A bus ride to freedom

On 1 December 1955, Rosa Parks had just finished work at a department store in Montgomery, Alabama.

She had a job as a seamstress there, and was making her way home to help with a NAACP youth meeting. There were a lot of people at the bus stop that evening, so Rosa did some shopping, then caught the next bus home. Luckily, she found a seat at the back, but after a few stops, more passengers got on, so the driver told Rosa to stand up. Why? Because the new passengers were white and Rosa was black. African Americans could only sit on the back seats of the bus and when the bus was full, they had to give up their seats to white people.
B

In the 1950s, African Americans were treated like second-class citizens. Segregation laws separated people of different races and meant that inequality was present everywhere – on buses, in restaurants, in cinemas and in shops. Even schools were divided up according to the colour of people’s skin. Back on the bus, the driver shouted at Rosa to stand up again. She wasn’t tired and her feet didn’t hurt, but she didn’t move. By now, the driver was furious and told Rosa he would get the police. ‘You may go and do so,’ she calmly replied. The police arrived and Rosa was arrested. (1) She must have felt humiliated as she was driven to jail, but she didn’t back down. She didn’t know it at the time, but her simple act of opposition would change the course of history and end segregation in America.

C

The next day, news of Rosa’s arrest spread rapidly through the city. People decided to boycott the buses and use other means of transport. They wanted the bus company to stop discrimination against black passengers. In fact, 75% of the bus company’s passengers were African Americans, so surely they would listen? They didn’t, so on Monday 5 December, thousands of people walked, shared cars, rode bicycles and even rode mules to get to work. (2) It can’t have been easy, but everyone was united in a common struggle.

D

In the end, the boycott lasted 381 days. During that time, protestors received threatening phone calls and homes were vandalized. A young pastor at the local church called Martin Luther King led the boycott and his home was attacked, too. People were ready to fight back, but Dr King made them stop and think. ‘We cannot solve this problem with violence,’ he said. ‘We must meet violence with non-violence.’ The attacks and threats failed to scare off supporters. In fact, they united people and taught everyone the value of peaceful opposition.
Then, finally, on 13 November 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on buses in Alabama was illegal. The next day, Rosa Parks, along with Martin Luther King, got on a city bus. Proudly, she took a seat right at the front. Rosa had shown how one person’s decision could make a huge difference. She showed that civil disobedience was a powerful way to protest and she inspired the civil rights movement. Across America, more and more people took part in public demonstrations and went on marches. Now they were fighting against segregation and injustice in all areas of society.

‘When I declined to give up my seat, it was not because of that day or bus in particular,’ Rosa said later. ‘I just wanted to be free, like everybody else.’ But what would have happened if Rosa Parks hadn’t refused to stand up on the bus that day? Another African American passenger might have done the same soon afterwards. On the other hand, they might not have. Without Roas’s brave protest, segregation could have lasted for longer than it did.

**NAACP**
The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909