

# ◆◆◆◆◆ NORTH CAROLINA ENTREPRENEURS ◆◆◆◆◆

## ELLA JO BAKER, CIVIL RIGHTS ENTREPRENEUR

- ◆ **Learning Outcome:** Students can explain how Ella Jo Baker used entrepreneurial skills to help the Civil Rights Movement succeed. ◆



Ella Jo Baker

Entrepreneurs are people who see problems and use their skills to fix them. Sometimes they come up with ideas that no one else has thought of. In two other lessons you learned (or will learn) about how an entrepreneur named Ralph Ketner started a business and how another entrepreneur named Robert Luddy started both a business and schools.

Ella Jo Baker was also an entrepreneur, but she didn't start a business or a school. Instead, she started two important civil rights organizations and was an important lifelong leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement was a time in which Americans from many different backgrounds joined together to oppose "Jim Crow" laws. These laws were passed by state governments in many parts of the country, but especially in southern states, from the 1880s until the 1960s. They required blacks and whites to go to separate schools, sit in separate places in buses and movie theaters, and even drink from different water fountains. These laws created a system called **segregation**.

People in the Civil Rights Movement worked to change these unfair laws. Sometimes they took great risks to speak out against the unfairness of Jim Crow laws. They peacefully protested by organizing public events where they gave speeches explaining the unfairness of segregation.

Sometimes they would protest by organizing a peaceful march, where a large group of people would walk through the streets holding signs to show others that they didn't agree with segregation. They also organized boycotts of businesses that participated in segregation. (A **boycott** is when a group of people stop buying things from a business as a way of protesting that business.)

One of the most famous boycotts was the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Black and white people in the Civil Rights Movement refused to use the buses in Montgomery, Alabama, because black people could sit only in one section of the bus. The bus company lost so much money as a result of the

### VOCABULARY WORDS

- ◆ Segregation
- ◆ Boycotts
- ◆ Harlem
- ◆ Great Depression
- ◆ Young Negroes Cooperative League
- ◆ Cooperatives
- ◆ Pooled
- ◆ Pastor
- ◆ Southern Christian Leadership Council
- ◆ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
- ◆ Coordinate

boycott that its owners agreed to stop segregating the seating on Montgomery's buses. People in the Civil Rights Movement also sometimes ignored segregation laws on purpose as a way of protesting these unfair laws. They entered segregated places even though the law said they shouldn't. They were peaceful, but they stood their ground.

Some actions to promote civil rights started in the early 1900s, but it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that the movement achieved several major successes. It was a long struggle!

Ella Jo Baker was an important part of the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Baker grew up in Littleton, North Carolina. Her grandmother had been enslaved before the 13th Amendment made slavery illegal throughout the United States. She told her granddaughter stories about how she stood up against bad treatment. Her grandmother's courage inspired Mrs. Baker to be unafraid throughout her life.

Mrs. Baker graduated from Shaw University in Raleigh. She had the highest grades of anyone in her class. Then, she moved to New York City. There, she lived in a neighborhood called **Harlem** where many well-known black writers, artists, and civil rights leaders lived.

Mrs. Baker did a number of different jobs to earn enough money to continue living in New York City. However, Mrs. Baker's life became more difficult during the **Great Depression** of the 1930s. Because of bad decisions, especially by the government, many people lost their jobs and became poor during the Depression. This time was especially difficult for people who already had been poor. Both black and white people suffered greatly as a result of the Great Depression.

In Harlem, during the Great Depression, Ella Baker helped start a group called the **Young Negroes Cooperative League**. This group worked to help black people who were in need. How?

The League created “**cooperatives**,” which were groups of families who **pooled** (combined) their money to buy food and other products. By joining together, they had more money to spend. Having a large amount of money that they could spend all at once helped the cooperative to persuade farmers and stores to sell them large amounts of food and other products at low prices. If the farmers and stores didn’t offer low prices, the cooperative could go elsewhere, which would cause the farmers and stores to lose a large amount of money!

Mrs. Baker continued to work in the Civil Rights Movement. She used all her talents—persuasion, writing skills, knowledge about how to work with people, and more—to make civil rights groups grow.

## TWO BIG IDEAS

Ella Baker had two other big ideas that helped the Civil Rights Movement move forward. Like other entrepreneurs, she didn't just think up good ideas; she also worked hard to make those ideas a reality. Mrs. Baker's good ideas led to the creation of two important civil rights organizations. Here is how Mrs. Baker worked to make these ideas a reality.

In many communities where many black people live, the Christian churches bring people together. As in all churches, people come together not only to worship, but also to help one another. Mrs. Baker realized that churches could be an important force in the Civil Rights Movement. After all, people respected ministers, pastors, and other religious leaders. Mrs. Baker recognized that these religious leaders could persuade their church members using sermons and stories from the Bible and the moral teachings of Christianity.



