

HOW OLD IS A HERO?



**HOW OLD IS
A HERO?**
A CHILDREN'S CIVIL
RIGHTS PLAY

Recommended for
Ages 6 to 12
Grades 1 – 6

A Reproducible Learning Guide for Educators

This guide is designed to help educators prepare for, enjoy, and discuss HOW OLD IS A HERO? It contains background, discussion questions and activities appropriate for ages 6 to 12

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TO BE AN ACTIVIST

The world isn't perfect—**yet!** On the news we see war and cruelty, unfairness and pollution. And sometimes we see these things right in our own neighborhoods. **But that doesn't mean we have to accept them.** Every day, people all over the world work to **change things for the better.** People who don't just sit there—who try to change things they think are bad—are called **activists.** Activists come in all shapes and sizes. Your great-grandmother can be one. So can you! You don't need to be famous, or rich, or even old enough to vote. All that's important is that you do something, big or small, to **stand up for what you believe in.**

What are some ways to be an activist? You can work with the government by voting, by going to court, or by contacting the people elected to represent you. You can **get the word out** about a problem by talking to reporters for newspapers and TV stations. You can demonstrate by marching with a sign, or simply by sitting down and refusing to move!

Being an activist doesn't mean being violent. You don't need big muscles—just **a strong spirit and a strong purpose.** Important activists, including Ghandi in India and Dr. Martin Luther King in America, entirely rejected violence. They and their followers got the world's attention by being peaceful, strong, and dignified. They achieved great changes because they never gave up, even in the face of threats.

The play *How Old is a Hero?* tells the stories of three young activists—Ruby, Ernest, and Claudette—who stood up for what they believed in. They brought their hope and energy to one great cause—**ending segregation in the American South.**

WHAT WAS SEGREGATION?

Fifty years ago in the South, **laws existed to keep Black people and white people apart.** Black people had to use separate restrooms from white people, and drink from different water fountains. They could buy things from the big stores in town, but they weren't allowed to sit down and eat at the stores' lunch counters. They could purchase clothes from the "white" stores, but they weren't allowed to try them on first, because they might get them "dirty" or "greasy."

This kind of separation was known as **segregation.** City buses were also segregated, which meant that white people got to sit up front, but Black people were forced to ride in the back. If you were Black, you might have to ride standing up, even if the "white" seats were empty. **Even schools were segregated.** White students went to all-white schools, which usually provided better books, equipment, and opportunity than the schools set aside for Black children.

Segregation wasn't fair, but many people accepted it. They didn't think they could change the way things had been for so long. However, others felt the unjust laws had to go. **People of all colors and ages became activists** as they began to protest laws that treated Black people as second-class citizens.

KIDS ON THE MARCH

Kids played a big role in these civil rights protests. They carried signs at rallies and sang freedom songs. When fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin helped touch off the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, **thousands of other kids did their part** by walking to school every day, just as their parents were walking to work. In 1963, a series of protest marches was even called the **Children's Crusade**, because so many young activists were arrested for taking part.

Adults went to court to win the right for Black and white students to go to school together. But grown-ups don't attend school. Ultimately, the only people who can integrate a school are schoolchildren themselves.

To stop school segregation, kids had to take the lead.

ERNEST GREEN & THE LITTLE ROCK NINE

When he left Central High School, says Ernest Green, "I remember reading in the paper that my graduating was going to be a real milestone. I thought to myself, 'This is great, but I want to do something else in life besides graduating from Little Rock High School. What do I do from here?'"

What did Ernest do? He eventually served as Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Jimmy Carter! Later he became an investment banker, living here in Washington, DC.



Ernest Green was a senior in 1957 when he and eight other Black students—known as "The Little Rock Nine"—integrated Central

High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. There was so much trouble from segregationists that President Eisenhower sent in army troops to escort The Nine to school and patrol the hallways. Despite it all, Ernest became the first Black student to graduate from the school.

Looking back, Ernest said, *"One thing I think is very important is this: while the nine of us may have been preselected, there really are nine, ten, thirty, forty, fifty kids in every community that could have done that.... **We were all ordinary kids.** You really do have the ability to do a lot more than you've been told....If given the opportunity, you'll be surprised at how much you can do, how much you can achieve."*

CLAUDETTE COLVIN & THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Claudette Colvin grew up and moved to New York, where she worked in a nursing home. She raised two sons.

Claudette Colvin was fifteen when she refused to move to the back of a **segregated bus** in Montgomery, Alabama.

"On March 2, 1955," she says, "I got on the bus in front of Dexter Avenue Church....I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. I think I had just finished eating a candy bar.... A white lady was sitting across the aisle from me, and it was against the law for you to sit in the same aisle with a white person.

'The bus driver looked back through the rearview mirror....He said, "Hey, get up!"...The white people were complaining.

'I said, "No. I do not have to get up. I paid my fare, so I do not have to get up. It's my constitutional right to sit here just as much as that lady. It's my constitutional right!"'

Policemen pulled Claudette off the bus, handcuffed, and **arrested her**. She was convicted of violating the law and had to pay a fine. A few months later, when Rosa Parks also refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger, the Black citizens of Montgomery, Alabama had had enough. For the next thirteen months, until the law was changed, they and their supporters refused to ride Montgomery City buses. It was a **boycott!**

A young African American minister named Martin Luther King was put in charge of the bus boycott. Almost all the Black people in Montgomery—over 17,000 men, women, and children—organized to find other ways to get to work and school. They walked, shared taxicabs, and got rides in private cars.

Ratified in 1868, **the Fourteenth Amendment** forbids any state to deny to any person "life, liberty or property, without due process of law" or to "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws." This promise continues to provide a basis for civil rights claims in the United States.

The bus company lost thousands of dollars in fares. Even more disturbing to segregationists, however, was the fact that so many people could work together, day after day, to stand up for their rights. As the rest of the U.S. began to take notice, the city fought back. City leaders created laws that made it almost impossible for Black people to use taxis and carpools. Some people spread false reports that the boycott was over. Others tried harassment or even violent attacks against Black people.

Young and old, Black citizens stuck together and kept up the boycott. Without carpools, however, African American leaders knew that many people would be forced to start riding buses again. So, they turned to the United States legal system: they filed a federal lawsuit against Montgomery's bus segregation laws, saying that these laws violated the 14th amendment of the United States Constitution. Eventually, the Supreme Court agreed. Segregation of buses was illegal. The Montgomery Bus Boycott has been called the **start of the organized civil rights movement**. It brought Martin Luther King to national attention. And

fifteen-year-old Claudette helped make it happen.

The word **boycott** comes from the name of Charles Boycott, a cruel land agent in Ireland who refused to lower high rents. To persuade him to change, people got together and refused to have any business dealings with him.

RUBY BRIDGES & SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Three other first-grade girls were selected at the same time as Ruby. They were assigned to integrate McDonogh, another school a few miles from William Frantz.

Ruby Bridges was only six in 1960 when **she stepped into first grade—and into history**. The year before, Black kindergarteners in New Orleans had been given a special, extremely difficult test by the school board. Ruby was one of only a few who passed. Black leaders in New Orleans thought she would be an excellent student to help desegregate an all-white school, so she was assigned to the William Frantz Public School.

Every day, federal agents escorted Ruby into the school through **shouting, angry crowds** who wanted to keep the school for white students only. Because these segregationists kept their own children home as a protest, **Ruby had the school almost to herself** for most of the year. She never saw the few white students who

came, because they were kept away from her classroom.

Ruby was the only student in her class, but she wasn't alone. She had **Mrs. Barbara Henry**, a young, dedicated white teacher. Mrs. Henry had just moved to New Orleans Boston native, so she was a **newcomer to the school as well**. When the other teachers refused to teach Ruby, Mrs. Henry volunteered.

It was a hard year, but it was worth it. By the next September, **thanks to Ruby, integration was accepted at William Frantz**. She and other Black children could go to school there without federal marshals for protection.

The William Frantz School had 576 enrolled students when Ruby began classes there. Three days later, attendance was only 4—including Ruby herself.

A NEW KIND OF SEGREGATION

Ruby stayed in New Orleans, became a travel agent, got married and raised four sons. For a while her first-grade experiences faded into the background, but in the 1990s several things happened that revived the past.

- With her nieces attending William Frantz, Ruby began to volunteer at the school she had helped to integrate decades before.
- After more than thirty years, she was reunited with Mrs. Henry, the teacher she had never forgotten and who had never forgotten her.

Ruby felt these events were coming together for a purpose. The William Frantz School, she says, "is in **a poor neighborhood in the inner city**, and most of the students there are African-American. As is true of most inner-city schools, **there's never enough funding** to keep William Frantz up to current standards or even to offer students the same opportunities they would receive in some of the suburban schools....**The kids are being segregated all over again.**"

So, for the second time, **Ruby became an activist**. To help fight racism and "turn inner-city public schools into great schools," she created the Ruby Bridges Foundation. She and Mrs. Henry often visit schools together to tell students what they learned from the integration experience.



PRIMARY Source!

Some of the Spoken lines in this show were actually said by the heroes themselves.

"She was someone who had a quiet determination, but had a general belief that things weren't fair, and the only way that you change it is - you have to be willing to stand up for it..."

- Ernest Green

"I remember one thing that was important to Mrs. Henry was reading. She always read stories to me. By second grade, I was a great reader."

- Ruby Bridges

"Walking up the steps [of Central High School] that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I've ever had."

-Ernest Green

"If there was anything heroic [in what we did], it wasn't what was on the TV cameras, it was when we went home at night and opened up our books."

- Ernest Green

"She didn't say anything. She just continued looking out the window. She decided on that day that she wasn't going to move."

– Actual Witness and Claudette Colvin's Classmate

"It wasn't planned, it was impulsive. I had the spirit of Sojourner Truth inside me, the spirit of Harriet Tubman, telling me, 'Don't get up!' I was glued to the seat. I was just as good as any white person."

- Claudette Colvin

"I was very hurt because I didn't know that white people would act like that and I was crying, And (the policeman) said, 'I will have to take you off.'

-Claudette Colvin

"I didn't move. I didn't move at all. So he kicked me and one got on one side of me and one got the other arm and they just drug me out. And I was screaming again and again, 'It's my constitutional right. It's my constitutional right. It's my constitutional right!'"

-Claudette Colvin

"I watched you walking into school today. I was surprised to see you talking to that mob. I saw your lips moving, but I couldn't make out what you were saying."

- Actual witness Mrs. Henry, Ruby Bridge's teacher

"Rosa Parks used to tell me what a brave young lady I was."

- Claudette Colvin

FOR DISCUSSION AFTER THE SHOW

WHAT IS COURAGE?

- Did Ruby's mother want Ruby to go to the new elementary school? Why or why not? Was Mrs. Bridges brave?
- Ernest Green didn't use his fists to fight back, even when angry people yelled and spit at him. What did he do instead? Did that take courage?
- Do you think there are different kinds of courage? What are some of them?



WHAT IS ACTIVISM?

- What is activism? Who were some of the activists you remember from the play? Can regular people be activists? How?
- Ruby spoke of Mrs. Henry as her first white friend. How can your teacher be your friend? How can you make friends with people who are different from yourself? Why is it good to have friends who are different?

ACTIVITIES...FOR YOUNG ACTIVISTS!

MAKING HEADLINES

- Every day, people like Claudette and Ernest, Ruby and Mrs. Henry stand up for what they believe in. In big ways and small ways, they help make the world better.
- Do you know somebody who has **stood up for something**? Maybe someone you know has cleaned up your neighborhood, or stopped a bully, or worked in a soup kitchen to help feed the homeless. (Hint: It doesn't have to be someone famous!)
- Put that person in the news! Draw a picture to go on the "front page." Write a caption, a headline and a news story about the person and their accomplishment.

BE A SQUEAKY WHEEL

- Abraham Lincoln described the United States government as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." What does "people" mean? It means **you**.
- Government officials—like **mayors, senators, representatives, and even the President**—are there for you. They have a responsibility to be your voice. But they aren't psychic! How do they know what you think?
- **They can't know—unless you tell them.**
- **What do you care about?** Endangered animals? Pollution? People's rights? Health care? Peace?
- **Be a squeaky wheel!** Look up the names and addresses of your elected officials - president, vice-president, U.S. or state senators and representatives, and mayor. **Write to them** about something important to you.

ACTIVE-ATE YOUR SCHOOL!

- Why did Ruby and Ernest struggle for school integration so long ago? Because they wanted African Americans to have **access to a better education** than the “black” schools could offer them. And why did Black people want and need a better education? **Because a good education gives you power.**
- It’s true. Throughout history, tyrannical governments have tried to keep people ignorant. Why? If you can **read and write**, you’re better able **to find out what’s going on around you**. You can find out about **ideas for change**, and **communicate** your own ideas to other people far away. In the past, women, enslaved people, and other oppressed groups often received little education. This lack of knowledge and abilities helped shut them out of the full rights and privileges every human being should be given.
- Today, laws guarantee people more rights. But **a good education is still essential**. It gives you the basic tools for living in our society, and helps you discover and develop your unique talents. It helps you find out where you want to go and how to get there.
- Ruby Bridges is still an **activist for schools**. At William Frantz, she says, “We hired teachers for multicultural arts programs. We started a ballet class, an African dance class, and a class on manners and etiquette. My hope is to bring programs like these to other inner-city schools. I believe **we must turn inner-city schools into great schools**....I believe strongly in literacy and the power of education.”
- Is your school great? **What would make your school better?** More computers? New science equipment? More field trips to Discovery Theater? **Write down the improvements you can think of.**
- Now, **get active—right this minute!** Pick one improvement and **start making it happen**. **Brainstorm** with your friends and your teacher. Exactly what is needed? How can you get it? Who might help you? (Some possibilities: librarian, principal, PTA, school board, elected representatives, arts organizations, businesses.) **Hint:** You might put the “squeaky wheel” technique to work for you (see previous page).

A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE USED IN THE SHOW:

This play will transport you back to the 1950’s-1960’s. In an effort to stay true to that time period, you may hear some words in the play that were used back then that we don’t use today. For example, you may hear the term ‘negro’ which was used to refer to Black people, but today, we say African American or Black.

MUSEUM CONNECTION:

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE

Explore the galleries throughout the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** and be on the lookout for some of the different people and events you learned about from this packet. Exhibits about The Little Rock 9, Claudette Colvin, and Ruby Bridges can be found in the Modern Civil Rights Movement exhibit. Visitors can also explore Making a Way Out of No Way to learn about how education strengthened Black community activism.

Please visit <https://nmaahc.si.edu/> for more information.

VOCABULARY

- Constitution**—a constitution is a written statement of the rules and laws of a government or organization. The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the United States of America, listing the powers and duties of the government and the rights of its citizens.
- Right (rights)**—something a person is automatically entitled to
- Constitutional Rights**—rights and personal freedoms guaranteed to people by the U.S. Constitution
- Civil Rights**—rights and personal freedoms guaranteed to people specifically by the 13th and 14th amendments to the Constitution of the United States. (The 13th Amendment made slavery illegal; the 14th guarantees all citizens equal rights and protection under the law.)
- Unconstitutional**—not allowed, based on the Constitution of the United States
- Boycott**—a form of protest where people refuse to buy some product or use some service
- Activist**—someone of any age who takes direct action to support a belief
- Race**—a group of people sharing certain physical traits (such as skin color, shape of eyes, hair color, etc.) that can be passed on to offspring and that seem to set that group apart from other groups
- Racism**—the belief that one race is better or worse than another race
- Versus**—against (used in court cases); abbreviated v. or vs.

The music and audio clips used in this production of are taken from the CDs *Every Tone a Testimony* and *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*. The quotations used in this guide are taken from the book *Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges and from interviews in *Freedom's Children* by Ellen Levine.

RELATED RESOURCES

- *I am Ruby Bridges*, by Ruby Bridges, illustrated by Nikkolos Smith, 2022. Ruby Bridges writes her own-story in a new picture book recommended Grades PreK-2.
- *Say Their Names* by Caroline Brewer, illustrated by Adrian Brandon, 2022, Grades 4-6. A young girl creates her own march and responds to racial violence and other issues she notices in her community.
- *Never Too Young: 50 Unstoppable Kids Who Made a Difference* by Aileen Weintraub, 2018, Grades 2+. Learn about 50 different kids throughout history who helped change their communities.
- *Cracking the Wall: The Struggles of the Little Rock Nine*, by Eileen Lucas. A well-written Easy Reader, with plenty of personal detail.
- *Ruby Bridges*. A full-length feature film from Disney, available on Disney+. Ages 8 and up.
- *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. This highly acclaimed PBS television series, available on video, may be the definitive history of the movement. Older readers will also enjoy the companion book by Juan Williams.
- *First Book*, is a non-profit that runs a marketplace for free- and reduced-priced educational resources. Visit their website to see eligibility requirements and titles available.
- *Every Tone a Testimony (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings)*—this double CD draws upon Smithsonian archives to create a history of African American life and culture in sound, featuring music, oratory, poetry, and prose by historically renowned African American musicians, writers, and activists.
- *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966 (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings)*—this 2-CD set (accompanied by a booklet written by Bernice Johnson Reagon and featuring rare historic photographs) documents the powerful story of African American musical culture and its role in the Civil Rights Movement

Check out the Smithsonian Learning Lab Collection for *How Old is a Hero?* here:
<https://learninglab.si.edu/q/ll-c/t4F2K1VfGXWMhguy>



Smithsonian Institution

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Smithsonian Associates advances the Institution's mission through life-enriching educational and cultural experiences inspired by the Smithsonian's research and collections for DC-region students, families, and adults, and for learning communities nationwide.

Discovery Theater has been presenting DC-area children with live educational performances for almost 40 years. With programs that enrich the Smithsonian experience for nearly 50,000 children annually, Discovery Theater is a gateway to the exhibits, collections, and themes contained in the museums and galleries on the National Mall and beyond. We explore American history and cultures, folk tales from around the world, and exciting, accessible science and math programs in the company of puppeteers, storytellers, dancers, actors, and musicians. Discovery Theater performances unite ideologies, enact themes that reflect the diversity of its audiences, open avenues of self-reflection, and offer an enjoyable means for parents and teachers to demonstrate life's lessons. There's so much to do and explore at the Smithsonian—and Discovery Theater is the ideal place to begin!



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