Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela was a great civil rights leader in the country of South Africa. He was born in the year 1918, in poverty, in a country where the great majority of the population was black, but had no civil rights. Whites made up roughly ten percent of the population, but controlled all aspects of government. The country was ruled by a white Apartheid government, meaning there was racial segregation of whites and blacks in all manner of life in that country, much like the American South in the late 1800’s, after the US Civil War.

Nelson Mandela had some successful years of education, and others that were not so productive. He ultimately completed his B.A. degree, along with a two year law degree. Nelson became interested in helping end Apartheid in his country and participated in this movement with an organization called the African National Congress (ANC).

On October 9th, 1963 Nelson Mandela joined ten others on trial for sabotage in what became known as the Rivonia Trial. While facing the death penalty, his words to the court at the end of his famous ‘Speech from the Dock’ on April 20, 1964 became immortalized:

“I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”
In 1964, Nelson and seven other protesters were sentenced to life in prison for their actions. Nelson spent 27 years in prison before finally being released.

Much of the change in South Africa that led to Mandela’s release could be credited to other civil rights leaders in his country who never gave up. Pressure from famous leaders around the world also contributed to reforms in South Africa, including the establishment of free elections, which finally allowed black South Africans to vote.

In 1993, he and the white President, FW de Klerk jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize for having worked together to eliminate segregation and make equality a goal for all South Africans.

Nelson Mandela then ran for the office of President of his country, a country that had imprisoned him for much of his life. He was inaugurated as the first democratically elected President of South Africa in 1994. His work helped bring tremendous change to South Africa, including the integration of schools, parks and beaches, hospitals, and other public institutions. His leadership also led to the country’s participation in the FIFA World Cup™ and the Olympic Games. Nelson Mandela died in 2013, at the age of 95. He had become a hero in his country and to people around the world.