

Time To Be Heard

The men are known as the Friendship 9. In 1961, they went to jail for breaking what was known as Jim Crow laws. These laws separated, or segregated, blacks and whites. They kept blacks out of many public places, such as restaurants, hotels and movie theaters.

The Friendship 9 decided they had to do something to protest Jim Crow segregation laws. In February 1961, they entered McCrory's in Rock Hill and sat down at the lunch counter. At the time, McCrory's served only whites. Blacks were not allowed to sit at the counter and order lunch.

What the Friendship 9 did is a form of peaceful protest known as a "sit-in."

"We cannot rewrite history, but we can right history," Judge Hayes said as he handed down his ruling. The packed courtroom burst into cheers at his words. Lawyer Kevin Brackett apologized to the men — eight of whom were in court. The ninth has died.

"Sometimes you just have to say you're sorry," Brackett said.

Brackett had not been involved in the original case. He was apologizing for the court, which he said had been wrong 54 years ago.

Change At The Lunch Counter

The Friendship 9's sit-in was an important event in the civil rights movement, which sought to give equal rights to African-Americans. It inspired many others to fight for equal rights. It also brought more nationwide attention to the civil rights movement.

The nine men were arrested for just sitting at McCrory's lunch counter. They were charged with two crimes — trespassing and disturbing the peace.

The Friendship 9 included eight students from Rock Hill's Friendship Junior College. They were W.T. "Dub" Massey, Willie McCleod, Robert McCullough, Clarence Graham, James Wells, David Williamson Jr., John Gaines and Mack Workman. The other member of the group was Thomas Gaither. He worked for a nationwide group that was fighting for civil rights.

Kim Johnson has written a book on the Friendship 9, titled "No Fear For Freedom: The Story of the Friendship 9." Last year, she went to Kevin Brackett, the chief law officer for the Rock Hill area. She wanted to see what could be done to clear the men's records.

"This is an opportunity for us to bring the community together," Johnson said before the ruling. Having the men's records cleared "says that it should have never happened in the first place."

Not Too Late To Be Sorry

Justice came too late for McCullough, who died in 2006. However, the others were glad for the judge's ruling.

The men's names are engraved on the stools at the counter of the restaurant, which is now called the Old Town Bistro. A sign outside marks the spot where they were arrested.

Back in 1961, a white man named Elwin Wilson was also at McCrory's during the sit-in. Wilson became angry and tried to pull one of the protesters from his stool. In 2009, he returned to the same counter, where he met with some of the Friendship 9. The men forgave Wilson after he told them he was sorry for what he had done.