

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY

GEORGE WHITE\*

\*George White graduated from Morehouse College in 1955; from Boston University School of Law in 1960.

Mr. White practiced law in Birmingham, Alabama from 1961-1963. Mr. White relocated to Atlanta in November 1963 to join the legal staff of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Public Housing). In 1967, Mr. White relocated to Knoxville, TN to continue his career in Federal Service with the Tennessee Valley Authority until his retirement in 1994.

Mr. White worked with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and other local attorneys, as a defense attorney, to secure the release of demonstrators from jail during the Civil Rights demonstrations in Birmingham in 1963.

What follows is Mr. White's eyewitness account of some of the historic events that transpired in Birmingham in 1963. Mr. White shared this account with seventh grade students at the Edgartown Middle School on June 16, 2015.

GOOD MORNING. MY NAME IS GEORGE WHITE. I LIVE IN KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE.

FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS, MY WIFE, LOIS AND I HAVE SPENT FOUR MONTHS OUT OF EVERY YEAR HERE IN WEST TISBURY (MARTHA'S VINEYARD).

I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO THANK MS. LEUENBERGER FOR INVITING ME TALK TO YOU ABOUT SOME OF MY PAST EXPERIENCES IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA.

THE YEAR IN QUESTION FOR OUR DISCUSSION THIS MORNING IS 1963-ALMOST 52 YEARS AGO.

NONE OF YOU CHILDREN ARE OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER 1963 BUT I DO.

MANY SIGNIFICANT EVENTS OCCURRED IN 1963.

1963 WAS THE YEAR BEATLEMANIA SWEEP ACROSS AMERICA-4 YOUNG MEN-ROCK AND ROLL MUSICIANS- FROM LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND BROUGHT THEIR VERSION OF BLACK MUSIC TO AMERICA AND CAPTIVATED A NATION.

IN 1963, A POSTAGE STAMP COST FIVE CENTS AND A GALLON OF GASOLINE WAS ABOUT 60 CENTS. THE AVERAGE INCOME OF A PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER WAS \$6,700 PER YEAR.

IN 1963, THE WAR IN VIETNAM WAS STARTING TO ESCALATE.

IN 1963, DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., DELIVERED HIS FAMOUS I HAVE A DREAM SPEECH FROM THE STEPS OF THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL.

ONE OF THE SADDEST AND MOST TRAGIC MOMENTS IN 1963 OCCURRED WHEN PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY WAS ASSASSINATED IN DALLAS, TEXAS; AND LYNDON B. JOHNSON SUBSEQUENTLY BECAME THE 36<sup>TH</sup> PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

BUT AS FOR ME, THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENT OF 1963 WAS THE ARRIVAL OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN MY HOMETOWN, BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA. I SAY BIRMINGHAM BUT TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, I WAS BORN AND REARED IN FAIRFIELD WHICH IS AN INDUSTRIAL SUBURB OF BIRMINGHAM.

IN 1963, BIRMINGHAM WAS THE MOST RACIALLY SEGREGATED MAJOR CITY IN AMERICA. ITS CRITICS OFTEN DERISIVELY REFERRED TO IT AS “BOMBINGHAM” BECAUSE SO MANY NEGRO HOMES AND CHURCHES WERE FREQUENTLY BLOWN TO PIECES; AND THE PERPETRATORS OF SUCH CRIMES WERE NEVER APPREHENDED.

WE HAD WHITE AND COLORED-WATER DRINKING FOUNTAINS. WE HAD WHITE AND COLORED PUBLIC RESTROOMS. OUR STREET CARS, BUSES, TRAINS AND OTHER PUBLIC CONVEYANCES WERE MARKED OFF WITH WHITE AND COLORED SECTIONS.

AND OF COURSE, OUR RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS WERE STRICTLY SEGREGATED, AS WERE OUR SCHOOLS, COLLEGES, UNIVERSITIES, LIBRARIES, PARKS, HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, HOSPITALS, MOVIE THEATERS AND OTHER PLACES OF PUBLIC ACCOMMODATION.

SEGREGATION AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, CALLED “JIM CROW” IN THOSE DAYS, PERMEATED EVERY ASPECT OF OUR CIVIC, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE. VERY FEW NEGROES WERE ALLOWED TO VOTE IN THOSE DAYS AND THOSE WHO DID WERE REQUIRED TO PAY POLL TAXES. THERE WERE NO NEGRO JUDGES OR POLICEMEN OR FIREMEN OR CITY COUNCILMEN OR OTHER ELECTED POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES.

WHEN I GRADUATED FROM MOREHOSE COLLEGE IN 1955, I WAS NOT ALLOWED TO ENROLL IN THE LAW SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA BECAUSE OF MY RACE. WHEN I ATTENDED BOSTON UNIVERSITY’S LAW SCHOOL, THE STATE OF ALABAMA PAID ME THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT IT COST TO MATRICULATE AT BU AND WHAT IT WOULD’VE COST TO GO TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA.

IN APRIL, 1963, THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE (SCLC), LED BY DR. KING, CAME TO BIRMINGHAM AND JOINED FORCES WITH THE ALABAMA CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (ACMHR), LED BY FRED SHUTTLESWORTH.

THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE (SNCC), THE NAACP AND THE CONGRESS OF RACIAL EQUALITY (CORE) ALSO JOINED THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN BIRMINGHAM, AS DID HUNDREDS OF OTHER INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS WHOSE NAMES ARE TOO NUMEROUS TO MENTION.

IN APRIL, 1963, DR. KING, DR. SHUTTLESWORTH AND SEVERAL COMMUNITY LEADERS WERE ARRESTED AND JAILED IN BIRMINGHAM FOR DEMONSTRATING AND PROTESTING RACIAL SEGREGATION AND DISCRIMINATION. THE DEMONSTRATIONS LEADING UP TO DR. KING’S ARREST WERE RELATIVELY SMALL AND LARGELY INEFFECTIVE.

THE LOCAL MEDIA, THE LOCAL RELIGIOUS, CIVIC, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LEADERS REFERRED TO DR. KING AND OTHERS AS “OUTSIDE AGITATORS” AND CONDEMNED THEIR PRESENCE AND THEIR ACTIONS AS UNNECESSARY AND PROVOCATIVE.

WHILE IN JAIL ON VAGRANCY CHARGES WHICH WOULD NOT ALLOW FOR EITHER VISITATION OR BAIL FOR 3 CONSECUTIVE DAYS AFTER ARREST, DR. KING WROTE HIS FAMOUS “LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL” ON APRIL 16, 1963. THE LETTER EXPLAINED WHY IT WAS NECESSARY TO CONFRONT THE EVILS OF RACIAL SEGREGATION AND INJUSTICE THROUGH A CAMPAIGN OF “DIRECT ACTION” AS OPPOSED TO A STRATEGY OF LITIGATION-USING THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM EXCLUSIVELY TO DISMANTLE SEGREGATION.

WHEN DR. KING WAS RELEASED FROM JAIL SEVERAL DAYS LATER, THE PROTESTS AND DEMONSTRATIONS RESUMED; HOWEVER, THE POWER AND SUPPORT OF THE MOVEMENT HAD BEGUN TO DWINDLE AND EVAPORATE, AS MANY BLACK ADULTS FEARED THE LOSS OF THEIR JOBS AND OTHER FORMS OF PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC RETALIATION.

REV. JAMES BEVEL WHO WORKED FOR SCLC AS A YOUTH LEADER RECOMMENDED TO DR. KING THE USE OF CHILDREN IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS. REV. BEVEL HAD PARTICIPATED IN THE NASHVILLE SIT-INS.

DR. KING FINALLY DECIDED THAT THE INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN IN THE MARCHES AND DEMONSTRATIONS WOULD BE BENEFICIAL, AS STUDENTS HAD MUCH LESS TO LOSE THAN THEIR PARENTS.

ON MAY 2, 1963, MORE THAN 52 YEARS AGO, ABOUT A THOUSAND SCHOOL CHILDREN, RANGING IN AGE FROM 8 YEARS OLD TO 18, Poured OUT OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> STREET BAPTIST CHURCH, IN GROUPS OF 50, ONTO THE STREETS OF BIRMINGHAM, HEADED TOWARD CITY HALL, JUST A FEW BLOCKS AWAY.

ON THAT DAY, OVER 900 STUDENTS WERE ARRESTED AND JAILED. THE JAILS BECAME QUICKLY OVERCROWDED, CAUSING AN OVERFLOW INTO OTHER AREAS IN THE CITY SUCH AS THE FAIRGROUNDS AND STADIUMS WHERE ORDINARILY BLACKS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO USE SUCH FACILITIES EXCEPT ON CERTAIN DAYS AND SPECIAL OCCASIONS.

ON THE FOLLOWING DAY, MAY 3, 1963, SOME OF THE PREVIOUS PROTESTORS AS WELL AS NEW ONES GATHERED AGAIN AT THE 16<sup>TH</sup> STREET BAPTIST CHURCH. YET THIS TIME, WHEN THEY CAME OUT OF THE CHURCH THEY WERE MET WITH BARRICADES OF POLICEMEN, FIRE HOSES AND POLICE DOGS. ALTHOUGH THE PROTESTORS WERE PEACEFUL AND NONVIOLENT IN THEIR MANNER AND CONDUCT, THEY WERE VICIOUSLY BRUTALIZED AND BEATEN. THE POLICE BEAT THE PROTESTORS WITH THEIR NIGHTSTICKS, FLOODED THEM WITH THEIR HIGH-PRESSURE WATER HOSES AND LET THEIR VICIOUS DOGS LOOSE ON THEM

THE ENSUING PUBLICITY- A COMBINATION OF TV AND NEWS REPORTS AND PHOTOS OF MORE THAN 3,000 SCHOOL CHILDREN BEING BEATEN BY POLICE AND ATTACKED BY DOGS AND WATER CANNONS SPREAD IMMEDIATELY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD.

THE RESULTING PUBLICITY CAUSED AN UPROAR AND A FEELING OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL OUTRAGE.

ON MAY 10, 1963, SEVEN DAYS LATER, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, BUSINESSMEN, RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS REACHED A SETTLEMENT. THEY AGREED THAT ALL LUNCH COUNTERS, HOTELS, FITTING ROOMS IN DEPARTMENT STORES, WOULD BE DESEGREGATED; THAT ALL PUBLIC SIGNS OF SEGREGATION WOULD BE REMOVED; THAT EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK WORKERS WOULD BE UPGRADED; AND THAT ALL PERSONS JAILED FOR DEMONSTRATING AND PROTESTING WOULD BE RELEASED AND ALL CHARGES DROPPED.

THE AGREEMENT SIGNALLED A MILESTONE VICTORY FOR THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THIS TRIUMPH, THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON OCCURRED ON AUGUST 28, 1963 IN THE NATION'S CAPITOL.

FROM THE STEPS OF THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL, DR. KING DELIVERED HIS CELEBRATED I

HAVE A DREAM SPEECH TO MORE THAN 250,000 AMERICANS.

THE VICTORY IN BIRMINGHAM PAVED THE WAY FOR PASSAGE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964 AND THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965.

THE PASSAGE OF SUCH HISTORIC LEGISLATION WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE SACRIFICIAL EFFORTS OF MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS ALL OVER THE SOUTH; WITHOUT THE GOOD WILL OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AND THEIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES; AND WITHOUT THE SACRIFICE AND THE HEROISM OF THE SCHOOL CHILDREN OF BIRMINGHAM.

AS I RECALL THESE EVENTS IN BIRMINGHAM IN 1963, I REMEMBER I SAW THEM ACTUALLY UNFOLD BEFORE MY VERY EYES.

FROM THE WINDOWS OF MY LAW OFFICE, LOCATED ON THE SECOND FLOOR AT THE CORNER OF 5<sup>TH</sup> AVENUE AND 17<sup>TH</sup> STREET, JUST ACROSS THE STREET FROM KELLY INGRAM PARK WHICH BECAME A STAGING GROUND FOR MANY OF THE PROTESTORS, I COULD SEE THE CHILDREN POURING OUT OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> STREET BAPTIST CHURCH. I ACTUALLY WITNESSED THE HORRIFIC BEATINGS THEY SUFFERED.

BUT AS A YOUNG LAWYER, IT WAS MY DUTY AND MY PLEASURE, WORKING WITH THE NAACP LEGAL DEFENSE FUND AND OTHER LOCAL ATTORNEYS, TO SECURE THE RELEASE OF MANY OF THE DEMONSTRATORS FROM JAIL.

TODAY BIRMINGHAM HAS A BLACK MAYOR AND A BLACK MAJORITY CITY COUNCIL; AND THE CITY IS PREDOMINANTLY AFRICAN AMERICAN.

THE CITY HAS CONSTRUCTED A MUSEUM DIRECTLY ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE HISTORIC 16<sup>TH</sup> STREET BAPTIST CHURCH. THE MUSEUM DEPICTS THE HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND JUSTICE IN BIRMINGHAM. THE MUSEUM IS CALLED THE BIRMINGHAM CIVIL RIGHTS INSTITUTE AND IT RECEIVES MILLIONS OF VISITORS EACH YEAR FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.

THE STEEL MILLS AND THE IRON FURNACES THAT ONCE DOTTED THE "MAGIC CITY" AND DOMINATED ITS ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE WHILE POLLUTING ITS ENVIRONMENT ARE NOW LONG GONE, REPLACED BY A GROWING AND VIBRANT MEDICAL/HEALTH SECTOR; AND A FINANCIAL SERVICES SECTOR.

RACE RELATIONS HAVE DRAMATICALLY IMPROVED OVER THE YEARS.

TWO OF OUR THREE CHILDREN (GEORGE, JR. AND ANTHONY GRAHAM) WERE BORN IN BIRMINGHAM AND THE YOUNGEST CHILD (BARRON JAMES) IN ATLANTA WHERE WE MOVED IN NOVEMBER, 1963, THE DAY AFTER PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION.

ALTHOUGH HISTORIC SOCIAL CHANGE EVENTUALLY CAME TO BIRMINGHAM, THE STORY DOES NOT END COMPLETELY ON A HAPPY NOTE BECAUSE ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1963, A BOMB PLANTED IN THE BASEMENT OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> STREET BAPTIST CHURCH EXPLODED, KILLING FOUR BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN ATTENDING SUNDAY SCHOOL. AFTER MANY DECADES, THE PERPETRATORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS HEINOUS CRIME WERE ULTIMATELY APPREHENDED AND CONVICTED. EVEN DR. KING HIMSELF WAS ASSASSINATED ON APRIL 4, 1968 IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE.

YET. DR. KING, DR. SHUTTLESWORTH, REV. BEVEL AND MANY OTHERS WILL ALWAYS HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE IN MY HEART FOR THE COURAGE THEY DISPLAYED AND THE SACRIFICES THEY MADE IN BIRMINGHAM IN 1963. BUT AS I LOOK BACK, I REALIZE IT WAS THE COURAGE AND BRAVERY OF THE SCHOOL CHILDREN THAT CARRIED THE DAY AND MADE THE DIFFERENCE; AND THEY TOO WILL LIKEWISE HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE IN

MY HEART.

THIS CONCLUDES MY REPORT.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

WAS THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN BIRMINGHAM BENEFICIAL? ETHICAL OR UNETHICAL? APPROPRIATE OR INAPPROPRIATE?

IS NONVIOLENT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE STILL AN EFFECTIVE WEAPON OR A USEFUL STRATEGY IN THE ONGOING STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE? OR SHOULD WE RELY MORE ON THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM TO GUARANTEE EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IN OUR DEMOCRACY?

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE LEADING CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUES OR ECONOMIC JUSTICE ISSUES OF YOUR DAY?

GIVE EXAMPLES.