

Diane Nash Biographical Sketch

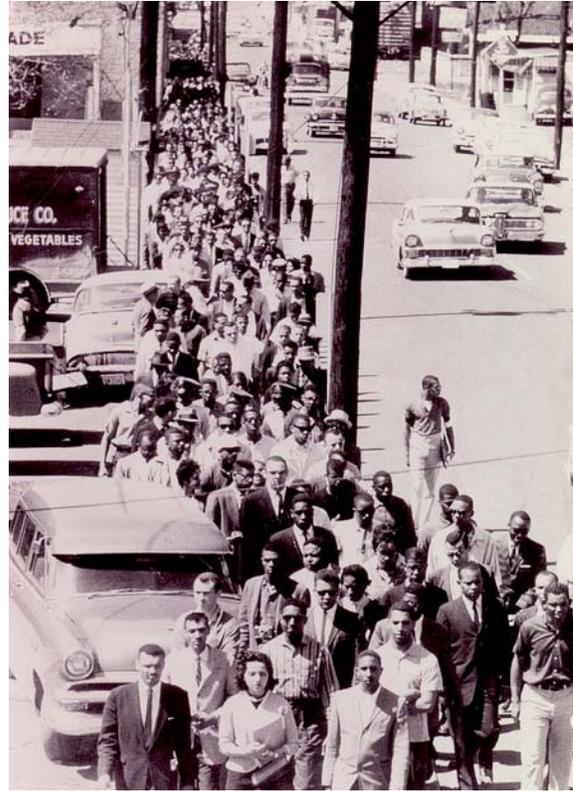
Before she started school at Fisk University in Nashville, Diane Nash had never seen a sign that said “Colored” or “Whites Only.” She grew up in Chicago, where her parents tried to shelter her from racism. At Fisk, she decided she wanted to fight against racism. Soon, she heard about people who were learning nonviolent ways to resist racism. She signed up for training in nonviolence and started to study what Mohandas Gandhi had done in India.

The first campaign she was involved with was to integrate the lunch counters in stores in downtown Nashville. Black shoppers could buy food at the counter, but they had to take it outside to eat it. The lunch counter sit-ins started in Nashville and spread throughout the South. Nash and many other students were arrested. As soon as they were arrested, others would take their place at the counter. After over 150 students were arrested and negotiations with the Mayor, the protesters eventually won their demand, and downtown lunch counters began serving Black customers for the first time.

Nash helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and dropped out of school to be in charge of its direct action arm. A historian who later wrote about her said she was “...bright, focused, utterly fearless, with an unerring instinct for the correct tactical move.”

Next, in 1961, Nash helped lead Freedom Rides. The Freedom Riders were interracial groups who rode interstate buses across the South as a way of challenging segregation on the buses. The Freedom Riders were beaten up when the buses rolled into town. The leaders of the campaign wanted to call off the rides because they were sure somebody would get killed. Nash refused. “We know someone will be killed, but we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence,” she said. She and other Freedom Riders made out their wills and were prepared to die. They were not killed, but some of the people who were beaten never recovered from the effects.

Nash married a fellow civil rights activist, James Bevel, and was pregnant with their first child when she was arrested for her Freedom Ride work and sent to jail. She could have paid bail and gotten out, but, she said, “I believe that if I go to jail now, it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free — not only on the day of their birth but for all their lives.”



Diane Nash (front row, center) and other activists march to the Nashville City Hall on April 19, 1960, to confront the mayor over segregation and violence against protesters. Credit: Copyright New York Times/Archive

President John Kennedy appointed Nash to work on the national committee that promoted passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But at the same time, Nash knew that it was very important to put pressure on politicians to make such progress possible. She worked with Martin Luther King to plan the voting rights march in Selma, Alabama, and to get publicity for the cause.

After being a leader in the civil rights movement, Nash became active in protests against the war in Vietnam. Many years later, when someone asked what the best piece of advice was that she'd ever gotten, she said, "When I have a decision to make, I always make the choice that will make me proud of and will make me respect the person I see in the mirror."

RESOURCES

There are a number of powerful videos and video segments that explore Nash's life. They include:

<http://www.makers.com/diane-nash> (video interview with Nash)

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthepize/story/04_nonviolence.html

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/people/diane-nash>

Virginia Durr

Biographical Sketch

Virginia Foster Durr saw a lot of change in her life. She was born in 1903 and died in 1999. She came a long way from the beliefs and prejudices of her early life. Raised in the South, the daughter of a well-known minister, Durr thought that her life would be similar to those of other privileged white women. But her life changed because of something that happened when she went to school at Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

At the school, students were expected to eat dinner with different people. When she saw that she was supposed to sit next to a Black student, she refused. The dean of the school told her that she had to eat with the student or she would have to leave the school. She wrote later that she stayed up all night thinking about her choice, then decided to stay at school and sit with the other student.

That decision changed her life, because she started to rethink all the things she had been taught about race. Later, after Durr became well known and wrote about how she had changed, some developmental psychologists called what she went through a “Virginia Durr moment.” That is the moment when you make a choice that advances your moral development. You reflect, you change your beliefs, you move forward morally.

Durr married a white lawyer from Montgomery, Alabama, named Clifford Durr. They had five children. She and Clifford moved to Washington, D.C. to work for President Franklin Roosevelt. They became involved in civil rights work. Virginia began to work on getting voting rights for Black people. Many states had poll taxes that people had to pay before they could register to vote. The taxes were a way to keep poor people and African Americans from voting. Usually, the law was written so that if you had an ancestor who had voted in 1867, then you didn't have to pay the tax.

Virginia Durr and her husband were active in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. They had to send their two youngest children away to school because of all the threats against their family. The Durrs helped bail Rosa Parks out of jail after Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. Durr had employed Parks as a seamstress and had helped her get a scholarship to a school that trained activists. When Virginia died, Rosa Parks said that Virginia Durr's "upbringing of privilege did not prohibit her from wanting equality for all people. She was a lady and a scholar, and I will miss her."

RESOURCES

<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1574>
http://www.digplanet.com/wiki/Virginia_Durr_Moment

Social Activism and Civil Rights, by Virginia Durr
Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr
Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years

Claudette Colvin

Biographical Sketch



Claudette Colvin was 15 years old when she walked onto the stage of history not once but twice. She was arrested for not giving up her seat to a white person on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. The officers kicked and handcuffed her.

Colvin was active in the NAACP youth group. Rosa Parks was a mentor to the group.

The NAACP had been looking for a test case to oppose segregation on the city buses. The lawyers thought that Colvin's case would be it the right case (see our [brief classroom activity on this](#)). But when Colvin became pregnant to a married man a few months after her arrest, they worried that the deeply religious black community might not be sympathetic to her.

Nine months later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, and the bus boycott began. Lawyers for the NAACP knew that they had to get the courts to declare segregation on city buses illegal. Even if the boycott worked, there would be no legal way to make another bus company stop segregating. The lawyers knew it would take a long time for the Parks case to go through the state court system. They needed a federal case.

They took another look at Colvin's case. They found four other women who had also been arrested for refusing to give up their seats on the buses. All the women and their families knew that they would be in danger once their names became public.

The NAACP realized that those cases could be filed as a class action in a U.S. district court, and a decision could be made faster. They asked Colvin and another teenager, Mary Louise Smith, to be part of the lawsuit along with three other women.

The case is called *Browder v. Gayle*. Aurelia Browder was what is called the lead plaintiff in the case, and W. A. Gayle was the mayor of Montgomery. One of the women dropped out of the case because of threats from whites.

It took almost a year, but the U.S. Supreme Court decided that segregation on the buses was illegal. A brave teenager was partly responsible for this historic win.

RESOURCES

<http://www.tolerance.org/article/browder-v-gayle-women-rosa-parks>

<http://www.philliphoose.com/books/claurette-colvin-twice-towards-justice/>

<http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/performance-%E2%80%99Cage-not-1-day-thing-untaught-history-montgomery-bus-boycott%E2%80%9D> (one-woman play about women involved in the boycott, including Colvin)