

THE HOUSE THAT CHANGED LIVES

A LESSON IN SOCIAL ACTION FROM THE LIFE OF SARAH E. RAY

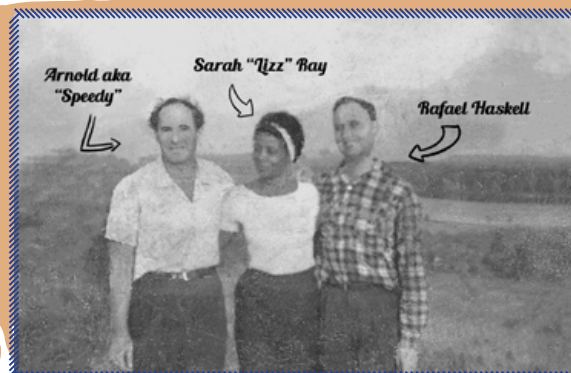


WHO WAS SARAH ELIZABETH RAY?

History has forgotten the woman known as "The Rosa Parks of the Boblo Boat." During [The Great Migration](#), a young, African American woman by the name of Sarah E. Ray left rural Tennessee for Detroit. She joined thousands of Black people from the segregated South who saw Detroit as a place of greater racial equity and economic opportunity. On June 21, 1945, she attempted to celebrate her secretarial school graduation on an amusement park ferry—the Boblo Boat—but was kicked off because of the color of her skin. Outraged, she filed a discrimination lawsuit with the aid of the NAACP. In 1948, with the famous African American litigator [Thurgood Marshall](#) in her corner, she won before the United States Supreme Court! This was six years before [Rosa Parks's](#) infamous protest on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. Ray's case, [Bob-Lo Excursion Co. v. Michigan](#), was one of the many cases that paved the way to [Brown v. Board of Education](#) in 1954, and the end of legal segregation in America.

WHAT DO YOU DO AFTER YOU CHANGE THE WORLD?

There's an old saying: **Think globally, act locally.** That means that in order to be an agent for global change, you can start by making a positive change in your own backyard. In other words, think big, but take small steps.



Sarah E. Ray aka Lizz Haskell with her husband Rafael and their neighbor Arnold

Sarah E. Ray did the opposite. Her first fight for change—challenging segregation on the Boblo Boat—helped change the course of civil rights nationally. After her win, Sarah E. Ray did not remain in the national spotlight. Little is known about her life in the 1950s, but in 1961, she married a Jewish labor activist named Rafael Haskell. Soon she was going by a new name: Lizz Haskell. Perhaps her marriage was itself an action of rebellion. There were not many interracial couples in those days. In fact, it was 1967 before the [Supreme Court](#) finally forbade states from prohibiting couples like the Haskellts from marrying.

The Haskell family settled in an east side community near Detroit City Airport. At the time, the neighborhood was integrated and the neighbors lived in harmony. But in 1967, Detroit erupted in flames as African Americans rebelled against the racist actions of the police.¹ Many cities had similar rebellions² in 1967-68, but Detroit's was the most violent.

The incident tore many communities apart, but Lizz and her husband were determined to keep their Airport Community together. Bounded by Gratiot, Harper, Van Dyke, and Grinnell, the community formed a neighborhood alliance in 1968 called Operation Friendship Understanding and Peace. And who was the leader of that alliance? None other than Lizz Haskell. The purpose of Operation Friendship Understanding and Peace was for Black and white members of the Airport Community to work together and bring racial and generational harmony to their neighborhood. Her fight for racial equality on the Boblo Boat had launched her into a national movement, but in midlife, Lizz began to fiercely advocate for her own community. It wasn't long before the Haskell family bought an abandoned grocery store and turned it into the home base for the activities of their neighborhood coalition.

That was the birth of Action House.

PROTEST V. EMPOWERMENT



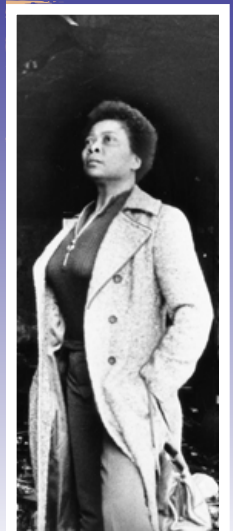
Action House documents found during our research

Initially, Action House focused upon the peaceful co-existence of the races. But it didn't take long for Lizz to understand that her dream of a stable interracial neighborhood was crumbling. White flight was in full effect, propelled by forces beyond Lizz's control. By the mid-1970s, the demographic makeup of the Airport Community had changed significantly. The neighborhood was now 75 percent Black residents.³ Key services were no longer being provided by the city. Abandoned houses and empty lots dotted the neighborhood. With no safe places to play or opportunities for enrichment, young people turned to gangs.

In response, Lizz changed the focus of Action House to community empowerment and youth development. She particularly focused on keeping kids in school and out of gangs. Action House became the place that neighborhood children went to feel safe, get a free meal, do homework, and engage in constructive activities like dance, music, art, and sports.

In this way, Action House lived up to its name. Through her organization, Lizz continued with her social action agenda, but on a very local scale. She fought for many causes, from building a neighborhood basketball court to transforming vacant lots into playgrounds, and challenging inequitable school busing plans.⁴

During all of her advocacy on behalf of her community, Lizz rarely spoke about her experience on the Boblo Boat, and her win in the U.S. Supreme Court. Until recently, many of the people who went to Action House as children never knew that Lizz had been a civil rights activist under the name of Sarah E. Ray.



Lizz Haskell in Detroit, photographed by Porter in 1975, courtesy of Detroit News

THE VOICES OF "THE CHILDREN OF ACTION HOUSE"

The Sarah E. Ray Project was able to interview some of the people who went to Action House as a child. Although they are senior citizens now, their memories remain vivid of Lizz Haskell and how she impacted their lives. Click on these four-to-six minute videos to hear their stories:



[Kevin George:](#)
A Slab of Asphalt Changed My Life



[Kourtney Thompson:](#)
We Had a Hero in our Family—and Didn't Know It



[Marie Shoulders:](#)
The Day We Spoke Truth to Power



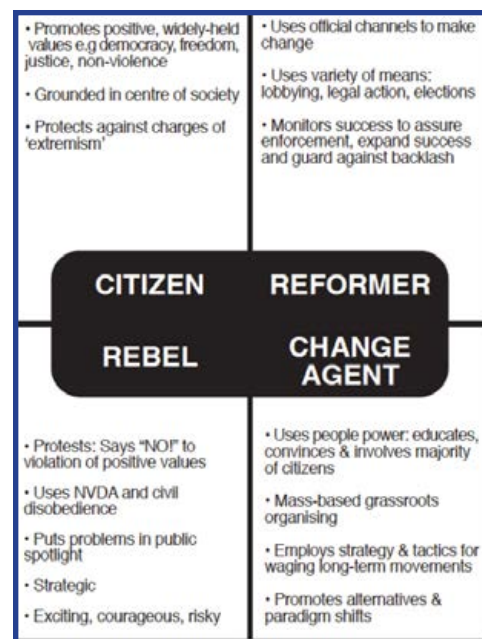
[Rochelle Wilson:](#)
We Swam in White Man's Water

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

NOTE: If students aren't explicitly making the connection between race and class in their answers to any of these questions, guide them to consider these key connections.

1. Let's look at [Bill Moyer's "Four Roles of Social Activism"](#): the citizen, the rebel, the reformer, and the change agent. Which category do you think best describes Lizz Haskell's work at Action House? Why?

Note: This graphic excerpts the central columns from the extended chart found in [Bill Moyer's Four Roles of Social Activism from Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements \(New Society Publishers, 2001, p. 21-22 and 28-29\).](#)



2. Many of the Action House grants, letters, and proposals discuss a "void" in activities for kids and teens in the Airport Community, leading them to feelings of "frustration and animosity" and "destructive activity." But in [Kevin George's](#) interview, he speaks with sadness about playing basketball in dirt and the lack of playlots. How does your environment affect how you feel about yourself and your community?

Possible Answers:

- When you live in a stable, well-supported community, you gain a sense of stability and support. The opposite is also true. A neglected, stressed community reflects the values of the people who make the rules. You may grow up feeling the world doesn't care about you.
- Humans adapt to their environments all the time. They learn to live with heat, or cold, or different terrains. Discuss how living in a crime-ridden, underserved community might make you adapt differently than if you lived in a wealthy, safe community.
- You might not think you deserve nice things or opportunities if you've never been exposed to them.
- You might feel frustrated at people who have nicer things than you.

3. From the oral histories, we can see that to those who grew up in the Airport Community, the bold woman who dreamed up Action House is remembered as "Lizz Haskell." Though the exact date of her name change remains unclear, we know that after marrying Rafael Haskell, Sarah E. Ray began to go by the name of "Lizz Haskell." She specifically said that she changed her name with the unconventional spelling of Lizz "so that folks'll remember me."⁵ Why do you think she wanted to be remembered for her activism as "Lizz," but not for her activism as "Sarah"?

NOTE: We have not been able to confirm her reasons in our research, but this question is designed to get students to think about the toll that the civil rights struggle had upon the lives of the "heroes" of the movement.

Possible Answers:

- Lizz's activist mission changed from a national, integrationist project to a local project to better the living conditions for Black Detroiters. The name change reflected her change in mission.
- Although she fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, it's easy to imagine how the Boblo Boat experience was very painful for Sarah. Perhaps her name change was a way of not having to constantly relive a painful memory. (Talk about the painful aspects of the experience—humiliation at being singled out on the boat, being thrown off the boat for being "inferior," not being defended by her classmates, watching them float away for a day of fun while she stood on shore.)
- It's possible that Sarah received death threats or other retribution for her lawsuit against the Boblo Excursion Company. A name change may have helped insulate her from continued attacks.
- Especially in her era, women traditionally changed their names when they married. Sarah may simply have been donning a new identity as a married woman. However, she gave her first name a "makeover" so that she would not totally disappear into her husband's identity.

She added the extra 'z' in Lizz
"so that folks'll remember me."



4. Action House was a neighborhood-empowerment organization, intent on holding politicians accountable to the needs of the people. However, in lots of archival material regarding Action House, Haskell writes about the importance of individuals relying upon themselves and not the government. She encourages teens to get jobs, moms to get an education, homeowners to learn home maintenance. How does taking individual responsibility help you to take care of your community?

Possible Answers:

- Government resources and rules change over time, leaving people abandoned and projects unsustainable. Self-reliance and ensure long-term sustainability.
- Individuals who are empowered can be role models for others to become self-reliant.
Being financially independent and stable allows you to help people in need or contribute to organizations doing work you think is important.
- If everyone contributes to the betterment of their community, the community can enjoy long-lasting benefits. Diverse individual skills strengthen a community if people work together.

5. Recall Rochelle Wilson and Kevin George’s interviews. They reflect on infrastructure Lizz brought to the neighborhood for play: the Swimmobile, the Bookmobile, and asphalt basketball courts. Why do you think these adults show so much emotion when talking about happy memories from their childhoods? What do they see now in Lizz’s activism that they couldn’t see when they were kids?

Possible Answers:

- As kids, they didn’t understand what kind of sacrifices Lizz made to give them these opportunities.
- They retroactively understand the importance of Action House in their personal development.
- They realize that the work done through Action House was bigger than just activities for kids.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

A Deeper Dive into the Impact of Action House

- Have students share stories about when they’ve collaborated with a diverse group of people for a common goal. Have them describe their fears, challenges, and victories. How did it feel? What did they learn?
- Have students imagine that an Action House equivalent exists in their community. In groups of three or four, have students draft a proposal for inclusive programming they’d actually participate in. They may also evaluate why an organization like Action House does or does not already exist in their community.
- Have students reflect on why a local organization might be able to affect more change than a national or international organization. Then, have students select an organization or activist and research how their chosen organization/activist extended their impact on a national or global scale. Example organizations and activists might include: MADD, UnidosUS, Alcoholics Anonymous, Habitat for Humanity, Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thurnberg, and Dolores Huerta.
- Have students locate the Airport Community and the 12th Street area where the 1967 Rebellion began. (See attached map.) They will be able to see that the neighborhoods are not adjacent. Yet, the rebellion directly affected the Airport Community for decades to come. Have them discuss why that might have happened. How do events far away affect them in their communities?
- Ask students to identify a local organization that furthers a social movement. Have them interview an employee or volunteer with the organization about how they got involved and why they’re pursuing change on a local level. BONUS: Have the student volunteer for a day/weekend and report back what they learned.
- Have students imagine themselves as a mom who dropped her kid off at Action House. Then, have students write either a diary entry from the perspective of the mom detailing what it felt like to have safe childcare available, and what she could now imagine doing with her life.
- Lizz Haskell knew a bit about marketing—she even wrote a theme song for Action House. Have students write and design a poster or write a script for a TV commercial advertising Action House’s youth development activities.

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Made in collaboration with Julia Irion Martins and The Detroit River Story Lab - University of Michigan.

Footnotes & Archival Materials

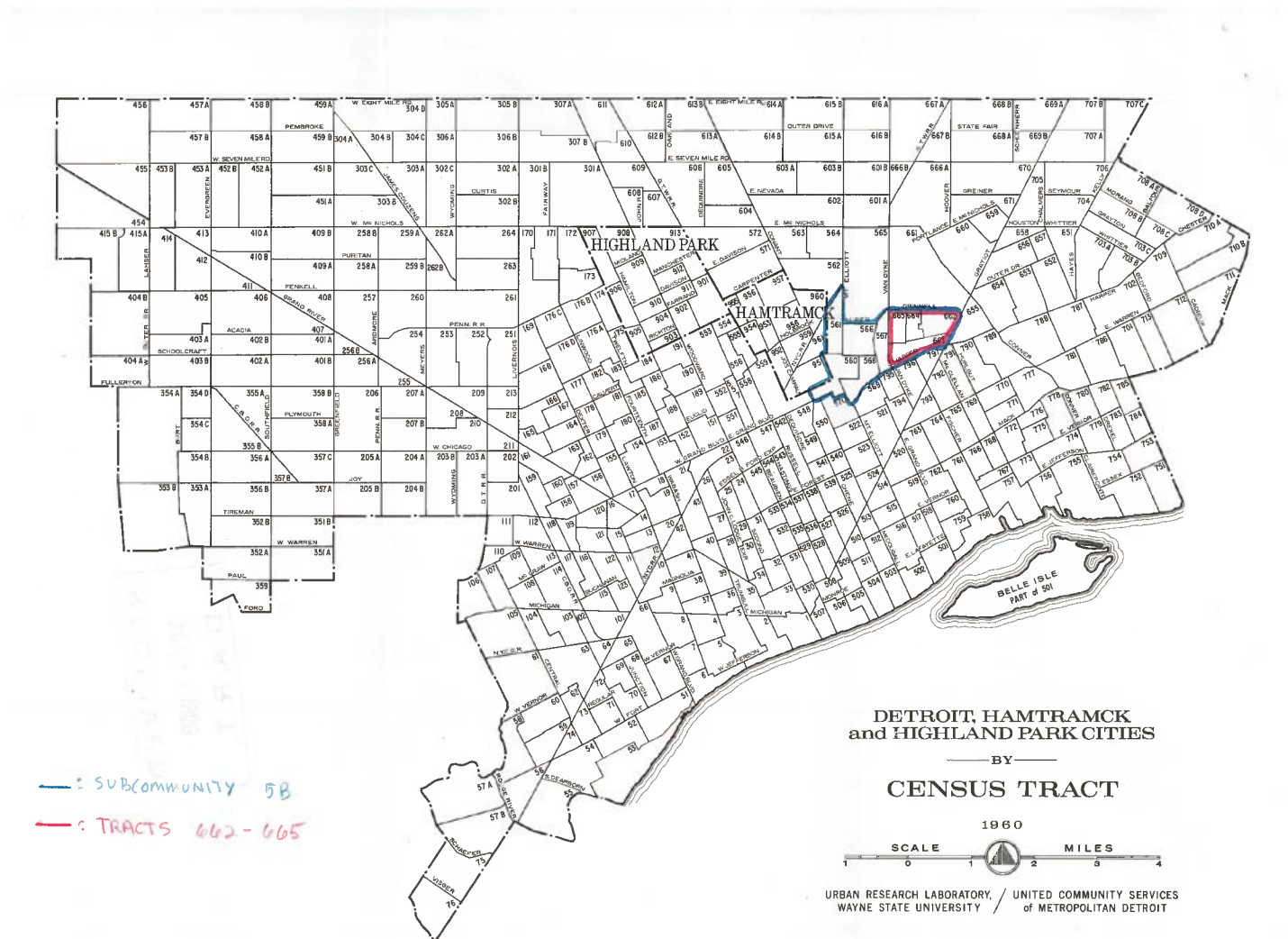
¹ For more information on the 1967 Rebellion, see [Detroit 1967: Origins, Impacts, Legacies](#) (ed. Joel Stone, Wayne State University Press, 2017).

² These disturbances have historically been referred to as "riots." However, the term connotes a melee that is devoid of political underpinnings. Over the past decade, Detroiters have increasingly used the term "rebellion" to refer to the incident that transformed the ir city. It was not a random incident sparked by lawbreakers. It was a direct response of the people to what they perceived as a racist, violent police force in Detroit. For more on this topic, go to ["Riot or rebellion? The debate over what to call Detroit's 1967 disorder continues - mlive.com"](#)

³ As cited in Haskell's 1974 "Preliminary Proposal Educational Development Program." This source can be found in our [linked archive](#) or in Box 57, Folder 5 of the New Detroit, Inc. Records at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University.

⁴ Douglas Ilka, 'Parents fight 5-mile bussing,' The Detroit News, September 10, 1970.

⁵ Alice Hagerty, "Scrappy director fights for community center," The Detroit News (published as The Sunday News-Tribune), June 22, 1975.



Action House Song of Peace and Understanding

Sung to the Tune of the L & M Commercial "Come on Over"

Come on over to Action House,
Come on over where the action is,
Come on over to Action House,
Come on over where the Action is.

We have fun at the Action House,
Fun for all as you can see,
There's no hate at the Action House,
We want to live in unity.

We want peace at Action House,
Understanding and Dignity.
We want Pride for everyone,
Black pride **without** hostility.

Black and white at Action House,
Working together so we'll all be free,
Black and white at Action House,
At Action House everybody is free.

So, come on over to Action House,
Come on over where the action is,
Come on over to Action House,
Come on over where the Action is.

Action House, Inc.

9302 WOODLAWN -- DETROIT, MICH. 48213

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ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Archival materials for teaching and lesson planning can be found [HERE](#). This folder includes the following documents:

"Excerpts from original Action House Proposal" folder:

1. **"Action House community support letters, 1968"**: This document includes three letters from community members who supported the creation of Action House. All three letters share an interest in kids having access to resources and a safe environment for enrichment and recreation.
2. **"Action House Needs Sheet"**: This document explains why particular age groups (children, youths, young adults, tots, adults, and senior citizens) need Action House programming. This document also references one of the letters in "Action House community support letters, 1968."
3. **"Action House Proposal, p. 1-7"**: This document provides context for Action House's creation, explaining its relation to Operation Friendship Understanding and Peace; the goals of Action House; and the demographics and history of the Airport Community.
4. **"Action House Proposed Programming"**: This document lists proposed programs (including both classes and activities) for adults, teens, and children.
5. **"Lizz Haskell's proposal letter about Action House"**: This document is a letter from Lizz Haskell articulating the urgent need for Action House. Though other letters of support for Action House focus on its importance for community youths, Haskell's letter focuses more on housing, integration, and white flight.

"Other materials" folder:

1. **"Action House community support letters and map, 1974"**: This document contains two letters from community members in support of Action House. One explicitly mentions concerns about gangs, and the other focuses more on the programming Haskell has brought to the neighborhood. Both express that Haskell is the heart of Action House.
2. **"Action House Newsletter, August 1969"**: This newsletter from 1969 emphasizes Action House as an organization that hopes to bring racial and generational integration to the Airport Community. Though it mentions expanding teen memberships to Action House, the newsletter emphasizes Action House as an organization for all ages to participate in neighborhood improvement.
3. **"Action House Newsletter, June 1970, p. 1-2"**: This newsletter from 1970 (particularly the selected pages) focuses on housing and neighborhood improvement. It does not mention youth programming.
4. **"Action House Preliminary Education Proposal from 1974, p. 1-2 and 4-5"**: This document is a preliminary proposal for Action House educational programming for teens. The document has comments and suggestions from a reviewer who suggests that Haskell submit a less ambitious proposal. It also provides important information about how the neighborhood has changed from the 1960s to the mid-1970s.
5. **"Action House Theme Song"**
6. **"Detroit News Article, "Scrappy Director Fights for Community Center," 06-22-1975"**: This article discusses the success of an Action House partnership with the Wayne County Juvenile Facility Network. There are many quotes from Haskell explaining the impact of Action House as well as the importance of funding it.
7. **"Map of Detroit with Airport Community region highlighted in red, 1960"**