Additional Teacher Narrative

Rosa Parks in her own words

The following extracts come from Rosa Parks' own autobiography called 'Rosa Parks: My Story' written with Jim Haskins (Puffin; Reprint edition: 31 Jan 1999, isbn 0141301201) - a copy of which is provided with this pack.

How it all started

One evening in early December 1955 I was sitting in the front seat of the coloured section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. The white people were sitting in the white section. More white people got on, and they filled up all the seats in the white section. When that happened, we black people were supposed to give up our seats to the whites. But I didn't move. The white driver said, "let me have those front seats." I didn't get up. I was tired of giving in to white people.

"I'm going to have you arrested," the driver said.
"You may do that," I answered.
Two white policemen came. I asked one of them, "Why do you all push us around?"
He answered, "I don't know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest."

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For half of my life there were laws and customs in the south that kept African Americans segregated from Caucasians and allowed white people to treat black people without any respect.
I never thought this was fair, and from the time I was a child, I tried to protest against disrespectful treatment. But it was very hard to do anything about segregation and racism when white people had the power of the law behind them.

Somehow we had to change the laws. And we had to get enough white people on our side to be able to succeed. I had no idea when I refused to give up my seat on that Montgomery bus that my small action would help put an end to the segregation laws in the South. I only knew that
I was tired of being pushed around. I was a regular person, just as good as anybody else. There had been a few times in my life when I had been treated by white people like a regular person, so I knew what that felt like. It was time that other white people started treating me that way.

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I was born on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, in the USA and named Rosa after my maternal grandmother, Rose. My mother took me to live with her parents in Pine Level, Alabama, when I was a toddler. Later my father joined us, and we lived as a family until I was two and a half years old. He left Pine Level to find work, and I did not see him again until I was five years old and my brother was three. He stayed several days and left again. I did not see my father anymore until I was an adult and married.

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I don't remember this myself, but my grandmother told me that one time when my mother was away, she was going to give my brother a whipping. He was just a little fellow, and she was scolding him, and then she took up a little switch. I said, Grandma, don't whip brother. He's just a little baby and he doesn't have no mama and no papa either." And so, she said, she put the switch down and looked at me and decided she would not whip him that day. I can remember what a mischievous little boy he was and how I got more whippings for not telling on things he did than I did for things I did myself. I never did get out of that attitude of trying to be protective of him.

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Not just another little girl

I was about six when I started school. Sylvester started a year later, when he was around five. We went to the one-teacher black school in Pine Level, in a little frame schoolhouse that was just a short distance from where we lived.

At school I liked fairy tales and Mother Goose rhymes. I remember trying to find Little Red Riding Hood because someone had said it was a nice book to read. No matter what Miss Hill gave me to read, I would sit down and read the whole book, not just a page or two.

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Some of the older boys at school were very good at running sports and playing ball. They were also the ones who were responsible for wood at the school. The larger boys would go out and cut the wood and bring it in.

They didn't have to do this at the white school. The town or county took care of heating at the white school. I remember that when I was very young they built a new school for the white children not very far from where we lived, and of course we had to pass by it. It was a nice brick building, and it still stands there today. I found out later that it was built with public money, including taxes paid by both whites and blacks.

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Another difference between our school and the white school was that we went for only five months while they went for nine months. Many of the black children were needed by their families to plough and plant in the spring and harvest in the fall. Their families were sharecroppers like my grandparents' neighbours. Sharecroppers worked land owned by

plantation owners, and they got to keep a portion of the crop they grew. The rest they had to give to the owner of the plantation. So they needed their children to help. I was aware of the big difference between blacks and whites by the time we started school.

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Some of the white children rode a bus to school. There were no school buses for black children. I remember when we walked to school, sometimes the bus carrying the white children would come by and the white children would throw trash out the windows at us. After a while when we would see the white school bus coming, we would just get off the road and walk in the fields a little bit distant from the road. We didn't have any of what they call "civil rights" back then, so there was no way to protest and nobody to protest to. It was just a matter of survival – like getting off the road – so we could exist from day to day.

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Not all the white people in Pine Level were hostile to us black people, and I did not grow up feeling that all white people were hateful. When I was very young, I remember, there was an old, old white lady who used to take me fishing. She was real nice and treated us just like anybody else. She used to visit my grandparents a lot and talk with them for a long time. So there were some good white people in Pine Level.

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Schooling in Montgomery

When I was eight years old…my mother had the idea of sending me to Miss White's school because it had a great reputation, better than the public junior high school. Miss White was from Melrose Massachusetts. All her faculty were white women from the north. That meant that when they came south to educate black girls they were ostracized by the white community in Montgomery. Any social life they had, had to be with blacks, and therefore they went to black churches and so on. Miss White had a very rough time. Her school was burned down at least twice in the early days.

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What I learned best at Miss White's school was that I was a person with dignity and self respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else just because I was black. We were taught to be ambitious and to believe that we could do what we wanted in life. This was not something I learned just at Miss White's school. I had learned it from my grandparents and my mother too.

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There were other aspects of segregation in Montgomery that I had to get used to. Public water fountains were one. The public water fountains in Montgomery had signs that said "White" and "Coloured." Like millions of black children, before me and after me, I wondered if "White" water tasted different from "Coloured" water. I wanted to know if "White" water was white and if "Coloured" water came in different colours. It took me a while to

understand that there was no difference in the water. It had the same colour and taste. The difference was who got to drink it from which public fountains.

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Marriage and activism

I first met Raymond Parks when a mutual friend, a lady I knew very well, introduced us. Parks – everyone called him Parks – was a very nice person, and I enjoyed talking to him. He would drive along and tell me about his life experiences and problems that he'd had as a youngster. Parks looked after his ill mother and grandmother until they died when he was in his late teens.

He was the first man of our race, aside from my grandfather with whom I actually discussed anything about the racial conditions. And he was the first, aside from my grandfather and Mr Gus Vaughan, who was never actually afraid of white people.

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Parks was also the first real activist I ever met. He was a long time member of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, when I met him. Later I came to understand that he was always interested in and willing to work for things that would improve life for his race, his family and himself.

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The second time Parks and I were ever in each other's company, he talked about getting married. I hadn't given marriage a thought at all. He spoke about it and I didn't pay it any attention. But one day he said "I really think we ought to get married," and I agreed with him. The next day, when I was at church, he asked my mother's permission to marry me, and when I came home from church she told me that she had agreed. He didn't actually propose to me at all, or anyway not formally. That was in August of 1932, we were married in December of 1932 in Pine Level, in my mother's home. It was not a big wedding, just family and close friends. We didn't even send out any invitations. After we got married we went to live on the East side of Montgomery not very far from Alabama State in a rooming house on South Jackson Street.

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My husband was very supportive of my desire to finish school and I went back to school after we were married. I received my High School diploma in 1933 when I was 20 years old. At that time only a small percentage of black people in Montgomery were High School graduates. In 1940, seven years after I got my diploma only 7 out of every 100 had as much as a High School education.

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After a while we left Huffman Street and moved to South Union Street, where we stayed with Mr. King Kelly, who was a deacon of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

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While we were living at Mr. Kelly's, an incident happened to me that I didn't even tell my husband about. I went downtown to the railroad station with the Kellys - Mr. Kelly and his daughter and her two children - to see them off on the train. I was walking a little behind them. We were on our way to the train when a policeman approached me and asked if I had a ticket. I told him, "No." He pushed me back against the railing and said, "If you don't have a ticket, you can't go." I knew that he had a club and a gun and that there wasn't anything for me to do but just get out of the way. It upset me quite a bit.

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What really upset me was that another young black woman was there – about my age, early twenties. I guess she must have been somebody who knew the policeman, because she was kind of playing with him, saying, "I'm going through." He said, "No, don't you go through," and he sort of swung his club in her direction. She laughed, and that upset me just as much, because she seemed rather familiar with him. To me, she showed a lack of respect for herself as a woman, and especially as a black woman. She had seen him treat me with disrespect. His treatment of her was just as disrespectful, but she had laughed about it.

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We fight for the right to vote

The right to vote is so important for Americans. We vote for people to represent us in government. If we do not like the way they represent us, we can vote for someone else. But in those days most black people in the South could not vote.

The segregationists made it very difficult for black people to register to vote. In order to get registered blacks had to have white people to vouch for them. A small number of blacks who were in good favour with the white folks did get registered in that way. But once they got registered, they did not want other blacks to do the same. I guess they felt that when the white people vouched for and approved of them being registered, that put them on a different level from the rest of us.

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The second time I tried to register to vote, I was put off a Montgomery city bus for the first time, I didn't follow the rules. The driver who put me off was a mean one. He was tall and thickset with an intimidating posture. His skin was rough-looking, and he had a mole near his mouth. I never wanted to be on that man's bus again. After that, I made a point of looking at who was driving the bus before I got on. I didn't want any more run-ins with that mean one.

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Black people had special rules to follow. There were thirty-six seats on a Montgomery bus. The first ten were reserved for whites, even if there were no white passengers on the bus. There was no law about the ten seats in the back of the bus, but it was sort of understood that they were for black people. Blacks were required to sit in the back of the bus, but it was sort

of understood that they were for black people. Blacks were required to sit in the back of the bus, and even if there were empty seats in the front, we couldn't sit in them. Once the seats in the back were filled, then all the other black passengers had to stand. If whites filled up the front section, some drivers would demand that blacks give up their seats in the back section. Some bus drivers were meaner than others. Not all of them were hateful, but segregation itself is vicious.

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By the time I was put off the bus, I was a member of the NAACP. It was a national organization with headquarters in New York, founded by a small group of African Americans and Caucasians who believed in democracy… They formed the group to protest against racial discrimination, lynching, brutality, and unequal education. As secretary of the NAACP, I recorded and sent membership payments to the national office, answered telephones, wrote letters, and sent out press releases to the newspapers. One of my main duties was to keep a record of cases of discrimination or unfair treatment or acts of violence against black people.

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There were more violent incidents against black people in the late 1940s, after World War II ended. Black soldiers who had served in the armed forces were coming home, and they felt as if they should have equal rights since they had served their country. A lot of black World War II veterans came back and tried to get registered to vote and could not. They found they were treated with even more disrespect, especially if they were in uniform. Whites felt that things should remain as they had always been.

There were cases of violence against blacks all over, not just in Alabama.

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When I first met Septima Poinsette Clark…. She was in her late fifties and teaching citizenship classes at Highlander School… Her job was to teach adults to read and write and learn about basic citizenship so they could become teachers of others, so they could register to vote. I spent ten days at Highlander for the NAACP and went to different workshops, mostly on how to desegregate schools. Everything was very organised. We all had duties, and they were listed on a bulletin board each day. We shared the work and the play. We forgot what colour anybody was. I was forty-two years old, and it was one of the few times in my life up to that point when I did not feel any hostility from white people. I experienced people of different races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony. I felt that I could express myself honestly without any repercussions or antagonistic attitudes from other people. It was hard to leave, knowing what I was going back to, but of course I knew I had to leave. So I went back to Montgomery and back to my job as an assistant tailor at Montgomery Fair department store, where you had to be smiling and polite no matter how rudely you were treated. And back to the city buses, with their segregation rules.

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