

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Civil Rights Leader

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. His family was actively involved in the African American Baptist Church. King's grandfather was one of the founders of the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP and was also the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. King's father also later became pastor of Ebenezer Baptist.

Dr. King was a very well-educated man. He attended several colleges and universities, specifically Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University. In 1955, Dr. King obtained his Ph.D. in systematic theology. During this time, he also became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and married Coretta Scott. During the course of his studies, Dr. King became very interested in Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent approach to bring about social change.

The civil rights movement launched King's career as a public figure. When Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus resulted in a bus boycott, black residents appointed Dr. King to lead the brand new Montgomery Improvement Association. The Montgomery bus boycott continued through 1956. Dr. King received national attention for his leadership role in the boycott, especially when the Supreme Court ruled in December 1956 that Alabama's segregation laws were unconstitutional and that Montgomery buses had to be desegregated.

In 1957, Dr. King and other prominent southern black ministers formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In 1959, Dr. King went to India to gain a deeper understanding of Gandhi's nonviolent approach. Later in the year, Dr. King moved back to Atlanta to serve as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church with his father.

In 1960, black college students founded the Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and held numerous sit-ins. Dr. King was supportive of this group and also wanted to begin a youth section of the SCLC. However, while students respected Dr. King, they disapproved of some aspects of his leadership style and wanted to remain an independent organization rather than a branch of the SCLC. In 1961, SNCC organized "Freedom Rides" and was openly critical of Dr. King's choice to abstain from the rides.

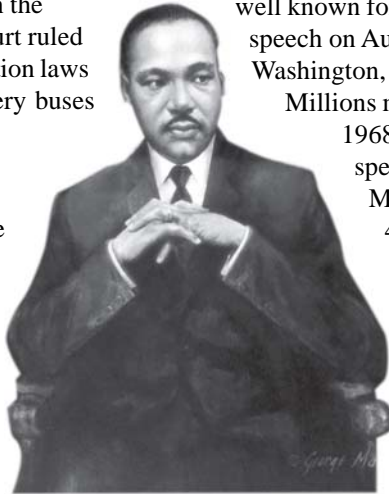
In 1963, racial tensions were high across the country and came to a head in Alabama. Dr. King and the SCLC organized huge protests in Birmingham. The city received worldwide coverage of the violence police used against the unarmed black protesters. Appalled at the violence, President Kennedy urged Congress to pass major civil rights laws. This ultimately resulted in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was a huge victory for the civil rights movement.

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a key piece of civil rights legislation, it did not solve every problem. Therefore, in 1967, Dr. King began a Poor People's Campaign to address economic issues left unsolved by earlier legislation.

Dr. King was a gifted speaker, and he is perhaps most well known for his "I Have a Dream" speech. He gave this speech on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington, which over 250,000 people attended.

Millions more listened on radio and television. In 1968, Dr. King gave what would be his final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," in Memphis, Tennessee. The next day, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated, and the country lost a great civil rights leader.

Dr. King earned numerous awards and recognitions for his civil rights work. Most notably, he was awarded *Time's* 1963 Man of the Year. He also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, becoming only the second African American to achieve this distinction.



Activities

1. Write a letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., today and describe for him the things that have occurred in the United States in terms of civil rights since his assassination in 1968.
2. Create a poster encouraging citizens, both black and white, to participate in the March on Washington in 1963 where Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech.