The Illinois Amistad Commission
and The DuSable Museum of African American History
Present:

Harold Washington:

The Right Man
at the
Right Time
Mayor Harold Washington: The Right Man at the Right Time

“I reach out my hand, and ask for your help with the same adventurous spirit of Jean Baptiste DuSable when he founded Chicago. We are going to do some great deeds here together.”
– Mayor Harold Washington

On the night of April 12, 1983, when Harold Washington was elected as the first black mayor of Chicago, his supporters joyously anticipated the changes that would come to the city. They may not have been aware of the courage and fortitude it had taken for the new mayor to accomplish this goal.

Harold Washington was born in 1922 on the South Side of Chicago. His parents, Roy L. Washington and Bertha Jones, were dedicated parents of their four children. Their marriage did not last, however: they were divorced in 1928. Young Harold was sent to a Catholic school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Discontented is the best way to describe how young Harold felt about his new private school. He ran away from that school and hitchhiked back to Chicago. Once he was back home, his parents enrolled him in a local school. During these years, Harold would get his first taste of politics. His father earned his law degree by going to school at night and became precinct captain of Chicago’s third ward. He used to bring young Harold along with him when passing out campaign literature.

Like many young African Americans of then and now, Harold Washington was a good student and an athlete. He attended DuSable High School but ended up dropping out after his junior year. Harold worked odd jobs until he was drafted to serve in the US Armed Forces during World War II. While serving his country, Harold also earned his high school equivalence diploma. After being discharged, Harold was ready to be serious about life. He enrolled in Roosevelt University, where he was elected president of the student body during his senior year. He continued his education by attending Northwestern University’s law school, obtaining his juris doctor in 1952.

When his father died in 1953, Harold Washington was prepared to take over his position as Democratic precinct captain. Now politically astute, Washington moved on the serve in the Illinois House of Representatives from 1965 to 1976. A hard worker and a man of the people, Washington was elected to the US Congress in 1980. Not long after this election, Washington was approached by a few independent groups that urged him to run for mayor in the city of Chicago. These grassroots organizations undertook a massive campaign to register several thousand new voters. This convinced Washington that he should run. The campaign was very intense and it was a close race, but Washington emerged victorious. He was a shining example of what an African American man could do if he applied himself to his goals.

As mayor, Washington never forgot his connection to the communities that had elected him. He created a new presence in city government made up of women, Latinos, African Americans, and
other underrepresented ethnic groups. He put an emphasis on city neighborhoods, securing millions of dollars to repair local infrastructure and create a new rapid-transit line. Harold Washington wanted the city government to serve its residents. One of his crowning achievements was winning a $130 million bond to build a new central library in Chicago's South Loop. After his sudden death on November 25, 1987, the library was renamed in his honor.

**Activity One — Recall**
Using the above profile and other resources, students can work in groups to create a timeline of Mayor Harold Washington’s life. As much as possible, the timeline should include pictures of the mayor (at the various stages of his development) and the environment in which he grew up.

**Activity Two— Geography and Mathematics**
Harold Washington created a new coalition of voters to win the office of mayor. This coalition consisted of African Americans, Latinos and liberal European Americans, using the website: [http://gif-explode.com/?explode=http://i.imgur.com/xZoKnTa.gif](http://gif-explode.com/?explode=http://i.imgur.com/xZoKnTa.gif) students should answer the following questions:

1. Using the demographic map of Chicago, determine how the racial demographics of Chicago have changed from the 1930s to the 1980s, when Washington was elected.
2. What neighborhoods have changed from over 90 percent European American to over 90 percent African American and Latino?
3. Looking at the demographic Chicago map from the year 2000, do you think it would still be possible to win the office of the mayor by creating a coalition of African American and Latino voters?
4. If so, what neighborhoods would be the focus of your campaign?

**Activity Three — Portfolio/History**
Students should read the attached article entitled “How Mayor Washington Influenced Barak Obama,” written by Edward McClellend of NBC (see appendix A). Students should prepare a postmortem or Posthumous thank-you letter that they feel President Obama would write to Mayor Harold Washington if he were given that chance. The letter should be proofread, revised, and kept as a portfolio entry.

**Resources**

**For Teachers**
*Harold! Photographs from the Harold Washington Years* by Salim Muwakkil et al. (2007)

**For Students**
*Harold Washington: Mayor with a Vision* by Naurice Roberts (1988)
Using [Youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), students can view *Harold Washington: Life and Times*, a six-part series.
Appendix

How Mayor Washington Influenced Barack Obama

By Edward McClelland

Monday, Nov 26, 2012 | Updated 11:37 AM CST

Source: http://www.nbcchicago.com/blogs/ward-room/How-Mayor-Washington-Led-To-President-Obama-180845381.html#ixzz2m9RzGLoG


Harold Washington, who died 25 years ago Sunday, wasn’t Chicago’s greatest mayor, or its most powerful. Those honors go, respectively, to Carter Harrison Sr. and Richard J. Daley. Nevertheless, it was Mayor Harold Washington who played the largest role of any mayor in American history because of his relationship with a young man he met only once—Barack Obama. If Harold Washington had never been mayor of Chicago, Obama would not be president.

In the mid-1980s, Obama was just out of Columbia University and was looking to build both a career and an identity as a black man. He wanted to live and work in a city where blacks were in charge of their own political destiny. At that time, Harold Washington was the most prominent black elected official in America. Obama wrote a letter to City Hall, asking for a job. He got no response, but when he saw an ad for a community organizer in Chicago, he jumped at the chance. Years later, accepting the Harold Washington Award from the Congressional Black Caucus, Obama said, “I originally moved to Chicago in part because of the inspiration of Mayor Washington’s campaign.”

Washington contributed to Obama’s success as a community organizer. Unlike administrations before or since, City Hall’s offices were open to do-gooders doing grass-roots work with the poor. Obama’s group, the Developing Communities Project, persuaded the city to open an employment training office on Michigan Avenue in Roseland. Washington attended the dedication, and Obama shook hands with his hero.
Before Washington, the highest office a black Chicago politician could aspire to was US congressional representative. Washington showed it was possible to aim higher, and his competent administration demonstrated to whites that the world wouldn’t end if they voted for a black candidate. As a result of Washington’s success, Chicago was the one place in America where there were no limits to the ambitions of a young black politician. Obama’s first venture into politics was Project VOTE!, a 1992 voter registration drive that aimed to add 150,000 blacks to the rolls. It was modeled on the registration drive that led to Washington’s election, and it succeeded: Carol Moseley-Braun—a black politician inspired by Washington—won the Democratic primary for US Senate that year.

When Obama began his political career in 1995, he wanted to follow in Washington’s footsteps. He had it all mapped out. He was going to run for the General Assembly, where Washington served from 1965 to 1980, then he was going to run for Congress, then he was going to be mayor of Chicago. It didn’t quite work out that way, but I’m sure Harold Washington would have been happy with the way it did work out.
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<th>Grade Level(s)</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>Unit and Time Frame</td>
<td>Two 50-minute periods</td>
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| Common Core State Standards | - CCSS. ELA-Literacy. RI.6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.  
- CCSS. ELA-Literacy. RI.6.7: Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, and in words) to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.  
- CCSS. ELA-Literacy. W.6.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.  
- CCSS. ELA-Literacy. SL.6.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly. |
| Lesson Goals | Increase students’ understanding about the most important contributions of Mayor Harold Washington to the American political landscape by having them do the following:  
- Create a timeline of Mayor Harold Washington’s life.  
- Discuss the successes of Mayor Washington and President Barack Obama as a result of coalition-building among Latinos, African Americans, and other races and the importance thereof.  
- Describe and understand how Mayor Harold Washington influenced President Obama.  
- Identify the important legacies of Mayor Harold Washington. |
| Materials/Resources | **For Teachers:**  
- Harold! Photographs from the Harold Washington Years by Salim Muwakkil et al. (2007)  
**For Students:** |
| Anticipatory Set (Opening) | 1. Opening: Teacher will explain that today the class will be looking at the rise of the first African American mayor of the city of Chicago, Mayor Harold Washington. To this end, the class will pay close attention to some of the strategies employed by Mayor Harold Washington in his election campaign.  
2. Introduction to New Material: Teacher will pass out the Mayor Harold Washington worksheet (for notes and definitions).  

Teacher will explain that on the night of April 12, 1983, when Harold Washington was elected the first black mayor in the city of Chicago, his supporters were joyously anticipating the changes that would come to Chicago. They may not have been aware of the courage and fortitude that it had taken for the new mayor to accomplish this goal.

Harold Washington was born in 1922 on the South Side of Chicago. His parents, Roy L. Washington and Bertha Jones, were dedicated parents of their four children. Their marriage did not last, however: they were divorced in 1928. Harold was sent to a Catholic school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. *Discontented* is the best way to describe how Harold felt about his new private school. He ran away from that school and hitchhiked back to Chicago. Once he was back home, his parents enrolled him in a local school. |
|---|---|
| Writing: | Students will work in groups to create a timeline of Mayor Harold Washington’s life.  
Students should prepare a posthumous thank-you letter that they feel President Obama would write to Mayor Harold Washington if he were given that chance.  

**Geography and Mathematics:**  
Using the demographic map of Chicago, students will determine how the racial demographics of Chicago changed from the 1930s to the 1980s, when Washington was elected. |
| Interdisciplinary Connections |  
| Fortitude | |  
| Demographic | |  
| Postmortem | |  
| Posthumous | |  
| Precinct | |  

**Key Terms and Concepts**

- On YouTube, students can view Harold Washington: Life and Times, a six-part series.
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1. Discussion: Teacher will lead students on a discussion on the life of Mayor Harold Washington. Teacher will guide students to help them understand the importance of building coalitions among the various races for success in elections. Teacher will discuss how to create a timeline.

2. Critical Reflection Activity: Student will write critical reflections for ten minutes on what they learned about
Mayor Harold Washington and why it is important to learn about this figure.

**Critical Thinking Questions:**

1. What were some factors that led to the emergence of Mayor Harold Washington on the political landscape of Chicago?
2. To what extent do you think coalition-building was essential in the successful election of Mayor Harold Washington?
3. To what extent do you think coalition-building was essential in the successful election of President Barack Obama?
4. What do you think were the greatest legacies of Mayor Harold Washington?

Students will volunteer to read aloud their reflections.

5. Closing: Teacher reiterates the key points of the day’s lesson on Mayor Harold Washington’s life and his rise to become mayor of the city of Chicago.

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<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Letter-writing assignment, critical reflection, class participation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Extensions (Homework, Projects)</td>
<td>Homework: letter-writing assignment, critical reflection</td>
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