



## PROFILES IN COURAGE

Teacher's Guide

# MARY S. McDOWELL

### CREDITS:

Starring Rosemary Harris, Audrey Christie, Albert Salmi, Ralph Williams, Frances Sternhagen, Rae Allen, and Woodrow Parfrey. Written by Peter S. Feibleman. Directed by Jose Quintero. Produced by Gordon Oliver and Robert Saudek Associates. Inspired by John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. **50 minutes.** Guide prepared by Robert D. Barnes for Social Studies School Service, 1983.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the meaning of freedom of conscience.
- To examine the balance between the rights of the community and those of the individual.
- To explore the role of education in a democratic society.
- To discuss the concept of patriotism.
- To understand the meaning of moral courage.

### SYNOPSIS:

The time is 1917 and America has just entered World War I against Germany. All over the United States people are caught up in a patriotic fervor. Outrage against Germany and Germans is prevalent. In New York City, acts of violence against German-Americans and their property are not uncommon.

In the New York public schools, teachers are asked to sign a "loyalty pledge."

"We, the undersigned teachers of the New York City Public Schools, declare our unqualified allegiance to the Government of the United States of America, and pledge ourselves by word and example to teach and impress upon our pupils the duty of loyal obedience and patriotic service, as the highest ideal of American citizenship."

Mary S. McDowell, a Latin teacher at Manual Training High School in Brooklyn, refuses to sign

the "loyalty pledge."

Mary, a practicing Quaker who believes in telling the truth at all times, cannot accept the board's need to have her formally promise her allegiance in the form of a "loyalty oath." Honesty is part of her Quaker heritage, and she finds the oath offensive and unnecessary.

Mary rejects the pleas of her mother, friends, colleagues, and principal to compromise. She refuses to do Red Cross work or support the Thrift Stamp drive, but she does make it clear that her personal feelings will not intrude in her classroom. Further, she will see to it that students who have made commitments to purchase Thrift Stamps keep their promises.

Despite an impeccable 13-year teaching record, Mary S. McDowell is dismissed by the N.Y.C. Board of Education for "disloyalty and insubordination" and "conduct unbecoming a teacher." An appeal fails.

Six years later Mary was restored to her teaching duties. Her record was cleared with the finding that she had been "tried at a time of great public excitement."

### VOCABULARY:

The following words and terms appear in the program. Teachers may wish to check for student understanding:

Queen Elizabeth (1533-1603)	patriotism
Earl of Essex (1567-1601)	aggression
unqualified allegiance	curriculum
Society of Friends/Quakers	enlist
loyalty oath	pacifist
snake in the grass	tenant
Punic Wars	hypocrite
end justifies means	pussyfooting
insubordination	synonymous
freedom of conscience	treason

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Mr. Schneider of the Board of Education expressed hatred for Germany and even requested that German be dropped as a subject in the N.Y. public schools. Why was Schneider so zealous? Can (should) a heritage be denied?
2. How was Lili Koeller's attitude toward her German ancestry different from Schneider's? Was her jeopardy any less than Schneider's? Can you think of any recent examples in the United States where Americans have been punished for their ethnic or foreign heritage?
3. Mrs. McDowell told Mary, "I don't believe in violence or war or anything like that in peace time." Do you think it is true that many of us profess strong beliefs or opinions until they are challenged? Can you give examples?
4. Principal Ralson, in an attempt to save Mary's job, urged her to do Red Cross work at the school "as a personal favor" to him. Why did Mary reject this "simple" solution?
5. "The test of a man is how well he is able to feel about what he thinks...the test of a woman is how well she's able to think about what she feels." Do you agree, or is this stereotyping?
6. What impact did Fred's death have on Mary's beliefs?
7. Most Quakers are opposed to capital punishment. If Mary held such a view, and lost a family member to a murderer, what feelings and attitudes do you think she would have felt or expressed toward the murderer? Why?
8. In her speech to the members of the Board of Education, Mary challenged, "Are you sure what your war is about? Is it to protect freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of thought in this country?" What was her point?
9. In time of emergency does "the end justify the means?" Give examples.

10. Mary McDowell said, "I believe the most patriotic service a pupil can render is to do his work thoroughly. I think the most important thing for a teacher is to help him." Contrast Mary's belief with the school board's "loyalty pledge." Which view do you support?

### FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION:

1. Both Fred and Mrs. McDowell tried to convince Mary that pacifism was outdated and impractical. Examine the movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. How did they experience similar criticism?
2. Every war has its pacifists or "conscientious objectors." Find out what happened to Mohammed Ali during the Vietnam War. What requirements does our government make today of individuals seeking "conscientious objector" status?
3. Ask your teacher to tell you about "loyalty oaths." They have been a condition of employment in many school districts. Read about Senator Joseph McCarthy and the "McCarthy era" of the 1950's to further your understanding of the terms "loyalty" and "patriotism."