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MOVING ON
 By JEFF ZASLOW


Kids on the Bus: The Overlooked Role Of Teenagers in the Civil-Rights Era

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There's a true story we should tell our children about a bus, an African-American citizen and her yearning for equality in the segregated South of the 1950s.

No, Rosa Parks is not part of this story. This story is about Barbara Johns.

In 1951, Barbara was a 16-year-old student at a segregated school in Farmville, Va. About 450 black students were crowded into a school built for 200. Overflow classes were held in leaky, tarpaper shacks and on school buses, with kids shivering in the winter. Books and supplies were in tatters.

One day, Barbara missed the bus to school, and waited by the road, hoping someone would pick her up. A bus, filled with white children heading to their far-superior school, passed by. After it drove off, Barbara bravely decided to organize a walkout of her entire student body. Her leadership would help change America.


Our children are taught about Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a bus in 1955. They know about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his "I Have a Dream" speech. But many don't realize that the early civil-rights movement was often led by unsung teens. Some academics and activists now argue that by not sharing this hidden history, parents and teachers are missing crucial opportunities to energize and inspire today's kids, especially African-Americans.

"Rosa Parks, an older woman, is a wonderful symbol, but most black teenagers don't have a sense of the role played by people their own age," says Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Educational Institute at Stanford University. "When we speak about Rosa Parks, let's speak about these other people."

Barbara Johns led Moton High School students on a two-week strike. The NAACP offered to help their cause if they agreed to sue for an integrated school, not merely a school equal to the white one. The case was one of five reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court when it declared segregation unconstitutional in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case. That year, Ms. Johns's family home was burned to ashes. She died from cancer in 1991.

"There were thousands of Barbara Johnses," says Doreen Loury, a professor of sociology and African-American studies at Arcadia University in Glenside, Pa. These were kids who made a stand to integrate lunch counters, community centers, sports leagues. As children in Columbus, Ohio, in the 1950s, Dr. Loury and her brother courageously entered a community pool and took a

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swim, even as white people got out and chanted, "We don't want you in our pool!"

One reason young activists have faded into history is because, early on, they didn't fit the image that civil-rights leaders wanted to project. Some were deemed too militant, rebellious or immature to be useful rallying symbols.

Claudette Colvin never became a household name. In Montgomery, Ala., nine months before Mrs. Parks took her stand, Ms. Colvin, then 15, refused to give up her seat on a bus and was arrested. Because she soon became pregnant, civil-rights leaders worried that her morals might be attacked, reflecting poorly on the movement if her case were taken to court. They preferred to showcase the 42-year-old Mrs. Parks, an upstanding citizen. Ms. Colvin, now 66, attended Mrs. Parks's funeral last week in Detroit, and was mentioned only briefly during the seven-hour memorial service.

In our sound-bite culture, we often simplify history into tidy stories: Dr. King was the black Moses who led his people to freedom. The saintly Mrs. Parks sat on that bus and became the mother of the civil-rights movement.

American children start learning about Mrs. Parks and Dr. King as early as preschool. I have a colleague whose 4-year-old niece came home from a Martin Luther King Day lesson insisting she'd learned the two were married.

Teaching often remains focused on Dr. King and Mrs. Parks in later grades, too, because "they're the safe revolutionaries," says Boyce Watkins, a Syracuse University finance professor who also lectures on racial issues.

Dr. Loury teaches a course on racism. She says none of her students, black or white, knew anything about Barbara Johns when the course began. She shows them documentary footage of young civil-rights activists, including grade-school children being jailed for protesting. "These were babies," she says.

The lauding of superstars oversimplifies the real history. "The civil rights movement would have happened without Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks," says Dr. Carson, who is editor of Dr. King's papers. Because the movement was often "the story of teenage revolt," he adds, stories of young heroes would resonate with young people today.

As Dr. Loury sees it, learning about these brave young people can give children today "a moral and academic compass" that will guide and fortify them on issues far beyond civil rights.

But the old guard -- institutions protecting the legacies of civil-rights icons -- can be resistant to sharing glory.

The Rosa & Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development in Detroit, a nonprofit education group founded by Mrs. Parks, chose not to get involved in a new traveling exhibit by the Smithsonian Institution called "381 Days." The exhibit focuses on the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott that followed Mrs. Parks's arrest.

While the exhibit shows that Mrs. Parks sparked the movement, it also recognizes the 50,000 people, young and old, who joined the boycott, walking miles to school and work, says a Smithsonian spokeswoman. At the Parks Institute, president emeritus Lila Cabbil says that the Smithsonian "wanted to feature other unsung heroes. We were concerned that [Mrs. Parks] wasn't featured prominently."

Actually, the Smithsonian is taking a worthy stand. The story of the bus boycott "has been

recounted as a lone act of heroism," the exhibit's introduction explains. "But the truth is more powerful."

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