



Goal Directed Behavior

ABOUT MORNINGSIDE CENTER

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility's evidence-validated programs engage young people in learning essential social and emotional skills and help educators build productive and respectful schools. The 4Rs Program combines superior children's books with engaging SEL activities that explore community, feelings, relationships, conflict, and problem-solving, adding depth to literacy instruction.

Hank Aaron, Brave in Every Way

By: The 4Rs



Book Talk / Read Aloud: Hank Aaron: Brave in Every Way

Note to the teacher:

This is the Book Talk section from The 4Rs™ [Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution] *Teaching Guide for Grade 3, Unit 4, Assertiveness, 56-60*. All units in The 4Rs™ begin with a summary and comment section to inform the teacher, and include a read-aloud of a story followed by discussion and activities that help children relate to the themes.

Time: 1 or 2 45-minute periods

Materials: chalk board or chart paper and markers; writing and drawing supplies

Hank Aaron: Brave in Every Way, by Peter Golenbock, illustrated by Paul Lee. Gulliver Books, Harcourt, Inc., 2001

SUMMARY

The world knows Hank Aaron as the man who broke Babe Ruth's record of home runs and as a great baseball player. But when he was born in 1934, only his parents had high hopes for him. His father "wanted him to know the joy of playing baseball in open grassy fields," and his mother "dreamed that one day he would make a difference in the world." Times were tough. The Great Depression had ravaged the country. Like countless others, Hank's father, Herbert Aaron, had trouble finding work. He saved enough to buy some land outside of Mobile, Alabama, but had no money for a house or even wood to build one. When Hank was eight years old his dad used boards from a torn-down house to build a small home with no electricity, glass windows, or indoor plumbing. But the elder Aaron had achieved a major goal. Not only had he provided a home for his family, he built it near "an open field for playing ball."

Young Hank loved playing ball. His mother wanted him to go to college. "Hank, try to be the best. . . Set goals for yourself and don't let anyone stop you from achieving them." Hank studied, but he also played ball. His goal, which seemed impossible at the time, was to be a major-league ballplayer. His father urged him to be realistic: "There aren't any colored players in the major leagues." Hank didn't stop dreaming, and when he turned 13, Jackie Robinson broke the color bar by joining the Brooklyn Dodgers.



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At age 16, Hank was offered a job with a local team called the Black Bears. The Bears would pay him ten dollars a game. Hank thought he would have a conflict with his mother. Not only were the other Bears adults, but the team played games on Sunday. He was sure she would say no. Still, he wanted to play with the Bears more than anything. He “put his fears away and asked permission.” To his surprise, his mother came up with a win-win solution. He had to stay in school and get his diploma. She wouldn’t let him travel with the team or be paid on Sunday, but he could play in all the home games. After two seasons with the Black Bears, he got an offer from a professional team called the Indianapolis Clowns. “Be strong,” his mother cautioned as she bid him farewell, too “upset to go to the train station to see him off.” And he would need strength. His talent led him to the Milwaukee Braves. He had achieved his goal to play in the major leagues. He became one of the leading home run hitters in the country. Now he set himself another goal: to break the career home run record of Babe Ruth, “baseball’s most beloved hero.”

When the Braves moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta, Georgia, the hate mail started arriving. Meanwhile, Hank was making steady progress toward the goal he had set for himself in the late 1950s. It was 1972, and he was 41 runs away from Ruth’s total of 714 home runs. The hate mail intensified. Many people did not want an African American to do better than a white man. “Hank decided to fight the best way he could. He swore that each angry letter would add a home run to his record.” As word of the hate mail and death threats got out, well-wishers sent letters, too. A “whole country of fans cheered for him.” On the day in 1974 when he hit 715, both his parents were in the stands. His mother feared for his life. What if someone tried to keep him from reaching home base? When he got to home base, she threw her arms around him and held on very tight. Her dream that her child would make a difference had been achieved.

COMMENT

There is a saying that we stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. Hank Aaron always acknowledged his debt to Jackie Robinson and others whose courage and assertiveness paved the way for him and many others. Peter Golenbock has written about Robinson and the intense racial hatred he faced from his own teammates as well as from fans. We can look at his book



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Teammates, which chronicles Robinson's story and the support he received from one white teammate who was courageous enough to transcend his own southern upbringing and also stand up to racist whites on his team. Both books take us back to a time that is ancient history for our students. It may be hard for them to imagine a time when African Americans were not major league players; when teams could have names like Black Bears and Indianapolis Clowns; when the slightest show of assertion by an African American could lead to death. This book is also in the tradition of stories of the American dream. The hero may not have been born in a log cabin, but the outlines of the tale remain the same.

We can look at the quiet courage and assertiveness of the entire Aaron family. In the midst of very hard economic times the father never loses sight of his desire to make a home for his family and to own land when so many families were in thrall to white landowners. His mother continues to believe in the power of education. She stays true to her faith, finding a way for her son to work on her dream without compromising the values she has instilled in him. Hank works unceasingly toward his goals, first to join the major leagues, then to break Babe Ruth's record. He does this without demeaning himself or others. He is quoted as saying, "I don't want them to forget Ruth. I just want them to remember me." And he is clear that he cannot waste precious energy letting the hatred of others deflect him from his goal. We can talk about how we can show assertiveness in tense situations, about ways to stay focused on our goals.

We can also talk about how we can support someone's efforts to be assertive. In *Teammates*, Pee Wee Reese refuses to sign a petition saying that the other players won't play if Robinson is hired. The petition dies. Later, in a dramatic moment when angry fans are screaming racial epithets at Robinson, Reese walks from his position over to Robinson and puts his arm around his shoulder in a show of public support. In this book, although Aaron presumably met with racism within the team, the focus is on the fans. And many fans rallied around him. We can ask how we can take assertive action to support others when we see them struggling.

Just sticking with the sport of baseball, we can look at other people who have overcome prejudice with graceful courage, such as Hank Greenberg, who faced



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anti-Semitism when he played in the major league, and the young girls who became the first to play in the formerly all-male Little League.

Book Talk – Read Aloud

Previewing the book

Show the cover of the book. Ask students what they know about Hank Aaron. What do they think the subtitle means? Give some historical background about the Great Depression and segregation in the entire country. Not only were sports teams segregated, so were the Armed Forces, as well as schools, hotels, and restaurants in the South. Jackie Robinson could not stay in the same hotels with his teammates. This book doesn't say so, but until desegregation at least in the South, neither could Hank Aaron.

Reading and responding to the book

Read the story.

You may wish to pause at certain points to explain some things (p. 8, use of the word “colored,” asking who knows who Jackie Robinson is, the fact that the Dodgers were once in Brooklyn; p. 21, the picture in the background is of Babe Ruth).

After you read the story, ask the students to pair up and talk about the book. What interests them? What questions do they have? Ask what was important to them about this story. Encourage the students to respond to each other by asking questions such as, “Do the rest of you agree or disagree with _____?” If others want to respond to a comment from one student, suggest that they restate in their own words what the student has said, then give their opinion and their reasons.



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Deepening students' understanding of the book

Ask students to recap the book. Ask how a biography is different from a fictional story. Note that often in children's literature a writer will create a fictional story that fits with the known facts about a person's life. In this case, the author seems to have stuck to known facts. He has kept the focus completely on Aaron's achievement of his goals. Our focus here is on Aaron's strength of character and assertiveness. Introduce the concept of assertiveness, of being strong but not mean. We want students to look for examples of Hank's assertiveness throughout the book.

On p. 10, Hank is afraid to ask his mother for permission to play with the Black Bears. What does he think her objections are? (Many students may not know how strong the Christian influence regarding Sunday as a day of rest was in this country up until the last twenty or thirty years. There were laws against buying and selling on the Sabbath. Many Christians refused to violate the Sabbath by working or even engaging in recreation, such as going to the movies on Sunday.) How does the win-win solution work for both Hank and his mother?

On p. 12, when Estella Aaron tells Hank to "be strong," what do you think she is thinking of? What strength will it take for him to stay focused on his goal of getting in to the major leagues?

On p. 20, Hank decided to "fight the best way he could." Why is it the "best" way? What other options did he have? How might the story have been different if he had responded differently?

On p. 30, Hank thanks God for "pulling him through." What do students think he is particularly thankful for? Is it just for his talent and for beating Babe Ruth's record, or could it be for the strength to endure the hatred and triumph over it, or for his parents still being alive to see his achievement? What do we know about Estella Aaron's faith? Do we think she taught Hank to have faith in God?



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Connecting the book to students' lives

Discussion: Have the students ever had a goal that they focused on? What strategies helped them obtain it? What do they think Hank had to do to achieve his goal? (Play a lot of ball, keep going to school, not believe white people's perception of black ballplayers' talents?)

What do the students think now about the book's subtitle "Brave in Every Way"? Ask students for ideas of how Hank was brave, then list them on the board (playing with adults, asking his mother when he knew she wouldn't approve of playing on Sunday, walking out on the field after he received death threats, and so on).

Ask students for examples of times they have been brave or have seen people be brave.

Writing: Write about a time when you were brave, or a time when you accomplished something good that you wanted to do, or a time when you saw something that was unfair.

Think of something you are passionate about doing. Imagine that there is now a law that people who have your color of hair cannot do this thing. Write a letter to the editor of the paper telling what you think of this law.

Draw a picture of yourself using a skill that you have.

Role-Play

Ask for volunteers to act out Hank and his father talking about Hank's dream of playing in the major leagues. What advice will his father give him? Ask for volunteers to play Hank and his mother when Hank asks if he can play with the Black Bears. How does he persuade her?

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