

HUD Black History Showcase Series

Rosa Parks
1913 - -

Civil rights activist, born in Tuskegee, Alabama to her mother a teacher, and her father a carpenter. As a small child, she moved with her mother and brother to Pine Level, Alabama to live with her grandparents. She attended the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, and graduated from the all-African American Booker T. Washington High School in 1928, and attended Alabama State College in Montgomery.

She married Raymond Parks, a barber, in 1932. Both were active in civil rights such as voter registration. She worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council and in 1943 was elected Secretary of the Montgomery Branch.

Rosa Parks worked at various jobs over the years, as a housekeeper, an insurance saleswoman and a seamstress. In 1955, while working as a tailor's assistant in Montgomery, she achieved fame by refusing to yield her seat on a bus to a white passenger. The bus driver threatened to have her arrested but she remained in her seat. Parks was arrested and taken to jail. NAACP and Montgomery church leaders decided that her arrest could provide impetus for a successful bus boycott and asked the city's African-American riders- who made up over 70 percent of the bus company's business, to stop riding the buses until the company would end its policy of segregation., and in addition, hire African-American drivers. Ultimately the matter wound up in the Supreme Court, and the justices declared that segregation of the buses was illegal and ordered their desegregation on December 10, 1956.

Rosa Parks and her family experienced harassment following the incident, and moved in 1957 to Detroit. Parks found work with John Conyers, an African-American member of the U.S. House of Representatives. She worked for him for 25 years while continuing her work for the NAACP and SCLC.

Rosa Parks received numerous awards, including an honorary degree from Shaw College in Detroit, the 1979 NAACP Springarn Medal, and an annual Freedom Award presented in her honor by the SCLC. In 1980 she was awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize and in 1984 the Eleanor Roosevelt Women of Courage Award. She was in demand as a public speaker and traveled extensively to discuss her role in the civil rights movement.

In September 1994, Parks was robbed and beaten in her Detroit home. She fully recovered from this incident and remained active in African American issues. In October, 1995 she participated in the million man march in Washington, D.C., giving an inspirational speech.

Parks began to have legal and financial problems in 1997. A corporation had been formed, the Parks Legacy, to control the public property rights to Parks' image. According to court records, the "selling" of Parks included fees for autographs and pictures of the civil rights legend, her appearance in a rock video, and her image on a phone-calling card. In April 1999, Parks filed a lawsuit against the rap group OutKast for using her name without her consent. The song "Rosa Parks" appears in the group's album. A federal judge ruled against Parks in 1999, stating the rap group's right to use Park's name is protected by the first amendment.

In 1999 Parks was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President Clinton, the nation's highest civilian honor.