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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. 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:

Do not:

- Strike back or curse if abused
- Laugh out loud
- 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

Do

- Be friendly and courteous at all times
- 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>.

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Primary Sources including images, texts, and interviews may be found at the Nashville Public Library by contacting:

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The Nashville Sit-Ins

Use the text to address the following questions.

1. Why were the sit-ins organized?

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

The Nashville Sit-Ins Use the text to address the following questions.

1. Why were the sit-ins organized?

To desegregate lunch counters in downtown stores.

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

Answers will vary

The Nashville Sit-Ins

Use the text to address the following questions.

1. What is the historical context of the sit-ins? Why were the sit-ins organized? What did the protesters hope to accomplish?

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

The Nashville Sit-Ins

Use the text to address the following questions.

1. What is the historical context of the sit-ins? Why were the sit-ins organized? What did the protesters hope to accomplish?

Sitins occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. Sit-ins were organized to stop segregation of store lunch counters. They were planned to disrupt the Easter shopping season.

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

Answers will vary.

Nashville Sit-ins

The Reverend C. T. Vivian served in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), one of the leading organizations of the Civil Rights movement. Vivian's career as a civil rights activist began in 1958, when he helped found the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), a local affiliate of the SCLC. In 1959, Vivian, the NCLC, and other activists engaged in sit-ins and boycotts that lasted for three months -- until in May 1960, Nashville city officials responded by integrating public facilities. The following excerpt is from an interview for Eyes on the Prize, the landmark documentary on the Civil Rights Movement.

INTERVIEWER: FROM 1956 TO 1960, WHAT WAS THE STRATEGY OF THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH?

Vivian: Well, the idea was to understand the power of nonviolent direct action, as it had been proven in Montgomery. Now, how do you keep that alive, how do you make it real, how do you encourage other places to move? See what I mean? Those were the first steps. And those were its goals--understood Montgomery as the spearhead of a great nonviolent movement that could begin to eradicate apartheid...

...and of course the main thing to move on was that where the greatest indignities were felt, and that was in public accommodations, and there is no greater indignity beyond the buses themselves you see, where you had to go to the back and people would drive away without you, take your money, or you could be arrested etcetera -- having to get up, all those things. But the next thing was the matter of the lunch counters, because you couldn't eat downtown, your wife, your children, you, all right? You were always watching other people be able to appreciate the natural consequences of a democratic society, and you were not able to participate. Your money meant nothing.

...When Jim Lawson came to the city, he began to organize students, alright? And most important to that, for both students and ministers, was that we had workshops, and the workshops on nonviolence made the difference. We began to, first, understand the theory, understand the philosophy behind it, the great religious imperatives that were important in terms of understanding people. Then finally, the tactics, then finally the techniques, how to in fact, begin to take the blows--cigarettes put out on you, the fact that you were being spit on--and still, still respond with some sense of dignity and with a loving concept of what you were about, to be hit and to be knocked down, and, to understand that in terms of struggle, and in terms of reaching conscience, in terms, of gaining the greater goals for which are sought. Now we actually beat people to the ground, we actually poured coffee on people, we actually kicked chairs out from under them, all right? Came on them in a crowded situation, so they could begin to get used to it: how did they respond? So they could begin to understand--respond, not in terms of verbiage but in terms of actuality. You see, it's in the action that ethics [sic] is tested. And this is one of the great learnings of nonviolent movement.

I think it has to be seen, that every black person, with rare exception, has one agenda, and that's how to get rid of racism, because that's the central problem of our lives. Now, if there is some means whereby that that can be done, then, let's take a look at it, how do

you do it?, Is it possible? Will it be effective? If so, how effective? All right? What do you have to do then? And, those are the kinds of questions that we all wanted to answer.

INTERVIEWER: SO TELL ME WHAT EFFECT THE ACTUAL SIT-INS HAD THE FIRST WEEK?

Vivian: We had our workshops, had recruited a number of students, those students were going back into their dormitories, the ministers were going into their churches., Now, the thing that was important., as part of all that, we began to have meetings with the merchants downtown, perfect nonviolent movement, going through the process, all right? As we began to hear from them both negative and positively, we began to find within that group those who were adamant and who might not be under a different set of circumstances. We began to then stand in to see where we'd be refused because that's a part of it, you had to be refused. Now, as we were refused, more and more people began to understand something can be done about this, and something should be. Remember, this is all backed up by the movement that was going on everywhere.

...Then as, as it exploded and they put people in jail, that's when things really moved, right? Because people came forward to put up their houses as bail, a mass meeting started on a large scale, people flooded and filled the churches, whatever church we would be in....

...we'd already interpreted--you see--jail as quite a different experience. Instead of being a stig- ma, it became a badge of courage. It became, the means whereby that you could be liberated and free, or that one had to pass through the jails into a promised land, that the society had to be turned upside down, to be turned right side up, the new definition. Now, parents, of course, of these students, everywhere, had different reactions. Many of the parents were afraid many of the parents, thought that their children's lives would be destroyed forever because of what would be on their record many telephone calls were coming from everywhere pressure was on, on the colleges, in particular, on the presidents and the vice-presidents and staff and etcetera. There was pressure everywhere. But students made up their minds what they were going to do. It was a great point of their own development and decision-making for their lives.

INTERVIEWER: ONE REPORTER OF THE [NASHVILLE] TENNESSEEN DESCRIBED THE SCENE AT WOOLWORTHS AS A SLOW, BUILDUP OF HATE BY THE CROWD AT HEADQUARTERS, CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE OPPOSTION?

Vivian: Sure. The students were prepared in Nashville to go in and sit in the lunch counters. They came down the street grouped together, they came in, they waited in line for their chance to sit at the counters. They began to sit on the counters, as they began to sit on the counters, people began to leave or stiffen. Occasionally, someone would smile because--you know, they really were shocked but, but thankful. You had all of this, but by-and large it was a buildup of the opposition, a buildup of disdain, but not knowing what to do. And the normal southern thing was simply to attack. And it was to beat any black. And more and more blacks came in and sat down at the counters. The waiters, waitresses didn't know what to do, the management didn't know what to do, right? They eventually closed the lunch counters at first, trying to avoid it. We came back

day after day, but then the opposition began to get ready for us, too. The young thug types in town, the Klan types in the city, all right, began to also come into the lunch counters where we would be, and that's when our training proved to be most helpful, because they began to attack, put out cigarettes on people, jerk people off of their stools and beat them and et cetera, pour things on people, right? Our students were ready and they sat there and they were prepared for it. Of course, that brought on the police when we were not defeated by it, then the police came in, naturally the police were on the other side.... The police knew that they represented the city, they represented the merchants, they represented the thugs more than they represented us, yet--and here again is the importance of nonviolence--they did not want to appear too demanding, too brutal, They wanted to stop us, but when we would not stop, then they had to begin to work on the thugs, because the thugs will bring out the worst of segregation in a racist society, that it even shames the people who are themselves racists and who keep the system going. And they were caught in that dilemma and they were waiting for their orders from the businessmen, the businessmen were caught, they did not quite know what to do. And they thought, however, that they could beat us down--if the police and the thugs both moved on us, things would change. The police left, the way the police did it was by being passive and allow us to be beaten, right? And then they would come in at the end and push the others back and arrest us, all right? So that it was the victim being arrested. And they figured that would stop it, but that only intensified it, because the whole city could see, black and white, but whites were passive, though they didn't like it. Blacks, on the other hand, were not passive at all, but very active in relationship to what was happening. As a result, they came to our support and the mass meetings grew larger and larger, the support became, more meaningful, more people came forward to mortgage their homes to pay for bail and et cetera.

INTERVIEWER: A LOT OF PEOPLE SAY THE BOYCOTT GENERATED A LOT OF FEAR IN THE CITY, THAT YOU KNOW, THE MOVEMENT WAS REALLY CALLING THE SHOTS. HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THAT?

Vivian: The demonstrations created in many white people, a fear of what was possible if blacks united. Naturally because of their own racism, they were afraid of anything that blacks did because they were oppressors, they were always afraid of the oppressed, all right, which created a dynamic in the city. But you see, here's where nonviolence saves us again, because no matter what they said, the oppressed were moving against the oppression with nothing in their hands with which to destroy, but something in their heart for a new relationship, right? So, because there was nothing in our hands, they could not then react to us in the ways that the old South normally did. They either had to accept this new loving black man and woman, or in fact, reject themselves. Now, they were caught in that kind of dilemma. Black people on the other hand, had found a method whereby they could rejoice and yet not have any attempt to destroy the other, but only open up the society fully to everyone.

The march in Nashville, Tennessee, was by the way, the first march of the movement ever, and it was a turning point. It was what in many ways, we'd been leading to without knowing it. It was--it would decide a good deal of all the negotiations... Ministers were there, and students were there, people gathered all out in front. There were some four thousand people there: the first march of the movement. We didn't know how it was going to come out...and the mayor was listening. I remember very clearly that the mayor,

I felt that the mayor wanted to answer with the normal political talk. The question came: “Are you against the segregation? Are you for what is happening in this city?”

Yes, those were the kinds of questions asked. He looked out across that expanse of four thousand people that had covered the street in front of the plaza, as well as the plaza. He looks in the other direction and people in fact were still coming on the plaza, and we did not know that at the time, all right? And he said: “No, no. I’m not for it.”

When Ben West then worked with them, it gave the new initiative that was needed, and that new initiative allowed City Council to make that move. And within a week, exactly a week to the day, every, all the lunch counters in that city were open.

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