

BAYARD RUSTIN

3/17/1910 – 8/24/1987

“We are all one. And if we don’t know it, we will learn it the hard way.”

Bayard Rustin was raised in West Chester, Pennsylvania, by Quaker grandparents who espoused pacifism. Rustin moved to Harlem in the 1930s, the time of the Harlem Renaissance. He paid his New York City College tuition by singing with folk artist Josh White and became an organizer for the Young Communist League in their work against racial segregation.

Rustin’s refusal to register for the draft in World War II resulted in his serving three years in a federal penitentiary. Although he was arrested 23 times for nonviolent protest, he never lost his conviction that equality should be pursued through nonviolent means.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Rustin organized nonviolent groups that became the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement for American blacks, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1947, he coordinated the Journey of Reconciliation, an event that became the model for the Freedom Rides of the 1960s.

In 1955, Rustin was instrumental in organizing the Montgomery Bus Boycott. When he arrived in Montgomery, there were guns inside Martin Luther King Jr.’s house and armed guards posted at his doors. As an expert in Gandhian nonviolent tactics, Rustin persuaded King and the other boycott leaders to commit the movement to complete nonviolence.

A superb strategist, Rustin experienced prejudice because of his sexual orientation and his controversial political positions. He was often relegated to behind-the-scenes roles.

Shortly before he died 1987, Rustin said at a gay rights rally: “Twenty-five, 30 years ago, the barometer of human rights in the United States were black people. That is no longer true. The barometer for judging the character of people in regard to human rights is now those who consider themselves gay, homosexual, [or] lesbian.”

Bayard Rustin was the chief organizer for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. of the 1963 civil rights march on Washington. Rustin’s expertise in nonviolent direct action assisted King in shaping the Civil Rights Movement.

