

# The Young Fought for Racial Justice During the Civil Rights Movement

When we think of the heyday of the civil rights movement, personalities such as Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., James Farmer, Floyd McKissick, and James Meredith come to mind. Individuals such as these were pioneers in the movement. However, we often forget that our young people played monumental roles in that struggle for racial equality. Without the key efforts of young people, it is doubtful that the civil rights movement would have been as successful as it was. Young people of all ages risked their lives for equality. Their involvement in the movement is one of the most magnificent stories of the 1950s and 60s. The paragraphs that follow will describe some of the courageous activities of the young during the civil rights movement.

## Oklahoma City

Lunch counters in department stores were segregated throughout the South in the 1950s. Blacks could not take a seat at a lunch counter and order food no matter how much money they had spent in the store. In Oklahoma City, a black woman, Clara Luper, and thirteen young people decided that they were going to integrate the lunch counters. It was not an idle threat. On August 19, 1958 Clara Luper and the thirteen youth went to the Katz Drug store and asked to be served. Mrs. Luper described what actually happened that hot night once they entered the drug store: "I was thinking about what should have been done, Lana Pogue, the six-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. Pogue, handed my hand; and, we moved toward the counter". At this point fifteen year-old Barbara Posey, who was the spokesperson for the group took charge. Replying to the irate and shocked white waitress, Barbara calmly said, "We'd like thirteen Cokes Please". At this point, the fury of the whites was unleashed. The demonstrators were cursed, called "nigger", and pushed. One of the young girls, Linda Pogue, "was knocked off a seat", she smiled and sat back on the stool."

It became clear to the segregationists at Katz Drug store that these young people were serious as well as disciplined and determined. In two days the whites at Katz decided to desegregate their lunch counters locally and in 38 outlets in Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas and Iowa. This group of young people led by Mrs. Luper and their spokesperson, Barbara Posey, did not stop with desegregating Katz. They demonstrated at segregated department stores throughout Oklahoma City for a decade. Many other young people throughout the city joined these ongoing demonstrations. Like the original demonstrators, most who joined were members of the local NAACP Youth Council. These young people of Oklahoma City confronted racial segregation head-on in thought and deed.

## Little Rock

Little Rock, Arkansas was another Southern city where young people took a courageous and dangerous stand for freedom. In September of 1957, nine black students led by the great Daisy Bates, who was president of the state NAACP, desegregated the all-white Central High School. On September the 4th, Minnijean Brown, Jefferson Thomas, Carlotta Walls, Elizabeth Echford, Thelma Mothershed, Terrance Roberts, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray and Niggers, Green entered the all-white school as white mobs shouted, "Niggers, niggers, go home", and "Two, four, six, eight, we ain't gonna integrate." The violence and the threat of violence in Little Rock was so intense that President Eisenhower had to send in one thousand paratroopers and place ten thousand members of the Arkansas National Guard on Federal service to put down the mob.

Even in the face of this violence and harassment the "Little Rock Nine" never wavered. Day after day they approached the school door with dignity. Speaking of those courageous students, Mrs. Bates said that, "each day I wondered where they

got the courage to re-enter the dimly lit corridors of Central High School to face new provocations and new assaults on their bodies as well as their dignity." Fourteen year-old Carlotta Walls personified the courage of the "Little Rock Nine". At the beginning of the campaign Mrs. Bates reminded Carlotta that the mobs would be at the school and asked her if she still wanted to participate. Carlotta responded, "Oh, I'll be there, even if I have to go it alone."

Throughout the school year these students attended their classes and studied hard while being kicked and cursed by their white classmates. They had to be protected by the National Guard each day while they attended classes. After two years of tension and confrontation, Central High School was finally desegregated. These nine young people who ranged from fourteen to sixteen years in age, risked their lives so that all people could get a good education regardless of race.

## Lunch Counter Sit-ins

In the spring of 1960 young people throughout the South took a courageous stand for racial equality. This time it was young black college students. On February 1, 1960, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joe McNeil, and David Richmond, all students at North Carolina A and T College, sat-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro. These students decided that they were no longer willing to cooperate with racial segregation. They decided that they were going to conduct sit-ins until Woolworth's desegregated the lunch counters. These students were so determined and dignified in their efforts that they inspired thousands of other black college and high school students to launch similar protests. Within just one month, sit-in protests by black students had occurred in North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky and Maryland. By the end of March, these protests had spread to Georgia, Texas, Ohio, West Virginia, Louisiana and Arkansas. Never before had the South witnessed such a powerful movement against racial oppression carried out by young people in conjunction with thousands of adults.

The student sit-ins was a watershed for the civil rights movement. Once thousands of young people became involved, the walls of segregation began to crumble much faster. In honor of the sit-ins, Dr. King proclaimed that, "when the students sat-in they were really standing up for their right. No one can ride your back unless it is bent." Out of the sit-ins came a key organization of the civil rights movement — the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This organization of students played a central role in overthrowing segregation. It became as important as the NAACP, SCLC, and CORE. It galvanized the student power of the period.

## Birmingham Struggle

Then there was Birmingham in 1963 led by Dr. King! It is accurate to say that if the young people of Birmingham had not participated in this historic struggle, it would not have been victorious. By the 1960s Birmingham was considered the racist capital of America. Whites in Birmingham, led by "Bull" Connor, controlled blacks through every conceivable means imaginable, including violence. So many homes in churches in Birmingham had been bombed by whites that the city had come to be known as "Bombingham." In the spring of 1963 Dr. King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) went to Birmingham for the explicit purpose of overthrowing segregation by conducting mass demonstrations and protests. By early May of 1963, over a thousand black people had been thrown in jail for participating in demonstrations. Up to this point no one younger than fourteen had been allowed to participate in demonstrations because of the likelihood of violence and arrests.

In early May the decision was made to allow young children to participate. They were overjoyed. King was attacked by the white press for allowing children to participate in such a dangerous enterprise. King pointed out later that, "one of the most ringing replies came from a child of no more than eight who walked with her mother one day in a demonstration. An amused policeman leaned down to her and said with mock gruffness: 'What do you want?' The child looked into his eyes, unafraid, and gave her answer. 'Freedom,' she said." On May 2nd, the young began marching, sitting-in and going to jail by the thousands. Dr. King reported that, "at one school, the principal gave orders to lock the gates to keep the students in. The youngsters climbed over the gates and ran toward freedom... At the height of the campaign, by conservative estimates, there were 2,500 demonstrators in jail at once, a large proportion of them young people."

For their efforts the young people were attacked by "Bull" Connor's dogs,

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