

In 1960, whites-only services were common in the South. Then four brave students showed the nation how wrong that practice was.

by **Kathy Wilmore**

SITTING IN FOR

CAST

Narrators A-E

- *Ezell Blair Jr., 17
 - *Franklin McCain, 18
 - *Joseph McNeil, 17
 - *David Richmond, 17
- } first-year students at an all-black college

*Waitress at the Woolworth's lunch counter, a white woman

*Manager of the lunch counter, a white man

*Dishwasher, a black woman working behind the lunch counter

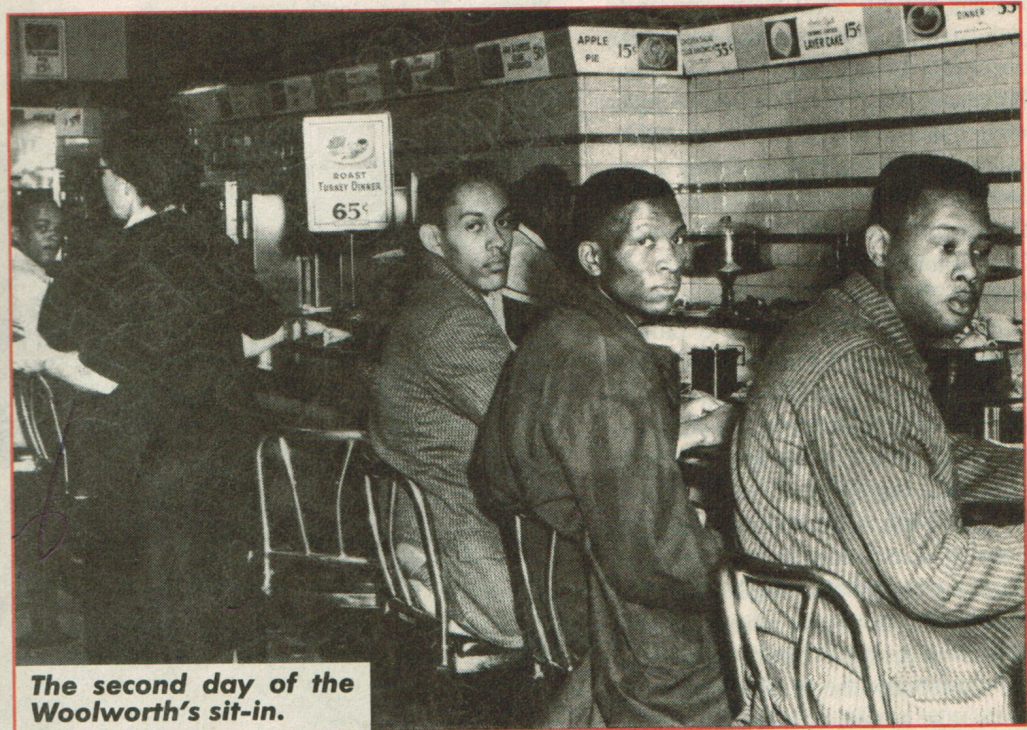
*Police officer, a white man
Classmate of the four young men

Mary Ann Davis, student at a nearby all-white college

Liz Harris, her roommate

*George Simkins Jr., a black dentist

*Trainer of nonviolent-protest tactics



The second day of the Woolworth's sit-in.

UPI/Bettmann

FREEDOM

ABOUT THIS PLAY

Does thinking about the world's problems make you feel powerless? There are so many: hunger, homelessness, racism, poverty, crime, drug abuse, pollution. Do you think: "Somebody ought to do something about this! But there is nothing I can do — I'm too young" or "No one would listen to me"?

In 1960, four young college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, refused to think that way. They were tired of being treated unfairly because of the color of their skin. They decided to do something about it.

Racial **segregation** (separation) was widely accepted in the U.S. at that time, especially in the South. Black people had few rights. Those

who dared to claim their rights met certain trouble: anything from loss of a home or job to imprisonment or even death.

The four Greensboro students dared to risk such dangers. They staged a small, simple protest. At the time, no one realized that their "sit-in" would set off one of the most powerful movements of the 1960s.

* This play is based on actual events. Characters with an asterisk by their names are real people; all others are fictitious.

SCENE 1

Narrator A: In their first term at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, four young men — Ezell Blair, Joseph McNeil, David Richmond, and Franklin McCain — meet and soon become good friends.

The four argue about sports, discuss girls, and debate politics. They also take their schoolwork seriously, and often get together to study. But during one study session, the conversation wanders. . . .

McCain: You know, it burns me up to get treated like a second-class citizen every time I leave this campus.

Richmond: Me, too. The white folks either ignore us, like we're invisible, or they tell us to "move along."

Blair: We may not be good enough for them, but they sure like our money. They'll take *that* quick enough.

McNeil: Not everywhere. We can go into Woolworth's and buy a pair of socks or a notebook and pencils. But they won't let us sit at the lunch counter and have a cup of coffee.

Richmond: The U.S. Supreme Court says that segregation is illegal.

McCain: Yeah. But nobody around here is doing anything to stop it. What's *wrong* with people, anyway?

McNeil: What's wrong with us?

Blair (thoughtful): Yeah. Why wait for somebody else to do something? Let's take action ourselves.

McNeil (excited): Okay, let's do this: We'll go into Woolworth's, sit at the counter, and ask for coffee. We'll just sit — and stay till they serve us.

Blair: That might take months. Or years. Maybe it will never happen.

Richmond: They might arrest us — or worse. And if the college hears about it, we could be kicked out.

McCain: That's how they keep us down. No one dares to take a stand. I say *let's do it!* How about you?

Richmond, Blair, and McNeil: Yes!

SCENE 2

Narrator B: On Monday, February 1, 1960, the four friends, with textbooks under their arms, enter the Woolworth's on South Elm Street.

No one pays attention to them.

Shoppers — black and white — are looking over merchandise and paying for their selections. The young men make a few small purchases, taking care to request receipts.

They exchange nervous glances, then walk to the lunch counter and take seats there.

Waitress: You can't sit here.

Blair: A cup of coffee, please.

Waitress: Are you deaf? I said, you can't sit here. You boys know that.

McNeil: We'll all have coffee, please.

Waitress: If you don't leave immediately, I'll get the manager.

Narrator B: They sit in polite and pa-

served at that counter over there. Isn't my money just as good here?

Manager: This lunch counter is for whites only. It always has been, and it always will be. Officer!

Police officer: Okay, boys, you've had your fun. Now move along.

McCain: All we want is some coffee, officer. We're willing to wait.

Narrator B: The police officer's appearance frightens the students, but they keep their seats. A crowd gathers, staring in amazement. The young men sit quietly, reading their books. When the store closes for the night, they gather up their books



For a later protest held in the South, these student demonstrators practiced remaining nonviolent when dealing with abusive whites.

tient silence. She leaves in a huff.

Dishwasher (whispering fiercely): What are you boys doing? Are you crazy? Or just stupid?

McCain: We would like a cup of coffee, ma'am. That's all.

Dishwasher: Why do you want to go and stir up trouble? You *know* this counter is for white people only! It's rabble-rousers like you who make life hard for the rest of us black folks.

Manager (rushing over): What seems to be the problem here?

McNeil: Four coffees, please.

Manager: We don't serve Negroes here.

Blair (holding up his bag and receipt): Excuse me, but I just got

and go back to the campus.

SCENE 3

Narrator C: Word of their action has already spread. They are surrounded by admiring classmates.

Classmate: What will you do next?

Richmond: We're going back tomorrow. Anyone want to join us?

Narrator C: On the second day, 23 black students "sit in" at Woolworth's. Their polite requests for coffee are refused and they are told to leave. Again, a crowd gathers. Some whites yell at the students, cursing or threatening them. But the students remain, sitting quietly and

reading until closing time. One excited onlooker rushes to a phone. . . .

Simkins: Operator, get me the office of CORE in New York City. That's the Congress of Racial Equality.

Hello, CORE? I'm calling from Greensboro, North Carolina. There is something going on here you might be able to help with. . . .

Narrator C: On the third day, 85 students take part in the sit-in — more than the 66-seat lunch counter can handle. Those who cannot sit stand quietly behind the others.

At nearby North Carolina Women's College, an all-white school . . .

workers arrives and a meeting of the student protesters is called. . . .

Trainer: We all know how dangerous it can be to protest racism. What you're doing is making a lot of white people angry. And where there is anger, there is a chance for violence.

McCain: We've been peaceful. We intend to stay that way.

Trainer: Good. But what if a white man in the crowd takes a swing at you? Anger or pain may cloud your judgment and you may strike back. We want to keep that from happening. Here's what to do. . . .

Narrator D: The students are taught



AP/Wide World

In February 1990, the "Greensboro Four" reunited at the Woolworth's lunch counter to commemorate their historic sit-in.

Davis: I missed the news, Liz. Are they still sitting in at Woolworth's?

Harris: They sure are. I heard a group of our students is going to join them.

Davis: That's right. I just signed up — for both of us.

Harris: Are you crazy? Why would I want to go help a bunch of rabble-rousing niggers?

Davis (shocked): How can you talk like that about fellow human beings?

Harris: They're no fellows of mine. They should stay in their place.

SCENE 4

Narrator D: Simkins's call brings immediate action. A team of CORE

how to ignore abuse, and what to do if they are struck. They practice staying calm under pressure. They realize they are taking a tremendous risk. But they do not give up.

On the sit-in's fourth day, a group of white students from North Carolina Women's College joins the protest. By the end of the week, 400 students are taking part. By now, the Greensboro sit-in has made newspaper and TV reports nationwide.

SCENE 5

Narrator E: Black students in other towns begin staging their own sit-ins. Soon, sit-ins are being held at

lunch counters all over the South. Students in Nashville, Tennessee, write guidelines for their sit-ins:

*Don't strike back or curse if abused.
Don't laugh out.*

Don't hold conversations with floor workers.

Don't block entrances to the store and aisles.

Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times.

Sit straight and always face the counter.

Remember love and nonviolence.

May God bless each of you.

AFTERWORD

Across the South, student protesters were yelled at, spat upon, dragged off their seats and beaten. Many were arrested and jailed. In the first six months of sit-ins, more than 3,600 students went to jail. Often, they refused bail, opting to remain in their cells as another form of protest. The students' dedication amazed many adults. As one student who refused bail told her pleading mother, "Mama, I love you. But I'm not free. And I'm not free because your generation didn't act. But I want my children to be free. That's why I'll stay in jail."

To most Americans, segregation was a problem that they preferred to ignore. But their children would not let them — not anymore. In time, the young people won their struggle. In town after town, "whites only" rules began to crumble.

Sit-ins were an important tactic in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s. Later, they were staged by young people protesting the Vietnam War and demanding equal rights for women. What four young men started in 1960 left its mark on an entire generation. ☆

YOUR TURN/Think About It

1. How was the four young men's sit-in an act of great courage?

2. Why were adults so surprised by the students' dedication? Do adults today expect political action from their children? Why or why not?