

# Nonviolence Then and Now

The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s pioneered nonviolent resistance in the United States. Nonviolence was at the heart of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy. Today, Occupy protesters, who took to the streets last year to protest wealth inequality and growing poverty, cite Dr. King and the civil rights movement as the inspiration for their non-violent methods.

"We had to make it clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice," King says in his 1957 speech *The Power of Nonviolence*. "It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence. This method is nonaggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually."

King became an advocate for nonviolence after studying Ghandi and the Indian battle for freedom from British rule. Born into a long line of Baptist ministers, King saw Christianity as a powerful force

for social change. And his vision of a peaceful, just and loving world opened his mind to new ways of thinking about resistance to oppression.

How well did nonviolence work? At the lunch counters and in the streets, civil rights protesters and freedom riders refused to retaliate, even as they risked their lives every day. In fact, there was plenty of violence, brutality and bombing. Most of it came from authorities and a substantial White population who were determined to maintain segregation and deny equal rights to Blacks.

Yet many historians credit nonviolence as a key impetus for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that ended official segregation. Images of peaceful young Black protesters being ruthlessly beaten and hosed outraged so many people that it allowed legislators to pass more progressive legislation than previously proposed.

The Skanner News asked a few Portlanders to talk about their impressions of nonviolence and social change. Here's what they told us.



**Derriel Ingram, student at Lane Community College**

"Things have become desperate with the increase in poverty and the struggles people are having. Back in the civil rights days Black people were not looked at as humans; we were dehumanized. Now it's the same, but some people are so blind to it, they can't see it. And the government doesn't care. Talking can only get you so far, eventually you have to act. I think (the Occupy movement) should be protesting in DC where the government and the officials are. People here can only do so much.

"But there are so many ways to get out there rather than getting pepper sprayed and hurting yourself. I wouldn't do it. I couldn't just not fight back. That would be different."



**Imani Muhammad, founder of the Portland Youth summit**

"It's true that the Occupy movement can be compared to Dr. King's ideas about non-violence. But I don't know that it will continue to be that peaceful movement. After what we have seen in Egypt and the Middle East I believe the uprising in the East is a sign of what will come to the West which will result in violence and bloodshed. People are so frustrated, and they want change because they are suffering. They are desperate to get the attention of people in power. The Dr. King I have studied: yes, he did advocate for resisting violence. But, near the end of his life he told Harry Belafonte, 'I've come to the realization that I think we may be integrating into a burning house.' And that burning house was the United States. He began to see that some of those people in power – the 1 percent – were not willing to give freedom, justice and equality to specifically Black people and the oppressed. They wanted to hold on to that idea of themselves as better than others and remain in power to control the masses. And this is why we are in the current condition today." See **ADVOCATE** on page 11



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