

Greensboro VOICES: Documenting the Civil Rights Movement in Greensboro, North Carolina

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

On February 1, 1960, Greensboro, North Carolina became the epicenter for the civil rights movement in the United States when four African American students from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State College (NCA&T) entered the segregated F.W. Woolworth store in downtown Greensboro and requested to be served at the whites-only lunch counter. In the following days and months, demonstrations spread across not only North Carolina but across the South where other sit-ins were held to obtain racial equality through peaceful protests.

Over the next several decades, further incidents took place in Greensboro which reflected the racial unrest of the nation. In 1963, Jesse Jackson, then the NCA&T student body president, participated in civil rights demonstrations in downtown Greensboro to integrate the city's theaters and cafeterias, leading to his arrest. In 1969, a riot at Dudley Senior High School, sparked by a contested student government president election at the school, resulted in the deployment of the National Guard and the death of a NCA&T student. Racial tensions came to a head on November 3, 1979 during an American Nazi Party/Ku Klux Klan and Communist Workers Party (CWP) confrontation in Greensboro's Morningside Homes neighborhood, causing the death of five people and the wounding of ten others.

As the nation observes the 50th anniversary of the Greensboro sit-ins, the city will have an opportunity to reflect on its unique civil rights history. This history is documented on the "Greensboro VOICES" Web site, <http://library.uncg.edu/depts/archives/civrights/>, which was created by the University Archives and the Digital Projects Office at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) to trace the struggle for civil rights in Greensboro and the surrounding area. "Greensboro VOICES" (an acronym for "Voicing Observation in Civil Rights and Equality Struggles") gives voice to those in the civil rights struggle by making 142 oral history interviews as well as biographical sketches of each interviewee available to students and scholars.

The project was conceived by UNCG University Archivist Betty Carter in 2005 to document the civil rights events that occurred in Greensboro and Guilford County from the 1950s to the 1980s. Realizing that this was a topic of local and national interest and that Greensboro had played a critical role in the civil rights movement, Carter believed that the time was right for UNCG to document this history with a digital library project. Carter hoped that this digital project would eventually be linked to the Web site of the International Civil Rights Center and Museum which was being developed in the historic Greensboro Woolworth building.

Carter knew that grant funding foundations looked favorably upon collaboration and that Greensboro Public Library (GPL) already had numerous civil rights oral history interviews. GPL Library Director Sandy Neerman and North Carolina Librarian Helen Snow were very interested in the project and agreed to loan their collection to UNCG. The plan was to have UNCG staff manage the project and oversee the creation of access copies from the original audio tapes, the digitization of audio tapes, the transcription of the interviews, and the preparation of a finding aid. UNCG was also in charge of creating and hosting a Web site which would make the oral history interviews available to the public. In February 2005, Carter applied for a grant from the

Community Foundation of Greensboro to create a civil rights digital library and received \$10,000 to hire students to transcribe oral history interviews and create a Web site in collaboration with the University Libraries' Digital Projects Office. Additional funds were received from the Community Foundation of Greensboro to complete the project.

In order to narrate a comprehensive story of the local civil right movement, Carter combined three oral history collections for a digital library which would be the cornerstone of the "Greensboro VOICES" project. These collections were a wide-range documentation concerning race relations as well as civil rights events which occurred from the 1950s to the early 1980s. The first collection of oral histories was a series of interviews conducted by history professor William Link and other members of the UNCG Department of History. He spearheaded the interviews of eighty- eight people from 1986 to 1990 as part of the short-lived Joint Committee on Civil Rights History, a cooperative research project between UNCG and NCA&T. Link transferred the collection to the University Archives in 1991 to preserve the audiotapes and make them better accessible to researchers.

The second collection, loaned by GPL, was comprised of eighty-nine oral history tapes documenting civil rights history in Greensboro. These oral histories were conducted between 1977 and 1983 by oral historian Eugene Paff, Jr. who felt the sit-in participants needed to tell their story about the Greensboro civil rights events which helped shape the national civil right movement.

The third collection of oral history tapes was obtained from the Greensboro News & Record newspaper. The collection included interviews with two women who worked at the Woolworth lunch counter during the Greensboro sit-ins and of a reporter and a photographer who witnessed the event. The four interviews were conducted between 1997 and 2001 by News & Record reporter Jim Schlosser for his newspaper column.

These three collections contain oral history interviews representing a broad spectrum of the community including attorneys, business executives, community leaders, educators, government officials, journalists, politicians, and religious leaders. Several prominent interviewees included in the project are James Farmer, who founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and three of the four original NCA&T students who started the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960: Jibrell Khazan (Ezell Blair, Jr.), Franklin Eugene McCain, and Joseph Alfred McNeil.

"Greensboro VOICES" has proved to be a successful collaborative community effort to preserve an important collection of local oral histories. The Web site provides access to these interviews as well as a list of resources for additional information related to the civil rights movement. These resources include related oral history Web sites and links to local and national civil rights organizations and projects. The Web site also contains a comprehensive reading list. Most importantly, "Greensboro VOICES" serves to encapsulate a unique period of time in the history of Greensboro and our nation.