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HISTORY & CULTURE

The Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963

In our continuing coverage of Black History Month, we look back at the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963.

KIM GILMORE • FEB 14, 2014

Our Black History coverage continues with a look at the Children's Crusade of 1963, a pivotal event of the Civil Rights Movement, which opened the eyes of the nation through the courageous activism of its youngest citizens.

"We were told in some of the mass meetings that the day would come when we could really do something about all of these inequities that we were experiencing. And we were calling it D-Day. That was May 2, 1963," remembers Janice Kelsey. Kelsey was one of thousands of young people who participated in a series of non-violent demonstrations known as the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama, during the first week of May 1963. For many African-American children in Birmingham, the Civil Rights Movement was already part of their lives. They had witnessed their parents involvement through mass meetings organized at churches like the 16th Street Baptist Church. While many parents and Civil Rights leaders were cautious about involving young people in the protests, it turned out that the brave actions of these children helped make lasting change in Birmingham at a key turning point in the movement.

Early in 1963, Civil Rights leaders in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and other civil rights groups developed a plan to desegregate Birmingham, a city notorious for its discriminatory practices in employment and public life. Segregation persisted throughout the city and blacks were allowed to go to many places like the fairgrounds only on "colored days." The goal of the plan was to use tactics of non-violent protest to provoke Birmingham civic and business leaders to agree to desegregate. The demonstrations started in April 1963 as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and local leader Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth led thousands of African-American protestors in Birmingham. The first phase of the campaign resulted in many arrests, including Dr. King who penned his powerful "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" on April 16th. A circuit court judge had issued an injunction against protest, picketing, demonstrating and boycotting, providing the legal grounds for mass arrests.