

## The Nashville Sit-Ins

*Essential Question: How did the Nashville sit-ins help secure rights for African Americans?*

*“I came to Nashville not to bring inspiration, but to gain inspiration from the great movement that has already taken place in this community.”*

*Dr. Martin Luther King, speaking of the Nashville Sit-ins*

As a movement began across the county to end segregation, one of the highlights for Tennessee happened within the state’s capital city. The city had begun to desegregate schools in 1957, and African Americans were hopeful to extend their rights further. As a gateway for the rest of the South, the hope was to begin a movement that would extend to other parts of the state and further South. It took three months for those involved to prepare for the upcoming endeavor. Along with the understanding that success might be difficult was also the realization that such a task was both dangerous and even possibly deadly.

Planning and preparation took place in conjunction with four area colleges and local churches. Churches offered a place for meetings and training while college students offered their time and dedication to the cause by volunteering to actually participate in the sit-ins. Rev. James E. Lawson Jr. taught students techniques of non violent resistance he had learned while serving as a missionary in India. Baptist minister Kelly Miller Smith Jr., who had previously won a victory against segregated schools in Nashville, helped to organize the students. The students also worked with their professors to prepare for the possibility of missed classes. This would be essential as students missed classes during sit-in events or were even absent due to arrests. Some professors volunteered to send work to prisons as a way to help these dedicated students not fall behind as the sit-ins continued.

Once the decision to participate was made, volunteers had to be prepared for whatever attacks might follow. This was true for the white volunteers who joined the cause as well. Though all were hopeful for change, there was still a real realization of what could be to come. The young volunteers had to practice being in such dangerous positions ahead of time. They would do so by taunting, attaching, and pulling at each other. The hope was that students would be prepared to take such abuse if they had practiced their responses ahead of time.

In addition, students were given a list of do’s and don’ts when dealing with negative situations. The rules were as follows:

- Strike back or curse if abused
  - Laugh out loud
- Do not:
- Hold conversations with a floor walker
  - Leave your seat without permission to do so from your leader
- 
- Block entrances to the store or aisles inside
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- Be friendly and courteous at all times
- Do
- Sit straight and face the counter at all times
  - Report any serious injuries to your leader
  - Send people with questions to your leader
  - Remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King

At first, the events were going well for the sit-in volunteers who had hoped to have further impact by staging the events so close to the Easter holiday; however, as time continued, more issues began to arise. At first, the students were able to sit at the lunch counters daily until the stores closed without any problems. By February of 1960, the first students were attacked by white students. The African American students were arrested and hired attorney Alexander Looby to represent them. The front of Looby's home was later bombed while he and his wife were in the back. In total, Looby was able to have charges of conspiracy to disrupt trade and commerce dropped for ninety-one students.

Civil rights activist decided to have a march in Nashville as response to the incidents in which over two thousand people participated. Upon reaching the City Hall, an important female representative of the civil rights movement, Diane Nash, asked the Nashville mayor, Ben West, a question: "Do you feel it is wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of their race or color?" His response of 'yes' was the final stamp on the situation in Nashville. By May, the lunch counters of Tennessee's capital opened to both white and African American customers. Even so, there was still much more to accomplish in completing the fight for civil rights.

Sources:

The Civil Rights Movement in Nashville. (2006). Retrieved July 11, 2014, from <http://library.nashville.org/civilrights/movement.htm>.

Timeline: The Civil Rights Movement in America . (2014). Retrieved July 11, 2014, from <http://sharetn.gov.tnsosfiles.com/tsla/exhibits/blackhistory/civil.htm>.

Sumner, David. "James E. Lawson Jr." *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Tennessee Historical Society. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/james-e-lawson-jr/> 19 June, 2019.

Sumner, David. "Kelly Miller Smith Jr." *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Tennessee Historical Society. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/kelly-miller-smith-sr/> 19 June, 2019.

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Use the text to address the following questions.

1. Why were the sit-ins organized?

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2. Look at the list of 'Dos' and 'Don'ts'. Are there any that surprised you given the situation? Why or why not?

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