



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Oklahoma City African Americans sit-in for integration, 1958-64

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

19 August

1958

to: 4 July

1964

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Oklahoma City*

**Goals:**

Desegregation of Oklahoma City lunch counters, businesses, and public spaces

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

### **Methods in 6th segment:**

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

### **Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 038. Marches

## **Classifications**

### **Classification:**

Change

### **Cluster:**

Democracy

Human Rights

### **Group characterization:**

- African American students

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

### **Leaders:**

Director of the NAACP Youth Council Clara Luper; students in the NAACP Youth Council

### **Partners:**

Attorney E. Melvin Porter, president of the Oklahoma City NAACP

### **External allies:**

General Board of the Oklahoma Council of Churches, Charlton Heston (Hollywood actor), Dr. Jolly West (nationally-known psychiatrist), Dr. Chester M. Pierce, (black scientist on the staff of the Veterans' Administration Hospital)

### **Involvement of social elites:**

See External allies

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

### **Groups in 1st Segment:**

- NAACP Youth Council Members

### **Groups in 2nd Segment:**

### **Groups in 3rd Segment:**

### **Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Charlton Heston
- Chester M. Pierce
- Jolly West

### **Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:****Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

Many in the black community, as well as church-going whites, were actively involved in the sit-in campaign and attended protests against segregation. The specific dates of their involvement could not be found.

**Segment Length:** *One Year*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Oklahoma City's segregated businesses

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Refusing Service, locking protesters into the establishment for a duration of several hours

**Campaigner violence:**

None known

**Repressive Violence:**

Extensive verbal abuse, threats directed at members of the Youth Council, anonymous phone threats directed at Clara Luper

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

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In 1955, just one year after the Supreme Court issued its pivotal *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the country was again shaken by the Montgomery Bus Boycotts (see “African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956”). The campaign, which targeted the city’s practice of segregation on public transportation, brought leaders such as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., into the national spotlight. The emergence of King in particular gave the civil rights movement a new momentum, as blacks across America integrated King’s nonviolent philosophy into their local campaigns. King’s emphasis on civil disobedience gave new direction to those who had been involved in past efforts against racism.

One such activist was Clara Luper, a local schoolteacher and director of the local NAACP Youth Council who became the face of Oklahoma City’s sit-in campaign. Three years after King’s success in Montgomery, Luper organized a cast of high school students to perform a play entitled “Brother President,” a tribute to Martin Luther King. The group was later asked to perform the play for the NAACP’s national office in New York City. The trip was an eye-opening experience for the students, most of whom had never been outside the limits of Oklahoma City. According to Luper’s account, their exposure to integrated lunch counters in the north had a “permanent effect in their lives.” Upon their return to Oklahoma, the group made a pledge to eliminate segregation in public accommodations across the city.

Segregation had long been ingrained in Oklahoma’s culture. Like other states across the country, the ubiquitous “Whites Only” signs were a constant reminder to blacks of their inferior status. Luper felt that legal action alone would not change such a pattern, favoring peaceful sit-ins as a way to confront the problem head-on. She also recognized the strategic value in targeting Oklahoma City: not only did the city have the highest concentration of blacks in the state, but it was also a political center of power and had a history of struggle for racial justice.

For the campaign's initial phases, the Youth Council decided to target downtown restaurants. They staged their first sit-in at a Katz drug store. On August 19th, thirteen black children entered the store, accompanied by Luper. They sat quietly at the lunch counter and ordered their Cokes. When they were refused service, they continued to sit in silence as the surrounding white customers unleashed a wave of threats and racial slurs. The manager called the police, who arrived and hovered over the children as the crowd of hecklers grew in size. The same scene was repeated again the next day, and although the sit-in never escalated into violence, the threats became increasingly hostile. Eventually, after a few days, the company relented and changed its policy.

One by one, the Youth Council used this tactic to force integration in a number of downtown restaurants over the next six years. Some establishments, such as S.H. Kress Company, yielded after less than a week. Others restaurants such as Bishop's and Anna Maude's waged much longer battles.

The group's initial victories in Oklahoma City triggered a wave of similar protests in cities throughout the state, although the media remained disproportionately focused on Oklahoma City. The media attention allowed Luper to take bolder action and apply more pressure on targeted businesses. Although the group continued with sit-ins, they also organized consumer boycotts of various downtown restaurants. In her memoir *Behold the Walls*, Luper recalls the experience of calling a restaurant owner to talk about changing the restaurant's discriminatory practices. Year after year, each time Luper called she was told that the owner was unavailable. It wasn't until she organized a boycott of the restaurant that she got an urgent call from the owner, who requested her presence for negotiations.

Over the course of their campaign, the Youth Council attracted support from members of the black community as well as many whites in the religious community. Important community leaders such as Father Robert Mc Dole of the Corpus Catholic church threw their weight behind the sit-in campaign and condemned the practice of segregation.

The desegregation campaign was brought to a formal close in 1964, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Bill that effectively outlawed discrimination in most public accommodations. Although there were no explicitly violent confrontations in Oklahoma City in the early years after the act was passed, the relative peace did not mean that all whites immediately embraced the law. Although attitude change would take many years to achieve, the integration of businesses throughout Oklahoma City meant that the Youth Council's dreams had been realized.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

Student members of the Youth Council were very much inspired by the philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr and the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott (see "African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956")(1). The initial sit-in in Oklahoma City set off a wave of similar demonstrations throughout the state.

### Sources:

Online Sources:

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<http://www.blackoklahoman.com/archives/874>

Books:

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Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman, 1982)

Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

Davis D. Joyce, ed., *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before: Alternative Views of Oklahoma History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

Journal:

Chester M. Pierce and Louis Jolyon West, "Six Years of Sit-Ins: Psychodynamic Causes and Effects," *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol. XII (Winter 1966).

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Carmen Smith-Estrada, 12/09/2011

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