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ROSA PARKS: 1998 RECIPIENT

Jillian Rich[†]

Rosa Parks embodies all that the International Freedom Award stands for. Stating once, that "[she] would like to be known as a person who is concerned about freedom and equality and justice and prosperity for all people,"¹ it is only fitting that she became the first recipient of the International Freedom Award in 1998.

Rosa Parks was raised in Alabama by her grandparents—both former slaves and outspoken advocates for racial equality. She recalled watching her grandfather sit in their front yard with a shotgun as Ku Klux Klan members marched down the street, and the influence this had on her own fight for equality.² Parks earned her high school diploma in 1933 after attending only segregated schools. Soon after graduating, Parks became actively involved in civil rights issues and joined the Montgomery, Alabama chapter of the NAACP to pursue equality with the rest of the forward-thinking world. However, it was not until 1955 that Parks would inspire a movement that struck at the very core of our nation, and left it changed forever.

At that time, the Montgomery City Code required all public transportation to be segregated; bus companies were to provide separate but equal accommodations by drawing a line down the middle of the bus and having white passengers sit in the front and black passengers sit in the back. If more white passengers boarded than were seats available to them, the bus driver would move the line further back and the black passengers in those seats had to get up for the white passengers.³

On December 1, 1955, after a long day's work, Rosa Parks boarded one of these buses and took a seat in one of the first rows available to black passengers. When more white passengers boarded than there were seats available, the bus driver asked Parks' row to get up and move for the white passengers. Parks refused to move and was soon arrested. She

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¹ 23881 CONG. REC. 151, 17 (2005).

² The Biography.com Editors, Rosa Parks Biography, A&E Television Networks, (last visited Nov. 17, 2015).

³ *Id.*

would later say, "I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true...the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."⁴ Parks' resistance sparked a movement, and just four days later, on the day of her trial, the black community came together to boycott Montgomery's buses. An estimated 40,000 commuters opted to walk to work—some as far as 20 miles—to protest segregation and Parks' arrest. This boycott continued for several months and left dozens of buses sitting idle.

The black community was met with hostility but armed with *Brown v. Board of Education's* ruling that "separate but equal" had no place in public education.⁵ A legal team took the strikingly similar issue of segregation in public transportation to the courtroom. On November 13, 1956, after years of litigation, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ruling that racial segregation is unconstitutional.⁶ Montgomery bus companies were forced to integrate public buses, and the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott became one of the most successful mass movements against racial segregation in history.

Rosa Parks was not only a symbol of freedom, but also a woman of wisdom. Reflecting upon the historical significance of the moment she said, "I had not planned to get arrested. I had plenty to do without having to end up in jail. But when I had to face that decision, I didn't hesitate to do so because I felt that we had endured [segregation] too long. The more we gave in, the more we complied with that kind of treatment, the more oppressive it became."⁷ Rosa Parks' courage and conviction reflects the spirit of other conductors on the Underground Railroad, making her a woman to be honored and celebrated.

⁴ Rosa Parks & Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* 116 (Gini Holland ed., Puffin Books 1991).

⁵ *Brown v. Bd. of Educ.*, 347 U.S. 483, 495, 74 S. Ct. 686, 692 (1954).

⁶ *Gayle v. Browder*, 352 U.S. 903, 77 S. Ct. 145 (1956).

⁷ *Civil Rights Icon Rosa Parks Dies*, Excerpt: *The Possibility of Arrest* (NPR radio broadcast October 25, 2005).