

Diane Nash

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Diane Nash

Essential Question: What role did Diane Nash play in the African American struggle for Civil Rights?

Diane Nash was born in 1938 in Chicago. After graduating high school, Nash attended Howard University in Washington D.C. for one year then transferred to Fisk University in Nashville where she majored in English. As a student attending school in Nashville, Diane Nash experienced the full effects of Jim Crow laws for the first time. For example, African-Americans were not allowed to eat at lunch counters in downtown department stores because of their race.

In 1959, she began to attend direct action non-violent workshops led by the Rev. James Lawson. These workshops stressed protest methods that used non-violence in response to the treatment African-Americans received under Jim Crow laws. Nash had the opportunity to practice nonviolent direct action when the Student Central Committee in Nashville organized a sit-in at a local department store lunch counter in downtown Nashville. Nash impressed so many people in the movement that she was elected chairperson of the Student Central Committee. This in itself is important because there were very few female leaders in the Civil Rights movement. In April 1960, Nash helped found and lead the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. More sit-ins followed and hundreds of Fisk Students and young African-Americans took part along with some white students.

On the morning of April 19, 1960 the home of Z. Alexander Looby, who had assisted students and participants in the Civil Rights movement in Nashville, was bombed. Nash organized and led a march in support of Looby. The march began with around 2,000 people and ended at the courthouse in Nashville with somewhere between 3,000 to 4,000 people participating. Besides the sheer numbers, the most impressive fact about the march was that it was accomplished in complete silence.

At the courthouse steps Mayor Ben West came out to meet the protesters. Discussions followed and Diane Nash took her turn. Nash asked Mayor West if it was wrong to discriminate against a person at a lunch counter solely based on his or her color or race. After a moment of silence Mayor West said he did not think it was correct. Nashville, Tennessee shortly thereafter became the first southern city to have integrated lunch counters. Nash was nominated by Dr. King for an award from the New York NAACP. Dr. King said, "Nash was the driving spirit in the nonviolent assault on segregation at lunch counters".

After the Nashville sit-ins, Nash helped to coordinate and participated in the Freedom Rides organized by the Congress of Racial Equality. There was some opposition to the Freedom Rider program by some leading members in the Civil Rights movement. Even after the Ku Klux Klan burned a Freedom Rider bus in Anniston, Alabama Nash continued to coordinate Freedom Ride efforts into Mississippi from her Nashville base.

In 1961, Nash dropped out of school to become a full time organizer, strategist and instructor for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference headed by Dr. Martin Luther King. Nash was active in the Civil Rights movement for several years. Nash has received several awards for her leadership in the fight for civil rights. She later taught school in Chicago and continued her activism in social and economic reform.

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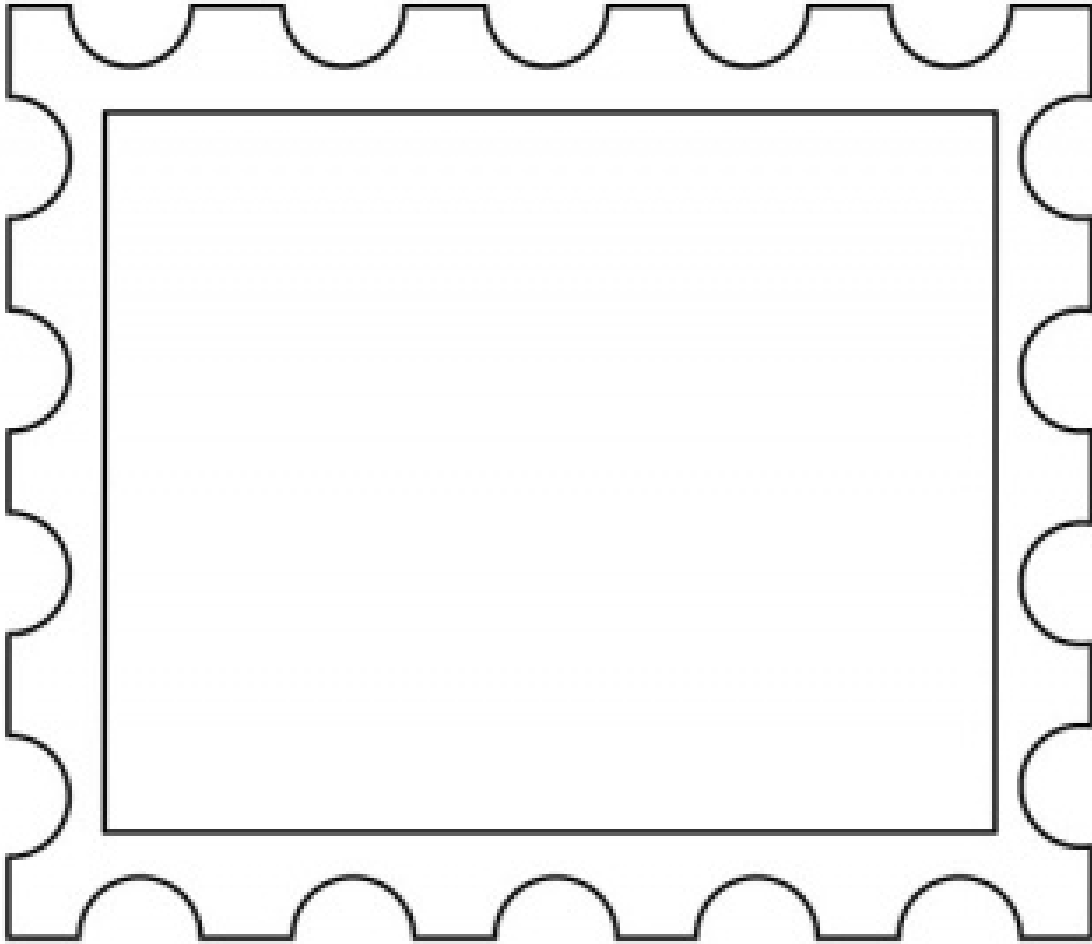
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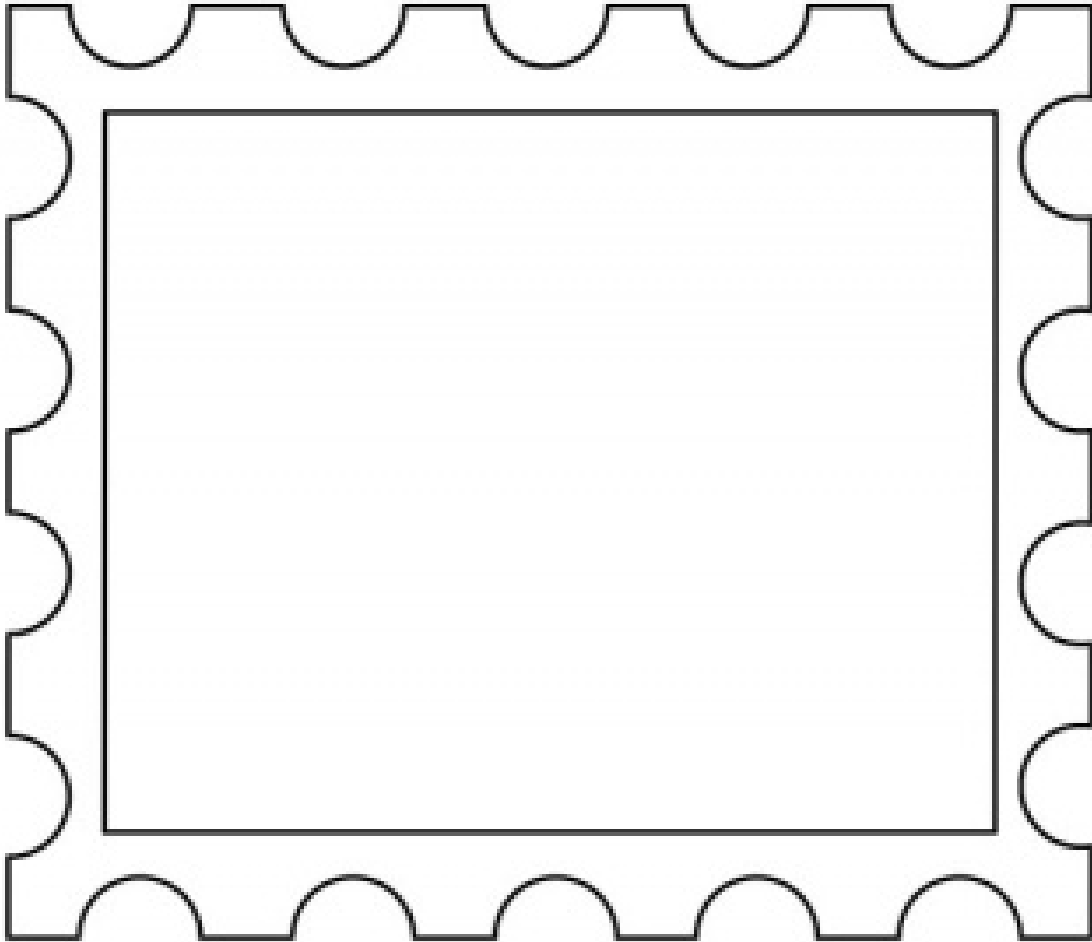
Diane Nash

Design a postage stamp in honor of Diane Nash. Afterwards, provide a brief explanation for why Diane Nash deserves to have a stamp made in her honor.



Diane Nash

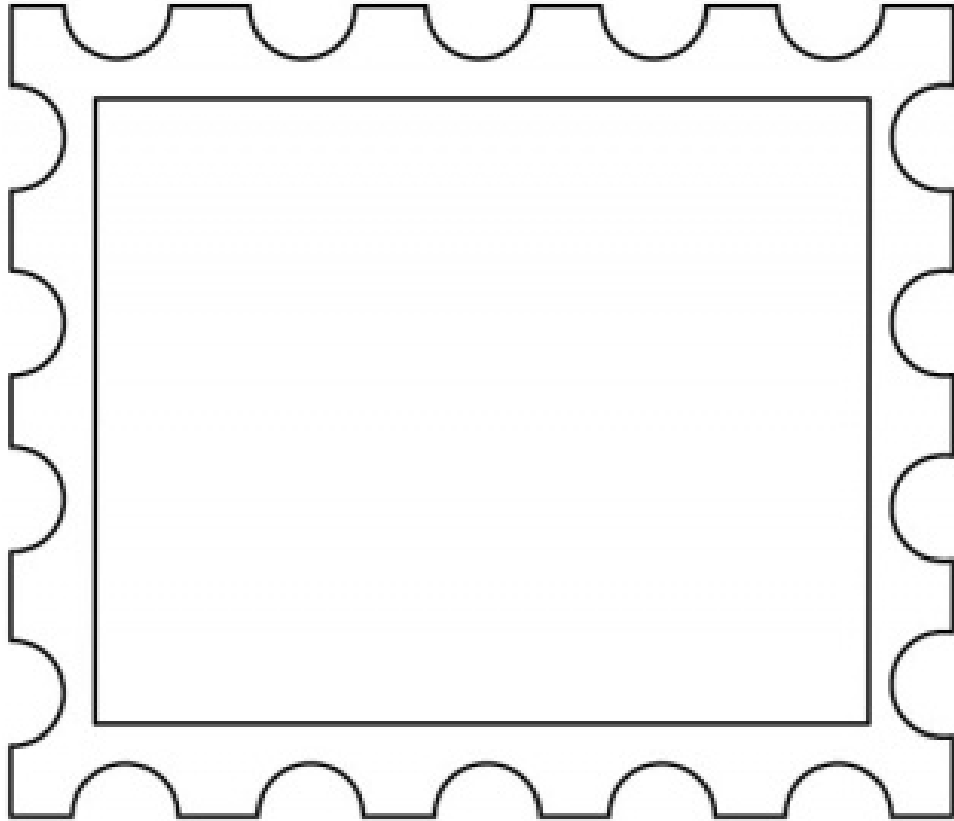
Design a postage stamp in honor of Diane Nash. Afterwards, provide a brief explanation for why Diane Nash deserves to have a stamp made in her honor.



Answers will vary.

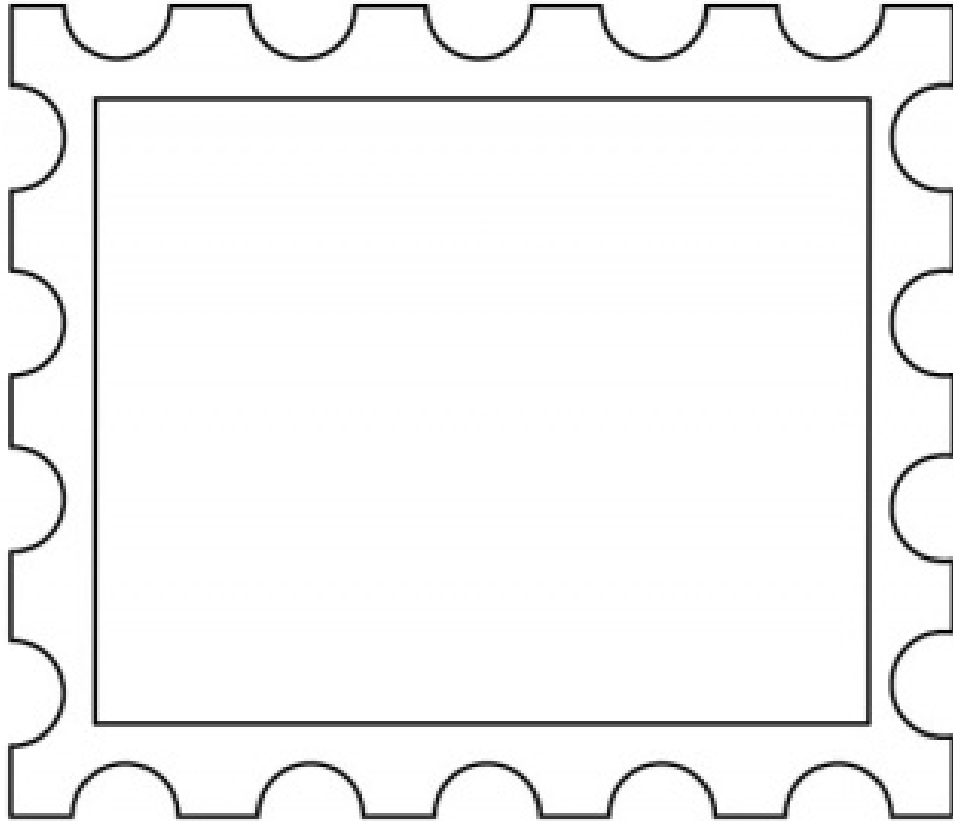
Diane Nash

Design a postage stamp in honor of Diane Nash. Afterwards, write a paragraph explaining why Nash deserves to have a stamp made in her honor. Use the text to provide specific examples of her accomplishments.



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Diane Nash News Article

Years after change, activist lives her convictions

By Heidi Hall, The (Nashville) Tennessean 9:06 p.m. EDT March 26, 2013

Diane Nash spent two days in prayer and meditation before deciding whether her first child would be born in a Mississippi prison.

For her, it was a rare disappearance from public life. She'd spent months coordinating Freedom Rides of buses full of black and white protesters across the South. She'd resisted anyone, including the Kennedy administration, who told her to stop them.

By spring 1962, at age 23, she had long achieved indispensable status in the male-dominated civil rights movement. Her quiet persistence, in fact, had played a critical role in pricking the conscience of Nashville as it became the first Southern city to desegregate lunch counters.

Now, six months pregnant, she faced a 2 1/2-year sentence for contributing to the delinquency of the underage students she'd encouraged to ride on the buses. Or she could fight it.

She re-emerged in the public eye with her convictions intact. "I believe that if I go to jail now," she wrote in an open letter, "it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free — not only on the day of their birth but for all their lives."

Ultimately, the judge sentenced her to 10 days in a Jackson, Miss., jail. She spent her time there washing her only set of clothing in the sink during the day and listening to cockroaches skitter overhead at night.

At age 74, with the world around her as challenging as ever, there's still only one course of action Nash considers — the next right thing. She's precise, principled, honest to the very last word. If that's awkward for some people, so be it. But her innate sense of justice is never far from the surface, and she applies it, as she always has, to every aspect of her life and the world around her.

'Are you colored, dear?'

If anybody raised Nash to be a civil rights leader, it was her maternal grandmother.

Carrie Bolton had been a maid in a white Memphis family's home. She baby-sat her granddaughter until Nash was 7. They lived in Chicago by then, part of the great migration north. Nash said Bolton shaped the family's views on race.

She doted on her pretty, blue-green-eyed granddaughter, saying she was the most precious thing in the world.

"My great-grandmother was a woman of great patience and generosity," said Nash's son, Douglass Bevel. "She loved my mother and told her no one was better than her and made her understand she was a valuable person.

"There's no substitute for unconditional love, and my mother is just really a strong testament to what people who have it are capable of."

Because Bolton believed that older people pass racism along to the young, nobody in the family really talked about it. But that left Nash confused when she encountered prejudice.

There was an innocent 15-year-old's call to a Chicago modeling school. It offered a six-week course in charm — how to walk gracefully, sit properly, put on makeup.

"The man talked to me for a few minutes. Finally, he said, 'Are you colored, dear?' " Nash recalled. "I said, 'I am a Negro.' I let him know I was totally not aware of keeping anything from him. Race was not on my mind.

"He said that their school did not have facilities to accept Negro students."

So it may have seemed odd when Nash decided to go south for college at Fisk University. She arrived in Nashville in 1959, a light-skinned beauty and, her contemporaries say, a shoo-in to be the toast of Fisk's party scene.

Instead, she found herself incensed by what she saw in Nashville, a more open brand of racism than the charm school snub — whites eating lunches at the counters of department stores, blacks allowed to shop but forced to take their lunches to go.

So she was an easy recruit for the Rev. James Lawson's nonviolence workshops. The Vanderbilt divinity school student — later kicked out for his work on the sit-ins — had studied the methods of Mohandas Gandhi and passed the revered leader's principles along in 6 a.m. meetings at Clark Memorial United Methodist Church. The students role-played demonstrators and attackers to prepare themselves for the hatred they would encounter.

Before long, Nash was elected chairwoman of the Nashville movement. That happened almost by default, according to her, but others say her intelligence and work ethic stood out.

It was tough to find women at the forefront of anything then, and much has been written about the infatuation Nash's fellow students felt for her. But she insists gender had nothing to do with her appointment and offers a simpler explanation. The first two chairmen were men who failed to show up for meetings and demonstrations.

"We really couldn't afford to have officers who were not efficient. We thanked them for their services and replaced them," she said. "Someone could get killed or injured. It was something we couldn't afford to do."

The dangers became even more apparent after the bombing of prominent black lawyer Z. Alexander Looby's home on the morning of April 19, 1960. It was a turning point in the Nashville movement as the students decided how to respond.

Nash wanted a prayerful, silent march, remembered John Seigenthaler, who helped direct The Tennessean's civil rights coverage.

A newspaper photograph captured Nash's serene determination that day. In the photo, she leads thousands of students down Jefferson Street to the courthouse steps downtown. She is flanked by C.T. Vivian and Bernard Lafayette, fellow leaders in the movement, but all of the drama is on her face. Wearing an immaculate suit, she cradles a sheaf of folders.

Jaw set, lips thinned, her eyes seem locked on some distant goal.

Mayor Ben West met the marchers on the steps, and her male colleagues braced for an argument over the segregated lunch counters. West fell back on what had become his standard refrain — he'd desegregated the lunch counter at the airport, the only one the city controlled.

Nash stood by, waiting her turn. She calmly led West through a series of questions.

"Mayor," she ultimately asked, "do you recommend that the lunch counters be desegregated?"

West said yes. A few weeks later, with little fanfare, Nashville became the first Southern city where blacks and whites sat together for lunch.

"It was the first time anyone in a leadership position who could make a difference, made a difference," Seigenthaler said.

'Kill us or desegregate'

If the people who hear Nash speak these days listen closely, they can come away with her life-changing point: To be oppressed, you've got to agree to it.

"We presented Southern white racists with a new set of options," she says. "Kill us or desegregate."

To students who packed a University of Tennessee-Martin auditorium to hear her last month, Nash explained how her reasoning works in circumstances as broad as segregation or as personal as marriage. Then comes the moral of the story: "Very often, we give our power away."

Nash's contemporaries, even years removed from contact with her, aren't surprised to hear such things. They fit right in with the code that's guided her life since Fisk.

"Diane and I obviously shared that point of view — eventually you have to make a choice," said Dr. Rodney Powell, a former Meharry Medical College student who joined the movement. Today, he works on civil rights issues for gay Americans. "You can confront an injustice or an evil or decide not to. ... I can see where she continued to apply that in all her philosophical approaches for the rest of her life."

When Nashville's lunch counters began to desegregate, Nash turned her attention to the rest of the South. She dropped out of Fisk after missing more classes than she ever imagined.

Nash helped coordinate Freedom Rides of young people on buses the federal government was supposed to have desegregated. She persisted even after male colleagues wanted to walk away, and even after U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy indicated the students would have administration support if they switched their efforts to voter registration. The Freedom Riders were savagely attacked. Members of the Ku Klux Klan burned a bus in Anniston, Ala.

Seigenthaler, by then a top adviser to Kennedy in the Justice Department, called Nash and tried to persuade her.

"I'm saying, 'You're going to get somebody killed.' She says, 'You don't understand' — and she's right, I didn't understand — 'You don't understand, we signed our wills last night.' "

From the South to Vietnam

That conventional girl who wanted to go to charm school was long gone by the time Nash redirected her attentions from civil rights in the South to the war in Vietnam. For her, saving villagers caught in the crossfire and getting American boys home clearly was the next right thing.

Nash had married a Nashville movement colleague, James Bevel. The two prevailed on Martin Luther King Jr. to oppose the war and worked together on anti-war efforts. Nash traveled overseas with three other American women, stopping in Moscow and Peking before landing in Hanoi for an interview with North Vietnam's president, Ho Chi Minh.

A Jan. 18, 1967, Nashville Banner article described the repercussions of that unauthorized trip — her passport would be revoked. Three days later, The Associated Press quoted Nash as saying U.S. bombings were "deliberately aimed at helpless villages."

Today, Nash's zeal for Barack Obama — America's first black president, elected out of her native Chicago — is tempered by his decision to continue wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"I am glad we have a black president. I think there are many positive things involved with that," she said. "I don't think what needs to be done in this country is going to be done by elected officials. American citizens have to take the country into our own hands, the future of this country, and do what's necessary."

Her marriage ended after seven years. She never remarried. But the marriage produced two children: Sherrilynn, the daughter almost born in prison, and Douglass. Her son lives about a mile from her Chicago apartment. She's advised him on life's most difficult decisions, he said, using the same principles that drove the Freedom Rides and lunch counter sit-ins.

"I feel like I could tell my mother anything," he said. "She's always been open and honest with me, almost to a fault. It's hard to compare my childhood to other people because I've never walked in their shoes. But she is always on 100 percent. Just a rock."

And when Douglass Bevel asks for advice — for anything, really — he has to be ready to hear the answer.

Source: Hall, Heidi. "Years after change, activist lives her convictions." *USA Today.com*

USA Today, 26 March 2013. Web, 23 July 2014.

<<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/26/nashville-civil-rights-diane-nash/2023301/>>