Nashville students sit-in for U.S. civil rights, 1960

13 February 1960 to May 1960

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Nashville, Tennessee
Location Description: eating establishments, drug stores, department stores, bus terminals, variety stores
Goals:
To integrate eating establishments in Nashville.
To "push the fight for Negro rights beyond the purely legal area and into the field of what they call moral rights, which they say include the common amenities of life, about which white people scarcely stop to think" (Taken from “Negroes in Nashville Trained to Maintain Passive Resistance”)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

• 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 162. Sit-in

Methods in 4th segment:

• 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

• 020. Prayer and worship
• 038. Marches
• 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:
• 162. Sit-in

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 037. Singing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 071. Consumers' boycott

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Diane Nash, John Lewis, and James M. Lawson, Jr.

Nashville Student Movement

Partners:
SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), NCLC (National Christian Leadership Conference), Z. Alexander Looby

External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Diane Nash
• James M. Lawson Jr.
• John Lewis
• NCLC

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: Approximately 15 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Nashville store owners, Mayor Ben West

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
There was one-sided violence from sit-in opponents towards the protestors. They also bombed the house of Z. Alexander Looby, the defense attorney for the sit-in protesters.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The campaign was successful in the desegregation of lunch counters in Nashville. They were also able to desegregate other establishments in the city.

The students remained unified throughout the campaign, and other organizations such as SNCC and NCLC not only remained intact, but grew both during and after the campaign.

The campaign started with 40 students in the first sit-in, and grew to over 2,500 supporters by the end of the campaign.

Starting in February of 1960, students began sit-ins in various stores in Nashville, Tennessee, with the goal of desegregation at lunch counters. Students from Fisk University, Baptist Theological Seminary, and Tennessee State University, mainly led by Diane Nash and John Lewis, began the campaign that became a successful component of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and was influential in later campaigns.

On February 13, 1960, twelve days after the Greensboro sit-in (see “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”), students in Nashville entered Kress, Woolworth, and McClellan stores at 12:40 pm. After making purchases, the students sat at the lunch counters; two hours later, the owners closed the counters without serving any of the students. Storeowners claimed that it was a “moral right” to decide whom they would or would not serve to. During the next three months the sit-ins continued, not only at the three stores initially targeted but also at the Greyhound and Trailways bus terminals, a Grant’s variety store, a Walgreens drugstore, and major Nashville department stores Cain-Sloan and Harvey.
The first violent responses from the opposition occurred on February 27, which Jim Lawson, Jr., another leader of the campaign, called “Big Saturday.” A group of agitators attacked the sit-in, resulting in the arrest of eighty-one protesters and zero white opponents. The protesters were found guilty of disorderly conduct, for which they decided to serve time in jail rather than pay the fines. “Big Saturday” also resulted in Lawson’s expulsion from Vanderbilt University. Expulsion was a major threat for many of the participants in the sit-ins; however, the prospects of what the successful campaign would bring to African-Americans outweighed the risks. To further emphasize the importance of the protests, campaign leader Diane Nash said, “I want a good America and I want that just a little bit more than a college degree.”

In an attempt to mediate between the storeowners and the protesters, Mayor Ben West appointed a biracial committee to investigate segregation in the city. However, despite numerous attempts at a compromise, the students declared that they would accept nothing less than the acknowledgement of their rights to sit at the store lunch counters along with white customers. On April 5, the committee suggested that the counters be divided into black and white sections. The National Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), which acted on behalf of the Nashville Student Movement, rejected the proposal, thus resulting in a standoff.

Although sit-ins were the main form of nonviolent action, singing became an influential mode of protest as the campaign continued. Freedom singers began creating songs based on traditional black spirituals, changing the words as necessary to “reflect the daily confrontations and ideological principles of the movement.” Young protesters used these songs to form a positive new cultural identity for blacks. Singing was also one of the main ways in which SNCC fostered grass-roots leadership.

There was finally a drastic turning point when a bomb destroyed the home of Z. Alexander Looby, the defense attorney for the protestors, on April 19. This event triggered a mass march to City Hall, where the students held a prayer session and demanded answers from Mayor West. The mayor, who had previously disliked the students in charge of the sit-ins because of the resulting damage to the business owners in Nashville, changed his opinion after the increasingly violent attacks from white agitators. During his response to the crowd of over 2,500 protestors, West said, “I appeal to all citizens to end discrimination, to have no bigotry, no bias, no discrimination,” which was received with cheering and applause. The next day, the headline of the Nashville Tennessean read, “Mayor Says Integrate Counters,” and within three weeks stores began to desegregate their lunch counters.

Nashville was the first major southern city to desegregate public facilities, and the campaign was used as an example for future civil rights campaigns, especially student-run. Although there was negativity and opposition throughout most of the campaign, there was also support from a variety of sources, including Southern press. In the Virginia-Norfolk Journal and Guide Gordon B. Hancock wrote, “Nothing would be more disastrous than a cessation of protest against the unchristian and the undemocratic. These sit-down students have been taught in our great American history that resistance to tyranny is honorable and righteous…” Student groups also made an influential debut into the fight for desegregation. Previously in the background of the movement, the students had emerged as new leaders; they introduced new nonviolent approaches to achieving integration, for, in their opinion, they had nothing to lose.

Research Notes

Influences:
The Nashville sit-ins were influenced by the Greensboro sit-ins in North Carolina (see "Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960"). (1)

The sit-ins played a pivotal role in the Shaw University sit-ins, and were used as models in other desegregation actions. (2)

Sources: