



ACHIEVING EQUALITY

Student Profiles of American Changemakers

By the Students of Lowell High School's
Seminar on American Diversity

Edited by Jessica Lander

A C H I E V I N G E Q U A L I T Y

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Lowell, Massachusetts

Foreword

Whose history do we study? Whose stories do we remember? Whose lives do we celebrate?

These are some of the questions my students asked as we set out to research, edit, and write *Achieving Equality*. This year, I have had the privilege of guiding these students in a seminar that explores the history of diversity in America.

My students are deeply qualified to tackle this challenging and meaningful work. They attend Lowell High School in the historic mill city of Lowell, Massachusetts. The city is rich with the stories of immigrants who brought with them hopes and dreams for a more just future. From the Puritans in the mid-1600s, to the Polish in the early 1800s, to the Cambodians in the late 1900s, and to the Syrians who are arriving now, communities from around the world have always found a home in Lowell.

More than one hundred years before the Little Rock Nine integrated Central High in 1957, Lowell High became the very first integrated high school in the United States: open to all from its founding in the 1830s. Today, our school is one of the most diverse in the nation, home to students from more than 60 countries across five continents.

In our class, we have debated the long and often messy history of America's fight for equality, justice, and recognition – a path that is rarely linear. Our understanding has been made richer by the diverse personal identities and histories of the students in our class.

We have looked particularly to the men and women – young and old – who have raised their voices and advocated for greater equality. Working for social change takes many forms: speeches and nonviolent protests, writing and art. Change is created by individuals, communities and organizations. It is solidified through laws and court decisions. All change requires courage, conviction and persistence.

In writing this book together, my students have sought to shed light on a few of the many men and women who have worked to create a more perfect union. Activism has no age limit. The activists profiled here created change at age 6 and at age 86. Our collection is in no way comprehensive: it is just a snapshot of some of the brave people who made America better. Our hope is to shine a spotlight on activists not often encountered in history classes.

Each student shares the story of one activist who worked to achieve equality—capturing some of their life's work and their methods for creating change—through writing and photography. There is much we can learn from the struggles these activists faced, the challenges they overcame, and the successes they achieved. We hope that their lives and their stories will help inspire the next generation of changemakers.

~ Jessica Lander
Lowell High School Teacher

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Mother Jones

Kyslanie

“Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living”

~ Mary Harris Jones



Mary Harris Jones (1837 - 1930), known as Mother Jones, was an Irish-born American school teacher and dressmaker who became a community organizer. She helped coordinate major strikes and co-founded the Industrial Workers of the World, which campaigned for unskilled, low-wage, and migrant workers.

The U.S. federal minimum wage in 2018 is \$7.25 an hour. Minimum wage is the lowest wage an employer is permitted to pay an employee, but for many years, minimum wage has not been a livable wage. You might be asking yourself, “How can minimum wage not be livable?” Well, for many workers it isn’t. There are many families who live in poverty even while working 40, 50, or sometimes even more hours a week, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This should not be happening. This inequity is what Mother Jones fought against.

Mary Harris Jones was born in Cork, Ireland but moved to the US as a kid to escape the Irish potato famine. In her early 20s, Jones moved to Chicago and became a teacher and a dressmaker. In 1876, when she was in her late 30s, she lost her husband and four children to yellow fever, an infection spread by mosquitoes. Jones worked as a dressmaker for the wealthy and constantly saw the struggles of people living in poverty, particularly compared to the wealthy people she worked for. Three years later after losing her husband and children, her dress shop was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Wanting to make change, Jones began working as an organizer for the Knights Of Labor, which was at the time one of the largest and most important labor organizations working for the rights of the working class, fighting for higher wages and better working conditions. She also joined the United Mine Workers Union, which represented coal miners, because she felt like she could help them since they helped her after the lost of her dress shop. She often led strikes (which occur when employees refuse to work because they want higher pay or better working conditions) and encouraged striking workers to stay on strike. By the time she was 60, she was known to many as “Mother Jones.” The name was given to her by the miners and all the other male workers who she helped.

Mother Jones believed that working men deserved a wage that paid them enough to live a comfortable life and take care of their families. She primarily made change by bringing together community organizations to take action. Jones was someone a lot of the workers looked up to because of her courage and willingness to go through a lot of trouble to help them. She was even put in jail a number of times for standing up for miners and working people, trying to help them get higher pay and better working conditions. Jones was once given a 20-year prison sentence. She did not have to serve the sentence because nationwide protests fought for her freedom. Jones continued to support strikes even at the age of 80. In 1921, she traveled to Mexico for the Pan American Federation Of Labor, an international trade union organization for Central and South America.

Today there are 45 million people in the U.S. living in poverty. That is roughly 1 in 7 people. Activists are continuing to build on Mother Jones’s work, fighting to ensure all workers be paid a fair wage. There is now a movement to raise the minimum wage to \$15 dollars an hour, making the minimum wage a livable wage.

Bayard Rustin

Monineath

“Let us be enraged about injustice, but let us not be destroyed by it.”

~ Bayard Rustin



Bayard Rustin (1912 - 1987) was an adviser to Martin Luther King, Jr. and a key organizer of the March on Washington in 1963. More generally he was an important civil rights leader who stood for pacifism and against racial discrimination.

Many great things have happened throughout our history. Certain famous names are known for creating change. Yet in the shadow of those leaders stand many people whose works received no or little recognition often due to discrimination.

While many people have heard of Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, few know about the role Bayard Rustin played mentoring King about racial equality and nonviolent resistance as well as organizing the March on Washington where King gave his speech. Rustin grew up being influenced by his grandmother, who was involved in African-American civil rights causes. In 1937, at the age of 25, he completed an activist training program and moved from Pennsylvania to Harlem where he attended the City College of New York. Rustin became a member of the Young Communist League (which advocated for racial equality). In 1941, he began working with other civil rights activists on the march on Washington, which would end up taking place 22 years later. Rustin was arrested 23 times during his civil rights career including one time in Kentucky when he refused to comply when the bus driver asked him to move to the back of the bus. In addition to his civil rights works, Rustin deeply believed in pacifism. In 1944, he traveled to California to protect Japanese-American internees' property while they were kept in the military camps during World War II. As a pacifist, Rustin refused to be drafted and was imprisoned from 1944 to 1946 for refusing. He was a leader—yet many of us have little to no awareness of his works. Why? Rustin was openly gay at a time when homosexuality was illegal in most states. As a result, Rustin was fired from various official positions and jobs, even those connected to the civil rights movement, and was even arrested for being gay. Despite his incredible work for the civil rights movement, he was discouraged from being a public leader of the movement, because of his sexuality. Even today, many textbooks do not often celebrate LGBTQ+ leaders.

Bayard Rustin primarily created change through advocating and teaching nonviolent resistance. In 1948, Rustin traveled to India to study Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. Later on, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, he went to Alabama to teach Martin Luther King about protesting using nonviolent strategies. Rustin was also the man who chiefly organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that gathered 250,000 people in 1963. Yet again, due to his homosexuality, he was not allowed to be in the spotlight.

While we admire the public leaders of activist movements, we might not always see the efforts of those who are behind them and all the work they do to make these movements possible.

Dolores Huerta

Ana Dutra

“We can’t let people drive wedges between us...because there’s only one human race.”

~ Dolores Huerta



Dolores Clara Fernández Huerta (1930 - present) is an American labor leader and civil rights activist. She is the co-founder of the United Farm Workers, which protects farmer’s rights.

In many cases, farmer workers in the United States are not well paid and have to work under unsafe conditions. They often think they have no rights. The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) fights to improve wages and working conditions for migrant farm workers. They have been fighting for better pay and safer working conditions for farmer workers since their founding in 1962.

Huerta was born in New Mexico and moved to California when she was three, after her parents divorced. Huerta lived with her mother, but still maintained a relationship with her father, who became a labor activist and inspired her own work. After WWII, Huerta's mom opened a hotel where she would feed and host farm workers. Huerta was still in high school, and she admired what her mother was doing. As a high school student, Huerta suffered discrimination from teachers and students for being Mexican-American. Once a teacher accused Huerta of stealing another student's work because the teacher didn't think Huerta was capable of doing it on her own. After she graduated, she married and had two children but later divorced. Later in life she would marry another labor activist and have five more children. Huerta became an elementary teacher but was distraught over the poor lives of many of her students, who were mostly farm worker children. This led her to start the Community Service Organization in 1955, a group that works to end discrimination and police brutality and to improve social and economic conditions for farm workers in the United States.

In 1962, Huerta met Cesar Chavez, another activist who shared the same beliefs as her. Together they founded the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) in 1962. In the same year, UFW took on the grape growers. Chavez organized a strike of all farm workers, and Huerta negotiated contracts with the farm owners. After five years of fighting, the organization signed 26 contracts with grape growers that improved farm worker conditions. During this time Huerta's phrase "Sí se puede" (Spanish for "yes you can") went viral. In 1975, Huerta helped advocate for the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, the first law to recognize the rights of farm workers. Huerta continued to be part of many protests, advocating for better immigration policy and better health conditions for farm workers.

Farm workers are a vital part of the United States workforce and economy. And yet, their rights are not always protected. Many are exposed to dangerous chemicals and dangerous working conditions, workplace abuse, extremely low pay, and other forms of abuse. We need people like Huerta to speak up for workers. Today at almost 90 years old, Huerta continues to do this important work.

Billie Jean King

Julian

“It’s just really important that we start celebrating our differences. Let’s start tolerating first, but then we need to celebrate our differences.”

~ Billie Jean King



Billie Jean King (1943 - present) was a top-ranked American tennis player who worked tirelessly for equal prize money for women in tennis tournaments. She was also the first elite athlete to openly come out as lesbian.

Did you know that on average, women in the U.S. are paid 80 cents for every dollar paid to men? And not only is there a gap between men's and women's wages, but there can also be a race pay gap. It is important that we work to eliminate such wage gaps.

Billie Jean King became an American #1 professional tennis player in the early 1960s. She achieved her first major goal at age 18 after winning her first Grand Slam. King won a total record of 39 Grand Slam titles at the most important annual tennis events in the world. Incredibly, she claimed three Grand Slam titles in one year. But at the beginning of the 1970s, King learned that women's prize money was lower than men's. She started campaigning for equal prize money for men and women athletes in 1971. That year she decided to join the Virginia Slims Tour for women and became the first woman athlete to earn over \$100,000 in prize money. She was only 28. In 1972 she won the U.S. Open, the fourth and final of the major events that make up the annual tennis Grand Slam, but received \$15,000 less than the male winner. This was not the only type of discrimination King faced. In 1973, a well-known tennis player, Bobby Riggs, claimed that women's athletes were inferior to men. King accepted his challenge to play an exhibition game to prove him wrong. The game gained a worldwide audience, with over 90 million viewers in 37 different countries. King beat Riggs in three rounds. Her win was considered very important, leading to women's sports becoming more valued and recognized.

King has gone on to work on a variety of equity issues, striving for inclusiveness in our country and outside of it. After King joined the Virginia Slims Tour for women, she took advantage of her position and took the lead of the Women's Tennis Association by becoming the first president in 1973, helping other women tennis players to gain recognition and equality. Fast-forwarding to 2014, King created the Billie Jean King Leadership Initiative, which strives to tackle the lack of inclusiveness found in company workplaces all over the globe. The Initiative wants every individual of any background to be promoted and celebrated for their work and skills and to gain more opportunities to lead.

Billie Jean King continues fighting to end gender discrimination in all fields. Some employers still treat women as if they were worth less and pay them less for the same work. Inequality remains, and although we have been able to make progress, we still must continue to seek equality.

Aaron Fricke

David James

“I didn’t want anything to do with any bourgeois heterosexual rites of passage. I would have preferred to stay isolated. But it was unfinished business: When Paul didn’t get to go (to prom) the year before, it left this big open wound, and I felt like I had to go too just as a way to resolve that.”

~ Aaron Fricke



Aaron Fricke (1962 - present) is an author and activist fighting for LGBTQ rights. In 1980, he took legal action to be able to take his boyfriend, Paul Guilbert, to the prom at Cumberland High School in Rhode Island. He went on to become an author, with his most notable works detailing what it was like to grow up gay during a homophobic, prejudiced time.

The bullying of members of the LGBTQ+ community is an ongoing issue, especially in school. A 2013 survey found that three out of four LGBTQ+ students have been bullied because of their identity. While this matter is still a problem today, it was considerably worse a few decades ago. For many, incessant bullying is more than just a struggle—to some, it’s an everyday crisis.

Aaron Fricke realized he was gay at a young age. As he grew older, his sexuality caused friction between his friends and him. He grew anxious, believing homosexuality was unacceptable and that he should keep his feelings hidden. However, his perspective changed during a family trip to Provincetown, MA when he was around 13 years old. He witnessed a group of pro-gay activists, exclaiming and holding up signs saying, “PROUD TO BE GAY.” Fricke was astonished. This was his first experience with openly gay people. His self-confidence slowly increased throughout high school. Then, one day while waiting for a ride home after school, a boy named Paul Guilbert asked for a ride. Guilbert was openly gay, and they quickly became friends. In the spring, Guilbert asked Fricke to his senior prom. Fricke refused out of fear of being bullied. Guilbert tried taking someone else, but the school would not allow it. The backlash from students and faculty was so severe that Guilbert changed schools. In Fricke’s senior year, he decided to take Guilbert as his date. Initially, the school denied Fricke’s right to bring Guilbert. Fricke took the school to court and ultimately won the right to go to prom with whomever he wished.

Even before his court case, Fricke had been a local advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. From aiding LGBTQ+ classmates to volunteering for the Gay Helpline, a phone line supporting fearful youth, he played an active role in supporting his community. Then, during his senior year, Fricke took his principal, Richard Lynch, to district court because the school refused to let him take his boyfriend to prom. The court ultimately decided that Fricke had the right to bring Guilbert. Fricke’s victory was a victory for LGBTQ+ people nationwide. Fricke has since written two books sharing his story of growing up gay. *Reflections of a Rock Lobster* is an autobiography about growing up in a homophobic society and the events leading up to the court case. *Sudden Strangers* is about the effect being gay had on his relationship with his father. Both books aim to inspire and encourage LGBTQ+ youth.

The path towards acceptance has been long. From the passing of anti-discrimination laws to the national legalization of same-sex marriage, the progress is undeniable. Yet, there is still plenty of headway to be made for equality. While it may be a rough road ahead, the future still shines with hope.