

# John R. Lewis Proposal

Submitted by Dennis McGilligan

As a member of a local book club, I previously was part of a unanimous group recommendation for renaming Falk Elementary School: William H. Noland Elementary School. If, however, the naming committee and School Board reject that recommendation I individually making the following recommendation for renaming Falk: John Robert Lewis Elementary School.

### Overview<sup>1</sup>

John Robert Lewis was an American statesman and civil rights leader who served in the United States House of Representatives for Georgia's 5<sup>th</sup> congressional district from 1987 until his death in 2020. He was also chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963 to 1966.

Lewis was one of the "Big Six" leaders of groups who organized the 1963 March on Washington. He filled many key roles in the civil rights movement and its actions to end legalized racial segregation in the United States. In 1965, Lewis led the first of three Selma to Montgomery marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. In an incident which became known as Bloody Sunday in the United States (not to be confused with another Bloody Sunday this time in Northern Ireland where protestants and police attacked catholic protesters over British internment policies), state troopers and police brutally attacked the marchers, including Lewis.

He was a leader of the Democratic Party in the U.S. House of Representatives, serving from 1991 as a Chief Deputy Whip and from 2003 as Senior Chief Deputy Whip. Lewis received numerous honorary degrees and awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

### Early Life and Education

John Robert Lewis was born on February 21, 1940 just outside the Pike County seat of Troy, Alabama. His parents were sharecroppers and farmers in rural Pike County.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the factual information contained in this letter is from Wikipedia.

As a boy, Lewis aspired to be a preacher. While growing up he became acutely aware of Troy's segregation.

In 1955, Lewis first heard Martin Luther King Jr. on the radio and he closely followed King's Montgomery bus boycott later that year. At 17 he met Rosa Parks, notable for her role in the bus boycott and met King for the first time at the age of 18.

Lewis was denied admission to Troy University in Alabama and considered suing the university for discrimination but after being warned by King that doing so could endanger his family in Troy, he decided instead to proceed with his education at a small, historically black college in Tennessee. He graduated from the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville and was ordained as a Baptist minister. He earned a bachelor's degree in religion and philosophy from Fisk University, also a historically black college.

### Student Activism and SNCC

As a student in Nashville, Lewis became an activist in the movement responsible for the desegregation of lunch counters in the city's downtown.

In 1961, Lewis became one of the 13 original Freedom Riders. In the South Lewis and other nonviolent Freedom Riders were beaten by angry mobs and arrested. In an interview with CNN during the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Freedom Rides, Lewis recounted the violence he and other Freedom Riders encountered in Montgomery: "It was very violent. I thought I was going to die. I was left lying at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery unconscious."

When the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) gave up on the Freedom Ride because of the violence, Lewis and fellow activist Diane Nash arranged for Nashville students from Fisk and other colleges to take it over and bring it to a successful conclusion.

In 1963, as Chairman of SNCC, Lewis was one of the "Big Six" leaders who organized the March on Washington that summer. The youngest, he was scheduled as the fourth to speak, ahead of the final speaker, Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr. Other leaders were Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer and Roy Wilkins.

### Work in Government

Lewis drew on his historical involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as part of his politics.

Lewis was one of the most progressive members of the House. He was called the “conscience of Congress” for his stands on hotly debated issues. For example, he opposed the 1991 Gulf War. He also spoke out in support of gay rights and national health insurance.

In 2016, House Democrats, led by Lewis and others, began a sit-in demanding House Speaker Paul Ryan allow a vote on gun-safety legislation in the aftermath of the Orlando nightclub shooting. Despite an order of the House into recess, the Democrats refused to leave the chamber for nearly 26 hours.

In 1988, the year after he was sworn into Congress, Lewis introduced a bill to create a national African American museum in Washington. The bill failed, and for 15 years he continued to introduce it. Each time it was blocked in the Senate, most often by conservative Southern Senator Jesse Helms. In 2003 Helms retired; the bill won bipartisan support; President George W. Bush signed the bill to establish the museum, with the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents to establish the location. The National Museum of African American History and Culture held its opening ceremony on September 25, 2016. Last year I had the privilege of visiting this museum; it was a highlight of my visit to Washington DC and it made a lasting impression on me about the struggles, sacrifices, successes and contributions of African Americans in this country. Large crowds of people were enjoying all the museum had to offer.

Lewis also was an author. In 2013 he became the first member of Congress to write a graphic novel, with the launch of a trilogy titled March. The March trilogy is about the Civil Rights Movement, as seen through the eyes of U.S. Congressman Lewis. It was inspired by a 1958 comic book, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Story.

On July 17, 2020, Lewis died at the age of 80 after a six-month battle with stage IV pancreatic cancer. Lewis had been the final surviving “Big Six” civil rights icon. The following represents persuasive evidence of the fact that Lewis was certainly one of the most prominent African Americans in modern American history.

President Donald Trump ordered all flags to be flown at half-staff in response to his death. Condolences also came from the international community, including the Swedish Prime Minister, the French and Irish Presidents.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that Lewis would lie in state in the United States Capitol Rotunda on July 27 and 28, with a public viewing and procession through Washington, D.C. He is the first African American lawmaker to be so honored in the Rotunda. On July 29, 2020, Lewis’s casket left the U.S. Capitol and was transported back to Atlanta, Georgia, where he lay in state for a day at the Georgia State Capitol.

Among the distinguished speakers at his final funeral service at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church were former U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who gave the eulogy. Former President Jimmy Carter, unable to travel during the COVID pandemic due to his advanced age, sent a statement to be read during the service. Lewis’s internment followed the service, at Atlanta’s historic South-View Cemetery.

Coverage of the above events was almost non-stop on CNN and other news channels with special stories and documentaries added for extra emphasis on his contributions and life achievements.

John Lewis is an inspiration to all Americans and especially to African Americans. His journey from humble beginnings, his thirst for higher education, his life-long fight for equal rights and justice for African Americans and all those who have been denied their fair and just rights which began when he was still a student and continued as an elder statesman in Congress, his values and integrity and character all serve as shining examples of what is possible for the MMSD student to set his/her goals toward. During his time, Lewis said it was important to engage in “good trouble, necessary trouble” in order to achieve change, and he held by the phrase and philosophy throughout his life. Madison has many schools

named after prominent nationally known and historical Caucasian people (i.e. James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Charles Lindbergh, Henry David Thoreau and Georgia O'Keefe). Wouldn't it be great to have another school, in addition to Malcom X, in the MMSD named after this prominent, nationally recognized, African American who inspired so many people in the United States and across the world. Wouldn't it be special to be among the first, if not the first, school district in the United States to name a school after John Lewis. Naming a school for someone is a special honor. Lewis was a special person. It would be a positive boost for the MMSD's national reputation to name a school after him.

Thank you for your consideration. Dennis McGilligan, 4230 Mandan Crescent, Madison, WI 53711, 608-271-0820

# John R. Lewis Proposal

Submitted by Muriel Simms

To: Board of Education and the Renaming Selection Committee  
From: Muriel Simms  
Date: September 20, 2020  
Re: Renaming Falk for John R. Lewis

I was born, raised, and always lived in Madison for 75 years. I went to public school and the UW-Madison. I was employed by the Madison School District as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator. My dad attended the UW-Madison in 1929. He, my mom, and sister settled in Madison in 1935. We are an African American ancestral family.

1. and 2. While I still favor the idea/concept of renaming Falk for an early activist African American pioneer, such as William Noland or Dimetra Shivers, per my August 27 letter, I will propose the recently deceased John R. Lewis.

3. I have lived long enough to follow the social justice and political activities of national African American leaders during the 1950 and 1960 civil rights movements, such as John R. Lewis, and the activities of African American newcomers to Madison. Because many African Americans came to Madison post-1950, some African Americans born in Madison pre-1950 consider post-1950 African Americans as newcomers. The civic engagement of these newcomers, such as Milele Anana and Virginia Henderson, pales compared to the level of social justice and political activity that Madison's early African American pioneers did and certainly were not active at the level John R. Lewis was. These deceased newcomers stood on the shoulders of the pioneers and thrived.

After Lewis died in July 2020, the number of speeches about him and news outlets honoring him gave me more knowledge about his passion, physical punishment while protesting, and unwavering courage and commitment to humanity. He was a behind-the-scene activist, not seeking any recognition or reward for his service, which benefited us all. He was quoted in The Washington Post: "I have been in some kind of fight — for freedom, equality, basic human rights — for nearly my entire life."

\*At an early age, Lewis was committed to the goals of education and later in his life championed voting rights for all.

\*Lewis and his fellow students sat silently at lunch counters where they were harassed, spat upon, beaten, and arrested and held in jail. He was attacked by a mob and brutally beaten and tear gassed, and had his skull fractured.

\*Lewis joined fellow students on the Freedom Rides.

\*Lewis was one of the founding members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

\* Lewis received numerous honorary degrees and awards for his work, including an award from the National Education Association and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

4. John R. Lewis Elementary School is most appropriate name for someone who will give the school pride and will motivate the teachers and students at the school to study civil rights, especially in these times of efforts to suppress the vote. Deceased African American newcomers, having lived their successful lives in Madison, could not generate civic engagement in children like John Lewis could. Selecting John Lewis will avoid controversy, criticism, and the challenges that may occur from selecting an African American newcomer to Madison who some educated African Americans view as well-liked, but who other African Americans view as not well-liked. Typically, educated African American newcomers are not well-known in low income neighborhoods. Further, African American newcomers are not prominent in the wider community. The board will do well to select John R. Lewis, an African American who, over his lifetime, became totally committed to social justice. His work will support the Falk mission of cultural pedagogy, may inspire Falk children, and may inspire the children of Madison's increasingly ethnic schools to become social justice activists.