



**National
Urban League**

To Be Equal #10

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From Selma to Montgomery – Martyrs of the March

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"What could more profoundly vindicate the idea of America than plain and humble people — the unsung, the downtrodden, the dreamers not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege, not of one religious tradition but many — coming together to shape their country's course?" – President Barack Obama, 50th Anniversary Commemoration of Selma's "Bloody Sunday"

No social reformation, reversal or revolution has ever rested solely on the shoulders of its most notable actors. This was as true during that pivotal moment in our nation's history when colonists rebelled against the tyranny of British rule, as it was 50 years ago in Selma, Alabama, where a decisive blow was struck to the institutionalized denial of voting rights for the city's African Americans—setting the stage for historic strides in social justice, not just for African Americans but for Americans of every stripe, color and creed.

Progress—the kind that balances the scales of justice and swings open the doors of equality and opportunity to a wider swath of our nation—never comes as the result of one act of injustice or one trajectory changing act of bravery. Clarion calls for action often follow years, even centuries, of slights and injustices. Likewise, the march towards justice is paved with innumerable acts of bravery, large and small, by the prominent and the unsung.

The American movement to attain the unobstructed right to vote was born within the walls of an unassuming green house on Lapsley Street in Selma. The home to Mrs. Richie Jean Sherrod Jackson and her husband Dr. Sullivan Jackson became a haven for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prominent civil rights leaders. The Jacksons' hospitality in an environment that proved inhospitable to both their guests and their struggle to expand the exercise of constitutional rights can only be described as one in a multitude of courageous steps on the long road to justice.

Running from police after a peaceful demonstration for the right to vote, civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed by an Alabama state trooper. Many of those enraged by his murder suggested marching his body from Selma to Montgomery. Stirred by his

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conscious after witnessing the violence at the first attempted march, Rev. James Reeb came to Selma answering Dr. King's call to ministers to join the movement. The 38-year-old father of four met his death there at the hands of club-wielding white supremacists. Viola Liuzzo, a 39-year-old mother of five, was shot and killed by Klansmen after the last of the three marches from Selma. Episcopal seminarian Jonathan Daniels came to Selma after Bloody Sunday. He stayed in Alabama to work on voter registration. Daniels was shot and killed by a police officer with a bullet meant for the Black, teenage girl he pushed out of harm's way.

President Obama put it succinctly during his speech marking the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, "What a solemn debt we owe. Which leads us to ask, just how might we repay that debt?"

First, we can, and must, do more than commemorate the work of these men and women because so much of what they accomplished is being dismantled today. The Voting Rights Act of 1965—arguably the crowning achievement of the Selma to Montgomery marches—is under attack. The 2013 Supreme Court ruling allowing states to bypass federal approval before changing their voting rules, ushered in a wave of voter suppression laws not seen since those days of marches and peaceful protests. Congress has been tasked with devising a new formula to determine which states require federal approval before making any changes to their voting rules, but Congress has not acted on this pressing matter. We must pass a new voting rights bill, because it is not enough to gain the right, we must maintain and protect it as well.

Second, we must build a modern-day civil rights movement that draws its inspiration from those who came before us and suffered reprisals, were beaten and unlawfully jailed and paid the ultimate price with their lives so this country could inch ever closer to its mandate to create a more perfect union. While signs of social progress within the African American community are undeniable, we celebrate the victories of past battles won under the cloud of recent high-profile killings of Black males and the Department of Justice's recent release of a scathing report detailing systemic racism in the Ferguson police department. Selma is now.

Countless heroes—both known and unknown—have tasked each and every one of us to continue to walk in their steps and be bold in the journey to justice. We have the opportunity today to show them that their work and sacrifice on behalf of this nation was not in vain. We are fortunate, because as the president recognized, "Our job's easier because somebody already got us through that first mile."

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