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By Chance or By Choice

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May 17, 2004 marked the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Linda Brown (1943-), a Topeka, Kansas third grader, is the symbol of “bringing down segregation” in U.S. schools (Linda Brown Thompson; *School: The Story of American Public Education*). In the fall of 1950, the Brown family and 12 other Topeka families were asked by the NAACP to attempt to enroll their children in the white schools. When they were unable to enroll the children, a lawsuit was brought against the Topeka Board of Education. The *Brown v. Board of Education* case presented to the U.S. Supreme Court was made up of five separate, but similar, court cases in four states and the District of Columbia. By what is identified as an “alphabetical accident,” Brown is the name attached to this historic decision.

It led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It led to sit-ins and bus rides and freedom marches. And even today, as we argue about affirmative action in colleges and graduate schools, the power of *Brown* continues to stir the nation” (Willoughby, 2004, p. 40).

Linda Brown’s name is recognizable because of this significant event in history. Her name was recorded by chance not by choice, but the important work that still needs to be accomplished is recalled at the mention of *Brown v. Board of Education*. “On one hand, *Brown* remains the hallmark of the promise of equality for this nation. On the other, *Brown*’s promise remains, if not broken, certainly unfulfilled” (Willoughby, 2004, p. 42).

Rosa Parks (1913-), “the mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus on December 1, 1955. She was arrested for violating a city law requiring that whites and blacks sit in separate rows on buses (*Rosa Parks: Pioneer of Civil Rights*). Her act led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks allowed Montgomery’s black leaders to use her arrest to spark a boycott of the bus system. The leaders formed an organization to run the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr.—then a Baptist minister in Montgomery—was chosen as president. For 382 days, thousands of blacks refused to ride Montgomery’s buses. The boycott ended in the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling that segregation on

public transportation was unconstitutional (Garrow, 2004). According to Parks,

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically . . . I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. . . . No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in. (Izrael, 2000)

Hers was a choice not to give up a seat, but it was by chance that her decision led her to become a figurehead of a movement that would change the United States.

Coretta Scott King (1927-) graduated from Antioch College and from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She is an accomplished musician and singer. While at Antioch, she was not allowed to practice teach in the local public schools because the schools had no black teachers and would not accept her. She completed her student teaching in the Antioch Demonstration School. While at the New England Conservatory of Music, she met Martin Luther King, Jr., a doctoral candidate at Boston University's School of Theology. They were married in 1953. They had four children. Her husband, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. Four days after his death, she led a march of 50,000 people in Memphis. She has created the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change as a living memorial to her husband's life and dream. The King Center, in Atlanta, is a national historic park that includes his birth home. The King Center is the first institution built in memory of an African American leader. In January 1986, because of her efforts, she celebrated the first legal holiday in honor of her husband. She is the first woman to deliver the class day address at Harvard, and the first woman to preach at a service at St. Paul's Cathedral in London (Carson & Brown; Coretta Scott King; Mrs. Coretta Scott King).

Coretta Scott King did not choose to become the spokesperson for her husband's dream of equality. By chance, because of his assassination, she became that spokesperson. Her accomplishments are evident. She has received 40 honorary doctorates, has authored three books and has been a leadership force in the Black Leadership Forum, the National Black Coalition for Voter Participation, and the black Leadership Roundtable (Mrs. Coretta Scott King).

These three women hold prominent places in the history of the United States. They hold their places in history either by choice or by chance. They have been part of a collective effort to achieve equality.

We are all part of the collective effort to achieve equality. We accept our roles in this effort whether they come to us by chance or by choice. In our efforts, we contribute to the history of the struggle.

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