



## Lesson: Exploring the Heroes of Social Justice Movements

### OVERVIEW

POV often presents stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media—stories like that of James Armstrong, a barber in Birmingham, Alabama, who was one of thousands of unknown and unsung heroes of the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

In this lesson, students will identify and research participants in social justice movements or other types of movements or communities. Students will select images, quotes, pieces of art or videos to represent such figures and organize these items in walls or digital “pinboard” displays that will be presented to the class. This activity is inspired by a wall display in the barbershop of civil rights veteran James Armstrong, as seen in a clip from the documentary **The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement**.

For more information on James Armstrong, the civil rights movement and how to use digital “pinboards” in the classroom, please see the [Resources](#) section of this lesson.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs (including **The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement**) that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Brainstorm a list of activists, leaders, pioneers and others who have made a difference in their communities.
- Identify the accomplishments of each individual.
- Curate quotes, images, artwork and videos that they feel represent each individual in a wall or digital “pinboard” display.
- Discuss how things would be different if the individuals in the display had not chosen to act.
- Determine how they can personally take action to make a difference.

### GRADE LEVELS

6-8

### SUBJECT AREAS

Civics, Social Studies, U.S. History, World History, Current Events

## **MATERIALS**

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video and conduct research

## **ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED**

One or two 50-minute class periods

## **FILM CLIPS**

Clip 1: “The Worst Thing a Man Can Do” (length 1:22)

This clip starts at the beginning of the film and ends at 1:22 when James Armstrong says, “...President of the United States.”

Clip 2: “Integrating the Schools” (length 2:52)

The clip begins at 9:18 with a shot of some pictures of President Obama on the wall of the barbershop. It ends at 12:10 when Armstrong says, “I praise them for taking it.”

## **ACTIVITY**

1. Tell students that you are going to show them a brief video clip that features a barber in Birmingham, Alabama, who was active in the civil rights movement. Ask students to pay special attention to the pictures on the wall of his barbershop. Then, show the clip “The Worst Thing a Man Can Do” (length 1:22).
2. Remind students of what Armstrong says at the beginning of the clip: “I’ve always thought that the worst thing a man can do is nothing. I’ve got a lot of pictures of everybody that was doing something.” Who were some of the people “doing something” whom Armstrong featured on the wall of his barbershop? (Possible answers include Jackie Robinson, Nelson Mandela, Douglas Wilder and Martin Luther King, Jr.) What were some of their achievements? What characteristics did they have in common? Why would Armstrong want to display their pictures on the wall of his barbershop?
3. Assign small student groups to create their own “walls” to recognize those who are “doing something” and making a difference, whether their acts are widely known or unknown. These walls could be physical displays for a wall in your classroom or school, or digital displays using a tool like Pinterest ([pinterest.com/](https://www.pinterest.com/)) or Learnist ([learnist.com/](https://learnist.com/)). (Note: Pinterest and Learnist are not for students under age 13.) Based on your curricular goals, you may wish to specify that students must choose people from a particular time period or geographical area.
4. Groups can begin by brainstorming lists of people (such as activists, leaders or pioneers in a particular field) who are making a difference. Then, have them conduct research to learn more about each person and collect something to represent him or her on their group’s “wall.” Encourage students to gather a variety of resources, such as pictures, quotes, artwork and video, as well as to seek diversity in the individuals they choose to research. Remind students that the people they choose can be “unsung heroes,” just like James Armstrong.
5. Have each group present their “walls” to the class, providing details about the accomplishments of the people featured on them. Discuss the risks that each took and

the sacrifices that each made. How would things be different if these people had not chosen to act? How can students take action and make a difference?

## EXTENSIONS

1. Explore what it was like for black students during desegregation. In 1957, after unsuccessfully trying to enroll his two sons at the all-white Graymont Elementary, Armstrong initiated a class-action lawsuit to integrate Birmingham schools. His children became the first black students to attend the school. Show students the lesson clip "Integrating the Schools" (length 2:52). Have students then imagine that they are 11-year-old Dwight and 9-year-old Floyd Armstrong and write first-person accounts of his first day at Graymont Elementary.

2. Study the challenges faced by black voters in the Jim Crow era. Begin by having students watch the NPR video "[A Civil Rights Activist Votes in Birmingham](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4vBQ4D_LnA&)" ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4vBQ4D\\_LnA&](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4vBQ4D_LnA&)), in which Armstrong reflects on voting in the 2008 presidential election. Explain that during the 1960s civil rights era, Armstrong and others used nonviolent protest to try to change the unfair voting restrictions, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, that disenfranchised black voters. Show students the entire short documentary **The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement** (length 26:00) to teach them more about these activities and explain that some people felt that it was worth dying for the vote. Have students also explore the online activity, "[Voting Then, Voting Now](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/tools_voting.html)" ([http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/tools\\_voting.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/tools_voting.html)) to see a sample literacy test and better understand other voting obstacles during that period. Then, ask students to interview adult relatives and friends about how they feel about voting and whether or not they voted in the most recent election. Discuss the responses from the student interviews and compare today's attitudes toward voting with those of Armstrong and his peers during the civil rights era. What may account for any similarities or differences?

3. Take a stand on whether violent or nonviolent protest is more effective. In **The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement**, Floyd Armstrong explains that as boys, he and his brother were taught that nonviolence was essential to their success in desegregating schools because any violent act would give white people a reason to say that black students did not belong. When accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence." Ask students if they think this philosophy is relevant today. Why or why not? When, if ever, is violence justified? Have students research specific examples from history of "just" wars or uses of violence, or of successful nonviolent actions or movements. Students should then share their findings with the rest of the class. Discuss whether any student viewpoints on violence changed as a result of their research or the presentations of their peers. You may also wish to discuss other POV and PBS films that address the issue of violent or nonviolent protest, such as:

- *Better This World* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/betterthisworld/>): Shows events surrounding the arrest of two young men at the 2008 Republican National Convention for making and possessing fire bombs.
- *The Camden 28* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/camden28/>): Tells the story of activists who raided a draft board office to protest the Vietnam War.

- *Freedom Riders*  
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>): Traces the work of a band of activists who used nonviolence to protest segregation in the American South in 1961.
- *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front*  
(<http://www.pbs.org/pov/ifatreefalls/>): Shows the consequences of a group of activists using arson as a form of protest against companies they believe are threatening the environment.
- *Revolution '67* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/revolution67/>): Studies the six-day black urban rebellion in Newark, New Jersey.
- *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/sierraleone/>): Depicts a band of refugees fighting back against their circumstances with music.
- *Soldiers of Conscience* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/soldiersofconscience/>): Follows the stories of both conscientious objectors and those who criticize them.
- *William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe*  
(<http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/>): Shows historic protests like Wounded Knee and the Attica Prison riot from the perspective of an attorney who defended those involved.

## RESOURCES

### Civil Rights

#### ***American Experience: Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985***

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/>

The website for this classic PBS series features a wealth of primary sources, teacher materials, profiles of key figures and groups, summaries of important events in the movement, image galleries, music, video, newspaper excerpts and more.

#### ***The Birmingham News: "James Armstrong, Civil Rights Flag Bearer, Dies"***

[http://blog.al.com/birmingham-news-stories/2009/11/james\\_armstong\\_civil\\_rights\\_fl.html](http://blog.al.com/birmingham-news-stories/2009/11/james_armstong_civil_rights_fl.html)

This article on the life of James Armstrong was published just after his death in 2009.

#### ***The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow***

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/>

This companion site to a series provides a timeline of the Jim Crow era, primary source documents, narratives of those who experienced Jim Crow discrimination, details on how the government sanctioned white oppression, interactive maps, interactive activities related to voting and more.

## Using Digital “Pinboards” in the Classroom

### **KQED Mind/Shift: “How Educators Are Using Learnist”**

<http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/2012/06/how-educators-are-using-learnist/>

This blog post describes how educators and students are using Learnist to curate ideas and resources.

### **MediaShift: “How Educators Are Using Pinterest for Showcasing, Curation”**

<http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2012/03/how-educators-are-using-pinterest-for-showcasing-curation080.html>

This page describes a number of ways that Pinterest can be used in the classroom.

### **Pearson: “Four Ways to Use Pinterest in Education”**

<http://www.pearsonschoolsandcolleges.com/blog/?p=424>

This article talks about how Pinterest can be used for lesson plans, sharing ideas, organization and student use. It also provides a video tutorial on using Pinterest.

## STANDARDS

### **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects**

(<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/>)

RH.6-8.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

RH.6-8.9. Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

RH.9-10.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH.9-10.9. Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

RH.11-12.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

RH.11-12.9. Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

SL.6-8.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL.6-8.4. Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume and clear pronunciation.

SL.6.5. Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.

SL.7.5. Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.

SL.8.5. Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence and add interest.

SL, 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.

SL.9-10.5. Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.

SL.11-12.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

SL.11-12.4. Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SL.11-12.5. Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.

**Content Knowledge:** (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Arts and Communication, Standard 3: Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings.

Arts and Communication, Standard 4: Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

Civics, Standard 10: Understands the role of voluntarism and organized groups in American social and political life.

Civics, Standard 27: Understands how certain character traits enhance citizens' ability to fulfill personal and civic responsibilities.

Civics, Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Civics, Standard 29 : Understands the importance of political leadership, public service and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Language Arts, Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

Visual Arts, Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.