

TEACHER GUIDE:

USING THE WITNESS LESSONS

VOCAL ESSENCE
WITNESS 

INTRODUCTION

To “*keep your eyes on the prize*” means to stay focused on what is important and to summon the courage to act on a vision of justice and equality. This year’s VocalEssence WITNESS School Program invites students to learn from three extraordinary women who have worked to create positive change in our world. Through stories of their lives, students are encouraged to reflect on the values, challenges, and legacies that continue to shape movements for justice today.

PROCESS

1. Biographical Articles

- Organize students into small groups or pairs to read the short biographical articles provided for each trailblazer. Each article introduces a different local trailblazer, her life story, and her contributions to advancing justice and equality.
- Encourage students to take turns reading aloud and sharing responsibility for leading discussion within their group, or assign as an individual reading assignment.

2. Bring the Trailblazers to Life through Video

On the Resource Hub, you will find videos on each of the three trailblazers. These provide additional context to the biographical articles that can help students connect more deeply with the material.

- **Before Reading:** Use the videos to spark curiosity, introduce key themes, and build background knowledge.
- **After Reading:** Use the videos to reinforce main ideas, clarify complex events, and extend discussion.
- **Flexible Use:** Videos can be shown as a whole-class activity, used in small groups, or assigned individually if students have access.

3. Trailblazer Portrait

- After reading the biographical article and watching the video, invite students to discuss what they learned about the featured trailblazer.
- Guide them to highlight key events, personal challenges, defining experiences, and achievements. Encourage them to consider not only what the trailblazer did, but also what values, character traits, or circumstances shaped her decisions.
- Provide the Trailblazer Portrait worksheet to each student. This activity asks students to visually and verbally capture the essence of the trailblazer’s identity, work, and impact. They may complete this individually, in groups, or as homework.

OBJECTIVES

LEARNING GOALS:

- *Students will read and discuss short biographical articles to learn about the lives, challenges, and achievements of three women who have made significant contributions to justice and equality.*
- *Students view trailblazer video stories to build background knowledge, deepen understanding, and make real-life connections.*
- *Students will collaborate in small groups to share insights, highlight key events, and identify values or character traits that shaped each trailblazer’s impact.*
- *Students will create a Trailblazer Portrait using words and images to represent the identity, work, and influence of each woman.*
- *Students will contribute to a collective Legacy Wall by adding words, images, or phrases that symbolize each trailblazer’s legacy, then participate in a gallery walk to observe patterns and themes.*
- *Students will reflect on connections between the trailblazers’ stories and issues in today’s world.*

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4. Legacy Wall

- After reading the biographical article and watching the video, ask students to brainstorm words, images, or short phrases that represent the life and legacy of each trailblazer. This can include qualities (e.g., courageous, persistent), symbols (e.g., a bridge, a ballot), or actions (e.g., registering voters, building community).
- Collect these responses and create a “Legacy Wall” in the classroom. This could take the form of a poster, bulletin board, or digital space (see materials below for examples).
- Invite students to take a gallery walk around the Legacy Wall to notice patterns, themes, or recurring ideas that connect the work of different trailblazers.

5. A Seat at the Table

- After reading the biographical article and watching the video, provide students with the Seat at the Table worksheet (digital, projected, or physical copy), which invites them to imagine the trailblazer hosting a conversation about justice, equality, or community change.
- Facilitate a discussion around the worksheet prompts, then ask students to reflect in writing on who they believe the trailblazer would invite to join her at the table and why.
- Display their responses around a symbolic table in the classroom. This creates a collective vision of dialogue and action across generations and movements.

MATERIALS:

- Biographical articles for each trailblazer (one copy per student or per group).
- Trailblazer Videos (available on the Resource Hub) — accessible for classroom viewing on YouTube and digital download.
- Trailblazer Portrait worksheets (one copy per student or per group).
- Legacy Wall materials
 - Physical option: chart paper, butcher paper, poster board, or bulletin board space; plus markers, sticky notes, or drawing supplies.
 - Digital option: Padlet, Jamboard, or Mentimeter for collecting and displaying student contributions.
- Seat at the Table worksheets (one copy per student or per group).
- Classroom display space to post portraits, legacy wall contributions, and symbolic “table” responses.
- Writing and drawing tools (pencils, pens, crayons, or markers).

LEARNING GOALS CONTINUED:

- *Students will complete the Seat at the Table activity by reflecting on who the trailblazer might invite into conversation and why, posting their responses around a symbolic classroom table.*
- *Students will compare and contrast the legacies of the three trailblazers, noticing common threads and recurring themes across their work.*
- *Students will consider their own values, goals, and potential impact, imagining what their portrait, legacy wall, or symbolic “seat at the table” might look like in the future.*

