

The Children's March: Birmingham AL, May 2/3 1963

By Bob Krajewski

Key figures = 16th Street Baptist Church (meetings), Kelly Ingram Park (rallying point), Fred Shuttlesworth, Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, N.H. Smith, A.D. King, John T Porter, Jim Bevel & Diane Nash, Bull Connor. Birmingham = Steel City/Magic City =1960 population 350,000 (65% white, 35% black) = highly segregated= only 10% of blacks registered to vote.

In 1960 students Diane Nash (Fisk University) and Jim Bevel (American Baptist College) were leaders in Nashville sit-ins and marches, and Freedom Rides. Now married and key in Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Jim was Director of Direct Action), they went to help stalling Birmingham movement **April 12, 1963**.

Project C = confrontation was started to help bolster Birmingham movement. Fiery bombing and beating victim Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth asked Martin Luther King to come help in early April. On **Good Friday April 12**, they and Rev Ralph Abernathy were jailed. MLK wrote his famous 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'

On **Palm Sunday**, Birmingham pastors Revs. N. H. Smith (Anthony's grandfather), A.D. King (MLK's brother) and John T. Porter led 2000 people in a downtown march to support their jailed colleagues. After the march the three knelt to pray at the corner of Kelly Ingram Park when they were confronted by Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Eugene 'Bull' Connor and police officers with billy clubs and police dogs.

Bevel recruited (strong girl leaders, gentle boy athletes) to march, but MLK and others objected (Malcolm X said real men don't put their children on the firing line). **May 2** = first day of Children's March—in timed groups from churches to downtown businesses. Many arrested.

May 3 = After students left 16th St. Baptist/adjacent to Kelly Ingram Park, Connor ordered fire hoses to level where they could peel off tree bark/separate bricks from mortar—students' clothes torn off, they rolled down street from the hose pressure. Attack dogs brought out. Bystanders began to throw rocks and bottles at police/firemen. Bevel tried to stop the throwing action/no avail. Many, many arrested, jails overloaded/sent elsewhere. City raised bail from \$300 to \$1200. Movement didn't have finances to cover.

May 10 Shuttlesworth and MLK won agreement to desegregate lunch counters, restrooms, drinking fountains, fitting rooms, hire blacks as salesmen and clerks in downtown stores. Unions raised \$237,000 for bail money to get children out of jail. Desegregation implementation = *slow*.

May 11 bomb destroyed Gaston Motel across from Kelly—where blacks/MLK stayed.

May 13 3000 federal troops sent to Birmingham

Summer Bevel threatened Children's March on D.C. MLK March on Washington I Have a Dream Speech. MLK = Times Man of Year 63, Nobel Peace Prize 1964

September Birmingham schools integrated (supposedly)

Sept 15 Sixteenth Street Baptist bombed, four girls killed.

The Children's March has been classified by some as the Chief Watershed of nonviolent movement in United States, and the Civil Rights Movement's most important chapter. It

- Brought national force to bear on issue of segregation
- Was a major factor in national push towards Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibited racial discrimination in hiring practices and public services in United States
- Showed that those who fought segregation were fighting a fire that won't go out
- Shut down a city to fight social injustice
- Defied police intimidation

The Children's March also showed that power to rebel/resist must always be present with power to love. The fire hoses and attack dogs couldn't stop those children from being catalysts for positive social change. The jails couldn't break their spirit.

Music was always a major part of the movement. But when Shuttlesworth trained Birmingham students in nonviolence, he told them 'silence is key—no songs, no slogans, no replies to obscenities,' and he added 'however, when you're arrested, sing your hearts out.' And they did. To the tune of The Old Gray Mare they sang

Ain't a-scared of your jail, cause I want my freedom, I want my freedom, I want my freedom

Ain't a-scared of your jail cause I want my freedom, I want my freedom now!

Ain't a-scared of your dogs, cause.....

Ain't a-scared of your hose, cause.....

Sustainability = hold up, bear, support, provide for

As we review the bravery of those Birmingham students who sustained their courage for positive social change, some of the questions for today's students are

What sustains me?

What keeps me going in the face of adversity?

How can I be a catalyst for positive social change?

What skills will I need?

What character qualities do I need to develop?