



The Unveiling, our little known history.

Children in the Movement

When we picture the turbulent years of the Civil Rights movements, with its snarling dogs and firehoses set on Black people, our mental images are often of adults: John L. Lewis beaten to the ground by a white policeman, Black men peacefully marching with I Am a Man placards on their chests while surrounded by tanks and National Guardsmen with rifles cocked. We may not imagine children in these horrific scenarios. But they were there. And they got results.

In 1963, the Civil Rights movement had faced multiple defeats across the south. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been jailed in Alabama. There was discouragement in the movement as they tried to strategize new tactics. A young activist named James Bevel proposed an audacious plan. Recruit school aged children to march.

His reasoning was that the numbers of protesters had dwindled as losses and arrests increased. They simply needed more people. Also, adults who were jailed often lost their jobs, but children had no such obligations and families would not be financially ruined. King was vehemently against the plan, rightly noting the brutality of the police and white mobs on the protesters.

Bevel went forward anyway, meeting with local Black students, pointing out that their hand me down, tattered books and sports and learning equipment were far inferior to what white schools provided. And asking them, “Do you want freedom?” He recruited

student leaders such as class presidents, prom queens, football players, and cheerleaders to sell the idea to others.

But they kept it secret. They met in private to learn nonviolent resistance as they brought in their friends and their friends' friends. In the days leading up to the walkout, there were coded radio messages from the local Black DJ telling the kids to show up at a party and "bring your toothbrushes, as snacks will be served," (in other words, prepare to be jailed.) At 11:00 a.m. on May 2, 1963, more than 4,000 African American schoolchildren ages 7-17 left their classrooms and marched to the 16th Street Baptist Church (from History.com). From there, they were sent out in organized groups of 10-50 at a time, carrying signs, singing freedom songs, and assigned to certain tasks: go to City Hall, sit at segregated lunch counters, or pack the shopping district downtown. Police with billy clubs were waiting to arrest them. Each time a group was arrested, another group was released from the church. By the end of the first day, over 1,000 young people had been arrested. The next day they started again. When the police turned fire hoses on them, they sat on the sidewalk with their backs hunched against the spray. So the police herded them off to jail. This went on for a week. Ultimately, Dr. King saw the power in it as TV crews lined the sidewalks and these images were shown in American living rooms each evening. He said he hoped this crusade would "subpoena the conscience of the nation" and it did, at least in part.

The police and city officials were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and did not have the officers to arrest them or the facilities to hold them. A national outcry caused President John F. Kennedy to send the Assistant Attorney General to negotiate a resolution. Birmingham city leaders met with Dr. King and others and ended the protests with an agreement to desegregate the lunch counters, businesses, and restrooms as well as make more and better jobs available to Blacks.

—It did not stop hate, though. The 16th Street Baptist Church would be the site of a Ku Klux Klan bombing five months later that killed 4 little girls.

But the movement had gathered momentum and couldn't be stopped. The Children's Crusade is considered a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement that resulted in President Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act into law the following year.



A statue erected in Birmingham in 2010 to commemorate The Children's Crusade.



Learn more about the story of these remarkable young people in this documentary:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5enZRwbNlSQ>

