

Justice for All

The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

On July 2, 1964, the United States Congress passed a Civil Rights Act. It was not the first set of civil rights laws enacted in the United States, but it has been the first law to last. The first Civil Rights Act was passed in 1875, ten years after the end of the American Civil War between the free states of the north (the Union) and the slave states of the south (the Confederacy).

The Civil War ended on April 9, 1865. During the next five years, Congress passed three constitutional amendments in an effort to undo the injustices of the past. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment made former slaves citizens of the United States. The Fifteenth Amendment gave these new citizens the right to vote. The Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 took these amendments one step further by outlawing discrimination in public places. The shameful story of America's mistreatment of African Americans seemed to be in its final chapter.

Unfortunately, in 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the Civil Rights Act of 1875. African American citizens could again be legally barred from "white" establishments, and southern states even found ways to get around the Fifteenth Amendment's mandates, threatening the jobs and lives of black citizens who registered to vote.

Nearly one hundred years after the Civil War, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood in the city of Montgomery, Alabama, mourning the lack of progress the nation had made in assuring the civil



rights of all citizens. Born in Alabama in 1929 to an African American minister and his wife, King himself endured injustices because of the color of his skin.

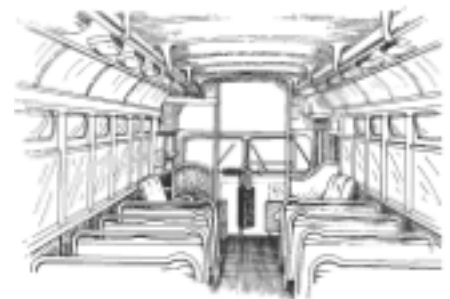
Although King's childhood was typical in many ways, he could not go to "white" schools or drink from "white" drinking fountains. White neighbors once asked him to stop playing with their son, and when King was shopping with his mother one day, a white woman struck him on the cheek and called him an offensive name.

On another shopping trip, a shoe salesman refused service to King's father because the senior King, who was also a civil rights leader, would not sit in the "black section" of the store. Martin Luther King, Jr., had cause to be angry, but he did not believe that anger would solve the problems of injustice. He believed the answers could be found in love.

After King finished his schooling, he became the pastor of a church in Montgomery, Alabama. He had enjoyed comfortable freedoms in the northern colleges he had attended. Now he felt called to help African Americans in the South experience those same freedoms. Just how he could change things, however, was not clear. About a year later, he saw a possible path.

On December 1, 1955, an African American woman named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white passenger.

Mistreatment of blacks on Montgomery city buses was common. Bus drivers called them hateful names and often drove away from bus stops before black passengers could board. More than once, black citizens were arrested when they refused to offer their seats to white people. But something was different this time. Rosa Parks called the National



Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to ask for help. Her case would go to court.

News of the Parks case spread quickly in the city of Montgomery, and people gathered at Reverend King's church to form a plan. Montgomery blacks would refuse to ride the bus the following Monday. They would take cars or taxis to work, or they would walk or just stay home. Thousands of fliers were printed and passed out, and the boycott worked! The buses in Montgomery were nearly empty on the morning of December 5, 1955.

Black leaders decided to continue the boycott until African Americans were treated fairly on the buses, and they elected Reverend King president of the group that would oversee the plan. The boycott continued for an entire year. At last, on December 20, 1956, the buses of Montgomery, Alabama, became integrated. Martin Luther King, Jr., was no longer a single individual who felt called to correct injustices. He was now the leader of a massive movement for civil rights.

The Montgomery boycott was just the beginning. Next, King became president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC was an organization that asked people of all colors and walks of life to break unjust laws. To oppose laws that forced blacks to sit in the backs of buses, Freedom Riders rode buses all over the South, and they would sit anywhere they liked. Sit-ins were held at restaurants and theaters, during which blacks sat in seats reserved for whites. Blacks also conducted kneel-ins at "white" churches.

King next organized marches to show government officials that people were ready to outlaw segregation. Throngs of people joined in these marches. A march on Washington in August 1963 drew a crowd of 250,000. In front of the Lincoln Memorial, many famous people spoke about the need for civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the day's final speaker. His speech, "I Have a Dream," expressed hope for a day when people of all races would live in harmony. The speech was met with thunderous

applause and is still quoted throughout the world today. And the Civil Rights Act passed by Congress in 1964 is still enforced today.

Proving that nonviolent reform is possible, Martin Luther King, Jr., earned the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. King united hundreds of thousands of people in a struggle for justice. His eloquent speeches, remarkable courage, and insistence on peaceful protests brought people of all races together.

It was not always easy for King to persuade his followers, or even himself, that injustices must be repaid with love. King and his family received hundreds of threatening phone calls. His house, his brother's house, and fellow pastors' houses were bombed. Many churches were bombed, too. Southern states used old laws to arrest thousands of protesters. Marchers were attacked by police dogs and blasted with water from fire hoses. People were injured, and people were killed. Some black leaders wanted to fight violence with violence, but King stood behind his belief in the power of love.

Sadly, on April 4, 1968, Reverend King was killed by a sniper's bullet. The man who refused to turn to anger, hate, or violence was killed by violence at the age of 39. Still, his dream lives on as the entire world continues working toward the day when all people, regardless of color, can live in peace and enjoy civil justice. Martin Luther King, Jr., can be thanked for defining the dream.

Questions About Justice for All

1. What kind of discrimination did Martin Luther King, Jr., experience as a boy?
2. How did Rosa Parks influence Reverend King?
3. What was unique about Reverend King's approach to creating justice for all?
4. Why do you think that marches were effective ways to promote civil rights reform?
5. What possible connection might there have been between the March on Washington in 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
6. What do you think were Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, greatest challenges?

Vocabulary

A. Write an example from the story on the lines after each word below to show that you understand the meaning of the word. On the line in front of each word, write P if the word relates to a problem or S if it relates to a solution.

Example: P discrimination: Black children were not allowed to attend the same schools as white children.

1. _____ injustice: _____
2. _____ sit-ins: _____
3. _____ mistreatment: _____
4. _____ boycotts: _____
5. _____ integration: _____

B. Write the letter of the correct definition on the line in front of each phrase or term.

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|----------------------------|---|
| _____ invalidate a law | a. the freedoms given to citizens |
| _____ endure injustices | b. making changes through peaceful means |
| _____ legally bar | c. to make or pass a law |
| _____ civil rights | d. to use the law to prevent the exercise of rights |
| _____ enact a law | e. a warning of intention to cause harm |
| _____ nonviolent reform | f. to claim that the law no longer has to be obeyed |
| _____ a threatening action | g. objecting in a nonviolent way |
| _____ peaceful protests | h. to tolerate unfair treatment or discrimination |

Think About It

- A. A legacy is something that is passed on from one generation to another. Write a paragraph describing Martin Luther King's legacy to the people of America.
- B. Think about an unfair situation that made you very angry. Describe the problem and then compare how you handled it with how Martin Luther King, Jr., might have handled it.

Character Map

Add details from the story to complete the character map below. Write two details in each box to describe that characteristic of Martin Luther King, Jr.

