



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Wichita students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1958

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

July 19,

1958

to: August 11,

1958

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Wichita, Kansas*

Location Description: *Dockum's Drug Store lunch counters*

Goals:

Ending discriminatory practices of segregated lunch counters at the Dockum's Drug Store.

Although Ronald Walters wrote in 1993 that the goal was to “protest against lunch counter segregation,” the specifics of the students’ goal are vague. The lack of press attention given to the sit-in makes it difficult to find explicit goals given at the time. Therefore, it is assumed that, while the students wished to send a strong message to all businesses practicing discrimination like Dockum’s Drug Store, the main target was specifically Dockum’s Drug Store.

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

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- African American students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Chester Lewis (President of the local NAACP branch), Ronald Walters (President of Wichita chapter of the NAACP Youth Council)

Partners:

Wichita branch of the NAACP

External allies:

Local churches, black-owned media outlets and some white-owned (TV, radio, and print), white students

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Members of the NAACP Youth Council

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Other African-American high school and college students
- White students

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 4 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Dockum's Drug Store owners

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Some African-American students arrived with knives and other weapons to counter a group of possibly violent Caucasian youths who intimidated the students sitting-in, but violence never occurred.

Repressive Violence:

Although violence never occurred, there was one tense situation where a group of Caucasian youths attempted to intimidate the students sitting-in, but stopped short of violence when a group of African-American students arrived to counter them, some holding knives.

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

Notes on outcomes:

Original goal of desegregation of lunch counters in Dockum's Drug Stores was realized; eventually the parent company (Rexel) desegregated all stores nationwide.

The isolated nature of this campaign makes it difficult to establish direct causality of growth of the organization. Although it resulted in the NAACP accepting sit-ins as a strategy, it only resulted in a small increase in membership at the local level.

The NAACP youth group and local branch continued to operate in Wichita after the Dockum's Drug Store sit-ins.

Race relations in the United States had been tense for decades before the 1950s. The tension was especially obvious in the political, economic, and social realm where African-Americans were unable to vote in many states, had previously been considered property by white Americans, and were frequently segregated in restaurants, libraries, movie theatres, or almost any place where African-Americans might interact with whites.

Students began organizing sit-ins in Wichita in 1956 with the attempt to desegregate movie theatres and lunch counters that had previously been "whites only." Although these early sit-ins failed, they laid the groundwork for the Dockum's Drug Store sit-in in 1958, which academics later recognized as the first successful sit-in of the civil rights movement.

In June of 1956, the Wichita National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council began planning a sustained sit-in at Dockum's Drug Store with the goal of being served at the "whites only" lunch counter. Ronald Walters, the organizing student and President of the Youth Council, believed that they could prevent Dockum's from making money by filling all the seats and, consequently, force them to begin serving African-Americans too. The students then presented their plan to Chester Lewis, the president of the local branch of the NAACP and a prominent civil rights lawyer in Wichita.

Lewis became their primary mentor in the endeavor and proceeded to present the students' plans to the executive committee of the local branch of the NAACP. Although the Youth Council did not receive immediate support from the local NAACP, the Wichita NAACP would rally behind them later as the effectiveness of the sit-in became more apparent.

Before the sit-in began, the students recruited others from the local high school and university to ensure they could fill all of the seats at the counter on a rotating basis. In addition, they held training sessions in the basement of a local church during which they role-played to anticipate possible harassment or other potentially dangerous situations.

However, a couple of days before the planned start of the sit-ins, the students received a telegram from the NAACP national headquarters informing them that the NAACP did not support the tactic of a sit-in and, consequently, could not support them legally or otherwise. However, Lewis offered his own legal support should anything happen to the students. The students decided to proceed.

Ten students began the sit-in on the morning of July 19, 1958 by entering Dockum's one-by-one and filling the seats gradually. An integral part of the sit-in was the manner in which the students conducted themselves; they wore clothing typically reserved for church, sat facing forward the entire time without leaning on the table, did not read or otherwise preoccupy themselves, and only spoke in response to Dockum's employees. This was done to make their sit-in appear professional, to prevent the students from being labeled loiterers, and to ensure the police had no reason to kick the students out or arrest them. At first, the students only ran the sit-in two days per week, but as word of the sit-in spread, they were eventually able to fill the seats several days of the week. Even some white students from the local university participated in the sit-ins.

By taking short shifts (30 minutes to 2 hours) and constantly rotating in new people, the students were essentially able to shut down Dockum's to business. A concurrent boycott of all Wichita Dockum's Drug Stores (of which there were nine) by the African-American community resulted in a substantial decrease in business for the drug store. During the first couple of weeks, the students received some coverage by local radio stations, TV channels, and black-owned newspapers, but only received a small article in the Wichita Beacon and nothing in the Wichita Eagle (the two leading newspapers in Wichita). Unfortunately, most of this original coverage has been lost.

Despite the students' well-mannered approach, there were several instances of intimidation by white patrons, waiting staff and managers, police officers, and white youths. At one point, a group of white motorcycle gang members entered Dockum's with the apparent intent to escalate the situation to violence. Even though the police arrived, one of the officers told the manager of Dockum's, "I have orders to keep our hands off of this" and promptly left. This demonstrated the refusal of the enforcement agency to protect the African-American students should violence occur.

Shortly thereafter, a group of black youths arrived at Dockum's in response to a request for assistance from the students participating in the sit-in. As a result, the white gang quickly left to avoid a confrontation. Although there was never an outbreak of violence, some students (including Walters) reported that the black youths brought clubs, a pistol, and some knives to this encounter.

However, the students' peaceful and professional composure allowed them to remain within the law and, consequently, to continue the sit-in despite insistence from Dockum's employees that they leave. Other than one day where the students called off their sit-in early to avoid a confrontation, it appears that the sit-in proceeded according to plan.

On August 11, 1958, 23 days after the first day of the sit-in, the storeowner acquiesced to the students' demands and ordered the manager to serve them, citing the financial burden the sit-in caused as the reason. Lewis later confirmed with the vice-president of the drug store chain that the new policy of serving African-Americans alongside whites was in place for the entire chain. The integration of Dockum's occurred without reported problems and there is no evidence that Dockum's suffered financially from the integration.

Following their success, the NAACP Youth Council organized additional sit-ins targeted at other local drugstores and quickly desegregated many of the lunch counters throughout Wichita and inspired other students to use the same tactics in other Kansas

cities. Outside of Kansas, the NAACP's adopted the sit-in as a tactic in the civil rights movement and this led to the desegregation of lunch counters in multiple states.

Research Notes

Influences:

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sit-ins in the 1940s (see "St. Louis CORE campaign for lunch counter desegregation, 1948-52")(1)

Sources:

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Walters, Ronald. "Standing Up In America's Heartland." American Visions Feb.-Mar. 1993: 20-23. Print.

Additional Notes:

The Dockum's Drug Store sit-in passed largely unnoticed by the larger civil rights movement and general public of the United States despite being the first successful student-led sit-in of the civil rights movement. Even though it was rarely recognized, it was instrumental in creating a precedent for future student-led sit-ins such as the more famous sit-in in Greensboro. In 2008 and 2009, the Dockum's Drug Store sit-in received recognition in Wichita and from the NAACP for its successes even though 50 years had passed.

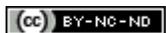
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