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Rosa Parks' Courage Should Inspire Us All

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NEWS

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Opinion: Rosa Parks

History professor Julius Amin reflects on the legacy of civil rights icon Rosa Parks.

The Dayton Daily News published on Feb. 15, 2013, an opinion piece by Julius Amin, history professor, about the legacy of Rosa Parks in the U.S. and Africa. It is reproduced below, with permission. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect an official University of Dayton position.

Rosa Parks' courage should inspire us all

By Julius Amin

Professor, Department of History

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Last June, as our bus, Amour Mezam, made the turn toward the American Embassy in Cameroon's bustling capital of Yaoundé, one of the University of Dayton student occupants shouted "Avenue Rosa Parks," and what followed was an engaging conversation about Rosa Parks.

I have been on that street many times before but this time it was different. Bus occupants knew little of Parks, and as they struggled to locate her on their historical landscape, some questioned why a street in Cameroon is named in her honor, while others quipped "Uncle Sam" might have imposed the street's name, referring to what the late U.S. Sen. J. William Fulbright once called the "arrogance of power" in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

But the conversation soon turned serious as several questions were asked in rapid succession:

"Who is Rosa Parks?"

"What do Cameroonians know about her?"

"Why is she honored in Yaoundé?"

As I pondered on responses, my mind went back to my years as a student at the University of Yaoundé, wandering and reflecting on my education there. While we learned about male "movers and shakers," female icons were almost completely absent. Parks' name on a street in one of Africa's more important capitals is refreshing and signals a changing time. It also reiterates that issues of human rights transcend national and continental boundaries. Parks served as a spokesperson for the oppressed, mandating that everyone speak up against injustice. But who was Rosa Parks?

Known as the "mother of the modern-day civil rights movement," Parks taught us important lessons about fortitude, moral courage, and the will to resist unjust laws. "The hottest places in hell," Dante wrote, "are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crises, maintain their neutrality."

On moral issues, Parks acted, rather than waited, and chose jail over quasi-freedom. A crusader for justice, she saw American racism as a human rights crisis, and dedicated her life to ending it. She stood up against America's Jim Crow system, which is also referred to as America's apartheid, and set in motion a chain of events to reverse it. She understood more than most that the law is not always just.

Almost six decades ago on that fateful day in December in Montgomery, Ala., she violated the law by refusing to give up her seat to a white man and that incident marked a high point of the modern civil rights movement. Her courage to stand up to America's apartheid was eye-opening. Parks' actions dramatized the magnitude of white racism and privilege. She dared to make a difference and, as a result, forced America to reflect on the meaning and shortcomings of its widely professed democracy.

Cameroonians and Africans alike in America are direct beneficiaries of civil rights gains made by Parks and her contemporaries.

In "Profiles in Courage," John F. Kennedy wrote that great crises produce great men of courage. Parks' life is a profile in courage.

As Africans wrestle with the numerous challenges of the moment, it is important to revisit the work of those whose names and images decorate their streets, textbooks and buildings. History teaches us about the lives of many whose work we can and should emulate, with hope that their disease of activism can become infectious. African nations continue to be a reservoir of injustice, abuse, and economic deprivation. Like Parks, we must dare to make a difference.

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