

Nashville's civil rights heroes return to tell their stories

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By Heidi Hall



Diane Nash and Jim Lawson embrace after talking about their roles in Nashville's civil rights movement. George Walker IV / The Tennessean

There's never enough time for Nashville's best-known civil rights figures to talk about all the ugly and beautiful things they saw in their fight for racial equality. Their stories pour out quickly, edited down after years of retelling.

But on Thursday, they spoke with larger-than-life pictures projected alongside them — revealing the little details they couldn't — and sometimes slipped easily into old familiar roles.

On the big screen, Diane Nash stares ahead grimly, wearing an immaculate suit and carrying an armload of papers as she leads scores of men toward a confrontation with the mayor.

The Rev. James Lawson sits placidly on a lush lawn, circled by enchanted college students, explaining Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence.

A poker-faced Ernest "Rip" Patton Jr. looks into the camera, a small placard reading "Police Dept. Jackson, Miss." hanging around his neck.

The determined leader. The spiritual guide. The foot soldier.

The three spoke at Waller law firm's Martin Luther King Jr. Day luncheon on a panel moderated by John L. Seigenthaler, chairman emeritus of The Tennessean and himself a civil rights activist. About 600 people attended the event, in its third year, held at the Doubletree hotel.

Mayor Karl Dean opened the luncheon with more information about a statue honoring Nashville's civil rights leaders, to be installed on the Avenue of the Arts — Fifth Avenue near the entrance to the Arcade. The city has whittled down proposals and is inviting the finalists for a site visit in March.

The spot for the statue is where college students protested against the city's segregated lunch counters in the 1960s.

"Thank you for making Nashville a leader in the civil rights movement," Dean told the panelists. "I don't know how long change would have taken if you hadn't acted."

Fate brought the group together here, they said, to play the roles they ultimately embraced.

Lawson was a student in Vanderbilt University's divinity school, already committed to King's goal of changing the Jim Crow South. He recruited Patton, a Nashville native; Nash, who moved here from Chicago to attend Fisk University; and more than 30 other people to begin desegregating the city's downtown.

Lawson trained them how to sit at the segregated lunch counters and endure taunts and physical violence.

As he recounted that process, his audience saw another picture — a white man dumping a drink on top of an African-American woman's head.

“We diminish our lives by being afraid to face crisis,” Lawson told the crowd. “We discover dimensions of life that we never imagined when we’re prepared to engage in the struggle of living and face the uncomfortable choices.”

Nashville and the rest of the South were ready to do just that, Nash said.

“I would go back to Chicago during the summers and think about some of the things I’d done in the South and think, ‘That was dangerous,’ ” she said. “The movement had a way of bringing things out of me I didn’t know were there, such as courage.

“Segregation was so humiliating. At that time, black people across the South had had it up to here and were willing to go to great lengths to end it.”

Female leaders in the civil rights movement were rare, but Nash became chairwoman of the one in Nashville after two elected male leaders skipped meetings and protests because — they told the group later — they were studying.

Nash said her success came from loving both her attackers and her fellow protesters, even being willing to jump between the two when things got violent.

She’s perhaps most famous for a 1960 confrontation with Mayor Ben West on the courthouse steps. After West explained how he supported desegregation, she asked a simple question: “Mayor, do you recommend that the lunch counters be desegregated?”

“Yes,” he said.

Three weeks later, they were, making Nashville the first Southern city to take that step.

The group battled on in other states.

Patton recalled his time in Mississippi’s Parchman Prison Farm with other Freedom Riders, who took bus rides through the South with messages of integration.

Guards put laxatives in the food and then shut off the water to sinks and toilets, Patton said. It was the worst thing he remembered.

But even then, the Freedom Riders woke up singing. And to make the point, he led Thursday’s audience in song: “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom.”

The original word was “Jesus,” not freedom, he explained. But for Patton, who carried his Bible to the stage, the two are inextricably linked.