

# An Overview of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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On April 4, 1968, the world lost one of its greatest heroes of social causes, Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a man who devoted his life to the nonviolent promotion of civil rights, and yet he died a violent death.

King was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. His mother was a teacher and his father was a minister. An excellent student, King graduated from high school at the age of 15. He continued his education at Morehouse College and went on to study theology at Crozer Theological Seminar in Chester, Pennsylvania. King later attended Boston University and received his Ph.D. in 1955. While he was in Boston, he met Coretta Scott and they married on June 18, 1953.



For five years during the fifties, King was pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, but he resigned so that he could devote all his time to the civil rights cause. He began to speak out against the discrimination that African Americans were facing. African Americans attended separate and unequal schools, they were forced to sit in the back of buses, and they could not eat at the same lunch counter as whites. It was degrading and unfair, and King was not afraid to speak out about these injustices. After African American Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, King helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott. King was arrested and jailed, his home was bombed, and threats were made against his life, but he continued his nonviolent protest. As a result, the city changed its segregation laws.

As a student, King had learned about Mohandas Gandhi's technique of nonviolent persuasion for social protest. During a trip to India in 1959, King was able to enhance his knowledge of Gandhi's principles. These were the cornerstone of King's protest.

On August 28, 1963, King led the March on Washington. A quarter of a million people of all races from all over the country traveled to Washington, D.C. to protest discrimination. This demonstration led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. A charismatic leader and an excellent orator, Martin Luther King, Jr., urged his followers to employ civil disobedience and nonviolent methods of protest. In 1964 he was awarded the Nobel peace prize for his work. It was a fitting tribute to a true hero of the times.

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## Suggested Activities

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**Speech** Martin Luther King, Jr. was a powerful speaker and is probably best known for his "I Have a Dream . . ." speech. Direct the students to read the complete text of the speech and to write a summary of the important ideas.

**Comparisons** Compare the lives and works of Medgar Evers and Malcolm X with those of Martin Luther King, Jr. Students can construct a chart or three-way Venn diagram. Alternatively, students can compare King's methods of nonviolence with those of Mohandas Gandhi.

**Background** Students may be interested to learn what sparked King's dream of equality. Read aloud "Does Friendship Have a Color?" by Valerie Wilson Wesley from the January/February 1996 issue of *Creative Classroom*. Related activities accompany the story.