

Sarah Keys: Staying Seated to Stand Up for Her Rights ^[1]

Sarah Keys: Keeping Her Seat to Stand Up for Her Rights

By Kelly Agan, N.C. Government & Heritage Library, 2019
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Take a minute to imagine that you couldn't sit where you wanted to on a bus because of the color of your skin or where you came from. How would that make you feel? What would you do? This article is about a courageous young woman of color who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Her refusal led to an important court case in the Civil Rights Movement.

Not giving up her seat: August 1, 1952

On August 1, 1952, a young Army private from North Carolina refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus. Sarah Louise Keys was on a Trailways bus to her parents' house in Washington, North Carolina. She was dressed in her Army uniform. The bus made a stop late at night in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. And the bus driver told her to give her seat to a white Marine who had been in the back of the bus. Her told her to do this because her skin was black.

In 1952, racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans were backed by state and federal laws. Sometimes those discriminatory laws are called "Jim Crow" laws. Jim Crow laws created a mandatory separation of races. And they affected all aspects of everyday life. They created inferior spaces and services for black Americans. And they created roadblocks to freedom and opportunity. They affected everything from choice in housing, jobs, and schools to hospitals and restaurants. Jim Crow laws even meant that black Americans had to use different public drinking fountains.

Sarah Keys was arrested at the bus station

Sarah Keys decided to stay seated to defend her right to sit where she wanted. So the bus company decided to punish and scare her. They made her sit on the bus by herself while all the other passengers got on a different bus. Then the police arrested her and falsely accused her of disorderly conduct. She spent several hours in jail because she did not have enough money to pay the \$25 fine. Eventually, she was released and put on a bus to Washington, North Carolina. She was alone and scared but carried herself with strength and dignity.

Her father persuaded her to fight the arrest charges

Ms. Keys wanted to put what had happened behind her. But her father persuaded her to fight the disorderly conduct charge. She initially lost her case in court and was convicted of disorderly conduct. Then she received help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP connected her with a civil rights lawyer from Charlotte. Her name was Dovey Johnson Roundtree.

Roundtree and her law partner fought Keys' case for three years, and they won. Their complaint against the bus company was filed with the Interstate Commerce Commission. The decision in the case called *Keys vs. Carolina Coach Company* came in November of 1955. The court ruled that the bus company had violated federal law. They said that buses that travel across state lines could not discriminate based on race. A few weeks after Sarah Keys won her case, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

Sarah Keys had left the Army and had moved to Brooklyn, New York by the time she won her case. In Brooklyn, she married her husband, George Evans. And she made a successful career as a hairstylist. She is still alive today.

Listen to an interview with Sarah Keys Evans and author Amy Nathan about Sarah Keys's experience in 1952 and a book Nathan wrote about Sarah Keys Evans, *Take a seat--make a stand : a hero in the family: the story of Sarah Keys Evans, a civil rights hero who would not be moved*.

The interview was aired on New York Public Radio station WNYC on February 9, 2011.

Additional Resources:

[Sarah K. Evans Inclusive Public Art Project](#) ^[3]

[Civil Rights Teaching: Sarah Louise Keys](#) ^[4]

[The quietly defiant, unlikely fighter: Pfc. Sarah Keys and the fight for justice and humanity](#) ^[5]

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