

Most people believe that Mrs. Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man because she was tired and weary after a long day at work. They believe that her courage that day stemmed from impulse. This was not at all the case. Like so many freedom fighters, Mrs. Parks had a long history of rebelling against racial segregation and inequality. By the time of her arrest in 1955, Mrs. Parks had been secretary of the local NAACP for over a decade and she had been the adviser to the NAACP Youth Council. It should be remembered that white Southerners in the 1940s and 40s viewed the NAACP as a militant and dangerous organization and treated its members accordingly. Nevertheless, Mrs. Parks continued to fight racial segregation through the NAACP.

In fact, during the 1940s, Mrs. Parks had refused several times to comply with segregation rules on the buses. In the early 1940s, Mrs. Parks was ejected from a bus for failing to comply. Ironically, the very same bus driver who ejected her that time was the one who had her arrested on December 1, 1955. According to Mrs. Parks, "My resistance to being mistreated on the buses and anywhere else was just a regular thing with me and not just that day." Clearly, then, the woman who launched the modern civil rights movement was a seasoned fighter for justice. This is why the black masses of Montgomery readily followed her lead. Together they made history.

Ella Baker

Ms. Ella Baker was another guiding figure behind the civil rights movement. Ms. Baker has fought for Black liberation throughout her adult life. The granddaughter of a proud, rebellious slave minister, Ella Baker was born in the South in 1903 and received her undergraduate degree from Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she was valedictorian of her class. In 1927 Baker moved to New York City where she became involved with numerous organizations fighting for social change. During 1941 and 1942 Baker served as the National Field Secretary for the NAACP. Between 1943 and 1955 Baker continued her work for social change.

When the Montgomery bus boycott began in 1955, Ms. Baker along with A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison immediately organized a Northern support group that sent money and other resources to Montgomery. Following the boycott Ms. Baker, Randolph, Levison and Rustin contacted Dr. King and urged him to establish a southwide organization for racial equality. In this regard Ms. Baker became one of the founding members of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Soon as the SCLC was formed in 1957-8, Baker moved to Atlanta and became the Associate Director of the organization. Ms. Baker was the one who established SCLC's central office in the late 1950s. She operated the mimeograph machines, wrote much of the early correspondence, and performed the countless administrative duties. Ms. Baker was also a genius when it came to organizing people and inspiring them to seek change. As an SCLC official, Baker organized the Black masses throughout the South. She was especially effective at getting women and young people involved in the movement.

Baker became a role model for the women and young people who joined the movement. When the student sit-in protests spread across the South in 1960, Ms. Baker became a guiding force behind them. It was Baker that organized the student meeting in 1960 from which the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was first conceived. This is why Ms. Baker is considered the mother of SNCC. Ms. Baker, then, was a central figure behind both Dr. King and the Black

student movement. Diane Nash-Bevel captured Baker's importance when she said, "Baker was the pillar of strength and good sense to lean on. Ella came across as just being such an honest, open, wise person with unending resources."

Septima Clark

Mrs. Septima Clark was born in Charleston, South Carolina on May 3, 1898. Mrs. Clark wrote in her autobiography that from her early childhood she wanted to be a schoolteacher. After teaching in Southern public schools for forty years she was fired because of her membership in the NAACP. In 1956 Mrs. Clark took a job at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee.

Mrs. Clark was deeply concerned that a large proportion of the black masses could not read or write in the late 1950s. She knew that Southern whites used black illiteracy as an excuse to prevent blacks from voting. Beginning in 1956 she designed an extremely successful grassroots literacy program. She explained that "in '56 and '57 night after night I sat down and wrote out a citizenship education program which would help illiterates to learn to read and write, so they could register to vote." Her approach was to teach adults based on their own experiences. She taught them how to write their names in the family Bible while others learned to write their sons in the military. She taught people to write words they had sung for years. Sharecroppers were taught mathematics by counting the number of seeds needed for their crops. In a short time the masses were learning to read and write. This was astonishing because the public schools had failed badly in their efforts to teach black adults. Because of its success, the program quickly spread throughout the South. Local people set up these schools in their own communities with phenomenal success. Once the adults learned to read and write they embarked on a trip to City Hall where they attempted to register to vote.

By 1961 Dr. King had become aware of the success of Mrs. Clark's literacy program. He persuaded her to move the program to the SCLC. Through SCLC Mrs. Clark and her staff were able to teach thousands. These "citizenship schools," as they were called, served as a community organizing base for Dr. King and the movement. Many of the students of these classes became involved in sit-ins, demonstrations, and running for public office. The schools prepared Blacks to listen to people like Dr. King. According to Mrs. Clark, many blacks in the 50s and 60s thought everything white was right. After they attended the schools they learned differently. Mrs. Clark's grassroots approach to education has been so successful that it has been used by other countries in Europe and Mexico. But most of all, the efforts of Mrs. Clark paved the way for the strong black electorate evident today. Recently the city of Charleston, South Carolina paid homage to Mrs. Clark by naming a street "Septima Poinsette Clark Drive."

Diane Nash-Bevel

Diane Nash, a Chicago native, arrived at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in the fall of 1959. At first she was excited about attending the historic black university. However, the walls of Southern racial segregation quickly vanished her excitement. Within a short period of time she grew tired of the fact of being able to go only to three restaurants and one movie theatre. According to her, "I started feeling boxed in and limited."

Within months Ms. Nash began attending workshops on how to conduct nonviolent demonstrations against Jim Crow. In the spring of 1960 the student sit-in protests against segregated lunch counters began in Nashville. Ms. Nash found herself deeply involved in protest activities despite her earlier claims that she would not go to jail because she was afraid. Within a short period of time Ms. Nash became a major leader of the student protest movement in Nashville. In fact, she became the chairperson of the Central Committee which was the leadership organ of the movement. In this capacity Nash led demonstrations and spent time in jail as a result.

During this era Fisk administrators were opposed to students participating in sit-ins. They believed it was not the proper thing for a Fisk woman to do. Yet, Fisk administrators were not straight-forward because earlier they had taken a pro-sit-in position in an interview with Jet Magazine. Nevertheless, a Fisk dean approached Nash informing her that if she did not desist from her protest activities she was going to be expelled from school. Ms. Nash responded, "I said, you go right ahead, and I'll go straight to Jet Magazine, and tell them what you did." The Nashville sit-in movement continued its protest and was able to desegregate Nashville's lunch counters. Ms. Nash remained in the forefront of that struggle.

Ms. Nash went on to become one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She was also the guiding force behind the continuation of the 1961 freedom rides after the initial riders had been severely

beaten in Birmingham, Alabama. Her courage and leadership ability set an example for those in the movement. Howard Zinn wrote that, "when students were being cross-examined at the trials that followed to Nashville demonstrations, one of the standard questions was: 'Do you know Diane Nash?' Friendship with her was apparently full of perils." Ms. Nash was a groundbreaker and a pacesetter.

Today's Challenge for Women

Black women activists of the civil rights movement served as role models for blacks and whites alike. The assertiveness, determination and leadership stance of black women shattered the image that women were supposed to be passive and fragile. Many of the white women who organized the modern women's movement had been exposed to these strong multi-faceted black women and the possibilities they represented. Today we can learn from the legacy provided by black women during the civil rights movement. By looking back, black women today can learn lessons from the women discussed here. Having learned those lessons, they can continue to provide the creative leadership so desperately needed in our communities at this juncture in history.

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12:15-1:45 p.m. — Lunch

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Representative, State of Oregon
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