



Ayanna Najuma: Sitting in for Change

A TRIP UP NORTH

In 1957, seven-year-old Ayanna Najuma took a trip to New York City. She had never been that far from her Oklahoma City home. Ayanna was part of the NAACP Youth Council, a group of children fighting for equal rights for Black Americans. The group traveled almost 1,500 miles by bus to perform a play about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called *Brother President*.

On the trip, Ayanna noticed that things were different in Northern cities. Black and white people could eat in the same restaurants, shop in the same stores and use the same bathrooms. Black people in the North faced prejudice, but their communities were less *segregated*. Ayanna wondered how she could make things more equal in her own city.

TAKING ACTION AGAINST SEGREGATION

After their trip to New York, Ayanna and the Youth Council met with community leaders. They spent a year discussing ways to do something about segregation. Then they decided to take action.

Katz Drug Store was a big chain with more than 30 stores. Only white people were allowed to eat at their lunch counters. Black people could buy food there but had to eat outside. Ayanna and the Youth Council planned a “sit-in” with the help of their parents and group leaders.

On August 19, 1958, Ayanna and 12 other young people took seats at the food counter of the downtown Katz Drug Store. They were told to leave but stayed until the store closed. They came back the next day and the one after that. People threatened them, spat at them and dumped soda and ketchup on them. The children braved the disrespectful treatment and sat peacefully. Then, on the third day, they got the news—Katz Drug Store would change their policy and begin serving Black people. Ayanna ordered a hamburger and Coke. It was a taste of freedom that she would never forget.

YOUTH IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Ayanna and the Youth Council continued their sit-ins over the next seven years. They helped to end segregation in restaurants across Oklahoma City.

In 1960, a group of college students led a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Hundreds of people joined over several days. News cameras showed up to report the story. The



Segregated means separated by race. From the 1870s to the 1960s, segregation laws in the U.S. (known as “Jim Crow”) separated Black people in almost every part of society, including schools, transportation, hospitals, theaters, parks and more.



AYANNA NAJUMA: SITTING IN FOR CHANGE (CONTINUED)



Freedom riders arrive in Jackson, Mississippi, 1961.

sit-in movement spread quickly. In just two months, more than 50,000 youth in 13 states were sitting in. They sat in restaurants, hotels, libraries, department stores and other segregated places. They were insulted, beaten, burned with hot coffee and dragged to jail. Yet the students remained determined and continued sitting until businesses and services across the South agreed to end segregation.

The sit-in movement was so successful that the students decided to take further action. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The youth must take the freedom struggle into every community in the South." The sit-in leaders gathered for a meeting in April 1960. They decided to form a group called the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC ('snick') for short.

SNCC helped to organize the "freedom rides" in 1961. Participants rode buses throughout the South to protest segregated bus stations. SNCC also helped to plan the 1963 "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Over 250,000 people turned out to demand equal rights for Black Americans. The following year, SNCC worked to pass a new law. The 1964 Civil Rights Act ended segregation in public places throughout the U.S. The law also made it illegal to discriminate against people because of their skin color and other parts of their identity such as race, religion, national origin, etc.

The actions taken by Ayanna, SNCC and other youth led to to greater freedom for Black Americans. Young people today are carrying on this work by fighting for justice in education, policing and other areas. They are all part of one struggle to end discrimination and ensure equality for all.

THINK ABOUT IT...

- 1 How do you think segregation affected both Black and white people?
- 2 How do you think the children prepared to respond to mean behavior peacefully?
- 3 What did the sit-in movement teach you about how to change unfair behaviors or rules?
- 4 Why did Dr. King believe it was important for young people to be leaders in the civil rights movement?
- 5 What do you want to learn more about after reading this article? Why?

SOURCES

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Policemen watch as "Freedom riders" arrive in Jackson, Mississippi on a Trailways bus. Mississippi Jackson, 1961. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98501400>.

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