

You have to move your feet

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By Barrie Moorman

Last March, I took my students to meet with Georgia Congressman John Lewis before we embarked on a week long journey to civil rights landmarks of the South. The respected veteran of the movement shared his insights and encouraged the students to fight injustice, telling them, “You have to move your feet.”

For all of us, this was a reminder of the importance of taking action when we see something that needs to be changed. Throughout our history, Americans have come together to act in order to help our country realize its founding vision. Protest is one way that we move closer to this vision becoming reality.

Recently I went to see the acclaimed film “Selma” with 100 juniors and seniors, including many of the same students who participated in last year’s civil rights trip. In the movie, we see John Lewis, as the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), literally moving his feet as a

leader of the march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday. Lewis was among those injured that day in 1965.

Before we saw the movie, we engaged in a [role play in class](#) put together by the organization [Teaching for Change](#) to meet many of the different individuals (some featured in the film and some not) who were a part of the movement for voting rights in Selma.

This was a powerful way to preview the different people students would see in the film and understand how they came to Selma, their similarities and differences, and the importance of their contributions in greater detail than the movie can portray.

Through this role play and the film, I was reminded again of the importance of moving one's feet – but also reminded that there are different ways we can do that and still contribute to movements that lead to a more just society.

Often when I talk to students about creating change in the world, the dominant narrative has convinced them that the history of change-making is the result of charismatic, all-powerful leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., who effected change with individual actions.

Instead of empowering students to make a difference in their communities and helping them connect with legacies of resistance, these stories persuade students that their best place is on the sidelines, waiting for the civil rights superhero to come along. This is particularly damaging for students of color living in low-income communities, whose survival depends on being able to navigate and effect change within political, social and economic institutions and advocate on behalf of themselves and others for justice.

I came away from “Selma” with a greater appreciation for the many different ways that citizens can act for change. While we saw Dr. King as a clear leader, he was not the only one. We can appreciate the variety of leadership styles and philosophies that emerge in the different approaches used by the

different individuals – some who are named in the film and some who are not – who descended on Selma to enforce protection of the right to vote for every American, regardless of their race.

Nothing King accomplished in Selma would have been possible without hundreds, even thousands, of other people, who each played critical roles in what was truly a mass movement.

Not every young person dreams of being in front of the crowd.

But “Selma” shows them that they can be the person who registers to vote even when the system is working against them.

They can be the person who makes sandwiches, which will keep marchers fed, or the person who hosts the movement organizers and makes sure they are cared for.

They can be the person who goes out into the street with their mother and grandfather, and whose greatest act of courage may be protecting their family from violence.

They can be the person who reports on what is happening and whose news stories show up on the front pages in different countries and create public pressure for action.

There are many ways we can move our feet and make a difference, and each of us has a part to play as we move our country toward justice.

Barrie Moorman teaches high school history and sociology at [E.L. Haynes Public Charter School](#) in Washington, D.C. She works to help students understand how they can shape history by being engaged in their community. In 2014 Moorman was D.C. History Teacher of the Year as well as a recipient of the Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching.