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## Beyond the Campus: Heroism as a Case Study for Extending Researchers' Influence Through K-12 Lesson Plans

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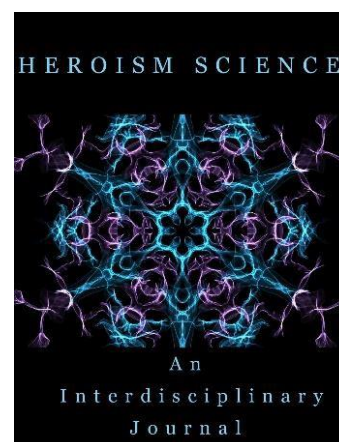
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# Beyond the Campus: Heroism as a Case Study for Extending Researchers' Influence Through K-12 Lesson Plans



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**ABSTRACT:** As a result of their training, college professors are subject matter experts who have the task of conveying ideas to students and to the public at large. They accomplish this, in large measure, through their research and their teaching. In this article, we consider an important alternative way in which professors can broaden their reach by creating lesson plans for students beyond their own classrooms—at very little time investment. We use as a case study our own lesson plan on heroism, which draws on expertise in political theory and psychology, in order to demonstrate the way in which such a project can be conceived, implemented and distributed to a wide audience. In designing and making such lesson plans available for K-12 students, as well as community groups and lifelong learners, we argue that subject matter experts can educate far beyond the walls of their own classrooms; they can also promote critical thinking, problem-based learning, community engagement, and even service-learning by building curricular pieces designed to speak directly to these important educational practices and outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** *heroism, education, bystander effect, optimal functioning, teaching, hero's journey*

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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There is a paradox in our universities. Professors and researchers develop knowledge that has direct bearing on our democracy, international relations, the economy, businesses, and even individual day-to-day lives. Yet, there are few structures in place to get this knowledge out to a broad audience where it could impact and benefit our world. In fact, other than op-ed pages, university classrooms, and blogs, there are almost no reliable outlets by which expert knowledge can reach non-researchers. This paradox is all the more dangerous because there is a growing divide between subject matter experts and laypeople, where experts are often viewed as untrustworthy<sup>2</sup>—even though, or perhaps because, most people have little access to their research and ideas. Spreading insightful, fact-based, peer-reviewed knowledge to a wider audience can only help repair this divide.

Subject matter expertise is particularly valuable in areas that directly impact individual lives. Researchers in political science, psychology, sociology, and the health sciences routinely discover, or improve upon, methods that can improve human happiness and wellbeing. The results of a single paper in these fields can easily translate to a practice people can use to improve their health, a framework for creating stronger communities, or a roadmap for individuals to do good on a large scale. But, unless these ideas catch attention in a popular article, or happen to become the focus of a government program, they risk existing only in an echo chamber: they live only among fellow experts.

At the same time, there is a segment of our population that hungers for new, fact-based knowledge—and has the platform to push this knowledge to millions of individuals. This segment consists of K-12 teachers. While constrained to some extent by state-mandated standards and federal requirements, teachers have a high degree of discretion in choosing the specific lessons they teach in their classrooms.<sup>3</sup> They also face scarcity in terms of preparation time, premade lesson plans, and district-provided materials.<sup>4</sup> The result is that many teachers face substantial stress in preparing for their classes and assembling the lesson plans they need every week in the classroom. As Montgomery and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Anderson 2011; Fiske and Dupree 2014; and Peat 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Chang 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Montgomery and Rupp 2005; Chang 2015.

Rupp (2005) note, “K-12 teachers face an array of stressors, yet are provided with few resources with which to alleviate them. Surveys indicate that K-12 teachers report experiencing a moderate to high level of stress, and ample evidence documents the causes and consequences of stress in teaching.” This has led to a demand for creative, wide-ranging, ready-to-use lesson plans—a demand so great that it has spurred a lesson plan market that brings in millions of dollars every year. A single lesson plan website, TeachersPayTeachers, has done well over \$150 million in sales in a decade,<sup>5</sup> and individual lesson plan authors have earned as much as \$1 million by creating and selling lesson plans online.<sup>67</sup> But, since teachers typically have to pay for lesson plans out of pocket, the demand for high-quality free lesson plans is potentially even greater. This creates an opportunity where a subject matter expert can create a simple, easy-to-follow lesson plan and extend the reach of ideas based on his or her research to thousands of young students.

## 2 WHY CREATE K-12 MATERIALS?

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To anyone working outside of the K-12 education system, the prospect of designing a lesson plan can sound like a difficult, time-consuming project, or one that is restricted to professional textbook publishers. Neither is true. Although modern educational practices are the result of extensive research, testing, and implementation experience,<sup>8</sup> the actual format for a lesson plan is simple and easy to follow. In fact, we have found that a high-quality lesson plan can be produced in less than a week of writing time for a typical university professor.

Our purpose in writing this article is not just to recommend, but to demystify the process of making lesson plans. It is our goal that more subject matter experts in all disciplines will create high quality, meaningful lesson plans and distribute them to teachers (ideally, for free). To encourage this, we will:

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<sup>5</sup> Cummings 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Savidge 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The authors are not affiliated with any lesson plan website and have no commercial interest in promoting the selling of lesson plans.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Glatthorn, Jailall, and Jailall 2017.

- Define what a lesson plan is and how teachers use them,
- Offer a simple template and detailed instruction on making strong lesson plans,
- Simplify the process of fitting a lesson plan to state standards and distributing it to educators, and
- Use a lesson plan of our own as a case study in the impact expert knowledge can have.

Creating K-12 materials is not the primary responsibility of most researchers and subject matter experts. However, it represents a powerful new tool in the arsenal of any expert who has valuable information worth spreading. By creating and distributing a lesson plan, the expert contributes to a true win-win situation: undersupplied teachers have new, high quality materials to use in their classrooms; students gain lessons based on cutting-edge research; and the expert has the ability to reach more laypeople than ever before, at crucial stages of learning and development. Seen in this light, lesson plans are not just a platform for finding a larger audience. They are a way to create a more informed, more civically engaged, more thoughtful next generation of citizens.

### 3 THE DNA OF A LESSON PLAN

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It helps to first define what we mean when we refer to a “lesson plan.” Lesson plans are typically short, designed to be taught in a single classroom session (less than one hour), or perhaps over the course of several sessions. Experts do not have to create a full curriculum to spread their ideas: a curriculum implies a much longer, semester- or year-long plan of topics to cover. Most teachers have no use for this; their curriculum is mandated by the state or district with some guidance by local officials, principals, or department heads. What they desperately need, on the other hand, are individual classroom lessons on topics that *fit* the curriculum. Some teachers seek out particularly engaging, novel, or creative lesson plans to “breathe life” into a stock curriculum, so to speak. It is these short, one-off lessons that can be powerful carriers for new ideas.

The lesson plan itself is a self-contained document aimed at the teacher, not at the students. Brevity is key because the teacher may need to absorb the lesson in a single prep

session. The teacher will read through the plan, decide if and how to implement it, and then teach the lesson in his or her own words. It helps tremendously to provide extras that can be used in class: an illustration, a worksheet, a short PowerPoint slideshow, or a video can all be useful. Ultimately, however, it is up to the teacher whether they use any of these aids. They may simply prefer to write on the board or make visuals of their own.

Today's lesson plans typically follow a three-part structure, and may be as short as three to five pages. An expert may be concerned, quite legitimately, that this is simply too little space to teach meaningful concepts. We have found the opposite to be true: this format is used precisely because it is effective at taking a single new idea and getting it to "stick" with a majority of students. The lesson moves from hooking the idea into what students already know, to exploring it together as a class, to getting them to practice or explain the idea in their own words. The result is that students can and do pass the idea to others (such as parents), and may remember the idea and think about it long-term.

There are clearly limits to this approach, of course. Lesson plans are well suited to a single concept or practice taken from a larger body of research. They cannot transmit large theoretical concepts or nuanced layers of meaning. Making an effective lesson plan depends on identifying core concepts from research and distilling them down to an engaging, relatable insight. The next section will help make that process easier by giving step-by-step guidance in creating a successful lesson plan.

## Outline of a Lesson Plan

### Introduction:

- Tells the teacher, in one sentence, what the lesson plan is about
- Clearly shows the intended audience—what class subject and grade level (or range)
- 1 page max

### 1. Anticipatory Set (“What do students already know?”)

- Helps teacher connect the lesson to existing student knowledge
- Provides the teacher with a strong hook for students, such as:
  - Intriguing opening question
  - Asking students what they know about the topic
- 1 page max

### 2. Introducing New Material (“The Lesson”)

- Interactive or discussion-based formats are preferred over lectures
- Provide the teacher with key takeaways and discussion outline/talking points
- Teachers appreciate images, videos, and handouts they can use in-class
- 1-2 pages

### 3. Practice and Implementation

- **Guided Practice:**
  - Teacher-led activities (1 page)
- **Independent Practice:**
  - Group or individual projects; provide several options (1 page)

### Supplementary Materials:

- Where possible, include extra material teachers can use in-class or on their own
- Essay contests may help spur interest from teachers
- Visual aids should be aimed at K-12, not reproduced from college-level handouts

## 4 HOW TO MAKE AN EFFECTIVE LESSON PLAN

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Lesson plans as described above open with a short introduction (for the teacher) and then follow a three-part format:

1. **Introducing the topic.** Also known as the “Anticipatory” section, this section focuses on asking the students what they already know, or tying the topic to things with which they’re familiar. The more engaging the “hook” is, the better.
2. **Introducing new material.** This is the “lesson” part, where the central idea is taught; the new material is introduced to the students in this section. In contrast to a fair amount of university education practices, an actual lecture-style lesson is uncommon. Interactive or discussion-based teaching suggestions are highly valuable.
3. **Practice and implementation.** This typically includes “guided practice,” where the teacher and students practice the material together—for example, by answering multiple-choice questions as a group—as well as “independent practice,” where students use the new material individually or in small groups, perhaps by roleplay, group presentations, essays, or video projects. Specific project ideas increase the value of the lesson plan.

Finally, the lesson plan may conclude with an appendix for handouts, visuals, or teaching aids, although this is optional; as well as links to supplementary background material that the teacher themselves can read to prepare.

How effective a lesson plan is (and indeed, how likely a teacher is to even use it) depends on how well these core sections are crafted, and whether they meet the teacher’s needs. For this reason, it’s extremely useful to get feedback on the draft lesson plan from even just a few actual teachers. Creating the draft itself, however, is not hard—anyone accustomed to writing at an academic level or preparing college lessons is capable of doing it. To show how, we’ll look at each section in detail.



## 4.1 THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction is purely for the teacher. It tells the teacher what the lesson is about, what curriculum subjects it supports, and what grade level it aims to serve. This can be accomplished in as little as two paragraphs:

1. **An introduction to the core idea.** For example, “The word ‘hero’ is used many different ways. However, all the real-life people we call heroes have one thing in common: *they make a sacrifice or take a risk for the sake of others.*” This introduction should pique the teacher’s interest and express exactly what new insight or habit the students will gain. Distill the idea into a single sentence that the teacher could use if a colleague asked, “What’s this lesson plan about?”
2. **Identifying who the lesson is for.** A teacher should be able to tell at a glance what grade level the lesson is aimed at, and what subject matter it hooks into. For example, our heroism lesson plan was designed to support “English Language Arts” curriculum, at the grade 6-12 level. We went a step farther by stating the specific outcomes our lesson plan helps achieve for students.

Neither grade level nor curriculum subject are difficult to determine. For grade level, many states divide up grades into cohorts of K-5 and 6-12. As a general rule, the younger the age group, the more the topic needs to be simplified. In the case of ethical and pro-social topics, for example, younger grades are likely to focus on basic concepts like sharing and cooperation, while older grades can wrestle with more reflective topics. Similarly, topics that require some knowledge of history may be better suited to older grade levels who have already taken years of history courses. For example, a lesson plan on identity politics could be more effective with students who already understand the Civil Rights movement.

Similarly, we found that tying our lesson plan into a curriculum area was much simpler than expected. While every state has a set of curriculum standards, many states make these available online. Furthermore, the majority of states now align with national standards, so a lesson plan adhering to these standards can be used in most states. This topic deserves detailed treatment, and is discussed in the “Hurdles” section below.

Finally, if needed, one may also include several paragraphs that give the teacher background on the topic and help them understand the aims of the lesson—i.e., what

specifically the students will learn. In most cases, the entire section should be less than one page (often a single paragraph).

## 4.2 PART 1: THE “ANTICIPATORY” SET – INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

This section will typically be one page at most, or simply fill out the same page as the introduction. It explains to the teacher how he or she can introduce the topic in class, and how to get students excited about it. As such, offering a strong hook is the most important part: why will the students care when the teacher first mentions the topic?

There are at least two types of hooks that work well:

1. **Leading with a problem or question.** For example, “How many of you ever feel sad?” “Where does food go when you throw it away?” At a higher grade level, perhaps for a lesson plan on identity politics, the teacher might start by mentioning the Civil Rights movement and then ask, “Do you think there is still racial inequality today?”
2. **Asking students what they already know.** In our heroism lesson plan, for example, we suggest simply asking the students who their heroes are. The teacher can write every hero on the board, using the students’ own excitement to build up the lesson.

The key to any lesson plan introduction is that it ties in to what students already know, or works to draw out their existing knowledge or experiences. As any educator well knows, this is fundamental to building interest amongst students in any topic, as it highlights the ways in which students are already connected with the themes of the lesson plan. The lesson cannot begin with a declaration or lecture; it has to begin with the students themselves.

Once the students are hooked, the introduction segues to presenting the core concept. In the heroism lesson plan, we suggested the teacher use the list of heroes the students created and ask, “What do all of these heroes have in common?” We included some guidance on how to nudge students in the right direction. Ideally, the students themselves would suggest something close to the definition at the heart of the lesson plan: “A hero is someone who makes a sacrifice or takes a risk for the sake of others.” Only then does the teacher write that “official” definition on the board.

### 4.3 PART 2: CONTROLLED LEARNING

This section is typically one to two pages and contains the “meat” of the new information that a subject expert wants students to absorb. It is the closest thing to a lecture that a contemporary lesson plan contains, but teachers are encouraged to avoid outright lecturing, and to use more interactive teaching styles. As such, the author of a lesson plan might offer one line or paragraph with the takeaway of the lesson, and then an outline or set of talking points to touch upon.

Different teachers will implement a lesson plan in different ways. Some might hold an open discussion with students and work in the main points of the lesson as they go. Some might talk through multiple choice questions with the class as a group, letting students guess out loud at the answers. Others might use a more lecture-style approach or create their own teaching aids (a story, a slideshow, etc.) to make the lesson engaging. It’s helpful to provide information on how to use several different methods to convey the core idea, so that teachers can choose what works best in their class.

Our lesson included three different types of material in this section:

1. **A set of four talking points to guide the lesson:** why people don’t always do the heroic thing (even though they want to); what exactly holds them back; how to overcome that; and a real-life example that students can relate to.
2. **A set of questions to lead an open-ended classroom discussion.** Questions focused on times when students saw people act as bystanders rather than heroes, and what responses they (or anyone) could have tried that would have changed the situation.
3. **Specific practices to be ready to act heroically.** These steps were based on habits that psychologists find are common among people who chose to take risks to help others.

We also provided a link to a TEDx video about our topic, but this was meant as a resource for the teachers themselves; it was not something designed to be shown in class.

### 4.4 PART 3: PRACTICE AND IMPLEMENTATION

This section gives the teacher specific projects for the class to do. The purpose of all of these projects is for the students to either recall the concepts they were taught and

apply them on their own, or to implement the specific concept they just learned about.

For example:

- If the lesson taught something conceptual, like positive psychology, students might do a project and present it in their own words.
- If the lesson is centered on a habit, like composting, students might now actually build a composting box as a group.

The best lesson plans provide the teacher with several different activities or projects; the teacher can choose from among these activities or integrate all of them into the classroom over time. Again, teachers may not use *any* of the proffered suggestions, and may design something completely on their own. However, since many teachers lack adequate preparation time, much of the value of a lesson plan is that it provides concrete projects they can use. Offering several types of projects increases the value of the lesson.

Types of projects to consider include:

- Building a model related to the lesson, so students can demonstrate how it works;
- Writing a creative story based on the core concept;
- Making videos (students could be “reporters” reporting on the topic, or they could make mini-movies acting out a problem and solution from the core concept, for example);
- Writing personal essays of their own experience with the topic;
- Working in small groups to give class presentations (each group can choose or be assigned a sub-topic related to the central theme);
- Roleplaying a scenario where students can implement what they’ve learned; or
- Taking a hypothetical scenario and brainstorming ways to respond to it.

The lesson plan only has to provide the basic details of these projects. Teachers run projects every week, and they know how to tailor them to meet their students’ needs. The most helpful thing that lesson plan authors can do in this section is to offer several different *types* of activities: for example, one group activity and one individual activity, one that involves writing and one that’s more visual. The more options a lesson plan provides to teachers, the better.

In the heroism lesson plan, we gave three project suggestions:

1. **An individual activity** where students took a real problem in their school and chose one heroic action that could help solve it (presented in an essay, a PowerPoint presentation, a video, and so on).
2. **A group activity** where students are given a hypothetical bullying situation and brainstormed heroic responses. Each group presented their favorite idea to the larger class.
3. **A field trip suggestion** where the class could attend our event, the Hero Round Table, a conference dedicated to teaching people how to be heroes. We included a worksheet/activity teachers could use if attending the conference.

If lesson plan authors do include extras like worksheets, we recommend putting them in an appendix at the end and keeping this section short.

#### 4.5 ADDING EXTRAS TO A LESSON PLAN

Some lesson plans are very short with no supplementary materials, while others include handouts, visuals, and other “extras” the teacher can use in class. Informally, we asked a small number of teachers what they prefer, and they said they appreciate having the “extras.” While we certainly cannot generalize beyond this small, anecdotal sample, we believe it makes good sense to conclude that extras serve as useful resources that teachers do not have to make on their own, and teachers can easily choose not to use them if they deem them not to be helpful or necessary.

For this reason, we recommend including any extra materials the lesson plan might call for that will be useful in the classroom. This can include:

- Full color images the teacher can print out or put up on a screen,
- Simple worksheets or handouts for the students,
- A small number of visual aids, such as charts or illustrations—*if* these are appropriate to the grade level,
- A video to show in class, or
- A slideshow the teacher can use.

It’s worth noting that academic or college-level materials do not work well in a K-12 environment. The same charts or slideshows that professors might use in teaching

undergraduate students may not be useful at all in high school or below. Teachers in K-12 schools are not only working with younger students, they also face tougher time constraints and an urgent need to make all lessons engaging. In our lesson plan, for example, we borrowed (with permission) several pages of a children’s book that features profiles of real-life heroes and caricatured portraits. The profiles were written in a voice meant for grade school, and the portraits made the material visually engaging and fun.

Supplementary materials can also include resources meant for teachers: for example, further background reading, FAQs, or opportunities for their students. Our lesson plan included:

- A short list of tough questions students may ask about heroes (like, “isn’t one person’s hero another person’s villain?”) and suggested answers, as well as ways to turn these questions into a larger discussion.
- A link to a TedX talk from a leading heroism expert.
- An essay contest offered by our non-profit organization. The top essays could win free tickets to our Hero Round Table conference not only for themselves, but for their entire class, providing a strong incentive for teachers to have their students enter.<sup>9</sup>

It would also be appropriate to add links to one or more articles the teacher can read for background, such as think-pieces, a journalist’s summary of research, or an academic article if freely available online. (Resources that are free and easy to access are especially useful to teachers.)

## 5 HURDLES: MAKING A LESSON PLAN FIT REQUIRED CURRICULUM

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When we first considered launching a lesson plan based on our work, the most daunting prospect was getting it to be “accepted” or fit into the curricula used by schools. As it turns out, there is no formal approval process for the day-to-day lesson

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<sup>9</sup> The Hero Construction Company (HCC), an educational non-profit on whose Board of Directors the authors both serve, hosts an annual conference each fall. Along with members of the general public, area school groups attend the conference each year at a discounted rate. This Hero Round Table conference has expanded to include annual national and international events, though the HCC is involved only in the original annual event. The authors have no commercial interests in either the Hero Round Table conferences or the Hero Construction Company.

plans teachers use. A typical public school in the U.S. will follow a set of standards mandated by the state, or increasingly, will simply align their curricula with national standards. These standards set forth the specific subject areas to be taught and proficiencies that must be attained at different grade levels.<sup>10</sup> These standards are then supported with standardized textbooks, which are also approved by the state. But using the textbooks is only a part of what happens in daily classroom teaching. Teachers can and do use outside lesson plans that are not state-reviewed in any way. Therefore, it may be helpful, but not necessary, to tie the lesson plan to specific curriculum standards.

In speaking to teachers, we learned that the exact level of freedom a teacher has can vary. Some schools (or departments or grade levels within a school) are more strict, and exert some level of oversight on the lesson plans used. Others strongly encourage teachers to seek out new and varied lesson plans. Overall, the trend in education is that greater creativity, and greater teacher innovation, are encouraged.<sup>11</sup>

This arrangement means that an expert can very easily make his or her lesson plan “fit” with required curriculum as long as he or she can connect it to one of the core lesson areas that schools must teach. For example, we matched our initial heroism lesson to the English Language Arts. A lesson plan about critical thinking might match to Science, as one needs critical thinking skills to draw good conclusions from data—or indeed, to devise meaningful experimental designs at all.

Meanwhile, a lesson about gender privilege could easily match to History, attaching to curriculum on the early Suffragette movement, the Civil Rights era or the present day. Many states have subcategories of these topics which may be even more fitting. In each of these examples, the lesson offers something that wouldn’t be found in the textbook, and goes beyond the required curriculum. But in doing so, each topic also shines a light back onto the required topic and deepens understanding. Any lesson plan that can check both of these boxes—a clear connection to state standards, but an innovative look beyond them—will, we suggest, find an audience with teachers.

If a lesson plans does attach to a specific subject area from state or national standards, it is worth using that subject as a touchstone in writing the lesson plan itself, and showcasing the connection to standards in the introduction. However, not all lesson plans go to this length. Many will simply state that the lesson is intended for “English,” “Math,” and so on at a specific grade range. If there is a clear tie to a subject that K-12

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<sup>10</sup> A list of these standards, by subject, is available free at: [educationworld.com/standards/](http://educationworld.com/standards/)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Blase and Blase 2001; Griffiths 2014; Collard and Looney 2014; and Williams and Hayler 2016

schools teach, there is no need to call out specific state standards at all.

## 6 DISTRIBUTION: GETTING A LESSON PLAN INTO THE RIGHT HANDS (AND MINDS)

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While writing a lesson plan is a simple adaptation of existing academic writing skills, actually getting the lesson out to teachers can be much more daunting. Currently, we are not aware of any central, large-scale distribution channel for free lesson plans. However, we have identified several ways to spread lesson plans without such a channel. These include:

- **Releasing it though a non-profit.** If the author of the lesson plan already works with a non-profit organization related to the topic, or with any educational organization, he or she has access to whatever network or audience this non-profit serves. Depending on the nature of the organization, it could be possible to release it together as a joint project, or simply send it to the organization’s existing email list. (This can be particularly useful if the organization is also willing to sponsor an essay contest with a cash prize.)
- **Emailing teachers directly.** Many states have listings of contact information for all public-school teachers, including email addresses. Since our heroism plan initially had a geographic focus, we made an email list of all teachers in our target counties, introduced our organization, and offered the lesson plan for free. This was very successful, and we heard immediately from teachers eager to use the lesson. Of course, we offered an “unsubscribe” link in all emails and were careful to use this list only a few times—there is no benefit from becoming a spammer.
- **Spreading the word through teachers’ groups on social media.** Increasingly, teachers use social media and opt-in email lists to share their own lesson plans with each other. A simple search of Facebook returns groups dedicated to every kind of lesson plan exchange: high school, kindergarten, English as a Second Language, and many more. These pages have anywhere from 2,000 to 86,000 members, and many have guidelines for posting lesson plans others can use. Likewise, the website [lessonplanspage.com](http://lessonplanspage.com) offers free signup for anyone who wants to share, download, or review free lesson plans. This approach has a marked advantage because the teachers who use these sites are already actively looking for new lessons. (Note: we do not have any affiliation with any of the



sites mentioned here.)

- **Starting small and local, and letting the word spread.** If the lesson author already knows any K-12 teachers, or if his or her work has a local focus, it can be worthwhile to simply ask one or two teachers to try out the lesson plan and give feedback. If they like it, they will help spread the word and may have ideas of their own on how to push it out.

The audience for these efforts is teachers, not principals. While some principals are active in supporting their teachers' classroom needs, it is the teachers themselves who need the lesson plans and who carry the burden of preparing each day's lesson. Teachers routinely seek out new material to use in class, whereas a lesson plan sent to principals may or may not ever be shared with their staff.

## 7 CASE STUDY: CREATING HEROISM IN SCHOOLS

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As a case study, we present our own lesson plan, "Helping Kids Become Heroes: Creating a Culture of Heroism in Your School."<sup>12</sup> This lesson plan began through our work with a non-profit, the Hero Construction Company (HCC). The HCC is engaged in the vital work of taking cutting-edge research in psychology, as well as political science, literature, and history, and turning it into an evidence-based method of teaching people to be heroes. Its mission, simply put, is that whenever a disaster or emergency happens, the people nearby should understand how to act heroically rather than simply being bystanders. However, the organization had a problem: its current methods of teaching heroism (including a series of conferences and in-school trainings) were resource intensive. We saw lesson plans as a potential solution. We used this first lesson plan as a pilot to test out whether teachers could instill the fundamentals of heroism without our direct involvement.

### 7.1 CREATING THE LESSON PLAN

Creating the lesson plan was not nearly as challenging as we thought it would be:

- We completed it in approximately 15 hours of work;

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<sup>12</sup> Available for free at: <http://tinyurl.com/herolesson1>

- The lesson plan itself was 8 pages long;
- It was tied directly to the “English Language Arts” core curriculum standard that grade 6-12 teachers are required to teach;
- The lesson included multiple options for group activities and individual projects, as well as a worksheet if teachers chose to bring their students to our Hero Round Table conference, which is held during each Fall Semester; and
- We included two supplements: a worksheet and eight pages of illustrated profiles of real heroes

We wrote and formatted this lesson in Microsoft Word and simply exported it as a print-ready PDF for distribution. Before releasing it, we invited several K-12 teachers to review it and give us their feedback — this is an invaluable step which can dramatically improve even a strong lesson plan. We made changes based on the teachers’ feedback.

## **7.2 DISTRIBUTING THE LESSON**

We made an intentional choice to distribute our lesson plan for free, in keeping with the mission of our non-profit, to maximize accessibility.

We distributed it using two main methods:

- We made it available for download through the HCC’s existing email list, which includes a large number of educators, and the HCC promoted this effort through social media; and
- We made a new email list of teachers from the publicly available contact information in counties near our educational conference. Working for approximately five hours, a volunteer was able to make an email list of over 8,000 teachers. Every one of these teachers taught within easy field trip distance of the conference.

## **7.3 RESULTS**

When releasing a lesson plan “into the wild,” it can be hard to directly track how many classrooms implement it. However, we got the following quantitative and qualitative markers of its impact:

1. The lesson plan was downloaded by teachers 838 times in the four-week period after it was sent out.
2. Within days of the email, we had already received excited feedback from teachers, expressing their intention to use it.
3. At least two teachers *outside* of our list (in other states) used the lesson plan, indicating that teachers shared it with other teachers.
4. The response from all teachers was extremely positive, indicating that they found the plan useful, well made, and engaging in the classroom.

These numbers represent a small beginning. Within two months, we had offered a revised and updated version of the lesson plan, and it is now being further revised to be available on a nationwide basis. We expect to use the social media groups mentioned above to share the lesson plan directly with interested teachers. The response has been so positive that the organization has also asked us to do a full series of these lessons, targeting different grade levels and different aspects of heroism research.

The most important outcome, however, is taking valuable findings about heroism out of universities and into the community. Prior to our lesson plan, the body of evidence-based heroism research was a highly specialized academic interest. Although there were heroism programs available for schools, most were either motivational in nature (rather than evidence-based) or were too expensive for many schools to afford. Now, teachers have access to some of the most important findings in an easy-to-use format. More students will have firsthand experience with something that only academics previously understood. This on its own is an important step, to say nothing of any potential good that's done as more young people choose to be heroes rather than bystanders.<sup>13</sup>

That's not to say that our lesson plan couldn't have had more impact. In the future, we plan to do follow-up with more teachers who have used the plan and solicit their feedback. Ideally, we would even find out what impact the lesson had in classrooms, although this would take in-depth research of its own.

The potential of this small beginning can be seen in another lesson plan, created by faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, to teach human rights at a high school

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<sup>13</sup> This point builds on research by Ari Kohen, Matt Langdon, and Brian Riches (2017) that suggests the importance of cultivating a heroic imagination in making it more likely that individuals will take heroic action should the need arise. By encouraging students to think about their heroes and about how they would act in a situation requiring heroism, this lesson plan has the potential to create that experience for many students at once, thereby substantially increasing the number of people who are primed for heroic action.

level.<sup>14</sup> First released in 2007, the lesson plan's web page consistently draws more than 3,000 views per month and has been adopted and promoted by a human rights non-profit. The lesson, and thus the concept of human rights as an active, difficult ethical issue in our world today, has now been taught to many thousands of students around the country and around the globe.

## 8 CONCLUSION

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Nearly 40 years ago, Isaac Asimov wrote that the United States suffers from “a cult of ignorance” where experts are spurned and expertise is rejected.<sup>15</sup> Anyone watching news headlines today would be forgiven for thinking the cult has now become an international phenomenon. But within our society there is a class of professionals who continue to eagerly seek out new knowledge and new ways to present it to our children. Any researcher or expert who has found deaf ears for his or her work should be aware that there are millions more that might listen—and help others to hear.

Certainly, at this early stage, our experiment with passing expertise to K-12 teachers remains incomplete. We have yet to harness the distribution power of social media channels and curriculum exchange websites. We would like to see how far our message will go in K-12 schools and what pitfalls we encounter as we expand its reach. Then we would like to document the impact of these lessons with a broader set of metrics, including the number of students reached, the rate at which teachers choose to repeat the lesson plans in school years, and the qualitative experience of the teachers and the students. Above all we would like to assess whether our particular subject matter gets internalized by students and translates to behavior. Determining that will be a slow process, and one that would be difficult if our lessons weren't attached to an educational non-profit. Until this kind of assessment is performed, there remain questions about the full impact of the lesson plan.

We do know, however, that lesson plans are in high demand, and that teachers have both the freedom and the desire to choose those that bring new and exciting topics into class. We also know that a disconnect exists between emerging academic research and the material taught in standardized K-12 curricula. Creating lesson plans that come

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<sup>14</sup> Available for free at: <http://tinyurl.com/unlhrlessons>

<sup>15</sup> Asimov 1980.

straight from the experts is a powerful way to close that gap.

With 50.4 million children attending K-12 schools in the U.S.,<sup>16</sup> it would be a mistake to assume that experts have no way to influence the masses. Lesson plans give these children the opportunity to absorb vital knowledge that, in many cases, neither their parents nor their lawmakers have read in the news. By creating even one short lesson plan, a researcher gets a podium in dozens or hundreds of classrooms. This is a level of access that no other medium allows; it has the potential to spread not only individual ideas, but a shift in how Americans view specialized knowledge—as something familiar, useful, and trusted. Any expert who wants his or her ideas to live outside of the university campus would do well to explore this platform. Indeed, if we care about the quality of democratic participation and public dialogue, we cannot afford not to.

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<sup>16</sup> National Center for Education Statistics 2016

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## 10 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*

## 11 APPENDIX

# Helping Kids Become Heroes

## Create a Culture of Heroism in Your School

This lesson plan is designed to support English Language Arts curriculum at the grade 6-12 level. By using this lesson in class, you help your students:

- **Communicate** by working to define a difficult word (“hero”) used many ways
- **Reason & think critically** by developing their own theory of what heroism is
- **Solve problems** by applying the principles of heroism to real-life problems in their school

Most importantly, **this lesson teaches children how to be heroes.** It is based on groundbreaking psychology research<sup>1</sup> and a modern, evidence-based approach to creating real heroism.

We believe that this curriculum will help your students be more responsible, proactive, and community- minded. It is our hope that thousands of students will internalize what it means to be a hero, and will go on to make a difference in the lives of others.

To get more lesson plans & info on hero training, join our teacher list: [heroconstruction.org/ mailing](http://heroconstruction.org/ mailing)

*“All heroes have one thing in common: they make a sacrifice or take a risk for the sake of others.”*

## Introduction for Teachers

The word “hero” is used many different ways. However, all the real-life people we call heroes have one thing in common: **they make a sacrifice or take a risk for the sake of others.** This makes heroism different from other sorts of moral behavior, like donating to a charity or volunteering for a good cause. Volunteers and donors do good work, but in most cases they don’t have to make a deep sacrifice or take a risk.

The lesson has three objectives:

1. Help students understand that a hero makes a sacrifice for others
2. Identify examples of this kind of heroism that students are familiar with (their heroes)
3. Help students understand *how someone becomes a hero*, and what it takes to do the heroic thing in a difficult situation

We’ve also included two supplements at the end: a list of tough questions students ask (and some ways to help answer them) and visual handouts of some real-life heroes you can use as examples.

<sup>1</sup> For a terrific overview of the research, we recommend the book *What Makes a Hero? The Surprising Science of Selflessness* by Elizabeth Svoboda.



# I. What Do Your Students Know about Heroes?

Every student already has their own ideas about what a hero is. The easiest way to get them thinking critically about heroism is to simply ask them to name heroes of their own. Start with this brainstorming exercise:

1. **Ask your students who they think of as a hero.** Get responses from around the room and write them on the blackboard/whiteboard as you go.
2. **Accept any answer.** Right now we're in brainstorm mode. There is no right or wrong answer. You can accept fictional characters, historic figures, celebrities or anyone else they name.
3. **Guide students.** We've noticed that when you ask, "Who is *your* hero?" you get personal answers like Grandpa, my mom, and so on. If you ask, "Who is *a* hero?" you get more famous examples like Harry Potter or Martin Luther King, Jr. If the list on the board is mostly personal heroes, you can guide your students by asking, "Who are some heroes you know of from history class?" or "Who are some heroes in your favorite movies?"

Once you have about 20 names on the board, it's time to ask students the big question:

**“What characteristics do these heroes have in common?”**

This may stump your students at first. If needed, explain that you're looking for what *makes* these people heroes, or what the students admire about them.

As your students give answers, write them down on the chalkboard as well. You'll get a wide variety of answers—everything from “they're strong!” to “they care about people.” As you write down these answers, start to look for responses that get at our definition of a real-life hero: *someone who makes a sacrifice or takes a risk for the sake of others.*

Once you have about 10 characteristics written on the board, you might already see students leaning in this direction. If you don't, it's okay. Try asking them: “Do you think it's easy for these people to be heroes?” Students will know the answer is no. From here, you can ask other open-ended questions:

- “What's the hardest thing these heroes had to do?”
- “Why did these heroes do what they did, if it's not easy?”

This will get students thinking about the *cost* of being a hero: the sacrifice or risk involved. At this point, you can summarize what they've said with our working definition of heroism, and write it on the board:

*A hero is someone who makes a sacrifice or takes a risk for the sake of others.*

## II. Teaching Kids about Heroism

The heart of the lesson is understanding what makes a person do something heroic. All of us have a natural instinct *not* to be the first person to take action in a bad situation. We would rather keep our heads down and wait for someone else to act. This is known as the Bystander Effect. Learning to overcome the Bystander Effect is the most important part of learning to be a hero.

### Talking Points

Here are talking points you can use in teaching your students about heroism:

- **The opposite of a hero is not a villain, it's a bystander.**  
We've all seen something bad happen, like someone tripping and falling, or being bullied by an older kid. Usually, when this happens there are other people around—and they just watch. These people are called “bystanders.” Bystanders have a lot of power, because if they just step up and do something to help, they immediately become the hero in the situation.
- **The Bystander Effect happens because no one wants to be the *first* person to act.**  
When lots of people witness something bad, but no one steps forward to do anything, that's the Bystander Effect. Usually, everyone there *wants* to help; they just don't want to be the first one to do it. The Bystander Effect is what holds us back from being someone else's hero.
- **If you decide to be the first person to act, you'll often find that others join in and help you.**  
It can be scary to be the first one to take action. But you usually won't be alone. Other people will feel more comfortable helping once they see that they're not the only ones. You just have to get over the initial fear of being the first one to act.
- **Even small actions can make a big difference.**  
Think about what makes a difference in real-life situations. If you see someone trip and fall, most bystanders just watch or even laugh. You can be the one who asks the person if they're okay.

### Further Material

In preparing for the lesson, you may also find it helpful to watch [the TedX talk by Matt Langdon](http://tinyurl.com/herotalk) (tinyurl.com/herotalk), educator and founder of the Hero Round Table. Langdon's talk gives a detailed explanation of how he teaches kids to be heroes.

## Discussion Questions

It may help your students to have an open-ended discussion about the ideas being presented. Here are some questions you can use to get a discussion going:

1. Can you think of some examples where people acted as bystanders?
2. What could those people have done differently?
3. Have you ever been a bystander?
4. Can you think of a situation where taking a small action would make a big difference?
5. Can you explain a time when you did this?

## Practicing to Be a Hero

You can also tell your students that there are specific things they can do to “train” to be heroes:

- **Become comfortable standing out.** Wear something funny to school, or do something that makes you uncomfortable, like singing a song in front of everyone at recess. This will make it easier to be the first one to act—and stand out—when a hero is needed
- **Pay attention to how other people are feeling.** The best way to be ready to be a hero is to notice when something is wrong. If a friend looks sad or upset, ask them if they want to talk. If someone needs help, like looking for something they lost, volunteer to help them out.
- **Compliment people.** If you like someone’s shoes, or backpack, or t-shirt—tell them. When you look for ways to compliment people, you will be more aware of how they feel and what they need.
- **Imagine yourself being a hero.** When you watch a movie or read a book, imagine being the main character. What would *you* do in their situation?

Often, no special training is needed to be a hero. Simply stepping forward and trying to help sets a powerful example, and can make a difference in many situations.

### III. Applying Heroism to the Real World

Here are two different projects you can use with your students to help them apply what they've learned to real-life situations.

1. **Group activity:**

Break the class into groups of 4-5 students. Give the class the following scenario:

“You’re coming into school and you see three older kids bullying a younger kid. They’re making fun of his hair and one even pushes him. The bullies are older than you, and you don’t see any adults or teachers around. What can you do?”

Each group should take about 10-15 minutes to brainstorm as many different ways to help as possible. They should write down all their ideas. Then, ask each group to choose their 1 favorite idea. Each group will take turns presenting their solution to the bullying scenario.

2. **Individual activity:**

Ask each student to choose a problem they’ve seen in school. They should do an individual project that explains the problem and suggests one heroic action that could solve it. The project could be a short essay, a PowerPoint presentation, a video or a different format.

If you want to give students sample problems, here are three to use:

- A new student transfers into the school halfway through the year. They don’t have any friends, and some students pick on them because they’re new.
- The school has recycling bins, but a lot of students don’t use them, and lots of recyclable bottles and cans get thrown out.
- The most popular item at lunch is pizza, but sometimes it runs out halfway through lunch. A lot of kids wait in line but never get it.

## Supplement I: Tough Questions & Answers

Heroism is a complex subject and sometimes students will ask difficult questions, especially at higher grade levels. This kind of discussion is good, because it gets students thinking critically, but it can also be hard for the teacher. Below, we give some of the most common “tough” questions and some possible answers. We also offer food for thought on each one, which you can use to spark further discussion.

**Q: What about terrorists? If they make a sacrifice for something they believe in, are they**

**“heroes”?** **A:** No. Although terrorists make a sacrifice, they aren’t doing it for the sake of helping others. They do it for a movement that hurts people. Terrorists believe in attacking civilians and forcing their beliefs on other people, which makes their entire cause immoral and wrong. No one who serves an immoral cause is ever a hero.

*Food for thought: Many terrorists think they’re doing something heroic. What do you think causes people who could have been heroes to become villains instead?*

**Q: Isn’t heroism subjective? Everyone has their own definition of a hero, so isn’t one person’s terrorist another person’s hero?**

**A:** No. Sometimes people call a bad person a hero, either because they have their own agenda or because they don’t understand what heroism really means. A hero is someone who makes a sacrifice *while acting in a moral way*. If the person does something immoral they cannot be a hero, even if people call them one.

When it’s unclear whether someone is a hero or a villain, or if some people call them a hero and other people call them a villain, we recommend a simple rule to tell them apart: *Does the person force their point of view on others?* If the answer is yes, they are not a hero.

*Food for thought: Sometimes bad people get called heroes, and sometimes real heroes never get recognition for what they’ve done. Is it worth it to do something heroic, if no one ever recognizes it or says thank you?*

**Q: What about everyday heroes, who do small but important acts? Are these people really heroes?**

**A:** Yes! Not every hero is going to save the world. Many will make a difference in just one or two people’s lives. If they took a risk to help someone, no matter how small the act is, it is a form of heroism.

*Food for thought: Who are some of your “everyday heroes”? What risk did these people take, or what sacrifice did they make?*

**Q: Does every hero have to fight, or risk their life?**

**A:** Absolutely not. In fact, most heroes don't fight anyone at all. Often they do something that risks their career, or their popularity, to help someone else. In other cases they do risk their lives, but not in a physical confrontation.

Here are three examples of real heroes who never fought anyone:

- **Coleen Rowley** sacrificed her career as an FBI agent by documenting how the government mishandled an investigation that could have prevented the 9/11 attacks.
- **John Lewis**, now a congressman, organized some of the most famous Civil Rights actions of the 1960s. He was one of the original Freedom Riders, led lunch counter sit-ins, and helped give birth to the Selma to Montgomery march. He knew his life was in danger because of his work, but he strictly adhered to nonviolent principles.
- **Chiune Sugihara** was a Japanese diplomat in Europe during World War II. He violated orders from his superiors and issued visas to 6,000 Jewish people, saving their lives. Sugihara knew he could lose his job and that his family could face reprisals, but he did it anyway.

***Food for thought:** What are some of the things that are most important in your life? What would it take for you to be willing to risk losing them?*

## Supplement II: Real Life Heroes



Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon

# Bayard Rustin

Bayard was raised by his grandparents in Pennsylvania. They introduced him to many people involved in the civil rights movement and he helped whenever he could. After college, he learned about pacifism and nonviolence through the words of Thoreau and Gandhi. He put it into practice by protesting separate seating on interstate buses, World War II, and segregated dining in prisons.

His first big moment came when he organized the Journey of Reconciliation to test the new laws against discrimination on interstate buses. Blacks and whites rode buses across southern America and were often beaten and arrested. This got him a lot of attention and he started working with Martin Luther King, Jr., eventually convincing him to protest nonviolently. Bayard became the obvious choice to organize the March on Washington due to his skills and successes. He accomplished all of this despite many people discriminating against him for being a gay man. He was a man of integrity and stuck with his values even when it hurt him.

**"We need in every bay and community a group of angelic troublemakers."**

Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon





Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon

# Irena Sendler

Irena was living in Warsaw, Poland during the occupation by Germany in World War II. When the Jewish people were confined to the Ghetto, she was determined to help the children, knowing that so many people were being sent to death. As an employee of the Social Welfare Department, she was allowed to enter the Jewish Ghetto. Irena built a team of people to begin saving children by smuggling them out of the Ghetto, hidden in ambulances, carts, and even sometimes disguised as packages.

Each child was given to a foster family under a different name. She kept a list of all of the children's real names buried in her garden, knowing she would need it after the war in order to reunite the children with their families. Irena's group was responsible for saving 2,500 children. In 1943, Irena was arrested by the Gestapo and tortured. She gave up no information, despite having her legs broken, and was sentenced to death. Her team saved her life by paying bribes. Irena went into hiding - listed as being executed.

**"Every child saved with my help is the justification  
of my existence on this Earth, and not a title to glory."**

Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon



Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon

# David Shepherd & Travis Price

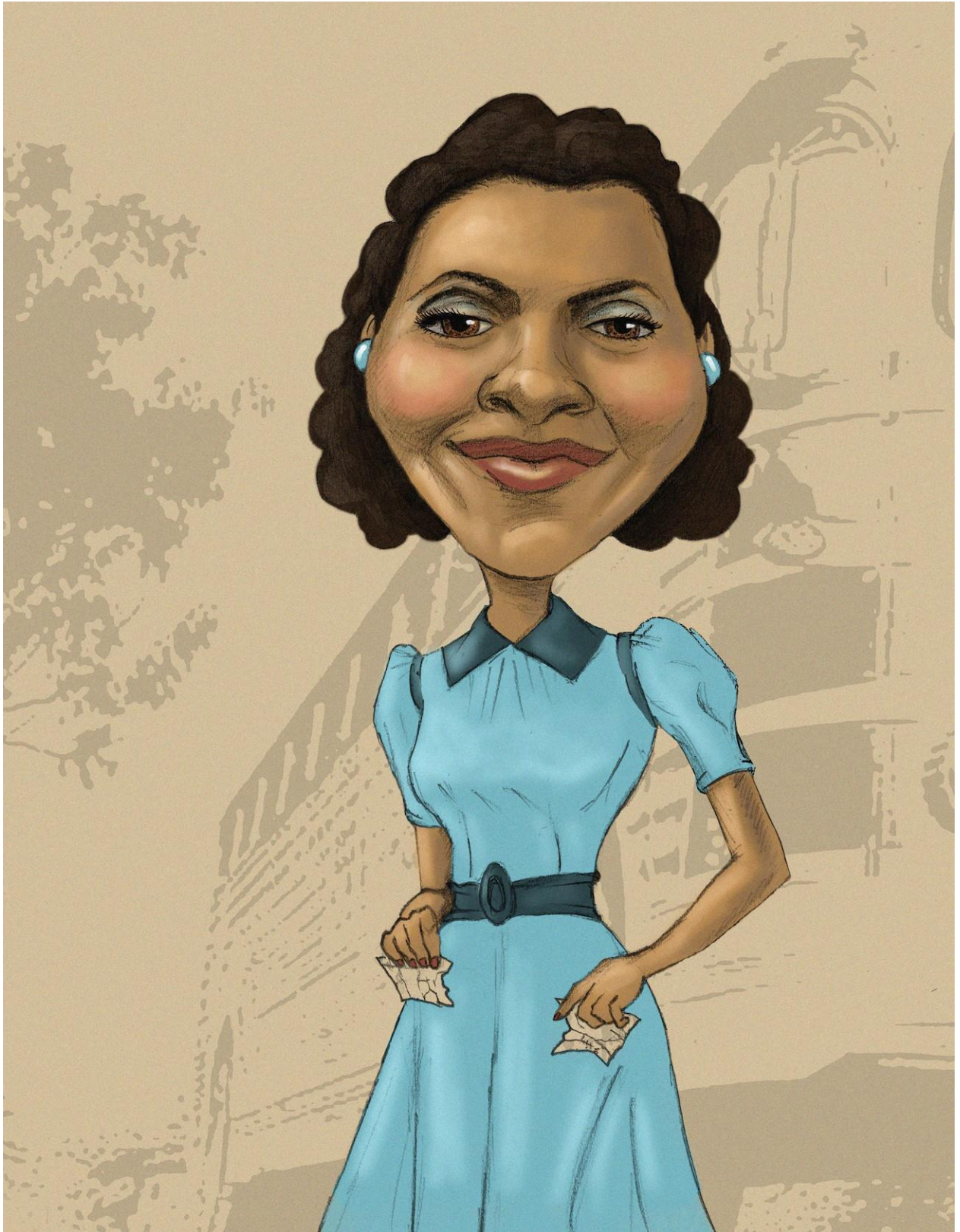
David and Travis were twelfth graders at a Canadian high school. At the end of the first day of school they heard about a ninth grade boy who had been crying. This boy had spent his first day of high school being teased by a group of twelfth graders for wearing a pink polo shirt. They had called him gay and threatened to beat him up.

David and Travis decided they would not stand for that sort of behaviour in their school. They planned to unleash a sea of pink the following day. Using the internet and their phones they urged everyone to wear something pink to school. The two boys purchased dozens of pink shirts, handing them out at the front door the next day. Out of a school of 1,000 students, 800 came in pink! When Travis and David saw the boy who had been bullied, the smile on his face rewarded them more than they could have imagined. Pink Shirt Day is now celebrated around the world every year.

**"We're not heroes,  
we're just two kids who stood up for a cause."**



Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon



Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon



# Irene Morgan

Feeling sick and tired on a bus ride to a doctor's visit, Irene refused to give up her seat to a white couple. She was already in the black half of the segregated bus. The driver drove straight to a police station, where an officer boarded the bus and gave Irene a warrant for her arrest. Irene tore up the warrant and kicked the deputy sheriff, saying she was within her rights.

She was arrested and pleaded guilty to resisting arrest, paying a \$100 fine and apologizing for her violent behavior. But she refused to pay the \$10 fine for sitting in the wrong seat. She appealed, and her case caught the attention of Thurgood Marshall, who took the case to the Supreme Court. They won. Her actions inspired others to stand up to injustice, including those on the Journey of Reconciliation led by Bayard Rustin. Eleven years later, Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat on a bus.

*"I can't see how anybody in the same circumstance could do otherwise."*

Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon