

Belles part of Woolworth sit-in history, too

By Tammi McCall
Banner Reporter

In the deepest corner of the F.W. Woolworth in downtown, Greensboro, four idle bar stools launched a civil rights movement that would place four NC A&T students in the national spotlight of history. What many don't know is that those same bar stools represent the continuation of a movement started by Bennett Belles. Together the Bennett and A&T students sparked a national protest for equality and human rights.

Six months before the initial lunch counter sit-in, the Bennett Student Government Association in conjunction with A&T's SGA conceived a plan that would allow blacks to be seated at the same lunch counter as whites in restaurants.

Gloria Brown Wise (now deceased), Bennett's SGA president in 1960 would make the connection that would link Bennett students to the 1960 sit-ins at 132 S. Elm St.

In September 1959 at least 20 Bennett students began crossing the tracks to conspire with A&T students before the initial sit-ins took place. Among those students was Roslyn Cheagle, who witnessed the historical event. She recalls why she was a part of the movement.

"It was a way of life," she said. "You don't do it with expectations of becoming a part of history."

Cheagle said that blacks were well aware of their history in the 1950s and 1960s. They knew about the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation and the Montgomery bus boycotts. Nothing was new to them.

"It was survival," Cheagle said.

Cheagle knew that Bennett's part in the protest would soon come. The students met with Dr. Willa B. Player, Bennett's president in 1960, to inform her of Bennett's role in the protest.

"There was no way she wouldn't approve," Cheagle reflected.

"Bennett was there to provide a service. Brotherhood and peace were instilled into our minds, so of course we were in on it from the start,"

Cheagle said.

Feb. 1 was the day the students would make their move. However, Bennett students would not take part in that first protest.

According to Ellease Colston, a 1953 Bennett graduate, the decision to eliminate Belles from the Feb. 1 protest was based on concern for the safety of the ladies.

"The students felt as if they should test the waters first," said Colston, who began her career at Bennett in 1954 and is currently director of Alumnae Affairs at Bennett.

Colston said that the A&T students involved in organizing the protest, along with the Bennett students, agreed that it would not have been a safe move for the women to participate that first day. However, once the first four students launched the sit-in movement as planned Bennett students joined in.

"We all marched to Woolworth the next day. They closed the lunch counter and we were jailed," Cheagle said.

Dr. Player contacted the students' parents and inform them of their child's imprisonment and safety.

Dr. Player negotiated with officials and within an hour the Bennett students were released from jail.

"Oh, we (blacks) filled the jail. There was no more room for anyone, so students were soon processed in the county home on Burlington highway," Colston said.

Colston said that Dr. Player then met with the students to calm them down for a few days so that she could do more negotiating. However, it wasn't long before the students were back at it again. Students in Raleigh, Durham, Alabama and all over the south began to sit-in at restaurants to proclaim their freedom.

Even students from Women's College, now UNCG, participated in the movement. Marches began and then adults would join in the protests.

Students of the 1960s endured beatings and were doused with food as they sat at lunch counters studying and protesting non-violently at the same time. All odds were against them. They still

overcame.

Today the Woolworth's downtown has been designated as civil rights museum with the help of funding. An organization, Sit-In Movement Incorporated, founded by County Commissioner Melvin "Skip" Alston and Greensboro City Council member Earl Jones, currently have an option to buy the building from its owner, First Citizens Bank for \$700,000.

Plans for the building include renovation and construction of facilities such as research laboratories, workshop space, classrooms where college and high school students may receive academic credit, a bookstore. The historical lunch-counter will open as a working cafe, which will serve as a centerpiece for the museum.

As the four young men sat in protest at bar stools in the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter Feb. 1, 1960, a black waitress approached them and asked, "What are you boys doing here? You know you are not supposed to sit here. You are a disgrace to our race!"

Six months later on July 25, the F.W. Woolworth Company in Greensboro served its first blacks: Bennett College women were there.



photo by Phanalphie Rhue

No more sitting around

Woolworth patrons sit at the bar stools which mark a phenomenon in black history. The bar stools have been contributed to the Smithsonian Institute for preservation.

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