

How Dignified Defiance Can Change A Nation: A Tribute to Rosa Parks, An American Icon

Each person must live their life as a model for others.

—Rosa Parks

Jimmy F. Robinson Jr., 2005–2006 Young Lawyers Conference President

In my mission to strengthen our community and better our profession, I often find inspiration in the history books. Join me in revisiting a story that taught a nation that human dignity is a right, regardless of one's station in life; and that right must be acknowledged and respected.

The death of Rosa Parks at age 92 reminded me that dignified defiance has the power to change laws, lives and nations. Fifty years ago, this American icon referred to by many as the “Mother of the American Civil Rights Movement,” led the challenge to the South’s Jim Crow laws and Montgomery Alabama’s segregated bus seating policy. Mrs. Parks began a movement that would bring international attention to the unjust practices of the segregated South. By refusing to relinquish her seat to a white passenger, this ordinary citizen, armed with human dignity and moral fortitude, changed the destiny of millions. I include myself in that number. All across this country, civic and community centers, schools and even highways are named in her honor.

On Thursday, December 1, 1955, Mrs. Parks, a forty-two-year-old seamstress for the Fair Department Store boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus in Montgomery. For African-Americans, who made up two-thirds of the bus riders, riding the bus in 1955 segregated Montgomery was no easy task. They had to step onto the bus, pay the driver, exit the bus and walk to the back door to reboard. If they were fortunate, they would find an empty seat in the “colored section” and would complete their ride. However, pursuant to Alabama law, when asked, African-Americans were required to give up their seats to white patrons, and had to move to the back of the bus. They were not allowed to sit across the aisle from whites.

On that famous Thursday, Mrs. Parks took her seat in the “colored section.” As the bus made its stops, it became crowded. Mrs. Parks was ordered to give up her seat to a white passenger. She refused. Some historians have written that her feet ached and she was tired. Others have written that her act was planned by the NAACP. However, by her own testimony, Mrs. Parks stated that



she was “no more tired than usual” and that she did not plan her arrest. “I did not get on the bus to get arrested. I got on the bus to go home.”

Mrs. Parks stated that she was tired of segregation, Jim Crow laws and the racist treatment she and other African-Americans received every day of their lives. In her book, *Quiet Strength*, Mrs. Parks wrote, “Our mistreatment was just not right, and I was tired of it. I kept thinking about my mother and my grandparents, and how strong they were. I knew there was a possibility of being mistreated, but an opportunity was being given to me to do what I had asked of others.”

Clifford Durr, a white attorney whose wife had hired Mrs. Parks as a seamstress, posted bail for her release after her arrest. The NAACP had searched long and hard for an ideal plaintiff for a case to challenge the constitutionality of Montgomery’s segregation laws and expose the injustice of segregated public transportation. That evening, they lobbied Mrs. Parks, and she agreed to be the face for the NAACP’s case.

The rest of the story is American history: her trial, a 381-day Montgomery bus boycott, the establishment of the Montgomery Improvement Association with the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. as its president, and the Supreme Court’s ruling in November 1956, finding that segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional.

Today we can all learn from the example of Rosa Parks. She was tired of being humiliated; tired of having to adapt to unjust rules codified into unjust laws. By sitting, Rosa Parks stood up for African-Americans and challenged all laws that treated them as less than human beings. In her simple act of dignified defiance, Rosa Parks taught us: Each of us has the power within us to change our communities, our families, and maybe even our nation through simple acts of dignified defiance. Do your part in 2006 to pass on this legacy. ♣