

Claudette Colvin

September 5, 1939 – present

Courage



“When you’ve been abused daily and you see people humiliated and harassed, you just get tired of it.” Claudette Colvin

Claudette Colvin was a good student who worked hard, and at 15 years old, her life changed. Before Rosa Parks took a stand, Colvin had had enough of the requirement that an African American give up a seat for a Caucasian on the bus. Using the **super skill of courage** Colvin said that she became empowered by her knowledge of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman in that moment and her normally quiet demeanor became outspoken and she was not budging from her seat, insisting, “It’s my Constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare; it’s my Constitutional right.”

Those words and stance had not been heard in Montgomery, Alabama, before, and it was a shock to those witnessing the moment. She was removed and arrested by police, scattering her books in the process. Colvin was taken to jail, charged, locked up and ultimately bailed out by her minister. At her trial, she was found guilty and was released on probation.

The *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)* acknowledged that the segregation was an issue but decided not to use Colvin as an example due to her age and the fact that she was pregnant. Months later, Rosa Parks was selected for that purpose. However, Colvin was

later named as a witness in the *Browder v. Gayle* case in which the segregated bus system in Montgomery was found unconstitutional in 1956. After her initial arrest, however, she had become labeled as a trouble maker, was not able to find work and was forced to drop out of college. She moved to New York in 1958, became a nurse’s aid and had a second child.

Although Rosa Parks, just months after Colvin, had gained the “civil rights heroine” title, Colvin’s encounters went nearly unnoticed. However, Rita Dove wrote a poem called *Claudette Colvin Goes to Work*, which later became a song in an attempt to illuminate Colvin’s courage. *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*, by Phillip Hoose, was a second attempt to award the first heroine her due. Colvin is credited with providing the foundation for having courage for action regarding the demeaning segregation laws. Although not widely recognized, she paved the way, according to the attorneys who represented Ms. Rosa Parks. Because of Claudette Colvin’s courage that day, the movement was started to correct the injustice.

Claudette Colvin is still alive and well today in New York, now retired.

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