



## Nurses In The Civil Rights Movement

By: **Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN**

### Abstract

A black student at a “whites-only” Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina; a Freedom Rider in Jackson, Mississippi; a participant in the March on Washington; a community organizer for the Freedom Summer; two marchers from Selma to Montgomery—one a black nun, the other a white activist murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. What these women have in common—in addition to being dedicated civil rights activists—is that they were nurses. One hundred years after slavery African Americans in the South were still subject to the Jim Crow laws that banned them from using public, tax-supported, “whites-only” facilities—including schools, libraries, parks, and hospitals. In the 1950s and 1960s, as increasing numbers of Americans became aware of these injustices, the desire for racial equality reached its peak and the civil rights movement was born. This article highlights the experiences of five nurses and one nursing student who joined tens of thousands of other citizens in taking a stand for social justice.

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# Nurses in the Civil Rights Movement

Six brave, committed health care workers who joined the struggle for racial equality. **By Phoebe Pollitt, PhD, RN**

The time is always right to do what is right.  
—Martin Luther King Jr.

A black student at a “whites-only” Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina; a Freedom Rider in Jackson, Mississippi; a participant in the March on Washington; a community organizer for the Freedom Summer; two marchers from Selma to Montgomery—one a black nun, the other a white activist murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. What these women have in common—in addition to being dedicated civil rights activists—is that they were nurses.

One hundred years after slavery African Americans in the South were still subject to the Jim Crow laws that banned them from using public, tax-supported, “whites-only” facilities—including schools, libraries, parks, and hospitals. In the 1950s and 1960s, as increasing numbers of Americans became aware of these injustices, the desire for racial equality reached its peak and the civil rights movement was born. This article highlights the experiences of five nurses and one nursing student who joined tens of thousands of other citizens in taking a stand for social justice.

## SIT-IN PARTICIPANT: CLARA ADAMS-ENDER

On February 1, 1960, four African American students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University walked from their campus to Woolworth’s five-and-dime store in downtown Greensboro, sat at the “whites-only” lunch counter, and ordered a meal. Within a week, they were joined by over 300 local African American and white college students who risked severe consequences for their actions, including expulsion, arrest, and violent confrontations with angry white citizens.<sup>1</sup>

Among the students who sat down at Woolworth’s was Clara Leach Adams-Ender, a nursing student at the university.

Adams-Ender came from a sharecropping family of nine children living in a substandard home in Wake



Brigadier General Clara Adams-Ender. Photo courtesy of Brigadier General Adams-Ender.

County, North Carolina, with no access to running water or electricity. She missed many days at her segregated public school, frequently having to work in the tobacco fields to help her family earn money. By 1960, when she chose to protest racial segregation by breaking the law at Woolworth’s, she was determined to strive for a better life for herself and for other African Americans. She recalled her experiences at the lunch counter in her autobiography, *My Rise to the Stars: How a Sharecropper’s Daughter Became an Army General*<sup>2</sup>:

We went down in bunches of four and five and I made several trips. During the first one, my stomach felt like a mass of braided steel as I sat down at the lunch counter and ordered a hamburger and a Coke.



Nurses and other health care workers at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, march under the banner of the Medical Committee for Civil Rights (MCCR). The inset shows Rachel Robinson (right), a national vice chairman of the MCCR, walking beneath one of the RN placards with public health nurse Ethel Underwood. These photos appeared in the October 1963 issue of *AJN*.

The manager, a burly white man with salt and pepper hair, a red face and a red neck, had a rather nasty air about him as he ambled over to us.

“We don’t serve nigras in this place.” . . . Mr. Red Face just walked away. I was worried that he might call the police, but fortunately he didn’t. So we just sat at the counter and were treated like invisible people until our protest shift was over.

To avoid a prolonged legal and public relations fiasco, the managers of Woolworth’s began serving African Americans at the lunch counter after only three weeks of protests. The Greensboro sit-ins galvanized thousands—especially college students—to organize more sit-ins, marches, picket lines, voter registration drives, and other forms of protest against segregation throughout the South.<sup>1</sup>

In 1962, 18 months after the sit-ins, Adams-Ender earned her bachelor of science in nursing. She then joined the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, eventually rising to its highest rank of brigadier general. She went on to earn two master’s degrees—one in medical–surgical nursing from the University of Minnesota and one

in military arts from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

Today she continues to advocate policies that help ensure racial and gender equity in the U.S. Army and beyond. One recent example of her continuing activism was her participation in 2014 as one of three generals on the Planning Commission on Transgender Military Service, whose goal was to research and implement policies to allow transgendered people to serve openly in the armed forces.<sup>3</sup>

Looking back on her life and career, Adams-Ender reflects,<sup>4</sup>

In nearly 40 years of leading and managing people, I had observed and witnessed how many people allow obstacles to slow or stop their progress in reaching their goals. They viewed obstacles negatively and as something that was designed to inhibit progress. I desired to convey a positive view of obstacles. . . . Obstacles are not really there to stop one’s progress. They are really opportunities for us to decide how we will overcome them to reach our goals. If we keep the goal in mind, then we can decide if we will go over, under, around or

through the obstacle to accomplish it. I wanted others to know that they had choices in how they viewed obstacles and how they took action afterward.

### **FREEDOM RIDER: CLAIRE O'CONNOR**

On May 4, 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—a national organization that played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement—began to test the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling that segregation on interstate buses and trains was unconstitutional.<sup>5</sup> To that end, it introduced what became known as Freedom Rides, prompting African American and white CORE members and allies—known as Freedom Riders—to board buses in Northern states and sit together near the front, keeping their seats as the bus rolled southward and entered states with segregation laws, where African Americans were legally forced to sit in the back. In North Carolina and Tennessee, the Freedom Riders encountered only minor hostility; but as they traveled further south, the bus carrying the first group was set on fire, with the Freedom Riders inside. The riders barely escaped with their lives.

Soon others were inspired to join the rides, despite frequent intimidation by whites along the way. Although they took different bus routes through the southern states, all Freedom Riders ended their journey in Jackson, Mississippi, where they knew they would be arrested and jailed. Approximately 300 Freedom Riders served time in Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary, notorious for the guards' ill treatment of activists, who were beaten, strip-searched, and given inedible food.<sup>5</sup>

Among these Freedom Riders was a 19-year-old white nurse named Claire O'Connor from Minneapolis. Born to an Irish immigrant, union-organizer father

and a politically active mother, O'Connor attended her first demonstration as a baby in her mother's arms. In 1960, while in high school, she earned her LPN certificate, and went on to work on a pediatric unit to earn money while she completed a degree in anthropology at the University of Minnesota.

In June 1961, O'Connor, by then an active CORE member, joined five male University of Minnesota students on a Freedom Ride. Already familiar with two of the men, she felt empowered by her association with a group of people with shared ideals. They reached Nashville, Tennessee, on June 10, 1961, where they were trained in techniques of nonviolence by staff from the Highlander Folk School, an interracial, ecumenical conference center and training school for those interested in social change.<sup>6</sup> The day after their training, O'Connor and her group boarded a bus for Jackson. At the Jackson bus terminal, O'Connor was arrested for "breach of the peace" because she had used the restroom for "Colored Women." She was sentenced to the Hinds County Jail for nearly two weeks before being transferred to Parchman Penitentiary. But after 30 days she was bailed out because she needed to return to her nursing job in Minnesota.<sup>7</sup>

The widely reported inhumane prison conditions experienced by the Freedom Riders caused public outrage and resulted in relatively quick action by the federal government: on September 22, 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission implemented full racial integration on buses and trains as well as in depots and stations across the country.<sup>5</sup>

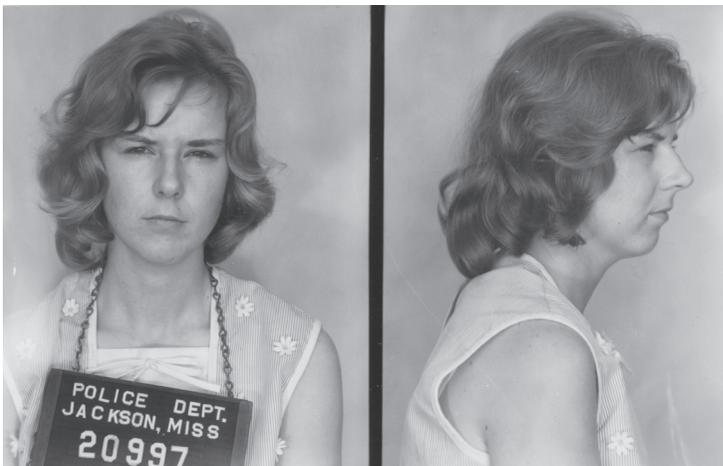
Speaking of her experience as a Freedom Rider O'Connor has said, "If you do something, you can bring about change. . . . It's the power of the people acting together—that's what makes change."<sup>8</sup>

In 1964, after graduating from the University of Minnesota, O'Connor returned to Mississippi as a volunteer community organizer for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), where she focused on voter registration in Panola County, Mississippi. She also made full use of her nursing skills, administering first aid to fellow activists who were attacked with electric cattle prods and police dogs, providing informal care to locals, and offering classes on birth control.

After leaving Mississippi, she married and had a family, earned a master's degree in adult education, and took additional graduate courses in anthropology. O'Connor spent many years as an administrator, coordinating services for battered women and running a clinic for sexually active teens. Today she follows another passion—pottery—and, inspired by health care models in Europe and Canada, advocates universal health care in the United States.

### **MARCH ON WASHINGTON: RACHEL ROBINSON**

On August 28, 1963, over 250,000 Americans of various races and religions gathered in Washington, DC,



Claire O'Connor, after her arrest for using the restroom marked "Colored Women" in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1961. Photo courtesy of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>9</sup> They peacefully demonstrated their support for the passage of a civil rights bill outlawing segregation in public accommodations, and for creating jobs for the unemployed.<sup>10</sup> The largest demonstration ever held in the nation's capital, the march was a watershed moment in the struggle for civil rights, culminating with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

In 1972, following her husband's death, Robinson became president of the Jackie Robinson Development Corporation.<sup>17</sup> During the decade she was at its helm the corporation built more than 1,300 units of affordable housing. She also created the Jackie Robinson Foundation, which has provided four-year college scholarships to more than 1,400 deserving students.<sup>17</sup> Robinson has earned many awards, including 12 honorary doctorates, the Candace Award

## O'Connor made full use of her nursing skills, administering first aid to fellow activists who were attacked with electric cattle prods and police dogs.

Among the participants in the march were members of the Medical Committee for Civil Rights (MCCR), a coalition of health care workers and organizations—including the American Nurses Association (ANA)—that provided emergency health care to civil rights activists and in minority communities.<sup>10, 11</sup> Rachel Robinson, an African American nurse, served as a national vice chairman of the MCCR.<sup>10</sup> In that capacity she successfully encouraged individual nurses, as well as the ANA, to endorse and participate in the march.

Born on July 19, 1922, in Los Angeles, Rachel Annetta Isum Robinson graduated from the five-year nursing program at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1945, at a time when very few nurses or African Americans earned baccalaureates.<sup>12</sup> Robinson delayed her nursing career to marry baseball great and civil rights pioneer Jackie Robinson, and to raise their children. Both Robinsons were very active in the civil rights movement, especially in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), raising thousands of dollars for civil rights causes.<sup>13</sup> Their annual jazz concerts, begun in 1963 to raise bail money for jailed activists, continued for a decade and featured prominent musicians such as Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and Sarah Vaughan.

Robinson's career in health care was as distinguished as her activism. After earning her master's degree in psychiatric nursing from New York University in 1959, she worked as a researcher and nurse therapist at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, later becoming nursing director of the Connecticut Mental Health Center and an assistant professor in the Yale School of Nursing.<sup>14, 15</sup> Throughout her career she remained an advocate for the humane treatment of people with mental illness.<sup>16</sup>

for Distinguished Service from the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Equitable Life Black Achiever's Award, and the Associated Black Charities Black History Makers Award.<sup>18</sup>

Ongoing demonstrations in the months that followed the March on Washington pressured political leaders to act. In the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, President Lyndon Johnson broke through the legislative stalemate in Congress and on July 2, 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law. Recalling the march for a special issue of *Time* magazine, Robinson said,<sup>9</sup>

The spirit in the whole setting was so exciting, so positive, so hopeful. . . . We felt very enthusiastic about everything. . . . And it turned out to be an extraordinary experience for all of us: for the children and for Jack and I, because we had never worked on anything of that magnitude or seen that kind of support for equal opportunities, which is what we had been hoping for for many years.

### FREEDOM SUMMER: JOSEPHINE DISPARTI

Freedom Summer, also known as the Mississippi Summer Project, was an intensive voter registration and community organizing campaign held in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. Nearly 1,500 white and African American activists spent 10 weeks working with local citizens to end the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South.<sup>19</sup> Among the participants were many white students, along with members of the clergy, attorneys, and 50 medical professionals from the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR; formerly the MCCR).<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the Mississippi Summer Project, state and local law enforcement officers and the Ku Klux



Josephine Disparti. Photo courtesy of Josephine Disparti.

Klan carried out violent attacks, including bombings, arson, beatings, shootings, false arrests, and the murder of at least three civil rights activists. The MCHR volunteer manual explained the acute need for health professionals to join Freedom Summer<sup>20</sup>:

Under the Jim Crow segregation system, many hospitals and white doctors in the deep South refused to admit or treat Black patients, no matter how ill or injured they were. And of those few willing to care for African-Americans, fewer still were willing to risk the wrath of the White Citizens Council and Ku Klux Klan by treating civil rights workers. It often took hours to get ill or wounded Movement activists to a hospital or to a doctor who would treat them.

discrimination. During that time she became active in several organizations, including CORE, through which she heard about the call for Mississippi Summer Project volunteers. Assigned to work in rural Mileston, in Holmes County, she was staying in the home of a local civil rights activist when, in her first week, night riders fired shots into the bedroom where she was sleeping.<sup>21</sup> Undaunted, she became involved with other health care professionals through the MCHR, providing medical care to protesters who were beaten or gassed during demonstrations. Often, under cover of night and unbeknownst to plantation owners and overseers—even hiding on the floor of the car—she visited ill, injured, or pregnant African American sharecroppers and arranged for them to receive medical care.<sup>21</sup>

Disparti also helped organize the Holmes County Health Improvement Association to encourage local residents to become more involved in the politics surrounding health care.<sup>22</sup> At a health department meeting in the state capitol in Jackson, she and others in the association reported on the wretched living conditions of African Americans and the lack of health care, and asked for funding to provide better public health services. Their requests were denied, perhaps because the Holmes County health officer was himself the owner of a local plantation.

That same summer Disparti also established a small nursing clinic in Mileston where she dispensed first aid and health education; eventually it grew into a part-time clinic where local African American health care providers administered care. She was also the first nurse to work at the two health centers for low-income African Americans established by the MCHR: one in Mound Bayou, in the Mississippi Delta, and the other in Columbia Point—an impoverished, minority neighborhood in Boston.

After finally receiving her master's in public health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,

## **Under cover of night, Disparti visited ill, injured, or pregnant African American sharecroppers and arranged for them to receive medical care.**

Josephine “Jo” Disparti was among the nurse activists involved in Freedom Summer. She grew up in Niagara Falls, New York, and graduated from Niagara University in 1959 with a bachelor's degree in nursing. While pursuing a master's degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, she practiced public health nursing in the community and witnessed her patients suffering from poverty, hunger, and racial

Disparti became an advocate for mental health patients. She moved to New York City where she earned a doctorate in education from Teachers College at Columbia University, and taught nursing at the City College of New York. She later worked for the National League for Nursing, testing and accrediting community health and home care agencies. Active in her retirement, she is now fighting for universal



Sister Antona Ebo (fourth from left), one of six Catholic nuns from St. Mary's Infirmary in St. Louis, leads the second Selma to Montgomery march on March 9, 1965. This photograph appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on March 10, 1965. Photo © Associated Press.

single-payer health coverage through such organizations as Physicians for a National Health Program and Healthcare-NOW.

### **SELMA TO MONTGOMERY: SISTER ANTONA EBO AND VIOLA LIUZZO**

Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade voting discrimination, most African Americans met fierce resistance in Southern states when they tried to vote in the 1964 presidential election. To disqualify potential African American voters, the all-white state boards of election used many tactics, including the administration of a literacy test containing mainly incongruous questions that was graded by white election officials with full discretion. Among the test questions were the following<sup>23</sup>:

- “If election of the President becomes the duty of the U.S. House of Representatives and it fails to act, who becomes President and when?”
- “On the impeachment of the chief justice of the Supreme Court of the U.S., who tries the case?”
- “Name two of the purposes of the U.S. Constitution.”

In the spring of 1965, in the city of Selma, Alabama, despite years of struggle, only 300 of the 15,000 eligible African American citizens found their names on the voting rolls.<sup>24</sup> To demand an end to voter discrimination, leaders of SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organized a march on March 7, 1965, from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery.<sup>25</sup> As depicted in the 2014 award-winning film *Selma*, the 600 demonstrators

who took part in the march were quickly met by law enforcement officers—many on horseback—who attacked them on the Edmund Pettus Bridge with clubs, whips, electric cattle prods, and tear gas. Because about 70 to 80 protesters were treated at the scene—17 requiring hospitalization—March 7 is referred to as Bloody Sunday.<sup>25</sup>



Viola Liuzzo. Photo © AP Images.

Undeterred, Martin Luther King Jr., head of the SCLC, urged the clergy and other sympathizers to join a new voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery on March 9. More than 1,500 civil rights advocates convened in Selma for this second march,<sup>25</sup> including a nurse named Virginia Wells, who walked directly behind Dr. King with first aid supplies in her purse and a gas mask hidden under her coat.<sup>22</sup> After marching to the bridge and again encountering the state police, Dr. King decided to turn around and return to Selma.

A third and successful Selma to Montgomery march was begun on March 21. Four days later, on March 25, more than 3,000 demonstrators—protected from local law enforcement by U.S. Army and National Guard troops—reached Montgomery, where Dr. King delivered his “How Long, Not Long” speech on the steps of the state capitol to a crowd of some 25,000 people.<sup>25</sup>

Among the participants in the Selma to Montgomery marches were two nurses: Sister Antona Ebo and Viola Liuzzo.

Liuzzo—a 39-year-old Wayne State University nursing student, mother of five, and active member of the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP—having heeded Dr. King’s call to join the third Selma to Montgomery march, was shot and killed on March 25, 1965.<sup>30</sup> Ku Klux Klan members (including an FBI informant) forced her car off the road and shot her in the head as she and another activist were traveling back to Selma after the rally in Montgomery.

On August 6, 1965, under pressure from citizens and politicians outraged by local law enforcement’s treatment of the Selma to Montgomery marchers, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, thus forbidding racial discrimination in voting. Today, more than 50 years later, racial disparity, while still prevalent, has significantly improved: Mississippi has more African American elected officials than any other state, with 134 county supervisors, 81 mayors, and 50 state legislators.<sup>31</sup> In Alabama, which had over 750 African American elected officials by 2002, six of the 35 current state senators are African American, as

## All of these nurses advocated for a more just society, often at great risk to their lives and careers.

**Sister Antona Ebo.** The only African American nun to march in Selma in 1965 was born Elizabeth Louise Ebo in 1924 in Bloomington, Illinois.<sup>26</sup> After her mother died and her father lost his job, four-year-old Ebo and her siblings were placed in the McLean County Home for Colored Children. She fulfilled her dream of becoming a nurse when she graduated from St. Mary’s Infirmary School of Nursing for Negroes in St. Louis in 1945; after graduation she joined the school’s convent and became a nun.<sup>27</sup> Upon hearing about Bloody Sunday and Dr. King’s call, she and five other nuns from St. Mary’s flew to Selma to participate in the second Selma to Montgomery march.<sup>26</sup> The sisters’ arrival in Selma caused a media stir, as nuns in full habits were an uncommon sight at civil rights demonstrations. Sister Ebo, whose photograph appeared on the front page of the March 10, 1965, *New York Times*, replied to inquiring reporters: “I’m here because I’m a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness.”<sup>26, 28</sup>

Today, Sister Ebo’s desire for a more just society has not diminished. On the 50th anniversary of the Selma march, the 91-year-old nun attended a “Faith in Ferguson” rally, protesting the shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014 of unarmed young Mike Brown by local law enforcement.<sup>29</sup>

**Viola Liuzzo.** The only white woman murdered for her participation in the civil rights movement, Viola

are 25 of the 105 state representatives.<sup>32</sup> Many more African Americans serve in city and county elected positions.

In April 2015, Viola Liuzzo was posthumously awarded an honorary doctoral degree from Wayne State University, and a nursing scholarship was created in her honor.<sup>33</sup> Two books (*From Selma to Sowrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* by Mary Stanton, and *Murder on the Highway: The Viola Liuzzo Story* by Beatrice Siegel) and a documentary film (*Home of the Brave*) depict her involvement in the struggle for racial equality.

### CONCLUSION

These brief stories highlight nurses’ ability to make history and shape the future. All of these nurses advocated for a more just society, often at great risk to their lives and careers. Standing up with determination for their ideals, they were examples to their fellow nurses of strength and conviction, and were committed to supporting—decades before its official declaration—the ANA’s 2010 directive to eliminate bias based on “institutionalized racism, environmental disparities, class discrimination, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, homophobia, and discrimination based on physical or mental disability.”<sup>34</sup>

The ANA is not alone in its appeal. Nursing associations such as the International Council of Nurses,

the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, and the National League for Nursing all call on nurses to work toward social justice.

As social disparities—including unequal access to health care, racism, and income inequality—continue, the illuminating stories of our predecessors can help us to better appreciate our collective responsibility as nurses, and guide us in our goal to improve the health care system. ▼

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