

NONVIOLENCE IN ACTION: THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Black Americans use the values of nonviolence to achieve equal rights?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define nonviolence and identify the values associated with it.
- Read about Georgia Gilmore and discuss how her actions during the Montgomery bus boycott exemplified nonviolence.
- Examine texts about other women who led the Montgomery bus boycott.
- Create a “found poem” reflecting key themes related to the struggle for civil rights.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

105–120 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment for projecting a handout and video
- *Six Values of Nonviolence* handout (one copy to project)
- *Pies from Nowhere: How Georgia Gilmore Sustained the Montgomery Bus Boycott* by Dee Romito (one copy of book or online read-aloud at <https://bit.ly/3yXdTEN>)
- *Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (copies of one handout for each small group)
- Picture books about the Montgomery bus boycott (optional)
- Slips of colored paper (cut-up sticky notes or index cards)
- Glue
- Crayons, colored pencils and/or markers



VOCABULARY

boycott	civil rights movement	Montgomery bus boycott	nonviolence
<i>Browder v. Gayle</i>	discrimination	NAACP	segregation
civil rights			unconstitutional

Procedures

NOTE

This lesson explores nonviolence and peaceful protest as ways to effect change. Students may hold some false beliefs about the concept of nonviolence, for example that it reflects weakness or that it's an outdated idea (from Dr. King's time). Make sure students understand that nonviolent direct action is bold and assertive, and is a method still used today by civil rights groups, such as Black Lives Matter. Students may also think that nonviolence means they can never stand up for themselves. Help them to understand that collective action for social change is something that takes planning and courage, but is different from personal self-defense and conflict resolution.

PART 1

The Value of Nonviolence (45 mins.)

- 1 Post the poem below and read together as a class. Discuss the choice that the poet is defining and that all people sometimes face.

CHOOSE by Carl Sandburg

*THE single clenched fist lifted and ready,
Or the open asking hand held out and waiting.*

Choose:

For we meet by one or the other.

- 2 In pairs, ask students to think about a time that a conflict occurred and there was a choice to respond with a "clenched fist" or "open hand." Have partners share the choice that was made and if they think it was the right one. Gather as a class and allow a few volunteers to share their anecdotes. Discuss some of the following questions:

- Do aggressive or peaceful responses to conflicts usually work out better in the long run? Why?
- How does each type of response make you feel inside? Which feeling do you prefer?

NOTE

Students may identify a conflict from history or current events, or they may focus on a personal experience. If their anecdote is personal, encourage them to keep it anonymous by sharing actions and not names of people.

- Why is a peaceful response sometimes a harder or braver choice than an angry one?
- Does responding peacefully mean being passive? How can a peaceful response be forceful?

NOTE

While this lesson focuses on the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, make sure students understand that the struggle for civil rights is ongoing and the philosophy of nonviolence continues to be used to make change today.

3 Write the term *nonviolence* on the board. Explain that nonviolence is a set of values that rejects violence and encourages change through peaceful actions. Share that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders believed nonviolence was the best way to achieve equality for Black Americans during the civil rights era. Ask students for examples of inequality that Black people faced during this time. Create a list of their examples (e.g., segregated facilities, under-resourced schools, poor housing, discrimination in voting, etc.).

4 Project the handout *Six Values of Nonviolence*. Read together as a class and clarify concepts as needed. Give each student a square of construction paper. Have them choose the value of nonviolence that is most meaningful to them. Direct students to illustrate the value and write a caption that encapsulates it in their own words. Allow students to share their illustrations in pairs or small groups, and assemble them into a class display.

PART 2

Taking Action: The Women Behind the Boycott (60–75 mins.)

5 Ask students for examples of nonviolent action during the civil rights movement and chart their ideas. If students do not bring it up, add boycott to the list and define it as “a type of protest in which people stop buying the products or using the services of a company.” Write “Montgomery bus boycott” on the board and ask students why people may have boycotted buses in the South in the 1950s. Allow them to share any prior knowledge they have about this event.

6 Tell students you will read aloud a true story about the Montgomery bus boycott and they should listen for examples of the values of nonviolence. Read *Pies from Nowhere* to the class and discuss some of the questions below. If a copy of the book is not available, an online read-aloud can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3yXdTEN> [8:26].

- What experiences did Gilmore have that led her to want to join the civil rights movement?
- What risks did Gilmore take to support the boycott? How did she overcome the obstacles she faced?

- Why was Gilmore’s group called “The Club from Nowhere”? What does this name reveal about the dangers faced by civil rights protesters?
- How did Gilmore use her personal strengths to make a difference? What did you learn from this?
- How did you feel when you heard that the Court ended segregation on public buses?
- What values of nonviolence did you notice in the attitudes and actions of the Montgomery protesters?

7 Share that the Montgomery bus boycott was successful because of the planning and work of many “hidden figures” in history, like Georgia Gilmore. Tell students that they will learn more about some of these figures. Divide the class into small groups and assign each a text to examine. Depending on the ability of the students, assign the readings in the handout *Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* or additional picture books on the topic, such as the following:

- *Claudette Colvin Refuses to Move* by Ebony Joy Wilkins
- *Rosa* by Nikki Giovanni
- *Rosa's Bus: The Ride to Civil Rights* by Jo S. Kittinger
- *The Montgomery Bus Boycott (Graphic Histories)* by Kerri O'Hern and Frank Walsh

8 Tell students they will create a “found poem” based on the text assigned in step 7. Provide the following directions:

- Read the text and identify a key message (e.g., all people have rights, nonviolence can make lasting change)
- Read the text again and choose at least 12 words, phrases or quotes that stand out and connect to the message.
- Write each word or phrase on a different slip of paper (e.g., colored sticky notes).
- Arrange the slips of paper (“found” language) into a poem.
- Paste the poem onto a sheet of paper, give it a title and illustrate it.

9 Display students’ work. As time allows, have groups share their poem, its key message and how it reflects the achievements of their “hidden figure.” Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the next page.

NOTE

Pies from Nowhere: How Georgia Gilmore Sustained the Montgomery Bus Boycott by Dee Romito tells the story of one woman’s efforts to support the civil rights movement. Gilmore was a midwife and a cook at the National Lunch Company in Montgomery, who organized a group (the Club from Nowhere) to prepare food for civil rights protesters. Gilmore helped raise significant funds for the Montgomery Improvement Association and lost her job as a result of her involvement and her testimony in the Court case that put an end to segregated buses.

Discussion Questions

1

What surprised you about *how* the Montgomery bus boycott came about and who planned it? How is this different from what you've learned in the past?

2

What did the bus boycott teach you about the power of nonviolence?

3

How would you respond to someone who says that fighting violence with violence is the best strategy?

4

What's an example of an injustice faced by Black people or other groups today that is being challenged using nonviolence?

5

What did you learn from studying the boycott that you can apply to your own life?

6

What did you learn about leadership from the women featured in this lesson? Did they inspire you to want to become a leader in some way in the future? Explain.

Lesson Extensions

- Deepen students' understanding of the civil rights movement through historical fiction or nonfiction. Read aloud and discuss one of the titles below, or set up student-led discussion groups around one or more books.

→ *Down to the Last Out: The Journal of Biddy Owens*
by Walter Dean Myers

→ *Glory Be* by Augusta Scattergood

→ *The Lions of Little Rock* by Kristin Levine

→ *Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges

→ *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis

- Assign students to research a current-day civil rights issue and how activists are using nonviolent methods to make change. Have students read two to three articles on their topic using the youth current events sources below. Guide students to write a brief report or create a multimedia presentation on what they learned.

[Dogo News](#)

[KidsPost](#)

[Newsela](#)

[Smithsonian Tween Tribune](#)

[Teaching Kids News](#)

[Time for Kids](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + DPLA. Primary Source Sets: Voting Rights Act of 1965, <https://bit.ly/3x2NHXB>; Fannie Lou Hamer and the Civil Rights Movement in Rural Mississippi, <https://bit.ly/3w14WZn>.
- + Flocabulary. "Martin Luther King Jr. & Leadership." Video, 5:02. <https://www.flocabulary.com/unit/martin-luther-king-jr>.
- + Fresberg Cartoon. "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." August 28, 2018. YouTube video, 2:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AV8CvZ3LoUA>.
- + Learning for Justice. "Lesson: Bus Boycott—Historical Documents Highlight Integration Milestone." <https://bit.ly/3gg5GD9>.
- + Scholastic. "Junior Scholastic Teaching Kits: The Civil Rights Movement." <https://bit.ly/2T7fOpO>.
- + Scholastic. "Lesson Plan: The Journey to Civil Rights." <https://bit.ly/352QNYj>.



Six Values of Nonviolence

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that the best way to conquer racism and injustice is through nonviolent actions and thoughts.

Dr. King taught that nonviolence:

- 1 Is a brave choice and an active way to fight back against unfairness and hate
- 2 Leads to friendship and understanding
- 3 Aims to defeat unfair actions, not make enemies of people
- 4 Sometimes involves getting hurt, which can help people become stronger inside
- 5 Is a choice to act with love—to not let violence into your heart by hating others
- 6 Recognizes that change may take time, but justice will eventually win



"Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding... It is a sword that heals."

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Text adapted from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, "Six Principles of Non-Violence," <https://stanford.io/3vNwmlu>.

PHOTO SOURCE: Albertin, Walter. *Martin Luther King, Jr., three-quarter-length portrait, standing, facing front, at a press conference*. World Telegram & Sun, June 8, 1964. United States Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. Accessed June 1, 2021. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/99404325>.



Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Jo Ann Robinson Thought about a Boycott for Years

Jo Ann Robinson was born in 1912 in Georgia. She was at the top of her high school class and was the first in her family to graduate from college. Later, Robinson became an English professor at Alabama State University.

In 1956, she was arrested for helping to lead the Montgomery bus boycott. A police officer threw a rock at her window and acid was poured on her car.

For Robinson, the idea of a bus boycott started seven years earlier. In 1949 she boarded a bus just before Christmas. There were only two people on the bus, and she sat in the white section. The driver stopped the bus, stood over her and yelled at her to get up. Robinson left the bus in tears.

That year, she joined the Women's Political Council (WPC), a group of over 200 Black women working for equal rights. The next year, in 1950, she became its president. The WPC recorded stories of all the horrible ways Black people were treated on city buses. They wrote letters to the bus company demanding change. They asked for more polite drivers, more stops in Black neighborhoods and more seats for Black riders. They said that Black people should be allowed to pay and enter at the front of the bus. They met with the mayor and city leaders, but the segregation continued.

Robinson and the WPC grew angry as they watched more and more Black people get mistreated and arrested on buses. They talked about the idea of a boycott. When Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on December 1, 1955, the WPC decided the time was right. The next day they sprang into action, handing out 35,000 flyers announcing the boycott. For 382 days, the women of WPC organized and led the boycott. Their strength and courage helped put an end to segregation on public buses once and for all.



Jo Ann Robinson was arrested in 1956 for helping to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott.



Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Rosa Parks was Well Prepared

People like to say that Rosa Parks was “tired” the day she rode that bus, and that her action was unplanned. “I was not tired physically,” wrote Rosa. “No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” It’s true that Parks didn’t set out to be arrested that day in 1955, but she had been preparing for it for many years.

Twelve years earlier, in 1943, she ran into the same bus driver who had her arrested in 1955. His name was James Blake. Parks paid for her ticket at the front of the bus. Blake demanded she get off and re-enter through the back door. She refused, and Blake threw her off the bus. Parks didn’t want any more “run-ins with that mean one.” It was pure chance that she got on his bus again years later.

That same year, in 1943, Parks joined the NAACP, a group fighting for equal rights for African Americans. She traveled across Alabama, helping to investigate crimes against Black people. She signed up to vote and fought for voting rights for all Black people. Parks also formed a youth council so young people could get involved. When she rode that bus in 1955, Parks had been working for civil rights for many years.

The summer before her arrest, Parks attended a special school in Tennessee called Highlander Folk School. The school taught African Americans about their rights and trained them to make change. In the summer of 1955, Parks studied how to fight segregation. One of her teachers was Septima Clark. Clark was born in 1898, and was the daughter of a laundrywoman and a former enslaved man. She grew up to become a teacher and a leader in the struggle for equality. Many called her the “Mother of the Movement” for civil rights.



Rosa Parks (right) attended the Highlander Folk School with Septima Clark, "Mother of the Movement." She studied how to fight segregation in the summer of 1955, a few months before her arrest.

On December 1, 1955, Parks was well-prepared when James Blake told her to give up her seat. Today, we remember her as a hero, but many people didn’t feel this way at the time. Weeks after her arrest, Parks was fired from her job at a department store. Her husband quit his job after being told he could not talk about his wife at work. They received hostile phone calls and even death threats. In 1957, Parks, her husband and her mother left Montgomery and moved north to Detroit to find work and safety.



Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

History Kept Claudette Colvin Stuck to Her Seat

Rosa Parks was not the first to be arrested for demanding her rights on a bus. Here are some of the many others in Montgomery, Alabama, who also fought back:

- In 1944, Viola White was beaten and arrested for refusing to give up her seat. A police officer got even by kidnapping and attacking her 16-year-old daughter.
- In 1946, Geneva Johnson was arrested for “talking back” to a driver and not having the correct change.
- In 1951, Epsie Worthy got off a bus after the driver demanded an extra fare. He followed her and began hitting her. When she fought back, she was arrested and fined \$52.

And then there was Claudette Colvin. Colvin was a 15-year-old high school student in 1955. Her class had been studying about Black leaders like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Colvin was interested in history and politics. She dreamed of becoming president of the United States. Colvin was also a member of the NAACP Youth Council, a group of young people who fought for equal rights. She was close to Rosa Parks, one of the group's leaders.



On March 2, 1955, Colvin was riding the bus home from school. This was nine months before Rosa Parks' famous bus ride. The driver told her to stand to make room for a white woman. Colvin and her neighbor, a pregnant woman, refused. Colvin said she'd paid her fare and it was her right to sit. "History kept me stuck to my seat," she remembers. "I felt the hand of Harriet Tubman pushing down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth pushing down on the other."

Two police officers handcuffed Colvin and dragged her off the bus. Her schoolbooks went flying. She was frightened and cried in her jail cell. Later, she joined other women who had been treated unfairly on buses. They fought in court for their rights. On November 13, 1956, the decision came down—the Supreme Court

agreed that segregation on public buses went against the Constitution. The women had won their case!

Colvin made history, but the newspapers didn't celebrate her accomplishment. Many in her community called her a troublemaker. After high school, it was hard for her to find and keep a job. So in 1958 she moved to New York City. She had two sons and became a nurse's aide. Colvin was left out of many history books, but she is proud of her actions to end segregation: "I do feel like what I did was a spark and it caught on."



Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Women Who Took the Bus to Court

The year 1955 was a time of struggle on the buses of Montgomery, Alabama. Most people know about the arrest of Rosa Parks that December. Fewer people know about the brave actions of these women:



CLAUDETTE COLVIN
Arrested March 2

Colvin was 15 when a bus driver demanded she give up her seat for a white woman. She refused, saying it was her constitutional right to sit. Colvin studied Black history in school and belonged to a civil rights group. She was not going to give in. Two police officers handcuffed her and dragged her off to jail.



AURELIA BROWDER
Arrested April 19

Browder was also arrested for not giving up her seat to a white person. She was strong and proud and stood her ground. She was a seamstress and owned several businesses. Browder had 21 children and still found time to finish high school and college in her 30s. She was not going to let a bus driver push her around.



MARY LOUISE SMITH
Arrested October 21

Smith was an 18-year-old maid earning \$2 a day. Her boss owed her \$11. She took the bus to her boss's house to collect the money, but no one was home. Smith was upset as she got back on the bus. That's when the driver asked her to give up her seat. She wouldn't move. She said, "I got the privilege to sit here like anybody else." The driver called the police.



SUSIE MCDONALD
Arrested October 21

McDonald was a widow in her 70s who walked with a cane and wore flowered dresses. Her neighbors called her Miss Sue. She was light-skinned with blue eyes and straight tan hair. Sometimes people thought she was white, but McDonald always corrected them. She made sure the bus driver knew she was a proud Black woman the day she refused to give up her seat for a white person.



In 1956 the courts ruled that "Segregation of black and white passengers on motor buses... violates the Constitution and laws of the United States."

These four brave women joined together as part of a Court case on February 1, 1956. The case was called *Browder v. Gayle* (W.A. Gayle was the mayor of Montgomery). They claimed that segregation on buses went against the U.S. Constitution. They demanded their civil rights. For many months, the lawyers argued and the judges studied the facts. On November 13, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court made its decision—segregation on buses was against the Constitution and had to stop. A few weeks later the 382-day Montgomery bus boycott ended. Colvin, Browder, Smith and McDonald are four of the unsung heroes of this struggle.