

Ruby Bridges

An Introduction to the Play



Ruby Bridges is a play in [Tacoma Arts Live's](#) Civil Rights Legacy program, a series of original, all-ages theatrical works, which explore the on-going story of American civil rights and liberties through the experiences of the nation's diverse peoples. Designed to bring to life both history and civics, each play is accompanied by study materials for varying ages. Included are both original resources and links to high quality curricula developed by Tacoma Arts Live's partners.

Historical Context

In 1960, a six-year-old's courageous steps echoed across a nation. Chosen as one of the first black students to integrate New Orleans schools, six years after *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, Ruby not only endured the shouting, taunting mass, she spent that entire school year alone with her teacher, Barbara Henry, the only white teacher at the school who agreed to teach a black child. Iconic photos and newsreels, along with the famous Norman Rockwell painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, would sear the image of innocence facing down hate for the entire nation.

Ruby Bridges was not the first, nor is she the last person to challenge our nation to deliver on its stated values of equality and opportunity. But, her story represents a critical moment when images of a little girl trying to go to school, facing down angry mobs with a bow in her hair and a lunch pail in her hands, forced America to face its segregationist past and to consider its future.



Synopsis

The year is 1960 and six-year old Ruby is braving hate and racism as she becomes the first child to integrate into a public school. This new play explores what Ruby's first days would have been like as the only student in the classroom because the white families would not let their children attend class with her. Follow Ruby's journey as she develops a special bond with her teacher Mrs. Henry and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s grows in intensity from the experience of Ruby, to Rosa Parks, and lunch counter sit-ins.

Accessing Civics Concepts through Social-Emotional Learning

Learning resources for Ruby Bridges include primary, intermediate and secondary activities, as well as short and long lessons. Most activities stand alone and do not require students to see the play, but can enhance learning as pre and post viewing experiences. The lessons draw on different learning modalities and use primary and secondary sources.

Our approach to civic education focuses on three major goals:

- 1) Introduce students to crucial characters, events and places, which have shaped the story of American civil life and whose impact continues to shape our experiences today.
- 2) Weave civics education with social emotional learning, by inviting students to integrate these stories in their own social development as they shape concepts of justice, fairness, opportunity, equality and equity. To challenge students to see and respond to issues of both individual and collective interest.
- 3) Challenge students to make connections between stories of the past and their own lives today. To encourage students to see themselves as activist-participants in on-going issues, not passive spectators of history.

We work toward these goals by incorporating both a conventional history-based approach as well as building on social emotional learning strategies and calls to action. Drawing on social emotional learning is essential to a personalized experience of civics because it challenges students to refine a sense of empathy and to experience civic issues as on-going questions that relate to themselves and their own era as much as to historical figures in black and white photos. Secondly, it is an appropriate lens through which to introduce our youngest students to the concepts of American democracy, equality and opportunity. Rather than taking a “heroes and holidays” approach, the learning resources seek to tap into young students’ emerging sense of fairness, self and other.

We hope that these learning resources will spark lively discussion and reflection at all levels. Civil rights are never static. They expand and contract with the decisions of every generation. Our actions and inactions in the public arena, at work, in the marketplace and at the ballot box, shape rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Students are the emerging characters in this story, and we can’t wait to see how they will shape it!

Meet the Characters

- **Ruby Bridges:** a six-year-old black student integrating into an all-white school in New Orleans. Also plays a college student in the Woolworth diner flashback scene.
- **Mrs. Barbara Henry:** a teacher from Boston and the only white teacher at William Frantz Elementary willing to work with Ruby. Also plays a customer in the Woolworth diner and a bus rider in the flashback scenes.
- **Chuck:** a federal marshal who escorts Ruby to and from school every day. Also plays the owner of the Woolworth diner and the bus driver in the flashback scenes.
- **Narrator:** this character takes on multiple roles throughout the play including the shadow puppet family, Mrs. Henry’s friend, school principal, college student at Woolworth Diner, and Rosa Parks.