

PAIRED TEXTS
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theme or topic

Nonfiction

IMAGINE THIS WAS YOUR SCHOOL

In 1951, there were 21 states that forced black students and white students to go to separate schools. These schools were supposed to be "separate but equal," but they never were. Where white schools tended to be modern and comfortable, black schools like this one were old and dilapidated. This 16-year-old had had enough, and in an act of tremendous bravery, she decided to do something about it. What followed changed America forever.

BY TERI KANEFIELD

Barbara Johns



Alabama, 1956



Behind a purple and gold curtain on the stage of her school's auditorium, Barbara Johns, 16, stood waiting. What she was about to do could put her—and her friends and family—in danger.

But she felt no fear.

The curtain rose. A gasp rippled across the room as hundreds of students looked up at her, surprised and amazed. What Barbara was about to say would change their lives forever.

Separate But Not Equal

It was 1951 in the rural community of Farmville, Virginia. For black Americans, it was a difficult time not only in Farmville but also across the U.S. A racist policy called **segregation** had created deep **inequality**. Under segregation, black Americans and white Americans were kept separate. Blacks could not ride in the same rail cars as whites. Black people were forced to sit at the back of buses while white people sat at the front. There were separate drinking fountains, and some restaurants would not even allow black people to come inside.

Schools throughout the South and elsewhere were racially segregated as well. In Virginia, a law actually forbade black students and white students from going to school together. Supposedly, these schools were “separate but equal,” but in reality, there was profound **disparity** between them.

Take, for instance, the schools in Farmville.

Barbara's school, the all-black Robert Russa Moton High School, was in disrepair. The toilets were old and cracked; the stall doors were rickety and often wouldn't close. The classroom ceilings were so leaky that students sat at their desks with umbrellas to keep water from making the ink on their papers run. In the winter, students sitting near the wood-burning stoves overheated, while those far from the stoves were so cold they shivered in their coats and hats. Smoke from the stoves eddied into the

classroom, causing sneezing and watery eyes. Kids got sick often.

The school was also wildly overcrowded. Moton High had been designed for 180 students, yet 450 were enrolled. To create more space, shacks with wood frames and tar-coated paper walls were built. Students called these makeshift classrooms “chicken coops,” because that's what they looked like. Some classes were held in a dilapidated bus in the parking

lot. Meanwhile, across town, white kids attended Farmville High, which had a real cafeteria, a fully equipped auditorium, spacious classrooms, locker rooms, and modern heating.

When Moton parents and teachers complained to the school board, they were told a new school would be built soon. It was clear, though, that “soon” would probably never come.

Most funds were going to the white students. The only things going to Moton were Farmville's old textbooks.

What Could Barbara Do?

Barbara lived on a small tobacco farm; she had a reputation as an introspective and



JACK MOEBES/CORBIS (LEFT); ELLIOTT ERWITT/MAGNUM PHOTOS (RIGHT)

hardworking girl. She took care of her younger sister and two younger brothers, and did chores, working in the fields and feeding the animals. She enjoyed solitude and could often be found in the woods behind her house. "She didn't have a lot of put-on airs about her," her grandmother said proudly. "She was a country girl."

But as her classmates would soon learn, there was a lot more to Barbara Johns than met the eye. Underneath her reserved demeanor was enormous courage—and growing outrage. She loved learning and she loved her teachers. She longed to have the school that she and her classmates deserved.

But in the 1950s, challenging whites was dangerous. Black people were treated with contempt and **bigotry**. In the South, a terrible practice known as lynching, in which a mob of white people would kill a black person for some supposed offense—without a trial or any kind of legal proceeding—was common. Because judges, juries, and police officers were all white, these killings

usually went unpunished. Yet Barbara was not afraid. She believed that it was up to her to *do* something.

But what?

A Bold Plan

One night, after Barbara said her prayers, an idea came to her: a strike. If she and her classmates refused to go to school, the school board would have to do something—wouldn't they? And surely nobody would harm children peacefully protesting the substandard conditions of their school, right?

The very next day, Barbara convinced a handful of her classmates to put aside their fears and join her strike. But they had to keep their plan top secret. If their parents or teachers knew what they were up to, they would forbid the strike. Plus, Barbara wanted to make sure that the teachers could not be accused of permitting the strike—if people thought the teachers knew about it beforehand, they could lose their jobs.

On April 23, 1951, the day of the strike, a student called the principal from a pay phone. Disguising his voice, he said some Moton students were loitering downtown and in trouble with the police. The principal reacted predictably. Black students in trouble with the all-white police was a serious matter. He hurried to his car and sped from the school. The moment he was gone, students delivered notes to each classroom calling an assembly. Barbara had written the notes and signed them "BJ," which was how Principal Boyd Jones usually signed notes. Barbara shared those same initials.

When the curtain rose to reveal Barbara instead of the principal onstage, everyone was shocked. Then she began to speak. She talked about the inferior conditions of their school. She talked about the fact that the school board had denied them proper funding. She talked about how hard it was to learn in this environment. "Are we just going to accept these conditions?" she asked. "Or are we going to do something about it?"

By the time her stirring speech was over, many students were on Barbara's side. The entire school body walked out in peaceful protest.



In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal" was constitutional. The decision allowed states to create rules that kept black Americans and white Americans as separate as possible within society. These rules were known as "Jim Crow laws." What do these two photos reveal about separate but equal?





Above: Students of Moton High.
Middle: The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a campaign for racial equality.



The Fight Was Just Beginning

The local newspaper ridiculed the students, accusing them of looking for an excuse to skip classes and play. The superintendent threatened to fire teachers and the principal for not maintaining order.

The strike, it appeared, was a failure. Yet the students held firm and refused to attend class until they were given a new school. Barbara called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization working for equality for blacks. She persuaded two NAACP lawyers to come to Farmville. The lawyers said they would back the students if they were willing to demand integration—that is, black students and white students attending school together—and if their parents were behind them.

To Barbara, demanding integration seemed like reaching for the moon.

At a town meeting attended by almost the entire black community of Farmville, Barbara gave another, even more rousing speech. The crowd erupted in joyous singing—and teary eyes. After much discussion and more speeches, the entire community agreed to get behind a lawsuit demanding integration. But the fight was just beginning. After the lawsuit was filed, Barbara received a death threat. Fearing for Barbara's safety, her parents sent her to live with her uncle in Alabama. She finished high school far from her friends.

A Landmark Decision

What happened next exceeded all of Barbara's expectations. The lawsuit went all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where it was bundled with similar lawsuits from Kansas, Delaware, Washington D.C., and South Carolina. Named for a plaintiff from Kansas, the case was called *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In 1954, the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*, declaring segregated schools illegal. Barbara was by then a student at Spelman College in Georgia. She was so excited by the decision that she shouted with happiness.

Across the U.S., many reacted with anger to the Supreme Court's decision. Barbara's family home was burned to the ground in what was most likely a case of arson. Her parents were unable to rebuild their home or keep their farm going because none of the banks or stores in town would give them credit. So Barbara's parents and her younger siblings left the place their family had called home for generations and moved to Washington, D.C.

An Act of Courage

Barbara's act of courage helped fuel a movement that would change everything. In Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, Rosa Parks captured the nation's

Barbara Johns Reaches for the Moon

By Irene Latham

She steps onto the stage,
makes a bold declaration,

No

Now

Strike!

Without hesitation,
she illuminates the situation—

separate but not equal:
cracked toilets, smoke inhalation,
tar-paper shacks packed
with the student population.

Despite danger, despite trepidation,
she clings to the dream with determination,

joins the fight for integration.
Together they march

like constellations
across a midnight sky,

their combined shine
inspiration for a changing nation.

Many states resisted the ruling that segregation was unconstitutional. It took years for schools to be desegregated. In this famous photograph from 1957, Elizabeth Eckford, 15, is going to her first day of school at the newly desegregated Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas. *What do you notice about the image?*

attention when she refused to move to the back of a bus. The bus **boycott** that followed led to the **desegregation** of city buses. Martin Luther King Jr. embraced nonviolent protests like Barbara's as the most effective means of achieving racial equality. Peaceful marches, sit-ins, and boycotts became the hallmark of the **civil rights** movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Barbara lived to see all of this unfold, but she never made any more speeches or sought recognition for what she did as a teenager. She married, earned her degree, raised a family in Philadelphia, and became a school librarian. She died in 1991.

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.



Today, Barbara's story is not widely told. But if you wander onto the capitol grounds in Richmond, Virginia, you will find a statue honoring the courage of Barbara and the Moton students. Engraved on the statue are Barbara's words: "It seemed like reaching for the moon." ●

WRITING CONTEST

What does "reach for the moon" mean? How do both the article and poem support the idea that Barbara Johns reached for the moon? Send your response to **BARBARA JOHNS CONTEST**. Five winners will get *The Girl from the Tar Paper School* by Teri Kanefield.

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