You’ve heard about Martin Luther King Jr. right? Of course you have as he was one of the most important and influential figures of the 20th century through his efforts as the most visible spokesperson and leader of the Civil Rights movement in the US during the 1950s and 60s.

Have you heard about Bayard Rustin? Thought not. Rustin was a Civil Rights activist whose efforts started in 1936 – when Luther King Jr. was only 7 years old. As an openly gay man, his efforts were very much limited to the background of the movement and it is felt that at least in part, his achievements did not attract the same attention because of his sexuality.

Rustin realised he needed to stand up for the rights of himself and of all black people following an incident on a bus. He concluded very shortly afterwards that to be true to himself and those around him about his sexuality was absolutely essential.

Bayard became a mentor to Luther King and is credited with teaching him about non-violent protest as a way of achieving their goals. In 1962, in an attempt to undermine Luther King Junior’s efforts, J. Edgar Hoover publicly implied that Luther King Jr. was in a gay relationship with Rustin and a committee was established to decide what, if anything, should be done. Its decision was to eject Rustin from the campaign – a decision reached apparently to protect Luther King Jr., as a rumour about him being gay would work to fundamentally undermine his credibility.

Fortunately, Luther King Jr. spoke up for Rustin and brought him back into the fold in 1963 – the year of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of which Rustin was the principal organiser. This is widely believed to be a critical milestone in the efforts of the movement, with 1964-5 seeing the introduction of the Civil Rights legislation.

Bayard died in 1987 having continued to campaign tirelessly throughout his life for the rights of repressed groups including amongst others the Soviet Jews who in the mid-1960s were suffering discrimination in employment, education and housing, and also denied the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union. He was on a humanitarian mission to Haiti at the time he died.

In 2013 President Obama posthumously awarded Rustin the Presidential of Freedom – the highest civilian award in the US. He said in awarding the medal to Rustin’s partner Walter Naegle:

*For decades, this great leader, often at Dr. King’s side, was denied his rightful place in history because he was openly gay. No medal can change that, but today, we honor Bayard Rustin’s memory by taking our place in his march towards true equality, no matter who we are or who we love.*

You can hear Bayard’s own voice in interviews he gave before his death in the Making Gay History podcast which can be found here: <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/bayard-rustin/>

