

The Greensboro Four

Series: Civil Rights



This photograph, taken on February 10, 1960, shows a sit-in at a Woolworth's in Raleigh. Courtesy of the Raleigh *News and Observer*.

On February 1, 1960, four friends sat down at a lunch counter in Greensboro. That may not sound like a legendary moment, but it was. The four people were African American, and they sat where African Americans weren't allowed to sit. They did this to take a stand against segregation.

Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr. (later known as Jibreel Khazan), Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond were freshmen at the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina (now North Carolina A&T State University). The students wanted to protest segregation laws that prevented African Americans from entering certain public places. They

agreed to stage a sit-in at Woolworth's, a variety store that had an eating area. African Americans could shop in the store and eat at a stand-up snack bar, but they could not sit at the lunch counter. "We didn't want to set the world on fire," Khazan said. "We just wanted to eat." Khazan and his friends would become known as the Greensboro Four.

The students hardly slept the night before the sit-in. They knew their actions would make some white people angry. They were afraid they would be arrested, beaten, or even killed. But they were determined to stand up for their rights and the rights of all African Americans.

The next day they went to Woolworth's. When they sat down at the lunch counter, a waitress told them that blacks weren't served there. They placed their orders anyway. The store manager asked them to leave. When they stayed in their seats, the manager called the Greensboro police chief, who said that he could do nothing as long as they remained quiet. The store closed early, and the four students left peacefully. They were happy that they hadn't been arrested or bullied.

That night they asked the members of several campus groups to join them, and many agreed. The next afternoon more than twenty African American students showed up at Woolworth's. Some white bystanders harassed them, but there was no violence. More students joined the demonstration each day. Soon black students from other colleges and some white students who supported the cause joined the sit-in. When the lunch counter filled up, the protesters picketed outside Woolworth's and began a second sit-in at a nearby store. Some of them were harassed and received threatening phone calls, but no one was harmed.

Students in other North Carolina cities started their own sit-ins. The peaceful protests soon spread to other states in the South. African Americans began picketing Woolworth's and other stores with segregated lunch counters in the North, too.

The Greensboro Woolworth's finally began serving blacks at its lunch counter on July 25, 1960, six months after the sit-in began. The first people served were the lunch counter employees themselves. In the first week, three hundred African Americans ate at that lunch counter.

The Greensboro Four became famous for fighting discrimination. Because of their courage, principles, and persistence, they have become legends in North Carolina history.