

2015

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Recommended Citation

Brian, S. (2015). No ordinary field trip: a conversation with John Lewis. Bank Street College of Education. Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/progressive/4>

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No Ordinary Field Trip

A Conversation with John Lewis

By **Sam Brian**, *Upper School Teacher*

It's never an ordinary senior trip to the nation's capitol. Hunkered down in one of the great marble hallways off which doorways led to the offices of various congressmen, we were forty 8th grade students and their teachers in pursuit of our appointment with a living legend, Congressman John Lewis. We had studied this living icon of the Civil Rights Movement, this first leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, this veteran of the sit-ins, the freedom rides, this apostle of nonviolent civil disobedience. We had seen the films of John Lewis standing before the advancing Alabama troopers seconds before the beating on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Now we were so close to meeting the man. Finally, the word came that a room had been secured, and clutching the questions they had written back in Bank Street, the students rose and scurried up a grand staircase and into a room to await the congressman.

Minutes later Congressman Lewis entered and strode to the front. At 62 years of age he is short, and powerfully built. "Which one of you is representing me?" he asked. In my letter to the congressman I had informed him that we were a mock Congress, a Senate and a House, and that one of the students had represented his Atlanta, Georgia district. The other thirty-nine members of Bank Street School's 30th Congress leaned forward, expectantly. And the questions started to fly.

"How did you get interested in politics?" one student asked, and John catapulted backward in time and place to Pike County Alabama. He spoke about how he used to preach sermons to the chickens he was responsible for tending on his father's farm. "I believe today that those chickens were more attentive than some of my colleagues in the House are today. And those chickens were always productive."

"When you led the first march over the bridge in Selma, your own organization, SNCC, refused to participate with Martin Luther King's group, SCLC. Why?" The question threw John back to the dramatic confrontations of the Civil Rights struggle, his eyes closing, his mind turning inward to remember. He described a contentious SNCC meeting lasting deep into a Saturday night in Atlanta, his decision to break with his own organization, and an all night drive from Atlanta to reach Selma by daybreak. John explained how he stopped at SNCC's "freedom house" in Selma, packed a toothbrush and a book to read for the inevitable jail time that would follow the march and the arrest, how he and another freedom fighter, Hosea Williams, were selected to lead the marchers on the five day walk to the state Capitol, Montgomery. How eerily silent were the streets of Selma that Sunday as they led the line of 800 through downtown Selma and started over the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

As he spoke, his eyes fluttered open and closed again. His large hands gestured dramatically, and his tone was low and full. He described marching up the arc of the bridge to its crest high above the Alabama River where he and Hosea Williams could first look ahead, down to the foot of the bridge, and glimpse the sea of blue uniformed Alabama State Troopers that Governor George Wallace had stationed there to prevent the march from going forward.

“That’s when Hosea asked me, ‘John, can you swim?’ and I said, ‘Not very much, can you?’” As the line of marchers, with John and Hosea at its head, came to a halt just feet away from the police, they were ordered to disperse. The marchers stood still; the troopers pulled on their gas masks. John recalled how Hosea glanced over, and, pointing to his nose, said, “John, they are going to gas us.” One of John’s staff members displayed an enlarged black and white photograph of troopers, batons flailing, trampling over falling protesters at the foot of the bridge. The room was silent. Some looked down, averting their eyes from the national disgrace of “Bloody Sunday,” 1965.

“Were you ever afraid?” a student asked. John explained that he didn’t feel fear when he committed acts of nonviolent civil disobedience and faced armed police, beatings, or jail. What he did fear was snakes. John launched into a heated testimonial about his fear and loathing of snakes. “If you were to say John, do this thing, or we’re going to put you in a dark dungeon full of snakes, I would say, just kill me instead. That’s just how much I hate snakes.” John didn’t always answer the questions he was asked directly. One student remarked later that John’s story of the beating on the bridge answered about ten questions he had, but that he really didn’t explain why SNCC didn’t support the March from Selma to Montgomery.

“Why did you change your speech when you spoke in the March on Washington?” John’s aide displayed a picture of the 22 year-old John, with a full head of hair, thin, earnest, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial delivering his speech shortly before Dr. King took the podium for his “I Have a Dream” speech. John explained that he believed then that the bill Kennedy had given to Congress, the bill that would become the 1964 Civil Rights Act, was “too little and too late.” He wanted to give a powerful speech that day, but some of the planners of the march thought he’d gone too far with his words. John displayed a picture of the architects of the march, “the big six” he called them, the day before the history-making event. “I’m the only one left alive,” he pronounced sadly, turning to point out the slight youth beside all the others. “This is me, this is Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, this is A. Philip Randolph, founder of one of the earliest black unions, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and this is Dr. Martin Luther King.” As his hand touched each of the members, the room was charged with their presence. Forgetting the question of the changed speech, we stared at the picture of the “big six”. It seemed as though the image of Dr. King might stir under his hand and add a detail to John’s story. Given the aura of history in the room at that

time, we might have accepted it without comment.

“You know who General Sherman was?” John asked, snapping us from our historical reverie. One of our students reassured John that we all knew the Union General Sherman had laid waste to a wide swath of Georgia “from Atlanta to the sea” during the Civil War. “Well, toward the end of that controversial draft of my speech I mentioned General Sherman in a way that really upset A. Philip Randolph.” John’s voice became deep, booming as he intoned, “The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We will pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently.” John related how, as the first speakers were already addressing the crowd that day, A. Philip Randolph, one of the big six, pleaded with John in a security hut behind the monument. The famous labor organizer had himself proposed a March on Washington in 1941 to protest racial discrimination in war industries and to propose the desegregation of the American Armed forces. That march was cancelled after President of the United States Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order that addressed some of their issues. “When a man like Randolph pleads with you, it is hard to say no.” John explained that he kept the ideas of the speech, but that he did remove the reference to General Sherman moments before he took his turn at the podium that day.

The congressman’s aides were signaling an upcoming vote on the House floor. John would have fifteen minutes, to walk the long halls, to travel under Independence Avenue on the special capitol train, to emerge on the House floor, and to slip his plastic voting card into the slot by his seat.

“Have you ever had a conflict between your conscience and the views of your constituents,” a student asked, slipping in a final question and invoking a classic question of representative democracy. Without hesitation Lewis said that congressmen should always follow their conscience. “I don’t always agree with my constituents about everything, but they reelect me each time with about 75 or 80 per cent of the vote.” At this point, the Congressman’s aides prevailed on him to head out to cast his vote, and our meeting with John Lewis was over. One of our teachers asked the students to stay seated, and we asked the students for their responses to the meeting.

“Moving”

“So powerful”

“It’s hard to put in words. I felt like I was right there with him sometimes.”

“When he told his stories, it seemed like he was reliving what he was telling about.”

One of the teachers asked how many of the students, having met John Lewis, were considering public service, at the local, state, or national level. Ten hands went up, one in four. One student proclaimed, “I’m definitely running for Congress.” Whether any student runs for political office as the result of the visit, we were cer-

tainly taking away lessons about conscience and political activism. We had learned that the difference between a stand of conscience and a political compromise was measured in the parsed meaning of a word. We had learned that physical courage was something other than a confrontation with a scaly reptile, but something conditioned by faith and philosophy. We had experienced the conflicting pull of competing loyalty as John was forced to choose between his commitment to his conscience and his commitment to the organization he led.

It has often been said that the object of social studies is to have students identify with the struggles, the dilemmas of people from times past and places often distant. To the degree that our conversations with John Lewis broke down these barriers of time and space, and we identified with the struggles of the past, this field trip was an extraordinary success.