

MAURICE RUDDICK

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\$500 Winner

When asked to name an influential person, the most common response tends to be a politician, an activist, or a writer. Seldom does one hear of those who fight for the human spirit, rather than human rights. Using his love of music and an indestructible will to live, Maurice Ruddick is one such person.

Born in 1912 in Joggins, Nova Scotia, Maurice Ruddick was a descendant of Loyalist slaves brought to Canada in the late 18th century. Supporting his wife and twelve children, he worked at the No. 2 colliery in Springhill, one of the deepest and most dangerous coal mines in North America. The colliery had had several explosions, including one in 1891 that killed 125 men and another in 1956, killing 39 men. Despite the hazardous working conditions, Ruddick remained cheerful, often leading songs to encourage comradery among the men working below.

Disaster struck in the fall of 1958, when the No. 2 colliery collapsed, trapping 174 men below the surface. Ruddick and six of his coworkers were among those men, trapped in a small cave 3,800 meters below ground. Lost in the darkness, with no food or water, and no way to know when they would run out of air or be poisoned by gases, the miners had all but given up hope. Had Ruddick not been trapped alongside them, they likely would not have survived their ordeal in the tunnels. Isolated in the collapsed mineshaft, Ruddick refused to give up. True inspiration is using everything you have in order to lift others. Ruddick used his voice and his indomitable spirit to give others the hope that they might live. Surrounded by death, with no way to know if any of them would live to see their families again, Ruddick sang. He led prayers and songs, he encouraged, and he refused to let his fellow miners give in to the crushing despair hanging over them. For nine days, he fought to bolster the spirits of his comrades, and succeeded.

After their rescue, Ruddick was recognized for his heroism and bravery. He and a dozen other miners were invited by a Georgia governor to stay at a resort on Jekyll Island. However, after learning that Ruddick was black, the governor demanded that he be segregated from the others. While the other miners rose in his defence and declared they would not go if Ruddick was excluded, Ruddick again showed his selflessness and accepted the governor’s terms, giving his fellow miners the vacation they needed. While the white miners got to stay at a luxury resort, Ruddick and his family were put in a trailer on a separate beach and were not permitted to attend the same ceremonies. Ruddick accepted this with dignity and grace, hoping that in doing so, he would open people’s eyes. Maurice Ruddick’s story shows that the true measure of a man lies not in the colour of his skin, but in the power of his soul. Ruddick inspired in others the will to live. He was not a celebrity or a well-known man. He was a simple working man, who found the potential and will within himself to lead others. Ruddick’s story illustrates that we all have within us the ability to inspire and lead others when put to the test, which, to me, is the epitome of an influential person.

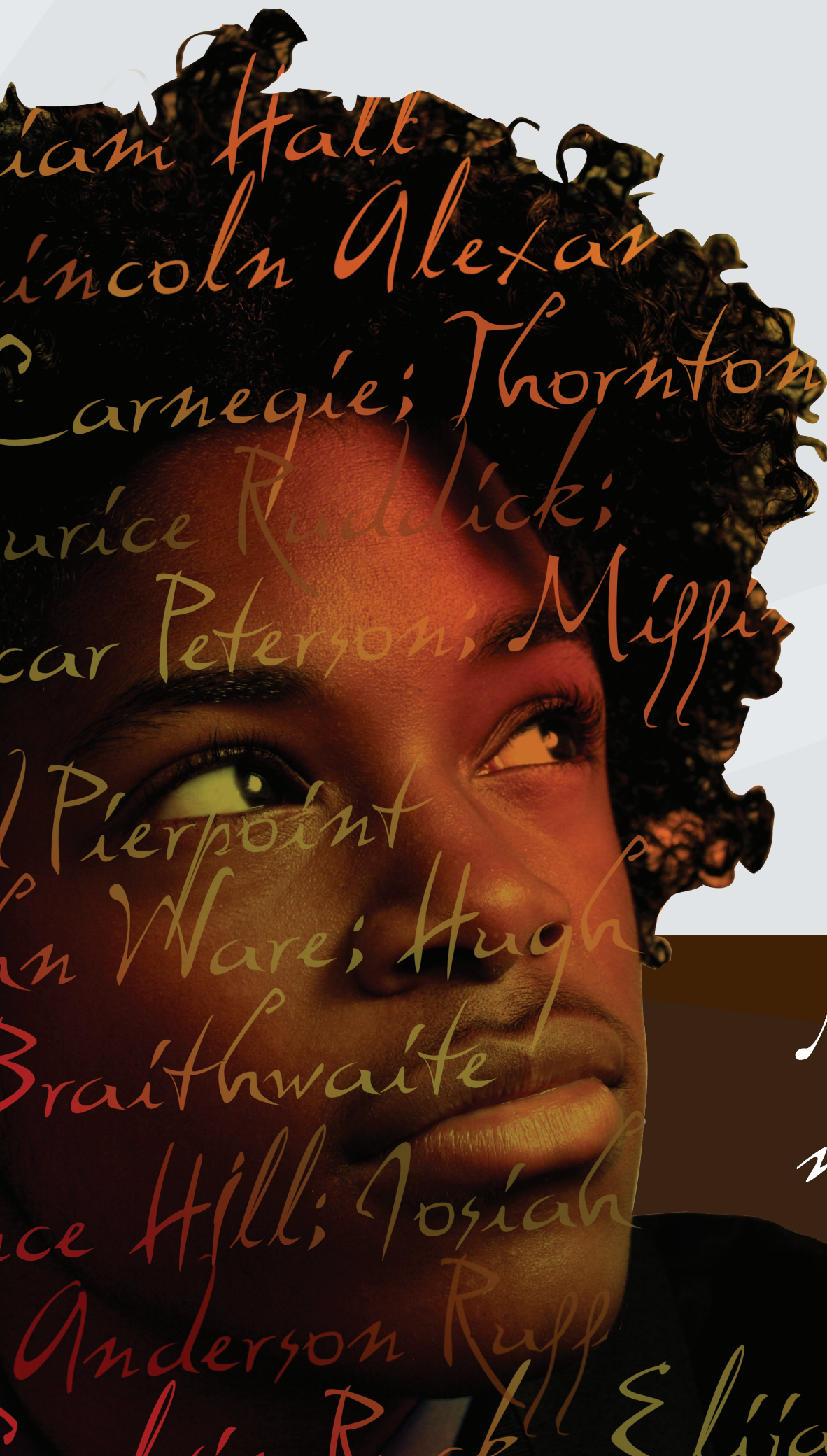
While there may be other black Canadians more well-known for politics, athletics, or writing, Maurice Ruddick spoke to me because of his bravery in the face of overwhelming odds. He was not fighting for civil rights or freedom; he was fighting for life itself.

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