

Sitting Down to Take a Stand

Peaceful protests played a big role in the civil rights movement.

By Suzanne Bilyeu



In 1960, four men staged a peaceful protest by sitting at a lunch counter.

Imagine a scenario in which you were legally barred from taking a drink at the same water fountain that other people were free to drink from. Or think for a moment about how you would feel to be forced to sit at the back of a bus

because of the color of your skin. It may seem surreal today, but before the 1950s, those were the kinds of unfair laws that African Americans were subject to everyday in many US states.

Free but Separate

Until the Civil War, most African Americans were slaves. After the war ended in 1865, slavery was abolished and African Americans were officially free. But almost 100 years later, that didn't appear to be the case—it seemed that few things had really changed. Many African Americans remained segregated from whites and still lacked many basic civil rights. This was especially true in the southern United States, where many whites didn't think blacks and whites should mix—they did not believe that black people deserved the same rights as whites.

Over time, thousands of black Americans had had enough: they began to take a stand, and some did so in the most unconventional way—by sitting down!

The Fight for Civil Rights

African Americans fought for their rights by marching in peaceful protests and by boycotting businesses that discriminated against them. They

also staged sit-ins: they sat in public places that were reserved for “whites only,” and when told to leave, these civil-rights activists refused to move.

That’s what happened in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. Four black college students sat at the “whites only” lunch counter in a department store. “We absolutely had no choice,” one later said vehemently.

The students weren’t served any food, and the store manager asked them to leave—but the students refused. They could have been arrested, and they could have been beaten, but they were just ignored. The students remained there unbudging until the store closed.

The Tide Turns

The four young men came to be known as the Greensboro Four. Word of their struggle spread on television and in newspapers across the country. Their protest inspired thousands of people, and more sit-ins were staged throughout the South.



During the 1960s, many people marched to protest laws that were unfair to African Americans.

Eventually, the lunch counter in Greensboro began serving black customers. Other businesses also stopped discriminating, and in 1964, racial segregation in public places finally became illegal. The civil rights movement could not have succeeded without the courage of the Greensboro Four.