

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 160, No. 209

Remembering civil rights pioneers on the anniversary of their passing

Mohandas Gandhi encouraged us to “be the change that you want to see in the world.” Friday holds the distinction of marking the passing of two pioneers in the civil rights movement who lived these very words.

On Oct. 24, 2005, Rosa Parks — who inspired the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott after being arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man — died at the age of 92. On that same day in 1972, the first black person to play Major League Baseball, Jackie Robinson, died at the age of 53.

The courageous actions of both Parks and Robinson served as beacons of inspiration to the civil rights movement, ultimately leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

It was 1947 when Robinson broke the MLB color barrier and made history by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He quickly garnered recognition for his stellar talents, winning National League Rookie of the Year and then, in 1949, league MVP, as well as helping his team achieve six NL championships and one World Series victory in a 10-year span.

Despite extraordinary skills that would make any player a hero to the fans, Robinson instead endured a barrage of vicious insults and threats simply because of his race. Rather than responding to the abuse, he faced it with genuine grace and dignified courage, which foreshadowed the coming era of the 1960s civil rights movement and its embrace of the theory of non-violence.

Robinson's journey inspired society to question the doctrine of “separate but equal,” and his success encouraged the integration of other professional sports, including basketball and football.

Although Robinson's accomplishments on the field are legendary, less known are his efforts to advocate for civil rights after his retirement from the game.

Robinson believed that “if such revolutionary change can be brought about in baseball, it can also be brought about in education, in transportation and any other area of our American life.”

In working to achieve that change, Robinson corresponded with Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon to implore them to work toward equality for all.

Robinson did not mince words, and in one letter to Eisenhower, he openly chastised the president for asking blacks to “have patience” with the process of change. Robinson wrote: “On hearing you say this, I felt like standing up and saying, ‘Oh no! Not again.’ I respectfully remind you sir, that we have been the most patient of people.”

Robinson also became active in the NAACP and chaired the Freedom Fund drive that raised more than \$1 million to support civil rights efforts. He also helped to create the Freedom National Bank, which granted black business owners and other minorities loans they otherwise would not have obtained from a white-run bank.

He advocated for equality through his column in the New York Post and coalesced other ballplayers to urge baseball to use its economic power to bring desegregation to Southern hotels and ballparks. Robinson also participated in many marches and protests, including the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.

In 1984, Robinson was recognized with a posthumous Medal of

LAW FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

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Freedom, our nation's highest civilian award.

Nearly a decade after Robinson first made history by integrating baseball, Parks made history by her brave refusal of a bus driver's order to give up her seat to a white male passenger on a Montgomery bus.

Parks' simple act of courage and her resulting arrest sparked the landmark boycott of the Montgomery bus system and forever changed our law and society.

In her book, “Quiet Strength,” Parks wrote of the mistreatment she and other blacks received on a daily basis due to the segregation mandated in public facilities under the Jim Crow laws of the time: “I saw and heard so much as a child growing up with hate and injustice against black people. ... Long ago I set my mind to be a free person and not to give in to fear. I always felt that it was my right to defend myself if I could.”

One significant symbol of the

oppression faced by Parks and other blacks was the segregation of local bus systems. On that fateful day in December 1955, Parks boarded a bus at around 6 p.m., paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of the middle section designated for black passengers. As the bus traveled its route, the white-only seats filled, leaving a few white men standing. When the driver ordered her to get up and move, Parks refused, was arrested and subsequently found guilty of disorderly conduct.

In “Quiet Strength,” Parks reflected on her actions and related that she was “tired of seeing the bad treatment and disrespect of children, women and men just because of the color of their skin ... It was time for someone to stand up — or in my case, sit down. I refused to move.”

Parks' arrest galvanized black churches in Montgomery to join together in support of a boycott of the use of the city's bus system, idled dozens of public buses and financially crippled the bus company, while the city's 40,000 black commuters found other means of transportation. After 381 days, the Montgomery boycott ended on Dec. 20, 1956.

During that period, Thurgood Marshall and other attorneys had worked feverishly to have Alabama's bus segregation laws declared unconstitutional, and in November 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Browder v. Gayle*, invalidated local Jim Crow laws requiring racial segregation on public transportation as violating the due process and equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment. Thereafter, Montgomery passed an ordinance allowing racial integration on its buses.

Like Robinson, Parks' courage and accomplishments were recognized through her receipt of the Medal of Freedom in 1996.