
Born the son of sharecroppers, John Lewis attended segregated public schools in Alabama. Inspired by the activism surrounding the Montgomery bus boycott and the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as a young boy he made a decision to become a part of the civil rights movement.

When he was a student at Fisk University, Lewis organized sit-in demonstrations at segregated lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1961, he volunteered to participate in the Freedom Rides, which challenged segregation at interstate bus terminals across the South. Lewis risked his life on those rides many times by simply sitting in seats reserved for white patrons. He was also beaten severely by angry mobs and arrested by police for challenging the injustice of Jim Crow segregation in the South.

While still a young man, John Lewis became a nationally recognized leader as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was largely responsible for organizing student activism in the movement, including sit-ins and other activities. At the age of 23, he was an architect of and a keynote speaker at the historic March on Washington in August 1963.

In 1965, Lewis helped spearhead one of the most seminal moments of the civil rights movement, leading with Hosea Williams, another notable civil rights leader, more than 600 peaceful, orderly protestors across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. They intended to march from Selma to Montgomery to demonstrate the need for voting rights in the state. The marchers were attacked by Alabama state troopers in a brutal confrontation that became known as Bloody Sunday. News broadcasts and photographs revealing the senseless cruelty of the segregated South helped hasten the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Despite more than 40 arrests, physical attacks and serious injuries, John Lewis remained a devoted advocate of the philosophy of nonviolence. After leaving the SNCC in 1966, he continued his commitment to the civil rights movement as associate director of the Field Foundation and his participation in the Southern Regional Council’s voter registration programs. Lewis went on to become the director of the Voter Education Project (VEP), adding nearly four million minorities to the voter rolls. In 1977, John Lewis was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to direct more than 250,000 volunteers of ACTION, the federal volunteer agency. In 1981, he was elected to the Atlanta City Council. While serving on the council, he was an advocate for ethics in government and neighborhood preservation.

Serving as U.S. representative of Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District since November 1986, Lewis is senior chief deputy whip for the Democratic Party in leadership in the House of Representatives, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, a member of its subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, and is a ranking member of its subcommittee on Oversight.
He is the co-author of the National Book Award winning and #1 New York Times bestselling graphic novel memoir trilogy “March,” written with Andrew Aydin and illustrated by Nate Powell. The “March” trilogy has been adopted into the core curriculum of school systems across the country to teach the civil rights movement to the next generation, and has been selected as a first-year common reading text at colleges and universities. The graphic memoir series for young readers was supposed to be a trilogy, but a new book, “Run,” will be published in August 2018, with more are on the way after that.


A subject of numerous documentaries, news broadcasts, and journals, he was featured most recently on the Netflix show “My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman.” During the premiere episode, President Barack Obama said John Lewis was the inspiration for the path that he took. In the episode, Lewis shared the story of the March from Selma to Montgomery with Letterman as they walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Lewis holds a B.A. in religion and philosophy from Fisk University, and he is a graduate of the American Baptist Theological Seminary, both in Nashville, Tennessee. He is the recipient of numerous awards from eminent national and international institutions, including the highest civilian honor granted by President Barack Obama, the Medal of Freedom. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and has one son, John Miles.

Throughout his adult life, John Lewis has remained at the vanguard of progressive social movements and the human rights struggle in the United States.

About Commencement at the University of California San Diego
The All Campus Commencement, featuring Rep. John Lewis as keynote speaker, kicks off graduation weekend at UC San Diego. Chancellor Khosla officially confers degrees by academic division upon graduates gathered as one student body. Following the ceremony, the campus’s six undergraduate colleges, two professional schools and various graduate programs host personalized graduation events where more than 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students will walk across stage as their names are read. All graduates, families and friends are invited to attend both ceremonies to fully experience the pomp and circumstance, and joy and pride, which mark one of the most memorable times in a student’s life.