

OPINION

‘Why I believe Rosa Parks is a heroine’


by Barack Obama

He is the 44th President of the USA and the first ever to be black. His father was Kenyan. He has read all the Harry Potter books and has a pet dog named Bo.

In 1955 she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. As many schools mark Black History Month, Barack Obama reminds us why we all need to follow Rosa Parks — even today.



Mother of the movement: ‘I was tired of giving in’ said Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks’ life was a lesson in perseverance. As a child, she grew up listening to the **Ku Klux Klan** ride by her house and lying in bed at night fearing that her house would be burnt down. In her small hometown in Alabama, she attended a one-room school for African-American children that only went through the sixth grade. When she moved to Montgomery, Alabama, to continue her schooling, she was forced to clean classrooms after school to pay her tuition. Although she attended Alabama State Teachers College, Rosa Parks would later make her living as a seamstress and housekeeper.

Of course, her name became permanently etched in American history on December 1, 1955, when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a **Montgomery** bus. It wasn’t the first time Rosa Parks refused to acquiesce to the **Jim Crow** system. The same bus driver who had her arrested had thrown her off a bus the year before for refusing to give up her seat.

Some schoolchildren are taught that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat because her feet were tired. Our nation’s schoolbooks are only getting it half right. She once said: “The only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

“WERE IT NOT FOR THAT QUIET MOMENT OF COURAGE BY MRS PARKS I BELIEVE I WOULD NOT BE PRESIDENT TODAY”

This solitary act of civil disobedience became a call to action. Her arrest led a then relatively unknown pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr., to organise a boycott of the Montgomery bus system. That boycott lasted 381 days and culminated in a landmark Supreme Court decision finding

that the city’s segregation policy was unconstitutional.

This solitary act of civil disobedience was also the spark that ignited the beginning of the end for segregation and inspired millions around the country and ultimately around the world to get involved in the fight for racial equality.

Rosa Parks’ persistence and determination did not end that day in Montgomery, nor did it end with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act years later. From 1965 to 1988, Ms. Parks continued her public service by working for my good friend Congressman **John Conyers**. And in an example of her low-key demeanour, her job in Congressman Conyers’ office did not involve appearances as a figurehead or celebrity; she helped homeless folks find housing.

At the age of 74, she opened the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, which offers education and job training programs for disadvantaged youth. And even into her 80s, Rosa Parks gave lectures and attended meetings with civil rights groups.

At the age of 86, Rosa Parks’ courage and fortitude was recognised by President Bill Clinton, who awarded her the nation’s highest honour for a civilian — the Congressional Gold Medal.

As we honour the life of Rosa Parks, we should not limit our commemorations to lofty eulogies. Instead, let us commit ourselves to carrying on her fight, one solitary act at a time, and ensure that her passion continues to inspire as it did a half-century ago.

Rosa Parks once said: ‘As long as there is unemployment, war, crime and all things that go to the infliction of man’s inhumanity to man, regardless — there is much to be done, and people need to work together.’ It’s up to us to make sure that her message is shared.

As a personal note, I think it is fair to say were it not for that quiet moment of courage by Mrs. Parks, I would not be president today. I owe her a great thanks. She will be sorely missed.

YOU DECIDE

Is racial inequality a major problem in Britain?

ACTIVITY

Imagine you were a reporter on the bus. Write a 300-word news story about the scene when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.

WORD WATCH

Ku Klux Klan – The Ku Klux Klan was a racist group established by people who believed that white people were better and wanted to see black people remaining slaves. It began in the southern states at the end of the American Civil War in 1865.

Montgomery – It was in the US city of

Montgomery that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus, launching a bus boycott and galvanising the Civil Rights movement nationwide. The city has commemorated that incident with a museum, which, along with a few other civil rights sights, is the main reason to visit. Alabama's capital, Montgomery is an otherwise pleasant but sleepy city.

Jim Crow system – 'Jim Crow' laws were

passed in the southern states of the USA. They denied black people equal rights. Black people and white people were segregated. Black people were not allowed to use 'whites only' public facilities such as schools and parks.

John Conyers – Michigan politician and Democratic member of the House of Representatives.

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 Notes

