

“WHO

by BARBARA ANN POSEY

SIT IN”

The girl who started
a nation-wide
civil-rights movement
tells how and why
she sits and waits

One hot summer day, before I was even in my teens, I went shopping downtown with my mother. I was tired and hungry and I wanted to stop at a lunch-counter for something to eat. My mother refused.

“But, why?” I asked her. It



POINT OF VIEW

Seventeen-year-old Barbara Ann Posey of Oklahoma City, Okla. decided that she simply had to do something to end lunchcounter discrimination against Negroes. So she sat down . . . and sat . . . and sat. By the time her long sit was over, that city's lunchcounters were finally serving every citizen with equal courtesy. And the nation-wide sit-in movement was launched.

In this series, Datebook presents unpopular or uncommon points of view written by individuals who feel strongly enough to subject themselves and their ideas to close scrutiny. Next issue, we will print the best letters from readers with their reactions to this article. There will also be another topic espoused by another earnest believer. Address all letters to Point Of View, DB, 71 Washington Pl., N. Y. 11. Need we add that the opinions expressed in this feature do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors?

didn't make sense to me.

“You can't sit down at the lunchcounter because you are a Negro,” my mother said.

It was an explanation. But it didn't make sense.

It was most confusing to me. Therefore, I discussed it with various people — friends and teachers and relatives. Most of them evaded the issue and this left me more confused than before.

Why couldn't I sit down and have something to eat at a lunchcounter in my hometown of Oklahoma City, Okla.? Why couldn't the more than 37,000 other Negroes sit down and eat also? It just didn't seem fair.

In 1957, when I was 14, I joined the youth council of a national organization which tries to help colored people. Our advisor told us the story of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the way the colored people of Montgomery, Ala., had won their battle to desegregate the bus system. They had used a non-violent method. They had simply gone about their business, quietly doing what they felt was right.

I was so impressed with the Rev. King, who had led them,

that I started reading everything I could find about passive resistance—about Gandhi as well as the Rev. King. I wondered why the leaders of the world did not use this non-violent method of solving international problems. As long as your cause is just, you are bound to be successful.

I began to practice non-violence in my school, church and everyday life. I came to believe that through love and understanding and a firm stand for what is right, most of the wrongs of the world can be corrected.

Then, the youth council of the Oklahoma City N.A.A.C.P. was invited to participate in a freedom rally in New York City. I went.

And it was the most exciting trip of my life. Besides seeing New York and meeting all sorts of interesting people, I experienced some of the little things that I realized I had always missed. I ate in cafeterias. I sat in lunchcounters with everybody else and was served a ten-cent coke. Maybe you think a simple thing like that is not important. But it is. Imagine that everybody else in the world can

do it and not you—and maybe you'll understand.

When I returned to Oklahoma City, I knew that it was time to do something. And the youth council agreed that we should all work toward eliminating segregation in public accommodations in Oklahoma City. Right now!

For over a year we tried to accomplish this by talking and negotiating. But in the end, we always received the age-old answer: "Wait. It takes time."

Well, for over 246 years my people had waited, dreamed and prayed for first-class citizenship. My people, along with others, had died on the battlefields of the world for democracy. Now, what could I do besides wait?

I could *sit* and wait. I could go to the places which refused to serve Negroes and just sit and sit and sit. Until I was served.

What would this accomplish? Well, as I sat, I would be reminding America of her shortcomings and her undemocratic behavior in regard to some minority groups. As I sat I could become a living witness to the fact that young people in America are still willing to sac-

rifice for the great American dream of liberty, justice and equality. As I sat I could be speaking to the world and saying, in effect, "I believe in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Do you?"

I sat for two and one half weeks from 10 a.m. until the stores closed. Then, from August 1959 until April 1960 at least once a week.

I sat and waited for restaurant owners in my city to change their segregated policy. And as I sat, I felt a closeness with the Jews who had waited in the concentration camps of Hitler. I remembered how Judge William Berry had described how he had waited in a Japanese P.O.W. camp for the Japanese to change their policy. I sat and remembered how the Indians under Gandhi had

waited and waited—and finally won out.

I knew that the threats, the insults, the humiliations which I was experiencing at the hands of some unthinking people were really insignificant. And so I sat in dignity and prayed. "Dear God, if it is Thy will that our Democracy shall survive, I will sit."

And as I sat, letters poured into Oklahoma City from all over the world; the council of churches and a citizen's committee spoke out against segregation and came to our rescue.

As I sat, along with hundreds of other young people, 61 restaurants in Oklahoma City opened their doors to my people. And our governor appointed a human relations committee to work to eliminate segregation in the state of Oklahoma once and for all.

That's why I sat in.

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20 WEST 40th STREET

NEW YORK 18, N. Y.