How the Children of Birmingham Changed the Civil-Rights Movement

Lottie L. Joiner

About the Author

Lottie L. Joiner, a writer based in Washington, D.C., covers social justice issues. She has written for The Washington Post, USA Today, and Essence Magazine, and is the senior editor of The Crisis magazine, the official publication of the NAACP.

BACKGROUND

In the 1960s, Birmingham, Alabama, remained one the nation’s most discriminatory cities. It was home to an exceedingly violent chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, and the state governor, George Wallace, was a leading and vocal opponent of integration. Because of its status as a stronghold of white supremacy, Birmingham was a major target of the civil rights movement.

Fifty years ago this month, Charles Avery left his high school in Jefferson County, Alabama, to lead about 800 of his fellow students on a 10-mile walk to Birmingham City. They were stopped by the sheriff’s department, arrested, and jailed. “I was put in the paddy wagon with Dick Gregory and his writer,” says Avery, who was 18 at the time and president of his senior class. “I would never forget that day.”

In 1963 Birmingham was known as one of the most racist cities in the South. Martin Luther King, Jr., had described it as a “symbol of hard-core resistance to integration.” Activists had nicknamed it Bombingham, because of the frequency of violent attacks against those fighting the system of segregation.

1. Dick Gregory (b. 1932) African American civil rights activist, writer, and comedian.
It was the Rev. James Bevel, a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and adviser to King, who came up with the idea of a protest group made up of children. In May 1963 they launched the Children’s Crusade and began a march on Birmingham. By the time Avery made it to the city May 7, more than 3,000 black young people were marching on the city.

It was King’s words that inspired 16-year-old Raymond Goolsby to participate in the march.

“Rev. Martin Luther King stood right beside me,” remembers Goolsby, 66. “He said, ‘I think it’s a mighty fine thing for children, what you’re doing because when you march, you’re really standing up; because a man can’t ride your back unless it is bent.’ And, boy, I mean he talked so eloquent and fast, after he finished his motivational speech, I was ready.”

On May 2, 1963, Goolsby joined thousands of students who left their classrooms and gathered at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. It was there where they spilled out in groups of 50 to march downtown. “My group was the first of 50 to march,” says Goolsby. “Our job was to decoy the police. We got arrested about a block and a half from 16th Street.”

The next day, the police, led by infamous commissioner of public safety Bull Connor, brought out fire hoses and attack dogs and turned them on the children. It was a scene that caused headlines across the nation and around the world.

“Pictures of the bravery and determination of the Birmingham children as they faced the brutal fire hoses and vicious police dogs were splashed on the front pages of newspapers all across America and helped turn the tide of public opinion in support of the civil-rights movement’s fight for justice,” says Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund.

Jessie Shepherd, then 16, was soaked when she was loaded up in a paddy wagon. “I was told not to participate,” says Shepherd, now a retired clinical diet technician. “But I was tired of the injustice.”

“I couldn’t understand why there had to be a colored fountain and a white fountain,” says Shepherd. “Why couldn’t I drink out the fountain that other little kids drank out of? As I got older, I understood that’s just the way it was, because my skin was black, and we were treated differently because of that.”

So she marched.

Soon the city’s jails were so overcrowded that students were sent to the local fairground. They slept on cots and sang freedom songs.

---

2. Southern Christian Leadership Conference civil rights organization founded by Martin Luther King, Jr., and others in 1957. The organization was hugely important in the civil rights movement and remains influential to this day.

3. Children’s Defense Fund organization founded in 1973 to provide a voice for American children and to protect and promote their rights.
songs while waiting for movement leaders to raise money for their bail.

“I didn’t anticipate the outcome being so drastic,” says Shepherd.

Gwen Gamble had just been released from jail and didn’t want to go back. Shortly before the crusade, the teenager had been arrested for participating in a lunch counter sit-in and jailed for five days. “We were put in with people who had actually broken the law. It was scary. They weren’t nice,” says Gamble, who was 15.

She and her two sisters were trained by the movement to be recruiters for the Children’s Crusade. On the first day of the march, they went to several schools and gave students the cue to leave. They then made their way to 16th Street Baptist.

“We left the church with our picket signs and our walking shoes,” says Gamble. “Some of us even had on our raincoats because we knew that we were going to be hosed down by the water hoses.”

Under intense public pressure, Birmingham negotiated a truce with King, and on May 10, Connor was removed from his position. The Children’s Crusade had worked.

“The Birmingham campaign was a crucial campaign,” says Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. “He had never led a massive campaign of civil disobedience before, and there were not enough adults prepared to be arrested. So the Children’s Crusade turned the tide of the movement.”

Carson also notes that had King failed in Birmingham, his legacy wouldn’t be what it is. “If he hadn’t won, there probably wouldn’t have been an ‘I Have a Dream’ speech or a Man of the Year award or a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964,” says Carson.

In honor of the 50th anniversary of the march, there will be a reenactment of the Children’s Crusade and the opening of an exhibit on the children’s march at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

Today Birmingham has an African-American mayor, a majority-black City Council, and a black superintendent of schools.

“Had it not been for those children going out in the streets of Birmingham making a difference, going to jail, protesting, I really don’t believe what we have today would be possible,” says Gamble. “I definitely say there would not be a Barack Obama.”

From The Daily Beast, May 2, 2013 © 2013 The Daily Beast Company LLC. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of this Content without express written permission is prohibited.
All I knew is I heard all this screaming and the people were turning and I saw this first part of the line running and stumbling back toward us. At that point, I was just off the bridge and on the side of the highway. And they came running and some of them were crying out and somebody yelled, “Oh, God, they’re killing us!” I think I just froze then. There were people everywhere, jamming against me, pushing against me. Then, all of a sudden, it stopped and everyone got down on their knees, and I did too, and somebody was saying for us to pray. But there was so much excitement it never got started, because everybody was talking and they were scared and we didn’t know what was happening or was going to happen. I remember looking toward...
the troopers and they were backing up, but some of them were standing over some of our people who had been knocked down or had fallen. It seemed like just a few seconds went by and I heard a shout. “Gas! Gas!” And everybody started screaming again. And I looked and I saw the troopers charging us again and some of them were swinging their arms and throwing canisters of tear gas. And beyond them I saw the horsemen starting their charge toward us. I was terrified. What happened then is something I’ll never forget as long as I live. Never. In fact, I still dream about it sometimes.

I saw those horsemen coming toward me and they had those awful masks on; they rode right through the cloud of tear gas. Some of them had clubs, others had ropes or whips, which they swung about them like they were driving cattle.

I’ll tell you, I forgot about praying, and I just turned and ran. And just as I was turning the tear gas got me; it burned my nose first and then got my eyes. I was blinded by the tears. So I began running and not seeing where I was going. I remember being scared that I might fall over the railing and into the water. I don’t know if I was screaming or not, but everyone else was. People were running and falling and ducking and you could hear the horses’ hooves on the pavement and you’d hear people scream and hear the whips swishing and you’d hear them striking the people. They’d cry out; some moaned. Women as well as men were getting hit. I never got hit, but one of the horses went right by me and I heard the swish sound as the whip went over my head and cracked some man across the back. It seemed to take forever to get across the bridge. It seemed I was running uphill for an awfully long time. They kept rolling canisters of tear gas on the ground, so it would rise up quickly. It was making me sick. I heard more horses and I turned back and saw two of them and the riders were leaning over to one side. It was like a nightmare seeing it through the tears. I just knew then that I was going to die, that those horses were going to trample me. So I kind of knelt down and held my hands and arms up over my head, and I must have been screaming—I don’t really remember.

All of a sudden somebody was grabbing me under the arms and lifting me up and running. The horses went by and I kept waiting to get trampled on or hit, but they went on by and I guess they were hitting at somebody else. And I looked up and saw it was Hosea Williams who had me and he was running but we didn’t seem to be moving, and I kept kicking my legs in the air,

1. Hosea Williams (1926–2000) African American civil rights leader, scientist, and politician. He was the leader of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.
trying to speed up, and I shouted at him, “Put me down! You can’t run fast enough with me!”

But he held on until we were off the bridge and down on Broad Street and he let me go. I didn’t stop running until I got home. All along the way there were people running in small groups; I saw people jumping over cars and being chased by the horsemen who kept hitting them. When I got to the apartments there were horsemen in the yards, galloping up and down, and one of them reared his horse up in the air as I went by, and he had his mask off and was shouting something at me.

When I got into the house my momma and daddy were there and they had this shocked look on their faces and I ran in and tried to tell them what had happened. I was maybe a little hysterical because I kept repeating over and over, “I can’t stop shaking, Momma, I can’t stop shaking,” and finally she grabbed me and sat down with me on her lap. But my daddy was like I’d never seen him before. He had a shotgun and he yelled, “By God, if they want it this way, I’ll give it to them!” And he started out the door. Momma jumped up and got in front of him shouting at him. And he said, “I’m ready to die; I mean it! I’m ready to die!” I was crying there on the couch, I was so scared. But finally he put the gun aside and sat down. I remember just laying there on the couch, crying and feeling so disgusted. They had beaten us like we were slaves.

Later that evening, Sheyann joined her friend Rachel at the church, where marchers and community members had gathered.

But then later in the night, maybe nine-thirty or ten, I don’t know for sure, all of a sudden somebody there started humming. I think they were moaning and it just went into the humming of a freedom song. It was real low, but some of us children began humming along, slow and soft. At first I didn’t even know what it was, what song, I mean. It was like a funeral sound, a dirge. Then I recognized it—Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Round. I’d never heard it or hummed it that way before. But it just started to catch on, and the people began to pick it up. It started to swell, the humming. Then we began singing the words. We sang, “Ain’t gonna let George Wallace turn me ’round.” And, “Ain’t gonna let Jim Clark turn me ’round.” “Ain’t gonna let no state trooper turn me ’round.”

And everybody’s singing now, and some of them are clapping their hands, and they’re still crying, but it’s a different kind of crying. It’s the kind of crying that’s got spirit, not the weeping they had been doing.

And me and Rachel are crying and singing and it just gets louder and louder. I know the state troopers outside the church
heard it. Everybody heard it. Because more people were coming in then, leaving their apartments and coming to the church—because something was happening.

We was singing and telling the world that we hadn’t been whipped, that we had won.

Just of a sudden something happened that night and we knew in that church that—Lord Almighty—we had really won, after all. We had won!
The Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Testing that decision, the “Little Rock Nine,” a group of African American teenagers, became the first black students to enroll at an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September of 1957. When school opened on September 4, the state governor called in the National Guard to prevent the students from entering the high school, but later that month President Eisenhower sent in federal troops to escort the nine students into the school.

Who doesn’t know that face?

It’s the face of a white girl—she was only 15 years old, but everyone always thinks her older than that, and judges her accordingly—shouting at an equally familiar, iconic figure: a sole black school girl dressed immaculately in white, her mournful and frightened eyes hidden behind sunglasses, clutching her books and walking stoically away from Little Rock Central High School on Sept. 4, 1957—the date when, in many ways, desegregation first hit the South where it hurt.

1. iconic (y KON ihk) adj. widely recognized and known.
2. stoically (STOH ihk lee) adv. acting without showing complaint or emotion.
It’s all in that white girl’s face, or so it has always appeared. In those raging eyes and clenched teeth is the hatred and contempt for an entire race, and the fury of a civilization fighting tenaciously to preserve its age-old, bigoted way of life. You know what the white girl’s saying, but you can’t print it all: commands to get out and go home—“home” being the place from which her forebears had been dragged in chains centuries earlier. That what that white girl was actually doing that day was more grabbing attention for herself than making any statement of deep conviction doesn’t really matter. Of anyone with that face, you simply assume the worst. You also assume she is beyond redemption, especially if, symbolically, she is more useful as is than further understood or evolved.

So how is it that 55 years later, it is this same white girl—even more than the black girl—who feels aggrieved, who considers herself the victim of intolerance, who has retreated into embittered sadness? How can it be that she, who was so prominent at the joyous 40th anniversary of the events in Little Rock, celebrated by President Bill Clinton among many others, was invisible at the 50th, and ever since?

The black girl is Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine. Moments earlier, she’d tried to enter Central High School, only to be repeatedly rebuffed by soldiers from the Arkansas National Guard placed there by Gov. Orval Faubus. A mob baying at her heels, Elizabeth is making her way, fearfully but determinately, toward what she hoped would be the relative safety of the bus stop a block away.

The face belongs to Hazel Bryan. Hazel, the daughter of a disabled war veteran, was largely apolitical, even on matters of race; while sharing the prejudices of her parents, she cared far more about dancing and dating. Being in that crowd that morning, making a ruckus, out-shouting all of her friends, was a way of getting noticed, and far more exciting than going into class. She’d thought nothing would come of what she’d done, and nothing ever would have had she not been captured in mid-epithet by Will Counts, a young photographer for the Arkansas Democrat.

If anyone in the picture, which reverberated throughout the world that day and in history books ever since, should feel aggrieved, it’s of course Elizabeth Eckford. What Counts had captured both symbolized and anticipated the ordeals that Elizabeth, a girl of unusual sensitivity and intelligence, would face in her lifetime. First came the hellish year she and other black students endured inside Central, and then decades in which the trauma from that experience, plus prejudice, poverty,

3. apolitical (ay puht LIHT uhl kuhl) adj. not interested or involved in politics.
family tragedy, and her own demons kept her from realizing her extraordinary potential.

With enormous courage and resiliency, Elizabeth ultimately made a life for herself and has largely come to peace with her past. Paradoxically, it’s been Hazel, who has led a life of far greater financial and familial security, who now feels wounded and angry. Someone who once embodied racial intolerance feels victimized by another form of prejudice, in which good deeds go unappreciated, forgiveness cannot possibly be won, and public statements of contrition breed only resentment and ridicule.

Concerned over her sudden notoriety, only days after the infamous photograph appeared, Hazel’s parents transferred her from Central to a rural high school closer to home. She never spent a day in school with the Little Rock Nine and played no part in the horrors to which administrators, either lax or actually sympathetic to a small group of segregationist troublemakers, allowed them to be subjected. And she left her new school at 17, got married, and began a family.

But Hazel Bryan Massery was curious, and reflective. Tuning in her primitive Philco with the rabbit ears her father had bought her, she heard the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and saw those black protesters getting hot coffee and ketchup poured on their heads at segregated lunch counters or being routed by fire hoses and German shepherds. Such scenes brought home to her the reality of racial hatred, and of her own small but conspicuous contribution to it. One day, she realized, her children would learn that that snarling girl in their history books was their mother. She realized she had an account to settle.

Sometime in 1962 or 1963—no cameras recorded the scene, and she didn’t mark anything down—Hazel, sitting in the trailer in rural Little Rock in which she and her family now lived, picked up the Little Rock directory, and looked under “Eckford.” Then, without telling her husband or pastor or anyone else, she dialed the number. Between sobs, she told Elizabeth that she was that girl, and how sorry she was. Elizabeth was gracious. The conversation lasted a minute, if that. In the South, in the ’60s, how much more did a white girl and a black girl have to say to one another?

Still, Hazel never stopped thinking about the picture and making amends for it. She severed what had been her ironclad ties to an intolerant church. She taught mothering skills to unmarried black women, and took underprivileged black teenagers on field trips. She frequented the black history section at the local Barnes & Noble, buying books by Cornel West and Shelby Steele and

---

4. *paradoxically* (par uh DOK sihk lee) adv. unusually, as opposed to what one might expect.
the companion volume to *Eyes on the Prize*. She’d argue with her mother on racial topics, defending relatives who’d intermarried. Secretly, Hazel always hoped some reporter would track her down and write about how she’d changed. But it didn’t happen on its own, and she did nothing to make it happen. Instead, again and again, there was the picture. Anniversary after anniversary, Martin Luther King Day after Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month after Black History Month, it just kept popping up. The world of race relations was changing, but to the world, she never did.

Finally, on the 40th anniversary of Central’s desegregation in 1997, Will Counts returned to Little Rock and arranged for Elizabeth and Hazel to pose for him again. Hazel was thrilled, Elizabeth, curious. Their first meeting was predictably awkward, but the new picture, showing the two women smiling in front of Central, revealed only the barest hint of that. It all but took over the next day’s *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, and very nearly upstaged President Clinton’s speech the next day, in which he worked in a reference to them both. Soon, a poster-sized version of the picture was available: “Reconciliation,” it said. Everyone rejoiced; thanks to Elizabeth and Hazel, Little Rock, maligned for 40 years, bathed in instant absolution.

Then, quietly, Elizabeth and Hazel discovered something quite miraculous: They actually liked each other. For all their differences—Elizabeth was better-read, Hazel’s life far better-balanced—they shared a good deal. Both were introspective, skeptical, a bit isolated; neither fit in anywhere, including in their own families. They visited one another’s homes, took trips together, spoke to schools and civic groups. In the process, Hazel helped pull Elizabeth out of her shell, then to blossom. Unemployed, on mental health disability for years, Elizabeth soon returned to work, as a probation officer for a local judge. Two years after they’d first met, the pair even appeared on *Oprah*.

Winfrey hadn’t bothered hiding her incredulity, even disdain, that day: Of all people, these two were now friends? But as rude as both felt her to have been, she’d been on to something. The improbable relationship had already begun to unravel.

A student of, and stickler for, history, Elizabeth looked for—and, she thought, spotted—holes in Hazel’s story. How, for instance, could Hazel have undertaken something so cruel so casually, then remembered so little about it afterward? And why, after all these years, did she absolve her parents from any blame? At their joint appearances, Elizabeth could treat Hazel impatiently,

---

5. *absolution* (ab suh LOO shuhn) *n.* forgiveness.
Meantime, others in the Little Rock Nine either shunned Hazel or complained of her presence at various commemorations.

But resentment came as well from whites, particularly whites who’d attended Central, particularly those from better families, who’d thought that, even by always looking the other way, they’d done absolutely nothing wrong during those dark days and, truth be told, considered Hazel and her ilk “white trash.” Forty years earlier she’d given them all a black eye; now, she was back, more conspicuous, and embarrassing, than ever. At a reunion she foolishly, or naively, attended, she felt their cold shoulder, and could hear their snickers. None of them had ever apologized for anything they’d done or not done, and, as far as Hazel could tell, they’d been none the worse for their silence.

Ultimately, it grew too much for Hazel. She cut off ties with Elizabeth—for her, Sept. 11, 2011, marked another anniversary: 10 years had passed since they’d last spoken—and stopped making public appearances with her. Her interviews with me—granted only with great reluctance—will, she says, be her last. When I asked the two women to pose together one last time, Elizabeth agreed; Hazel would not. Hazel was poised to vote for Obama in 2008; after all, even her own mother did. But so deep was her hurt that she found some excuse not to.

So the famous photograph of 1957 takes on additional meaning: the continuing chasm between the races and the great difficulty, even among people of good will, to pull off real racial reconciliation. But shuffling back and forth between them, I could see that for all their harsh words—over the past decade, they’ve only dug in their heels—they still missed one another. Each, I noticed, teared up at references to the other. Perhaps, when no one is looking—or taking any pictures—they’ll yet come together again. And if they can, maybe, so too can we.