

BIRMINGHAM – 50 YEARS LATER

What a perfect day to visit the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Today is December 1, 2013, and it is the 58th Anniversary of the day Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, AL. I was humbled and inspired to learn more about the Civil Rights struggle today.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court declared segregation violated the US Constitution. Prior to this High Court decision, Negroes attended separate, inferior public schools. My Black friend, Barbara Cordle, accompanied me to Birmingham. She can remember drinking from separate water fountains and not being allowed in a hamburger joint in Decatur, AL. Just because the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional, did not mean Southerners were going to willingly integrate Blacks into their society. Change only happened because of the brave men and women who participated in the movement for civil rights.

In 1963, Birmingham, AL was the epicenter of this conflict. This city had the strictest segregation laws in the entire country. George Wallace had been elected governor of the State of Alabama. In his inaugural speech, he proclaimed, "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny...and I say...segregation now...segregation tomorrow...segregation forever! (1) In January 1963, Black leaders met in Georgia to discuss the Birmingham civil rights campaign. Dr. Martin Luther King was in attendance at this meeting because of his successful leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, the designated leader of the Birmingham campaign was Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, who was pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church. He later on became the President of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. (1)

The first confrontations occurred at the Birmingham lunch counters in April 1963. Black college students respectfully demanded service. The owners of the establishments refused them service, and they were subsequently arrested. To make sure this would not happen again, Judge William Jenkins signed an injunction banning black protests altogether on April 10, 1963. On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth defied this order and led a march starting at St. Paul Methodist Church. They only walked a few yards and were arrested and put in jail. It was during this arrest that Dr. Martin Luther King wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." (2) This letter was his response to white clergy who believed segregation could only be ended in the courts. This was the first time President Kennedy publicly supported the Civil Rights protesters. He called Dr. King in the Birmingham jail, offering emotional support.

In May 1963, the world was introduced to one of the most evil and despicable human beings that ever lived – Eugene "Bull" Connor. Bull Connor was an abhorrent, disgusting piece of crap, who was the Public Safety Commissioner of Birmingham. He was the person who ordered fire hoses be turned onto children who participated in the Children's Crusade Demonstration Day. Also, he had guard dogs ferociously bite the child protesters. Children were also thrown in jail by him for protesting segregation in Kelly Ingram Park. Unfortunately, I am not making this up. Journalists took pictures and movies of the event, and they were flashed around the world.



50 Years Later – A memorial to the children who were thrown in jail during the Children’s Crusade in Kelly Ingram Park



A statue dedicated to the children who were bitten by guard dogs during the Children’s Crusade in Kelly Ingram Park...50 years later.

One would think with all the international shame brought upon Birmingham in 1963, that the citizens of Birmingham would peacefully integrate and live happily ever after. That was not to be and further evil would happen in 1963. On Tuesday, September 10, 1963, President Kennedy ordered the Alabama National Guard federalized and told Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara to integrate Alabama

public schools...matter what it took to get it done. On Sunday, September 15, 1963 a bomb went off in the 16th Street Baptist Church and killed four very cute young Black girls: Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley. In retrospect, historians believe the bombing deaths of these little girls propelled the Civil Rights legislation to be signed into law in December 1964. This is because their horrific deaths garnered public support for the civil rights cause across America.



The 16th Street Baptist Church – 50 Years Later



The window that the bomb was thrown into...killing Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley.



Memorial to the little girls...outside the window where the bomb was thrown through the window.



The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute...Preserving the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

When Birmingham incorporated into a city in 1871, it was also known as The Magic City. This was a tribute to the first industrialized city in the South and a leader in the manufacture of iron. During the turbulent times of 1963, it became known as “Bombingham” or “The Tragic, Not Magic City.” From the late 1940’s to the mid 1960’s, there were 50 unsolved racially related bombings.



On the 50th Anniversary of the bombing deaths of Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley, these statues of them were placed in Kelly Ingram Park. To me, they are symbols of hope for a peaceful future for us all...no matter our race.

References:

- 1. Wright, Barnett of the Birmingham News. 1963. Copyright 2013. Page 21**
- 2. Ibid. Page 29**

Information in this post was also obtained as I toured the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Kudos to the wonderful docent, Oliver Harper...who was also one of the foot soldiers in the civil rights movement.