

**THE GREENSBORO SIT-INS:
HOW FOUR YOUNG MEN DECIDE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
BY WILLIE MACK LOS ANGELES**

Youth, be courageous! Do not fear evil people! Boldly speak out! Cause your voice of conviction to resound like a thunderclap that awakens all living beings! Shake up society, which has grown stagnant, and revitalize the world!

—SGI President Ikeda (May 25 *World Tribune*, p. 5).

Four guys met, planned, and went into action. It's just that simple.

—Franklin McCain

The following is part one of a two-part essay.

In 1960—the same year SGI President Ikeda launched the worldwide kosen-rufu movement beginning with America—four black college students met in a dorm room at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, N.C., to discuss politics, life and philosophy. They debated the politics of the South and the hypocrisy of the community, religious leaders and government. They were young idealists that believed that they had the power to make a change in the world. Each of these four men shared dreams of overcoming the racism rampant in America. They had grown up with segregation, humiliation and injustice as everyday occurrences. The idea of equality was a dream they could only discuss amongst themselves.

President Ikeda states, “Those who have something they truly believe in are fearless” (May 25 *World Tribune*, p. 6). Buddhism teaches us to strive to discover our mission. Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda said that youth should have big dreams, because in the course of our lives we will only accomplish a small fraction of what we set out to do. The bigger our dreams, the more we will accomplish.

Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond and Joseph McNeil were college freshmen who decided that they could not wait any longer for change. One Sunday night, Joseph McNeil said: “It’s time that we take some action now. We’ve been getting together, and we’ve been, up to this point, still like most people we’ve talked about for the past few weeks or so—that is, people who talk a lot but, in fact, make very little action” (*My Soul is Rested*, by Howell Raines, p. 75).

These young students decided to use nonviolent, direct action as their tool for ending segregation in Greensboro. They had studied about Mahatma Gandhi in school and decided that nonviolence was the way to go. At that point, the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the activities of Martin Luther King Jr. were only local issues. Their desire to take on this task came from their own thinking and planning.

The next morning, Feb. 1, 1960, the four young men went to Woolworth’s, a major shopping center in downtown Greensboro. Woolworth’s had a policy of not discriminating against shopping customers, but would only allow whites to eat at their restaurant. Blacks had to go down to the basement where they would be served.

“Once getting there...we did make purchases of school supplies and took the patience and time to get receipts for our purchases, and Joseph and myself [McCain]

went over to the counter and asked to be served coffee and doughnuts. As anticipated, the reply was, 'I'm sorry, we don't serve you here.' And of course we said, 'We just beg to disagree with you. We've in fact already been served; you've served us already and that's just not quite true...We wonder why you'd invite us in to serve us at one counter and deny service at another. If this is a private club or private concern, then we believe you ought to sell membership cards and sell only to persons who have a membership card. If we don't have a card, then we'd know pretty well that we shouldn't come in or even attempt to come in" (p. 76).

At this point, there was a crowd forming and the police were there. The police were unable to do anything because the students had not broken any laws. They were peacefully sitting in a restaurant at a store where they had made purchases. These students had taken a step that no one in Greensboro had taken before. They were scared, but they had conviction and belief in their cause. They weren't looking for attention; they were only trying to free themselves from the restriction of segregation and racism.

Surprisingly, they faced mixed reactions from other customers at the restaurant. Some older white women walked past them and actually commended them for their efforts. However, others—including a middle-aged black dishwasher—said, "That's why we can't get anyplace today, because of people like you, rabble-rousers, troublemakers" (p. 77).

These students proved that reluctance to take on injustice only strengthened its grip. They felt that standing up with courage, conviction and dedication is the only way to freedom.

Look for part two of this essay in the July 27 issue of Seize the Day.