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## The Roots of Change

Students Learn of Widespread Efforts That Propelled Civil Rights Movement

By *Avis Thomas-Lester*  
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Eighth-grader Michael Clark knows all about civil rights pioneers Rosa Parks and Thurgood Marshall. But he also can give you the rundown on Jo Ann Robinson and Charles Hamilton Houston, who worked behind the scenes to fuel the movement.

He knows all about the slaying of NAACP field officer Medgar Evers in 1963, but he can also describe how the killing of black 14-year-old Emmett Till -- who flirted with a white woman -- stirred protests nine years earlier.

"After his body was found, Emmett Till's mother insisted that he have an open casket at his funeral so that the world could see what racists had done to her child," recounted Michael, 14, who attends White Oak Middle School in Silver Spring. "And that really opened people's eyes to what was happening in the South."

With black history in the spotlight this month, educators across the region and the nation are changing their approach to teaching about civil rights, emphasizing the grass-roots support that propelled the movement.

To get beyond Medgar, Malcolm and Martin, teachers said they are introducing such people as Till, Montgomery bus boycott organizer Robinson and NAACP counsel Hamilton. Students are reenacting the lunchroom counter sit-ins and protest marches of the era.

"When they see that these were ordinary people who were inspired by others, it says to young people, 'You can do this, too,'" said Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights activist who talked about the movement Tuesday at MacFarland Middle School in the District.

Educators have said the shift in emphasis can encourage students, especially African Americans, to become more active in their own communities.

"A piece of it is to counter the notion that there were a few people involved in the civil rights movement, when the real success of the movement was the grass-roots movement," said David Faus, who teaches a course called "Decade of Change" at St. Stephen and St. Agnes School in Alexandria. "What made Rosa Parks successful was that every night, 500 people showed up in church and pledged not to ride the buses."

At White Oak, instructor Deena Barlev uses role-playing, demonstrations and oral histories, as well as books and movies, to teach a course called "The American Civil Rights Movement."

For a lesson on Freedom Summer volunteers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, killed in Mississippi in 1964 while helping to register voters, Barlev's class watched the film "Murder in Mississippi."

For a lesson on the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case that prohibited school segregation, students yesterday acted out an exercise that then-NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall used a half-century ago to prove how segregation damaged black children.

Marshall called a psychologist to testify that black children chose white dolls over black dolls when asked to select the nicest toy or the one they most wanted to play with.

"Show me the nice doll," Michael, acting as the psychologist, asked Deivy Campusano, who was portraying a child in the role-playing exercise.

"That one!" said Campusano, who is black, pointing to the student portraying the white doll.

"What does it say about someone's self-esteem if they are a Negro and they chose the white doll as nicer?" Barlev asked, prompting a class discussion.

Barlev, Faus and other educators credited a textbook written by three local educators -- "Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching: A Resource Guide for Classrooms and Communities" -- with providing original ideas and instruction material.

"I wept when I found this book," Barlev said. "Until I saw it, I thought I was the only one teaching about the civil rights movement."

Jenice View, one of its authors and a humanities teacher in the District, said the book was born out of a conference at Howard University five years ago.

"A lot of teachers were saying, 'We'd like to teach the civil rights movement in a different way, but we can't find materials. . .,'" she said. "They were also not sure how to teach the movement to little kids without being too simplistic or too frightening."

For some students, learning about the grass-roots efforts has boosted their self-esteem.

"Finding out about all the people who were involved in the civil rights movement made me really appreciate being black, because it showed me that [a] lot of people, not just a few famous ones, had gone through a lot to get us here," said Katrina Lowe, 14, a White Oak eighth-grader.

Others said the lessons have helped open a dialogue with their families: Michael found out his grandmother used to work for the NAACP. Classmate Alexander Blocker discovered his father was once an activist.

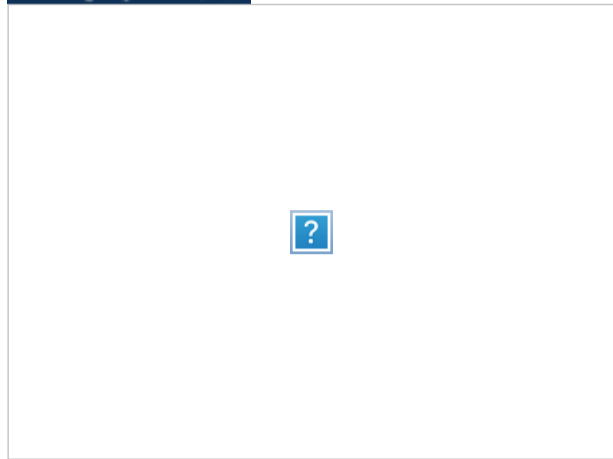
"I was surprised to find out that he was a member of the African People's Revolutionary Party" while attending Howard University in the 1970s, said Alexander, 14. "He started talking to me about that more. He told me that one day [Black Panther] Stokely Carmichael was in town making a speech and afterwards my dad gave him a ride. . . . I was like, 'Wow, my dad was in the car with Stokely Carmichael!'"



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Jose Navarro picks out states on the map as his White Oak Middle School class in Silver Spring studies civil rights. (Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post)

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