

Activists for Social Change

Students can learn a lot by studying the lives of people who have worked for social justice. Their lives can teach how to face challenges, where to gather strength to face adversity, how to relate to other people, and how to deal with defeat. Researching the life of a famous person is an assignment frequently given to youth during the heritage months. Whatever the occasion, following are some recommendations for helping students to get the most from this assignment. On the next pages are some suggestions of people and organizations for student research.

Suggested Guidelines

- 1. Enlarge and diversify the list of people you suggest for student research.** Too often students are asked to research the same names year after year—Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harriet Tubman during Black History Month, Cesar Chavez and Roberto Clemente for Hispanic Heritage and the suffragists during Women’s History Month. Rather than challenging stereotypes, this repetition can lead students to believe that there were only a few great Blacks, Hispanics and women in U.S. history. Accompanying this lesson is a list of many more activists for social change. Encourage students to refer to this list for any project you assign on people who have made a difference. We have tried to limit the list to people about whom we know students could find at least one book. Add names of people who may not be nationally known but who are familiar as local leaders.
- 2. Personalize the assignment.** Ask students to write the report in first person, as if they were the person under study writing an autobiography. This can help the students get into the other person’s shoes and can motivate them to learn more. The quality of the student’s writing is also likely to improve. Their essay will be an engaging story rather than the all-too-frequent lifeless reports. The student could

also use his/her imagination to write about how the activist felt about certain experiences.

- 3. Encourage the use of varied and primary sources.** Reward students with extra points for all non-encyclopedia type references. Suggest to students that they look for autobiographies and biographies, writings by the person they have selected, information from any organizations they were affiliated with, newspaper articles, interviews with people who knew the person, etc. In the case of primary sources, challenge students to use ones that are less commonly known. For example, in the case of Martin Luther King Jr., everyone is already familiar with his speech “I Have A Dream.” Powerful as it is, it is only one of hundreds of moving and powerful essays he authored on domestic and international topics. The student will learn a lot more from Dr. King if he or she broadens their reading. Another example is Helen Keller. Everyone knows her accomplishments with regards to sight and hearing, but more thorough investigation will reveal her extensive work as a political activist.
- 4. Examine how the person changes over time.** This will help students to realize that learning and growing are lifelong processes. Most people they would choose to study developed their analysis and methods over time. Ask students to document some of those changes.
- 5. How could the person’s work have been strengthened?** Ask students what they would recommend to the person they are studying that would (or could have) increased the effectiveness of their work. Ask them to pay particular attention to the “matrix of oppression.” Point out to students that in many cases the person they are studying may have been very strong in one aspect of their work, but ignored other forms of oppression. For example, if the person worked on labor issues—did they address racial and/or gender discrimination in the union?



Rigoberta Menchu, Nobel Prize winner. Defender of the land and cultural rights of the indigenous people of Guatemala.

If they addressed the rights of a racial group, did they address class and gender discrimination within that group?

- 6. Highlight community activists.** Encourage students to research and present the lives of people who might not be well-known, but who are active in their community or region. Local individuals may be receptive to a request for an interview from a student. Students can get ideas about who would be a good candidate for such a request from reading newspaper articles or newsletters from local chapters of activist groups, focusing on issues such as housing, women’s rights, education, labor, etc. The same sources can be good background reading for students to use to prepare their interview questions.
- 7. Highlight the organizations and institutions involved in social change.** Ask the students to include in their report/essay information about the organizations with which the person worked and the forces which influenced them. Many mainstream books and poster series give students the false impres-

sion that people do great things all by themselves. Rather than inspiring the students, this can leave them feeling powerless. “I could never accomplish that by myself,” students say to themselves. Well, neither did the famous person. There is barely an accomplishment in science, sports, social change movements or other fields which does not reflect group effort and/or the strong influences of family or religion. In *Rethinking Schools*, Herbert Kohl describes how Rosa Parks has been traditionally and erroneously portrayed as an old lady who one day was just too tired to go to the back of the bus. Although she was indeed always tired at the end of a long day’s work, her decision was influenced by her associations with others active in the Civil Rights movement, including discussions at the Highlander Center with other activists about strategies for confronting Jim Crow. If we want students to learn from the lives of famous people, then one of the lessons to be learned is how one works with others—through organizations, family or other groups—for change.

Another option would be to ask students to study the life of an organization. They could then make reference to various key individuals, but the focus would be on the organization itself—why and how it got started, goals, methods, successes and failures, alliances, conflicts, etc. There is not room to list all of the individual organizations here. But within each of the categories listed below, there is a history of the movement and many organizations still working on the issues today.

- Women’s rights
- Civil rights
- Anti-war
- Gay rights
- Native American rights and sovereignty
- Immigrant rights
- Labor unions
- Liberation movements
- Environmental protection
- Health issues (AIDS, infant mortality, health of people of color)
- Prison reform/prisoner’s rights
- Rights of the physically disabled
- Housing rights
- Anti-police abuse/criminal justice reform ❁

Activists for Social Change

These are just a few suggestions of people and current organizations that students could research. It is an alternative to the traditional lists of sports stars, musicians, actors and mainstream politicians, but it is by no means complete. Each name is followed by a few descriptive words, noting the area in which she or he were active. We tried to limit our selection to people about whom students would be able to find some published information.

Mumia Abu-Jamal
Journalist, Black Panther, political prisoner

Rudy Acuna
Chicano rights activist, professor



Jane Addams ↑
Developed community social services and training for people in poverty

Pedro Albizu Campos
Puerto Rican independence advocate

Saul Alinsky
Community organizer

Maya Angelou
Author, activist

Susan B. Anthony
↓ Abolitionist, suffragist



Jean-Bertrand Aristide
Haitian leader in movement for justice, former President

Joan Baez
Folk singer, activist

Ella Baker
Civil rights activist

James Baldwin →
Novelist, essayist, lecturer, civil and gay rights advocate

Dennis Banks
Founded American Indian Movement (AIM)

Benjamin Banneker
Mathematician

Daniel and Phillip Berrigan
Anti-war activists



Mary McLeod Bethune →
Founder, National Council of Negro Women, educator



Chief Black Hawk
Sauk chief, led people against White settlers in Illinois →



Grace Lee Boggs →
Chinese American active in Civil Rights Movement



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Simon Bolivar ↓
Fought for the liberation of Latin America from Spain



Anne Braden
Southern labor organizer

David Brower
Ecologist, environmentalist, writer

John Brown
Militant abolitionist

Carlos Bulosan
Migrant farmworker, documenter of Filipino-American experience

Omar Cabezas
Nicaraguan Sandinista

Will Campbell
Southern Baptist leader

Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure)
Civil rights activist, SNCC founder

Rachel Carson
Founder, the environmental movement

Fidel Castro ↓
Leader of nationalist, anti-imperialist Cuban revolution, president of Cuba



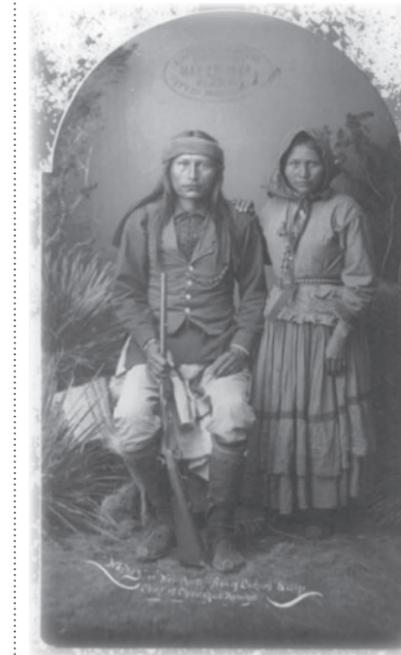
James Earl Chaney
Civil rights activist

Cesar Chavez
Labor leader, founder of the United Farm Workers

Shirley Chisholm →
Politician, first Black woman elected to U.S. Congress

Septima Clark
Adult educator, civil rights activist

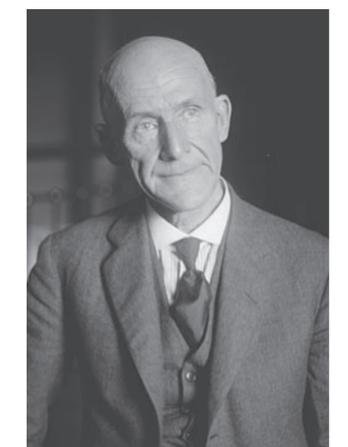
Charles Clements, M.D.
American doctor, volunteered his services during the war in El Salvador



Chief Cochise ↑
Chiricahua Apache leader

Robert Coles
Psychologist, children's activist

Eugene V. Debs ↑
Socialist politician, labor activist



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Morris Dees
Lawyer, anti-Klan activist

Frederick Douglass
Abolitionist, author, statesman



W.E.B. DuBois ↑
Author, teacher, socialist, founder of NAACP

Virginia Foster Durr
Civil rights activist, worked to abolish the poll tax

Marian Wright Edelman
Founder and current president, the Children's Defense Fund

Daniel Ellsberg
Anti-Vietnam war activist, European American

Olaudah Equiano
Abolitionist, writer

Medgar Evers
Civil rights leader

James Farmer →
Civil rights leader, national director, CORE



Elizabeth Gurley Flynn →
Labor organizer, feminist



Marcus Garvey ↑
Advocate, rights of people of African descent in the Americas, founder, Universal Negro Improvement Association



Chief Geronimo →
Chiracahua Apache leader warred against U.S. land encroachment

Nikki D. Giovanni
Author, poet



Emma Goldman →
Labor organizer, internationalist, anarchist, feminist

Andrew Goodman
Civil rights activist



Angelina and Sarah Grimke →
Women's rights and antislavery activists



Che Guevara
Economist, doctor, guerilla, revolutionary

Woody Guthrie ↓
Folk singer, advocate, working people's rights



Jose Angel Gutierrez
Chicano rights activist

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Fannie Lou Hamer ↑
Civil rights activist

Vincent Harding
Historian, author

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
First known African American novelist, abolitionist

Dorothy Height
President of National Council of Negro Women, activist, educator

Abraham Joshua Heschel
Writer, historian of Jewish life, spiritual leader

Joe Hill
Labor activist, song writer

Myles Horton
Educator, labor and civil rights activist, founder, Highlander Center

Dolores Huerta
Labor organizer, cofounder, United Farm Workers

Langston Hughes →
Poet, author

Zora Neale Hurston →
Writer, researcher, Harlem Renaissance



Daniel Inouye
First Japanese American to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives and later the first in the Senate

Jesse Jackson
Organizer, politician, founder, Rainbow Coalition

Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson
NAACP leader

Mae Jemison
First African American astronaut



Mother Jones ↑
Labor organizer, UMW

Barbara Jordan →
Lawyer, professor, political leader



Chief Joseph ↑
Nez Perce (Wallowa) chief and activist for land rights

Benito Juarez
First indigenous person to become president of Mexico

Coretta Scott King
Civil and human rights activist

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Civil rights movement leader, anti-war activist

Maxine Hong Kingston
Author, educator

Yuri Kochiyama
Japanese-American and social activist

Elizabeth Koontz
Educator

Fred Korematsu
Fought the order of internment of Japanese-Americans in WWII all the way to the Supreme Court

Jonathan Kozol
Author, education activist

John L. Lewis
Labor leader, organizer of industrial workers

Ben Linder
Engineer, clown, volunteered in Nicaragua



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Viola Liuzzo
Civil rights activist

Audre Lorde
Poet, activist for rights of women, gays, and people of color

Touissant Louverture
Leader, Haitian revolution

Nelson Mandela
South African freedom fighter, president, South Africa

Wilma Mankiller
Principal chief, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma

Subcomandante Marcos
Militant peasant and indigenous rights activist, Zapatista leader



Thurgood Marshall ↑
First African-American Supreme Court Justice, civil rights advocate

José Martí →
Cuban independence fighter, organizer, theorist, writer

Rigoberta Menchú
Guatemalan activist for indigenous rights, Nobel Peace Prize recipient

Chico Mendes
Advocate, rights of Brazilian rubber tappers and protection of the Amazon rainforest



Kweisi Mfume
Congressman, former president of NAACP

Harvey Milk
Politician, gay rights activist

← **Ho Chi Minh**
Fought for independence of Vietnam from Japan, French and the U.S.

Patsy Mink
Political leader, women's rights activist

Mirabal Sisters →
Four women who fought the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic



Toni Morrison
Author, Nobel Literature Prize winner

Bob Moses
Civil rights activist, founder, Algebra Project

Pauli Murray
Educator, legal and civil rights advocate, feminist



Ralph Nader
Consumer rights advocate

Holly Near
Feminist and anti-war songwriter and singer

Ellison S. Onizuka
Women's rights leader

Gordon Parks
Photographer, poet, activist

Rosa Parks
Civil rights activist

Leonard Peltier
Imprisoned Native American rights activist

A. Phillip Randolph
Organizer of African American workers (Pullman), socialist, civil rights activist

Bernice Johnson Reagon
Political activist, historian, founder, Sweet Honey in the Rock, songwriter

James Reeb
Religious leader (Unitarian Church), Civil Rights worker

Marlon Riggs
Film maker, gay rights advocate



Paul Robeson ↑
Musician, civil rights advocate

Jackie Robinson
Baseball player, civil rights advocate

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Helen Rodriguez-Trias
Doctor, women's health advocate

Buffy Sainte-Marie
Canadian First Nations singer, social activist

Ken Saro-Wiwa
Nigerian environmentalist, author, Ogoni activist

Dalip Singh Saund →
First Asian-American elected to Congress, Indian advocate



Arturo Alfonso Schomburg
Historian

Michael Schwerner
Civil rights activist

Chief Seattle
Advocate for protection of Native Americans and the environment

Pete Seeger
Folk singer, political activist

Chief Sitting Bull
Hunkpapa Sioux chief and medicine man

Gloria Steinem ↓
Women's rights leader



Ron Takaki
Historian, author

Chief Tecumesh
Leader of the Shawnees who formed a confederacy to protect their lands from invasion

Mary Church Terrell
Civil rights activist, writer

Piri Thomas
Writer, documenter of immigrant experience

Henry David Thoreau →
Author, leader of the Transcendental movement, naturalist



← **Harriet Tubman**
Abolitionist, underground railroad leader, women's rights advocate

Nat Turner
Leader of slave revolt

Denmark Vesey
Abolitionist, planned slave rebellion

Alice Walker
Author, feminist, Pulitzer Prize winner

Ida B. Wells
Journalist, antilynching and women's right advocate

Roy Wilkins
Civil rights activist

Sarah Winnemucca
Advocate for Native Americans

William Worthy
Journalist, anti-imperialist

Carter G. Woodson
Historian, educator, founder, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

Malcolm X ✦
Muslim minister and spokesperson, philosopher, organizer



Jim Thorpe ↑
Native American leader, champion athlete

Sojourner Truth →
Abolitionist, itinerant preacher, women's rights advocate



Minoru Yasui
Protested the internment of Japanese-Americans

Mao Zedong
Leader of China's communist revolution

Howard Zinn
Professor, author, historian, civil rights activist

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