A civil rights asterisk gets star treatment

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By Jim Auchmutey

Montgomery, Ala. --- Claudette Colvin, her fingers draped over the handle of a cane, watched intently as an actress captured the deepest irony of her life in one simple statement.

"I'm as anonymous as Rosa Parks is famous," said the woman on stage. "I am a footnote to history."

Colvin nodded slightly from her seat in the auditorium of the Rosa Parks Library and Museum. She's 65 now, slowed by arthritis and diabetes. But when Colvin speaks, her voice rising excitedly, it's possible to hear the feisty spirit of the 15-year-old schoolgirl who refused to move from her seat on a segregated bus nine months before Parks took a similar stand and became an American icon.

Colvin, on the other hand, was largely forgotten. She dropped out of school and moved to New York, where she worked for years in obscurity as a night shift nurse's assistant.

Fred Gray, the lawyer who represented both women in 1955, says he begins speeches by asking whether anyone has heard of Colvin. Very few hands go up. "If there had been no Claudette Colvin," he tells audiences, "there would have been no Rosa Parks. And if there had been no Rosa Parks, the world might never have been introduced to Martin Luther King Jr."

"History," Gray says, "has treated Claudette unfairly."

In Montgomery this past week, they tried to change that.

Troy State University, whose Montgomery campus includes the Parks museum, invited Colvin to be the special guest at a performance of a play about her and other women involved in the bus boycott that kicked the civil rights movement into overdrive 50 years ago. Awele Makeba, an actress and educator in Oakland, Calif., wrote the piece, "Rage Is Not a 1-Day Thing," after she discovered Colvin's story in a book about children in the movement.

On Thursday, she performed it for students at Colvin's old high school, Booker T. Washington. "They call me a troublemaker," Makeba said, slipping into character with a girlish drawl. Her subject, watching from the second row, seemed less like a rabble-rouser than a church organist, with her silver glasses, hoop earrings and softly curled perm.

Grandmotherly as she is, Colvin is fiercely proud of what she did. After her arrest, she relates, her minister said, "Claudette's going to bring the revolution in here."

He meant it as a joke --- only it wasn't.

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Colvin grew up on an unpaved street in King Hill, a poor neighborhood near downtown Montgomery. Classmates remember her as a high-strung girl who made good grades and liked to read. She was impressed with a couple of teachers who talked about justice and racial pride. She told friends she wanted to be a lawyer and even allowed her hair to go natural for a time --- not the typical do in the ironed and straightened South of the '50s.

"Some of the students thought I was a little crazy," she says.

Colvin's family didn't own a car, so she relied on the city's gold-and-green buses to get to school. On the afternoon of March 2, 1955, she boarded the Highland Gardens bus for home. According to law and custom, the back rows were restricted to blacks and the front rows to whites. The middle section was a gray

area where blacks could sit as long as seats were available and whites didn't need them.

The bus was uncrowded when Colvin settled into the last row of the middle section. With each stop, more whites boarded. Finally the driver looked in the mirror and asked the riders on Colvin's row to move.
The others complied. Colvin ignored him.

The driver walked back and asked her again.

"I'd moved for white people before," Colvin says. But this time, she was thinking of the slavery fighters she had read about recently during Negro History Week. "The spirit of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth was in me. I didn't get up."

Police were summoned. Two officers approached Colvin, who started crying as she tried to explain herself. One of them kicked the thin teenager and knocked the textbooks from her arms.

"They dragged her off that bus," says Annie Larkin Price, who was sitting behind her classmate. "The rest of us stayed quiet. People were too scared to say anything."

Colvin was handcuffed and taken to the city jail, where she was charged with disorderly conduct, violating the segregation ordinance and assault and battery, presumably because she clawed the officers with her long fingernails. She was thrown in a cell by herself until her mother and minister came to bail her out. That night, her father sat up with a gun in case of trouble.

Montgomery's black community had become increasingly angry over bus segregation, and one woman, Jo Ann Robinson, an English teacher at Alabama State University, had started planning a boycott. But even though Colvin's arrest enraged people and some stayed off the buses out of support for her, a full-scale protest didn't materialize.

"People weren't quite ready to take that step," says Stewart Burns, who began his recent history of the movement, "To the Mountaintop," with the Colvin story. He believes her case was the first time someone pleaded not guilty and contested Montgomery's segregation laws.

Two weeks after her arrest, Colvin was convicted of two of the charges and put on indefinite probation. She broke down sobbing when the verdict was read.

Though she was convicted, her case had greater repercussions.

A couple of months after Parks took her famous ride that December, touching off the boycott that changed America, Fred Gray filed a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of segregation on the buses. There were five plaintiffs: Colvin and four other women who had been arrested in other incidents on the buses.

"That was the case that actually integrated the buses," Gray says. "Winning Mrs. Parks' case would have just gotten us a not guilty."

By the time the federal courts ruled for the boycotters, Colvin was in no mood to celebrate. Her young life seemed to have come untracked.
Back in school after her arrest, she felt isolated and conspicuous. "People didn't seem to want to talk to me," she says.

That summer, she became pregnant after an encounter with a married man that she regards as statutory rape. It gave her nightmares for years. She dropped out of school as a senior and delivered a son she gave to her mother to raise. She tried to find a job, but nothing lasted. Once, when she was working as a short-order cook, a customer recognized her from the news and complained. The restaurant let her go.

In 1958, Colvin boarded another bus, for New York, where she found work cooking, cleaning and taking care of other people's children. She moved north full-

time in 1968 and took a job at a nursing home. Her son, Raymond, came to live with her, but there was tragedy in the reunion; he had become a drug addict and was eventually found dead in her apartment. Her second son, Randy, is an accountant in suburban Atlanta. Colvin retired recently and is considering moving in with his family.

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Over the years, a few historians and journalists have sought out Colvin. She has trouble explaining how it feels to be a footnote to a legend. Her emotions about Rosa Parks are complicated.

Colvin admires Parks and concedes that a self-assured adult of 42 made a better symbol for the bus boycott than an impetuous youth of 15 would have. Moreover, Parks was a family friend. Colvin used to spend the night at her house and once served as a mannequin for a wedding dress the seamstress was making. When Claudette was arrested, Parks raised money for her legal defense.

"She used to tell me what a brave young lady I was," Colvin remembers.

Even so, it has bothered her to hear so much about Parks and so little about the other women who challenged segregation on the Montgomery buses.

Parks once phoned her from her home in Detroit to tell her that she was going to be speaking in New York. Could Claudette come? It was a short-notice request and rubbed Colvin the wrong way. She said she had to work.

"You have to realize that our family never talked much about what happened to Claudette," says her kid sister, Gloria Laster, an advertising account executive in Birmingham. "Part of it was fear. But part of it was Rosa. Our mother always felt that as long as Rosa Parks was breathing, she's the mother of the civil rights movement, and we shouldn't say anything to take away from that."

There was more than enough room for both women at the Parks museum Friday night. While signs on the front door proclaimed Parks' 92nd birthday, the audience inside showered Colvin with affection. After the performance, they gave her a standing ovation, and Montgomery Mayor Bobby Bright presented her with a key to the city and invited her to move back to a changed Alabama.

As she stood on the stage smiling her gap-toothed smile, Colvin looked as pleased as a high school junior who had just won a blue ribbon for debating. But even at such a satisfying moment, her mind was on the difficult road she has walked.

She thought of a line from a Langston Hughes poem and quoted it to the audience: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."