

Stepping Into Selma: Voting Rights History and Legacy Today

Background

In this 50th anniversary year of the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the Voting Rights Act it helped inspire, national media will predictably focus on the iconic images of “Bloody Sunday,” the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the interracial marchers, and President Lyndon Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act. This version of history, emphasizing a top-down narrative and isolated events, reinforces the master narrative that civil rights activists describe as “Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, and the white folks came south to save the day.”

But there is a “people’s history” of Selma that we all can learn from—one that is needed, especially now. The exclusion of Blacks and other people of color from voting is still a live issue. Sheriff’s deputies may no longer be beating people to keep them from registering to vote, but institutionalized racism continues. For example, in 2013 the Supreme Court ruled in *Shelby v. Holder* that the Justice Department may no longer evaluate laws passed in the former Confederacy for racial bias. And as a new movement emerges, insisting that “Black Lives Matter,” young people can draw inspiration and wisdom from the courage, imagination, and accomplishments of activists who went before. [From article by Emilye Crosby.]

This lesson on the people in Selma’s voting rights movement is based on an effective format that has been used with students and teachers to introduce a variety of themes including the history and literature of Central America, the U.S. Mexico War, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, women in the Civil Rights Movement, and more.

This lesson is not intended to provide an in-depth history. Instead, it invites students to step into the history, introducing them to people, turning points, and issues. The lesson format provides students the scaffolding for deeper study and is often used as a pre-reading or pre-film viewing activity. If used in advance of viewing the film *Selma*, it can help students recognize and understand more of the people and issues that are referenced.

Objectives

Students will be able to discuss the history of Selma with more background knowledge and insight, including the following aspects of the context of the struggle:

- long history of grassroots organizing for civil and human rights
- the role of many local, state, and federal institutions that were complicit in preventing black voting
- central role of youth, women, and key organizations such as the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- relevance and lessons for similar or current struggles

Materials and Preparation

- Read the following in advance of using the lesson: “[The Selma Voting Rights Struggle: 15 Key Points from Bottom-Up History and Why It Matters Today](#)” by Emilye Crosby and the background on Selma at [CRMvet.org](#). Find more recommended reading on this [Selma book list](#).
- Have a name tag available for each student. Use sticky name tags and have them write their (assigned role play) name. (Or prepare name tags in advance with the [photo sheets](#).)
- Copy for each student:
 - Interview sheet
 - Role. Because this is an introductory lesson, the bios are relatively short. We hope these brief bios interest students in learning more. [Note: We began with the bios indicated in bold. The rest will be added over time.]

Rev. Ralph Abernathy Ella Baker Harry Belafonte James Bevel Amelia Boynton Stokely Carmichael Sheriff Jim Clark Annie Lee Cooper John Doar Bettie Mae Fikes Marie Foster James Forman Fred Gray Dick Gregory Prathia Hall J. Edgar Hoover Archbishop Iakovos Jimmie Lee Jackson Richie Jean Jackson	Frank Minis Johnson President Lyndon B. Johnson Coretta Scott King Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Bernard Lafayette Colia Lafayette John Lewis Viola Liuzzo Diane Nash James Orange Rev. Maurice Ouellet James Reeb Reverend Frederick Reese Bayard Rustin Fred Shuttlesworth Mayor Smitherman Maria Varela CT Vivian	George Wallace Sheyann Webb Lee C. White Reverend Hosea Williams Senator John J. Williams Andrew Young Samuel (“Sammy”) Leamon Younge Jr. Malcolm X <i>Groups</i> Alabama State Troopers Dallas County Police FBI DCVL Klans National Guard SNCC SCLC Voter Education Project
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Time Required

Day 1: (approximate times) 5 minutes for the warm-up, 5 minutes for the timeline, 5-10 minutes to introduce and explain the activity, 20-25 minutes for the meet-and-greet

Day 2: 30-45 minutes for discussion questions

Suggested Grade Levels

Grades 7 and above.

Procedure

1. Warm up and Introduction: In small groups, have students create lists of everyone they can name who was in the Civil Rights Movement. Have the groups share some of their responses. Explain that at the end of this lesson, they will know many more people. They are going to learn more about the people and history of the Civil Rights Movement by stepping into it themselves. You could add that (a) this lesson will give students a chance to see if they can learn from the Civil Rights Movement about actions we might -- or might not -- want to do now to challenge contemporary injustices; and (b) high school students played a leading role in the Civil Rights Movement -- even though high school students are left out of most images from that time and in the media today. If you do this activity in advance of seeing the film *Selma*, you can explain:

You are going to go see a major new film on Selma. In preparation, we will do an activity where you will take on the roles of a lot of people you will see (or hear referenced) in the film -- and some who are left out (no film can include all the history). You are going to get a chance to step into that history as one of the characters from that time. When you see the film (or, if you saw it already, now that you've seen the film....) you can consider whether you think your character was represented accurately, what else you learned about them, what else you want to know, etc.

Come back to their lists at the end of the lesson and ask how many more people they know and can describe.

2. Distribute roles so that each student has one. If there are more students than roles, make multiple sets and have two or more students take on each role. Explain that during the interview process they cannot interview themselves. If you wish to have students learn more in advance about the person they are representing, distribute roles on the day prior with the assignment to find background information about their person in history.

3. Distribute blank name tags and have students write their character's name on the tag. (Or prepare names tags in advance using the [photos on the handout](#).)

4. Explain: "You will have a chance to meet people who were present in Selma, Alabama in early 1965. In your assigned role, you will interview each other using a set of questions on an interview sheet." Ask them to read their own role two or three times so they can prepare to step into that person's shoes.

5. Provide each student a copy of the interview questions. Review any terms in the interview sheet that might not be clear to students, such as "repression." Their assignment is to circulate through the classroom, meeting other individuals who were in Selma in early 1965. They should use the questions on the sheet to talk with others and to complete the questions as fully as possible. They must find a different individual to answer each of the ten questions. As Bill Bigelow explains in another lesson using this format, "Remind students that this is not a race; the aim is to spend time hearing each other's stories, not just hurriedly scribbling down answers to the different questions." (A high school teacher who field tested this lesson noted that instead of using the interview sheets, students could talk with each other and write down two interesting facts about each person they meet.)

6. Timeline. If time allows, it can be helpful for students to see a visual timeline of their characters' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Once students have read the bios of their assigned roles, have them stand up and organize themselves in a line, as close as possible to the year that their

person got involved with the Civil Rights Movement. Designate one side of the room as 1920 and the other as 1965.

7. **Model a sample interview** with a student volunteer, demonstrating an encounter between two individuals. Emphasize the need to introduce yourselves in character, asking one of the questions on the sheet, and probing for more information if time allows. Point out that this is a verbal conversation; students should not hand each other their bio sheets.

8. **Announce that the interviews will begin.** Encourage them to circulate throughout the class, interview each other, and fill out responses to the interview questions. If this is the first time your class has done an activity like this, you might need to remind them of the need to stay in role and to take the time with each interview for the detailed question.

9. **Bring everyone back together.** Ask selected questions from the interview sheet and have students raise their hands if the question applies to their character.

Ask the students some of the following comprehension questions:

- What did you learn that surprised you?
- What were some of the strengths and challenges of the people you encountered, including yourself?
- What questions do you have based on your interactions and what you learned today?
- Is there someone you met today whose story you could identify with? If so, why?

10. **Analysis and application.** These next questions require more time and varying amounts of background knowledge. Select the questions that are appropriate for your group. Have students talk in small groups using a Socratic Seminar approach or write first before discussing these as a class. Copy or project the questions you select for all students to see.

- Why were people willing to risk their lives to vote?
- Why do you think some of the people you met today are not mentioned in textbooks?
- How did the activity change your perception of who made up the Civil Rights Movement?
- What were the different ways that the status-quo (white privilege, white supremacy, Jim Crow Laws, Black Codes) was maintained leading up to the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
- How similar or different are the conditions for people of color today with respect to civil and human rights?
- People used creative approaches to challenging injustice. For example, promoting voting rights at Boynton's funeral. What are some other examples, big and small, of how "ordinary" people contributed to the movement?
- What lessons can be learned from the organizing in Selma that you can apply to struggles for justice today in your own school, community, the country, or the world? What would you do differently and why?

The roles follow on the next page.

Note that the text in quotes indicates the actual words of the character. The rest of the text is paraphrased from descriptions found in the sources listed at the end of each role.

Ella Baker (December 13, 1903 - December 13, 1986)

I developed a sense for social justice early on, due in part to my grandmother's stories about life under slavery. As a student at Shaw University in North Carolina, I challenged school policies that I thought were unfair. After graduating in 1927 as class valedictorian, I moved to New York and joined social activist organizations to fight economic inequity. I began my involvement with the NAACP in 1940, first as a field secretary and then as director of branches. That meant I traveled all over the deep south, by train and by myself, to develop and work with local NAACP groups. Inspired by the historic bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, I then co-founded the organization In Friendship to raise money to fight against Jim Crow laws in the deep South.

In 1957, I moved to Atlanta to help organize Martin Luther King's new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and became its executive secretary. I also ran a voter registration campaign called the Crusade for Citizenship. At the heart of my vision for changing U.S. race relations was that local people had to demand an end to racism, rather than wait for a powerful leader from an outside organization. This is why I encouraged young people to organize themselves—separately from the adult civil rights organizations—as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. These courageous young people came to Selma to encourage local people to demand and get their voting rights. I have been called the “Godmother of SNCC” and a leader of the Civil Rights Movement, but my “job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how *group action* could counter violence.” [[Zinn Education Project](#)]

Amelia Boynton (August 18, 1911-)

I am a long-time Selma resident and community leader. Before 1965, I was one of the few blacks in Dallas County allowed to register to vote. During the time before the civil rights movement started, which was between twenty-five and thirty years before the whole country became interested in registration and voting, my husband and I decided that we were going to help people to register, to own their own land, and get educated. My husband, Samuel William Boynton, and I, along with other African American activists founded the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) in the 1930s. Our steering committee was known as the “Courageous Eight.” At that time, people wanting to vote had to fill out questions that were pretty hard for the average person, and impossible for those who were illiterate. But we would teach people how to fill out these forms. We could not do it by coming out in the open, so we started with people with whom we worked, the rural people.

We would have meetings in rural churches, and even in homes. When my husband began to bring three and four people at a time to register, the registrar became very upset and said, “You’re bringing too many people down here to register.” In my office I had a big sign, “A Voteless People is a Hopeless People.” When my husband died and lots of people came to his funeral, we turned it into a voting rights rally. Later a judge ruled that we could not meet in groups of more than three. You might have heard of my son, Bruce Boynton, from [Boynton v. Virginia](#). It is a 1960 U.S. Supreme Court case that ruled against segregated facilities in bus and train stations. That’s the case that launched the Freedom Rides. My whole family was dedicated to the freedom struggle. To help the voting rights campaign succeed, I invited Martin Luther King Jr., to come to Selma, which he did. When the time came to march to Montgomery for voting rights, state troopers gassed me and beat me badly in what was later called “Bloody Sunday.” [[Voices of Freedom](#)]

Stokely Carmichael (June 29, 1941 - November 15, 1998)

I was born on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, and moved to Harlem when I was eleven years old. I attended college at the historically-black Howard University, where I joined the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), an affiliate of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). I participated in every major demonstration and event that took place in the Civil Rights Movement between 1960 and 1965, including anti-war demonstrations, and the Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer in Mississippi. I was arrested more than thirty times, serving months in some of the worst prisons in the South, before moving on to Selma. Like many in the movement, I was concerned that we had to invite whites to Mississippi to gain national attention to violence against blacks and the denial of voting rights. "At this point it seemed to me that the movement itself was playing into the hands of racism, because what you want is the nation to be upset when anybody is killed, and especially when one of us is killed. It's almost like, for this to be recognized, a white person must be killed. . . . Of course, we're still bitter to this day about it, because it still means that our life is not worth, even in death, the life of anybody else—that their life is still more precious."

I opposed the Selma voting-rights march to Montgomery. We in SNCC now believed that on-the-ground organizing, rather than mobilizing big marches, was more effective. But, during the Selma March, I did not publicly criticize Dr. King's decision to mount the march. Instead, I used the march to try and organize local blacks I met along the way. After the Selma campaign ended, I returned to Lowndes County and worked with the already-formed local group, the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights, to organize the independent Lowndes County Freedom Party to help them gain economic and political power. I was then 23 years old. I used the phrase "Black Power" in summer 1966 and after that many people considered me a militant. But I was always militant and spent my life working for the unification of Black people around the world. [[Voices of Freedom](#), *Ready for Revolution*, NYT obituary, *Stokely: A Life*, [Biography.com](#)]

Annie Lee Cooper (June 2, 1910 - November 24, 2010)

I was born in Selma, dropped out of school in the seventh grade, and moved to Kentucky to live with an older sister. When I was old enough, one of the first things I did was register to vote. I also got my high school diploma by going to school at night.

I returned to Selma in 1962 to take care of my elderly mother and joined the voting rights movement. "In October 1963, Ms. Elnora Collins and I were fired from our jobs at the Dunn Rest Home after our employer saw us standing in line at the courthouse on Freedom Day, trying to register. All of the other black ladies that worked for Mr. Dunn walked off the job in protest."

In January 1965, I was just standing in front of the courthouse in Selma when Sheriff Jim Clark's deputies told a man who was with us to move. When he didn't, they tried to kick him. Clark also used a billy club to push me out of the way. With one devastating punch, I knocked the sheriff down, only to have his deputies wrestle me to the ground and the angry sheriff pound me repeatedly in the head with a club. I was handcuffed, charged with assault and attempted murder, and taken to the county jail. The charge eventually was dropped. Soon afterwards I successfully registered to vote in Alabama. [[Montgomery Advertiser](#), *Selma Times-Journal*, *Protest at Selma*]

Sheriff Jim Clark (September 17, 1922 - June 4, 2007)

I was born in Elba, Alabama, about a hundred miles southeast of Selma in the Wiregrass region of the state. I served in the Army Air Force during WWII. In 1955, Jim Folsom, the governor of Alabama and my boyhood friend, appointed me sheriff of Dallas County. The high-fallutin' white people in Selma didn't like that much. Folks in the Black Belt thought they were better and more sophisticated than the poorer whites who came from my area of the state. But the rural folks of Dallas County liked me well enough and helped me win reelection in 1958. It was my job to keep the peace. My deputies and I made sure that the blacks and labor agitators didn't step out of line. I created a posse of reliable white citizens to help me maintain order with billy clubs and shotguns.

When those sit-ins started happening up in Greensboro, I deputized the posse. I had 300 members divided into a mounted posse and the rest of them on foot. We were ready when civil rights agitators invaded Selma. They wanted to disturb our way of life, trying to register to vote and bringing "black supremacy." I did everything in my power to stop them. Once my posse and I marched a hoard of young agitators out of town at a running pace, shocking them with cattle prods when they slowed down. They claimed to be non-violent, but one of those women, Annie Lee Cooper, ripped my nightstick out of my hand and beat me with it. When hundreds of agitators tried to march to Montgomery one Sunday, my posse was ready. We shot tear gas in the air and beat them back across the bridge where they belonged. Mayor Smitherman and the highbrow people of Selma didn't stand by me, but they knew that I was protecting the interests of the good white folks of Dallas County. They still abandoned me in the next election, the one when the blacks started voting. That was the end of my days as Sheriff. [[Encyclopedia of Alabama](#)]

John Doar (December 3, 1921 - November 11, 2014)

As a Republican lawyer from rural Wisconsin, I became the U.S. Assistant Attorney General and led the federal effort to protect civil rights in the South in the 1960s. I knew that "countless black citizens in the South couldn't vote. They were second-class citizens from cradle to grave. The discrimination was terrible, brutal." Although I was always committed to equal rights, when I began my southern fieldwork I had a devastating lesson in how far white racists would go to keep blacks from voting and how important it was to have federal protection. I had traveled to McComb, Miss. and asked who was being threatened. I was given the name of Herbert Lee, a farmer with nine children who was driving SNCC activist Bob Moses to people's homes to encourage them to vote. I wasn't able to meet with Mr. Lee before I left town. By the time I got back to my office in D.C., there was a message waiting on my desk saying that Lee had been murdered. After that, I swore to myself that I would do all I could.

I pushed to enforce the constitutional ban on racial discrimination in voter registration, filing lawsuits in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. Unfortunately, little progress was made in black voting because local officials and some federal judges appointed by President Kennedy delayed or blocked the legal efforts we made. In 1962, I escorted James Meredith when he registered as the University of Mississippi's first black student. I was in and out of Selma beginning in 1961. While those of us in the federal government like to take credit for voting rights, I must admit that "the Selma and voting rights success was built on the preceding but more obscure work of SNCC and the dirt farmers in Greenwood, Mississippi, which first prompted the department's development of a comprehensive new approach to voting rights protection, that became the template for the department's interventions in Selma." [[Berkeley Law News Archive](#), NYT obituary]

Bettie Mae Fikes

“I am from Selma, Alabama and I got involved in the Movement there. As a high school student at R.B. Hudson high. I didn't have a clue what was going on around me in the adult world. I could only deal with what I was seeing from my own eyes, and I knew, I could tell there was something wrong, I just didn't know what. This fellow here, Mr. Bonner, and my other dear friend Cle, was telling us about SNCC. And they got all of their friends that they knew involved. I was one of the friends they got involved. When it hit, it was like something that, — you went to bed, like tonight, and you woke up the next day with a new world order. All of a sudden these people are coming to town and they're talking about voters' rights. I didn't even know that was happening, — that our parents didn't have the right to vote. There were a few black people that were registered, mostly in Selma. Lowndes County and all these [surrounding] counties were unregistered. So these are the things that brought me into the Movement.” I had teachers in high school that were very supportive. One day we decided to have a walkout. Mr. Anderson said he was going to the window to turn his back, and if anyone was left when he turned around, they would be sure to fail. We marched from Hudson High to tabernacle Baptist Church for the first student meeting. At the tender ages of fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, we were taught how to protect ourselves from the police. We decided we would have sit-ins, marches, and boycotts. [[CRMvet](#), [Hands on the Freedom Plow](#)]

James Forman (October 4, 1928 - January 10, 2005)

I was born in Chicago, Illinois, but spent part of my youth with my grandmother on a farm in Mississippi. After serving in the Korean War, I had a lot of experiences that convinced me of the need to join the Civil Rights Movement. For one, while I was a college student (and a war veteran) I was arrested and badly beaten by the police in Los Angeles in a case of mistaken identity. Then, I saw tremendous injustice to others while working as a reporter, covering the Little Rock desegregation crisis and Tennessee sharecroppers as they were evicted from their homes for registering to vote.

In 1961, I became the executive director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). I was older than most of the other members of SNCC, so I stepped in to help build SNCC's staff, developed our communication and research offices, and brought on staff to run our photo department and printing presses, to increase our contact with SNCC's national support groups, and raise money. I used my administrative and organizing skills to increase the movement's effectiveness nationally. One of our main goals was to organize majority black communities around the right to vote.

I worked with Robert Williams in Monroe, N.C., who believed in self-defense against the white terrorists who opposed the movement there. In 1964, I helped organize Freedom Summer in Mississippi, an ambitious campaign that included freedom schools and black community centers, as well as drives to register African Americans to vote. "I went to Selma in 1963 because working in Selma was part of our original plan to work in the black belt areas of the deep South. Voter registration in the rural black belt counties was very important because of the enormous amount of power that the counties held in the politics in the United States. We were working in Albany, Georgia and we opened up a base in Selma, Alabama.

We were very conscious about what we were doing in Selma, Alabama. We knew that when we went to the federal courthouse, with signs saying register to vote, the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] wouldn't protect us. This was further ammunition for a lawsuit to make sure that people got their rights because the federal law said that anybody who was registering to vote, or somebody who was assisting someone to register to vote, had to have the protection of the federal government. We were trying to get the government to enforce that federal law." A march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights seemed pointless to most of us in SNCC. On many occasions, while trying to organize protests in Selma and elsewhere, I was myself harassed, jailed and beaten by law enforcement officials or racial terrorists, all of which turned me into "a full-fledged revolutionary." I was increasingly impatient with the pace of change and with the strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC. [[Washington University Digital Gateway](#), [Washingtonpost.com](#), The Making of Black Revolutionaries]

Marie Foster (October 24, 1917 - September 6, 2003)

I was born in Wilcox County, Alabama, just across the Dallas County line. My husband died young, leaving me to raise our three children on the low-paying jobs I could scrape together. Once my children were grown, I went back to school to become a dental hygienist. When I looked around Selma, I was mad about how black people couldn't vote and how we were treated so badly. I wanted to be a first class citizen, so I decided to try and register to vote. It took me eight whole years before they sent me the postcard saying I was registered. In 1963, I started teaching literacy and citizenship classes with the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) to help other people learn how to pass the voting test and become registered. I used the voter registration tests from the courthouse as study guides. I only had one student in my first class, a 70-year-old man whom I taught to write his own name. But I soon had four and then ten and then fourteen people showing up.

When Bernard Lafayette and SNCC came to town, the DCVL already had a movement brewing. Because I worked for my brother who was a dentist, the white people who didn't like our work couldn't fire me, like they did some of the others. I was part of what they called "the Courageous Eight" in the DCVL who invited Dr. King to come to Selma. We knew we needed something bigger if we were ever going to change life for blacks in Dallas County. When that awful day came on Bloody Sunday, a state trooper clubbed me until my knees were swollen, and I could barely walk. But I was back on the front lines when we walked to Montgomery two weeks later, wearing the bright orange vest they gave to the three hundred people who were permitted to march the entire way. I stayed active in the movement for the rest of my days, and I eventually became a deputy registrar so I could keep registering people to vote. [Biography.jrank.org]

Prathia Hall (1940 - August 12, 2002)

When the student movement began on February 1, 1960, there was never a question in my mind that I would become involved at the deepest level possible. My father, a Baptist minister, was a passionate advocate of racial justice, teaching me to integrate "the religious" and "the political." This "Freedom Faith" means that "God intends us to be free . . . and empowers us in the struggle for freedom." I was baptized into the civil rights movement while I was a student at Temple University, and was arrested in Annapolis, Maryland, for participating in a protest against segregation, which resulted in my being put in jail for two weeks. After college, I joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) working in Southwest Georgia, where I was shot by white terrorists. I became involved in the Albany Movement, becoming known for my oratorical power, speaking at movement meetings and preaching as well. Dr. King once said, "Prathia Hall is one of the platform speakers I would prefer not to follow."

In early winter 1963, SNCC field secretary Bernard Lafayette was beaten and jailed in Selma, where he and his wife, Colia, had been working alone with high school students in the projects. So Forman came to me and said, "Come on Prathia, we need you in Selma," and so I did. The members of the Dallas County Voters League had been working there for ages. "The 1965 Selma Movement could never have happened if SNCC hadn't been there opening up Selma in 1962 and 1963. The later nationally known movement was the product of more than two years of very careful, very slow work in what was an extremely dangerous state. In Selma, the police used cattle prods on the children's torn feet and stuck the prods into the groins of the boys. In Alabama, there was a sadistic kind of joy in inflicting pain that I had never seen in Georgia." [Hands on the Freedom Plow, PBS.org, ethicsdaily.com]

Jimmie Lee Jackson (December 16, 1938 - February 26, 1965)

I was born in Marion, Alabama, a small town near Selma. After serving in the Vietnam War, I returned to my hometown and became my Baptist church's youngest deacon. In 1962, I saw my 80-year-old grandfather (Cager Lee) prevented from registering to vote, which made me angry enough to join the civil rights movement. Throughout late 1963 and 1964, local black activists in Selma and Marion campaigned for their right to vote. By the time Dr. King and the SCLC arrived in Selma in January 1965 to support the campaign, I was 26-years-old, and had already attempted to register to vote several times, in part to make a better world for my young daughter.

I attended a large rally at Marion's Zion United Methodist Church, where the Rev. C.T. Vivian spoke. Afterwards, I joined a nighttime march to protest voter discrimination and the arrest of SCLC activist James Orange. We had walked only a few steps when the police chief and state troopers carrying long black nightsticks ordered us to disperse. Suddenly, the streetlights went dark, and the troopers clubbed any photographer and marcher they could find, including my frail grandfather and my mother. The minister who led the march was on his knees praying, when he was beaten. Other terrified demonstrators ran back to the church, nearby houses, and businesses for safety. In the melee, my family and I sought refuge in Mack's Café, but troopers continued beating us inside.

I tried to defend my mother, only to be struck in the face and shot twice in the stomach at point-blank range. After I was shot, I staggered out into the square, where the police continued to beat me. I died a week later, the first of three to die in the Selma campaign. Dr. King presided over my funeral and said that I had been "murdered by the brutality of every sheriff who practices lawlessness in the name of law." In 2010, the trooper who killed me was finally sent to jail for a few months. [[Stanford](#), Southern Poverty Law Center, Encyclopedia Alabama]

Richie Jean Jackson (August 30, 1932 - November 10, 2013)

I was born in Mobile, Alabama. My father worked on the railroad, one of the best jobs a black man could get during those days. My parents sent me away for my education, first to Selma and then to Washington D.C., because the local black schools met in split session, so the children could pick cotton. I went on to earn my teaching degree from Alabama State University and I married Sullivan Jackson, who was a dentist in Selma.

My husband tried twice to register to vote and even testified before the Civil Rights Commission. He believed that his service to the country during WWII more than qualified him to be a first-class citizen. "After his testimony, I lost my job as an office administrator at the Selma Housing Authority. The white power elite began to look for a way to get back at Sully for testifying so they looked to me." But I kept busy at our "house by the side of the road. During the early years of our marriage, it was a sad fact that motels and hotels were not ready to accept blacks, especially in small southern towns such as Selma." So our door was always open for family and friends, and I kept homemade biscuits and a clean bed ready. Coretta Scott and Juanita Jones were my childhood friends, and well before 1965, their husbands, Martin King and Ralph Abernathy, would come to stay when they were in town for a Baptist convention. When the Dallas County Voters League invited Dr. King to help in the struggle for voting rights in Selma, most of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference moved into our home! "During the Selma movement, the walls of our house would be pulsating as people came and went, talking, laughing, and planning, and the telephone constantly ringing." People threatened us for our involvement. They said they'd bomb our house or kill my husband. But that didn't stop us from giving what we could to the struggle for voting rights. [[The House By the Side of the Road](#)]

Coretta Scott King (April 27, 1927 - January 30, 2006)

I was born and raised in Marion, Alabama. I graduated as valedictorian from Lincoln High School, and then went on to receive a B.A. in music and education from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. While studying concert singing at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music, where I earned a degree in voice and violin, I met Martin Luther King, Jr. who was then studying at Boston University. We were married in 1953 and in 1954 we took up residence in Montgomery, Alabama. I balanced mothering and movement work such as speaking before church, civic, college, fraternal and peace groups. I also conceived and performed a series of favorably-reviewed Freedom Concerts which combined prose and poetry narration with musical selections. These concerts functioned as significant fundraisers for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the direct action organization of which Dr. King served as first president. [[The King Center](#)]

Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15, 1929 - April 4, 1968)

I was born in Atlanta, GA as Michael King. After a trip to Germany, my father changed his name and mine to Martin Luther King in honor of the German reformer Martin Luther. I attended Morehouse College and then moved to Montgomery to lead my own church. In 1955, I was asked to assist in the Montgomery bus boycott. Through the boycott I became a national figure. In 1957, I was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization designed to provide new leadership for the now burgeoning civil rights movement. As the years went on, I experienced threats and violence aimed at me and my family. I was stabbed, arrested numerous times, and my house was bombed all because I was attempting to bring equal rights and opportunities to African-Americans. By 1965, there was a movement to pressure the government to pass legislation to protect our constitutional right to vote. I had been to Selma before and returned in 1965 with other members of SCLC at the request of the black leaders in the community. They knew that the media followed me, so my presence would bring national attention to their efforts.

Bernard Lafayette (July 29, 1940 -)

I was born in Tampa, Florida and moved to Nashville in 1958 to attend American Baptist Theological Seminary. As a freshman, I attended weekly meetings arranged by James Lawson, a representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation who had contacted Martin Luther King during the Montgomery bus boycott. Throughout 1958 and 1959, in partnership with Nashville's SCLC affiliate, Lawson taught Gandhian nonviolence techniques to me and my fellow Nashville students, including John Lewis, James Bevel, and Diane Nash. I also attended a retreat on nonviolence at the Highlander Folk School. I participated in the 1960 lunch-counter sit-ins, co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and joined the Freedom Ride, barely escaping the Ku Klux Klan before ending up in a notorious prison for several weeks.

In 1962 I became the director of SNCC's Alabama Voter Registration Project. The following February, my wife, Colia, and I began running voter registration clinics in Selma, Alabama. On June 12, 1963, the night NAACP leader Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi, whites viciously attacked me outside my apartment in Selma in what appeared to be a coordinated effort to suppress black activism. In 1965, several SCLC activists, including Dr. King, James Orange, Diane Nash, and I, decided that Selma should be the focal point to gain voting rights for African Americans, and we organized several public demonstrations to apply enough pressure on President Lyndon Johnson and the federal government to enact legislation for voting rights. Selma had a violent sheriff named Jim Clark who would likely lose his temper in public once blacks made a concerted effort to secure the vote. If the sheriff's violence against black citizens trying to register to vote could be photographed, public sympathy might well support the civil rights movement, as it had in Birmingham, Alabama. I later became a top official in SCLC and national coordinator for the Poor People's Campaign led by Dr. King in 1968. [[Stanford](#), Digital Library of Georgia, The Children]

Colia Lafayette (1940-)

I was born in rural Hinds county in Mississippi and spent most of my early years living in Jackson, Mississippi. Between 1959 and 1970, I spent pretty much all of my time working on civil rights and human rights causes. Major work was concentrated on the removal of those seemingly ancient symbols of subordination that marked the southern part of the United States and the struggle for the simple right to vote. My career started with the NAACP at Tougaloo College and I moved rapidly to become a special assistant to Medgar W. Evers, field secretary for the NAACP. I am the founder and first president of the North Jackson NAACP Youth Council which is now infamous for initiating the 1963 mass movement in Jackson under the leadership and guidance of Medgar Evers and our advisor, John Salter. In November, 1962, I met and married my first love, Bernard Lafayette Jr., SNCC field secretary. In February, 1963, Bernard and I moved to Selma, Alabama, where he served as director of the SNCC Black Belt Alabama Voter Project and I continued as SNCC field secretary. The project was headquartered at Selma but we had responsibility for developing voter registration and direct action projects in the seven Black Belt Counties. During this time I helped to organize local high school students. While at Selma, I was appointed by James Forman, executive secretary of SNCC, to assist with the Birmingham, Alabama Movement under the leadership of Dr. Martin L. King Jr. It was in Birmingham that I took one of the worst beatings during the civil rights struggle. Three firehouses assaulted me for what seemed forever on May 8, 1963. [[Teaching for Change](#), [CRMvet](#), [Civil Rights Teaching](#)]

John Lewis (February 21, 1940 -)

I grew up in Pike County, Alabama. While I was a student at Fisk University, I became involved in the Nashville sit-ins. I also participated in the Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer before arriving to Selma on October 7, 1963. This date, known as Freedom Day, “I believe it was a turning point in the civil rights movement. We had witnessed at the March on Washington, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) call for one man, one vote.” We went to Selma to test that idea. “We had witnessed the bombing of a church in Birmingham a few weeks earlier where four little girls were all killed, and we had made a commitment; we felt we had an obligation, a mandate really, to go to Selma, where only about 2.1 percent of the black people of voting age were registered to vote.” On Freedom Day, “hundreds of blacks lined up and stood at the county courthouse for most of the day, and at the end of the day only about five people had made it in to take the so called literacy tests. I can never forget that day. We met hostile law enforcement officials. Sheriff Jim Clark and others stood there and later some of us were arrested.” Elderly black men and women stood in line all day. “As several people from the outside observed, it was a turning point in the right to vote.”

The local black leadership invited the SCLC to Selma. Later, when there was a call for a march to Montgomery, the SNCC executive committee met all night and debated whether we should participate. “Some people said that SCLC would have this march and then they would leave town, and the people would be left holding the bag. I took the position that we should be there.” “It was decided that if I wanted to go, I could go as an individual but not as a representative of SNCC.” During the march, I was beaten so badly that my skull was fractured. [[Voices of Freedom](#)]

Viola Liuzzo (April 11, 1925 - March 25, 1965)

I attended segregated schools in rural Tennessee and Georgia. In the South, I learned that “Hate hurts the hater, not the hated. It eats you up and makes you so unhappy.” By the mid-1960s, I was a 39-year-old homemaker in Detroit, Michigan with five children. I was also a medical technician and a part-time student. I joined the NAACP at a time when few whites did.

I was inspired by the Mississippi Freedom Summer project to register black voters. In March 1965, I participated in marches in Detroit to demonstrate solidarity with voting rights activists in Selma, Alabama. After Bloody Sunday, Dr. Martin Luther King called for Americans from all over the country to come to Selma, a call that I and thousands of others accepted. I told my husband that the struggle was “everybody’s fight,” and laughed off my daughter’s fears for my life. My assignment was to drive weary marchers between Selma and Montgomery. On March 25, four Klansmen, including an FBI informant named Gary Thomas Rowe, were plotting to kill Dr. King. They spotted my Michigan license plates and ambushed me after a high-speed chase. They fatally shot me in the head about twenty miles outside Selma. My passenger, 19-year-old Leroy Moton, survived by pretending to be dead. Adding insult to injury, the FBI launched an outrageous slander campaign against me. Eventually John Doar, an assistant attorney general for civil rights, won convictions of the KKK members accused of my murder. It was the first time a Southern jury had found whites guilty of a federal crime against civil rights workers. My death, along with those of Jimmie Lee Jackson and James Reeb, greatly increased pressure on the federal government to approve legislation to protect black voting rights and to make the murder of civil rights activists a federal crime. [[Encyclopedia of Alabama](#)]

Diane Nash (May 15, 1938 -)

I was born and raised in a middle-class Catholic family in Chicago, Illinois. When I attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, I suddenly came face to face with racial segregation in the Jim Crow South. Determined to end such racism, I participated in the nonviolent protest workshops led by James Lawson, an apostle of Gandhi. In February, 1960, I joined the sit-in movement, and before long, Nashville became the first southern city to desegregate its lunch counters. Weeks later, I helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the spring, 1961, I sent additional volunteers to rescue the stalled Freedom Ride, which was intended to ensure desegregated interstate travel. When the Justice Department asked me to postpone the Ride after the Ku Klux Klan assaulted the riders, I flatly refused, because “we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence.” Later that year, I left college in order to become a full-time organizer and strategist for Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). I also married fellow Nashville activist James Bevel, and we moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where I was sent to jail for teaching nonviolent tactics to children. The Birmingham church bombing of 1963, in which the Klan killed four black girls, shook me and my husband to our core, and we decided to avenge their deaths by forever changing Alabama’s repressive political system. We called for a statewide campaign of protests, voter education, voter registration drives, and mock elections, starting with Selma and its violent sheriff, Jim Clark. We finally convinced Dr. King to join us there, where I took charge of voter canvassing. Later on, I returned to Chicago, opposed the Vietnam War, taught in the public schools and continued to advocate social change for a variety of powerless groups. [[Stanford](#), [Stanford](#), PBS.org, [commercialappeal.com](#), [blackpast.org](#), *The Children*, [colorlines.com](#)]

James Orange (October 29, 1942 - February 16, 2008)

I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. After attending a church meeting in 1962, led by the Revs. Ralph David Abernathy and James Bevel, I joined the civil rights movement. Soon after, I became a project coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), working closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to bring young people into the movement. Although I weighed 300 lbs. and was called a “gentle giant,” my passion for justice through nonviolent means was fierce. In early 1965, I was organizing a voter registration drive in southwest Alabama, when I was arrested on charges of disorderly conduct and contributing to the delinquency of minors. These charges were intended to prevent me from organizing young people to join the movement. “Rumors had gotten out that I was supposed to be lynched in jail.”

On the night of February 18, 1965, protesters had hardly left a church when we were blanketed with tear gas and brutally beaten. One young protester, Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was trying to protect his mother and grandfather from being beaten, was shot by a state trooper and died eight days later. That sparked a movement to avenge Jackson’s death and to dramatize the obstacles against black voting rights both at the same time. The original plan was to carry Jackson’s body all the way to Montgomery and lay it on the steps of the State Capitol, so that Gov. George Wallace could see what type of racists still existed in the state of Alabama. That became the reason for the march from Selma to Montgomery, which ultimately brought about the 1965 Voting Rights bill. “Jimmie’s death is the reason that Bloody Sunday took place. Had he not died, there would never have been a Bloody Sunday.” After Selma, I became an ordained Baptist minister and later worked as a union organizer for the AFL-CIO. All told, I was arrested more than a hundred times for protesting injustice of one kind or another.

Fred Shuttlesworth (March 18, 1922 - October 5, 2011)

I was born in Mount Meigs, Alabama to an extended family that eventually moved to Birmingham when I was a toddler. After graduating as valedictorian from my high school, I worked assorted jobs before finding my calling to the pulpit. I became pastor of Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church in 1953. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, I was further inspired to actively participate in the growing Civil Rights Movement. I called for the hiring of African-American police officers, and with the outlawing of the NAACP in my home state, I established the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights in 1956. I also co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with other leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr.

I convinced Dr. King to have Birmingham become a focal point of the movement and organized well-documented youth-driven marches and protests, in which I was badly hurt at one point in 1963. In the spring of 1963, I organized the Children's March, two tumultuous weeks of daily demonstrations by black children, students, clergymen and others against a rigidly segregated society. I also helped organize the historic marches from Selma to Montgomery. Those events led to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The laws were the bedrock of civil rights legislation. [[New York Times](#)]

Mayor Joseph Smitherman (December 23, 1929 – September 11, 2005)

My father died when I was very young, leaving my mother to take care of me and my five older siblings. Everyone in East Selma was dirt poor. The shotgun shack we lived in looked as bad as the houses of our black neighbors, and my family lived off of cheese we got from the government. After high school, I joined the Army and served in the Korean War. When I got home Walter Stoudenmire, the owner of Selma Appliance Company, gave me a break and hired me to sell Frigidaires. Then in 1960, I took over Walter's seat on the city council. I made my reputation challenging Mayor Chris Heinz on most everything he did. Heinz came from the right side of the tracks. He and his rich friends lived in big houses and were members of the Selma Country Club, which didn't let the poor people in just like it didn't let the Blacks in. Of course, I was for segregation, just like every right-thinking white person in Alabama was. But times were changing, and the northern companies we wanted to bring to Selma weren't inclined to do so if police were cracking the Blacks on the heads. Well, I gave the Mayor a run for his money and won his seat in 1964 by promising I was for progress and paved streets for all Selmians. I didn't see much reason for the Blacks to have a vote because I was looking out for their best interests. Before I could make good on my promises, though, Martin Luther King and his civil rights agitators came to town and ruined everything. I tried to keep the peace in the city, but it was hot-tempered Sheriff Jim Clark who controlled the courthouse. Every time he shocked one of those agitators with his cattle prod, it put Selma in the national news in a bad way. When Blacks eventually won the vote, I wanted to keep my position as mayor. I started paving the streets in Black neighborhoods and working with the Black leaders that could be reasoned with. I found that if I gave them some of what they wanted, I could still keep white people in control of Selma. [[New York Times](#), [Eyes on the Prize Interview](#)]

CT Vivian (July 30, 1924 -)

I grew up in Macomb, Illinois and participated in a successful lunch counter sit-in in 1947. I then served as pastor of the First Community Church in Nashville from 1956 to 1961. While organizing in Nashville, I became acquainted with James Lawson. Together with Kelly Miller Smith, we founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference. In early 1960 I joined Diane Nash, James Bevel, John Lewis, and other students from local universities to stage sit-ins and other nonviolent protests throughout the city. In 1961 I was among the Nashville activists who replaced injured freedom riders in Montgomery, Alabama. At the conclusion of the Freedom Rides in Jackson, Mississippi, I was arrested and sent him to Parchman Prison, where I was brutally beaten by guards.

In 1963 King invited me to join the executive staff of SCLC as the Director of Affiliates which meant I would coordinate the activities of local civil rights groups nationwide. In February 1965, I was struck by Sheriff Jim Clark while leading a group attempting to register to vote at the Selma courthouse. [\[Stanford\]](#)

Sheyann Webb (February 17, 1956 -)

I grew up in a family of eight children in Selma. When I was only 8 years old, a chance encounter changed the path of my life. I was passing by the Brown Chapel AME Church on my way to school when I saw a crowd of black and white people standing together, an unusual circumstance in 1960s Alabama. I followed the group into the church, and ended up attending a meeting for the Civil Rights Movement. I returned to the church later to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak. King's words motivated me to join the Civil Rights Movement. It was a commitment that was solidified, when on another occasion, I met King when he arrived at the church for a meeting. He allowed me to stay for the meeting; afterward, he asked if I was going to march. I told him that I intended on marching for my freedom. I grew increasingly dedicated to the fight for civil rights, going so far as to skip school in order to attend meetings for the movement. After a young African American, Jimmie Lee Jackson, was killed by police following a peaceful demonstration, a march from Selma to Montgomery was organized to protest his death, and to demand equal voting rights for African Americans. Despite my parents' worries, I decided to join the march on March 7, 1965. I was the youngest person there. [\[biography.com\]](#)

Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (May 19, 1925 - February 21, 1965)

I saw the newly created Organization of African American Unity (OAAU) as a potential source of ideological guidance for the more militant veterans of the southern civil rights movement. At the same time, I looked to the southern struggle for inspiration in my effort to revitalize the Black Nationalist movement. Therefore, my primary concern in 1964 and 1965 was to establish ties with the young black activists I saw as more militant than King. I knew a number of workers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In fact, I met SNCC chairperson, John Lewis, when we happened to meet in the airport during a trip to Africa, and with the strong Mississippi leader Fannie Lou Hamer, when we both spoke at an event in Harlem. In January 1965, I revealed in an interview that the OAAU would support fully and without compromise any action by any group that is designed to get meaningful immediate results.

I urged civil rights groups to unite, telling a gathering at a symposium sponsored by the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) (CORE), “We want freedom now, but we're not going to get it saying 'We Shall Overcome.' We've got to fight to overcome.” In early 1965, I was invited by a SNCC campus chapter to speak at Tuskegee College, the historically black college in Alabama. SNCC workers from Selma attended my speech and asked me to accompany them to Selma to speak there. At the time King was in jail Selma, Alabama, but I had a private meeting with Coretta Scott King. I assured her, “Mrs. King, will you tell Dr. King that I’m sorry I won’t get to see him?” I added, “If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King.”

I received a rousing response to my speech from the primarily young audience that day. Shortly after my visit to Selma, a federal judge, responded to a suit brought by the Department of Justice, requiring Dallas County registrars to process at least 100 applications from African Americans each day their offices were open." [[Stanford](#), [SF Bayview](#), [Voices of Freedom](#)]

Interview sheet

My name (in role) is: _____

*Find a **different person** for each description below. Write his or her name and the response to the question. Remember: Take your time. This is not a speed contest; have thoughtful conversations with as many persons as you can. You may not have time to answer all the questions and they do not need to be answered in order.*

1. **Find a person who was active in or opposed the Selma Movement before 1965.**

Name: _____

When did that person start his or her activity and what did they do?

2. **Find a person who was a victim of or responsible for physical violence.**

Name: _____

What happened or what was their role?

3. **Find a person who attempted to register to vote or assisted others in the process.**

Name: _____

What happened? Why did the person risk so much for the right for themselves or others to vote?

4. **Find a person who has spent time in jail for their actions or beliefs.**

Name: _____

What happened? Why was the person willing to go to jail for the right to vote?

5. **Find a person who was in the Civil Rights Movement before they came to Selma.**

Name: _____

What did they do?

6. **Find a person who was under 25 when they were active in the Movement in Selma.**

Name: _____

What motivated them to join the movement?

7. **Find a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and/or Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC):**

Name: _____

What can that person tell you about the organization based on their involvement?