

Basic US History  
End Unit – Post WWII America  
Nashville Lunch Counter Sit-Ins: An Interview With Diane Nash

*The sit-in movement brought a new generation of mobilized college students into the civil rights struggle. These students began to systematically challenge segregation in college towns throughout the South. Lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina were only their first target. Students held sit-ins, boycotted segregated stores, and entered “whites only” restaurants where they demanded service for both blacks and whites at lunch counters. In this interview, Diane Nash, former activist and SNCC founder and member, recalled her introduction to the sit-in movement:*

Because I grew up in Chicago, I didn’t have an emotional relationship to segregation. I understood the facts and stories, but there was not an emotional relationship. When I went south and saw the signs that said “white” and “colored,” and I actually could not drink out of that water fountain or go to that ladies’ room, I had a real emotional reaction. I remember the first time it happened was at the Tennessee State Fair. I had a date with a young man, and I started to go to the ladies’ room. And it said, “white” and “colored,” and I really resented that. I was outraged.

In Chicago, at least, I had had access to public accommodations and lunch counters. So, my response was, “Who’s trying to change these things?” I remember getting depressed because I encountered what I thought was so much apathy. At first I couldn’t find anyone, and many of the students were saying, “Why are you concerned about that?” They were not interested in trying to effect some kind of change, I thought.

And then I talked to Paul LePrad, who told me about the nonviolent workshops that Jim Lawson was conducting. They were taking place a couple of blocks off campus. Jim had been to India, and he had studied the movement [of] Mohandas Gandhi. He also had been a conscientious objector and had refused to fight in the Korean War. He really is the person that brought Gandhi’s philosophy and strategies of nonviolence to this country. He conducted weekly workshops where students in Nashville, as well as some of the people who lived in the Nashville community, were trained and educated in these philosophies and strategies. There were many things I learned in those workshops that I have used for the rest of my life.

I remember realizing that with what we were doing, trying to abolish segregation, we were coming up against governors of seven states, judges, politicians, businessmen, and I remember thinking, “I’m only 22 years old. What do I know? What am I doing?” I felt very vulnerable. So when we heard that other cities had demonstrations, it really helped, because there were more of us. And I think we started feeling the power of an idea whose time had come.

The sit-ins were really highly charged, emotionally. In our nonviolent workshops, we had decided to be respectful of the opposition and try to keep the issues geared toward desegregation. And the first sit-in we had was really funny, because the waitresses were nervous. They must have dropped \$2,000 worth of dishes that day! I mean, literally, it was almost a cartoon. I can remember one in particular. She was so nervous, she picked up the dishes and dropped one, and she’d pick up another one and drop it. It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh, because we thought that laughing would be insulting. At the same time, we were scared to death.

The day that the police first arrested us was interesting, too. They had made a decision they were going to arrest us if we sat in that day, and so they announced to us, “O.K., all you nigras, get up from the lunch counter or we’re going to arrest you.” And of course we were prepared for this.

So they said, “Well, we warned you, you won’t move. Everybody’s under arrest.” So everybody who was at the lunch counter was arrested. [...] And then they turned and they looked around the lunch counter again, and the second wave of students had all taken seats. They were confounded [...] and said, “Well, we’ll arrest those, too,” and they did. No matter what they did and how many they arrested, there was still a lunch counter full of students. They didn’t quite know how to act and pretty soon it just got to be a problem for them. [...]

The movement had a way of reaching inside me and bringing out things that I never knew were there. Like courage, and love for people. It was a real experience to be seeing a group of people who would put their bodies between you and danger. And to love people that you work with enough that you would put your body between them and danger. I was afraid of going to jail. I said, “I’ll do telephone work, and I’ll type, but I’m really afraid to go to jail.” But when the time came to go to jail, I was far too busy to be afraid. And we had to go, that’s what happened. I think it’s really important that young people today understand that the movement of the sixties was really a people’s movement. The media and history seem to record it as Martin Luther King’s movement, but young people should realize that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement. When they look around now, and see things that need to be changed, they should say: “What can I do? What can my roommate and I do to effect that change?”

**Directions:** Find the answers to each of the following questions in the text and highlight or underline where you located your answers, marking the question number in the margin. Then write the answers in complete sentences in the space provided.

1. Which particular memories stood out for Nash about her first encounters with segregation in the South?

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2. What was Nash’s original reaction to the ways in which blacks were treated in the South? How was this different from her earlier understanding of segregation as a Northerner?

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3. What motivated Nash to get involved in the movement to overthrow segregation?

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4. How did Nash overcome her sense of powerlessness as a young student?

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5. What did Nash learn from being involved in nonviolent protests?

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6. *(This is an opinion question so there is no specific answer in the text to highlight/underline.)*

After Nash's experience in Nashville she proposed the formation of a voluntary nonviolent army to tackle injustice in the United States. Are there causes for which you would volunteer?

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