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Author(s): Linda T. Wynn

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The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-Ins, February 13–May 10, 1960

By Linda T. Wynn

On Monday, May 18, 1896, the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in the Louisiana case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. The Court determined that the 1890 Louisiana law, in which ordered “equal but separate” accommodations for the white and colored races on passenger railways, complied with the “equal protection of the laws” clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Court’s approval of racial segregation “reduced the Fourteenth Amendment to little more than a pious goodwill resolution,” and gave the “ultimate blow to the Civil War Amendments and the equality of Negroes.”¹ Although *Plessy vs. Ferguson* dealt with compulsory separation of the races on the railroads of Louisiana, it gave the legal sanction for racial segregation in general. Author Charles Lofgren concludes that the “Court’s acceptance of an overt racist social policy” sentenced blacks for more than fifty years to the “Plessy prison.” More broadly, it inaugurated a half-century’s hiatus in moral leadership in America, announced “the federal birth of the separate but [un]equal doctrine,” and itself produced a “catastrophic backlash” against blacks of “almost unbelievable” proportions. It was, in short, says Lofgren, “the National decision against equality.”²

The determination of the Court was not unanimous. Justice John M. Harlan wrote a powerful and prophetic dissent. Arguing that “there is no caste here . . . our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.” Justice Harlan predicted that the decision of the majority would “stimulate aggressions more or less brutal” upon the rights of Negroes and would nullify the full purposes of the Civil War Amendments. Time vindicated his argument and history verified his prophecy.³

Plessy vs. Ferguson opened the floodgates for numerous segregation laws in the South. From birth until death, “Jim Crow” ruled the lives of Negroes. The creed set forth by the decision covered not only

public transportation, but education, housing, restaurants, hotels, libraries, parks and recreational facilities, marriage, employment, the armed forces, and almost all public necessities and conveniences.

It would take fifty-eight years for the Supreme Court to overturn *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. In 1954, the Court ruled against state-mandated school segregation in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Noting Harlan’s vision of a color-blind constitution, the editor of the *New York Times* stated, “the words he used in lonely dissent . . . have become, in effect, . . . a part of the law of the land.”⁴ Ten years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banning segregation in all public places. Before the enactment of the Civil Rights Act, however, Negroes would sit-in, stand-in, sleep-in, freedom-ride, and boycott in a direct nonviolent manner to overcome white society’s denial of human dignity, freedom, and equality.

Thirty years have passed since Southern students, most of whom were of African-American descent, took it upon themselves to protest against Jim Crow lunch counters. A cursory review of the student movement would lead one to believe that it all started in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four students from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical College sat down at the Woolworth’s lunch counter on February 1, 1960, and requested service. Civil rights activists, however, conducted sit-ins between 1957 and 1960 in at least fifteen cities, with Nashville, Tennessee, being among them.⁵ While scholars have not overlooked these earlier sit-ins, according to Aldon Morris, they have not made known their scope, connection, and organizational base. These sit-ins were directed by respected community leaders who came forth, not in reply to an unexpected crisis, but as a unified group who exhibited forethought and advance preparation for attacking the issue of segregated lunch counters. Nashville was no exception, for the

students who held “test” sit-ins in 1959 had been instructed in the philosophy and tactics of nonviolent protest.⁶

This does not imply that Greensboro was not an important event in the sit-ins of the 1960s, for the action by the students of North Carolina A & T galvanized the Southern student sit-in movement. According to a study by leaders of the Southern Regional Council, between February 1, and March 31, 1960, major sit-in protest and activity of a similar nature occurred in sixty-nine cities.⁷ By mid-April, the demonstrations had reached more than a hundred communities throughout the South, involving at least 50,000 black and white participants.⁸ Aldon Morris, in his article, “Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization,” suggests that the “Southern sit-in movement of 1960, although it appears to have developed in a spontaneous manner described by classic collective behavior theory, actually grew out of pre-existing institutions and organizational forms. The spread of the sit-ins followed networks of these pre-existing institutional relationships. Factors internal to the black community—churches, colleges, protest organizations, and leaders—were responsible for nurturing and developing the movement.”⁹

Prior to the mid-1950s, most white Nashvillians considered race relations in the city “good.”¹⁰ The city, known as the “Athens of the South,” was considered to be a place of refinement and culture, a regional center for education and religion. By the 1950s, the races had never been more segregated. There were separate schools and public parks. Blacks needing hospital care generally went to Hubbard Hospital while whites chose among several for their race. The bus station and train depot had separate rest rooms, waiting areas, and snack counters. On Sundays, blacks and whites went to worship in racially segregated congregations. Neighborhoods were black or white, and all knew which were which.

Vivian Henderson, professor of economics at Fisk University, surveyed the employment prospects of black Nashville in 1960. Although he found a relatively prosperous class of Negro professionals and white-collar workers, the rest were frozen in unskilled labor and cut off from any upward mobility. Segregation was equally as evident in the retail and wholesale sectors. There were “virtually no Negro salesmen,” and the same pattern prevailed in public utilities, government employment, and telecommunications. The banks, insurance companies, and department stores employed blacks only as porters

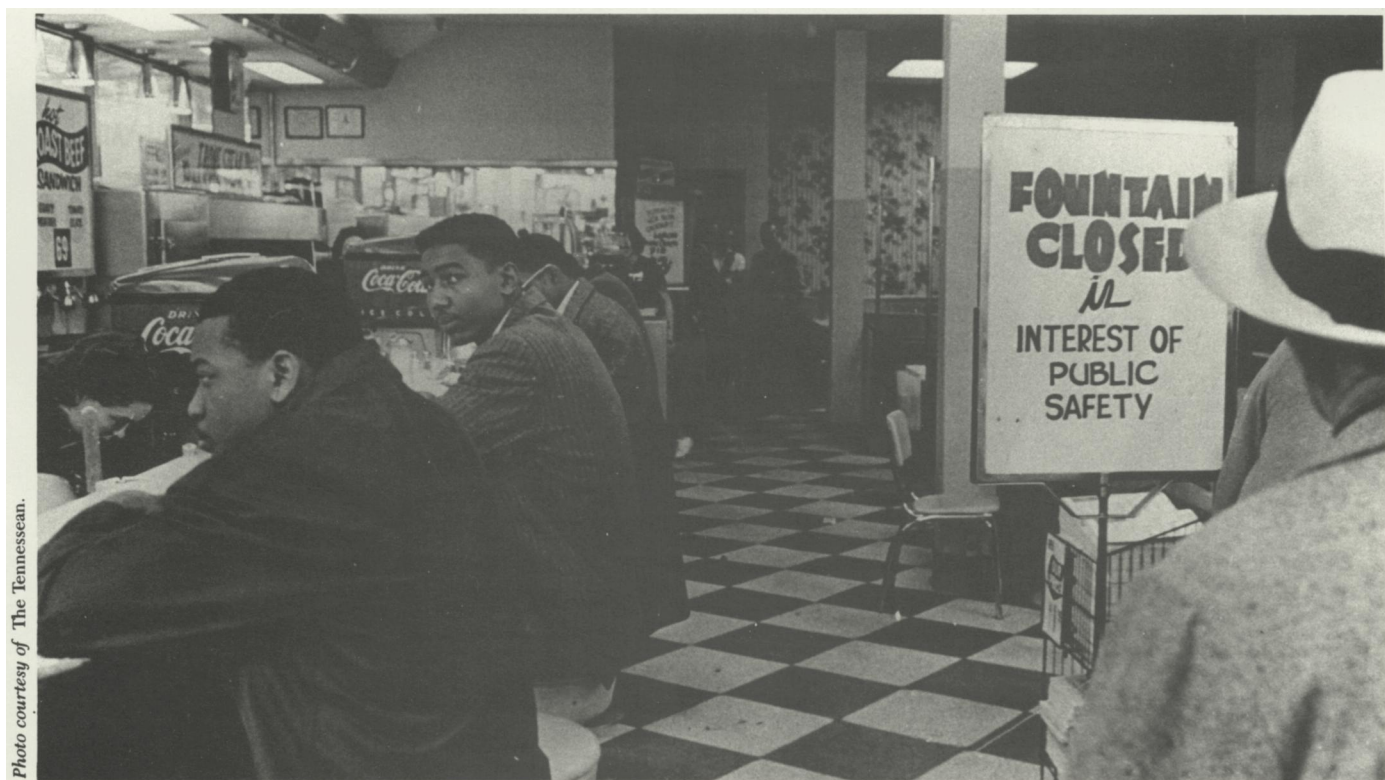


Photo courtesy of The Tennessean.

In Nashville, a sit-in at a Walgreen's lunch counter is staged as part of an organized non-violent campaign for desegregation.

and janitors, even though they welcomed them as customers.¹¹

Nashville's African-American community was prohibited from entering white-owned eating establishments and were denied front-door entrance and first-floor seating in the major theaters of the city. They were even barred from municipal recreational services which their tax dollars helped to support. At every turn, blacks were made incessantly aware of the subordinate standing that segregation was intended to impose upon them. In the words of Diane Nash, "segregation reach[ed] into every aspect of life to oppress the Negro and to rob him of his dignity in the South."¹² Negro leaders and students began the attack on Jim Crow in 1958, with the formation of the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC). They ushered in a new day by dismantling Southern mores that allowed blacks as consumers of goods on an equal basis, but not as equal consumers of services.

The NCLC, an affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was established by the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church. This organization, representative of many religious denominations in Nashville, was concerned with combating discrimination and other prevailing injustices. As this group of religious ministers formulated plans to attack the social, political, and economic problems of black Nashville within the Christian framework, they realized the organization would be more effective by including lay persons who shared the same beliefs.¹³

Although increasing voter registration was the immediate goal of NCLC, it was understood from its inception that the group would plan other projects. Some two months after NCLC's formation, the members made plans to conduct a workshop to "seek to establish a concept of Christian nonviolence." The planning committee designed the session to lay a foundation for using Christian precepts of nonviolence as a method of confronting the disparities of racial segregation and social inequities. Glenn Smiley and James M. Lawson, Jr., representatives of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a Christian pacifist organization headquartered in New York, assisted in setting up the workshop. The first session was March 26-28, 1958, with Smiley, Lawson, and Anna Holden of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) serving as leaders. The guest speaker was the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, who had been a leader in the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott.¹⁴ Additional workshops reinforced the concept of Christian nonviolence and it became the method of the sit-in movement. The con-

cept would predominate in combating the customs and laws of Jim Crow.

James Lawson, a native of Ohio, an ordained Methodist minister and a graduate of Baldwin-Wallace College, applied to the Vanderbilt University Divinity School in May, 1958, and was accepted for the 1958-59 school term.¹⁵ A firm believer in pacifism, Lawson had chosen to go to prison during the Korean conflict rather than take up arms. He served eleven months of a three-year sentence and was paroled under the recognizance of a group of Methodist ministers, who sent him to India as a missionary. Lawson spent three years there, learning about the teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi and his nonviolent resistance. The teachings of Gandhi reinforced his pacifism and provided new insights into the virtues of passive resistance.¹⁶ Lawson became active in the NCLC and, because he was well versed in the philosophy of direct-nonviolent protest, the Reverend Smith appointed him chairman of the project committee.

As chairman of the committee, Lawson's responsibility was to train people in nonviolent direct action. Weekly workshops were held in various black churches of Nashville, where members of the community were trained in the techniques of nonviolent protest. The workshops demonstrated that nonviolence was not for the faint of heart. Participants had to sit quietly while others, acting the role of segregationists, jeered, poked, and spit at them. Nonviolence required compassion, commitment, courage, and faith, but, most important, it required self discipline.¹⁷

There were four black institutions of higher learning in Nashville: Fisk University, Tennessee Agriculture and Industrial State University, American Baptist Theological Seminary, and Meharry Medical College. The propinquity of these institutions made Nashville an ideal city for the training of students in the Civil Rights Movement. Several college students had approached Lawson about participating in the sessions. Lawson consulted Smith about the students' query, and both agreed to their participation. In 1959, a cadre of students from the various educational institutions, many of whom would become leaders in the national movement, joined the workshops.

Lawson meticulously schooled the participants in the philosophy and tactics of nonviolent protest. They also gained from the experiences of the Reverend C. T. Vivian, who had participated in nonviolent demonstrations at segregated restaurants, hotels, and lunch counters in Illinois. Exposed to the experiences

of activists like Vivian, participants learned to protect themselves in the midst of violence and to be creative in difficult situations.¹⁸

Early in 1959, the NCLC decided that the time had come to desegregate the downtown eating facilities,¹⁹ since segregated lunch counters illustrated the hypocrisy of the economic system. Merchants were willing to accept money spent by blacks for goods, but they would not allow them lunch counter service. Leaders of NCLC attempted to negotiate with representatives of the two larger department stores, Cain-Sloan and Harvey's, but the store managers would not change the status quo for fear they would lose more business than they would gain.²⁰

Although at a stalemate with the store managers, NCLC negotiators felt that the meeting was beneficial, since the foundation had been laid for future conversations. When negotiations resumed on a continuing basis, the groups were not strangers and this proved to be of great value.²¹

The NCLC had verbal confirmation of the stores' policies regarding segregation, but the group's leaders felt that the stores' governing principles of segregation should be tested in an "action" situation.²² The NCLC not only looked at those who perpetuated the system of segregation, but also looked at those who complied with the system. It was the opinion of the NCLC that those who perpetuated the system and those who complied with the system were guilty of not taking the necessary steps to rectify discrimination and, therefore, all who participated in the charade were in accord with that system.²³

In November and December of 1959, the governing principle of segregation was tested at Harvey's and Cain-Sloan department stores. The Reverends Smith and Lawson, students John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Marion Barry, along with other participants, purchased goods and then unsuccessfully attempted to desegregate the lunch counters. The "test" sit-ins were to confirm the exclusionary policy of denying Negroes service in the stores' restaurants or lunch counters.

Lawson's workshops on nonviolent protest continued as the group planned to oppose vigorously the policy of segregation, with continuous sit-ins beginning in 1960. During the workshop sessions, Lawson re-emphasized that the issue was a moral one. The planned sit-ins were designed to raise the community's awareness of the evils of segregation and discrimination.

Before the Nashville group could execute their plans, North Carolina A & T students Ezell Blair, Jr.,

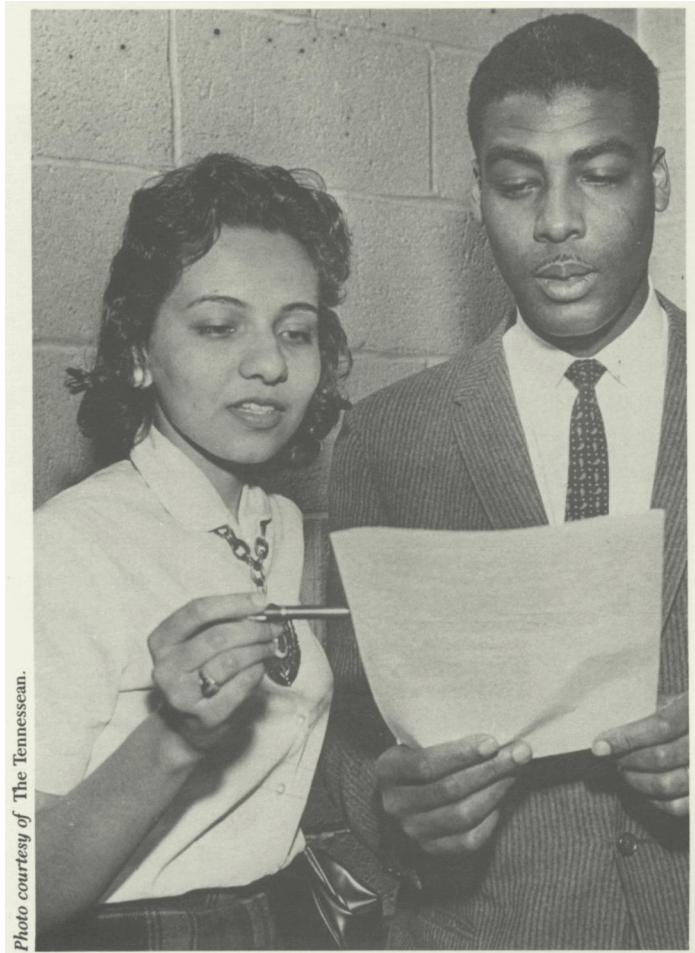


Photo courtesy of The Tennessean.

Diane Nash, Fisk University junior and chairman of the protest group, and the Reverend Kelly Smith, pastor of the First Baptist Church and president of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, confer before releasing a statement to the press.

Franklin McCain, Joe McNeil, and David Richmond staged a sit-in on February 1, 1960, at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro. These students, as had their Nashville counterparts, purchased goods and sought service at the lunch counter. As they had anticipated, the reply was, "I'm sorry, we don't serve you here."²⁴ After being refused service, they remained seated until the store closed.²⁵

On February 10, Douglas Moore, a Methodist minister involved in the Greensboro protest, called his friend James Lawson to ask if there were anything the Nashville students could do to show their sympathy for the North Carolina sit-ins.²⁶ Lawson made no commitments, but conveyed Moore's message to the Reverend Smith, president of the NCLC. Smith suggested that he confer with the students to see how they felt about the matter. The next day, on the campus of Fisk University, representatives of the NCLC met with students to discuss the action to be taken.

Lawson and Smith wanted the students to wait until funds could be raised and lawyers could be retained. They believed that these matters could be settled within a week. The students felt that they had been adequately schooled through the workshops, and they were ready to make a move against the segregated policies of Nashville. One student replied, "Something will happen in the situation that will make for some solution to some of the things we're talking about." The students decided to begin the Nashville sit-ins. Lawson found himself giving a crash course on nonviolence late into the night. He instructed the students how to behave in emergency situations, how to keep from violating the loitering laws, how to move to and from lunch counters in orderly shifts, even how to dress: stockings and heels for women, coats and ties for men. The students who participated in the workshops were to be group leaders, since they had studied the principles of direct nonviolent action. The first full-scale sit-in came two days later on Saturday, February 13, 1960.²⁷

On that day, about 124 students from American Baptist Theological Seminary, Fisk University, and Tennessee A & I State University began their sit-in. They convened at the Arcade on Fifth Avenue North; at approximately 12:40 p.m., small groups of two and three entered Kress's, Woolworth's, and McClellan's stores, all located on Fifth Avenue North. They made small purchases and within minutes occupied all vacant lunch counter seats. By 2:30, all three retail outlets had closed their lunch counters, and the students left without incident.²⁸

The Nashville students were prepared to lead one of the most disciplined and sustained sit-in protests of the early student movement. Their commitment to the principles of direct nonviolent protest action received its acid test during the first month of the movement.²⁹

Five days later, on Thursday, February 18, approximately 200 students conducted the second sit-in, selecting the same three lunch counters and W. T. Grant's. In each case, the counter was immediately closed. Two days later, on February 20, 350 students struck the same lunch counters at 11:45 a.m. The protesters converged on Walgreen's at 1:30 p.m. and management immediately displayed a prepared sign: "CLOSED IN THE INTEREST OF PUBLIC SAFETY." While the students were sitting-in at Walgreen's, a group of whites began verbally harassing Carol Anderson, a white protester attending Fisk University. Police cleared the store.³⁰

The episode at Walgreen's caused Nashville stu-

dents to formulate rules of conduct for demonstrators, which became the code of behavior for later protest movements in the South.³¹ The rules included (1) Do show yourself friendly at the counter at all times; (2) Do sit straight and always face the counter; (3) Do refer all information to your leader; (4) Do remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Martin Luther King; (5) Don't strike back or curse back, if attacked; (6) Don't laugh out; (7) Don't hold conversation with floor walkers; (8) Don't leave your seat until your leader has given permission; (9) Don't block entrances to stores and aisles; (10) Remember love and nonviolence. May God Bless each of you.³²

On February 23, students Bernard Lafayette (ABT), Curtis Murphy (A & I), and Julia Moore (Fisk), representing Diane Nash, met with Chief of Police Douglas Hosse. They asked that law enforcement personnel be placed on the inside of each store to thwart the possibility of violence advanced by hecklers. Hosse refused the request on the premise that it would disrupt business. On February 27, 400 students sat-in—fifty more than the week before—and Cain-Sloan was added as a site. The demonstrators were under specific instructions not to respond, in any way, to insult or attack. When refused service, they sat adhering to the rules of conduct, while hostile whites badgered them. On that day, the students were met with violence. They were beaten with fists and clubs, repeatedly knocked down, stomped, and burning cigarettes were pushed into their backs. Paul LaPrad, a visiting student from India and one of the demonstrators, was violently attacked and pulled to the floor by a gang of whites at McClellan's. After the outbreak of violence, officers entered the store and placed the abused LaPrad under arrest for "disorderly conduct." At the request of the store manager, all students were arrested. As police carried students away in paddy wagons, however, other protesting students replaced them. They had no fear of the unknown and no sacrifice was too great in their quest for freedom.

As the day continued, smoldering hatred in Woolworth's erupted; enraged whites descended upon the demonstrators. The passive resisters were at the mercy of their antagonists. According to one reporter, Nashville was "A Good City Gone Ugly," as whites gave way to barbaric behavior. "The slow build-up of hate was worse than the actual violence. For more than an hour the hate kept building up . . . name calling, spitting, cuffing, bolder punching, banging their heads against the counters, hitting them, and stuffing cigarettes down their collars."³³ Through all



Courtesy of The Tennessean.

Passions flared when angry whites abused lunch counter demonstrators at one of the frequent sit-ins.

the verbal and physical abuse and the unjustified incarcerations, the students steadfastly held to the principles of nonviolence. The concept of “Christian nonviolence” and its attendant tenets of compassion, courage, faith, and discipline were clearly operative on this day of the sit-ins.

By day’s end, eighty-one protesters had been arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. Bail was set at \$100 per person. The protesting students refused bond money, and confinement to a jail cell did not stop their demonstrations; refusal of bail money was in itself a protest. The \$100 bond was finally reduced to five dollars, but the students chose to remain incarcerated. Finally, they were released without bail into the custody of their schools, with the stipulation that they appear in court the following Monday morning.³⁴ Upon their release on Saturday night, the students had an all-night meeting with a battery of attorneys. They informed their legal advisors that they would plead not guilty and, if found guilty, would spend whatever time necessary in jail. Although the attorneys wanted to appeal the cases if the protesters were found guilty, the students held firm. Finally, the legal counsel conceded and supported their action.³⁵

On Sunday, February 28, a mass meeting was called at Fisk to apprise students of current conditions. President Stephen J. Wright gave his approval to the demonstrators. He said that “the students had broken no laws by the means they had employed” and commended the students for conducting themselves peaceably with poise and dignity. As long as this was true, he had no intention of instructing them to discontinue their efforts.³⁶

On Monday, February 29, the trials of the students began. More than 2,500 gathered around the Nashville courthouse as lawyers from the black community

defended the students. Each student was found guilty and fined \$50. The students executed their previously agreed-upon plan and refused to pay the fines, choosing to serve thirty-three and one-third days in the county workhouse.³⁷

On the same day, a group of black ministers met with Mayor Ben West at the First Baptist Church, with the Reverend C. T. Vivian presiding. Vivian stated, “The students were dignified in their demonstrations. They did not retaliate when abused. But not one of the hoodlum element that abused the students were [*sic*] arrested. This sort of brutality must be stopped.” Mayor West replied that he was going to “uphold the law and that applied to all races.” He admitted no law had been violated by asking for service at the lunch counters, but he added that a person would be violating the law if management closed the counters and a person refused to leave. The mayor’s remarks brought a lively response from the Reverend Lawson, who told the mayor that the law was apparently being used as a “gimmick” to keep the Negro in his place and, that being the case, a minority group felt justified in defying said law.³⁸ The *Nashville Banner* portrayed Lawson as a “ramrod of strife directed from outside,” and concluded there was “no place in Nashville for flannel-mouth agitators . . . under whatever sponsorship, imported for preachments of mass disorder, self-supported vagrants, or paid agents of strife-breeding organizations.”³⁹

Two days later, on March 2, an additional 350 students staged another sit-in protest, which included Greyhound and Trailways bus stations and Harvey’s department store. Students arrested on this day were booked on state charges of “conspiracy to obstruct trade and commerce.” This state offense carried a more serious charge, so law enforcement authorities re-arrested those already incarcerated and charged them with the same offense.⁴⁰ The black community again showed its support of the students with offers of bond money and legal assistance. Again, the students refused to post bail.

Lawson’s debate with the mayor and the subsequent scathing editorial by *Banner* publisher, James Stahlman, also a member of the executive committee of Vanderbilt University’s Board of Trust, brought Lawson and his sit-in activities under the scrutiny of Vanderbilt officials. On March 1, Chancellor Harvey Branscomb, possibly because of Stahlman’s editorial and his being a member of the executive committee, realized he might not have the luxury of inaction and decided he had to act.⁴¹ Branscomb wanted to know if Lawson had been misquoted or if he had misspoken in

the tense atmosphere of the meeting with the mayor. Dean Robert F. Nelson of the Divinity School conveyed Branscomb's inquiries to Lawson.⁴² Lawson did not claim authorship of all the statements attributed to him, but neither did he say that he would instruct the students to cease a sit-in any time a manager proclaimed the counter closed.⁴³ On the afternoon of March 1, Nelson delivered Lawson's response to Branscomb.⁴⁴ Branscomb then attempted another strategy. Nelson was sent back to Lawson in the evening to tell him of a regulation in the student handbook that forbade students to participate in disorderly assemblies or assemblies likely to lead to disorder, a regulation created to control "panty raids" and never applied to professional or graduate students. Since no other professional students had previously been required to abide by that rule, applying it to Lawson was discriminatory.⁴⁵ Author Paul Conkin stated, "Lawson suffered not from overt violation of university regulations but from refusing to pledge himself beforehand to obey them."⁴⁶

On March 3, at a regular meeting of the executive committee of the Board of Trust, a letter from Lawson

was read by Dean Nelson. Lawson denied press accounts that he was a principal leader in the sit-ins or that he condoned lawlessness and violence. He further stated: "Defiant violation of the law is a contradiction to my entire understanding of and loyalty to Christian non-violence. When the Christian considers the concept of civil disobedience as an aspect of non-violence, it is only within the context of a law or a law enforcement agency which has in reality ceased to be the law, and then the Christian does so only in fear and trembling before God."⁴⁷ After hearing Lawson's statement, the executive committee offered him two choices: withdrawal by 9:00 a.m. the next day or expulsion. Lawson chose expulsion.⁴⁸

As Lawson viewed it, the students had a constitutional right to service, regardless of what the state laws said about the issue. He felt that those staging sit-ins were victims, the wronged parties. The store owners were guilty of injustice and of bending the laws to their own purposes. Why should public authorities ask victims to make further sacrifices? Why not make the store owners—the exploiters—change their policies?⁴⁹



Photo courtesy of The Tennessean.

March, 1960. Fisk student Judith Nash, makes a statement that defendants in the race demonstration cases have decided against paying fines as a matter of "moral principle."

Lawson's argument that store owners were, in all likelihood, in violation of the United States Constitution's equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was echoed in 1961 by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas in his concurring opinion in *Garner et al. vs. Louisiana*, *Briscoe et al. vs. Louisiana*, and *Hotson et al. vs. Louisiana* cases. In the Garner case, participants sat-in at the lunch counter of Sitman's Drug Store on March 29, 1960; the Briscoe group sat-in at the lunch counter of the Greyhound Bus Station of the same day; and the Hotson participants sat-in at the lunch counter of S. H. Kress and Company on March 28, 1960. All were arrested for "disturbing the peace."⁵⁰ Justice Douglas stated in his opinion that "Restaurants, whether in a drugstore, department store, or bus terminal, are a part of the public life of most of our communities. Though they are private enterprises, they are public facilities in which States may not enforce a policy of racial segregation."⁵¹

There was no indication that Vanderbilt's expulsion of Lawson would end the sit-ins. The demonstrations against the segregated lunch counters of Nashville were not contingent upon the activities of a single inspiring leader, but instead depended upon numerous individuals with boldness and self-discipline: those whose goals were greater than gaining admittance to dining facilities and testing the local system of fundamental laws and principles; those whose goals were focused on changing the self-image of Negroes and transforming injustice into justice.⁵²

During the weeks that followed Lawson's expulsion, Vanderbilt University was beset with campus demonstrations and received a deluge of mail from across the country in support of Lawson. On May 30, twelve of sixteen Divinity School faculty tendered their resignations, and the University endured national embarrassment because of its clumsy attempt to repress Lawson and the civil rights movement.⁵³

On Thursday, March 3, the same day that Vanderbilt officials expelled Lawson, the mayor appointed a biracial committee to examine the issue and make recommendations. The committee consisted of two Negroes, Dr. Stephen J. Wright, president of Fisk University, and Dr. Walter S. Davis, president of Tennessee A & I State University; other members were Lipscomb Davis of Davis Cabinet Company, F. Donald Hart of Temco, B. B. Gullett, president of the Nashville Bar Association, and George Barrett, a lawyer and president of the Nashville Community Relations Conference. Chairman of the committee was Dean Madison Sarratt of Vanderbilt University.⁵⁴

Shortly after its formation, the committee held discussions with student leaders from Fisk, Tennessee A & I State, and American Baptist Theological Seminary. The students agreed unofficially to call off the sit-ins and give the committee a chance to work.⁵⁵

The temporary restraint came to an end on March 16, when four students from Fisk University entered the Post House Restaurant in the Greyhound bus terminal, took seats, and placed orders. After the students had been served, they were beaten by whites.⁵⁶

Sit-ins resumed again on March 25, the same day a crew from the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) arrived in the city to film a documentary, "Anatomy of a Demonstration." Governor Buford Ellington charged that the sit-in was "instigated and planned by and staged for the convenience of CBS." Frank Sutton, president of CBS, denied the charges.⁵⁷ The demonstrators maintained that "after three weeks, the hope of many had grown dull." There was little to indicate the mayor's biracial committee could induce the merchants to change their policies. "They had no choice but to again witness in a dramatic, yet loving fashion."⁵⁸ Students told the mayor's committee that a temporary halt to the sit-ins was a two-way truce and that the store owners should have closed their lunch counters until the committee made its report. Diane Nash, a junior at Fisk University and chairwoman of a student protest organization, said, "The intention to resume sit-ins should refute charges by Governor Ellington that CBS staged the March 25 sit-ins."⁵⁹

The mayor's seven-member, biracial committee made its report on April 5. Having failed to gain full approval from the Negro leadership and city's major merchants, the committee recommended that the merchants divide their lunch counters into two sections, one for whites and one for blacks and whites together. This method was to operate on a ninety-day trial basis. The committee also recommended that, if no further demonstrations by the students occurred during the trial period, all cases against them be dismissed, and that a permanent biracial committee be created for the purpose of studying and making recommendations on any racial problems that might develop in the city.⁶⁰ The recommendation to divide the lunch counters was rejected by the student protest leaders and the NCLC. They said that the proposal ignored the moral issue for the realization of human rights, retained segregation, and placed the principle of desegregation on trial. Both groups explained that they were concerned with removing segregation and that "the suggestion of a restricted area

involves the same stigma of which we are earnestly seeking to rid the community.”⁶¹ The representatives of the stores involved rejected the plan. They did not like being “placed in the unenviable position of deciding on a social practice which would be a radical change in the customs of our community. The very nature of our business is such that it is most impractical for a small group of stores to assume the role of leading such a change.”⁶²

While the committee’s report made recommendations for divided lunch counters for ninety days, it did not say what was to happen at the end of the trial period. Would lunch counters remain divided? Would they be totally desegregated? Or would they return to their segregated status?

A boycott of the downtown stores followed the failure of the mayor’s biracial committee to find a satisfactory solution to the demands of the students and the NCLC. The boycott was led by the Reverend Kelly M. Smith and Dr. Vivian Henderson. Speaking at Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church to more than 500 members of the black community gathered to discuss the sit-ins, Henderson asked, “If there is anybody here who [has] not spent any money downtown in the last two weeks, stand up.” Almost the entire audience stood. Referring to the boycott as “our saving program” and, later, as “an economic withdrawal,” Henderson estimated that blacks spent over 50 million dollars annually in Nashville. Even the boycott was cloaked in the armor of morality. Henderson stated that “this is not a boycott to club men down. This is an economic withdrawal against evil.”⁶³ The concept of an “economic withdrawal against evil” by the black community was in keeping with the position of the NCLC, that it was morally indefensible for blacks to cooperate with a system that was in need of change. Shortly before Easter, approximately 98 percent of Nashville blacks used their “dollar vote” and simply stopped buying.⁶⁴ Black women, through daily and maximum use of the Southern Bell Telephone lines, mobilized the boycott in a forceful display of unity with student protesters and sustained the “economic withdrawal” for almost seven weeks. This action caused the downtown retail merchants to lose approximately 20 percent of their business.⁶⁵

On April 11, as blacks protested against segregation in downtown Nashville, two whites were arrested: one a heckler and one a demonstrator from Vanderbilt Divinity School. Virgil W. Glenn, the heckler, was charged with disorderly and offensive conduct by breaking the peace, fighting, and inciting others to do the same. Herschel W. Yates, the demonstrator from



Photo courtesy of The Tennessean.

Paul Laprad, a white student at Fisk University, crouches on the floor and shields his head with his arms after white youths dragged him from a lunch counter and beat him.

Vanderbilt, was charged with disorderly and offensive conduct. Yates was acquitted of disorderly conduct in city court and Judge Andrew Doyle suspended Glenn’s \$25 fine after Yates said he wanted to forgive him.⁶⁶ The following day, students launched a sit-in with a new approach: integrated groups sat-in while larger groups picketed outside the stores.⁶⁷ Angry whites again attacked the demonstrators and law enforcement officials arrested the students, along with two white youths who were attacking the demonstrators.⁶⁸ On this day, McClellan’s on Fifth Avenue North was evacuated after a bomb threat was received.⁶⁹ Racial strife ravaged the “Athens of the South.”

One week later, on April 19, an early morning explosion badly damaged the home of Z. Alexander Looby, defense counsel for the students, a city councilman, and a leading figure in desegregation movements throughout Tennessee. Although the house was extensively damaged, the lives of Looby and his wife were spared.⁷⁰ The force of the explosion damaged two neighboring houses and blew out approximately 147 windows across the street at the predominantly black Meharry Medical College. Mayor

West was joined by other community leaders in deploring the act of violence. Bomb “scares” followed the Looby home bombing. On the following morning, Meharry Medical College received a bomb threat.⁷¹

By mid-day of April 19, an assemblage of at least 3,000, including some whites, marched silently, three abreast, in long defiant columns from Fisk to the public square, protesting the malicious bombing and the immorality of racial segregation. “This line seems to be endless,” commented one bystander, as the throng of humanity walked past the capitol to the courthouse.⁷² Black leaders had asked Mayor West to meet them on the courthouse plaza. He complied. Upon arrival at the courthouse, the Reverend C. T. Vivian read a prepared statement charging the mayor with “refusing to speak out against the injustice of the segregation statement offered him by his biracial committee, of not using the moral weight of his office to speak out against violence and hate mongers, encouraging violence by his lack of decision, and permitting the police to use their authority with partiality.”⁷³ The mayor replied, “I deny and resent to the bottom of my soul the implications you made in that statement.”⁷⁴

Vivian and Nash challenged him to prove the state-

ment false. West replied, “I appeal to all citizens to end discrimination, to have no bigotry, no bias, no discrimination.”⁷⁵ “Then, Mayor,” Nash retorted, “do you recommend that lunch counters be desegregated?” The mayor said, “Yes.”⁷⁶ With that affirmation, 3,000 people responded with thunderous applause. The crowd left after the mayor’s positive response to the question posed by Nash. The following morning the front-page headline of the *Tennessean* read, “Integrate Counters—Mayor.”⁷⁷

Nashville’s student movement did not go unnoticed by national leaders of the civil rights movement. On April 20, Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a crowd of 4,000 at Fisk University. King’s address, however, was delayed an hour after Nashville police and fire officials ordered the gymnasium evacuated, following an anonymous bomb threat to police headquarters. After city officials found no bomb, the crowd returned and the program resumed. King prefaced his talk by saying that “the movement here is one of the best organized and best disciplined of the movements in the southland today.” Their united effort, he declared, was stronger than all the ill will manifested by bombers and segregationists. “The only thing uncertain about the death of segregation is the day it will be

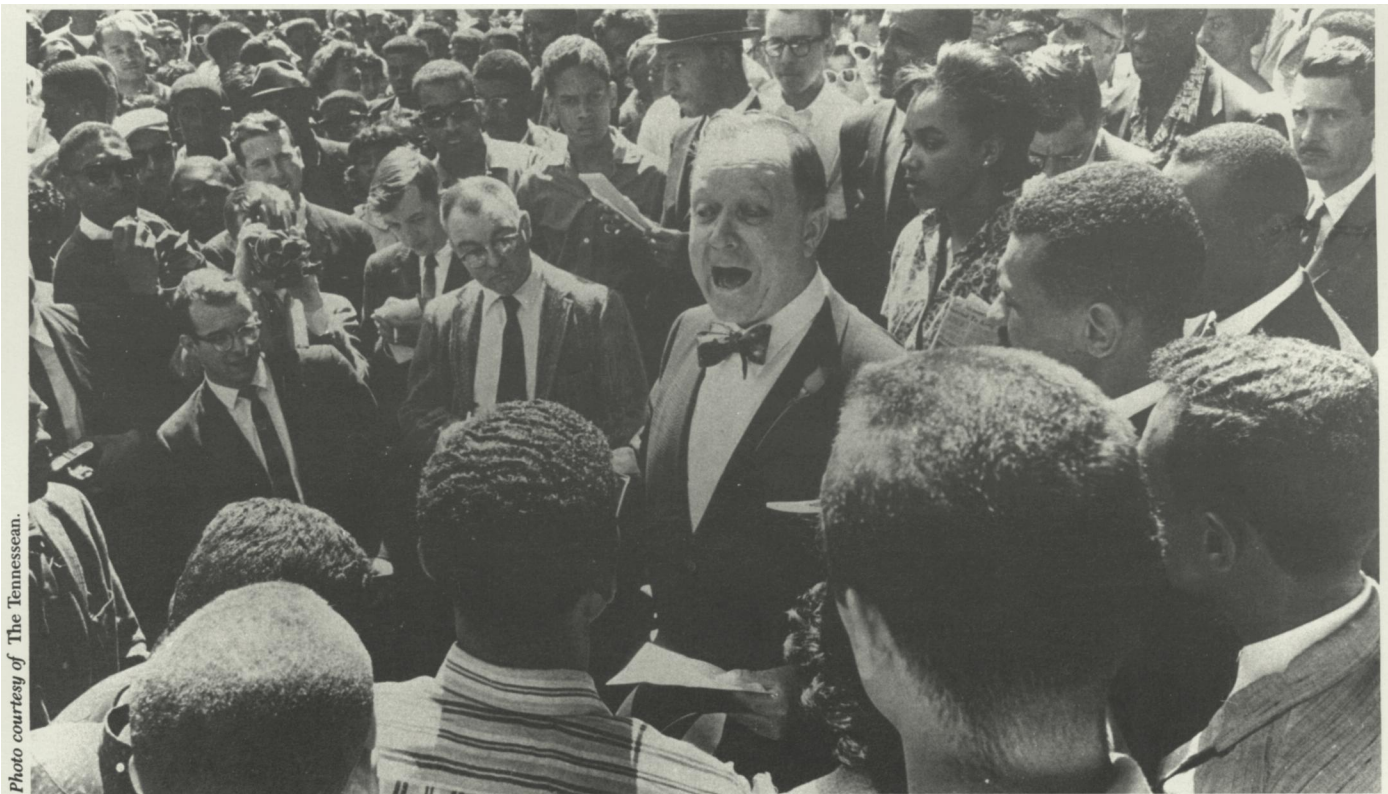


Photo courtesy of The Tennessean.

April, 1960. Nashville Mayor Ben West shouts to be heard as he tells a crowd that he intends to uphold the law. The man in the hat just beyond West’s right shoulder is the Reverend C. T. Vivian, who later read a statement critical of the mayor and then debated with him.

buried," King said, and urged them to continue their struggle. "No lie can live forever," he said. "Let us not despair. The universe is with us. Work together, children. Don't get weary."⁷⁸

As the protest continued, downtown merchants reluctantly negotiated with leaders of the black community to resolve the problem. The merchants requested that the negotiators for the blacks be representative of the black community, as well as of the sit-in committee. Said one of the merchants, "We made these requests for two reasons. We discovered, much to our surprise, the Negro members of the mayor's biracial committee, although both were university presidents, were not representative of the Negro community. We also discovered that whenever white persons joined the Negroes in negotiations, they started preaching to us about the morality of the question. We didn't need anybody to orate to us about that."⁷⁹ The black community agreed to the requests by the merchants. The conferees for the black community consisted of Rodney Powell, a student at Meharry Medical College, Diane Nash, a junior at Fisk University, the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, and Coyness Ennix, an attorney and member of the city school board. Greenfield Pitts, of Harvey's department store and head of the Chamber of Commerce Retail Merchants Division, was the chief negotiator for the merchants.⁸⁰

Negotiation began the second week of April and, by the end of the first week of May, "The Nashville Plan" was laid out for settlement of the sit-in crisis. The plan was simple: only small groups of blacks were to ask for service and the merchants would have their employees fully prepared for the event. Plain clothes policemen also were to be on hand to take care of any trouble that might develop and a corps of white United Church Women were sent to mingle with the control groups and "give the appearance of normalcy."⁸¹ On May 10, six of the seven targeted stores, led by Cain-Sloan and Harvey's, served blacks at their lunch counters.⁸² By May 18, all controls were removed.⁸³

The students' capacity and willingness to endure abuse and suffering, combined with the economic boycott, prodded merchants to reach an agreement with Negro leaders. "In the beginning," said one merchant, "we believed this was largely a student affair and quite possibly one that was led and organized by outsiders, students from the North and East." Later, "we learned differently after the boycott got underway . . . our customers were not the student types. They were the Negro men and women of Nash-

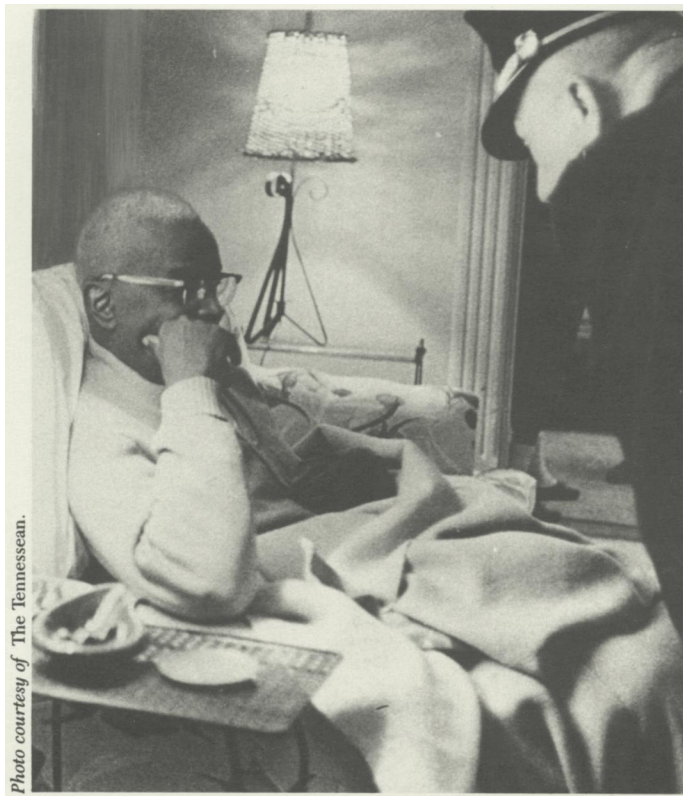


Photo courtesy of The Tennessean.

Z. Alexander Looby, one of Nashville's most respected leaders in the fight for desegregation.

ville who live here, work here. We got an inkling of how deep their feelings were when thousands of them marched in Nashville."⁸⁴ The boycott, in conjunction with violence, bomb threats and the bombing of Z. Alexander Looby's home, sit-ins, and arrests, brought, in the words of one merchant, "the most serious situation that Nashville retailers had ever faced."⁸⁵

Time magazine stated, "If Nashville's white merchants remained segregationists at heart, they . . . at least learned to become pocketbook integrationists."⁸⁶ Acting in their economic interests, Nashville's merchants found themselves reluctant facilitators of the dawning of a new day in Nashville's race relations. The economic boycott forced the retail business community to place profit before segregation, so the business community did not feel compelled to adhere to the Jim Crow mores. Nashville merchants realized that change was inevitable and outwardly rearranged their priorities. They did not necessarily relinquish their racist attitudes, but they did choose to place economic considerations above the preservation of Jim Crow.

The students, with their sit-ins and unrelenting faith in the principles for which they were struggling, galvanized the black community to the point that it

was ready to sustain an economic boycott. The bombing of Z. Alexander Looby's home solidified the black community to the extent that it demanded an end to Nashville's governing principle of segregation.

Although there would be more violence, resistance, and disruptions, the coffin was sealed May 10, 1960, on Jim Crow lunch counters at six of the seven targeted stores. Just as Nashville had been the first major Confederate city to fall in the face of the Federal invasion, it now became the first major city in the South to begin desegregating its public facilities.⁸⁷

Author Aldon Morris gives three principal reasons why the Nashville sit-in movement was developed and sustained. First, the sit-ins grew out of the pre-existing social structure that included activist groups, churches, formal movement organizations, colleges, and overlapping personal networks. Kelly Miller Smith organized a well-developed, church-based organization in the late 1950s in Nashville. The organization, the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, was an affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Reverend Smith's First Baptist Church became the coordinating unit of the Nashville sit-in movement. The Reverend James Lawson, an expert tactician of nonviolent protest and chairman of the NCLC project committee, developed a formal structure called the Nashville Nonviolent Movement to direct the sit-in activities. Its two sub-structures, the Student Central Committee and the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, worked closely together and had overlapping membership. The Student Central Committee usually consisted of twenty-five to thirty students drawn from local colleges. The two groups' specific tasks were accomplished by such committees as the finance committee, the telephone, publicity, and news committee, and the work committee. The city's black lawyers became the defense team, and students from Meharry Medical College were the medical team.

Second, the Nashville group was ready to act when the call came from Douglas Moore on February 10, since a cadre of students had already received training in nonviolent direct action and had conducted "test sit-ins" in the downtown department stores before the Christmas holidays. The group had already made plans in late 1959 to begin continuous sit-ins in 1960, with the stated intention of desegregating Nashville. Third, the sit-ins specialized in what was called nonviolent direct action, which included mass marches, boycotts, and negotiations, as well as sit-ins. The consumer boycott of local businesses by the black community was critical in influencing local elites to

desegregate the lunch counters.⁸⁸

A group of courageous black students, who appeared on a snowy Saturday afternoon in Nashville and dared to ask for service, made national headlines in the winter of 1960. All during the following spring, they filled the jails with freedom songs, sparking similar actions and demonstrations across the South. Although an earlier sit-in had taken place on February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, it was the small coterie of Nashville students who were the catalysts for the concept of nonviolent direct action. This dauntless coterie continued to provide critical leadership to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and to the movement in cities throughout the nation.

The students with their sit-ins and the attendant economic boycott brought Nashville to the dawning of a new day on May 10, 1960, when Woolworth's, Kress, McClellan's, Walgreen's, Harvey's, and Cain-Sloan opened their lunch counters to all citizens, irrespective of race. Although W. T. Grant declined to join the other stores in the settlement, blacks agreed to refrain from any further demonstrations downtown for "a reasonable period of time." However, the economic boycott of Grant continued. On June 8, 1960, Grant opened its lunch counters on an integrated basis.⁸⁹

Seven days later, Judge Andrew Doyle retired the charges against those students involved in the sit-in demonstrations at the Greyhound and Trailways bus terminals. In September, the state charges of "conspiracy to disrupt trade and commerce" were dropped on a legal technicality in criminal court.⁹⁰

The desegregation of the seven lunch counters in the spring of 1960 did not end the sit-in movement in Nashville. In November sit-ins resumed, as racist practices were still customary in most eating establishments, and institutionalized racism remained intact.

The Nashville sit-in movement served as more than just a model for future demonstrations against segregated eating facilities, movie houses, hotel and motel accommodations, unfair employment practices, and segregation in general. It also emboldened and further mobilized others across the country because it was conducted solely on the principle of nonviolence.

The young demonstrators comprising the Nashville movement brought race relations to the dawning of a new day on May 10, 1960. They embodied the faith and hope invoked in the spirit of the first stanza of the Negro National Anthem—faith that the dark past had taught them, hope that the present had brought them; facing the rising sun of a new day begun, they marched on until victory was won.

- ¹Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1987), 1.
- ²*Ibid.*, 4.
- ³Matthew H. Ahman, ed. *The New Negro* (New York, 1969), 70.
- ⁴Lofgren, *The Plessy Case*, 204.
- ⁵Aldon Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 46, 748; *Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, February 1960.
- ⁶Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement," 748.
- ⁷*Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, April 1, 1960; Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," 756; sit-in and related protest activities occurred in North Carolina, Florida, Virginia, South Carolina, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, West Virginia, Louisiana, Arkansas, Maryland, Ohio, and Kentucky.
- ⁸John M. Glen, *Highlander No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (Lexington, 1988), 145.
- ⁹Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement," 744.
- ¹⁰*Newsweek*, "A Pattern for Peace" (March 21, 1960), 50-56.
- ¹¹Don Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s* (Knoxville, 1985), 230-34; *Tennessean*, April 24, 1960.
- ¹²Ahman, ed., *The New Negro*, 4.
- ¹³Guy Carawan, "The Nashville Sit-In Story," Folkways Records (New York, 1960); album notes provided by the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*
- ¹⁵Paul K. Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Knoxville, 1985), 547.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, 548; Juan William, *Eyes on the Prize: American's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* (New York, 1987), 122.
- ¹⁷Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1984), 176; Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 123.
- ¹⁸Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 176.
- ¹⁹Carawan, "Sit-In."
- ²⁰*Ibid.*; Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 245.
- ²¹*Ibid.*
- ²²*Ibid.*
- ²³*Ibid.*
- ²⁴Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York, 1977), 76.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 79.
- ²⁶*Tennessean*, March 21, 1960.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*; Jim Sessions & Sue Thrasher, "A New Day Begun: Interviews with John Lewis," *Southern Exposure*, Vol. IV, No. 3, 19; Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 205-206; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York, 1988), 274.
- ²⁸*Tennessean*, February 14, 1960; Julia Moore, *Fisk News*, Spring 1960; Carawan, "Sit-In"; Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 245.
- ²⁹Robert H. Brisbane, *Black Activism: Radical Revolution in the United States, 1954-1970* (Valley Forge, 1974), 45.
- ³⁰Moore, *Fisk News, Tennessean*, February 19-21, 1960; Carawan, "Sit-In"; Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 245.
- ³¹Clayborn Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981), 22.
- ³²*Tennessean*, February 28, 1960.
- ³³Moore, *Fisk News*; Carawan, "Sit-In"; Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 246; David Halberstram, "A Good City Gone Ugly," *The Reporter*, March 31, 1960, 19; Brisbane, *Black Activism*, 46; *Southern School News*, March 1960, 2.
- ³⁴Moore, *Fisk News*; Carawan, "Sit-In"; *Southern School News*, March 1960; *Tennessean*, February 28, 1960.
- ³⁵*Southern Exposure*, "Nashville Sit-in Nonviolence Emerges: Interview with Marion Barry and John Lewis," Vol. IX, No. 1, Spring 1981, 31.
- ³⁶*Nashville Globe*, March 4, 1960; "The Nashville Sit-Ins: Nonviolence Emerges: Interviews with Marion Barry and John Lewis," *Southern Exposure*, Vol. IX, No. 1, Spring 1981, 31.
- ³⁷Moore, *Fisk News*, 17; The lawyers representing the students were: Z. A. Looby; Robert Lillard; Avon Williams; Coyness L. Ennix; A. J. Steel; J. F. McClellan; R. B. J. Campbell, Jr.; Adolph Birch; W. H. Hawkins; Roscoe Hamby; William Blakemore; E. B. Lindsey; and Eugene White.
- ³⁸*Nashville Globe*, March 4, 1960; "The Nashville Sit-Ins: Nonviolence Emerges," *Southern Exposure*, Vol. IX, No. 1, Spring, 1981, 31.
- ³⁹*Nashville Banner*, March 1, 2, 1960.
- ⁴⁰Moore, *Fisk News*, 17; *Nashville Banner*, March 4, 1960; Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 248.
- ⁴¹Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 552.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*
- ⁴³*Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 552-53.
- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 553.
- ⁴⁷*Tennessean*, March 3, 1960; Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 554.
- ⁴⁸Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 554.
- ⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 550.
- ⁵⁰Walter Wyatt, Reporter of Decisions, *U. S. Reports*, Vol. 368 (Washington: U. S. Printing Office, 1961), 159; Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 550.
- ⁵¹*Ibid.*, 177-178, 182-85.
- ⁵²Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 248; Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 550.
- ⁵³Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy*, 550-661; Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 248; *Southern School News*, April 1960.
- ⁵⁴*Tennessean*, March 6, 1960.
- ⁵⁵*Ibid.*, March 8, 1960; *Southern School News*, April 1960.
- ⁵⁶*Nashville Banner*, March 17, 1960.
- ⁵⁷*Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, April 1960; *Nashville Banner*, March 26, 1960.
- ⁵⁸*Tennessean*, March 26, 1960.
- ⁵⁹*Ibid.*, *Tennessean*, March 30, 1960.
- ⁶⁰*Ibid.*, April 6, 1960; *Southern School News*, May 1960; Wallace Westfeldt, "Settling A Sit-In," A Report Prepared for the Nashville Community Relations Conference, 1.
- ⁶¹*Tennessean*, April 6, 1960; Westfeldt, "Settling A Sit-In," 1.
- ⁶²*Ibid.*
- ⁶³*Ibid.*; *Business Week*, April 23, 1960, 32.
- ⁶⁴Louis E. Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, (New York, 1962), 142.
- ⁶⁵*Ibid.*
- ⁶⁶*Tennessean*, April 13, 1960.
- ⁶⁷Moore, *Fisk News*, Summer 1960, 8.
- ⁶⁸*Tennessean*, April 13, 1960.
- ⁶⁹*Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰Moore, *Fisk News*, Summer 1960, 8; *Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, May 1960; *Nashville Banner*, April 19, 1960.
- ⁷¹*Nashville Banner*, April 19, 1960; *Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, May 1960.
- ⁷²*Nashville Banner*, April 20, 1960; *Tennessean*, April 20, 1960; *Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, May 1960.
- ⁷³Moore, *Fisk News*, Summer 1960, 8.
- ⁷⁴*Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, May 1960.
- ⁷⁵*Ibid.*; *Tennessean*, April 20, 1960.
- ⁷⁶*Ibid.*; Moore, *Fisk News*, Summer 1960, 9; *Tennessean*, April 20, 1960.
- ⁷⁷*Tennessean*, April 20, 1960.
- ⁷⁸*Ibid.*, April 21, 1960; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 297.
- ⁷⁹Westfeldt, *Settling a Sit-In*, 4.
- ⁸⁰*Ibid.*; *Tennessean*, April 7, 1960.
- ⁸¹Westfeldt, *Settling a Sit-In*, 6; Interview with Dr. Charles J. Walker, January 27, 1990; Ahman, *The New Negro*, 60.
- ⁸²*Tennessean*, May 11, 1960; *Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, June 1960.
- ⁸³*Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, June 1960.
- ⁸⁴Westfeldt, *Settling a Sit-In*, 5.
- ⁸⁵*Business Week*, April 23, 1960, 32.
- ⁸⁶*Time*, May 26, 1961, 17.
- ⁸⁷*Southern School News*, Southern Regional Council, June 1960. Greensboro did not desegregate its lunch counters until July 25, 1960. For more information on the Greensboro sit-ins, see William H. Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and The Black Struggle for Freedom*.
- ⁸⁸Aldon Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," 764-766.
- ⁸⁹Westfeldt, *Settling a Sit-In*, 6.
- ⁹⁰*Ibid.*; *Nashville Banner*, June 15, 1960; *Tennessean*, October 19, 1960.