

Our Grandparents' Civil Rights Era

Family letters bring history to life

BY WILLOW MCCORMICK

"1955? I bet my great-great-grandmother was alive then! Maybe she knew Rosa Parks!"

We were reading Nikki Giovanni's *Rosa*, a powerful and nuanced account of the Montgomery bus boycott. To a 7-year-old, anything that happened more than four months ago was a long time ago; events that took place before they were born are ancient history. 1955 may as well be 1855. My students, predominantly white and attending a well-to-do suburban school, were categorizing the Civil Rights Movement along with the extinction of dinosaurs and the Time Before Television.

I marked the page with my finger and rested the book in my lap. "1955 wasn't that long ago, you know. Your grandparents were alive then—some of your aunts and uncles were little babies at the time!" The kids looked at each other with wonder or skepticism, some doing calculations to confirm my assertion. "My mom is 40! That means she was born in . . . 1971! And I think my grandma is 70-something. Whoa!"

Listening to them marvel, seeing them orient themselves suddenly on a timeline that stretched between generations, inspiration struck. "You know," I said, "we could write letters to our grandparents, asking them to share their memories of the Civil Rights Movement." If the children could connect their learning in the

classroom to their lives outside of school, and see that the Civil Rights Movement's crescendo wasn't so long ago, they might begin to better understand the continuing reverberations, the work that remains to be done.

We had been reading books about civil rights for weeks—*Rosa*, of course, and also *Martin's Big Words* and *My Brother Martin*. These focus on Martin Luther King Jr. and detail some of the major tenets of the movement in kid-friendly language. *Through My Eyes: Ruby Bridges* gives good background and insight into the now-famous little girl's experience integrating a primary school in New Orleans. My favorite books are the ones that take the spotlight off the famous leaders and turn it toward the many courageous young activists: *Freedom Summer* and *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* tell small stories of young people standing up for themselves and each other. As my students listened to the stories and studied the pictures, I asked what they would have done in those circumstances.

"I would've gone to the Woolworth's and sat with Ezell and his friends. Even if the manager shouted at me, I would come back every day until the bad rules got changed."

I pressed: "But you're not African American. Would you really join the movement? It was risky."

"We could write letters to our grandparents, asking them to share their memories of the Civil Rights Movement."



Bec Young

“Yeah! And even if someone mad poured food on my head I would keep sitting tall and proud. See those white kids in that picture? They did the sit-ins, too. I would be like them.”

We listened over and over to audio files of Dr. King’s speeches—especially one known as the Funtown speech, in which King speaks to the heartbreak of explaining to his young daughter why she, by virtue of being African American, could not go to an amusement park called Funtown. When I first played the speech for them, I turned the lights out and gathered them together on the rug. They got comfortable and closed their eyes. I reminded them to picture what King described, to identify the message of his speech.

After the speech, I asked what they heard. I urged them to think about what King and his daughter Yolanda were each feeling during the conversation. The children could imagine how sad they’d be if they were barred from a place like Funtown. They felt the injustice so strongly. When Dr. King described the tears in his eyes as he broke the news to Yolanda, they empathized with him, too.

Second graders have an inherent sense of fairness. Coming from relatively sheltered, wealthy

backgrounds, many of them had never heard of injustice on this scale. We had many class conversations trying to understand the social climate of the time, putting ourselves in the shoes of the various players using terms we’d explored in a bullying unit earlier in the year—perpetrator, target, bystander, and ally. What compelled the various groups to act or hold back? What was at stake for each group?

The children empathized with and admired the civil rights leaders we studied, but had a tough time relating to the white majority who institutionalized racism and actively or passively perpetuated it. They wanted to know why many white people felt superior. It’s a question many adults grapple with, and each year I struggle to find an entry point into the conversation that makes sense to 7- and 8-year-olds. I start with slavery because it’s concrete, although the roots of racism go back further than that: “In order to keep slaves, to treat people as property, they had to convince themselves that they were better than the slaves. And after slavery, racism allowed white people to feel OK about paying people little money for the work they did. They passed their opinions on to their kids and grandkids, and the

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laws and customs of the time seemed to back up those opinions, so the kids and grandkids believed them.” It’s an imperfect explanation, and for my wise students, inevitably it came back to “Yeah, but it isn’t fair!”

These conversations were without easy answers. I hoped that my plan to use their older relatives as sources of oral history would give my students another pathway to understand the era and how different hindsight is from being in the midst of tumultuous social change.

Letters to Grandparents

We brainstormed topics we wanted the grandparents to address: King’s speeches, marches and sit-ins, segregation, and friendships across races. We had read about white people who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and many kids wanted to know if their grandparents did so. They also wondered how much their relatives knew about the movement, and whether or not they supported it.

Then we discussed the mechanics of writing the letter—a friendly greeting, a short description of our study, a few questions—and the need for the letters to be respectful. We collaborated on a model letter, which I posted on the board. Kids were free to borrow lines or phrases from the model or write one all their own. I lined up other adults with Civil Rights Movement experience to correspond with the children who didn’t have an older relative to ask about this. I chose people who might round out our study with perspectives that would be missing otherwise—notably African American voices. I found these grandparent-surrogates through friends, neighbors, and by reaching out to a local NAACP chapter.

Most of the students’ letters were similar to Tim’s:

To Grandma and Grandpa!

We are learning Social Justice. Did you agree with the black people that it is not fair that the white people could have better things than the black people? Did you march with the black people or did you see people march? Did you see Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on TV? Was it unfair where you are? Write back please. I can’t wait until you write back to me.

*From,
Tim*

I also had the students enclose a letter of my own with a description of our study and some specific guiding questions. I wrote: “We’re not looking for big, heroic stories; we really want to know what day-to-day life was like during the Civil Rights Movement.” I tried to frame my questions in a way that would honor their experiences and prompt thoughtful responses:

- What were race relations like where you grew up? Were you aware of tensions between races? Did you have classmates or friends of other races?
- What did you know about the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s? Did you or anyone you know participate in any marches or other actions?
- Do you remember hearing any of Dr. King’s speeches on TV or the radio? Do you remember where you were when you heard he’d been shot?
- Is there anything else you’d like our class to know about social justice as they grow up and go out into the world?

The Letters Arrive

Letters started coming in within a few days. The first was from a family friend of one of my students. I asked Callie to read the letter slowly and clearly; we sat in a circle on the rug to listen.

They wanted to know why many white people felt superior.

The author, who had taken a bus from Portland, Oregon, to Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington when she was just 14 years old, ended her letter:

As a mother I look back on my experience in 1963 and sometimes think, “What were our parents thinking?” We were so young, and there might have been violence. We learned a powerful lesson, though, by going: If you believe in something, stand up for it. Take an active part in making change happen, even if there is some risk.

When Callie finished reading the letter, we all looked at each other in amazement. “What did you hear in Callie’s letter? What was interesting or surprising? What questions did you come away with?” It was quiet at first as the kids processed and then some tentative hands went up.

“I heard that she rode the bus for three days to get there and they even went to the bathroom on the bus!”

“I wondered if her parents were worried about her when she was gone.”

“I wish that I did that so I could have heard Dr. King say the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.”

When we had discussed the letter, we took it into the hallway where a U.S. map was affixed to our bulletin board. I tacked the letter up with a piece of string connecting it to a pin in Portland, and we marveled at the distance she’d traveled to stand up for her beliefs.

The letters poured in after that. Conrad’s grandmother wrote about organizing a chapter of SNCC at her small college in Illinois after the president of the college gave a speech discouraging students from dating across races. Conrad’s grandfather, a California high school teacher,

wrote about leading a group of students on a historical tour of Washington, D.C., in 1968. The day before they left, King was shot and riots erupted in the capital city. They spent the week holed up on the roof of their downtown hotel, listening to gunfire and sirens and watching the city burn. He ended his letter: “When we finally returned home to Southern California everyone agreed we were very fortunate to have witnessed a major event in U.S. history, and lucky not to have been hurt.”

When Conrad’s mom came to pick him up after school the day we read his letters, she told me she had never known the rich stories contained within them. She was learning about her parents’ experiences with the Civil Rights Movement alongside her son. Other parents expressed a similar sense of wonder and gratitude.

Many of the letters ended by addressing the guiding question “Is there anything else you’d like our class to know about social justice as they grow up and go out into

the world?” I highlighted this section of the letters so the eyes of passersby would be drawn to this tender and generous advice.

From Jonah’s Nana:

In time, many rights were won and the Civil Rights Act was passed. I would love to say that fixed everything, but today there is still plenty of work that needs to be done. I hope your generation is the generation that can truly “judge a person on the content of their character and not the color of their skin.”

From Nay, one of our African American correspondents:

Through this and the other letters your class will receive, I hope you get a picture of what the Civil Rights Movement was like and see



Three of the books used in this lesson.

how we all need to keep making Dr. King's dream a living reality for everyone. Build within yourself the kind of character that Dr. King taught us. Build the kind of life that looks for ways to serve others.

As each letter arrived, either the student or I read it aloud to the class, and we discussed it in the context of the other letters we had received. Our conversations deepened as we talked about the different regions of the country, and realized that discrimination and racism weren't isolated to the South. Arleta's grandmother wrote about growing up in the very community where I teach:

There were no African American students in school with me during those years of 1940–52. In fact, there were no African American families living in the West Linn, Gladstone, and Oregon City communities. The reason for this was because Oregon City had an ordinance that stated that no African American could stay overnight within city limits.

The children were stunned and, honestly, so was I. Although I had read accounts of redlining in Portland and had heard mention of other racist practices in the city, I still found myself caught off guard by this letter. Here was evidence of institutional racism in our own community. Arleta's grandmother ends her letter: "Thank goodness our country has come a long way from those days, and I am happy that you get to go to school and grow up in a community that is welcoming to people of any color of skin." It's true that West Linn is home to families of many different nationalities—Indian, Japanese, Estonian, Mexican, Syrian, Chinese—yet there is a noticeable lack of African Americans in the community to this day. This legacy of racial discrimination, combined with the dramatic racial wealth disparity in the United States—Pew's 2011 study on U.S. wealth inequality found that whites have fully 20 times as much wealth as African

Americans—makes West Linn an affluent enclave of predominantly white families.

Another letter painted an even more dispiriting portrait of Oregon:

Papa and I were married [in Grants Pass] in 1969 and we invited two black friends from our college in Portland to attend. They did, but they had to leave after the ceremony because, even though the Civil Rights Act said they could stay overnight, they did not feel safe to stay.

It was sobering to pin these letters on the bulletin board and connect the thread to our state. They brought the history home, and it felt uncomfortably close in time and place. When I asked the students what they heard in the letters

and how they connected to the rest of our study, the general feeling was that 1969 wasn't that long ago, and Grants Pass wasn't that far away. Although it was difficult to face that closeness, ultimately it was these letters that surfaced the true intention of our study: The fight for civil

rights isn't fixed in the past or deep in the South. It's an ongoing struggle that still reverberates in every part of our society. There is much work to be done, and having an understanding of the problem is the best start to solving it.

Some letters proved problematic. One arrived on my desk with an accompanying note from my student's mother, explaining that the letter was "a little out there" and that I should do with it what I wished. It contained patronizing anecdotes about a "lovely" black classmate at a religious college in Utah. Another grandmother wrote, "Papa and Nana were not aware of trouble between races because of where we live. Papa and I did not have friends of other races (not because we did not want any) because there were no other races where we lived." I wondered: Does her letter perpetuate the distance that I'm hoping to bridge? How do I honor the experiences of

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stand up for it. Take an
active part in making
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all of our contributors while still focusing on the essential questions of the study?

I had to tread carefully to make sure that the subtle and overt racism embedded in these (and other) letters didn't undermine the purpose of my unit. Without thoughtful teacher moves, my students might walk away thinking that things weren't really that bad after all. I addressed this concern in a few different ways. First, I made sure the students had a firm foundation of some major tenets of the movement (in particular, nonviolent activism in support of voting rights and desegregation)—through books, speeches, and discussions, along with timelines, vocabulary charts, and art activities—before I started sharing the letters. That way the letters could fit into an existing framework of understanding, rather than serving as the primary window into the issues.

Next, I emphasized to the students that our display in the hallway would be a teaching tool for other children in the building who might not know much about the Civil Rights Movement. We needed to be selective about what we chose to highlight in the letters we posted. Thus after each letter was shared we talked about what information fit with our study and would help passersby learn what we already know (from the books, speeches, etc.) about the Civil Rights Movement. Those were the sentences we devoted our conversations to, and what we chose to highlight. We understood that some families were sheltered from or unaware of the injustices of the time. Many of the letters came from farms in states like North Dakota, where few African American people lived. "My grandma didn't know a lot about racism since she lived on a farm and she didn't even have a TV." We agreed not to focus on the sections of letters that downplayed the problems faced by African Americans.

Early on, I shared every letter we received in its entirety, which led to protracted lectures on my part about topics that were simply over the heads of most of my students. One letter lingered on the "violent black people" involved in the Watts riots. In trying to provide thoughtful context to 7-year-olds, I was slogging through a

complicated and loaded tangent, leaving them confused at best. And so I decided that when the letters contained sections that were racist or lingered on unproductive themes, I would speak privately to the students addressed in the letters and explain—in gentle but frank language—why I couldn't share their letter in its entirety with the class: "It's so nice your grandma wrote to you! I'm just going to post and share the part at the end where she encourages you to make the world fairer. Some of the other stories she tells in the letter might make it seem to other students in the school that segregation was less serious than you and I know it was." Sometimes these conversations felt awkward, and no two were the same. I had to take what I knew about each child into account to present my exceptions to their letters as sensitively as possible.

Focus on Solidarity

The kids' initial interest in white people's acts of solidarity also led me to emphasize those letters that included descriptions of such acts. Jonah's Nana, along with dozens of other white high school football fans in Missouri, walked out of a roadside diner after a victorious away game when the management refused to serve the African American players and fans. She wrote: "We had won the game. I was so happy and excited but all that changed in a split second. I felt sick, embarrassed, and angry. I can tell you as we all left that restaurant no one felt hungry." I hoped that through studying these acts of solidarity—large and small—my students would begin to envision themselves as potential social justice activists.

The letters remained on display in the hallway for a month after our unit ended, and students of all grades, along with staff members and school visitors, lingered over them—glancing through the highlighted snippets or methodically reading entire letters. It was a bit sad when I finally took them down to make way for another display. I wanted the rich conversations to continue! A friend suggested I donate the letters to the Oregon Historical Society and, with the blessings of my families, I did. It's exciting to think about future scholars and students discovering

this small but powerful collection of primary source documents.

This study was the beginning of a shift in how I teach about social justice. The power of the primary source documents written by their grandparents ultimately led my students to feel connected to this history more profoundly than they had in previous years, when they studied the topic with interest but from a distance. The letters were only one component of a broader study, but they added a richness and line of personal connection that grounded our study in a specific time in history. My continuing work is to carry that thread of understanding into the present, to bring contemporary injustices to light and empower the children to be agents of change.

Resources

Ruby Bridges. *Through My Eyes*. Scholastic Press, 1999.

Christine King Farris. *My Brother Martin: A Sister Remembers Growing Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* Illustrated by Chris Soentpiet. Aladdin, 2005.

Nikki Giovanni. *Rosa*. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. Square Fish, 2007.

Martin Luther King Jr. Funtown speech, 1964.

Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBTSW0ulOps>

Andrea Davis Pinkney. *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down*. Illustrated by Brian Pinkney. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2010.

Doreen Rappaport. *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* Illustrated by Bryan Collier. Hyperion, 2007.

Deborah Wiles. *Freedom Summer*. Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue. Aladdin, 2005.

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Illustrator **Bec Young**'s print work can be found at justseeds.org.



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