Who are some people who have made a difference in our lives?

(African American Biographies)

In Standard 2.5, students will be introduced to the many people, ordinary and extraordinary, who have contributed to their lives and made a difference. The teacher may pose a question such as, What makes someone heroic? or “Who are some people who have made a difference in our lives?” A picture book, such as Rosa by Nikki Giovanni, introduces students to an ordinary person, Rosa Parks, whose actions made a tremendous difference in the lives of others. Students learn about a variety of men, women and children whose contributions can be appreciated by young children and whose achievements have directly or indirectly touched the students’ lives or the lives of others. Included, for example, are scientists such as George Washington Carver, Marie Sklodowska Curie, Albert Einstein, Louis Pasteur, Jonas Salk, Charles Drew, and Thomas Edison; authors; musicians, artists and athletes, such as Jackie Robinson and Wilma Rudolph; and humanitarians like Clara Barton, Jane Addams, Henri Dunant, and Florence Nightingale. Teachers may read biographies aloud as well as utilize biographies written at a variety of reading levels, such as the Rookie Biography series, for students to read independently. As students meet these heroes from long ago and the recent past, they understand the importance of individual action and character in one’s life. As students identify and discuss the skills and knowledge that helped these people achieve their goals, they have opportunities to cite textual evidence, write informational reports, and create presentations.

Students can also make a difference. Students can work together in groups to brainstorm problems that exist at their school and in their community, such as litter or bullying. Students can evaluate and vote on a solution, which for litter might include hosting a clean-up day, increasing recycling, or working to change a rule. Students can create a plan and work in teams to carry it out. Together they can then evaluate their effectiveness. For example, is there less litter? Teachers can invite community members who are making a difference on issues important in the students’ lives as guest speakers or partners in student projects to make their communities a better place to live. By meeting local “heroes,” students will have role models from their own communities who are making a difference.
George Washington Carver (c. 1860–1943)

* Botanist * Inventor * Educator

GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER was born into slavery in Missouri just as the Civil War ended. His parents and several older siblings passed during his childhood. From a young age, Carver developed “an inordinate desire for knowledge” about the natural world around him. He took particular pleasure in tending to his secret garden in the woods, created out of plants and flowers he collected.

Like many African Americans after the Civil War, Carver seized new opportunities for schooling. Despite the difficulties of supporting himself since the age of twelve, Carver eventually completed high school. In his mid-twenties, Carver attended Iowa State Agricultural College and earned a master’s degree in botany. He became the college’s first black student, and later, the first black faculty member at Iowa State. In 1896, Booker T. Washington, offered Carver a position as head of the Agriculture Department at the Tuskegee Institute - one of the most famous colleges established for African Americans after the Civil War.

During his 47 years at Tuskegee, Carver emphasized introducing a science curriculum to young students. Specifically, he helped train future teachers on “how to engage in nature studies in the classroom,” including cultivating school gardens. Carver also focused his research on helping black farmers in the South. Most black farmers at the time primarily grew cotton as cash crops. He returned to his childhood passion for gardens and advised farmers to plant small home gardens for sustenance and subsistence. With his knowledge of botany and through experimentation, he taught farmers innovative and sustainable practices that involved crop rotation, natural fertilizers, and recycling. Finally, George Washington Carver is best known for his food inventions—he created new food and industrial products out of crops, particularly peanuts and sweet potatoes.
The contract will prove valuable only as far as the teacher makes the children understand just what a contract means, its binding effect in the business operations of the garden and the suffering or loss regardless of excuses to the person or persons who fail to come up to the stipulations."

*George Washington Carver in Bulletin no. 18 (June 1910) "Nature Study and Gardening for Rural Schools."
Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977)

*Activist *Civil Rights Leader*

FANNIE LOU HAMER stood—and sang—as one of the foremost voices of the Civil Rights Movement. Born into a family of sharecroppers in Mississippi, Hamer attended school until age twelve when poverty forced her to give up school to work on the family’s farm. In 1962, married and with a family of her own, Hamer submitted a voter registration application for the first time. Her white employer promptly fired her from her position as a cotton plantation timekeeper. Undeterred, she joined one of the leading civil rights organizations, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to fight for the rights of African Americans. White supremacy had prevented generations of black people from registering to vote, much less voting.

The lack of a high school diploma did not stop Fannie Lou Hamer. She captivated many young activists in the movement with her urgent appeals demanding that the United States live up to its proclaimed ideals as the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” She played a leading role in the formation, organization, and training of activists committed to “Freedom Summer” (1964), during which SNCC trained and transported hundreds of northern college students into the Deep South to stage voter registration drives. The violent reprisals towards the nonviolent activists shocked the nation and raised awareness about the racialized politics of the South.

Fannie Lou Hamer fought for black freedom and self-sufficiency. Her message was heard at the national level when she represented the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the 1964 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in an attempt to circumvent the state’s racist presidential nominating process. She helped found the National Women’s Political Caucus and the Freedom Farm Cooperative, the latter supported poor and dispossessed black farmers with attaining economic independence.

*WATCH* Fannie Lou Hamer’s August 22, 1964 DNC testimony.

“This challenge that we’re challenging the five representatives from Mississippi; now how can a man be in Washington, elected by the people, when 95 percent of the people cannot vote in Mississippi? Just taking a chance on trying to register to vote, you can be fired. Not only fired, you can be killed.”*

*Hamer’s speech given on December 20, 1964 in Harlem, NY explaining why the MFDP should be seated at the DNC.*
Frederick Douglass c.1817–1895

* Abolitionist * Human Rights Activist *Author

FREDERICK DOUGLASS was born into slavery near Baltimore, Maryland around 1817. He inherited his mother’s status as an enslaved laborer and never knew his white father. After several failed attempts, Douglass finally escaped his bondage in 1838. Rather than safely disappear to Canada or hide in the safety of the bustling city, Douglass immediately began demanding the abolition of slavery publicly. The abolition he fought for would be immediate, complete, and uncompensated for owners. He connected with northern abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison (publisher of the fiery newspaper The Liberator) and the American Anti-Slavery Society, and began the first of what was, on the whole, a life-long tour throughout the United States promoting the end of slavery and equal rights for African Americans.

In addition to countless speaking engagements, Douglass wrote tirelessly. He published three separate autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892). All three received praise for their bravery and eloquence. In fact, of his first autobiography, critics doubted Douglass’s authorship, because they could not square the expressive writing as deriving from a black man. In 1847, Douglass created North Star, a newspaper committed to abolishing “slavery in all its forms and aspects, promoting the moral and intellectual improvement of the COLORED PEOPLE, and hastening the day of FREEDOM to the Three Millions of our enslaved fellow countrymen.”

During the Civil War, Douglass secured a historic meeting with President Lincoln to demand equal treatment of African Americans enlisted in the Union Army. He left that meeting not entirely satisfied with Lincoln’s continued caution regarding racial equality but felt convinced of Lincoln’s intentions and agreed to continue recruiting African Americans into the Army. (Two of his sons, in fact, were among the first black men to enlist.) Lincoln also agreed to increase the pay of black soldiers.

Following emancipation (Thirteenth Amendment), Douglass continued, for the remainder of his life, fighting for the full inclusion of African Americans into American society. He championed equal rights for other oppressed groups as well, including women, on whose behalf he pressed for suffrage. He attended the historic Seneca Falls Convention as an honored guest.
Harriet Tubman (c.1820–1913)

* Abolitionist * Civil War veteran (nurse, spy, guide)

HARRIET TUBMAN, once enslaved in Maryland, secured her freedom by running away from her captors. Tubman was in her late twenties when she made the final daring escape with two of her brothers, who turned back out of fear. She followed the North Star until she reached Philadelphia. Once there, Tubman began working as a domestic servant to fund return trips to the South to lead others away from forced labor and captivity.

Tubman devoted her life to the pursuit of freedom. She became known as the “Moses of her people,” because she repeatedly put herself at great personal risk of capture and death. Tubman is best known as one of the leading “conductors” of the Underground Railroad—a network of safehouses, individuals, and routes that worked together to support black freedom. Tubman made numerous trips back into Maryland and led as many as three hundred enslaved people to safety, primarily in Canada. Over the ten years Tubman journeyed for black independence, she avoided capture and never lost a “passenger,” despite the reward for her capture reaching as high as $40,000 (that’s more than $1,000,000 in today’s dollars!).

Tubman was an active abolitionist in words and deeds. She spoke before audiences in the North, and worked with Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and even helped John Brown recruit men for his raid on Harpers Ferry. Tubman possessed skills and training that proved vital during the Civil War. She used her intimate knowledge of the terrain and ability to move at night without detection to guide Union forces to hidden rebel camps and reported on the movement of southern troops. Finally, Tubman provided medical care as well. Her natural remedies cured soldiers suffering from dysentery, a common killer among armies fighting in the South.

Harriet Tubman remains one of the most admired citizens in American history. Parks, monuments, museums, operas, and even an asteroid have been dedicated in her name. Most recently, the Obama administration began the process of replacing Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill with her image.

"I started with this idea in my head, 'Dere's two things I've got a right to, and dese are, Death or Liberty--one or tother I mean to have. No one will take me back alive; I shall fight for my liberty, and when de time has come for me to go, de Lord will let dem kill me."*

*From Sarah H. Bradford's Harriet Tubman's 1869 biography.
Atlanta, GA., March 21, 1868.

MY DEAR MADAME*: 

I have just received your letter informing me that Hon. Wm. H. Seward, Secretary of State, would present a petition to Congress for a pension to Harriet Tubman, for services rendered in the Union Army during the late war. I can bear witness to the value of her services in South Carolina and Florida. She was employed in the hospitals and as a spy. She made many a raid inside the enemy’s lines, displaying remarkable courage, zeal, and fidelity. She was employed by General Hunter, and I think by General Stevens and Sherman, and is as deserving of a pension from the Government for her services as any other of its faithful servants.

I am very truly yours,

RUFUS SAXTON, Bvt. Brig-Gen. U.S.A

* Presumably written to Sarah H. Bradford, author of Harriet Tubman’s 1869 biography.
Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960)

* Author * Anthropologist * Educator

ZORA NEALE HURSTON was born in Alabama in 1891. Her parents were formerly enslaved and worked as sharecroppers. At thirteen, her mother died which prompted Hurston to move frequently throughout the South to stay with extended family. Although she initially was unable to attend school regularly, she developed a love of story-telling and the South, particularly the Florida countryside where her father eventually settled.

Hurston attended Howard University where she co-founded the college’s now-famous student newspaper, The Hilltop. After completing her associate’s degree, she received a scholarship to Barnard College in Manhattan and earned her bachelor’s degree in anthropology examining black folklore. At this critical moment, Hurston developed friendships with several other leading African-American writers, such as Langston Hughes. Together, the group of rising literary stars contributed their talents to the cultural and artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance.

During her studies at Barnard, Hurston worked with Franz Boas, considered by many to be the founder of modern anthropology. Boas encouraged her to study and record the cultural legacy of her roots and African American life in the South. She became a life-long student and promoter of black culture, traveling not only through the South but also to Haiti and Jamaica.

Hurston’s literary career lasted more than three decades during which she published four novels, two books of black folklore, an autobiography, and numerous short stories in leading magazines. However, due to widespread racism and sexism in the early twentieth century, Hurston’s work failed to either earn her much praise (outside the African American community) or financial stability (a problem exacerbated by the Great Depression). One of her most popular works was Their Eyes Were Watching God. The fictional story chronicled the tumultuous life of Janie Crawford. Hurston paved a new path in literature in writing about the experiences of black people, particularly women. Years after her death, fellow-writer Alice Walker (The Color Purple) located her unmarked grave and placed a headstone with the epitaph: “Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South.” Today, Hurston is recognized as one of the leading literary intellectuals of American life.

* Attorney * Supreme Court Justice

Popular stories of THURGOOD MARSHALL’s childhood highlight that he was always headed for a life defending the law. After first being rejected to study law at the University of Maryland because of his race, Marshall attended Howard University and graduated at the top of his class. While in law school, Marshall became a trusted assistant to Charles Hamilton Houston, the university’s president and head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) Legal Defense and Education Fund. Together, they committed to dismantling segregation through the courts.

Marshall eventually replaced Houston as the lead attorney for the NAACP and proceeded with overturning school segregation. For example, in 1950 the NAACP won a landmark Supreme Court case, Sweatt v. Painter that successfully challenged the “separate but equal” principle in higher education. In this case, the University of Texas School of Law had denied Heman Marion Sweatt admission on account of his race but permitted him to enroll in a hastily-built “separate” law school in neighboring Houston.

This victory came after he lent his guidance in Mendez v. Westminster which desegregated schools throughout the state of California. These two court cases and several others allowed Marshall and the NAACP to gain essential precedents and legal insights which, in 1954, led to the groundbreaking and unanimous decision in Brown v. Board of Education. With this landmark decision, the Supreme Court fully invalidated the 1896 Plessy case that made “separate but equal” constitutionally permissible and thereby desegregated schools across the United States.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Thurgood Marshall as Solicitor General (the Justice Department’s legal representative before the Supreme Court). Two years later, Johnson nominated him to the Supreme Court, and in doing so, Marshall became the first African American to serve on the high court. During his twenty-four years on the bench, Marshall frequently ruled in favor of protecting civil rights and championing human rights.
Grade 2: Who are the African Americans who have made a difference in our lives?

Citations
(Sources listed by order within text.)

Johnston, Frances Benjamin. George Washington Carver, half-length portrait, facing right, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama, 1906.

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Carver, George Washington, Bulletin (Tuskegee Institute, 1910) no. 18, “Nature Study and Gardening for Rural Schools.” [External]


Powelson, Benjamin F. [Portrait of Harriet Tubman] / Powelson, photographer, 77 Genesee St., Auburn, New York, 1868 or 1869.

Lindsley, Harvey B. Portrait of Harriet Tubman. Taken between 1871 and 1876?, printed between 1895 and 1910.

Bradford, Sarah H. Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (Auburn: W.J. Moses, Printer), 1869. (Page 24, 64)


Additional Resources
(From the Library of Congress and More)

African American History Month
African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship, Reconstruction and Its Aftermath
Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom
Fannie Lou Hamer, National Women’s History Museum
Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress
George Washington Carver and Nature Study
George Washington Carver National Monument
Harlem Renaissance
Harriet Tubman: Online Resources
James Baldwin Reading from His Works
Meet Amazing Americans > Activists & Reformers > Frederick Douglass
Meet Amazing Americans > Activists & Reformers > Harriet Tubman
Meet Amazing Americans > Leaders & Statesmen > Thurgood Marshall
Meet Amazing Americans > Scientists & Inventors > George Washington Carver
National Park Service | Legends of Tuskegee
This Little Light of Mine: The Legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer
Today in History: James Baldwin
What Was the 1964 Freedom Summer Project?
Zora Neale Hurston Digital Archive
Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress