Civil Rights Activists: Desmond Tutu

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the COP17 "We Have Faith: Act Now for Climate Justice" Rally on Nov. 27, 2011, in Durban, South Africa. Photo by Kristen Opalinski/LUCSA

Synopsis: Desmond Tutu spent many years fighting for the rights of black South Africans. His chief goal was ending South Africa’s racist apartheid system. Under this system, non-whites had fewer rights and were forced to live separately. In 1984, Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

Growing Up In Segregated South Africa

Desmond Mpilo Tutu was born on October 7, 1931, in Klerksdorp, South Africa. His father was a school principal and his mother was a school cook.

When Tutu was a child, South Africa was completely segregated. Whites and blacks lived in different worlds. Black Africans could not vote and they could only live in certain areas. Black children were treated worse than white children based on nothing other than the color of their skin.

When Tutu was 12 his family moved to the capital city of Johannesburg. Five years later, in 1948, the National Party won control of the South African government. This political party began enforcing apartheid, a set of laws that made segregation complete and official. Before that segregation had been commonly practiced, but it was not the law.
Teaching Under Apartheid

Tutu graduated from high school in 1950. He soon decided to become a teacher. In 1954, he returned to his own high school to teach English and history.

Tutu soon realized that apartheid made teaching a difficult job.

In 1953, the government passed the Bantu Education Act. The act said black South Africans should not be taught as much as whites. They only needed to learn enough to work as servants.

The government spent one-tenth as much money on the education of a black student as on the education of a white one. As a result, Tutu's all-black school was undersupplied and his classes were overcrowded.

Tutu eventually decided he could not work for a school system that was so unfair to blacks. In 1957, he quit teaching.

Pursuing Religious Influence

Tutu then set out to become a priest in the Anglican church. A priest is someone chosen to perform the ceremonies of a certain religion and is usually associated with Catholicism. After studying for a number of years, Tutu was made an Anglican priest in 1961. He soon rose much higher in the church.

In 1975, Tutu became the Anglican Dean of Johannesburg. He was the first black person to hold that job. Tutu decided he would use his new fame to fight for the rights of black South Africans. He soon began to speak out strongly against apartheid. In 1978, he was selected as the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. As he rose in the South African church, he continued to push for an end to apartheid.

"I never doubted that ultimately we were going to be free," Tutu said. "I knew there was no way in which a lie could prevail over the truth, darkness over light, death over life.

The Nobel Peace Prize

In 1984, Tutu received the Nobel Peace Prize for fighting against apartheid. The award made Tutu famous around the world and brought more support for his cause.

In 1986, Tutu became the Archbishop of Cape Town. This is the highest job in the South African Anglican Church. Tutu was the first black person in South Africa to rise that high.
Apartheid Ends

In 1993, South African apartheid finally came to an end. The world realized that Tutu had done much to make this happen. He had been one of the great leaders in the fight to end the terrible system.

In 1994, South Africans elected Nelson Mandela as their first black president. Tutu was given the honor of introducing the new president to the nation. He recalled that he whispered to God, “If I die now, it would be almost the perfect moment.” It was the moment all black South Africans had been waiting for.

Personal Life

Tutu married Nomalizo Leah Shenxane on July 2, 1955. The couple has four children. Today, Tutu continues to fight for social justice around the world. He remains among the most important leaders in the fight for human rights for all.
**Quiz**

1. Select the sentence from the section "Growing Up In Segregated South Africa" that describes the segregation Desmond Tutu experienced growing up.
   - (A) His father was a school principal, and his mother was a school cook.
   - (B) When Tutu was a child, South Africa was completely segregated.
   - (C) Black children were treated worse than white children based on nothing other than the color of their skin.
   - (D) This political party began enforcing apartheid, a set of laws that made segregation complete and official.

2. Which answer choice BEST describes the effect teaching had on Desmond Tutu?
   - (A) He decided to work for the equality of whites and blacks.
   - (B) He was frustrated that black students went to undersupplied schools.
   - (C) He fought against the Bantu Education Act.
   - (D) He decided he should go back to school to become a priest.

3. Based on the article, which of the following statements is TRUE?
   - (A) Tutu directly fought against members of the National Party.
   - (B) Tutu wanted to become a high school teacher from an early age.
   - (C) Tutu became Archbishop of Cape Town after Mandela became president.
   - (D) Tutu was involved in the election of South Africa’s first black president.

4. Why was it important that Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize?
   - (A) It led more people to join the fight against apartheid.
   - (B) It made him more famous in South Africa.
   - (C) It helped him get a better job with the Anglican Church.
   - (D) It made him the most important black man in South Africa.