Source C: Suzanne Bilyeu, article about the historical effects of the Greensboro sit-in, "1960: Sitting Down to Take a Stand," *The New York Times Upfront*, January 18, 2010

It was shortly after four in the afternoon when four college freshmen entered the Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. They purchased a few small items—school supplies, toothpaste—and were careful to keep their receipts. Then they sat down at the store's lunch counter and ordered coffee.

"I'm sorry," said the waitress. "We don't serve Negroes here."

"I beg to differ," said one of the students. He pointed out that the store had just served them—and accepted their money—at a counter just a few feet away. They had the receipts to prove it.

A black woman working at the lunch counter scolded the students for trying to stir up trouble, and the store manager asked them to leave. But the four young men sat quietly at the lunch counter until the store closed at 5:30.

Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond, now known as the "Greensboro Four," were all students at North Carolina A&T (Agricultural and Technical) College, a black college in Greensboro. They were teenagers, barely out of high school. But on that Monday afternoon, Feb. 1, 1960, they started a movement that changed America.

A Decade of Protest

The Greensboro sit-in 50 years ago, and those that followed, ignited a decade of civil rights protests in the U.S. It was a departure from the approach of the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the leading civil rights group at the time, which focused on challenging segregation in the courts, a process that could take years. The sit-ins showed that Americans, and young people in particular, could protest against segregation directly and have a real impact. (They also served as a model for later activism, such as the women's movement and student protests against the Vietnam War.)

"The civil rights movement would have moved much slower, would have accomplished far fewer victories if you had not had those student sit-ins and the entry into the movement of all this young energy," says Aldon Morris, author of *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*.

Six years after the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, the civil rights movement seemed to have stalled. In *Brown*, the Court had ruled that "separate but equal" facilities were unconstitutional, making segregation in public schools illegal. But some states virtually ignored the ruling, especially in the South where "Jim Crow" laws and customs often prevailed, and public facilities like hospitals and parks remained segregated, with water

fountains and restrooms often designated "White" or "Colored." In many places, blacks could not eat in the same restaurants as whites.
Earlier sit-ins in the Midwest and the South had, in some cases, led to the integration of local lunch counters. But they were mostly isolated incidents that hadn't gained momentum. The Greensboro sit-ins happened at just the right time and place, according to William Chafe, author of *Civilities and Civil Rights*, a history of civil rights in Greensboro.

"There was growing impatience within the black community over the absence of any significant progress on desegregation after *Brown*, both in Greensboro and throughout the country," says Chafe. "It was like pent-up pressure ready to burst at the appropriate moment—and February 1st provided that moment."

But the four A&T students didn't go to Woolworth's on a whim. They'd been discussing it in their dorm rooms for months: Why was it that a store could cheerfully accept their money at one counter then refuse to serve them at another?

'We Absolutely Had No Choice'

Before heading to Woolworth's, the students rehearsed how they would act and what they would say. When they sat down at the lunch counter, they fully expected to be arrested—or worse.

"I felt that this could be the last day of my life" recalls Franklin McCain, now 67 and living in Charlotte, North Carolina. "But I thought that it was well worth it. Because to continue to live the way we had been living—I questioned that. It's an incomplete life. I'd made up my mind that we absolutely had no choice."

When it came to serving blacks at its lunch counters, the policy of the F. W. Woolworth Company, based in New York City, was to "abide by local custom." In the North, blacks sat alongside whites at Woolworth's, but not in the South.

At the time, Woolworth's was one of the world's largest retailers, and the store in downtown Greensboro was one of its most profitable. It was a typical "five and dime" that sold all kinds of merchandise for less than a dollar, and its lunch counter served about 2,000 meals a day. Curly Harris, the manager, didn't want any disruptions that would scare away customers. When the four black men sitting at the lunch counter refused to leave, Harris told his staff, "Ignore them. Just let them sit."

The four returned the next morning, along with two more A&T students, and took seats at the lunch counter. Some opened textbooks and studied, and occasionally they tried to order something. Otherwise, they were silent. By the end of the week, students from A&T and Bennett, a black women's college in Greensboro, occupied all 66 seats at the Woolworth's counter. A few white students joined in. Soon, the sit-in spread to S.H. Kress, another variety store down the street.

Some whites in Greensboro supported the sit-ins, but others, including some Ku Klux Klan members, resisted, taunting demonstrators with racial epithets and taking seats at the Woolworth's counter to keep blacks from sitting there. On the Saturday after the sit-ins began,

nearly 1,000 people crowded around the lunch counter before a bomb threat prompted the manager to close the store.
That weekend, a truce was called: The sit-ins were suspended, and Woolworth's and Kress's temporarily closed their lunch counters. Greensboro's mayor formed a negotiating committee of local businessmen.

The Role of the Media

During earlier sit-ins in other cities, newspapers had buried the stories in the back pages or didn't cover them at all. But the *Greensboro Record* ran the story on the front page of its local-news section. Reporters from other news organizations began arriving, and on February 3, *The New York Times* ran the first of many articles about the sit-ins. Media coverage was one reason that the movement spread so quickly.

While the Greensboro sit-ins were suspended, the movement took off in other cities. Within days after the four students first sat down at Woolworth's, sit-ins were taking place in towns across North Carolina. Students in Nashville, Tennessee, held sit-ins at a number of stores. In New York, demonstrators picketed Woolworth's stores in support of the students in North Carolina. Word of the sit-ins spread through a network of black colleges and groups like CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.), led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Over the next few months, 50,000 demonstrators would sit in at lunch counters in a hundred Southern cities. King encouraged the students in their nonviolent campaign, telling them to prepare to be arrested. (In October, King was jailed along with dozens of students during a sit-in at Rich's department store in Atlanta.)

In Greensboro, the sit-ins resumed in April after the mayor's committee failed to come up with a solution. Students began picketing Woolworth's and Kress's, and local civil rights leaders urged blacks to boycott downtown businesses.

Six months after the sit-ins began, Harris, the manager of the Greensboro Woolworth's, finally relented: The sit-ins had already cost him $150,000 in lost business. On July 25, 1960, the lunch counter served its first black customers—four Woolworth's employees who worked in the store's kitchen.

In some cities, police used tear gas or fire hoses on demonstrators. In Jacksonville, Florida, whites beat sit-in participants with ax handles and baseball bats. But by the end of the year, lunch counters were integrated in many cities across the South.

The civil rights protests didn't end with a cup of coffee at Woolworth's. In 1963, another series of demonstrations in Greensboro—led by an A&T student named Jesse Jackson—targeted movie theaters and cafeterias, as well as discriminatory hiring practices. That same year, police in Birmingham, Alabama, responded violently to marches and sit-ins led by King. In both Greensboro and Birmingham, the jails overflowed with black students.

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy, in a live television address from the Oval Office, called for legislation that would give "all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments."

Civil Rights Act

Sit-ins and marches, along with Kennedy's assassination in 1963, helped galvanize support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed racial segregation in public facilities and employment. It was signed into law by Kennedy's successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in July 1964.

Today, there is no longer a Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro—the company closed the last of its U.S. stores in 1997. But on February 1, the 50th anniversary of the sit-ins, the building that once housed the Greensboro store will reopen as the International Civil Rights Center & Museum.

McCain, who plans to attend the opening, says he'll never forget how he felt on Feb. 1, 1960, at age 17.

"I've never had a feeling like that in my life—just sitting on a stool," he says. "It was the most relieving, and the most cleansing feeling that I ever felt—the kind of feeling that I'll never have in my life again."

http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f011810_greensboro.