

Civil Rights Movement: Sit-ins

Greensboro, North Carolina Sit-In

On February 1, 1960, four North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College students sat down at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina and waited for service. While the students knew that most likely they would not be served, they were also aware that this form of nonviolent protest was potentially a powerful method in accomplishing the desegregation of lunch counters.



However, this was not the first time sit-ins were used at lunch counters. This method of nonviolent protest had been used in 1943 in Chicago by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), in St. Louis in 1949, and in Baltimore in 1953. In these previous sit-ins, they had not gained much attention from the media or the public.

Despite the lack of success of previous lunch counter sit-ins, this time was different. On the first day of the sit-in, college students Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Ezell Blair Jr. arrived at Woolworth in the afternoon. They took seats at the lunch counter and encountered silence from the white patrons. At first, servers ignored them and then they were told that they would not be served. Nevertheless, the four sat silently.

When the police chief was notified, he informed the store manager that nothing could be done as long as the students were peaceful. Since the police refused to respond and the students would not budge, Woolworth closed early. The students left with the intent to return the following day.

After the first day, word spread in the community about the sit-in. Thus, the following day, two more students joined them. Finally, the media picked up the story and over the course of several days the protestors were joined by more students, including whites.

The effectiveness of the sit-ins was due in part to the behavior of the participants. They dressed in their Sunday clothes, were quiet, nonviolent, and respectful. Furthermore, many students brought their school textbooks, and studied while they sat at the lunch counters.

Nashville, Tennessee Sit-In

The sit-in movement spread to numerous other cities. The community in Nashville, Tennessee quickly joined the movement. Prior to the Greensboro sit-in, Nashville students had been preparing through workshops for sit-ins. Thus, when it was their turn, they were ready.

On February 13, around five hundred students participated in the first sit-in. They organized into groups and went downtown to Woolworth, Kresge's, McCellan's, and other stores. On the first day and several days thereafter, they did not encounter any violence. However, on February 27, white teenagers attacked the student protestors. When the police arrived, they let the white teens

go and arrested the sit-in protesters for disorderly conduct.

The violence in Nashville continued. On April 19, the home of black attorney Z. Alexander Looby was destroyed by dynamite. Looby had been targeted because he had represented the arrested student protesters. Miraculously, Looby and his wife only suffered minor injuries. In response, students and community members marched to the City Hall. Upon their arrival, they were greeted by Mayor Ben West. Fisk University student Diane Nash took the opportunity to ask him whether he thought it was right for lunch counters to discriminate based on race. According to West, it was wrong. The next day, his statement was reported in the newspaper, and a few weeks later on May 10, six lunch counters in Nashville began serving black patrons.

End of the Sit-Ins

Despite progress in Nashville, not all sit-in protests had the same outcome. Therefore, the sit-ins continued throughout the country. In Greensboro, the sit-in protesters remained steadfast in their dedication for five months until Woolworth and Kress integrated. In some southern cities, they continued until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Over the course of the sit-in movement, more than 78 cities participated, there were over fifty thousand black and white protesters, and two thousand participants had been arrested.