

## LESSON

## White Anti-Racist Biographies: Early Grades

For young white students, explorations of fair and unfair, just and unjust, can go a long way in advancing anti-racist white identity. Purposeful use of literature and basic study of white anti-racists are among the key ways educators can advance such aims. Teaching Tolerance presents four short biographies for early grades classrooms, with activity ideas.

**Grade Level** K-2, 3-5

Topic: Race & Ethnicity

Social Justice Domain: Justice

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Prior to using these biographies, educators should ensure students possess prior knowledge about the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II (Margaret Gunderson), segregation and the Civil Rights Movement (Jack Greenberg and Myles Horton) and/or the needs of immigrant students today (Laurie Olsen).

### Biographies

#### MARGARET GUNDERSON

It was 1942. The United States was at war with Germany and Japan. The U.S. government worried about Japanese Americans. The government thought they would be loyal to Japan. The government made many Japanese Americans leave their homes. The government made them live in prisons. It was wrong to treat citizens this way. Margaret Gunderson knew this. She became a teacher at one of the prisons, Tule Lake. Margaret's students did not have enough food. They did not have doctors to take care of them. Margaret taught her students about injustice. She taught them that the government was wrong. Margaret's student, Walter Miyao, remembers her. "She told us ... we shouldn't be there. ... It was a violation of the Constitution." Margaret was proud to be a teacher at the prison. "No teaching experience can compare to the joy and satisfaction of work at Tule Lake."

## JACK GREENBERG

Jack Greenberg was a 27-year-old lawyer. It was 1954. He was standing in front of the most powerful court in the land. His friend, Thurgood Marshall, stood next to him. They told the Supreme Court that it was wrong to keep black and white children separate. They told the Court that black and white children should go to the same schools. The Court agreed. The case was called *Brown v. Board of Education*. It changed America forever. Black and white children could finally be together. Jack later worked as the director of the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund. It is one of the most powerful civil rights organizations in the world. He argued more than 40 civil rights cases. He also helped start a civil rights organization for Asian Americans. Today, Jack teaches at Columbia University.

## MYLES HORTON

Myles Horton grew up in a Southern white family that didn't have a lot of money. As a young man, he dreamed of uniting black and white people to end poverty. In 1932, Myles' dream came true. He opened the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Myles and his school were controversial from the start. In Tennessee, it was against the law for white people and black people to study together. But Myles ignored these laws and welcomed students and teachers of all races. In the 1950s, some Southern states made people take reading and writing (literacy) tests before they could vote. So, the Highlander Folk School started a literacy program. Myles and his friends taught thousands of black people how to read and write. Myles' school taught people how to stand up for civil rights. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fanny Lou Hamer were his friends. In 1960, Tennessee courts told Myles to close his school. They didn't like that Blacks and Whites were working together. Myles did not close his school. Instead, he renamed it the Highlander Research and Education Center. Myles died in 1990. His friend Paulo Freire said, "[Myles'] presence in the world is something which *justifies* the world." The Highlander Research and Education Center continues today.

## LAURIE OLSEN

Laurie Olsen cared about immigrant students. She cared about how they did in school. She started the Immigrant Students Project in California. It was 1986. Laurie talked to students and their families. She talked to teachers and principals. Laurie learned that many immigrant students felt left out at school. Students bravely told their stories -- more than 400 students in all. Laurie shared their stories. She talked to schools and to the California government. She asked them to improve how immigrant students were treated. They agreed. Immigrant students

felt safer at school. Today, Laurie is the director of California Tomorrow. The organization makes sure all students are treated fairly.

## Biography Activities

### CREATE THE CONTEXT:

Divide students into small groups. Assign each group one of the following topics: the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II; segregation and the Civil Rights Movement; and the educational needs of contemporary immigrant students. Small groups should conduct research. Groups with the same topic should then collaborate on a verbal and visual classroom presentation about their findings. Alternatively, students can write short essays about their findings.

### CONNECT THE PEOPLE:

Working in small groups, students can research and write companion biographies for other individuals referenced in the stories: Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fanny Lou Hamer and Paulo Freire. Students also can create biographies of Japanese American children who were imprisoned during World War II.

### FILL IN THE BLANK:

In classrooms where the Internet is available, teachers can remove key facts from the biographies and send students on an online treasure hunt to locate information. If the Internet is not available, educators can compile resources, and students can conduct the treasure hunt using provided information.

Browse these **literature recommendations** to help young white children see racism and bigotry and understand how to take a stand against it:

### THE LEGEND OF FREEDOM HILL

(\$15.95) tells the story of two young friends in 1850s California -- Rosabel, an African American, and Sophie, who is Jewish. When Rosabel's mother, Miz Violet, is captured by a slave catcher, the two young girls put their heads together to win back her freedom. The lively text and colorful illustrations enliven this moving tale of friendship and bravery. (Grades K-4)

ISBN # 978-1-58430-169-1 (paperback)

Lee & Low Books

The beauty and perils of being different are highlighted in ***Wings*** (\$16.95). Ikarus Jackson, a new boy on the block, surprises his neighbors one day by flying above the rooftops with his "long, strong, proud wings." People start to whisper, though, and soon those whispers turn to taunts, disdain, and finally even dismissal from school. One quiet girl, someone who knows loneliness herself, doesn't think the winged boy is strange and finds the courage to speak against prejudice and discrimination. (Grades 1-3)

ISBN# 0590033778

Scholastic Press

### **MOLLY BANNAKY**

(\$17) tells the true story of a dairymaid exiled from England for the crime of spilling milk (considered "stealing" in 1683) to work as an indentured servant in America. Upon completing her seven-year sentence, she staked a land claim -- unheard of for women in those days—and further defied societal norms by marrying an African slave. In the revealing conclusion, Molly inscribes a new Bible with her grandson's name, Benjamin Banneker. (Grades 1-5)

ISBN# 039527287X

Houghton Mifflin Co.

Sara knows she lives in a place where "Jim Crow" laws, which kept African Americans and whites apart in almost all aspects of life, exist. Yet, Sara goes to the front of the bus out of curiosity and an emerging sense of injustice. Sara's curiosity and bravery lead her on a crusade that changes the laws where she lives. In the novel ***The Bus Ride*** (\$16.95), a young girl discovers that she can make a difference. The book is a timely reminder for readers of all ages that no act is too small when it comes to confronting injustice. (Grades K-5)

ISBN# 978-1-880000-60-1

Lee and Low

### **A GOOD NIGHT FOR FREEDOM**

(\$16.95) is the story of a young girl named Hallie who finds out her neighbors are a stopping place for runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. Should Hallie turn them in or help them? (Grades 1-4)

ISBN# 0-8234-1709-3

Holiday House

Set in South Carolina in the 1920s, ***Darby*** (\$16.99) is partly derived from oral history interviews conducted by the author between 1997 and 2000. Assisted by her friend Evette, 9-year-old Darby writes a funny story about toads for the local newspaper. Next, Darby and Evette submit a much more controversial piece, which raises questions about racism. When the story is published, it leads to turmoil and transformation throughout the community. (Grades 5-8)

ISBN# 0-7636-14173

Candlewick Press

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