

Ella Baker (1903—1986)

My grandfather was a civil rights activist back in the 1850s, and I carried on the tradition. I taught sharecroppers and immigrant workers about world issues, and I was not afraid to teach about racism in America when few people



were talking about it. In the 1940s, I became a leader in the NAACP and traveled around

the country trying to recruit new members. After the Montgomery Bus Boycott, I confronted Martin Luther King Jr., urging him to organize the black community and build on the momentum of the boycott. I spent two years organizing King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, despite my disagreement with the SCLC's policy valuing strong central leadership over grassroots organizing. Recognizing the importance of student voices in the fight for social justice, I also actively sought out student leaders by organizing discussions with students from 56 different colleges in the U.S. After the Greensboro sit-ins, I left SCLC and helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For years I served SNCC as a quiet leader, incorporating teaching techniques into my organizing work. For my efforts, I was honored with the title "*Fundji*," a Swahili word for a person who passes skills and knowledge on to the younger generation.

Daisy Lee Bates (1914—1999)

Growing up in a small Arkansas town, I knew I was a Negro, but I did not really understand what that meant until I was seven-years-old. At that time, I went to buy some meat for my mother at a store and the butcher said brusquely, "N____s have to wait 'til I wait on the white people." The incident had a strong impact on me, but my rage at discrimination turned to horror when I learned later that the parents I had known all my life were in reality friends of my real parents. My mother had been murdered while resisting rape by three white men. "So happy once, now I was like a little sapling which, after a violent storm, puts out only gnarled and twisted branches." I met my future husband at the age of 15, and we married in 1932. My husband had always dreamed of starting a newspaper, and in 1941, we did just that. It was called the *Arkansas State Press*, and we used the paper to write about civil rights issues such as police brutality and the rights of black veterans. In 1946, I wrote an article in support of a group of striking workers. I also criticized a local judge in the article, and he had me arrested for it, but I was eventually cleared of the charges. Later in life, our house

in Little Rock, Arkansas, was the command post for desegregation in the city. The nine students who desegregated Central High School in Little Rock used my



house as the official pick-up and drop-off site on their trips to and from Central

Women of the Movement Bios

High School each school day and I served as their principle advisor/mentor. Starting in 1952, I served as the president of the Arkansas chapter of the NAACP. At the March in Washington in 1963, I was the only woman to speak from the podium. You can read about my life in *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* (University of Arkansas Press, 1962) (Source: www.galegroup.com)

Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005)

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised by my grandparents in the Barbados. I returned to New York to attend high school. After I completed college, I became a nursery school teacher and eventually became the director of the school. In 1968, I began a new career by getting myself elected to Congress. I was the first black woman to serve in the House of Representatives.



During my time in Congress, I fought hard for the rights of women, workers, and children.

After three years in Congress, I decided to run for president. Although I did not win the race, I was the first black woman to make an attempt at it. After the presidential election, I stayed in Congress for 11 more years. I retired to Williamsville, New York, and took a leadership role in the National Political Congress of Black Women. Throughout my life, I fought for civil rights in

America. Through my work as a teacher and as a politician, I was driven to improve the rights of black Americans, women, and children. My career as an activist is memorialized in my biography, which shares its title with my personal slogan, “Unbought and Unbossed.”

Septima Clark (1898–1987)

From the very beginning of my life, my parents made sure that I understood how important school was. My mother not only pushed me to work hard in school, but she also demonstrated to me what real courage is. I remember sitting on our front porch watching my mother sternly warn a policeman to stay off our property—“I’m a little bit of leather, but I’m well put together, so you don’t come in here,” she told him. What courage! Her actions then gave me the confidence I needed when I later found myself faced with the hate and anger of members of the Ku Klux Klan. My activist life focused on increasing the educational opportunities for black citizens. I helped establish “Citizenship Schools,” so African Americans would receive the education they needed in order to vote. I saw the right to vote as a key part of American citizenship. I worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and continued to struggle for civil rights even after I lost my job as a teacher because of my NAACP membership. Ironically, much later in life I ended up serving two terms on the same Charleston County School Board that had once fired me! Despite several heart attacks, I never really retired. When a fire killed four children who had been left home alone by their working mother in 1978, I was upset by the refusal of the city of Charleston to respond by funding a daycare center. I

Women of the Movement Bios

approached other women, rented a room with the money we raised, and paid a teacher. The daycare center that grew out of that experience is named after me.

Jessie de la Cruz (1919–1993)

I was born in 1919 and spent my childhood traveling with my family throughout California, going wherever we could find work. As a child, I experienced harsh working conditions and the death of family members; I also saw that the government and landowners treated Mexicans and poor people of all races unfairly. That is why I joined the United Farm Workers of America (UFW). I helped to win the ban of *el cortito*, the short-handle hoe that crippled many workers. I sought ways for farmworkers to buy their own farmland, and became the owner of a cooperative farm myself. I have served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, testified before the Senate, and met with the Pope. Author Gary Soto wrote a story for young people about my life called *Jessie de La Cruz: A Profile of a United Farm Worker* (2000, Persea Books).

Virginia Foster Durr (1903–1999)



As a child, I grew up in a strongly segregated neighborhood, and even attended Ku Klux Klan parades with my father. My bigoted beliefs were challenged when I attended Wellesley College. Due to financial problems, I had to drop out of college and return to Birmingham, Alabama. While back at home, I met my future husband and eventually moved with him to

Washington, D.C. In the nation's capital I got more involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1938, I became a founding member of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare. On the second day of our opening convention in Birmingham, Alabama, we went head to head with the Birmingham Chief of Police, Eugene "Bull" Connor, who threatened to arrest anyone who crossed racial lines by sitting on the "wrong" side of the meeting hall. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was in attendance and responded by placing her chair directly on top of the line separating African Americans from whites. One of the civil rights issues that I was most passionate about was the poll tax—a system that required blacks and many women to pay a tax before they could vote in any election. I joined many others in the fight against the poll tax, and this work eventually brought about the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I was an activist all my life, in fact: "The problem is, once you open a gate, there's another and another gate beyond each one. It makes you think you want to live forever to continue the work....."

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977)

Born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi, I was the granddaughter of an enslaved African



American, the daughter of two sharecroppers, and the youngest of 20 children. When I was six, I began to help my parents work in the cotton fields, and

Women of the Movement Bios

when I was 12 I had to drop out of school to work with them full time. In 1962, I went with 17 other people to register to vote. On our way back, we were stopped by police and put in jail—the police told us that we were being arrested because our bus was the wrong color. When I finally arrived back home, the man who owned my family's land told me that I could not stay in our house if I insisted on voting, so I left. I immediately joined two national civil rights groups working to register blacks to vote. During my work in the Civil Rights Movement, I was arrested multiple times and beaten by police once. In 1964, I helped to organize the Mississippi Freedom Summer, a broad campaign to get blacks registered to vote. That same year I helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in an effort to increase awareness of voting discrimination. When I spoke out to describe the conditions in Mississippi and to protest the refusal of the Democratic Party to seat us, President Lyndon Johnson scheduled an emergency press conference to divert media attention. But my speech was broadcast later that evening on national television, and now the world knew of our struggles. In 1968, I founded Freedom Farms Corporation, a land cooperative that provided poor farmers with land they farmed and lived on, and eventually purchased themselves. In the last decade of my life, I received a lot of recognition. When the National Council of Negro Women started the Fannie Lou Hamer Day Care Center in 1970, I became the chair of the board of directors.

Dolores Huerta (1930—)

I was born in New Mexico during the beginning of the Great Depression. My

mother was an inspiration to me; she was an example of unwavering strength, independence, and ambition. After graduating college, I took a job as a teacher in a farm workers' community. Every day in my classroom I saw the terrible effects of poverty on my students and their families. Seeing these families' hardships, I decided that I needed to join the fight to improve the lives of workers by helping them organize, registering voters, and encouraging them to participate in the democratic process. In 1962, together with César Chávez, I organized the United Farm Workers Union. We organized nonviolent protests and boycotts throughout the West. I also worked to convince Congress to pass laws that would protect the rights of workers, which they finally did with the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. Speaking out against the desperately low pay and unsanitary working conditions, my work also helped to establish health plans and benefits for farm workers. Today, I am still a leader with the United Farm Workers and other groups fighting for the rights of workers.



Viola Liuzzo (1925—1965)

I was born in Pennsylvania on April 11, 1925. I joined the NAACP as one of the few white members and was soon immersed in the civil rights struggle. I was a housewife, medical



Women of the Movement Bios

technician, and a civil rights worker who came to Alabama to participate in the march from Selma to Montgomery and to help with voter registration in 1965. Following the demonstration, I offered to drive a group of protesters back to the airport in Montgomery. As we made our way to the airport, I stopped at a local gas station. While I was filling my car with gas, a car of white men from the Selma area pulled over and began harassing me. They eventually drove away, and we continued on our way. The white bystanders shouted insults at the protestors in the back of my car. As I left the gas station another group of white men in a car driving behind me turned on his high beams and left them shining in my rear view mirror until I reached the airport. After I had dropped most of the marchers off, three members of the KKK drove up alongside my car and started shooting. In spite of strong evidence of their involvement, the men who killed me were acquitted of murder. It was only after President Lyndon Johnson stepped in that they were convicted of any crime at all.

Pauli Murray (1910—1985)

Shortly after I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, I was orphaned and moved to North Carolina to live with my grandparents. Although I never knew my parents, it was as if I had three mothers, each trying to teach me their values:



“stern devotion to duty; capacity for hard work; industry; and above all honor and courage in all things.” I closely observed the women of my family and did extremely

well in school. After I graduated from

college, I tried to attend law school but was denied at the University of North Carolina because I was black. Later, I was denied acceptance to Harvard Law School because I was a woman. I eventually enrolled at Howard University Law School and graduated in 1944. Seeing how racism and discrimination played into my life, I became an active member of the Civil Rights Movement. From sit-ins to integrate Washington, D.C. lunch counters in the 1940s to my work in creating the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the early 1970s, I took challenges head-on, but rarely sought public attention for my work, though I am remembered for having coined the phrase “Jane and Jim Crow.” Much of my efforts focused on international civil rights issues, including the effort to liberate many African nations and to get the U.N. to address issues in the African global community. Through my work as a civil rights lawyer, a professor, and an activist, I worked toward social justice in the United States.

Jo Ann Robinson (1912—1992)

Born near Culloden, Georgia, I was the youngest of 12 children. I was educated in the segregated public schools of Macon and then at Fort Valley State College. Following my college graduation, I became a public-school teacher in Macon. After five years of teaching in Macon, I took a job at Alabama State College and was in Montgomery during the bus boycott. In May 1954, more than 18 months before the arrest of Rosa Parks, I wrote to Montgomery’s mayor as the Women’s Political Council (WPC) president. In my letter, I gently threatened a Black boycott of city buses if discrimination did



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Women of the Movement Bios

not stop. After Rosa Parks was arrested in December 1955, I played a central role in the start of the protest by producing the leaflets and spreading the word of the boycott among the Black citizens of Montgomery. In 1960, I left Alabama and eventually settled in Los Angeles, where I lived and taught. You can read more about my story in my book, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*.

Ruby Doris Smith Robinson (1942—1967)

I participated in my first sit-in at the age of 17 and worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from its earliest days in 1960 until my death from cancer in October 1967. I succeeded James Forman as SNCC's executive secretary; becoming the only woman ever to serve in this capacity. I was known for demanding hard work and dedication from everyone around me. I was the creator of SNCC's "jail no bail" policy and was one of the original Freedom Riders. Because of my attitude and actions, I soon became a legend. Most early SNCC members could recount at least one "Ruby Smith-Robinson" story. For example, when a delegation of SNCC staff were preparing to board a plane for Africa in the fall of 1964, an airline representative told us that the plane was overbooked and asked if we would wait and take a later flight. This angered me so much that without consulting the rest of the group I went and sat down in the jetway and refused to move. We were given seats on that flight. My life is documented in *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Smith Robinson* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

Dorothy Zellner

My role as an activist started in the women's rights movement in New Orleans, Louisiana. Later, I brought together the fight for equality for women and the struggle for equality for blacks in the U.S. In the 1960s, I became an active member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I worked as a co-editor for the SNCC newspaper, *Student Voices*, which worked to build morale within the organization and provide eyewitness accounts of the racial violence that members encountered in the South. Much of my work focused on recruiting and organizing white students in support of the Civil Rights Movement. As a white, Jewish woman, I committed myself to developing a broader coalition of people fighting for social justice. I recognized the importance of including people of all races, religions, and economic backgrounds into the struggle for equality. Now I am a director for the School of Law at the City University of New York.

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Women of the Movement

Answer the questions below based on the biographies you read on women who were influential in the Civil Rights Movement.

1. As president of Montgomery, Alabama's Women's Political council, she helped organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott
2. This champion of education was once removed from her job as a teacher for being a member of the NAACP, only to be elected a member of the same district's school board later in her life
3. Co-editor of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's *Student Voices* newspaper
4. An organizer of the United Farm Workers Union, she pushed for the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act
5. This woman, honored with the Swahili title of "Fundi" (person who passes skills and knowledge on to the younger generation) helped organize the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
6. A founding member of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare
7. Barred from law schools for being both black and a woman, she went on to become an organizer of the National Organization for Women
8. I was the first black woman to run for president



Women of the Movement

9. This woman and her husband started the *Arkansas State Press*
10. The death of his mother and housewife by Klansmen in Selma, Alabama drew further national attention to the Civil Rights Movement
11. She helped pass the ban of *el cortito*, the short-handle hoe which disabled many farm workers
12. The first and only woman to serve as the executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
13. An organizer of Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Women of the Movement

ANSWERS:

1. Jo Ann Robinson
2. Septima Clark
3. Dorothy Zellner
4. Dolores Huerta
5. Ella Baker
6. Virginia Foster Durr
7. Pauli Murray
8. Shirley Chisholm
9. Daisy Bates
10. Viola Liuzzo
11. Jessie de la Cruz
12. Ruby Doris Smith Robinson
13. Fannie Lou Hamer

