

Teaching resources and community service-learning programs for grades 4-12.

The curriculum introduces students (of all ages) to the legacy of Paul Robeson, placing emphasis on his role as an artist, organizational leader, and coalition-builder in civil rights, peace and intercultural unity in the first half of this century.

Teaching materials relate directly to students lives and their communities.

The following is a column about Paul Robeson, (including the YLSN curriculum) written by the Honorable Elijah E., Cummings, representing the 7th Congressional District of Maryland in the United States House of Representatives — *9/26/98 Baltimore AFRO-American Newspaper*

*To Hold Their Destiny in Their Own Hands*  
by Congressman Elijah E. Cummings

In this era of declining political activism, it is difficult to fully appreciate the social impact of one committed person. Each of us will find it worthwhile to make that effort.



Recently, at the invitation of Ms. Camay Murphy, I attended a tribute celebrating the centennial of Paul Robeson's birth. Although he became famous, Paul Robeson never forgot the conditions of his birth. He drew upon that experience, and the pain of his ancestors, to empower and liberate himself.

During the tribute's moving program, we recalled the *Phi Beta Kappa*, two-time All-American football star, lawyer, world-class singer and actor. We also recalled the fighter for human rights, sympathizer of revolutionary ideals, working class hero and, for many years, American un-person.

Motivated by his belief that Russian egalitarian ideals offered promise for African Americans, Paul Robeson opposed President Truman's post-WWII anticommunism. As a consequence, our government crippled Paul Robeson's career as a concert artist. Paul Robeson was prevented by government influence from renting most American concert halls. His passport was canceled, and he was placed under "house arrest," preventing him from working abroad.

Although Paul Robeson's "pro-Russia" positions remain controversial, we should recall that his "crimes" were unpopular ideas, not active disloyalty to our country. We also should remember that Paul Robeson responded to censorship by singing in our churches and anywhere else working people could gather and hear the uplifting sound of his voice.

During the Baltimore celebration, I was recalling these aspects of Paul Robeson's life as I considered how we can pay tribute to the man whom reactionaries, without success, tried to read out of history.

Many Americans were disappointed, for example, when the Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee rejected the more than 90,000 signatures on a Paul Robeson centennial stamp petition. Despite that disappointment, I know that Paul Robeson's legacy lives on — stamped on our hearts and in our minds. The presence of African-Americans in the United States Congress is part of Paul Robeson's legacy. In a very real sense, we pay tribute to the legacy of Paul Robeson by our very existence in the public and cultural life of this, our country.

More important is the opportunity each of us have to be a positive presence in our local communities. Each of us can pay tribute to Paul Robeson's legacy. We should listen to Douglas Calvin's advice that we encourage our children to be like Paul Robeson, helping them realize that their culture and their liberation cannot be separated. By so doing, we will encourage our young Paul Robesons to become more than bystanders of history.

Paul Robeson's life also exemplifies this teaching of his Quaker mother: each of us has the opportunity to ask God for *the gift of disturbance*. Each of us has the capability to open our eyes to the death, addiction and despair which surrounds us.

As my good friend, Rev. Michael Curry, has taught us, we must not be afraid to "trouble the waters." Like Paul Robeson, each of us has the power to speak out about those things which need to be said. Deep within ourselves, each of us can find the courage to take constructive action.

I know that many people reading this column are hard at work with our young people, teaching them their heritage of freedom. To each and every one of you, I want to say. "Thank you for living up to the legacy of Paul Robeson in your daily lives."

We must continue to work together to demonstrate, to our children and to each other, Paul Robeson's understanding of fundamental human rights. It is our birthright, and our responsibility, to live the dream his songs proclaimed for all human beings threatened by poverty or terror: To be free; to walk the good American earth as equal citizens, to live without fear, to enjoy the fruits of our toil, to give our children every opportunity in life; that dream which we have held so long in our hearts is today the destiny that we hold in our hands.

If we have the courage and wisdom to accept Paul Robeson's legacy, our children shall hold their destiny in their own hands.

-The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings represented the 7th Congressional District of Maryland in the United States House of Representatives.