

## Heroes in Literature and In the Real World

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*Rosa Parks*



***What makes Rosa Parks a hero?*** Rosa Parks was a leader in the Civil Rights movement. Her actions began the Montgomery bus strike, which in turn, led to subsequent court battles and justice for many colored people.

*Notes*



**Rosa Parks' action:** In December of 1955, the NAACP leadership decided that the best possible test case that could lead to serious legal action regarding desegregation of transportation was to have Rosa Parks refuse to give up her seat to a white woman on a bus.

Rosa Parks was an eminently suitable candidate for the test. She was a seamstress in a downtown department store, who altered, repaired, and steam-pressed garments. She was a forty-year-old churchgoer, very level-headed and committed, unlike the “feisty” and “emotional” Claudette, and perhaps most significantly, she was light-skinned, but not white. Rosa Parks was respected by both the Black leadership—because she had been an activist for so long—and by ordinary Black workers. When Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a crowded bus, the usual pattern of the driver calling the police occurred.



But from that point on Rosa Park's experience was quite different from that of Claudette Colvin. The police officer politely asked, “Why don't you stand up?” Ms. Parks replied, “Why do you push us around?” He answered, “I don't know but the law is the law.” Rosa Parks stood up and walked off the bus under her own power. Moreover, one officer took her shopping bag, and another picked up her purse, as they escorted her from the bus. She sat in the back seat of the patrol car, not wearing handcuffs. She was led to the station and then to city

hall, where she was fingerprinted. After the paperwork was finished, she was allowed a telephone call. Finally, she was charged only with disorderly conduct—not with breaking segregation laws or resisting arrest. The NAACP had chosen well. The Montgomery bus strike was about to begin.

Montgomery Bus Strike, the result of Rosa's action: On December 2, 1955, tens of thousands of Montgomery residents studied an unsigned leaflet, which began “Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. It is the second time since the Claudette Colbert [sic] case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped.” The message pleaded that every Black person, young and old, working or in school, stay off the buses on the following



Monday. The Montgomery Bus Strike was perhaps the most powerful and significant action that occurred on the long path to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The boycott lasted 381 days.

The mayor of Montgomery, W.A. “Tacky” Gayle, when the boycott was less than a month underway, loudly asserted, “We [the white Administration] are going to hold our stand. We are not going to be a part of any program that will get Negroes to ride the buses again at the price of the destruction of our heritage and way of life.” In the meantime, mass meetings of Black people continued at Black churches every Tuesday and Thursday night. Black protestors, who were determined to exert economic pressure peacefully let the shiny green buses lumber by as they walked to work, to school, to every area which their lives demanded. The MIA, or Montgomery Improvement Association, was founded. They designed a program of alternative transportation on the scale of a military transport system to move tens of thousands of maids, yardmen, clerks, and students around Montgomery’s far-flung neighborhoods every day. There would be forty-two pick-up stations every morning and forty-eight stations every evening that traveled routes that had been plotted by mail carriers, who knew the city best.

The operators of the system were all volunteers; the cars were ordinary people’s automobiles; those who owned automobiles but were not free to drive in the mornings or evenings would lend their cars to the MIA. So, for example, a maid needing to get across town to her white employer’s house would walk to the morning station nearest her home and wait for a ride. But though the network was elegantly designed, it did not provide enough seats to replace the entire city bus system, thousands of Black workers set out from home at dawn and walked many miles each day. The system was maintained financially solely by donations made at the bi-weekly meetings.



In response to the powerful speeches, he made at the weekly mass meetings encouraging the participants in the boycott, the young charismatic Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected to the leadership of the MIA. His famous “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” was written when he was among the one hundred leaders of the boycott indicted on conspiracy charges.

Not all white people opposed the boycott—indeed, many whites strongly opposed segregation as a whole. A small but determined minority of white people actually drove their employees to and from work and donated money in support of the boycott. Robert Graetz, pastor of the Lutheran Church, and Clifford Durr, who assisted Fred Gray in his legal cases, and his wife Virginia Durr



were outstanding white supporters. But one true heroine of the movement was Juliette Morgan, a white librarian. Ms. Morgan wrote a letter to the Montgomery Advertiser in which she said, “It is hard...not to be moved with admiration at the quiet dignity, discipline, and dedication with which the Negroes have conducted their boycott.” (69) The consequences of her writing that letter were to become dire. She received death threats by phone and mail that increased month by month. Her doorbell would be rung in the dead of night again and again. People threw stones at her house, finally shattering her picture window. And, of course, she lost many friends. Sadly, this white heroine, Juliette Morgan, committed suicide about a year after her letter was published and her torments began.

Results of the Montgomery Bus Strike: It was the Montgomery Bus Strike that led directly to the court case that finally ended segregation. Fred Gray, the lawyer who had defended Claudette Colvin in her first trial proposed a course of action that he had envisioned from the day of Claudette’s arrest. He thought that the best way to bring about the end of the bus strike, and by that means to open a path to full desegregation was to go to court and sue the city of Montgomery and the state of Alabama on the grounds that segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional, that it was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Gray and the NAACP lawyers in New York wanted to mount a legal attack on behalf of all Black riders as a class action suit, not merely to defend individual protestors who had been arrested and charged as criminals one by one. The MIA voted to send Gray to New York to plan legal strategies with NAACP lawyers and to raise money for the court case. The lawyers ruled out Rosa Parks as a plaintiff because her case was still being appealed and they wanted a new federal lawsuit to be independent of any existing criminal case. Out of the hundred or so people who would be named as witnesses to the brutality suffered by Black passengers under the Jim Crow segregated buses.



Fred Gray chose five women who had been bullied, insulted, cheated, and man-handled on Montgomery’s buses. They were all both angry and courageous. The first called, named in the suit, was Aurelia Browder, a thirty-seven-year-old seamstress and graduate of ASC, who had raised six children by herself after her husband’s death. The youngest among the five was Claudette Colvin. The case of Browder vs. Gayle was presented before three white federal judges on May 11, 1956. They were Federal Justices Richard Rives, Seybourn Lynne, and Frank Johnson. The plaintiffs were represented by Fred Gray and a team of NAACP lawyers. They argued that laws and governances requiring segregated seating on public buses violated the equal rights provision of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The leading defense lawyer was Walter Knabe. His case rested on the false grounds that: 1) The Black community had not objected to segregated seating before the boycott; 2) That the leader of the protesters, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was a “silver-tongued outsider”, a troublemaker who had never ridden a Montgomery bus, and who had talked the Black community into boycotting. When Claudette was called to the stand, under the questioning by Fred Gray, she described, in a low and intense voice, the treatment she had received when she stood up for her Constitutional rights and refused to give up her seat to a white woman. Walter Knabe, the defense lawyer tried to trap her repeatedly into saying that the bus boycott did not arise from the Black passengers but rather was stirred up by Martin Luther King. The following is a small snippet of Knabe’s questions and Claudette’s replies:

Knabe: You and the other Negroes have changed your ideas since December 5<sup>th</sup>, have you not?

Claudette: No, sir. We haven’t changed our ideas. It has been with me since I was born.

Knabe: But the group stopped riding buses for certain named things... That is correct, isn’t it?

for certain things that Reverend King said were the things they objected to.

Claudette: No, sir. It was in the beginning when they arrested me, when they seen how dirty they treated Negro girls here, that they had begun to feel like that...although some of us just didn’t have the guts to stand up.

Knabe: Did you have a leader?

Claudette: Did we have a leader? Our leaders is just We, ourselves.

Knabe: But somebody spoke for the group.

Claudette: We all spoke for ourselves.

Again, and again, Knabe tried to trick Claudette into saying that the Reverend King, not the Black community itself, was responsible for the boycott. But Claudette’s testimony, so simple and direct, was extremely powerful. Finally, the testimony was complete, and the three judges went into Justice Johnson’s chambers. Justice Johnson, as the junior judge, was asked to vote first. He said, “Judge, as far as I’m concerned, state-imposed segregation on public facilities violates the Constitution. I’m going to rule with the plaintiffs here.” By a 2-1 decision a federal court abolished segregated seating on Montgomery’s, and Alabama’s buses. Justice Johnson later said: “The testimony of ...Miss Colvin and the others reinforced the Constitution’s position that you can’t abridge the freedoms of the individual. The boycott case was a simple case of legal and human rights being denied. (91) The decision was announced on June 19, 1956. Almost every Black citizen of Montgomery, Alabama, who is still alive vividly remembers where she was and what she was doing when she heard the first sounding of the liberty bell in the American South.





On December 21, 1956, the first day of integrated bus service, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and white Rev. Glenn Smiley rode the first bus together. The bus protest that had been ignited twenty-one months earlier by Claudette Colvin's arrest came to an end. It was one of the great human rights victories in U.S. history, and the heroine who started it did so by standing up for the Constitution against tyranny.

**Why were Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin heroes?** It was the powerful actions of these two heroic Black ladies, Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin, who led this special victory over the evils of racial segregation.

***Discussion Questions:***

- Can one person lead to systemic change? Is it possible for one person to change the system alone or do they need support from others?
- What were the emotional, and situational elements of the effort to change segregation law?
- How can one single change lead to more systemic change?

***Points of Lessons that are present in these examples:***

***Situational Awareness:*** *The observation that some element of the situation is problematic.*

***Social Fitness:*** *Practicing important social skills.*

***Everyday Hero:*** *Acting courageously in a challenging situation in order to bring about positive change.*

***Positive Systemic Change:*** *Making an effort to change a destructive system.*

***Turning Point:*** *The point at which change begins to occur.*

***Point of Intervention:*** *The point at which a person can choose to act courageously or give in to their fears.*

***Resistance:*** *The negative, yet unjustified, consequences to heroic action.*





**Peer pressure:** *Feelings of obligation to conform to the social norm.*

**Bystander:** *A person who ignores social/emotional cues to assist in a situation.*

**Conformity:** *Aligning your thoughts, feelings, or behaviors to that of the social norm.*

**Ingroup and outgroup:** *Making a distinction between those who belong and those who don't in your social group.*

**Fixed Mindset:** *The inability to change a preconceived opinion.*

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*Special Addenda:*

Rosa Parks relied to the question of a colleague of Zimbardo, Jason Reese, who asked in her own words what transpired on the day she was sent to jail for not sitting in the segregated section of the bus.

She wrote:

August 4, 1994

“I was evicted from the bus in 1943 by the driver because I would not get off the bus and go to the back door to re-enter the bus.

I was arrested on the bus on December 1, 1955, because I would not stand for a white male passenger to take my seat. The passenger did not demand the seat. The driver did not want to see a white man standing. Both incidents were incited by the same driver. (!) I worked with Mr. E.D. Nixon and Rev. Ralph Abernathy before Rev. M.L. King Jr. came to Montgomery Alabama.”

P.S.

I was very humiliated and offended by both experiences. The first went almost unnoticed. The second brought on the boycott of the Montgomery bus for 387 days and the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. R.P.

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