

## Why We Broke The Law

Students should read and discuss these personal testimonies from participants in the civil rights movement. The testimonies are from Black and White people who risked their lives for the idea of racial equality.

### A) Rosa Parks Sits Down, Montgomery, Alabama, 1955

The Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott began in December, 1955 and lasted for more than a year. It ended when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that segregation on the buses took away rights promised in the Constitution of the United States. The city of Montgomery finally agreed to allow equal rights in sitting on the buses and to hire black drivers. During this boycott, a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. first became well known.

**Rosa Parks** (Black woman): "Having to take a certain section (on the bus) because of your race was humiliating, but having to stand up because a particular driver wanted to keep a white person from having to stand was, to my mind, most inhumane.

Over the years, I had had my own problems with the bus drivers. In fact, some did tell me not to ride their buses if I felt that I was too important to go to the back door to get on. One had evicted me from the bus in 1943.

On December 1, 1955, I had finished my day's work as a tailor's assistant and I was on my way home. There was one vacant seat on the Cleveland Avenue bus, which I took, alongside a man and two women. On the third (stop), the front seats were occupied and this one man, a white man, was standing. The driver asked us to stand up and let him have those seats, and when none of us moved at his first words, he said, "You all make it light on yourselves and let him have those seats."

When the driver saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up and I said, "No, I'm not." And he said, "Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to call the police and have you arrested."

I said, "You may do that".

He did get off the bus, and I still stayed where I was. Two policemen came on the bus. One policeman asked me if the bus driver had asked me to stand and I said yes.

He said, "Why don't you stand up?"

And I asked him, "Why do you push us around?"

He said, "I do not know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest.""

Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (Bantam, New York, 1990) p. 19-20.

### B) Students Sit-In For Integration, 1960

In February, 1960, students began to "sit-in" at racially segregated lunch counters and restaurants all across the south. Black students and white students who opposed segregation joined together in these protests. In Nashville, Tennessee, and other cities students received training in nonviolent civil disobedience to prepare them for the "sit-ins". Many of the sit-ins were organized by CORE, the Congress for Racial Equality.

**Leo Lillard** (Black man): "When I was a boy, Nashville was clearly a divided town. I was always curious to know why it was segregated. One day, we were at a (store) and it had these beautiful marble fountains. One said 'Colored' and one said 'White'. And being the kind of kid I was, I went over to both fountains, tasted the water, and told my mother, 'Tastes the same to me, Mom.'"

The boycott of Nashville primarily focused on the downtown stores. We figured if they would feel the pinch of not having shoppers buy in the stores, then they would put pressure on the mayor to change the rules. Students were the vanguard (leaders), but it was clear that the town had declared war on racism.

**Margaret Leonard** (White woman): "The policeman led me and the two Negroes at the white counter out of the store, past a lot of staring people, and put us in a car to go to the police station. Several policemen then talked to me. One asked me if I was a southern girl. I said yes. I was raised in Macon, Georgia, and Atlanta. He asked why, as a southern girl, I was doing this, and I said something about wanting to demonstrate how I felt about discrimination. Everybody I talked to seemed surprised that I was an authentic southern girl. The police finally told me to go back to my minister and think very seriously before I ever did this again."

Steven Cohen, ed., *Eyes on the Prize Sourcebook*, p. 22-24.

### **C) Freedom Riders, 1961**

In 1961, CORE and other civil rights groups began to organize racially integrated groups to challenge racial segregation on buses in the south. Buses and Freedom Riders were attacked by mobs. Outside of Anniston, Alabama, one bus was set on fire.

**John Lewis** (Black man): "This group of thirteen Freedom Riders, seven blacks and six whites, had a dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Washington, D.C. It was my first time having Chinese food. To me this meal was like the Last Supper, because you didn't know what to expect going to the Freedom Ride."

Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (Bantam, New York, 1990) p. 76-77.

### **D) Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964**

In 1964, large numbers of black and white students were recruited by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to go to Mississippi to challenge segregation by registering black people to vote. Three young civil rights workers, one black and two white, were murdered in the summer of 1964. They were James Chaney from Mississippi and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner from the north.

**Unita Blackwell** (Black woman): "We had heard that there were supposed to be these Freedom Riders coming to Mississippi. Nobody thought they would show up, you know. And then they showed up. It was two guys, two black fellows. Two Freedom Riders came to Sunday school that morning. (They said) God help those who help themselves, you can help yourself by trying to register to vote. That's the first time in my life that I ever come in contact with anybody that tells me that I had the right to register to vote."

For black people in Mississippi, Freedom Summer was the beginning of a whole new era. People began to feel that they wasn't just hopeless anymore, that they had come together. Black and white had come from the North and from the West and even from some cities in the South.

Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (Bantam, New York, 1990) p. 179-193.

**Peter Orris** (White man): I grew up in New York City. I had been raised in a family where being Jewish was important in terms of identifying with the underdog, with people who were suffering repression and discrimination. Three civil rights workers -- Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner -- had disappeared. Our reaction was horror. Following the disappearance of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, there was a decision that those of us that were going to go to the southwest area of Mississippi shouldn't go right away, because the situation was too tense and the possibility of mass violence and many more deaths was present. So they decided that we should go to Holmes County in the Delta and do voter registration there.

Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (Bantam, New York, 1990) p. 186-191.