



Get Into Good Trouble!
U.S. Representative John Lewis
Atlanta, Georgia

It was a Sunday morning in 1955 when 15-year-old John Lewis turned on the radio. The voice he heard was of a man who would change his life forever. It was the voice of a young minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was giving a sermon. The words he preached that day inspired John to write a letter to Dr. King, and ask for his support.

As a sophomore in high school in Troy, Alabama, John aspired to get a good education, go to college, maybe even be the first Black youth to attend Troy State College. He knew that college was the best way for him to build a better life for himself. He'd seen how hard his parents worked every day as sharecroppers. Growing up racism and bigotry were part of his everyday life. He knew deep in his soul that something needed to change. So when he heard Dr. King on the radio that day, his powerful words resonated with what John had already been feeling all his life.

John felt fortified in his understanding that there are causes that one needs to stand up for, even if it means getting into trouble: what he called "good trouble, necessary trouble." His first formal act of protest was a petition arguing that the City Library of Troy should be open to all Black people. But what seems self-evident today didn't even get a response back then.

That fall, when he hadn't heard back from Dr. King, he decided to go to a small Black college in Nashville, Tennessee. It was then that Dr. King invited him to come for a visit, during his spring break. John vividly remembers the day he met the legendary civil rights leader for the first time. "Are you the boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis?" Dr. King said. And John answered, "I am John Robert Lewis," giving his full name. From that moment, he knew then that he wanted to follow in Dr. King's footsteps, and become active in the movement.

While in college, John became an active member of the Nashville Student Movement (NSM) and joined them in their fight for desegregating the city, as a step toward racial equality and voting rights for the Black community. Voting rights was an issue close to his heart: his great-great-grandfather was the first person in his family to vote, in 1867, just as soon as he had been freed, as part of the Reconstruction Act of 1867. It was more than a hundred years later that John Lewis was the next person in his family to exercise his right to vote.

But before they could tackle such underlying questions of power, John and his fellow activists had to turn to much more basic forms of discrimination. So, along with other NSM members, he organized sit-ins at segregated diners and department stores in Nashville. Every day at lunchtime, John and his fellow activists would gather to simply be visible in public spaces. "We *wanted* them to see us," he said. "We wanted white people, everyday citizens, everyday customers to be exposed to us, to see us as we were, not as something in their minds, in their imaginations."

As his activism made him an increasingly well-known figure in Nashville, he was invited to study nonviolent action with Rev. James Lawson at the Clark Memorial United Methodist Church. It was there that he became a dedicated believer in its fundamental principles. He then applied to be one of the first Freedom Riders—seven white and six Black activists who planned to travel together, on the same bus, from Washington DC to New Orleans. They knew that this strategic act of protest could lead to their being attacked, and that they couldn't count on local police to protect them. These brave young men and women risked their lives by just taking a bus ride to stand up against racial segregation, and in fact three of them were abducted and murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan. John knew two of them personally. Despite this horrific violence and sustained resistance to their campaign, they were ultimately successful. In 1963,

President Kennedy announced that his administration would introduce the most expansive civil rights bill the U.S. had ever seen. And John Lewis's participation in the Freedom Rides, and his being arrested 24 times for his involvement in nonviolent activism had made him a celebrity, and a beacon of hope for the Black community, especially among college students.

Buoyed by his experience, and his desire to engage many more Black youth, John Lewis became a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He rallied them to join with Dr. King, Ralph Abernathy, A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin to help organize the Civil Rights March on Washington on August 28, 1963. Hundreds of thousands of people marched that day to demand their civil and economic rights. And it was on that historic day that Dr. King's iconic "I Have A Dream" speech fed their souls.

John Lewis was the youngest speaker that day. "We are tired," he said. "We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. And then you holler, 'Be patient.' How long can we be patient? We want our freedom, and we want it now!"

As chairman of SNCC, John Lewis zeroed in on the fight to register Black people to vote. The next year, he launched the "Mississippi: Freedom Summer" campaign of 1964, to register as many Black voters as possible in order to change the balance of power. He travelled across the country, cajoling college students to get everyone they knew to register to vote so they could make their voices heard, and fight for equal rights.

Then in 1965, when Dr. King invited him to lead the march from Montgomery to Selma, Alabama, he proudly accepted this life-changing offer. Together with his fellow activists, he fearlessly crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Police in riot gear were waiting for them. When the marchers stopped in front of the police to pray, the police attacked. John Lewis was badly injured by a strike on the head, the scars of which he bore for the rest of his life.

But he and his fellow activists continued protesting the pervasive racism throughout American society. Eventually, as a politician he gained the power needed to develop laws to strengthen the voting rights he'd fought for as a young activist. He worked tirelessly on the bill that enshrined important protections against racial biases that were part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. But the bill was never passed, due to opposition in the Senate. "It makes me sad," he said. "It makes me feel like crying when people are denied their right to vote."

Until the end of his life, John Lewis continued to fight for the right to vote for all Americans. Even in his 80s, he was sought after to speak at rallies across the country. "You have been called to do something," he would tell the crowds. "The vote is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have for our democracy."

As the representative for Georgia's 5th District, he used his platform to challenge and mentor a younger generation to take over and carry on his legacy. From their work on voter suppression to issues of prison reform and police brutality, as well as the disproportionate effect of climate change on Black communities, he was proud of the young activists who are speaking up today.

Until his death in July 2020, John Lewis had lived by a simple philosophy. "When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just—say something, do something! Get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble!"

One of John Lewis's greatest joys was seeing Barack Obama become America's first Black president. At his funeral President Obama said of him that he "brought this country a little bit closer to our highest ideals. You want to honor John? Let's honor him by revitalizing the law that he was willing to die for. And naming it the John Lewis Voting Rights Act." Then he added, "But John wouldn't want us to stop there. Once we pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, we should keep marching to make it even better."

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Call to Action: VOTE: Racial inequality continues to this day, and, sadly, racism is all around us. We each have a responsibility to change this: to inform ourselves to speak up. Go out and get into good trouble! Watch the movie *Good Trouble*. Be inspired!

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