One Simple Act
When Rosa Parks died, Robert Johnson didn't think twice about jumping in the car and driving with his young children to Detroit for the funeral.

"A few things transform our lives -- marriage, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one. When they're writing my story and asking what changed my life, Rosa Parks' funeral will be one event that did," said Johnson, vice president for enrollment management at the University of Dayton. "She literally transformed a nation with one simple act."

Johnson will offer a reflection at a 6 p.m. memorial service for Rosa Parks on Thursday, Nov. 17, in the Immaculate Conception Chapel on campus. The service is open to the public.

Parks, a seamstress who sparked the civil rights movement when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., nearly 50 years ago, died Oct. 24 at the age of 92. An estimated 4,000 people from all walks of life attended her eight-hour funeral, with thousands more turned away at the door of Greater Grace Temple. Johnson's uncle and father both knew Parks, so he grew up hearing stories about her courage. He wanted his children to hear the stories about her life -- and her legacy.

"I wanted my kids to see the legacy and richness of history that literally took place at her funeral. Civil rights leaders of old talked about how she sat down, so we could stand up," he said. "I told them, 'One day, when you're adults, you will remember this day, and it will become the source of your strength and encourage you to carry on.'"

Besides Johnson, the Rev. Leroy Chambliss, pastor of South Park United Methodist Church and a UD graduate, will offer a reflection at the service. The service, which will include prayers and song, is being organized by J. Roland Bailey, campus minister for Protestant students at the University of Dayton.

"Rosa Parks embodies the spirit of liberty," Bailey said. "She didn't have a Ph.D. or oversee a multitude of people in her job. She was just an everyday woman who felt compelled to stand up and be heard. It impacted America and the world."

When Parks died, she received an honor usually accorded to deceased heads of state. She was the first private citizen and the only woman to ever lay in state in the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.

"She was a living legacy," Johnson said. "Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, 'If it appears that my head veers above the crowd, it is because I am standing on the shoulders of those who have come before me.'"

"All people are standing on Rosa Parks' shoulders."

Contact J. Roland Bailey at (937) 229-2575 and Robert Johnson at (937) 229-3717.