

Women of the Civil Rights Movement Student Worksheet 1-4

Video Clip Transcripts

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Clip 2-1: Dorothy Height, Early Civil Rights Protests

DR. HEIGHT: Well I tell you we had a slogan, Christian Youth Building A New World. And I had a speech that I used to make, and would always conclude with, "We are Christian Youth building a new world. Come join us." There was a--we really believed that we could make a difference.

The American Youth Act, young people who came to Washington and protested, and did all the things that we did, bolstered and strengthened by people like Eleanor Roosevelt. We came to feel that we could make a difference, and we worked at it.

And while there might have been others who were off playing bridge, we were always developing strategies or appearing before the City Council, or working out our little messages and sending them to Congress, or as with Anti-Lynching, setting up a youth who wore armbands around 42nd Street, and the NAACP would put out a sign saying, "A man was lynched today." And when they did that. As that flag was put over 5th Avenue, we would take our group from Harlem and go down to Time Square, and legally, stay within bounds, and walk around with black armbands on, and we would chant, "Stop the lynching. Stop the lynching." That's all we would do. So that we learned how to protest nonviolently. But it was a steady stream of action.

And we had a full calendar of things to do because Harlem was so rich in its culture, but very poor. And I was put into the Department of Welfare into the Personnel Department in 1935, by the work of Harlem Citizens Committee, headed by Reverend Johnnie Johnson of St. Martin's Church. And that Citizens Committee recognized that 8% of the population of New York City, at that time, was Black. And they were 42% of the relief rolls. And that was they're--the size of the unemployment. And when the community just erupted, and all that happened, and they selected two people, Ann Arnold Hitchman [ph] to get into the Commissioner's Office, and I went into the Personnel Office. So that even my work put me on the firing lines. Do you see what I mean? So that I was always in the middle of it.

And I had earned that place by working in the District Office in Brooklyn, where the District Supervisor put me in charge of dealing with the unemployed council. And if you can imagine everyday having crowds of people come into the reception room and protest and give you a list of things to do, and I had to try to see what I could do with them.

But the most important thing I learned was how to work with them. And even when they wanted something that I could not deliver, I tried to help them understand that. And so I

had a working relationship. And it was the woman in that district office who recommended me to that bureau as a special investigator, so I was doing--investigating fraud and those kinds of things, and out of that I got into the personnel office. So I've never had easy jobs. I mean I was right in the middle of the whole thing. And that also was what let me know that I had to get out of the public system and do something where I could be more affective in changing the conditions that made that work necessary.

INTERVIEWER: You like being on the firing line, don't you?

DR. HEIGHT: Yes. Well, if its--I don't like to--I don't mess around. I don't like to be in something where you're just stewing and letting off anger and so forth. And I think people sometimes mistake that and think that I'm timid, or that I am very--too quiet. I've been told that. But this is the way that I am.

And I believe, I believe something that--in 1937, the same year that I met Mrs. Bethune, I was also at a conference in England, and John McMurray said to us as we were leaving - we were working on the Christian faith and the economic order and how you bring about change, it was a world conference for the churches, and I was one of the youth delegates at that time. And he said to us at that time, "As you go forward, be radical in what you do, but don't try to be a radical." He said, "There's no one so tire as a tire radical." He said, "You have to stay at it. Work for a radical change, but stay at it." And that to me was a life directing moment.

And I have tried to work in that way, to be steady on a course and not just jumping up and down, saying everything you think. But getting some way to say, "What can I do that'll make this better?"

Clip 2-2: Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

MRS. KING: Our house was the center of activity. Uh, in the beginning. Because we, we created, I had to create an organization from, from, you know, just, it was a, it was a spontaneous movement. And, and, and so the organization was created. And a lot of, uh, the activities, meetings and so fourth, were held at, at our house.

MRS. KING: A lot of his conferences certainly were at the house. Because people started coming from all over, the media, to cover the story. So he had a lot of interviews scheduled. They had, sometimes an interview, uh, would be scheduled, and I was waiting lunch for him. And he would walk in late. And of course, uh, he would say to them, well he had to have lunch, would you, would you like to have lunch with me?

Well I hadn't prepared lunch for for anybody extra.

So I had to say, oh, just a minute. Um, I'll call you in a few minutes. And then try to figure out, find some more food from somewhere. So I learned pretty quickly to have a lot of food on hand. Always have more than what Martin and I could eat. But anyway, I, after the movement started, it was like, you know, you don't plan any day. It's planned for you almost.

And, and I learned to live with that. But Antioch had prepared me for change, you know, constant change in my life there. So I continued to adjust to it. It wasn't easy. But it was exciting. It was exciting when the people stood up, uh, 50,000 strong, to boycott the buses. I mean, that was so exciting, because this had never happened before.

INTERVIEWER: And Rosa Parks was also an extraordinary woman. You, you got to know her during this period?

MRS. KING: Oh, yes. Uh, Mrs, Mrs. Parks was a very, uh, quite and dignified person, and was the appropriate person, uh, uh, to be the, you know, the pioneer. Because she was such a lady. She was a southern lady. And I think one of the reasons why the bus driver didn't rough her up, uh, she, she was, she was so dignified in a carriage. And she was such a lady, you know.

You can't, how can you hit on Rosa Parks, you know. Uh, and so she, she was non violent in her spirit, even then. Because she had been to The Highlander Folk School where they, you know, it, they talk about non-violence. Teach, uh, non violent, uh, violence. And, uh, so everybody, uh, when they found out it was Mrs. Rosa Parks, you know, everyone was righteously indignant say, let's say.

Because how can you, uh, uh, a very respectable lady like Rosa Parks, you put her in jail like this and treat her this way. So I think she was, again, it was the right person for the moment. And of course, Martin was, uh, asked to be the spokesperson. And when he came home that evening from the first meeting that was called, and told me that they had, uh, he had selected, been selected to be the spokesperson. And he said I have 20 minutes to prepare for the most important speech in my, in my whole life.

MRS. KING: And, and, and he was obviously nervous, you know. But he, he had a way of doing an outline. He did an outline quickly. And he could speak from an outline as well.

INTERVIEWER: So it was exciting, but it was also dangerous. And, and you had to get used to that.

MRS. KING: It, it was, it was dangerous and I didn't know how dangerous it was initially because, uh, when we started getting the threats. Then I realized, you know, it

was dangerous. But I thought that many a times they were empty threats. When a carliff, uh, called and said to my husband, uh, if you don't stop your, your, I don't know what word he used, but whatever, in three days, we're, and be out of town in three days, we're going to bomb your house and kill your wife and baby.

MRS. KING: Well, when, uh, the bomb, there was some talk about bombing, you know, supposing they bombing, I thought well nobody's gonna bomb the house. If they do, they'll, it'll be a hit and run from the back, not on the main street. But when the bomb actually hit I said oh these, they are for real, you know. And I could, we could have been hurt, we could have been killed even.

MRS. KING: So, you know, that's when I realized how dangerous it was. And that's when I also had to realize that if we continued, if I continued with my husband in the struggle, that I, too, could be killed. And

INTERVIEWER: How, how do you adjust to that? How do you . . .

MRS. KING: Well I, you know, again, I turned within. And I did a lot of soul searching and praying. Because, um, uh, I know that if we are doing God's work and doing the right thing that, uh, you know, that God would protect us. I had that belief. That was my feeling. Now of course, it doesn't mean that, you know, you may not be, that you may avoid being killed. It means that you could be killed.

But I, you have an inner peace and a satisfaction if you feel that you are, uh, doing the right thing and doing what God intends for you to do. Because I remember after the house was bombed, and, and I, I had to, because my parents were pulling me, trying to pull me away and his parents were trying to pull him away.

MRS. KING: Uh, and, and, and I knew I wasn't going any where. Uh, but, you know, I had to be polite about it. Uh, but I, I had to, I had to come to a, a, you know, a peace within myself, that I am not going to go anywhere. I'm gonna be right here, because this is what, uh, this is right what we are called to do. And then I started thinking back over the path that I had, that had led me there, from, from my home training. The threats from my father. And I thought gosh, my father was threatened in his early years, uh, in my early years.

And, you know, it's like, maybe I was subconsciously being prepared then. Because I, you know, I was fearful for my father. Uh, and then I talked to, thought about the path to Antioch College and my preparation. And then to Montgomery now. And here I am. And I all of a sudden, when Martin said we're going to Montgomery, uh, that's where I want to start my ministry, and I wondered why. And then I said now I know why. This exciting movement. And this is part of God's plan and this is what we are supposed to be doing. This is what I'm supposed to be doing.

Clip 2-3: Dorothy Height, March on Washington

DR. HEIGHT: Well, I think that often I was not so prominently displayed, but I did have the opportunity of working together and had a relationship with each of them. And sometimes there would be times when I could be a part of a leveler or try to bring us together, because I had some idea of what each had shared and each was thinking.

But then there were times that people worried about me because they saw me knitting, and I'll never forget Carl Holdman came out of a meeting one day at the Civil Rights--we were planning a Civil Rights Conference, and he said that the chairman worried that I was knitting. And so I said, "Whoa." You know, Eleanor Roosevelt knitted all the time. But I said, "You know, sometimes I listen much better when I'm knitting."

When we got back in the meeting and I challenged what had just been done, the chairman came to me afterward and said, "I will never complain about your knitting." Because he said--he realized that I had heard every word. And I think while sometimes people daydream, if you are knitting your mind is right where you are because you don't have--I don't have to learn it. I know it. It's just an activity. Other people doodle.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. And I had read that at one point--and this may have been an ongoing thing that you occasionally had to do--that in some of the all-male get-togethers, and you would be sitting there knitting or whatever, that you on a couple of occasions said something like, "Well, if it"--to sort of calm things down--"if you would listen to a mere woman," or something, "the opinion of a mere woman." Were you ever--

DR. HEIGHT: Well, I never used the term "a mere woman," but I would say that--well, I'll give you an example.

Early on when SNCC was not a part of the United Civil Rights Leadership Group, there was real resistance because it seemed that they were kicking over all of the gains that already had been made, and I had to say, "Well, as a woman I cannot sit here and not say that I think we have to have our youth here with us around the table." There was no resistance to it, but they did it.

And I think that sometimes it's a matter of being willing to risk speaking up, and doing it in a way that helps people understand that you are trying to move something forward. It is not a resistance, it's an effort to move it forward.

INTERVIEWER: How difficult was it for you occasionally to be the only woman in that group? As you said, you were not prominently displayed, as you put it.

DR. HEIGHT: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the--how did you--what were some of the touchy points or difficulties of kind of being the woman in that group, for you?

DR. HEIGHT: I have to honestly say, I felt that we were a group of peers. I felt at home in the group. There were times when the men differed with each other and I could help bridge the gap, but I never--I never felt that I needed to fight as a woman.

It is true that several times people pointed out to me, and we had a real incident of that, that often when the pictures were made, that I was not--I was on the end

and I might be cut off and things of that sort. But in terms of the working relationship, I have to say I had great respect for those men.

Many times in the Women's movement they have asked me, "Well, why didn't you step forward?" Who steps ahead of Martin Luther King, Jr. when you're in a march? Do you see? And I think that for me there's always a way of looking at who am I in this situation and what do I do, and if I can help move it or if I can help bridge, I try to do that.

Clip 2-4: Amelia Boynton Robinson, March from Selma to Montgomery, Part 1

MS. POUSSAINT: How did the, the Selma march idea come about?

MS. ROBINSON: It started when I was arrested coming out of the courthouse. And I said, you had to have three White men to, uh, vouch for you. Well, I happened to be a registered voter. I was a registered voter when I was 21 years of age. You had to be 21 at that time. And, uh, I was coming out of the courthouse at noon and Jim Clark told me to get in the line.

Now, when that, when African-American adults decided that they were going to try to register was when they were, when they lost their jobs after they attended the memorial of my husband and they lost their jobs. And this was one of the times that they went to the courthouse and decided that they were going to march and demonstrate and get the right to vote. Their children were out there doing it. And they were not of an age that they could register.

So, they can get out there and work for me to become a citizen. I am going to get in the line. And I am going, and I am going to fight to register. And when I got out and Dr. King was across the street, he was on the Federal property. And he saw when Jim Clark caught me and told me to get in the line and I told him I was going to my office. He grabbed me in the back, propelled me around, shoved me half a block and threw me in the paddy wagon.

Carted me off to jail. These people said, as I passed them going to jail, Mrs. Boynton, you will not be there by yourself. We will be there with you. Dr. King and the group, and his staff, went back to the house and said, we've got to do something. I don't know what is the best thing to do. But we are going to have to do something. Then, two or three days after that, nights after that, Jimmy Lee Jackson was killed not too far from Selma in Marion, Alabama when he attended a meeting.

And this state trooper made an attempt to harm his mother and he tried to protect his mother. And they shot him in the back. And Dr. King said, we are going to march to Montgomery and we are going to see George Wallace and let him know that he had to protect the citizens of Alabama. And that's when the idea came to march to Montgomery.

MS. POUSSAINT: The morning that you marched across the bridge, did you have any sense of what might happen?

MS. ROBINSON: No, I didn't. I didn't know. I, I had no idea that anything would happen. And yet, I questioned the fact that so many of these youngsters were coming between the head or the leaders, the leaders who were, uh, Hosea Williams and John Lewis. They were the leaders. We were right behind them. One of the leaders who dared to work with us, and that was Marie Foster and I were next. But as we got nearer the bridge, several of these young men came in between us.

I didn't think of anything happening. And even when I got across the bridge and I saw these state troopers like tin soldiers. They had gas masks on. They had nightsticks, cattle prods. Some were on horses. Many of them had gas. I didn't, I was amazed. I was stunned. I just wondered why are these people like tin soldiers standing up there so erect. And only when Hosea Williams was told don't go any farther.

MS. ROBINSON: Because they had blocked the road. Don't go any farther. Turn around and go back to your church. And Hosea made an attempt to say

something. He said, may I say something. And Clark who had charge of the state troopers said no, you may not have anything to say. Charge on them, men. And when they came from the right, from the left, from in front of us, it was then that I realized these people are terrible.

What's, what's, what's going on. Just what is going on. And I don't know whoever, I don't know what, uh, Lewis and Williams expected. But Dr. King was supposed to have lead that march. And he didn't.

Clip 2-5: Amelia Boynton Robinson, March from Selma to Montgomery, Part 2

MS. POUSSAINT: Did you have a personal sense of danger that, that you were about to get, uh, physically harmed?

MS. ROBINSON: No. I didn't. Maybe another thing my mother said, maybe I didn't have sense enough to realize that I was in danger. I wasn't. Not even after I was hit the first time. The first thing, I was frozen. I was stunned. When I saw blood and saw people running, seeing these men behind them with clubs and cattle prods, seeing the horses, I was frozen. I don't, I have never been that way before. I was so stunned. I was shocked and I was frozen.

And when one of them came to me and said, run, I wondered whether he was crazy. Run for what? But the second lick, of course, caused me to fall and become unconscious.

MS. POUSSAINT: Where were you hit?

MS. ROBINSON: Right in the base of my neck. Right back there. It could've killed me. And the tear gas, stand over me and pumped tear gas. And, and, and the, the interesting thing is, when I left the church, a very good friend of mine said to me, where is your hat. It was a very dreary day. I said, you know I don't wear hats. And she had a cap. She had a plastic cap. She said, here, put this on. And I had it over my head.

And when I was hit, I was hit so hard that that cap fell over my eyes. And there I was. And then, pumping this gas, I had an intake of that gas in my, uh, through my mouth and nose. And today I still have that seared esophagus that occasionally I get to the place that, uh, you know, it's like a, they tell me it's just like, uh, well, I guess, like a vein stands out. That's what it's like.

MS. POUSSAINT: And also, you had damage to your, to your arm, also, right?

MS. ROBINSON: Yes. But this one is the worst because of the fact my voice changed completely from a high-pitched voice to, uh, mezzo-soprano. And I don't sing. I can't sing like I used to. Of course, I couldn't do it now because of my age. But after that. It really caused me to be damaged very badly.

MS. POUSSAINT: When, when did you regain consciousness?

MS. ROBINSON: Oh, about two days afterwards.

MS. POUSSAINT: Two days?

MS. ROBINSON: It was about two days. Uh huh.

MS. POUSSAINT: You woke up in the hospital?

MS. ROBINSON: Yeah.

MS. POUSSAINT: How did this experience effect you? And, other than physically. How did it change you. How did it change your life?

MS. ROBINSON: It made me more determined to do everything I could to make African-Americans first class citizens. And to destroy the fear that is in our people. And that's what I am doing today.

MS. POUSSAINT: And, again, there was no hesitancy, no animosity?

MS. ROBINSON: No animosity.

MS. POUSSAINT: Even towards the, the, the men who, who hit you?

MS. ROBINSON: The only thing that I can see is pity. I feel sorry for them. Because when I think of what these people had gone through on the farms and plantations, and how brainwashed they were, and how masters, as they were called, these people, masters, how they had been brainwashed to think, to be stupid enough to think that they are superior because of color of their skins.

I feel sorry for them. And to this day I feel sorry for racists. Because it's ignorance. It's untrained and it's unfortunate. That's the way I feel about it.