Lives Who Inspired Us in 2020

They were ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives – or extraordinary people who put their lives on the line to protect the health and welfare of everyone.
In what has become an annual tradition, as the year comes to a close ADL pauses each December to take stock of the moments and people who shaped the last 12 months – for better, or for worse – with a Top 10 list.

For 2020, we compiled two Top 10 lists: One looking back on the moments of hurt and hate that shaped our country, and another celebrating the lives of those individuals who had a profound impact on the year.

So, without further ado, here are a few of the lives who inspired us in 2020.

**REP. JOHN LEWIS AND RUTH BADER GINSBURG**

The passing of Rep. John Lewis, the civil rights icon and longtime U.S. Congressman from Georgia, came at a time when the racial justice movement was taking on new life with protests emerging across the country in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of law enforcement. The loss of Lewis at this pivotal moment was devastating, and yet as Americans of all stripes came together to mourn and eulogize this towering figure of the civil rights movement, the memory of Lewis’s life has continued to...
serve as an inspiration to all. And in 2020 America mourned the loss of trailblazing Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court and the architect of the legal strategy that toppled some of the most egregious forms of sex discrimination. Justice Ginsburg, a lifelong champion of civil rights and liberties as both a legal practitioner and jurist, was a national and cultural icon whose brilliance, passion and strength was an inspiration to all. And as the nation continues to grapple with the legacy of racial injustice and discrimination, the memories of Lewis and Ginsburg continue to inform and empower movements for full equality and justice.

GEORGE FLOYD AND BREONNA TAYLOR

While countless Black men and women have suffered from police brutality, perhaps no names conjure up the recent struggle against racial injustice more than George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, two individuals from very different backgrounds whose lives were cut short this year by police violence. Floyd’s tragic death on May 25, after being pinned under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, allegedly for “8 minutes and 46 seconds,” became a rallying cry for justice around the country and the video of his killing was viewed around the world. Four officers
have been charged in his murder. Taylor was shot and killed by Louisville police officers in March during a botched raid on her apartment. Her killing likewise fueled demonstrations and calls for racial justice. Floyd, once a tall star athlete who told his friends he wanted to “touch the world,” maybe in the NBA or the NFL, never realized his dreams and instead became known for another phrase he uttered, one of his last: “I can’t breathe.” And Taylor, an emergency room technician, was just 26 years old with a promising life ahead of her when she was cut down in a hail of police bullets. She has become a symbol of police violence and racial injustice. As the year 2020 winds to a close, we celebrate the lives of Floyd and Taylor, two unintended and unlikely heroes who inspired us to move the fight for racial justice forward.

FIRST RESPONDERS, HEALTH CARE WORKERS, ELECTIONS OFFICIALS AND VOLUNTEERS

They are the true heroes of the coronavirus pandemic: The people who every day risk their own health and wellbeing to bring aid and comfort to those
affected by the pandemic, which has already claimed the lives of more than 286,000 Americans. With more than 14 million cases reported across the country and the number of new infections and hospitalizations rising, we have been continually inspired by the selfless actions of the first responders, health care and hospital workers, volunteers and essential workers who have often extended a lifeline to those most in need. And in an important election year we were doubly inspired by our election workers and volunteers, who worked tirelessly to ensure that every vote was counted even if it meant counting votes into the wee hours and braving protests and threats. We salute these thousands of Americans who have put their lives on the line to ensure our democracy remains strong, that people needing emergency health care received timely care, and that every American was able to exercise his or her right to vote despite the ongoing challenges of a pandemic. We thank them, one and all, for their service to our country.

THE 1,200 COMPANIES AND CELEBS WHO STOOD UP TO FACEBOOK

After years of excuses but little concrete action to combat the spread of hate and disinformation on the world’s largest social media platform – Facebook – advertisers big and small took decisive action this year to take on the social media juggernaut by joining an international campaign to “Stop Hate for Profit.” The campaign, which called for an advertising “pause” on the platform, had no advertisers on board when it was first announced by nine civil rights and advocacy organizations in mid-June. But advertisers, fed up with excuses, soon joined on in droves. The initiative quickly rallied the support of more than 1,200 companies, businesses and nonprofits, including many of the highest profile brands in the world.

The list included iconic American companies like Ben and Jerry’s, Best Buy, Levi’s, Patagonia, REI, Starbucks, Verizon and many others; global brands like Bayer, Honda, Unilever and VW to name just a few; and an extraordinary array of small businesses and mom-and-pop retail enterprises. The ad pause
in July was not the full campaign – it was a warning shot across Facebook’s bow. It was followed up in September, when Stop Hate for Profit sought broader engagement, calling on public personalities to take a one-day freeze on Instagram. Within hours, a wide range of celebrities signed on, including Sacha Baron Cohen, Kim Kardashian, Leonardo DiCaprio, Katy Perry, Jamie Foxx, Michael B. Jordan and Jennifer Lawrence. By the end of the week more than 50 A-List Hollywood celebrities and influencers had taken part in the action with a total follower count that eclipsed two billion people. While the campaign was gaining momentum externally, Facebook employees were taking stands internally, adding to a pressure cooker that would finally boil over.

The campaign secured a series of real concessions from Facebook, the kind of substantive changes that it had failed to make in its first 15 years. This included creating a new senior executive role at the company focused on
civil rights; a newfound willingness to participate in an audit of hateful content on the service; and finally taking long overdue action to remove violent white supremacist groups, armed militias and hateful content including Holocaust denial.

ROSE RITCH

A Jewish student leader and activist, Rose Ritch, currently a senior at the University of Southern California, was motivated by her values of social justice and her passion for leadership to run for an elected leadership role in student government. But she was eventually forced to resign her position after being harassed and pressured for months by her fellow students. The reason? Because she openly identified as a Jew who supports Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish homeland. Some USC students even launched a mean-spirited and vindictive social media campaign to “impeach the Zionist.” Ritch refused to go quietly. She bravely identified the harassment for what it was: Antisemitism. And she used her experience to make a point about how the attack on her Zionist identity was also an attack on her Jewish identity. “The suggestion that my support for a Jewish homeland would make me unfit for office,” she wrote, “plays into the oldest and most wretched stereotypes of Jews: accusations of dual loyalty and...
holding all Jews responsible for the actions of the Israeli government.” And she courageously defended her core beliefs and her right to speak out against not only the suffering of the Jewish people – the persecution, massacres, pogroms and genocides of history – but for all those who are mistreated and scapegoated.

**THE JEWISH STUDENT UNION GERMANY**

After a neo-Nazi gunman targeted a synagogue in Halle on Yom Kippur last year, but couldn't get past its heavy door, he changed his plan and started shooting and killing passersby. He shot and killed a woman on the street, then targeted a kebab shop next door, which he reportedly singled out because it was Muslim-owned. In the aftermath of the attack, business at the kebab shop owned by Ismet Tekin and his brother, Rifat, suffered, and the eatery was unable to qualify for government assistance. So, members of the Jewish Student Union Germany stepped into action, creating a GoFundMe page in September 2020 with a goal to raise 28,000 Euros to support the business financially and get it back to stability. “The right-wing terrorist did not believe in a multicultural society,” the students wrote. “We, as the Jewish Student Union Germany, believe in a multicultural society in this country. We believe in a peaceful coexistence, regardless of religion, nationality or
skin color. We believe in solidarity.” As of this writing, the campaign has raised more than 29,300 Euros (approximately $35,000) from 873 donors.

**RABBI JONATHAN SACKS**

Former UK Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks passed away on November 7 at the age of 72. He was a unique Jewish leader who touched the lives of millions of people around the world, Jews and non-Jews alike. While he identified as Orthodox, his passion in both his writing and public engagement was one of inclusivity and openness. A prolific writer of more than 25 works, he sought to translate Jewish ideas and concepts into universalist themes that appealed to the masses.

His friendships spanned from princes and archbishops to everyone in between. He used YouTube videos to explain Judaism to the public, recorded BBC specials where he interviewed religious scientists and atheists, called out antisemitism in the halls of power, spoke publicly and passionately in defense of persecuted religious minorities, and addressed audiences from school children and university students to the Pope.
In his eulogy for Rabbi Sacks, Prince Charles beautifully summed up how his friend will be remembered by those around the world whose lives he touched: “With his incomparable store of learning, and with his innate sense of the power of the story, he defined the moral challenges and the choices our society faces, speaking with conviction across the boundaries of the sacred and the secular, across the generations and across all barriers of culture and religion. He taught us how to listen to others, and how to learn from them without compromising the convictions of either party; he taught us to value participation in the common life of the nation; and through it all, he taught us the need to respect the integrity and harmony of God’s Creation.”

**ZACH OWEN AND BERNIE RAMIREZ**

Zach Owen, a Sam’s Club Employee, and Bernie Ramirez, a border patrol agent, **took decisive action** when they saw a hate crime unfolding right in front of them. On March 14, members of the Cung family, who are of Burmese descent, were shopping at a Sam’s Club in Midland, Texas, when the family was suddenly attacked by a knife-wielding man who **allegedly thought** that the family was “Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus.” Owen immediately jumped into action, risking his own life as he applied a chokehold to the attacker,
stopping him from continuing the knife assault on the father and his children. And Agent Ramirez, who was off duty, jumped in and helped to apprehend the assailant. The attack left the father and his two- and six-year-old sons hospitalized, but, thankfully, alive and recovering. Owen and Ramirez were later honored with the Lily and Vincent Chin Advocacy Award for their service to the community. The attacker faces three counts of attempted capital murder.

DAVID DEUTCHMAN

A hospital volunteer in Atlanta who had spent more than 15 years snuggling babies in the neonatal intensive care unit, David Deutchman was affectionately known as “NICU Grandpa.” His story had gone viral in 2017 for the work he did cuddling and snuggling babies at a hospital run by Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta in the years following his
retirement. But his volunteer work at the hospital ended suddenly in March of this year, when the hospital stopped the volunteer program in response to the coronavirus pandemic. In October, Deutchman, 86, himself was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. He passed away a few weeks later, but not before members of the staff at the Scottish Rite hospital where he had volunteered had an opportunity to show their appreciation for his work with a drive-by parade at his home. David’s legacy was not only the many infants he comforted as the “NICU grandpa” but in those whose lives he touched and inspired around the world.

ELLIO T PAGE

When Elliot Page announced earlier this month that he is transgender, the well-known Hollywood actor and star of “Juno” expressed concern that his popularity and privilege would not insulate him from the rising tide of cruelty, discrimination and hate against trans people in this country. “I’m scared of the invasiveness... and of violence... The discrimination towards trans people is rife, insidious and cruel, resulting in horrific
consequences.” He has good reason for concern. According to the Human Rights Campaign, 40 transgender or gender non-conforming people have been fatally shot or killed in 2020 alone. But Page’s decision to come out – as a nonbinary, transgender man – was hailed by hundreds of Hollywood celebrities and thousands of his fans, who responded on social media with an outpouring of love, praise and gratitude.