Bayard Rustin
Gay U.S. Civil Rights Activist
(1912-1987)

LPEI — LEGACY PROJECT EDUCATION INITIATIVE

On the forefront of A. Philip Randolph's efforts to end segregation in the Armed Forces, Bayard Rustin was instrumental in obtaining President Harry S. Truman's July 1948 order to integrate the U.S. military. In 1949 Rustin spent almost a month on a chain-gang in North Carolina as punishment for protesting segregated seating on buses. As a leading proponent of non-violence in the face of racial injustice, Rustin used his influence to strengthen Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s position in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, eventually becoming one of King's chief political advisors, strategists and speechwriters. Through much of Rustin's career his openness about being gay was an issue of contention. Despite widespread pressure from other civil rights activists to fire him, Randolph and King remained steadfast in their support - though the threat of scandal often forced periods of estrangement. Indeed Rustin and King parted ways for three years before Randolph orchestrated Rustin's pivotal role as architect of the watershed March on Washington, where Dr. King delivered his seminal "I Have A Dream" speech. In August of 1963, conservative Senator (and unabashed segregationist) Strom Thurmond of South Carolina took to the floor of the U.S. Senate to discredit the March by accusing Rustin of being a Communist, a draft-dodger and a homosexual. But such declarations did not sway Rustin from the path he had chosen for his life, and could not diminish his impact on King or on the movement he had quietly, but profoundly, influenced for decades. Rustin mentored King to make Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent "Civil Disobedience" the strategic centerpiece of King's activism and the hallmark of his legacy. Rustin was the living embodiment of what came to be called "Rainbow Politics," strategically linking tolerance and acceptance for sexual minorities with the struggle for racial and economic justice – setting the tone for the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement that was to come. Though Bayard Rustin is often forgotten by many contemporary activists, few people had a more powerful influence on the Civil Rights Movement and its enduring impact on the course of American History.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Before today, have you ever heard of Rustin in your social studies class?
2. Read the biographical information and view the following website: http://rustin.org/?page_id=2
3. Group Discussion: What was his most significant accomplishment? How has Rustin's work contributed to your understanding of equality?
4. Extend knowledge: How do you think Rustin's discrimination as an African American was like his discrimination as a gay man? How do you think it was different?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Website Investigation: Which of the following GLBT inductees contributed to the Civil Rights Movement?
2. View the interview for the film "Brother Outsider" at http://www.pbs.org/pov/brotheroutsider/video_interview.php
3. Determine how these contributors can be incorporated in an investigative research assignment within your discipline or content area.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Describe the significance of why Rustin was so effective in his work?
2. Reflect on why Rustin may not be as well known as other civil rights leaders of his era and/or how his homosexuality effected his life's journey. What impact did his repeated separation from his work have on the Civil Rights Movement?
3. Demonstrate your findings regarding these changes and develop your own vision statement through an oral presentation (using Animoto or other visual software).

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Extend your own personal understanding of "Rainbow Politics" and develop your action plan for change.
2. Based upon your own learning in school and investigation of Bayard Rustin's life, how would you demonstrate your own movement in society today?
3. Nominate a role model who has demonstrated ideals and values for change.