

# The nashville sit-ins essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In late 1959, James Lawson and other members of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council's projects committee met with department store owners Fred Harvey and John Sloan, and asked them to voluntarily serve African Americans at their lunch counters. Both men declined, saying that they would lose more business than they would gain. The students then began doing reconnaissance for sit-in demonstrations.

The first test took place at Harvey's Department Store in downtown Nashville on November 28, followed by the Cain-Sloan store on December 5. Small groups of students purchased items at the stores and then sat at their lunch counters and attempted to order food. Their goal was to try to sense the mood and degree of resistance in each store. Although they were refused service at both lunch counters, the reactions varied significantly. At Harvey's, they received surprisingly polite responses but while at Cain-Sloan they were treated with contempt. These reconnaissance actions were low-key and neither of the city's newspapers was notified of them.

These actions marked another chapter in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Do you think these students should have engaged in what could have been construed as unlawful action at the time? Explain your answer remembering that under Plessey vs. Ferguson, "separate but equal" was the law at the time.

The civil rights struggle during the 1960s was a huge turning point in our country's history. If not for the small efforts put in for change, such as the sit-in demonstrations, these efforts would not have grown, and ultimately changed our country for the better. These sit-ins were also passive and very

peaceful, causing no harm to others. Although desegregation was not what some people wanted, fighting for it was ultimately the right thing to do, even if it was considered unlawful action at the time. In the end, those students did what was right because they helped a cause they believed in.

For many years, the United States was under the “separate but equal” law where facilities and public areas were separated by race, only on the condition if all facilities were of equal quality. However, most colored facilities, like schools, were inferior to white-only schools. This segregation deprived black children from the educational and mental growth they were capable of. Because of this, the Brown vs. Board of Education case then overruled that law. From this case, it was proven that the unequal conditions of white and colored schools were a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This event, as well as the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 really got the ball rolling for outlawing racial discrimination in America because it helped others realize that they could do something to end segregation.

During those days, most African-American students did not agree with what segregation did to society. Segregation literally separated the United States, and separation caused groups to discriminate against each other.

Segregation also caused one group to remain above all others and this superior group was the first to take any benefits or opportunities while the inferior group was left with little. For example, these sit-ins started because minorities wanted to be able to order food in white restaurants. As one student said, “We believe, since we buy books and papers in the other part of the store, we should get served in this part.” These negative things

affected their everyday lives and many were tired of being treated this way. This is why many of the students took action against segregation, even if it was promoting something against the law.

As this particular sit-in was set a few months before the official Nashville sit-ins, it really was a key event to the outcome of the Civil Rights Movement. It began with James Lawson who gathered up a few students to simply observe what was going on in the restaurants and slowly grew to be a whole movement in itself with 70, 000 participants. Many college students, such as Diane Nash, C. T. Vivian, and Bernard Lafayette who participated in the first sit-ins such as this one, went on to continue to participate, and even lead and direct aspects of the Civil Rights Movement. All these people who started it were an important tool to what became the Nashville sit-ins.

However, what made this sit-in a perfect protesting method for students was because it was very peaceful and nonviolent. Mahatma Gandhi first introduced this type of resistance while he was attempting to be independent from Britain, and he showed the world that this new form of protesting was safe and effective. For the students, this meant that the storeowners would not get hurt, and neither would they. During these sit-ins, they were taught to be fully respectful and not cause a ruckus, which is probably why it remained inconspicuous. Their basic plan was, “ Do show yourself friendly on the counter at all times. Do sit straight and always face the counter. Don’t strike back, or curse back if attacked. Don’t laugh out. Don’t hold conversations. Don’t block entrances.” These students believed in peace and this belief helped bring legislative change to the American government.

In conclusion, what these students did was perfectly justified because they did it for all the right reasons, all the while promoting peace and non-violence. This specific sit-in was the first of many that helped bring the end to segregation. Saying that the students should not have been involved because it was unlawful is like saying everyone that participated in the Civil Rights Movement should not have because it was unlawful. Without the students help, the majority of the supporters for the sit-ins would be excluded and the protest would not have been as effective.