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The Children's Crusade: When the Youth of Birmingham Marched for Justice

Facing a dwindling movement in Alabama, civil rights leaders recruited Black students to revive the march to end segregation.

BY: ALEXIS CLARK

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Toward the end of April 1963, <u>Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.</u> and fellow

leaders in the <u>civil rights movement</u> faced a grim reality in Birmingham, Alabama. With diminished support and fewer volunteers, their campaign to end segregationist policies was teetering on failure. But when an unorthodox plan to recruit Black children to march was implemented, the movement reversed itself, reinvigorating the fight for racial equality, in what became known as the Children's Crusade.

King had traveled to Birmingham in the spring of 1963, along with Southern Christian Leadership Conference co-founder Rev. Ralph Abernathy, hoping to shore up resistance against segregation in the state. The pair partnered with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, a local civil rights organization led by Fred Shuttlesworth, a prominent minister and activist.

But the Alabama movement was fresh off a failed attempt to end segregation in Albany, Georgia. Overall, fewer people were attending meetings, sit-ins and marches. After King was arrested and confined to a jail cell, where he wrote his famous work, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, he knew, along with other activists, that a new strategy was essential if the campaign were to succeed.

"The number of adults who were willing to volunteer, to get arrested, had steadily dwindled those last two weeks of April and it looked like the movement was about to fall apart," says <u>Glenn Eskew</u>, a history professor at Georgia State University and author of the 1997 <u>book</u>, But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle.

Recruiting Children to the Cause

James Bevel, a member of SCLC, came up with an idea to include schoolage children in protests to help desegregate Birmingham. The strategy involved recruiting popular teenagers from Black high schools, such as the quarterbacks and cheerleaders, who could influence their classmates to attend meetings with them at Black churches in Birmingham to learn about the non-violent movement. There was also an economic reason to have children participate since adults risked being fired from their jobs for missing work and protesting.

Janice Kelsey was 15 when she attended her first meeting for the Children's Crusade. "I knew what segregation was and separation, but I didn't understand the extent or the level of the inequities in that separation," recalls Kelsey, a Birmingham native who wrote about her experience in the movement in her 2017 memoir, I Woke Up with my Mind on Freedom.

Bevel posed questions to the students who discovered that hand-medown books and football helmets were not what white students used. Nor was there just one typewriter in the entire school, like Black students had, but rooms with typewriters at the white schools, says Kelsey. "Things like that became personal to me and I decided I wanted to do something about it," she says.

King, along with other activists and members in the Black community were adamantly opposed to involving children in marches because of the threats to violence from white mobs, as well as from policemen led by Eugene "Bull" Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham notorious for his racist policies.

Bevel, undeterred, told the children to gather at 16th Street Baptist Church on May 2, 1963. More than 1,000 students skipped school to

participate in the protest. The youth, ranging from ages 7-18, held picket signs and marched in groups of 10 to 50, singing freedom songs.

"We were told what to expect," says Kelsey. "We even saw some film strips of people who had sat at lunch counters and were spit on and pushed and all that. We were told that if you decide to participate that this is a nonviolent movement, so you can't fight back."

Nonviolent Student Demonstrators Faced Hosing, Arrests

The demonstrators had several destinations: some went to City Hall, others went to lunch counters or the downtown shopping district. They marched daily for almost a week.

"It was well thought out," says Vicki Crawford, director of the Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection. "It was not just a bunch of people calling up to meet downtown. There was mobilization and organization, following King's Six Steps of Non-Violence to bring about social change."

As the children bravely took to the streets, the Birmingham police were waiting to arrest them, putting them in paddy wagons and school buses. Kelsey says she was arrested on her first day marching and remained in jail for four days.

The sight of young people peacefully protesting reinvigorated the Birmingham movement and throngs of people started attending

meetings again and joining the demonstration. King changed his mind as well about the effectiveness of the Children's Crusade. Although the police were mostly restrained the first day, that did not continue. Law enforcement brought out water hoses and police dogs.

Television crews and newspapers filmed the young demonstrators getting arrested and hosed down by the Birmingham police, causing national outrage. More than 2,000 children were reportedly arrested during the days-long protest.

"They had locked up as many people as they could possibly lock up, and they couldn't control it anymore. And that's what broke the back of segregation," says Eskew. "A civil order collapsed because there weren't enough police. "

Children Became 'Catalyst for Change'

When influential white businessmen and city officials saw the business district swarming with demonstrators, in addition to President John F. Kennedy demanding a resolution and sending assistant attorney general Burke Marshall to Birmingham to facilitate negotiations, white city leaders called a meeting with King. An agreement was made to desegregate lunch counters, businesses and restrooms and improve hiring opportunities for Black people in Birmingham.

"I think we served as a catalyst for change," says Kelsey.

Improvements hardly happened overnight in Birmingham. In September 1963, the Ku Klux Klan <u>bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church</u>, killing

four Black girls. Yet, the civil rights movement kept up the momentum, and the following year, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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