Love May Lead to Freedom, but It Usually Takes a Few First Steps: The Story of the 1960 Greensboro Sit-Ins

By Dr. Millicent Ellison Brown

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"Move over. I can't see."

"Go down that aisle. Maybe we can get to the front."

"Stop pushing. There's no more room!"

So many people were piled into Bennett College's chapel in 1958 that David Richmond and Ezell Blair, both seventeen years old, were fussing with one another as much as with anyone standing in their way. They had come early enough, they thought, to get to see and hear the famous black minister from Alabama that everyone was talking about. No seats were open, but eventually the young men found room on the floor close to the stage.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had worked successfully with dozens of community leaders and thousands of ordinary citizens, was about to speak. He soon explained to the audience his role in challenging the laws and customs that had always given better treatment to whites than to blacks. Dr. King told the packed crowd about the famous thirteen-month-long Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956). By refusing to ride the buses, walking long distances, and banding together, that community had set the foundation for a 1956 United States Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation on public buses.

David and Ezell would never forget that night on the Greensboro campus, Dr. King's words, or his passion for standing up for change. They knew that somehow *they* wanted to be a part of the change. But they now understood that passion had to be backed with a strategy, or plan, for organizing. Blacks there in Greensboro, across North Carolina, and throughout the South and the nation continued to be deprived of the simplest rights—sitting, eating, living, working, playing, and learning where they chose and in facilities as good as any provided for whites. Local ministers and leaders that the young men knew, many of them in an organization called the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), had long encouraged people to work for fairness and just principles. Dr. King's exciting words and dedication represented what countless

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people in numerous places were saying and doing: the time had come to make America operate as a true democracy.

The next year the two teens attended the Agricultural and Technical (A&T) College of North Carolina (now North Carolina A&T State University), located in their hometown. They took the image of someone very much like them—young and black—and shared it with two other freshman students, Joseph McNeil and Franklin McCain. The young men spoke in their dormitory rooms of how others were stepping forward to insist that old ways of treating people of a different color so unfairly would have to end. One night someone threw out an idea. The four agreed they were willing to “make a down payment on manhood.” The day the four students, Franklin in his army ROTC uniform, walked the six or seven blocks and sat calmly at the F. W. Woolworth Building lunch counter on South Elm Street was February 1, 1960.

Blacks were allowed to buy goods at all other counters in stores such as Woolworth’s, but they couldn’t sit down to eat. If they bought food, they would have to walk away with it or stand along the walls. After purchasing toothpaste and school supplies, the four young men went to the lunch counter at the back of the store. When told they could not sit down to order food, the students kept their seats and refused to leave the store until it closed. The next day they returned with approximately twenty-five more students. There were eighty-five supporters by the third day, and four hundred by the fourth. These students came from local high schools and colleges, especially A&T and Bennett College, where King had spoken almost two years before. Lunch-counter seats were always left open for any white supporters to take a part, with students from Greensboro’s Guilford College and Woman’s College among the first white students to join in.

Word spread quickly in newspapers and on television across the state and nation. By the third week of the demonstration, as hundreds of marchers picketed the Greensboro stores and sat at the lunch counters, young people were organizing “sit-ins” in stores and at counters throughout the South. Students, who had no special skills or resources, recognized how important it was to participate in the biggest change the country had seen in many years. A committee appointed by George Roach, Greensboro’s mayor from 1957 to 1961, and made up of black and white citizens met regularly trying to end the demonstrations. Adults who had been encouraged by the actions of the youth stepped up to demand that city and other government officials take the protests seriously. Even though the president of A&T, Dr. Warmoth T. Gibbs, feared what state officials would do to the college for supporting such “radical” action, he told critics, “We teach students how to think, not what to think.”

The protests lasted six months in Greensboro and ended only because of a United States Supreme Court decision made that summer declaring it unconstitutional to segregate lunch counters. On July 25, 1960, Woolworth opened its lunch-counter seats to anyone who had the money to buy, not just white customers. By the end of 1960, “sit-in” demonstrations had evolved into protests against segregation at beaches, libraries, parks, pools, restaurants, and other public places. They had been organized and participated in by young and old in every southern and border state, even Nevada, Illinois, and Ohio.

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As a result, fewer people bought tickets, food, or merchandise at places that kept blacks "out." Marchers, picketers, and media attention made it uncomfortable for whites or blacks to come to these spots. As money was lost, people nationwide began to see the impact that economic boycotts could have on helping to bring about social change. Blacks demanded to be hired as clerks, not just to be "allowed" to act as customers. Always, there was a commitment on the part of protestors to be peaceful and nonviolent when pressing for justice, even when crowds were rowdy and violent toward them.

Slowly, some stores and businesses in the South began to change policies, but the majority still treated blacks in an inferior and unjust way. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed under President Lyndon B. Johnson, finally made it unconstitutional for black citizens to be denied public access anywhere in the nation. The 1965 Voting Rights Act guaranteed that same right at the voting booths.

The beginning of the most successful student-organized and student-led movement in American history is remembered with a statue at the four Greensboro students' alma mater. The university annually awards its Human Rights Medal to others still working to keep love for humanity as the foundation for freedom—when some of us are willing to take those first steps.

At the time of this article's publication, Dr. Millicent Ellison Brown worked as an assistant professor of history at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro.

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