

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

CLAUDETTE COLVIN

nurse, organizer, activist

"I knew then and I know now, when it comes to justice, there is no easy way to get it."

Page | 1



COURTESY OF ALAMY

Background Information

Born: September 5, 1939

Claudette Colvin was raised in Montgomery, Alabama. She attended the segregated Booker T. Washington High School. During this time, she developed an interest in political activism and the civil rights movement in the South. Her friend and classmate, Jeremiah Reeves was arrested and given the death penalty for allegedly raping a White woman. Reeves' case is now considered a state-approved lynching and an example of the injustice and terrorism that Black people experienced in the South.

Colvin's Resistance

Colvin was a member of the NAACP's Youth Council. In 1955, at the age of 15, she refused to give up her seat on a bus. After school one day, Colvin and her friends were riding the bus in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. The bus was becoming increasingly crowded, and the bus driver asked Colvin and her friends to give up their seats for the White people who were getting on the bus. Her friends complied, but Colvin refused and stayed seated. This was nine months before Rosa Parks did the same.

The police were called, and they aggressively took Colvin off the bus and put her in an adult jail. At first, many members of the movement thought that this would be a case to challenge bus segregation. However, because of her dark skin, lower income background, her young age, and the fact that she got pregnant a few months later, they decided that she would not be a good choice to use as the face of the movement. Today, Colvin agrees that Parks was the much better choice to be the symbol of the movementⁱ.

Achievements

Colvin is extremely humble about her actions, choosing for many years not to talk about what she did when she was 15ⁱⁱ. However, she does not regret her actions, and believes that she made the right decision to stay seated on the bus that day. Her actions were vital in setting the stage for Rosa Parks to do the same thing nine months later and set the civil rights movement into full motion. In Montgomery, March 2 is Claudette Colvin Day, in honor of her actions. There is also a street named after her.

Essential Questions

1. Colvin became interested in activism in high school. If she were in high school today, what issues would she care about?

2. Colvin refused to give up her seat to a White person before Rosa Parks. How do you think she felt about not getting widespread recognition for it?

3. Colvin's bravery was mostly ignored for many decades. Now that you know her story, what are some ways to give Colvin the recognition she deserves?

4. *"I knew then and I know now, when it comes to justice, there is no easy way to get it."*
 - a. Do you think that message applies today? If so, how can people stay motivated?

ⁱ The First "Rosa Parks". (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.core-online.org/History/colvin.htm>.

ⁱⁱ Rumble, T.-D. (2018, March 10). Claudette Colvin: The 15-year-old who came before Rosa Parks. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-43171799>.