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 was a leading spokesperson for the rights of black South Africans. During the 1980s, Tutu played a vital role in drawing attention to the injustices of South Africa's racist apartheid system. Under this racist system, whites were granted special privileges, while non-whites had fewer rights and were forced to live in separate neighborhoods. In 1984, Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

**Education During South African Apartheid**

Desmond Mpilo Tutu was born on October 7, 1931, in Klerksdorp, South Africa. His father was an elementary school principal. His mother also worked, cooking and cleaning at a school for the blind. The South Africa of Tutu's youth was rigidly segregated. Black Africans were denied the right to vote and forced to live only in specific areas. The young Tutu understood that he was treated worse than white children based on nothing other than the color of his skin.
Tutu recalls an incident that occurred during his childhood while he was out walking with his mother. A white man, a priest named Trevor Huddleston, tipped his hat to Tutu's mother. It was the first time Tutu had ever seen a white man pay this respect to a black woman. The simple gesture made a strong impression on Tutu. It taught him that he need not accept discrimination and that religion could be a powerful tool in the fight to overcome racism.

When Tutu was 12 his family moved to the capital city of Johannesburg. It was around that time that Tutu contracted tuberculosis and nearly died. The experience inspired his ambition to become a medical doctor and find a cure for the disease.

In 1948, when Tutu was 17 years old, the National Party won control of the South African government. The party formalized the nation’s long-present segregation and inequality into the official policy of apartheid.

Tutu graduated from high school in 1950. Although he had been accepted into medical school, his family could not afford to send him. Instead of becoming a doctor, Tutu set out to become a teacher. In 1954, Tutu returned to his own high school to teach English and history.

During these early years, Tutu became increasingly frustrated with the racism of South African life. In 1953, the government passed the Bantu Education Act. This act intentionally lowered the standards of education for black South Africans to ensure that they learned no more than what was needed for a life of service or physical labor. The government spent one-tenth as much money on the education of a black student as it spent on the education of a white student. As a result, Tutu's school was undersupplied and his classes were overcrowded.

Tutu eventually decided he could not participate in an educational system intentionally designed to promote inequality. In 1957, he quit teaching.

**Entrance Into Priesthood**

Tutu then set out to become a priest. In 1958, he enrolled at St. Peter's Theological College in Johannesburg. He was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1961, then pursued further religious studies in England.

In 1975, Tutu became the first black person to be appointed the Anglican Dean of Johannesburg. In this position, he emerged as one of the most prominent voices in the South African anti-apartheid movement.

"I realized that I had been given a platform that was not readily available to many blacks," Tutu explained. "Most of our leaders were either now in chains or in exile." Tutu decided he would use his position to advance the hopes and express the suffering of black South Africans.
Pushing For An End To Apartheid

In 1976, Tutu was appointed Bishop of Lesotho, and in 1978, he was selected as the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He continued to use his elevated position in the South African church 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."

In 1984, Tutu received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to promote "human dignity." The award made Tutu a renowned world leader. It also transformed South Africa's anti-apartheid movement into a truly international force with deep support across the globe.

In 1985, Tutu was appointed the Bishop of Johannesburg. A year later, he became the first black person to hold the highest position in the South African Anglican Church when he was chosen as the Archbishop of Cape Town.

In 1993, South African apartheid finally came to an end. Its dismantling was in no small part due to Tutu's brave leadership.

In 1994, South Africans elected Nelson Mandela as their first black president. The honor of introducing the new president to the nation fell to Tutu. He recalled that in that triumphant moment he whispered to God, "If I die now, it would be almost the perfect moment. This is the theme for which we had all been waiting for."

Personal Life

Tutu married Nomalizo Leah Shenxane, a teacher, on July 2, 1955. The couple has four children. Although Tutu officially retired from public life in the late 1990s, he continues to fight for social justice across the globe and remains among the world's most important human rights activists.
Quiz

1  Which section highlights the idea that early experiences with injustice fueled Tutu's desire to work for equality?
   (A) "Education During South African Apartheid"
   (B) "Entrance Into Priesthood"
   (C) "Pushing For An End To Apartheid"
   (D) "Personal Life"

2  What led Desmond Tutu to become a teacher?
   (A) Medical school was too expensive.
   (B) He wanted to work for better education policy.
   (C) He wanted to inspire students to reach their potential.
   (D) He was inspired to change the way black students were taught.

3  Select the paragraph from the section "Entrance Into Priesthood" that BEST shows how Tutu used his position in the church.

4  Fill in the blank. The author MAINLY explains the importance of Desmond Tutu's activism by ...
   (A) interviewing multiple experts on South African apartheid
   (B) providing descriptions of his childhood
   (C) giving examples of his words and actions
   (D) showing his rise to church leadership