When traveling by bus, African Americans were expected to sit in certain seats. It was as if African Americans and white people lived in different worlds.

When Rosa was a little girl, she attended a school that was just for African American children. It was an old, one-room schoolhouse that only held classes for five months of each year. Far too often there weren't enough desks or school supplies for the students. Rosa noticed that buses took white children to the new school near where she lived.

When Rosa was eleven years old, she was sent to Montgomery, Alabama, to continue her studies. But when she was sixteen, Rosa had to leave school to care for her grandmother and her mother who had both become ill. To help support the family, Rosa worked in a shirt factory.

When Rosa was nineteen, she married Raymond Parks. Raymond was a barber. He was also actively involved in the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This organization wanted to make life in the United States fairer and safer for all African Americans and end segregation in the South. Rosa also became involved and served as the Montgomery chapter secretary. In addition, she returned to high school to earn her high school diploma.

Then came the day in Rosa's life when she stood up for what was right. Actually, Rosa did not stand up, and that's the reason why we remember and honor Rosa Parks to this day.

The evening of December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, was cold. The streets were full of people shopping or making their way home from work. By this time, Rosa had a job as a seamstress at a local department store. Her day had just ended, and she had rushed to catch the city bus that would take her home. As Rosa boarded the bus, she could see that it was already quite full. Because the section at the back of the bus where African Americans usually sat was so full, Rosa found a seat near the middle of the bus.

The seat Rosa found was just behind the seats reserved for white people. Before long, all the seats on the bus were full and several white people were left standing. Back then, the bus driver had the authority, or power, to move

people, and African Americans were the first to be moved.

The bus driver noticed the people standing and ordered several African American people on the bus to give up their seats. All of them did as he asked except for Rosa. When the bus driver told Rosa that if she did not stand up, he would call the police to come and arrest her, she quietly responded, “You may do that.” When he asked her one more time to stand up, Rosa responded by saying, “I don’t think I should have to stand up.”

The bus driver made the call, and before long, a police officer arrived. The officer wanted to know why she would not give up her seat. Rosa responded by asking the officer a question. “Why are you always pushing us around?” she asked. Rosa was arrested and taken to the police headquarters. Later that night she was released on bail.

The law at that time in Alabama gave bus drivers the right to assign seats, and it also gave them the right to carry guns. As a result, many African American people felt threatened and were frightened to challenge this practice, but Rosa had done so.

Rosa later said that she had not planned to protest, but in that moment, her desire for civil rights and her sense of injustice drove her to make that decision. “When I made that decision,” Rosa said, “I knew that I had the strength of my ancestors with me.”

This was the moment that changed history. Rosa had refused to move, and now others would show their support for her.

It was decided that the hundreds of African Americans who rode the city buses to work would walk instead. This kind of action is called a boycott. The NAACP began to organize what became known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. African American women’s groups began to organize, too.

A young man named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the boycott. Dr. King said, “We will walk until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Beginning on December 5, 1955, people refused to ride the city buses in Montgomery. The boycott lasted for 382 days. Without passengers to ride the buses, the buses couldn’t afford to run. At that time in Montgomery, more than seven out of every ten riders on buses were African American. Businesses were disrupted. Many white people supported the boycott, too.

On November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court decided that Montgomery’s segregated bus seating was unconstitutional. That meant that it was against the law. A court order was served on December 20, 1956, and the boycott ended the next day. After that, buses were integrated and African American people could sit wherever they wanted. That boycott became a powerful way for people to peacefully protest.

Rosa Parks’ actions helped to start the civil rights movement. In fact, Rosa became known as the “mother of the civil rights movement.” Rosa remained an active member of the NAACP and other civil rights groups. She showed her support for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by participating in civil rights marches.

Rosa became a member of the staff of a Michigan congressman. She worked in his office for twenty-three years—from 1965 until she retired in 1988. Rosa also founded an institution to help young people complete their education.

In her lifetime, Rosa received several awards for her courage and her work. In 1979, the NAACP awarded Rosa its Spingarn Medal. Rosa also received two of the U.S. government’s most important civilian honors, or those honors given to people who aren’t serving in our military. Rosa received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996 and the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor in 1999.

Rosa once said, “I’d see the bus pass every day. But to me, that was a way of life; we had no choice but to accept what was the custom. The bus was among the first ways I realized there was a black world and a white world.” Incredibly, by her own actions, Rosa Parks changed that world. Rosa became a symbol of the power of nonviolence. Her quiet, courageous act changed America and changed the course of history.

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