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# 35 Who Made a Difference: Robert Moses

A former civil rights activist revolutionizes the teaching of mathematics

By Neil Henry

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Robert Moses finally finds a moment to return a reporter's phone call on a hectic afternoon. He's standing outside a rural grocery store near Beaufort, South Carolina, getting ready to deliver a speech about equal opportunities for disadvantaged American kids. "It's all about organizing. It's always been that way," Moses, a recipient of a 1982 MacArthur "genius" award, says in a measured tone as he waits for his wife, Janet, to pick up a few supplies in the store. "And making sure that people's demands are consistently heard, whether it's the right to vote in the old days or the right to a quality education today."

Moses is 70 now, but his voice sounds as impassioned as ever. The Harlem-raised, Harvard-trained math educator first traveled to the South 44 years ago. As a field director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he risked his life several times to help register blacks to vote.

In 1964, Moses also helped plan what came to be known as Freedom Summer, when activists who included white Northerners and university students went to Mississippi to register rural black voters.

Milestone reforms that that effort sparked, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, allowed black Americans to enjoy rights that were promised under the Constitution. But entrenched poverty and other inequities have continued to occupy Moses. Although his field of operations has certainly changed, in some ways he has never left "the movement" at all.

When writer Bruce Watson visited him nearly a decade ago for *Smithsonian*, Moses was immersed in something he called the Algebra Project, an innovative initiative to teach math literacy to poor and minority students at the middle- and high-school levels in the rural South and the nation's inner cities. Seeking to redress the failures of many public schools, the project aimed to prepare students for college and future employment in a society where, Moses believes, proficiency in science and math are key to "successful citizenship." He has used everything from gumdrops to music and rides on the subway to make mathematics more fun and more accessible. By 1996, the project had reached some 45,000 pupils, and its instructional materials were being used by teachers in 105 schools across the country.

But over the past decade, Moses says, the nation's educational priorities have shifted to emphasize test results and teacher accountability, leaving approaches such as the Algebra Project strapped for funds. Its 2005 operating budget of roughly \$1

million—from federal and private sources—is only about a quarter of what it was in 2000.

Today, Moses teaches classes in trigonometry and introductory engineering to 43 students at Lanier High School in Jackson, Mississippi. He wants his charges to enter college on an equal footing with their more advantaged peers.

"I do still think of it the same way I felt about the voting rights struggle," he says. "Back then, the common belief was that black sharecroppers weren't smart enough to vote and didn't care about voting. But that mind-set certainly changed when thousands of sharecroppers began to appear at the polls. Their demands helped force change. I think a similar strategy will succeed in education."

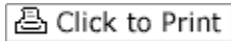
These days, he says, "it's the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people who were gridlocked in previous generations who are key" to stemming the crisis in school dropout rates. Moses is also campaigning to pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing every child in America the opportunity to receive a quality public education. "We had our first meeting in March at Howard University and expected maybe 30 people to show up. But we actually got more than 130," he says of the Quality Public School Education as a Civil Right campaign.

Does he feel demoralized by the slow pace of change?

"No," he answers. "I think there still operates a belief at a deep level in this country in the idea that if kids can do it, they should be given an opportunity to do it. That belief keeps one optimistic. So I don't become too distracted by the pace. You can live a good life in this country, but struggle is also a necessary part of it. That's how I see my life."

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