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Rosa Parks: Bus Rider and Civil Rights Activist

Maggie Blackmon

Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History

Philosophy class should be a place where one can debate ideas openly, earnestly, and without fear of being mocked. However, when such a philosophy class is filled with senior boys who don't care about the class and will say absolutely anything to get a rise out of someone, then it can be difficult to have a valuable learning experience. It was during such a debate over whether or not it is ethical to threaten the security of the country by breaking laws if the law itself was unethical that our team brought up Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat. The opposing team's rebuttal was simply "Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat for civil rights, she was just lazy!" followed by laughter. I was so shocked that he would carelessly belittle the woman who is credited with igniting the entire Civil Rights Movement. The teacher eventually made them give an actual response to our statement, but his initial comments still stuck with me. I looked up information about Rosa Parks and I was surprised to find that there was a lot of information trying to correct the notion that Parks was just too tired and that's why she didn't move. This information sat in the back of my brain for months until college started and I was asked to choose a not well behaved woman to write about. Rosa Parks was one of the first people that came to my mind.

Rosa Parks' actual involvement in civil rights started long before she jumpstarted the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After working for a desegregated US military base, Parks had tasted the freedom of integration and joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1942 (Sanders, 2006). Parks worked hard for the integration of schools in Montgomery, Alabama after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Kohl, 2005). Quickly becoming the first woman secretary for the

Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, Rosa Parks became known for “her opposition to segregation, her leadership abilities, and her moral strength.” (Kohl, 2005).

Though racism is a social norm, it was also written into law. In Alabama, the front half of the bus was legally reserved for white people while the back was reserved for black people. However, there was no law that gave the bus drivers authority to ask black people to move from their seats for white people (*Rosa Parks*, 2009). In fact, there was a law in Montgomery, Alabama that stated that no one, regardless of race, could be asked to be moved from their seat (*Rosa Parks*, 2009). The Woman’s Political Council (WPC), an African American woman’s activist group, and the NAACP had been waiting for many years to find someone who was mistreated by a white bus driver that they could use as a symbol to start a bus boycott. There had been other black people who had been arrested for refusing to give up their seat, but none of them had a strong enough spirit to endure the racist attacks that would follow such a symbol (Kohl, 2005). Rosa Parks was also looking for such a person; she did not realize that she was just the person they were looking for until after she was arrested. It was not her intention to set the wheels in motion for the Montgomery Bus Boycott by refusing to give up her seat that day as she had refused to give up her seat before without arrest (Kohl, 2005). This is probably where the popular idea that Parks accidentally set off the bus boycott came from, but she was involved behind the scenes from before the beginning to the very end.

While the legal repercussions of her refusal to move were a mere \$14 fine, the social consequences were far more harmful (*Rosa Louise McCauley Parks*, 2014). During the Montgomery Bus Boycott Parks lost her job as a seamstress, her husband lost his job for openly discussing Parks and her trial, she received numerous death

threats, and her husband began to smoke and drink excessively (Sanders, 2006). Needing to escape the pressure, Parks and her husband moved to Detroit, Michigan where she became U.S. Representative John Conyer's secretary and eventually board member for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (*Rosa Louise McCauley Parks*, 2014). However, she soon learned that Detroit was just as racist as Montgomery and became disillusioned with the idea of the North as "the promised land." (Sanders, 2006).

Although she is well known as the woman who would not give her seat to a white passenger, Rosa Parks has been immersed in resisting social order from an early age. Born in 1913, Parks lists her mother and grandfather as two of her greatest influences for "giving me the spirit of freedom." (Theoharis, 2013). Her mother was subtle in her rejection of social norms; she was unafraid to say "no" and state her mind which was a very risky thing for an African American woman living in Alabama in the 1910s to do (Theoharis, 2013). Parks' father was not home while she was growing up so her mother had to move back in with her parents. Parks' grandfather was often mistaken for a white man and he used this to his advantage to do things that would annoy white people (Theoharis, 2013). He was also a huge supporter of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association which celebrated black pride (Sanders, 2006). There's no doubt that Rosa Parks' upbringing had a large impact on her "life history of being rebellious." (Theoharis, 2013).

Truly, Rosa Parks is the most famous activist of her family, she also had a husband who supported civil rights. She married NAACP member Raymond Parks at the age of 19 in 1932 (*Rosa Parks*, 2009). Raymond helped collect money to fund the

lawyers who defended the boys in the Scottsboro trial (Sanders, 2006). He did not want Rosa Parks to join the NAACP because he feared for her safety, but she joined anyways (*Rosa Parks*, 2009). Raymond Parks also discouraged her from letting the NAACP use her to start the bus boycott, but she still let them (Sanders, 2006). Although they loved each other, they did not have any children (Theoharis, 2013).

Overall, Rosa Parks was successful in creating the social change that she wanted. The WPC distributed flyers urging African Americans to not ride the Montgomery buses in protest over Rosa Parks' arrest (Kohl, 2005). Over the next 381 days an estimated 40,000 African Americans walked or carpoled to work instead of taking the bus (*Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 2010). Finally on June 5, 1956, the federal court ruled that the laws that segregated buses violated the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment and were therefore unconstitutional. The unexpected momentum of the movement also led to the creation of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) which elected Martin Luther King Jr. to be its president (*Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 2010). Rosa Parks' legacy can still be felt today for, if it wasn't for her, buses may still be segregated and Martin Luther King Jr. would not have been put in the spotlight that later led to more social justice.

This project taught me a lot about the Civil Rights Movement. Although we learned about it in school, I've never looked at it this in depth. I also learned about the library and its research tools. I'm really glad that we had to use the databases for this project so that I had to learn how to use them because I am sure that I am going to be using them in the future.

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