

Handout No. 1: Biographies of Women Activists

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 in 1955, I confronted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and urged 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 (SCLC), 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 recruited student leaders from 56 different colleges across the United States. After the Greensboro sit-ins at Woolworth in 1960, I left SCLC and helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For years, I served SNCC as a quiet leader and incorporated teaching techniques into my organizing work. For my efforts, I was honored with the title "*Fundi*," 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 7 years old. 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 resulting from color-based discrimination turned into horror when I learned later that the parents I had known all my life were, in reality, friends of my real parents. It was then I learned that my biological 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 got married in 1932, and my husband had always dreamed of starting a newspaper. 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. 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 school each day, and I served as their principle advisor and 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)



Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000)

I was born in Topeka, Kansas, but my family moved to Chicago when I was a child; that is the city I called home. During my childhood, I had a strong interest in poetry, and it was through writing that I became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. While sit-ins and marches were among the more visible strategies used during the Civil Rights Movement, I used the power of my words to tell stories about the world that I knew growing up; I told the stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things all around me. In 1950, I became the first African American writer to earn the Pulitzer Prize. My writing style shifted during the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s. You can read *In the Mecca* (1968) to distinguish between the different styles of my poetry. In addition to continuing my own writing, I used my national recognition to support and promote the work of other poets.



Elaine Brown (1943–)

Growing up in a poor black neighborhood in Philadelphia, my childhood was extremely hard. My mother fought to enroll me in an experimental school so that I would get a good education. Although the school had a four-year waitlist, my mother persevered until I was admitted. As a result of my mother's efforts, I was an extremely successful student and was admitted to a very competitive high school for girls. Later in my life, I got involved in the Civil Rights Movement, first as a supporter of nonviolent tactics and later as a member of the Black Panther Party. In 1974, I was the first and only woman to lead the Black Panthers. Under my leadership, the Party worked to change the economic and political systems in Oakland, California, and we helped to get the city's first black mayor elected. I saw the Civil Rights Movement as an international human rights movement and traveled all around the world to share our message. In working toward social justice, I started programs to provide access to better health care, education, and housing for African Americans.



Shirley Chisholm (1924– 2005)

I was born in Brooklyn and raised by my grandparents in Barbados. I returned to New York to attend high school. After earning my M.A. in elementary education from Columbia University in 1952, 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, NY, 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 the importance of education. My mother not only pushed me to work hard in school, but she also demonstrated to me what real courage was. I remember sitting on our front porch watching my mother sternly warn a troublesome policeman to stay off of our property—“I’m a little bit of leather,” she told him, “but I’m well put together, so you don’t come in here.” 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 activism focused on increasing the educational opportunities for black citizens. I helped establish “Citizenship Schools” so African Americans could 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 (SCLC), 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. In 1978, when a fire killed four children who had been left home alone by their working mother, I was upset by the refusal of the City of Charleston to respond by funding a daycare center. I approached other concerned 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 (1919–2013)

I was born in 1919 and spent my childhood traveling with my family throughout California, going wherever we could find farm 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 had crippled many farm workers. I sought ways for farm workers 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).



Angela Y. Davis (1944–)

I was born in 1944 in Birmingham, Alabama. My parents were members of the Communist Party, and they got me interested, as well. When I was 16, I studied in Germany for two years and Paris for one year. I returned to the U.S. to go to college, and it was during my college years that I became very involved with the Communist Party and the Black Panther Party. My membership in these two organizations meant that I received a lot of attention from the police and the FBI. My membership in these groups also caused me to lose my teaching job at the University of California.

In 1970, I was placed on the FBI's *Ten Most Wanted List* on false charges, and was the subject of an intense police search that drove me underground and culminated in one of the most famous trials in 20th century history. A massive international "Free Angela Davis" campaign led to my acquittal in 1972. Today, I am a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, active in the fight to reform the U.S. prison system, a promoter of multicultural coalitions and global strategies, and a speaker on civil rights.



Virginia Foster Durr (1903–1999)

As a child, I grew up in a whites-only, segregated neighborhood, and even attended Ku Klux Klan parades with my father. My bigoted beliefs were challenged when I attended Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Due to financial problems, I had to drop out of college and return to Birmingham. While back at home, I met my future husband, Clifford Durr (a Rhodes Scholar), 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



Virginia Foster Durr with Rosa Parks

Welfare. On the second day of our opening convention in Birmingham, 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 6, I began to help my parents work in the cotton fields, and 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 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, finally, 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. The National Council of Negro Women started the Fannie Lou Hamer Day Care Center in 1970, and I became the chair of the board of directors.



Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965)

As a child, I lived in an all-white community, where my parents and I faced racism often. When I was 20, I moved to New York City to take writing classes. There I met Langston Hughes and took a course from W. E. B. DuBois. I participated in the Civil Rights Movement by writing plays and painting, all focused on my experiences with discrimination in the United States. My most famous work is called *A Raisin in the Sun*, which won numerous awards and was the first drama by a black woman to



appear on Broadway. In addition to my work in the theatre, I fought for social justice by fundraising, lecturing, and speaking on writers' panels in support of the Civil Rights Movement. Sadly, I was diagnosed with cancer and died at the age of 34, before my career fully matured.

Dorothy Height (1912- 2010)

I was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1912. My mother was a nurse in a hospital for African Americans and my father was a building contractor. When I was 4, we joined the great migration of blacks to the North, settling in Rankin, Pennsylvania — a multiethnic neighborhood of mostly recent European immigrants. When a new principal arrived in 1928 at the nearly all-white Rankin High School, he forbade me, as a black student who usually led the singing at school assemblies, from ever doing so again. At the first assembly after the edict, when the accompanist began the Rankin Alma Mater, the students refused to sing. The pianist began twice more; still the students were silent. Finally, the exasperated principal motioned me to the stage. The student body of mostly white teenagers in Pre-Depression America rose *en masse* and a chorus split the air, which surprised me. I continued to speak out and organize for justice after this incident. I served as a longtime Y.W.C.A. executive and as the president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). In the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, I was one of the only women in the leadership circles and I have been an adviser to presidents, from Eisenhower to Clinton. In 1994, I was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and in 2003 the Congressional Gold Medal. (Excerpted and adapted from a book review by Gioia Diliberto.)



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 (UFW). 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.



Yuri Kochiyama (1921–2014)

I was born in a small town on the California coast in 1921. My parents were first-generation Japanese immigrants. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, which brought the United States into World War II, changed my life. During the war, my family, as well as many other Japanese families, were forcibly removed from our homes and imprisoned in internment camps. We were held there for two years during the war. Most of the people being held in these camps were U.S. citizens, but their Japanese ancestry made them the targets of racism. The time that I spent in the internment camp opened my eyes to the similarities between the discrimination that I was experiencing and the discrimination that I had seen against blacks in the United States. Once I was released from the camp, I dedicated my life to eliminating racism, fighting for civil rights, and protesting inequality. In 1960, I moved to Harlem, New York, with my husband. Three years later, I met Malcolm X and joined his group, the Organization for Afro-American Unity, which worked for racial justice and human rights. I was with Malcolm X when he was shot and killed. Today, I tour the country to speak with youth about racial justice and human rights. My advice to young people is: "Don't become too narrow. Live fully. Meet all kinds of people. You'll learn something from everyone. Follow what you feel in your heart."



Audre Lorde (1934–1992)

I was born in New York City to immigrant parents from the West Indies. My childhood was spent living in Harlem during the Depression, listening to my mother's stories of the West Indies. The skill that my mother had with words got me interested in writing, and I quickly developed a love of poetry. I published my first poem in *Seventeen Magazine* while still in high school. I attended Hunter College and Columbia University in New York City then became a librarian in New York public schools and an active member of the gay rights community in Greenwich Village. I soon became a professor of poetry at Tougaloo College in Mississippi and used my teaching and writing to encourage my students to pursue social justice. My writing career included the publication of six books of poetry and many individual essays, and I co-founded the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. When asked to describe myself, I said I am a, "Black lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." I documented my 14-year battle against cancer in *The Cancer Journals* and *A Burst of Light*. In the latter I wrote: "The struggle with cancer now informs all my days, but it is only another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that black women fight daily, often in triumph." (www.lambda.net/~maximum/lorde.html)



Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (1977)

This is the collective name used to represent our group consisting of 14 working-class mothers, ages 40–70, who defied a ban on public gatherings instituted by the military rulers of Argentina in the year 1977. We were the mothers of a whole generation of working young people, students, and popular activists who had been kidnapped by the military. For years, we demonstrated every Thursday at 3:30 in the afternoon, assembling at the historic Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires to demand to know the fate of our loved ones. We would arrive dressed in black, wearing white handkerchiefs embroidered with the names of our missing relatives. Some of us, including our founder, Azucena Villaflor de Vicenti, disappeared as a result. Today, the group continues to protest for human rights throughout the world.



Winona LaDuke (1959–)

Born in 1959, I grew up in Los Angeles, California. My family and I are Anishinabe from the Makwa Dodaem (Bear Clan) of the Mississippi Band of the White Earth reservation in northern Minnesota. Both of my parents inspired in me a commitment to activism. While I was in college at Harvard, I became involved in Native American environmental issues. At the age of 18, I spoke before the United Nations about Indian issues and quickly became a voice for American Indian economic and environmental concerns throughout the United States and internationally. After graduating from Harvard, I moved to the White Earth reservation in Minnesota. I started my life there as a teacher, but soon became involved in a lawsuit to recover lands originally held by the Anishinabe people and taken illegally by the U.S. government. I ran for office with Ralph Nader as candidate for vice-president in the 1996 and 2000 presidential campaigns. At present, I am actively involved in Native American environmental work throughout the United States.



Viola Liuzzo (1925–1965)



I was born in Pennsylvania in 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 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 us. They eventually drove away, and we continued on our way. After I had dropped most of the marchers off, three members of the Ku Klux Klan 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.

Wangari Maathai (1940-2011)

I was born on a farm in central Kenya in 1940. I loved the beautiful Kenyan land, and I often helped my family harvest our crops. I did extremely well in school, and I was awarded a college scholarship to come to America. I received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in biological science. I then returned to Kenya and became the first East African woman to receive a Ph.D. Upon returning to my home country, I saw that commercial farming had become more popular, depleting the land of its natural resources and leading to more poverty. To help fight against this, I founded the Green Belt Movement. I persuaded local women to help me plant trees on the grounds of schools, farms, churches, and fields. Women learned how to become active and aware citizens so they could start their own projects in their own communities. In 2002, I was elected to Kenya's Parliament and I became the Assistant Minister for Environment in the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources a year later. My tree-planting efforts continued to spread throughout Africa and thirty million trees were planted by 2004. That same year, I was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.



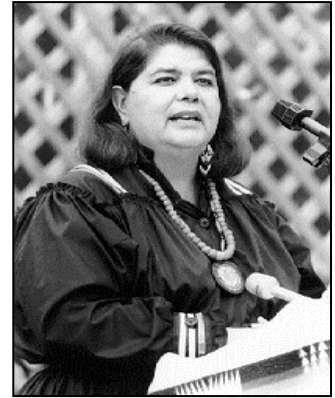
Rigoberta Menchu Tum (1959-)

I was born to a poor peasant Mayan family in Guatemala in 1959. During my childhood, I helped with the family farm work and traveled with my family to wherever there was work. At a young age, I became involved in social activism work through the Catholic Church. The labor-reform work and ideologies of my family got a lot of attention from military officials, and my brother, father, and mother were all tortured and killed by these groups. Following the deaths of my family members, I became even more strongly committed to civil rights. I engaged in efforts to educate the Native peasant population in resistance to massive military oppression. This work eventually forced me into exile in Mexico. Even then I did not give up. Instead, I continued working to organize resistance in Guatemala from outside of the country. I am now widely known as a leading advocate of Native rights and ethno-cultural reconciliation, not only in Guatemala but throughout the Western Hemisphere. My life story, as told to Elisabeth Burgos Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is really a story of the lives of many indigenous people in Guatemala. In 1992, I was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. (www.nobel.se/peace/)



Wilma Mankiller (1945– 2010)

I was born in 1945 in Mankiller Flats near Tahlequah, Oklahoma, but during my childhood my family was moved to California as part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation program. My interest and commitment to civil rights ignited in 1969 when I learned about the American Indian Movement's occupation of Alcatraz Island. In 1974, I became the first woman chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the first female in modern history to lead a major Native American tribe. As a leader in the Cherokee community, I started an organization to work on community development projects in the Native American community. In 1986 I was honored as the American Indian Woman of the Year. Grassroots activism was the center of my work in civil rights.



Joan Trumpauer Mulholland (1941–)



I was born and reared in the Washington, D.C. area. I attended Duke University and the sit-ins in Durham sparked my interests in the Civil Rights Movement. A few other white students from Duke and I joined the black North Carolina College students at the lunch counters and in the jails. I got in trouble for that at Duke. At 19 years old, I thought it best to move back to Washington. But my stay at home was short-lived. After a desegregated bus of nonviolent protestors was violently attacked in Anniston, Alabama in 1961, I decided to continue on their fight and became a Freedom Rider. I

did the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Ride, which was a train ride from New Orleans to Jackson, Mississippi. Police were waiting for us when we arrived, and promptly threw us in the paddy wagon. There were nine of us, and all of us refused bail. While in jail, I kept a diary of my daily routines and feelings to maintain hope and strength. I was then transferred to Parchman State Prison Farm and the time there was very hard. After the Freedom Rides, I continued my studies at Tougaloo College in Mississippi and helped plan Freedom Summer in 1964. I later taught elementary school in Arlington, Virginia.

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. My elders each tried 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 Hunter College, I tried to attend law school at the University of North Carolina but was denied acceptance 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. I 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 United Nations (UN) to address issues in the African global community. Through my work as a civil rights lawyer, a professor, and an activist, I worked towards social justice in the United States.

Diane Nash (1938–)

Born in 1938, I grew up in Chicago in an African American, middle-class Catholic family. During my college career in Nashville, I was exposed to a more visible form of racism than I had known in Chicago. As I became familiar with the system of segregation in Nashville, I became interested in the problems of discrimination that all black Americans faced and possible solutions through social change. The segregated restaurants, theaters, water fountains, and other facilities in Nashville disturbed me tremendously.

In response to the discrimination that I saw around me, I became a leader of the sit-in movement. As a leader in the civil rights community in Nashville, I was often a target of whites’ hatred, but I remained strongly committed to nonviolent protests, like the famous Freedom Rides of 1961. Today, I am an educator and an activist who remains involved in organizations working for racial justice, reconciliation, and peace.

(www.africanpubs.com/Apps/bios/1145NashDiane.asp?pic=none)



Antonia Pantoja (1922–2002)

I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1922. I attended school and went to college in Puerto Rico and worked as a schoolteacher for two years. My experiences as a teacher reinforced my commitment to equality in education. I moved to New York City in November 1944, where I got a job as a welder in a factory making lamps for children. It did not take long for me to be introduced to the racism and discrimination against Puerto Ricans in the United States. I also noticed that there was a great need to persuade the Puerto Rican community to get involved in the political process. In an attempt to achieve these goals, I became an activist in the factory, providing information to other workers about their rights and how to organize a union. In order to prepare myself for a leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement, I went back to college in the United States, where I was an active participant in numerous Latino student organizations. One of my greatest contributions to the Puerto Rican community in the U.S. was in 1958 when I joined a group of other young leaders in creating the Puerto Rican Forum, Inc., which led to the creation of ASPIRA, an advocacy group that works to educate people on how to rebuild their communities. Throughout my life, I fought for the rights of workers, Puerto Ricans, and children.



Gloria Richardson (1922–)

I was born May 6, 1922, in Baltimore, Maryland. Harriet Tubman had always been one of my role models, and I did everything that I could to follow her courageous lead in fighting for civil rights. As a leader for black rights, I focused on what I believed to be the fundamental problems facing blacks in Cambridge, Maryland: a lack of adequate housing, discrimination in the educational process, lack of equal job opportunities, and poor health. I helped to organize and then lead the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee. Eventually my efforts earned me the opportunity to meet with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to share my ideas about desegregation. Although I was criticized by the NAACP, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the media for my direct action and refusal to compromise, I prevailed. Among the most important successes I facilitated were the signing of a treaty that provided for the complete and immediate desegregation of public schools and hospitals in Dorchester County, Maryland; the construction of 200 units of low-rent public housing for blacks; and the adoption of a charter amendment to desegregate places of public accommodation.



Judy Richardson



I was born in Tarrytown, New York where my mother was an office worker and my father an autoworker and union activist until he died on the assembly line when I was seven. In college I joined the Swarthmore Political Action Committee (SPAC). SPAC traveled to Cambridge, Maryland and worked with Gloria Richardson, Reggie Robinson, and others to desegregate public accommodations. I then joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff where I worked with James Forman, Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson and Julian Bond. I also worked with SNCC in Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. In 1968, along with other former SNCC staffers, I founded the Drum and Spear Bookstore in Washington, D.C. A writer at heart, in 1978 I began working in film at Blackside, Inc. — a black-owned film production company started by Henry Hampton 10 years prior. The

lessons I learned at Blackside and in SNCC fueled my inspiration to use film as a window for new generations to see how civil rights and social justice movements affect America. In 1985, I helped research and produce the award-winning 14-hour *Eyes on the Prize* series, which is widely considered the best documentary on the Civil Rights Movement. I later co-produced *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*. Most recently I produced a film called *Scarred Justice* about the 1968 Orangeburg (SC) Massacre and co-edited and contributed to an anthology titled *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*. [Excerpts from www.thehistorymakers.com.]

Eslanda Goode Cardozo Robeson (1895-1965)



Born in Washington, D.C. near the turn of the century, I had a passion for science and black feminism that led me to become an anthropologist, author, and global activist for decolonization. After graduating from Columbia University with a degree in chemistry, I was the first African American woman to head a lab at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital. As my husband Paul Robeson's business manager, I helped elevate his career as a singer, actor, and activist on the international stage. I continued my passion for science by earning a degree in anthropology at the London School of Economics, where I was inspired by the African students I met to learn more about the various African struggles for independence in the 1930's. After completing my Ph.D. studies, I published a book called *African*

Journey based on my travels throughout Africa and advocated for the important role played by black women in advancing political activism. During my return to the United States, I stayed committed to the fight for African decolonization movements through the Council on African Affairs.

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 Montgomery 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 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 that spread 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: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*.

Arundhati Roy (1961–)

Born in Kerala, India, to a Christian mother and a Hindu father, I am both an author and political activist. Activism has been a part of my life since childhood. As a young child, I watched my mother work against discriminatory laws in India. When I was 16, I left home and lived on my own in Delhi, India where I made a living by selling empty beer bottles. Eventually, I chose to attend the Delhi School of Architecture. I later moved to Italy, where I really started to explore my passion for writing. My most famous book is titled *The God of Small Things*, which is based on a lot of my experiences as a child. Through plays, books, and poetry, I have been, and continue to be, a champion for human rights.



Vandana Shiva (1952–)

I am a physicist, philosopher, and a feminist. I grew up at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains in India, and I was raised in a tradition of commitment to community. When I was a child, my grandfather went on a hunger strike in an effort to convince the government to build a college for girls in our area. Using my experience in activism and my education in the sciences, I am currently active in citizens' actions against government destruction of the environment in India. In 1991, I founded *Navdanya*, a national movement to protect the diversity and integrity of living resources, especially native seeds. I am strongly committed to improving the rights of traditional farmers throughout the world. One of my major goals is to help protect local farmers from the globalization movement being led by the World Trade Organization.



Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons ()

My childhood in Memphis was a happy one lived almost entirely within an all-black community that showered me with encouragement, love, and support. When I was admitted to Spelman College with a scholarship, my family was so *proud* (it was a family first), and I assured them that nothing would come between me and my studies. But I had already had an epiphany that would lead me to break that promise. As a teenager out seeking a summer job, I'd been caught in a torrential thunderstorm without shelter, and the sight of scores of white people staring out at the storm (and me) from their dry, safe buildings suddenly made me feel foreign and alone. *This*, I thought, *is what it means to be black in the American South*. At Spelman, I learned about the history of the African Americans freedom struggle, and began volunteering at the national headquarters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). There I helped my history professor, Staughton Lynd, plan the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. I managed to keep my Movement activities from my family for awhile –until a SNCC demonstration against segregated restaurants landed me in jail, another family first. Joining the Movement meant breaking with my family, a decision that was painful but transformational. Joining the Freedom Summer Project, I worked in Laurel, Mississippi on voter registration for the “Freedom Ballot” of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and taught literacy and citizenship in a freedom school. Becoming state project director by default, I learned about sexism and northern liberal racism within an antiracist organization, and developed a democratic feminist style of leadership. Putting up with no nonsense and forbidding sexual harassment of any sort within the project, I developed a reputation as an “Amazon” – a title I regarded with some pride, as it meant I had come of age. In all, I spent seven years working on voter registration and desegregation activities in Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama. Beginning in 1968, I went to work with the National Council of Negro Women in the Midwest, and with the American Friends Service Committee in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. I am currently a professor of religion at the University of Florida where I teach Islamic Studies. My research focuses on the impact of Islamic law on women in the Middle East.

Barbara Smith (1946–)



I have been a leading feminist writer and activist since the 1960s. As a lesbian and a feminist, in 1977 I highlighted the need to give an activist's voice to African-American women's literature, and more specifically to African American lesbian literature. With these goals in mind, I co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the first publisher for women of color in the United States. My writing has appeared in many publications, including *Essence Magazine* and *The Advocate*. Most of my work focuses on the connections and relationships between race, gender, and class. I use my literary voice as a tool for activism, working to educate and inform people about discrimination in our society. My publications include *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. Today I travel around the country speaking at universities about my writing and my

perspectives on the state of civil rights in the United States.

Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson (1942–1967)

I was born in Atlanta in 1942, and I participated in my first sit-in at the age of 17. I 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). [From The King Papers Project at Stanford University, www.stanford.edu/group/King/.



Photographer: Paul Saltzman/Special to the Clarion-Ledger

Emma Tenayuca (1916–1999)



I was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1916. My family was very large—I was one of 11 children, so I lived with my grandparents when I was young. My first knowledge of the plight of workers came from visits to the "Plaza del Zacate," the Trafalgar Square of San Antonio where socialists and anarchists came to speak. From 1934-48, I supported almost every strike in the city, writing leaflets, visiting homes of strikers, and joining them on picket lines. Contact with fired workers led me to join the Workers Alliance (WA) in 1936 and the Communist Party in 1937. The WA was an organization of the unemployed founded by Socialists and Communists, and 90 percent of members were pecan shellers and agricultural workers. The WA held demonstrations for jobs, not relief, and demanded that Mexican workers have the right to strike without fear of deportation, and the right to a minimum wage.

When 12,000 pecan shellers marched out of the factories in 1938, I was unanimously elected strike leader. What started out as a movement for organization for equal wages turned into a mass movement against starvation, for civil rights, for a minimum wage law, and it changed the character of West Side San Antonio. As a result of the anti-Mexican, anti-Communist, and anti-union hysteria that pervaded the United States at the height of my work, I was forced to leave Texas to ensure my safety and well being. I returned to San Antonio years later and worked as a teacher. I dedicated my life to speaking out at a time when neither Mexicans nor women were expected to speak at all. Through my work as an educator, speaker, and labor organizer, I became known as "*La Pasionaria*."

Ingrid Washinawatok (1957–1999)

I am remembered as an international humanitarian and activist who fought for the rights of Indigenous people. I was a member of the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin, and my father served as a member of the tribal Supreme Court and a leader within our Tribe. He was a powerful role model for me, and I worked hard to follow in his activist footsteps. I served as a leader in a number of native civil rights groups, including the Women's Indigenous Network and the Fund for the Four Directions located in New York City. I fought for the creation of the People's Permanent Forum at the United Nations, which was established after my death. All of my work was directed at empowering Indigenous Peoples through activism. On a trip to Venezuela to help develop a cultural education system for one of the indigenous groups there, I was kidnapped and killed. It was here that my activism ended, but my activist spirit continues to live on through those who knew me.



Merle Woo (1941–)

I am a Korean-American activist fighting against discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. I choose to focus my work on writing and teaching about oppression and racism in an effort to help my students think more carefully about stereotypes and discrimination in the United States. In particular, I have worked to dispel the image of Asian women as submissive and docile. Currently, I am a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, but twice I have been fired from the University for protesting against discriminatory policies at the school. Each time I successfully sued to get my job back. Among the most important themes of my work is the need for collaborative work across issues of social justice, such as race and class disparities and gender inequality.



Flonzie Brown Wright (1942-)

June 12, 1963 was my defining moment. When Medgar Evers was assassinated in the presence of his wife and children, something inside of me said, 'You've got to get involved in this movement. You've got to get out and learn and see what is really going on.' I learned that in my hometown of Canton, Mississippi, out of 10,000 potential African American voters, only about 100 were registered to vote. When I attempted to register the next year, I had another wakeup call when the registrar arbitrarily failed me on the basis of a trumped-up test given only to blacks. That day I resolved to one day hold the position of registrar. With the encouragement of activist Annie Devine, I ran for and won the position of Madison County election commissioner in 1968, becoming the first black woman to hold the post since Reconstruction. In this capacity I trained poll workers, supervised registrars, and set up and monitored elections that I once could not take part in. When the Elections Board refused to qualify black candidates and certain black poll workers, I sued them—three times in all. Now Canton's on its third African American mayor. My book *Looking Back to Move Ahead* (1994) recounts my experience in the civil rights movement, with a special focus on Canton.

Dorothy Zellner

My role as an activist started in the women's rights movement in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1968. Previously, I had spent five years as a staff member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), working in Atlanta; Greenwood, Mississippi; Danville, Virginia; and running the New England regional office of SNCC in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By 1968, I was a staff member of the Southern Conference Educational Fund. During my SNCC years, I worked as a co-editor for the SNCC newsletter, *The Student Voice*, which provided eyewitness accounts of the racial violence that African Americans endured in the segregated South. As a white Jewish woman, I have committed myself to developing a broader coalition of people fighting for social justice. I was the director of institutional advancement for the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law, and in recent years I have worked as a foundation consultant. Utilizing my experiences in various movements, I am currently a Jewish activist against the Israeli government's occupation of Palestine.

