

Sitting In for

Freedom



Left to right, Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, and two other students at Woolworth's.

CHARACTERS

Prologue Narrator

Franklin McCain, 17

David Richmond, 17

Ezell Blair Jr., 17

Joseph McNeil, 17

students at an all-black college

Waitress 1, a white woman working at the Woolworth's lunch counter

Waitress 2, a black woman working at the lunch counter

Clarence "Curly" Harris, the white lunch-counter manager

Police officer, a white man

Woman, a white senior citizen sitting at the lunch counter

*Classmate of the four young men

Narrators A-E

Epilogue Narrator

*Fictional character

In 1960, four students were refused a cup of coffee because of the color of their skin. Their simple act of defiance helped define the civil rights movement.

Prologue

PROLOGUE NARRATOR: For hundreds of years, racial **segregation** was widely accepted in the U.S. African-Americans who stood up for their rights took a life-or-death risk, especially in the South.

In 1960, four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, had grown tired of being treated unfairly because of the color of their skin. When they decided to do something about it, they had no idea that they were about to make history.

SCENE 1

NARRATOR A: It is January 1960. At North Carolina A&T, an all-

black college, four young friends gather. Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond talk about a lot of things. But one topic comes up again and again.

FRANKLIN MCCAIN: It burns me up to be treated like a second-class citizen every time I leave this campus.

DAVID RICHMOND: Me too. White folks either ignore us, like we're invisible, or they tell us to "move along"—if not worse. I've been called a lot of ugly names.

EZELL BLAIR JR.: We all have. We may not be good enough for them most of the time, but

Words to Know

segregation (seg-ruh-gay-shun) *noun*. The act or practice of keeping people or groups apart.

generation (jen-uh-ray-shuhn) *noun*. All the people born around the same time.



McCain: That's how they keep us down.

No one dares to take a stand. I say, let's try!

they sure do like our money. They'll take that quick enough.

JOSEPH MCNEIL: Not everywhere. We can go into Woolworth's and buy a notebook and pencils, but they won't let us sit at the lunch counter and buy a cup of coffee.

RICHMOND: It's been six years since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation is illegal. But nobody around here is doing anything to stop it.

MCCAIN: It seems like it will never change. What is wrong with people?

MCNEIL: What is wrong with *us*?

BLAIR: You're right. Why should we wait for somebody else to do something? Let's take action ourselves.

MCNEIL: I agree. We should go into Woolworth's, take a seat at the counter, and ask for coffee. Then we'll just sit there till they serve us.

BLAIR: What if they don't?

RICHMOND: They might arrest us—or worse. 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 try! How about you?

RICHMOND, BLAIR, AND MCNEIL: We're in!

SCENE 2

NARRATOR B: On February 1, 1960, the four friends, with textbooks under their arms,

enter the Woolworth's on North Elm Street in Greensboro. No one pays attention to them.

NARRATOR C: They make a few small purchases, taking care to request receipts. Then, exchanging nervous glances, they go to the lunch counter. As they take seats, workers behind the counter stare in amazement. So do customers passing by.

BLAIR: May we be served? A cup of coffee, please.

WAITRESS 1: You boys know better than to ask that!

MCNEIL: I'll have one too, ma'am.

WAITRESS 1: Well, I'm sorry, but we don't serve your kind here.

BLAIR (*holding up his bag and receipt*): Excuse me, but I just got served at that counter over there.

RICHMOND: And I got served at another counter, over there.

WAITRESS 1: I mean that I can't serve you at this counter.

MCCAIN: What's the difference? Oh, you mean that this counter is where white people eat.

MCNEIL: Don't worry. We're people too, just like they are.

WAITRESS 1: Well, I still can't serve you here. It's our rule. It's the way it has always been.

RICHMOND: Well, don't you agree that your rule is wrong?

WAITRESS 1: All I know is that you boys can't stay here. If you want something to eat, go downstairs. There is a place in the back where you can stand and order food.

MCCAIN: We would prefer to sit and relax while we eat.

WAITRESS 1: If you don't leave, I'm going to have to get the manager!

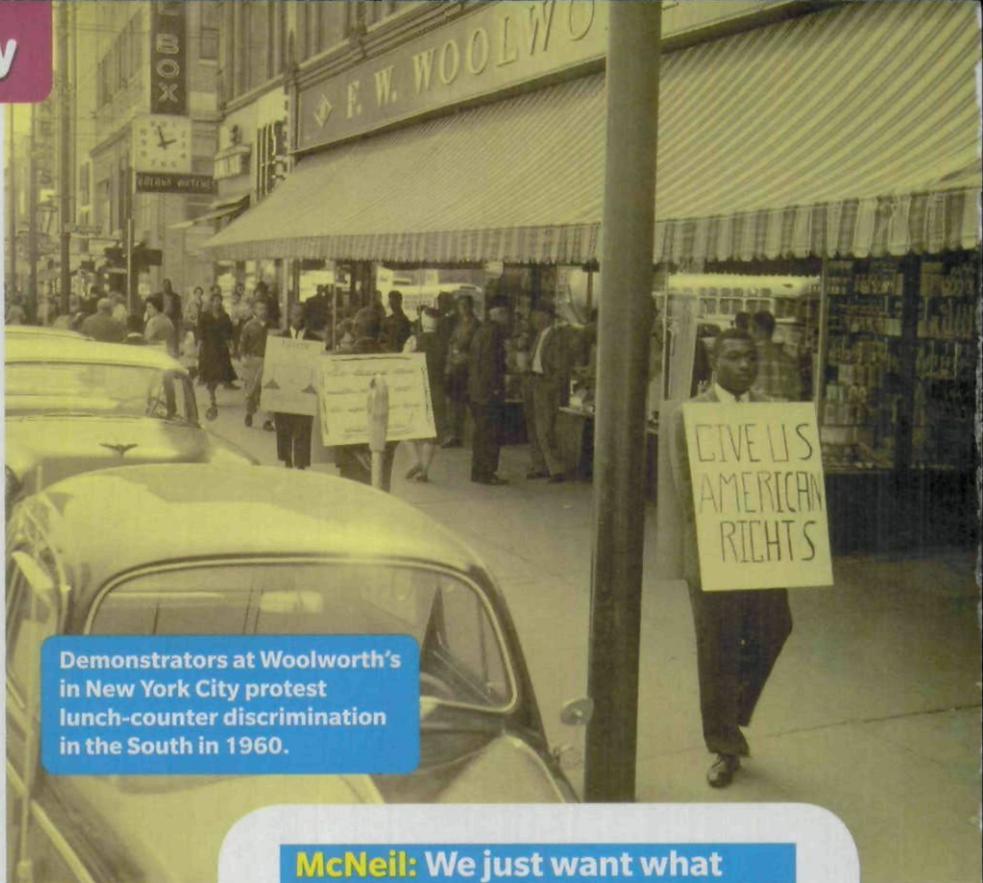
BLAIR: Thank you, ma'am. Perhaps he will help us.

Scene 3

NARRATOR D: She hurries away. The young men sit and wait in polite and patient silence. A black woman working behind the counter goes over to them.

WAITRESS 2 (*whispering fiercely*): Are you crazy? You know you aren't supposed to be here! It's troublemakers like you who make life hard for the rest of us black folks.

MCNEIL: We aren't trying to make trouble, ma'am. We just want what is fair—for all of us.



Demonstrators at Woolworth's in New York City protest lunch-counter discrimination in the South in 1960.

McNeil: We just want what is fair—for all of us.

CLARENCE "CURLY" HARRIS (*rushing over*): What is the problem? What are you boys doing here?

RICHMOND: We would like to be served. Four coffees, please.

HARRIS: You know that we don't serve black folks here.

BLAIR: Excuse me, but I just got served at that counter over there. See my receipt? Isn't my money just as good here?

HARRIS: That's just the way it is. Rules are rules.

NARRATOR E: There is a pause. Then, as if for the first time . . .

MCCAIN: May we be served? Four coffees, please.

NARRATOR A: The manager will not budge, but neither do the four friends. They open their textbooks to read and sit in patient silence. Harris steps away to make a telephone call. A

few minutes later, a police officer arrives.

MCNEIL (*whispering to the others*): Remember to stay calm. Let's not give him any reason to get angry.

NARRATOR B: The officer seems more confused than angry at the sight of four black men sitting at a whites-only lunch counter. He and the manager step aside and whisper to each other.

HARRIS: They can't stay there! What will all of our white customers think?

POLICE OFFICER: I'll do what I can, Curly. But they don't seem to be breaking any law.

NARRATOR C: The four young men have stayed seated. When the police officer approaches, they hide their fear as best as they can.

POLICE OFFICER: OK, boys,



Blair: We're going to do the same thing every day until we get served.

From left: Joseph McNeil, Jibreel Khazan (formerly Ezell Blair Jr.), Franklin McCain, and David Richmond at the Woolworth lunch counter in 1960.

you've had your fun. Now move along.

RICHMOND: All we want is coffee, officer. We will wait.

NARRATOR D: For a while, nothing happens. Then an older white woman who had been sitting at the far end of the counter gathers her things to leave. On her way out, she marches toward the four young men.

MCCAIN (*whispering*): She looks about ready to claw our eyes out!

NARRATOR E: To their surprise, the woman smiles at them and pats McCain on the shoulder.

WOMAN: I am so proud of you. I only wish someone had done this years ago. It's about time things changed here!

NARRATOR A: No one serves the four young men, but they stay put, quietly reading their books until the store closes for the night.

SCENE 4

NARRATOR B: Word of the "sit-in" spreads quickly. Back on the A&T campus, other black

students are excited by the news.

CLASSMATE: What will you do next?

RICHMOND: We're going back there tomorrow—and the day after that.

BLAIR: And the day after that. We're going to do the same thing every day until we get served.

MCCAIN: Anyone want to join us?

NARRATOR C: Over the next few days, several other black students take part in the sit-in. The group soon becomes larger than the 66-seat lunch counter can handle. Those students who cannot sit stand quietly behind the others. Again, their polite requests for service are refused. Some whites yell curses or threats, but the students stay calm. They study quietly until closing time.

NARRATOR D: On the sit-in's fourth day, other students, black and white, start a sit-in at a store across the street. By the end of the week, more than 400 students are taking part. The Greensboro sit-ins make news nationwide. Soon, similar

protests are being held all over the South.

Epilogue

EPILOGUE NARRATOR: The protesters were yelled at, spat upon, and sometimes beaten. Many were arrested. In the first six months of sit-ins, more than 3,600 students went to jail. Often, they remained in their cells when offered a chance to leave, as another form of protest.

On July 25, 1960, the Greensboro Woolworth's lunch counter finally served blacks and whites alike. In time, racist rules began to crumble throughout the South. What four young men started in 1960 left its mark on an entire generation.

—Kathy Wilmore

BACK TO YOU

- Name an injustice that affects people today. What peaceable action could you take to try to spark change?