
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Who is Your Rosa Parks?

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I was asked this question recently. It made me pause to consider the contributions of one individual to all of humanity. What is the possibility each of us has within for changing the course of history? Certainly Rosa Parks changed the lives of a great many people.

Rosa Parks was not a random choice for challenging the segregation laws of the 1950s. She was educated, politically savvy, employed by the NAACP, and had completed training for engaging in peaceful activism. But these reasons alone are not sufficient to understand why a community, black and white, came together to support Parks through a successful 13-month boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama National City Lines Transit system.

Parks had the ability to cross social, cultural, and economic barriers. She was known and respected by both black and white families. In fact, one of her white employers assisted with her bail following her arrest for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. Parks was actively engaged in everything from church organizations to mentoring youth chapters of the NAACP to providing “emergency” seamstress services to the young debutants of the Montgomery society pages.

Perhaps most important, however, is that when asked if she would appeal the guilty verdict, she said yes.

I pondered all of these qualities that Parks engendered as I thought about my own Rosa Parks. Who are the people who stand up and say “yes” to inexplicable odds every day? What one person has made this sort of difference in your life?

Of course we expect our families to support our endeavors, be our best cheerleaders, and make sacrifices when needed. Yet, I expect that we all have someone outside of our family who has made a significant contribution to our lives. Mine is Mrs. Netch.

Mrs. Netch taught eighth-grade English for the Chicago Public Schools. Beyond guiding 13-year-olds through “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” Mrs. Netch made a career of preparing middle school students for high school. She was not an easy teacher. Yet her ability to believe in you, beyond your own ability, made her exactly the right person at the right time for many of us making that scary passage to the unknown of high school.

“Michael, you are a good student,” she told me, numerous times, in the waning months of eight-grade, “you have potential and you absolutely will go to college.”

I wasn’t so sure. I expect that many residents of Montgomery, Ala. weren’t so sure about boycotting the bus, standing up for Mrs. Parks, and moving into an unknown, either.

But Mrs. Parks, like Mrs. Netch, believed in the tremendous potential of humanity and the ability each of us has to stand up and say yes.

Yes, I will help.

Yes, I can serve.

Yes, I believe in you.

I can think of no other group that embodies the leadership and legacy of Rosa Parks than teachers. From one-room school houses to virtual classrooms, Emporia State University has been training successful teachers for 150 years. If you are a life-long Kansan, the odds are pretty good that many of your teachers were graduates of Kansas State Normal, Kansas State Teacher’s College, Emporia Kansas State Teacher’s College, or ESU. Perhaps one of them is your Rosa Parks.

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