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# Gerda Weissmann Klein & the Presidential Medal of Freedom

Classroom Activities

February 2011

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## Overview

On February 15, 2011, in a White House ceremony, President Barack Obama bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Gerda Weissmann Klein and 14 other individuals who have made “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.” This special set of sponge activities commemorates that moment and is designed to supplement coursework in classrooms where students are studying, or have studied, Mrs. Klein’s life.

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## Materials

- Handouts
- Writing materials

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## “Handout A” Activity Suggestions

This handout recounts President Obama’s comments about Gerda Weissmann Klein upon her receipt of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

- Underline words or phrases that resonate with you and assemble them into a free-form poem. For example, “In hopeless moments/When the darkness seems so total/We must endeavor/We must discover/We must remember/The extent of our strength/The depth of our love/And never, ever give up.”
- Write for three minutes, describing strategies you can use in “hopeless moments” to ensure you “never, ever give up.”

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## “Handout B” Activity Suggestions

This handout reveals the symbolism included in the design of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

- Drawing from our previous lessons about Mrs. Klein’s life, provide specific examples of how her life story reflects a) a commitment to freedom, b) idealism and c) strength.
- What principles or values are most important in your life? Draw a sketch of a medal that symbolically reflects your core values, and explain the medal’s meaning in one paragraph.

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## “Handout C” Activity Suggestions

This handout introduces students to other individuals who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in February 2011. Teachers may provide the handout to students in whole, or select particular entries for use in shorter time periods.

- Select another Medal of Freedom recipient and create a Venn Diagram, comparing that individual and Gerda Weissmann Klein. Identify the similarities and differences in how each has made “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.”
- Write for three minutes on the following prompt: “The Medal of Freedom recipient with whom I most identify is XX, because ...”

- The recipients of the Medal of Freedom represent an array of professions. Write for three minutes on the following prompt: “When I’m an adult, I want to work as a XX, and I will use my profession to help the world by ...”
- Each of the recipients of the Medal of Freedom has made a unique contribution to our world. Write for three minutes on the following prompt: “Fifty years from now, I will be standing on a stage accepting an award for ...”

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### **“Handout D” Activity Suggestions**

This handout highlights Mrs. Klein’s expression of gratitude upon receiving the Medal of Freedom.

- Mrs. Klein expresses gratitude for the freedom she gained in coming to the United States. Define freedom and describe how it affects your own life. Provide concrete examples.
- Write for three minutes, describing one person, one place and/or one thing for which you are grateful – and why.
- Mrs. Klein says she “tried in whichever way I could to give back.” Write for three minutes describing a time when you took action “to give back.”

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## Handout A

The Presidential Medal of Freedom recognizes individuals who have made “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.” It, along with the Congressional Medal of Freedom, is the highest civilian honor in the U.S.

On February 15, 2011, President Barack Obama awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Gerda Weissmann Klein, saying in his remarks:



“By the time she was 21, Gerda Klein had spent six years living under Nazi rule — three of them in concentration camps. Her parents and brother had been taken away. Her best friend had died in her arms during a 350-mile death march. And she weighed only 68 pounds when she was found by American forces in an abandoned bicycle factory. But Gerda survived. She married the soldier who rescued her. And ever since — as an author, a historian and a crusader for tolerance — she has taught the world that it is often in our most hopeless moments that we discover the extent of our strength and the depth of our love. ‘I pray you never stand at any crossroads in your own lives,’ she says, ‘but if you do, if the darkness seems so total, if you think there is no way out, remember: never, ever give up.’”

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**Handout B**

In February 2011, President Barack Obama bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Gerda Weissmann Klein. The Medal's design uses numerous symbols, including:



The White Star: Freedom and Democracy

Thirteen Stars in a Field of Blue: Idealism

Red Oak Wreath: Strength

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## Handout C



The Presidential Medal of Freedom recognizes individuals who have made “an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.” In February 2011, President Barack Obama bestowed the Medal to 15 individuals. Fourteen of them attended the White House ceremony. (Angela Merkel, the first woman and first East German to serve as Germany’s chancellor, was not in attendance.) Below, you’ll find the official descriptions for each individual, as read during the presentation of his or her Medal of Freedom.

### **Gerda Weissmann Klein**

Gerda Weissmann Klein’s life is a testament to the tenacity of the human spirit. A Holocaust survivor, she was separated from her parents and sent to a series of Nazi labor camps. In 1945, she was one of a few survivors among those forced to undergo a 350-mile death march to avoid the progress of liberating Allied forces. From tragedy to triumph, she and her husband proudly started the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation to promote tolerance, respect and empowerment of students throughout the world. By sharing her stories and encouraging others to see themselves in one another, Gerda Klein has helped to advance understanding among all people.

### **John H. Adams**

At a time when contaminated waterways and polluted air threatened too many of our communities, John H. Adams co-founded the Natural Resources Defense Council to encourage responsible stewardship of our natural resources. A staunch defender of the wonders of our planet, he served as executive director and, later, as president of the NRDC, challenging Americans to live up to our responsibilities to leave something better to our children with an urgency matched by few others. John Adams’ decades-long commitment to safeguarding the Earth has left our air purer, our water cleaner and our planet healthier for generations to come.

### **Dr. Maya Angelou**

Out of a youth marked by pain and injustice, Dr. Maya Angelou rose with an unbending determination to fight for civil rights and inspire every one of us to recognize and embrace the possibility and potential we each hold. With her soaring poetry, towering prose and mastery of a range of art forms, Dr. Angelou has spoken to the conscience of our nation. Her soul-stirring words have taught us how to reach across division and honor the beauty of our world.

### **Warren E. Buffett**

As a world-renowned investor and philanthropist, Warren E. Buffett's business acumen is matched only by his dedication to improving the lives of others. He is a co-founder of The Giving Pledge, an organization that encourages wealthy Americans to donate at least 50 percent of their wealth to philanthropic causes. Warren Buffett's example of generosity and compassion has shown us the power of one individual's determination and inspired countless women and men to help make our world a brighter place.

### **The Honorable George Herbert Walker Bush**

From his time as a decorated Navy pilot to his years in the White House as the 41st President of the United States, President George Herbert Walker Bush has led a life marked by a profound commitment to serving others. As President, he upheld the American value of liberty during a time of renewal and promise. As a private citizen, he has united Americans in times of crisis, lending his tireless efforts to men and women whose lives have been upended by disaster. Over the arc of his life, President Bush has served our nation as a tremendous force for good, and we proudly salute him for his unwavering devotion to our country and our world.

### **Jasper Johns**

Bold and iconic, the work of Jasper Johns has left lasting impressions on countless Americans. With nontraditional materials and methods, he has explored themes of identity, perception, and patriotism. By asking us to reexamine the familiar, his work has sparked the minds of creative thinkers around the world. Jasper Johns' innovative creations helped shape the pop, minimal and conceptual art movements, and the United States honors him for his profound influence on generations of artists.

### **The Honorable John R. Lewis**

From his activism in the civil rights movement to his nearly 25 years in the House of Representatives, John R. Lewis has dedicated his life to shattering barriers and fighting injustice. The son of sharecroppers from Alabama, he rose with courage, fortitude and purpose to organize the first student sit-ins and the earliest freedom rides. The youngest speaker at the 1963 March on Washington, a fearless advocate and a distinguished member of Congress, John Lewis has earned our lasting gratitude for a lifetime dedicated to the pursuit of equality and justice for all.

### **Elizabeth Little, accepting on behalf of her husband, Dr. Thomas Emmett Little**

Dr. Thomas Emmett Little was an optometrist who devoted his life and skills to those in need. Starting in the 1970s, Dr. Little and his wife lived largely in Afghanistan in order to provide vision care to the people of that nation. Even as they dedicated their lives to healing others, Dr. Little and nine of his team members were murdered in Afghanistan in 2010. Our nation mourns the loss of these humanitarians who paid the ultimate price in pursuit of their ideals, and we look to Dr. Little's example of generosity and goodwill so we can better know the meaning of sacrifice and the necessity of peace.

### **Yo-Yo Ma**

Recognized as one of the world's greatest musicians, Yo-Yo Ma's talents know no boundaries of genre or culture. Since performing at the White House for President Kennedy at the age of seven, he has recorded more than 75 albums, won more than a dozen Grammy awards and established himself as one of our

nation's most acclaimed and respected artists. His music has bound us together and captured our imagination, and the United States proudly honors this prolific cellist and ambassador for the arts.

### **Sylvia Mendez**

Sylvia Mendez was thrust to the forefront of the civil rights movement when she was just a child. Denied entry to the Westminster School because of her Mexican heritage, she sought justice and her subsequent legal case, *Mendez v. Westminster*, effectively ended segregation as a matter of law in California. The arguments in that case catalyzed the desegregation of our schools and prevailed in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, forever changing our nation. Today, Sylvia Mendez continues to share her remarkable story and advocate for excellence and equality in classrooms across America.

### **Stanley F. Musial**

Stanley F. Musial represents the best of American sports icons. His name is synonymous with the St. Louis Cardinals, the team on which he played for his entire 22-year career. A perennial all-star and three-time Most Valuable Player, he won accolades as a player and championships as a teammate. Nicknamed "Stan the Man" Musial, he played the game with unrivaled passion, and his humility and decency remain a model for all young Americans to this day.

### **William F. Russell**

Basketball was a different sport before William F. Russell donned a uniform. With unmatched skill, he led the Boston Celtics to an unparalleled string of titles and earned the distinction of being named the National Basketball Association's Most Valuable Player five times. He broke down barriers on and off the court, becoming basketball's first African American coach and serving as a passionate advocate for civil rights. Bill Russell can reflect with pride on helping change the culture of a sport and the course of our nation.

### **The Honorable Jean Kennedy Smith**

The eighth of nine children to Joseph and Rose Kennedy, Jean Kennedy Smith joined the family business of helping her fellow Americans in improving our world. In 1974, she founded Very Special Arts, a nonprofit organization that promotes the artistic talents of young people living with disabilities. On the international stage, Jean Kennedy Smith played a pivotal role in the peace process in Northern Ireland while serving as United States ambassador to Ireland. With intelligence, compassion, creativity and grace, Jean Kennedy Smith has contributed volumes to her family's outstanding legacy of service to our country.

### **John J. Sweeney**

As a champion for the American worker, John J. Sweeney has strengthened our families, our economy and our country. The son of Irish immigrants, he worked his way up in the labor movement, serving as president of the Service Employees International Union and president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, all the while reaffirming our nation's commitment to rewarding the enduring values of hard work and responsibility. The United States proudly honors John Sweeney for a lifetime of courageous service on behalf of working people.

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**Handout D**



“When I had the great privilege and honor to come and become an American, to be given my life, my freedom, it is a great opportunity. To be a wife, a mother and an American citizen. I tried in whichever way I could to give back to this beloved country all that it has given me, fulfilling dreams I never knew how to dream. And to think that today, my country is thanking me? It’s something almost incomprehensible that I cannot in any way articulate.”

— Gerda Weissmann Klein on receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom

## **Content Standards**

These content standards are drawn from the Compendium of K-12 Standards, 4th edition, available at <http://www.merel.org/standards%2Dbenchmarks/>

### **Language Arts**

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

### **Civics**

Standard 27: Understands how certain character traits enhance citizens' ability to fulfill personal and civic responsibilities.

### **Thinking and Reasoning**

Standard 3: Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences.

## **Additional Resources**

Order "One Survivor Remembers," a multimedia kit about Gerda Weissmann Klein for grades 8 and up, offered in partnership with Teaching Tolerance and available for free at [http://kleinfoundation.org/programs/teaching\\_tolerance.asp](http://kleinfoundation.org/programs/teaching_tolerance.asp)

Order "Stand Up, Speak Out, Lend a Hand!," a service-focused resource from the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation and Time magazine, at <http://kleinfoundation.org/programs/inTime/default.asp>

Learn about Mrs. Klein's new nonprofit, Citizenship Counts, at <http://citizenshipcounts.org/>

## **Acknowledgements**

Written by Jennifer Holladay. Special thanks to the supporters of the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation whose generosity makes resources like this one possible, and to the teachers who bring these resources to life in classrooms worldwide.