

The Children's Crusade

"My mother told me I had to serve my time," said Anita Woods, a twelve year-old girl arrested for demonstrating against racial segregation in Birmingham. When asked if she wanted to go home she replied, "Yes! But I'd do it again. I'll keep on marching till I get freedom (1)."

In 1963 the campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama, generated national publicity and federal action because of the particularly violent response by segregationists and the decision to use children in the campaign.

On 20 April, eight days after his arrest, Martin Luther King, Jr. was released from Birmingham jail only to find that the demonstrations were losing support. "We needed more troops," Wyatt T. Walker later recalled. "We had scraped the bottom of the barrel of adults who would go [to jail]." SCLC staff member James Bevel, a participant in the Nashville sit-in movement, initiated the idea of using children in the demonstrations. Bevel argued that while many adults may be reluctant to participate in the demonstrations for fear of losing their jobs, children had less to lose. King had reservations about the use of children, but after some deliberation he agreed, hoping for the action to "subpoena the conscience of the nation to the judgment seat of morality." Members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) immediately began canvassing local schools for volunteers.

On 2 May, hundreds of students – many carrying blankets, toothbrushes and school books – skipped their classes and came ready to demonstrate. The first group of young students - one just six years old- emerged from Sixteenth Street Baptist Church carrying signs and singing freedom songs. Onlookers cheered as the children approached police lines. A bewildered policeman asked Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth how many more child protesters were involved. "At least a thousand," he replied, eliciting a "God Ah'mighty" from the policeman (2).

Large numbers of students were arrested; and when police ran out of paddy wagons, school buses were used to carry the children away. The laughing and singing youngsters offered no resistance to arrest. While some participants ran when police approached, most of the marchers fell to their knees and prayed. At the end of the day, over 900 children were taken away to Birmingham jails. As the jails overflowed, James Bevel and Andrew Young discouraged parents from posting bail.

The next evening King delivered a speech at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, offering encouragement to the parents of the young protesters: "Don't worry about your children; they are going to be alright. Don't hold them back if they want to go to jail, for they are not only doing a job for themselves, but for all of America and for all of mankind (3)."

King was criticized for using children in the demonstrations. One of the most vocal criticisms came from Malcolm X who stated, "Real men don't put their children on the firing line (4)." King responded by saying that the demonstrations allowed children to develop "a sense of their own stake in freedom and justice."

Despite threats of suspension and expulsion from principals and the school superintendent, students returned on 3 May to continue the demonstration. Police barricaded the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where the black students had assembled; and when the students tried to leave the church; they were blasted with fire hoses and attacked by dogs. Two girls ran through the park in just their slips – their outer clothing ripped off by the fire hoses. Several others had their shirts torn off by the water.

The next day newspapers around the country carried shocking images of the violence taking place in Birmingham. Pictures of children being attacked by dogs, of fire hoses knocking bodies into the street and up against buildings, and of women being beaten by policemen, helped awaken the "moral conscience of the nation." On 10 May, an agreement was announced resulting in the desegregation of many of Birmingham's public facilities.

The Birmingham campaign was the largest of several mass protest movements in 1963, that culminated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The success in Birmingham, according to King, could largely be attributed to the thousands of young people who participated and affirmed a personal commitment to justice. The Birmingham Campaign helped pave the way for the passage of the most significant civil rights legislation of the 1960s: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Endnotes

1. Philip Benjamin, "Negro Girls Define 'Freedom' From Cell in Birmingham Jail." *New York Times*. May 9, 1963, 17.
2. Diane McWhorter. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 367.
3. King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Address Delivered at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church," May 3, 1963.
4. M.S. Handler, "Malcolm X Terms Dr. King's Tactics Futile." *New York Times*. May 11, 1963, 9.