

How To Be a Hero



Register to vote. Check. Found my polling station. Check. Ballot in box. Check. Is that it? At a basic level, voting is the most powerful way we can influence our ever-evolving society. Our individual civic duty to vote can change a community and give a voice to younger generations.

To me, that is kind of heroic. Brave too. But was that everything that bravery and activism entailed? When I went to cast my ballot on for the primary, I couldn't help but be reminded of the giant who was known as the Conscience of Congress to his peers and a hero to the rest of the world. Echoes of Representative John Lewis' voice amplified in my head.

"I gave a little blood on the bridge in Selma 53 years ago. I almost died. Some of my friends and colleagues were murdered in Mississippi and other places. I'm not asking any of you to give any blood. I'm just asking you to go and vote." — John Lewis

He was a true hero. Lewis held a sweeping legacy that is difficult to put into words. He embodied integrity and sacrifice that guided a nation. He gave a speech to a crowd in Georgia during their 2018 midterm election when he mentioned the events on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. As the youngest and last surviving member of the

Big Six civil rights activists, he lived through the segregation era in the United States. In 1965, Lewis risked his life pushing to pass the Voting Rights Act that prohibited racial discrimination in voting. He personified the word “resistance.” Lewis wore an invisible cape.

Roughly 10 days after Lewis’s passing, his op-ed was released to the New York Times and I read it. His words were especially inspiring at this time, when, like many others, I contemplated ways I can continue his march and honor his legacy beyond the ballot.

Good trouble. Be a hero by getting into some good trouble. I’d say not the kind that would get me arrested 24 times, but that’s exactly what happened to Lewis as a result of the nonviolent movements he held for justice. Lewis spent a lifetime making what he called, “good trouble,” which left scars and a powerful legacy.

At 25 years old, he was beaten within an inch of his life on March 7, 1965 — a day known in history as Bloody Sunday. The Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma is where he and others peacefully marched. It’s also where he almost lost his life.

At 25 years old, he also set a new precedent for what trouble looked like in the era of Jim Crow for a Black man in America. Lewis championed the right to vote. Later that same year, in August 1965, a law was enacted and signed by then-President Lyndon B. Johnson to protect minorities against legal barriers at a state and local level.

“Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key.” — John Lewis

Shed hope. Yes you. Be a giant! Shed the hope you’ve got inside of you, I know you have

it! We all do. Despite the headlines at the bottom of our televisions and at the top of our newspapers, there's still hope. In dark times, you don't settle or look away. You don't silently hope for the best but instead, loudly give a voice to the voiceless the way Lewis did.

He wanted the voice of the people to prevail over anything else. From sit-ins to marches and protests and speeches, he spoke justice and equality into existence among large crowds of people like the March on Washington in 1963. Nearly 250,000 people came to witness the glimpse of a changed future.

"You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society."— John Lewis

Know the truth. Elections are so important. We can do a lot with a vote. Since the 17th century, an election has been the best way a community can adhere to a formal group decision-making process to elect people for public office. The truth is, the work has been done before us! So let's use methods like these to create real change in our society.

"The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time." — John Lewis

Vote. Lewis served 17 terms in the House of Representatives. I doubt he knew at 25 years old that he would be a future congressman. He was 15 years old when he was turned away from his public library because he was Black. His sister, his brother and a few first cousins were all told they couldn't get books because the library was for

“Whites only, not Coloreds.”

Lewis persevered and fought in the face of adversity. I imagine him years later, soon understanding other strategic and deliberate systemic exclusions that marginalized communities were facing, nearly 100 years after the Civil War. He was the bridge to the voting booth. Literally. From that point on, it's evident that Lewis hadn't stopped fighting against barriers that exist today. Though gutted and ignored by the Supreme Court, the Voting Rights Act was his life's work.

“I have said this before, and I will say it again. The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy.” — John Lewis

Believe. Believe in anything and everything. Believe something is possible, even in the impossible. And then, stand up for what it is that you believe in even if it's yourself.

I stand on the shoulders of giants and I fly with the heroes that have flown before me. They soared above ideologies that served as a direct hindrance to equality, justice and liberation. John Lewis said he wanted to see young people in America feel the spirit of the 1960's and find a way to get in the way. To witness real change some 60 years later was a testament to the strength of humanity and courage in the face of injustice.

When we do the work toward justice today, I had to remind myself that we were doing it beside the only surviving speaker of the March on Washington. I'm happy he got to see his legacy unfold. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but he believed it was possible and worked toward a better future. Let's continue to do the work.

“Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.” — John

Lewis