

GREENSBORO'S BEST-KEPT SECRETS

Placing the Greensboro sit-in movement in context



By Eric Ginsburg

Feb. 1 marks the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Greensboro sit-ins. On that day in 1960, four black A&T students sat at the segregated Woolworth's lunch counter downtown. Their action against white supremacy was one of the catalysts for a new wave of student participation in the Civil Rights movement.

A series of commemorative events will mark the opening of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum on the site where Woolworth's once was. A press release published Jan. 20 announced a ribbon-cutting event at 8 a.m. on Feb. 1 that will be free and open to the public.

"This (museum) stands as a physical testament to the courage, sacrifice and commitment those four young men demonstrated 50 years ago," said Melvin "Skip" Alston, chairman and co-founder of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum.

The actions of the A&T Four are frequently removed from the historical context that gave rise to the sit-ins. Many people are unaware that the demonstrations grew into months of protest and involved thousands of Greensboro residents. The sit-ins may have marked the beginning of a new phase of struggle, but they were deeply rooted in the history of resistance in Greensboro.

"A story that has often been told about Civil Rights is about heroes like Martin Luther King, and to a lesser extent women like Rosa Parks," said community & justice studies professor Sherry Giles. "It leaves out the history of the grassroots that makes movements like the sit-ins so powerful."

Black Greensboro residents who were actively engaged in challenging the white power structure in the 1950s set the stage for

the sit-in movement. After a number of lawsuits, a city-owned golf course was successfully desegregated in 1955, and residents were engaged in pushing for full access to public pools.

Another crucial factor leading up to the movement was the rising frustration over white attempts to thwart desegregation. After the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision declared segregation illegal, the black community in Greensboro grew angrier about the slow progress of integration.

Greensboro has a reputation as a city that prides itself on civilities, which is often used as an excuse to stall attempts at change. Commonly called the "progressive myth," this approach was utilized by the City Council and white business community in response to the Civil Rights movement and other grassroots attempts to eradicate racism.

"The Progressive Myth insists that Greensboro is a progressive city and that Greensboro's leaders are progressive, diligently working to improve racial and economic conditions for all," writes Randy Johnston on his Web site, ProgressiveMyth.com. "(It) is an impressively bold lie, repeated so often and in so many ways that it is accepted as truth by much of the community."

Not all white Greensboro residents were so reactionary. White store-owner Ralph Johns provided advice and support to the A&T Four, and called a reporter on Feb. 1 to cover the sit-in on their behalf. Other white Greensboro residents joined black students on the picket line.

"They were met by members of white gangs who waved confederate flags," explains William Chafe in his book "Civilities and Civil Rights", which is all about Greensboro. "Carrying small American flags purchased in advance by student leaders, the (A&T) football team then formed a flying wedge that moved through the whites to permit new demonstrators to replace those at the lunch counters."

Some of the city's leadership attempted to



negotiate between demonstrators and segregated business owners, and students agreed to hold off on protests as talks continued. When they fell apart at the end of March 1960, regular picketing and demonstrations immediately resumed. Roughly 1,200 A&T and Bennett students headed downtown to carry on the struggle.

As the school year ended and many white residents hoped for an end to the demonstrations, college movement leaders like Lewis Brandon III prepared residents and high school students to continue the movement on a daily basis. Brandon, who joined the sit-ins on the second day, is one of the organizers who are referred to as "fifth men" to the A&T Four because of their role in orchestrating community support.

An economic boycott of segregated businesses drew on the participation of the broader black community with significant financial implications for many businesses. Community leaders like Bennett College President Willa Player stood firmly beside students. On July 25, Woolworth's conceded defeat, officially opening its lunch

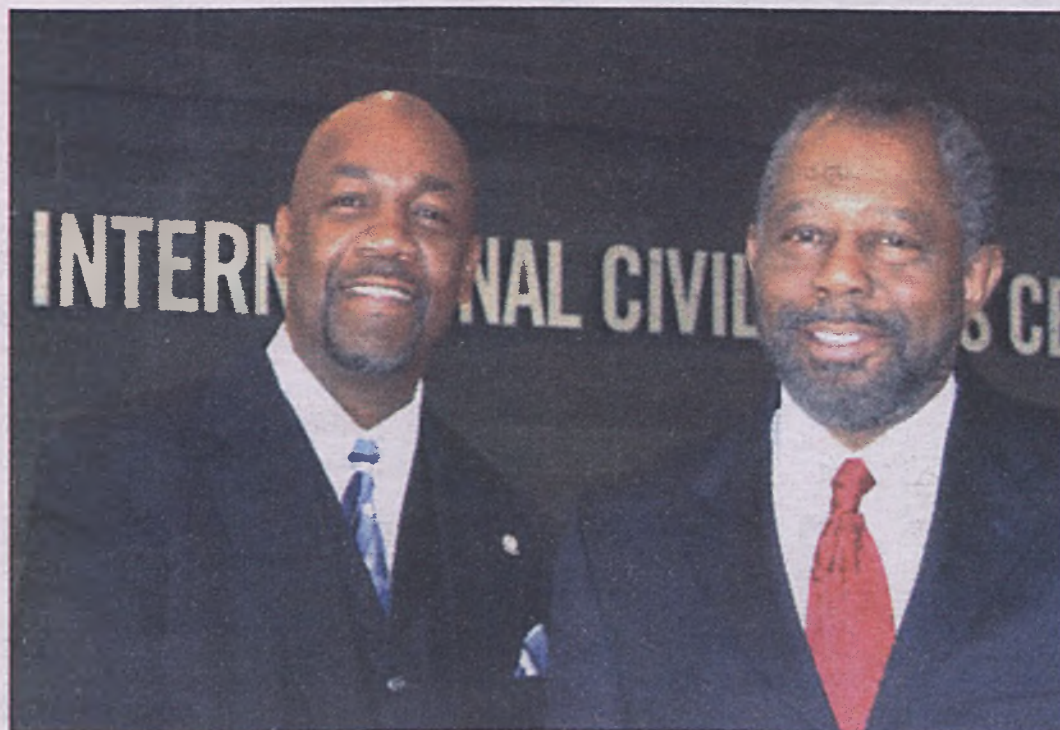
counters to black patrons.

While remembering the cataclysmic contributions of the A&T Four, it is imperative that the movement as a whole is recognized. As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the sit-ins, it is crucial that the full historical context is included.

"The sit-in demonstrations represented a dramatic extension of, rather than a departure from, traditional patterns of black activism in Greensboro," writes Chafe.

With luck, the opening of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum will allow residents and tourists to dig into the complexities of the sit-in movement and draw essential connections to the persisting issues in Greensboro today.

"Nobody can ever be certain that what they will do will make as much difference as they made," said Greensboro community activist Ed Whitfield. "(The A&T Four) couldn't have been sure what they did would have world-changing implications, but it did. It proves that it's possible, and since it's possible, there is a responsibility to always try and make a change."



(Above) Guilford County Commissioner **Melvin "Skip" Alston** and Rep. **Earl Jones**, co-founders of the museum, stand in front of the civil rights center. (Right) The original portion of the lunch counter and stools where the four students sat on Feb. 1, 1960, still stands in its original location in the building. (Top right) The museum faces N. Elm St, awaiting the grand opening.



Photos Courtesy of sitinmovement.org

International Civil Rights Center & Museum



Feb. 8 @ 8 a.m.
301 North Elm Street