

# Labor Honors Greensboro Civil Rights Sit-In Heroes



*Three of the original students who staged the famous sit-in at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, NC, in 1960 returned to Greensboro as part of the 2010 AFL-CIO Martin Luther King, Jr., Day celebration. From left, Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain and Jibreel Khazan.*

Speaker after speaker at this year's AFL-CIO Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Observance in Greensboro, NC, struggled to find the right words to describe the impact of the Woolworth lunch counter sit-in that began in that city on February 1, 1960.

One called it the most significant event in U.S. civil rights history; another described it as the inspiration for the movement that toppled apartheid rule in South Africa, while all agreed it paved the way for the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But it was Franklin McCain, one of the four North Carolina

Agricultural & Technical College students who began the historic protest, who riveted the audience with his recollection of how he was just plain fed up with not being able to get "a lousy cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie" because of the color of his skin.

## **Segregated South**

Describing the entrenched segregation that flourished for more than 100 years after the Civil War, McCain recalled the separate drinking fountains, separate libraries, schools, housing and health care facilities.

"It was a system that was designed to make a segment of the population feel inferior and

limit opportunities for growth," said McCain, who recalled how, at age 17, he preferred jail or even death to raising his own children under such a system.

Two others who took part in the original Greensboro sit-in, Joseph McNeil and Jibreel Khazan (Ezell Blair, Jr.), joined McCain at the AFL-CIO event. The fourth student, David Richmond, passed away in 1990.

The three men described how they planned and executed their non-violent protest, and were ultimately joined by dozens and then hundreds of supporters, black and white. All were determined to end the

*IAM Executive Assistant Diane Babineaux and Assistant Legislative Director Hasan Solomon help distribute clothing and other supplies for non-profit agencies in Greensboro as part of the AFL-CIO Martin Luther King, Jr., Day community activities.*

practice that encouraged African-Americans to shop in the chain's stores, but denied them service at the store's lunch counters.

Jibreel Khazan described how his parents approved of his taking part in the risky sit-in, but insisted he wear his best Sunday suit. "But mama, suppose I get killed?" he complained. "Well then, my son," she replied calmly, "you'll be dressed to kill."

## **Movement Begins**

The resulting photographs of four well-dressed and serious-looking students are among the most iconic and dignified images of the American civil rights movement. Equally iconic are the photographs of the same students being punched and beaten but never relinquishing their seats at the counter.



Despite store management's efforts to limit publicity, word of the Greensboro students' non-violent protest spread quickly. Within weeks, sit-ins were being held across North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida. The protests reached as far as Woolworth's headquarters in New York City, where activists sought a national policy of desegregation.

Meanwhile in Greensboro, bomb threats, assaults and demonstrations organized by the Ku Klux Klan failed to discourage the protestors while negotiations between students, civil rights leaders and

store owners continued for months without a resolution.

## **Big Victory**

The stalemate lasted through April, when Woolworth's store managers ordered the lunch counter closed, a move that triggered increased picketing at the remaining downtown stores that practiced segregation. Forty-five students were arrested on April 21 when they entered the chained-off lunch counter at Kress, less than a block away from Woolworth's.

Finally, on July 25, 1960, Woolworth and Kress relented and began serving all customers at their lunch counters, regardless of their skin color.

While the fight to end discrimination continues to this day, Franklin McCain's dream of coffee, apple pie and justice was finally on the menu at Woolworth's.

*On the second day of the Greensboro Sit-In, Joseph A. McNeil and Frank McCain are joined by William Smith and Clarence Henderson at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, NC.*

