



Crucibles of Courage A Black History Month Special Presentation

Introduction

Each February, people throughout the United States honor African Americans and explore their roles in our nation's history. Despite the severe challenges of slavery and discrimination, Black Americans have pioneered countless advances in the worlds of politics, science, education, business, and the arts. ***Crucibles of Courage***, hosted by (then) Illinois Senator Barack Obama, highlights the lives of five courageous African Americans who changed the course of history. The featured biographies explore the contributions of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Olympic athlete Jesse Owens, Congresswoman and Presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm, classically trained soprano Marian Anderson and heavyweight boxing champ Muhammad Ali.

This one hour documentary will give students new insights into the lives of these individuals, their personalities, and each of their unique moments and roles in American history. The harsh realities of discrimination in the 1930s, the groundbreaking *Brown v. the Board of Education* Supreme Court case, and the political upheavals of the 1960s serve as the background for these compelling stories. With historical footage and vivid images, the personality characteristics of these five individuals come to life. This focus on five very different individuals allows students the opportunity to explore similarities and differences between their goals, historical circumstances, and their approaches to affecting change. With commentary from Senator Obama, this program is an excellent overview for Black History Month. ***Crucibles of Courage*** will engage students to discover the many ways African Americans have pushed the United States to live up to the promises, profoundly shaping our history and the lives we live today.

Curriculum Links:

Crucibles of Courage would be useful for History, Social Studies, American Culture, and Ethnic Studies courses, and for community events. It would be an excellent program to feature in Black History Month related lesson plans and activities. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students, as well as adults.

THURGOOD MARSHALL



Born in 1908 in Baltimore, Maryland, Thoroughgood Marshall was the great-grandson of slaves. Marshall later changed his name to Thurgood; from an early age, he was committed to education despite facing segregation and inferior schools. While attending Howard University, Marshall traveled with a dedicated lawyer named Charles Hamilton Houston throughout the American South to chronicle racial inequalities in public resources. This “fact-finding” mission was the start of a path-breaking career in which Marshall dedicated himself to dismantling legal segregation in the United States. Marshall became a persuasive lawyer, helping achieve a groundbreaking win in the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* Supreme Court case. Following this landmark victory, Marshall earned the post of Solicitor General of the United States and with an appointment by former President Lyndon B. Johnson, he became the first African American to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Vocabulary

Define the following words used in this documentary:

Affable
Farce
Prophetic

Diverse
Integrated
Segregated

Questions

1. Why do you think Thurgood Marshall chose to become a lawyer in order to affect change?
2. What do you think were the key turning points in Marshall’s life? What characteristics do you think were most important to his successes?
3. Why do you think Thurgood Marshall decided to become a lawyer? How did he use his legal work to make change?
4. What were some of the most important court cases during the Civil Rights Movement? Why do you think the courts became so important to this struggle for change?

MARIAN ANDERSON



Born in 1897 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Marian Anderson exhibited impressive vocal talents as a child. While her family and teachers believed Anderson could become one of the most important singers of her era, she was prevented from attending the nation's best music and arts schools due to segregation and poverty. Nonetheless, Anderson continued to sing, honing her skills as a soprano and attending music school for a short period with the assistance of funds from fellow church members. After successful tours of colleges in the U.S. South, Anderson went on tour in Germany in the early 1930s, and was greeted with rave reviews and enthusiastic audiences. Anderson was thrust into the national spotlight in the late 1930s when the Daughters of the American Revolution denied her a performance at Washington D.C.'s Constitution Hall. In response, a movement emerged for Anderson to perform an outdoor concert in front of the famed Lincoln Memorial. With the assistance of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Anderson performed at the Lincoln Memorial for an audience of 75,000 on Easter Sunday, 1939. The concert was a resounding success as people throughout the nation, and the world, listened and watched Anderson's stunning performance. Anderson was officially designated a delegate to the United Nations in 1958 and went on to receive a UN Peace Prize in 1972.

Vocabulary

Define the following words used in this documentary:

Heritage
Relegated
Soprano

Poise
Revered
Tone

Questions

1. What do you think Anderson meant when she said that she was "not a fighter"? Do you think her decision to perform at the Lincoln Memorial contradicts this statement? Discuss.
2. How would you define Anderson's personality? How do you think she differed from other significant African American leaders?

JESSE OWENS



Jesse Owens was not just an athlete, but an icon of personal grace and courage in the face of racism. The grandson of a slave, Owens family moved from Alabama to Cleveland, Ohio where he excelled as a runner. Quickly proving his enormous speed and talents as a competitive runner, Owens would become known as the “fastest man in the world.” During the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Owens triumphed as both an athlete and an individual citizen fighting against the backdrop of Adolph Hitler’s burgeoning Third Reich. Owens won an extraordinary four gold medals abroad, proving that black Americans could compete, and excel, against the world’s best athletes. After his successes, Owens continued to face racism at home as discrimination and inequality persisted through the 1930s and 1940s. Despite his many hardships, Owens will forever be remembered as the athlete who outran Hitler.

Vocabulary

Define the following words used in this documentary:

Amateur

Nominal

Redemption

Exhibition

Pride

Questions

1. What was Hitler’s notion of “Aryan” supremacy? What role did these ideas play in the treatment of black athletes in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin?
2. Why do you think Jesse Owens’ triumph in the Berlin Olympics is remembered as such a transformative moment? Do you think all Americans appreciated the importance of this event?
3. How do you think Jesse Owens might have inspired those who participated in the Civil Rights Movement? Who are some of the other athletes you know about who contributed to the effort to make social change?

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM



Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1924, Shirley Chisholm lived during her youth with relatives in Barbados before returning to the United States and devoting her life to politics. The first African American woman to win a Congressional seat, Chisholm went on to break new ground by becoming the first to make a credible run for President in the 1972 election. With plain talk about the need for equal rights and social programs, Chisholm's platform found an audience during the turbulent era of the Vietnam War. Although Chisholm lost her bid, she won respect and admiration from many across the country who saw her as a glimmer of hope in a dark political time.

Vocabulary

Define the following words used in this documentary:

Adept
Exemplified
Staunch

Audacity
Instill

Questions

1. Why do you think Chisholm rejected her placement on the forestry committee? What did this decision reveal about her priorities as a member of Congress?
2. Why do you think Shirley Chisholm was able to make a bid for the Presidency despite the odds against her? What about her platform and ideas do you think were compelling at the time? Would she still be considered a pioneer today?
3. Do you think the United States is ready for a female president today? What role do you think Shirley Chisholm played in paving the road for African American women in politics?

MUHAMMAD ALI



Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., was born in 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky. An early career as a successful amateur boxer blossomed into triumph on the world stage when Clay won the gold medal in light-heavyweight boxing in the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Becoming a fervent Muslim, Clay later changed his name to Muhammad Ali. The charismatic heavyweight champion became an outspoken cultural critic. Ali's refusal to fight in the Vietnam War for moral reasons put him in the middle of a national firestorm, eventually costing him his title for a period of time. With a fiery wit and a fierce devotion to change, Muhammad Ali became a symbol of integrity and courage while his keen athleticism made him a sports figure of international acclaim.

Vocabulary

Define the following words used in this documentary:

Affiliation
Pugilist

Aptitude
Vociferous

Questions

1. Why do you think Muhammad Ali commanded the attention of the world when he decided to oppose the war in Vietnam?
2. One of Muhammad Ali's nicknames is "The Greatest." Why do you think he received this nickname? If you were going to give this nickname to one other person from history, who would it be and why?
3. Despite the unpopularity of some of his beliefs, Ali remains a figure of world renown. Do you think his sports career or his political beliefs have played a greater role in his popularity? Discuss.

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. This documentary details the lives of five famous African Americans. Imagine that you were asked to choose five African Americans to highlight for a similar program. Who would you choose and why? Make a list of your top five and include a brief paragraph explaining your choices.
2. Chose an African American leader you admire. Create a resume for this person, highlighting their key activities, contributions, and achievements. Share these findings with your larger class or group.
3. Create an illustrated mini-biography of one of the five individuals featured in this documentary, or another important African American historical figure. These biographies could be in Powerpoint format, on poster-board, or in essay format.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

Christian, Charles M. *Black Saga: The African American Experience, A Chronology* (Beacon, 2006).

Franklin, John Hope and Alfred Moss, Jr. eds. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

Hine, Darlene Clark and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope: A History of Black Women in America*. (Broadway, 1999).

Horton, James O. and Lois Horton. *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America: Volume 2: African Roots Through the Civil War*, (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

Websites

A Black History website from The Bio Channel:
<http://www.biography.com/blackhistory>

The official site of the NAACP:
<http://www.naacp.org/>

A helpful African American history site from the Library of Congress:
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/intro.html>