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# OPINION

## Honoring a Warrior for Justice and Equality for All

### Courageous Sojourner Truth

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

I was recently deeply honored to be asked by Navy Secretary Ray Mabus to serve as sponsor for a Navy ship being named for Sojourner Truth, my lifelong heroine and North Star in the struggle for freedom, equality and justice in our land.

This ship will join others in the John Lewis-class of ships named after civil and human rights leaders. The lead ship in the class honors iconic civil rights activist and Congressman John Lewis, D-Ga. Other Lewis-class ships honor Senator and Navy veteran Robert F. Kennedy; gay rights activist and Navy diver Harvey Milk; 19th-century suffragist Lucy Stone; and the great Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren. Navy Secretary Mabus, the former governor of Mississippi, had previously announced other ships honoring labor rights and farm worker organizer and Navy veteran Cesar Chavez and Mississippi civil rights leader and martyr Medgar



Evers.

I am so grateful to Secretary Mabus for his commitment to reflecting the inclusiveness of American society and recognizing each of these leaders' extraordinary contributions to closing the gap between our nation's creed and deed.

Sojourner Truth was a brilliant but allegedly illiterate slave woman, a great orator and a powerful presence who possessed unbelievable courage and perseverance in standing up for justice as a black woman.

She challenged the racial and gender caste system of slavery by suing for the return of a son sold away from her. She got thrown off Washington, D.C. streetcars but kept getting back on until they changed the rules and let her ride. She stood up with fiery eloquence to opponents and threatening crowds who tried to stop her from speaking. When a hostile White man told her that the hall where she was scheduled to appear would be burnt down if she spoke, she replied, "Then I will speak to the ashes." When taunted while speaking in favor

of women's rights by some white men who asked if she was really a woman, she bared her breasts and allegedly famously retorted, "Ain't I a woman?," detailing the back-breaking double burden of slavery's work and childbearing she had endured. When heckled by a white man in her audience who said he didn't care anymore about her antislavery talk than for an old flea bite, she snapped back, "Then the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching."

Scholar Carleton Mabee tells us a bit more about how in 1865, one year after visiting President Abraham Lincoln in the White House, Sojourner Truth determined to desegregate the segregated horse car system in Washington, D.C. She was working with freed slaves in Washington at the time and was often ignored by drivers when she tried to get them to stop.

"One day, in 1865, Truth signaled a car to stop," Mabee said. "When it did not, she ran after it yelling. The conductor kept ringing his bell so that he could pretend he had not heard her. When at last the conductor had to stop the car to take on White passengers, Truth also climbed into the car, scolding the conductor: 'It's

a shame to make a lady run so.'" The Sojourner Truth Institute says: "Sojourner Truth, who rode the horse car that day, and many horse cars afterward, sat where she pleased; not where she was told. Her determination followed a lifetime of going where angels, and her contemporaries, often feared to tread." We need the same determination today.

Our nation is still struggling mightily to live up to its creed enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and overcome its huge birth defects that still plague us in the implementation of our political and economic system: Native American genocide, slavery, and exclusion of all women and non-propertied men, including white men, from America's political process.

We have come a very long way but these deep-seated cultural, racial, economic and gender impediments to a just union challenge us still. We must remain vigilant in rooting them out and determined to move forward and not backwards if we are to become a greater nation with an opportunity to show the majority non-white world a living democracy.

Every day I wear two pendants

around my neck with the portraits of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. When I think I'm having a hard day, I just touch them, remember their challenges, get up and keep going.

Inscribed on the back of Sojourner Truth's image are these words: "If women want any rights more than they's got, why don't they just take them, and not be talking about it." Those are our marching orders for building an America where none of our children, including our daughters and granddaughters, face a ceiling on who they can become and what they can achieve.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund.

### Letter to the Editor

#### Just Because I'm Black

Just because I'm black  
I'm not ghetto  
I'm not poor  
I'm not stupid

Just because I'm black  
I don't steal  
I'm not bad  
And I don't rob people

Just because I'm black  
It doesn't mean I can't play fair  
Or even that I'm a fighter

Just because I black  
Why do you hate me?  
What did I do to you?  
Why do you mess with me?

-- Jalen Mekhi Craig,  
age 11,  
Boise-Eliot/Humboldt  
Elementary

## Black Youth and Elusive Freedom

### Remembering my brother's struggle

BY KAREEN CURREY

This summer brought too many new videos of black men — Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Phillando Castile in a St. Paul suburb, Terrence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma — losing their lives at the hands of police officers.

As these videos circulated, I found myself crying new tears. Yet these new tears are filled with old memories.

At the age of 11, I cried for my brother for the first time.

He was 16 and had just bought his first car. He so enjoyed the freedom that came with it. But on his first day driving it to school, police stopped my brother and searched his car. My mother and I happened to be on our way home when we saw my brother sitting on the curb as police went through his belongings.

I wept.

That wouldn't be the only time

police stopped my brother. My mother and I would see my brother sitting on the side of the road multiple times. He was never charged or convicted of any crimes during these stops.

My brother would survive all these encounters. I now think back on how fortunate he was.

But this continuous stream of searches — a ridicule of my brother's freedom — changed how he viewed himself and how our community viewed him.

My brother no longer felt he had either the freedom or the power to assert his right to drive. Our neighbors, meanwhile, assumed that he must be guilty of some crime, and questioned my mother about why he was getting pulled over.

The police have the power to protect us as citizens. But my brother's story demonstrates how the abuse of that power can strip the freedom and innocence from of a free and innocent young man.

Stories like my brother's happen all the time. They seldom make national news, but their negative impact is lasting. That's why we need to heal and empow-

er our young black boys and girls.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood that the sorts of indignities heaped upon my brother can "cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention."

"I must say," Dr. King added, "that a riot is the language of the unheard."

In Ferguson, in Baltimore, in Charlotte, and all across the nation, we've seen our youth take to the streets in protest after the deaths of countless black men and women in the presence of police.

Those young people showed their frustration with a criminal justice system that can take a person's life without any appropriate accountability, punishment, or justice served.

But our youth need opportunities to share their stories.

Empowering them can offer a loudspeaker to the unheard, like it did during the Civil Rights Movement, when student led sit-ins fostered the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Our youth need the tools to de-

velop solutions, make real changes in their communities, and become future leaders, like those who led the more recent movement in Curtis Bay to stop the building of a polluting garbage incinerator.

Providing our youth with opportunities to make an impact allows them a chance at that elusive freedom.

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