Q&A With Franklin McCain

Franklin McCain was one of the Greensboro Four—the four African-American teens who started a groundbreaking lunch-counter sit-in at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina on Feb. 1, 1960. (See the JS issue of February 8, 2010, pp. 14-17.) He is now 67 and living in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Here is McCain’s interview with Suzanne Bilyeu, Senior Editor, The New York Times Upfront, on November 23, 2009.

Q: What was it like for black people living in Greensboro, or any other Southern city, in 1960?
A: Well, during the ’50s and ’60s—and even before that, of course—things were not very good at all. I was taught that we live in a democracy and certain things accrue to you as an individual, and I found out that wasn’t true at all. It’s what I termed “the Big Lie” [told] by my parents and grandparents.

It was said to me, “Franklin, if you do all the things that you’re supposed to do, then you’ll be no different from everybody else and you’ll have the same privileges and advantages.”

It didn’t take me long to figure out that wasn’t very true at all. Like going to school and getting good grades and believing the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, believing in the Ten Commandments as your code of ethics, and being respectful to your elders. All those are great things. There’s nothing wrong with them, and I subscribed to all those principles—and I found out, “Hey, it’s business as usual.” Meaning that I was discriminated against because of my skin color and no other reason. Of course, everybody’s familiar with the separate water fountain. The thing that’s really hard to take is the public library that was off-limits to you. Public parks—“public” means everybody but not all.

Q: Even hospitals?
A: Hospitals! Yes. Absolutely. Black people had to go miles and miles out of their way for emergency treatment, and for regular treatment, simply because the so-called white hospitals would not accept them. They would not accept black doctors on the staff either, so that made it even more difficult. Any place of public accommodation that you could probably think of was strictly off-limits to you. Ranging from the front of the bus to any kind of café or restaurant or hotel, amusement park. Kids today find it hard to believe: “You couldn’t go to a McDonald’s?”

Q: Or movie theaters.
A: Even if you could go in, you had to sit up in what we call the crow’s nest. That’s way, way up away from everything. If you could go to some of these eating places, they’d ask people to come to the back door and do takeout. Which I thought was just unprincipled. I just can’t understand that.

I thought that without manhood and without dignity, man can’t live. He absolutely can’t. You only exist. I found the whole thing not only embedded with hypocrisy, but also just unbelievable. So unbelievable that my children didn’t even believe it. They thought it was all war stories, old wives’ tales that I used to tell them. They couldn’t get their minds around the fact that people could be discriminated against, kept out of public places, simply because of their color.

I felt there was something choking me all the time. This stifling feeling. I didn’t feel fulfilled, and I didn’t feel as though I got the biggest value out of my hard work in going to school and trying to do little things in my community and just being a good citizen. And I could not for the life of me understand how my grandparents and parents, who were educated people, could live in a system like that for so long. When you’re 15 or 16, you don’t understand that. There are certain things you can’t get your mind around and that was certainly one of them. As a young boy, I had all sorts of nasty feelings toward them about that. Because I thought that there’s an instance where people are not being assertive or aggressive and they’re part of the problem.

Q: You thought that some of your elders had just been too passive for too long?
A: Yes, absolutely. I really felt as though they had let us down. I thought that there are people who really don’t know how to negotiate the system. But that wasn’t true of my parents or my grandparents. I was wealthy in the sense that I had a bunch of educated relatives around me, and that was worth more than money, as far as I’m concerned.
Q: Had you heard of some of the earlier sit-ins that had taken place in other cities?
A: No, actually I hadn’t heard of the other sit-ins that had taken place, [not] until after February 1st.

Q: What gave you and your friends the idea to sit in at Woolworth’s?
A: Since September [of 1959], we sort of had the same things on our minds. We got together and discussed democracy and segregation, integration, every night. Anything but study! That seemed like a good alternative. It just happened that we were brought up with the same kind of outlook, and we shared the same frustrations as well.

One night the thought occurred to us that, “You know, maybe we’re the hypocrites. Maybe we’re the ones who ought to be chastised, who ought to have to fess up.” Because we’ve got more opportunities and more chances than our parents ever had to do things.

When I thought about it that way, I didn’t like myself. I felt that I had shortchanged myself and a lot of people around me, because in spite of all the good things I tried to do, I hadn’t even begun to scratch the surface of how to make improvements or change our situation.

The thought occurred to us on January 31 [1960], Sunday night, that by gosh we’ve got to do something. We’ve got to do something other than just engage in bull sessions every night for four or five hours because we are letting a lot of people down, including ourselves. We’re not studying as much as we ought, [and] that’s why our parents sent us here. At the same time, we’re not doing some of the same things that we criticize other people for. We’ve been “armchair activists” so far.

So we said, “Well, you know what we have to do? We have to attack the system—and we have to attack the system so that people can really understand and appreciate it.”

We thought that there was no better place to attack the system than where you saw a dichotomy of treatment of people. The real dichotomy that we saw was the five-and-ten stores. Like a Woolworth’s. Like you saw all across this country. You could be treated one way in Philadelphia or New York City. Then the same person could drive to Richmond, Virginia, and be treated just the opposite . . . That was not right. We thought, “Here’s something that’s not defendable.” It is a place to demonstrate what we’re talking about and to try to make some change. So that’s really what made us do what we did.

Q: What did you fear was the worst thing that could happen?
A: I thought that my days as a student were going to be over. If I was lucky, I would stay in jail for a long, long time—and if I weren’t so lucky, I’d come back to campus in a pine box. I really felt that was a possibility.

I felt this could be the last day of my life, but I felt it was well worth it. Because to continue to live the way we had been living, I question that. It’s an incomplete life. I’d made up my mind. We all had decided that we absolutely had no choice.

Q: Why had you decided not to go to Woolworth’s initially, rather than a fancier restaurant?
A: Yes, indeed. You’re not good enough if you want to get a coffee and a doughnut, but you can spend all the money you want to buy school supplies in the same store.

Q: Did any civil rights organization encourage you to go to Woolworth’s, or was it something you decided among yourselves?
A: It was something we decided among ourselves. Of course, over the past 25 years there have been organizations [that have] said, “We encouraged those boys,” and that sort of thing. I always say that success has a thousand parents, and failure is an orphan.

Q: Did you ever feel like you were going to say in Woolworth’s?
A: We did indeed, because we pretty well knew what the response was going to be.
at us in amazement and passed us by two or three times. Then we asked, “May we be served?”

One lady stopped and said, “Well, I’m sorry. We don’t serve you here.”

We said, “Well, we beg to disagree with you. You do serve us here, and we’ve got purchases and receipts to prove it.”

She says, “I mean just at this lunch counter.”

We said, “Well, what’s different about this lunch counter as opposed to the counter where you buy pencils?”

“Oh, this is where you eat,” I said, “Well, what’s different about it? We’re the same people, your same customers.”

“Well, I just can’t serve you here!” “Why not?”

“Well, it’s just our custom.”

“Then you’ll agree that the custom is wrong. It doesn’t make sense to you.”

“Well, I don’t know. But if you’d really like to eat, there’s a place downstairs in the back where you can stand up and make your order.”

“Well, we want to eat here, the same place where we made our purchases.”

“I just can’t serve you.”

I said, “Well, find somebody who can serve us.”

So she summons the manager. But just before the manager came—just to show you how ingrained things were—there was a black woman working at the lunch counter who came up and said, “You boys know you aren’t supposed to be here. You’re troublemakers and that’s what creates problems for all of us.”

At that moment, the 17-year-old boy [I was then] hated her guts. But as I grew older I learned to appreciate what her position was. She was threatened, her way of life was threatened. And I hold no malice today for the server.

Q: What did the manager, Clarence “Curly” Harris, say to you?

A: The manager came out and told us, “Boys, I can’t serve you here.” And we went through the same conversation with him.

He says, “Well, you know, that’s just the way it is. [Woolworth’s headquarters in] New York wouldn’t let us do it even if we wanted to.”

Of course, later, we found out [that] Woolworth’s position was “Do whatever you want.”

Q: Their position was to “abide by local custom”?

A: If Curly wanted to [do something different], I think they might have said, “OK, Curly, are you sure? Is that going to hurt your business?” But it never got that far. He blamed the whole [policy] on Woolworth’s.

Q: So just one important distinction I want to make is that, at least in Greensboro, there wasn’t really a city ordinance or a law against integrated eating places? It was just local custom.

A: No, there was not. It was just local custom: “This isn’t done here.” I think that’s the reason the local cop came in 10 minutes later. He looked at us and gave us the evil eye, and he turned as red as a beet. Then he started to pace behind the stools. He pulled his nightstick out and started slapping it in his hand and I said to myself, “My gosh, this is it. This is how it’s going to end up.” The thing that I knew and I was prepared for is that my head was certainly going to be split open. The only thing I didn’t know was exactly when. But I knew it was going to happen—and I was quite prepared for that.

Q: When did it become apparent that they were just going to let you sit there?

A: I think they became paralytic, because Curly Harris said something to the policeman as he went to the other end of the counter. They had a two-minute conversation, and both [of them] looked exasperated. They looked totally confused.

That’s when I determined, “Well, I don’t think much is going to happen with these guys. They don’t know what to do.” McNeil and I shared the same sentiment.

The police officer just pounded that nightstick in his hand. I knew that that was a sign of frustration. “Hey, they aren’t breaking any laws that I’m aware of. No disruption. They’re being courteous. No screaming and yelling.” So it was just paralytic on his part. That’s how he was.

But I suppose in any instance like this there’s always a bright spot to look for. There was this little old white lady [who looked] about 200 years old. I remember her 50 years later just like it was yesterday. She looked at us and then she continued to look at us and then she finished her coffee and doughnut. She had this big bag, and I imagined that she had knitting needles and scissors in it. She strode over to our seats and I said [to myself], “Dear God, this is it. I don’t know if she’s going to claw my brains out or spit on me or call me some nasty names. I’m prepared to deal with all of them.”

She put her hand on my shoulder, and I’m thinking, “Where’s the razor blades?”

But she said in a calm voice, “Boys, I am so proud of you. I only regret you didn’t do this 10 years ago.”

That was one of the most wonderful things that has ever happened in my life. Not only that, I learned a les-
son for life—that I am still reminded of every day almost when I meet people. That lesson says to me, “Franklin don’t you ever have pre-formed opinions or discriminate against anybody because of their color, because of their age, race, or where they happen to come from. You’ve got to get to know folks before you have any opinions about them.”

[That’s] how wrong I was about this little old lady, because typically what would you expect in 1960 in a Southern town, [for] black boys acting “out of place”? What do you expect [from her]? Scorn! That’s what you’d expect. You wouldn’t expect anything good or any encouragement.

That was what was so wonderful about it. It was humbling to me as well. It really taught me a lesson that I should never forget, and I try to spread that lesson to everyone I meet. You never know when you’re going to get a gift from someone you don’t expect or someone you don’t know—and I consider that a gift.

Q: So you left the store around 5:30?
A: Actually, they closed the store a little earlier. Because by this time the store was full of onlookers. They weren’t doing any business. [The store was] still full of people, but cash registers weren’t ringing up. All eyes were on us. So the store manager announced that the store was going to close a few minutes early.

I said to McNeil, “You know, I think we’d better leave too, because the last thing we want is for them to lock us up in the store and then charge us for breaking and entering.” We knew that could happen too. From that point on, we were feeling so high and so good that we said to ourselves, “We’ll be back tomorrow as soon as this counter opens.”

And we strode out of the store, and it seemed like a million people were out on the sidewalk. I think the word had gone all up and down Elm Street: What was going on?

We strode back to our campus feeling very good and thought, “Well, to do this thing successfully we are going to need some help to make even a bigger presence. We’ve got to find some [other] students.”

We summoned most of the leadership of organizations of [the] student council, student government at our school. We said, “We want to talk to you, tell you about something that we’ve done. We need your help.”

We spent 30 to 45 minutes expressing to them what we’d done and why. You know, it took another hour before we could convince even 20 percent of them that we’d done what we’d done. They absolutely didn’t believe us! We asked if they would come downtown with us the following day, on Tuesday, and sit in with us. Most of these were upperclassmen, 90 percent of them. They said, “Oh yes. We will, we will.”

Q: How many did go back with you the next morning?
A: Zero. None. We picked up two friends who lived in the same dormitory. So there were two additional friends to go with us the second day.

Q: On what day did a couple of dozen students join the sit-in?
A: The third day. The third day, we had three [white] students from UNC Women’s College. They came, in fact, even before the students at Bennett College came. But they were told after a couple of days, “You will not [be allowed] back [to your classes] if you do. Because if you do [join the protest], you will be summarily dismissed from this school. Expelled.” They did not come back.

It was Thursday or Friday before we began to pick up 25, maybe 35, students. Saturday we had more students than we could accommodate in Woolworth’s. So we decided on the spur of the moment that Kress’s, which was a half-block down the street, shouldn’t be exempt. So we sat down at Kress’s as well on Saturday.

Q: I read accounts that said you had something like 600 people crowded around the counter on a Saturday. Some of them were white kids who were—
A: The hecklers. In fact, most of these white kids who were the hecklers were people who came into town on Saturday, and I would wager that more than half were rural folks. They really weren’t from Greensboro. I mean, coming to town on Saturday, I think, was a big thing for people who lived in the small towns.

Q: So you didn’t get large groups until the end of the week?
A: Until the end of the week.

Q: How many days did you personally take part in the sit-ins?
A: Initially, every day.

Q: Then there was a bomb threat on the weekend, and there was sort of a truce called. Is that how it happened?
A: We had a bomb threat, and we did call a truce, and I learned something about that too: Never do that again. If the opposition wants to have a cool-off period, don’t do it. Because they feel threatened, and they’re on the run—and you should keep them on the run. But we [were] trying to be more than fair. We even asked the student body [of our college]—we had a big rally—[asked them] “What shall we do?” It wasn’t clear-cut that we ought to have a truce. I would guess the split was something like 45–55. What you
do, also, when you have a truce is you lose some of your momentum, and that did happen to us.

**Q:** So George Roach, the Mayor of Greensboro, formed a committee mostly of local businessmen. Did they actually negotiate with the students? Or did they just talk among themselves?

**A:** They really wanted the students to send representatives. Spencer Love, who was president of Burlington Industries [then a major textiles company], is the guy who really wanted this committee and not necessarily the Chamber of Commerce or businesses. Spencer Love, he was the most powerful man in Greensboro, and his interest was that he didn’t want a bad image or a bad mark on his city. That was his total interest. Image. Our [college] president was on that committee as well.

As a sidebar, Spencer [Love] and Warmoth Gibbs, the president of [our school had gone] to Harvard together. In fact, they were roommates. Spencer thought he had a special “in” with Dr. Gibbs and said, “Look, you really need to stop these kids and bring them back to the campus. Let them study, which is the reason they came here.” Our president said, “Spencer, at A&T, we teach our students how to think and don’t tell them what to think.”

It was, I think, one of the more courageous stands taken by a semipublic official during those times. Particularly when, in other cities, college presidents were being fired, were being told to “Keep your mouth shut or you’re out the door,” that sort of thing.

**Q:** Governor Luther Hodges was telling the college president that he had to put an end to it.

**A:** Oh yes. Governor Hodges did, in fact. But Dr. Gibbs ignored that. One night early on, he summoned us to his office and told us all the pressure he was under, and what people were tempted to do with him and to him, and he said, “I just wanted you boys to know, don’t worry about me. I’m going to be OK. I don’t know what the four of you are going to do. But if you’re half the men that I think you are, I know what you’re going to do.”

I thought that was the most clever way to tell a bunch of boys, “You’d damn well better not stop what you’re doing.”

**Q:** Were there any members of the black community who disapproved [of your protest]?

**A:** Oh yes, indeed. Most of them were merchants, again because of the self-interest. There [also] were a few ministers in the city and other folk who were against what we were doing because it was disruptive, and we had bitter relations in Greensboro.

**Q:** What approach did they think was appropriate? Just wait around?

**A:** [Their attitude was] “Oh, we can talk through these things.” We quickly reminded them that they’d been talking through things their whole lives, and it had gotten them nowhere. Not everybody in the African-American community by any means was pro-sit-in or with us. There’s no question about that. But of course, you can’t find anybody today who would say that.

**Q:** So the Mayor had this committee, and it didn’t reach a solution?

**A:** Well, I don’t know, because initially they didn’t. But the Chamber of Commerce, which had a representative on that committee, said, “Why don’t we just survey and find out what people think?” They did do that, and the results of the survey were quite revealing. In fact, the majority of the people said, “We don’t care,” and most of the merchants said, “We don’t care, but there’s no way I’m gonna step out and be first [to give in and serve blacks in my store].”

**Q:** Once the sit-ins started and they started to pick up in other cities, what roles did civil rights organizations like the NAACP [the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and CORE [the Congress of Racial Equality] play in the spread of the sit-ins?

**A:** I think the NAACP had far less of a role than CORE. CORE’s primary mission was to teach people [effective protest] techniques and teach people about the advantages of nonviolence. But remember, you’re talking about 17- to 21-year-old folks [who] did not want to be led around by established organizations—by adults who thought they had all the answers but in our sight had never made much progress. So because of that, they were not given very prominent places for a long time in any city.

**Q:** So it was really a student-led thing.

**A:** It was a student-led thing and that’s why you had the formation of SNCC [pronounced “snick”—the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee].

**Q:** How did your participation in the sit-ins affect the rest of your life at that time?

**A:** Oh, I had virtually no other life—and that’s for a long time. It did affect my grades.

**Q:** I can imagine it being all-consuming.

**A:** Absolutely all-consuming. Thirty-six hours a day. The good thing about sitting-in is that it allowed you the opportunity to study. You could bring your books. I said the same thing.
“Well, if I go to jail a long time, I can be even a better student.” [laughs]
That’s the second reason jail didn’t frighten me at all.

Q: Did you ever go back and eat at Woolworth’s after they integrated the lunch counter?
A: No, I didn’t eat there. But I went back that week. I went back the week that they had begun serving black people at Woolworth’s. I did eat at Meyer’s [department store] Tea Room. [The change at] Woolworth’s came after [that of] Meyer’s Tea Room.

Q: Were you involved in any civil rights activism after the sit-ins? I know that in 1963 there was a whole second wave of demonstrations by Jesse Jackson. Did you participate in any of those?
A: Oh yes. Yes, indeed.

Q: Was there ever a time that having participated in the sit-ins caused you any difficulty later on, such as difficulty in getting a job?
A: Yes, that did affect me. I learned about it after the fact. People said, “No, no, no. You don’t want that guy. You’re gonna have hell on your hands.” So I was excluded from a few things, but I reckon that’s the price you pay, and it’s a price well-paid, as far as I’m concerned.

Q: I know that they’re turning the old Woolworth’s in Greensboro into a civil rights museum. Have you had a chance to take a look at it?
A: I was there a couple weeks ago, doing an interview with The New Yorker [magazine], and they kind of showed us around. It looks impressive what they’ve done. I’ll be there for the opening on February 1st [2010].

Q: Could you ever have imagined that that first sit-in would start such amazing things?
A: Absolutely not. I’d love to tell you yes, I envisioned it all—but no.

Q: How did you feel, a few days after you began sitting in at Woolworth’s, when you heard that sit-ins were taking place all over North Carolina?
A: I felt [that] it was the most wonderful thing in the world. I really did. I was astonished, surprised. But so pleased because I thought, “This has got to help the Greensboro effort.” My only concern was, “Dear God, let it still remain nonviolent.” Because I really felt that was our secret weapon.

Q: Did the Greensboro police handle things fairly well?
A: They did. In fact, we got to the point in Greensboro where we could call up the police chief and tell him we were going to march, and he would say, “OK, we’ll make provisions for that to accommodate you.” That’s the kind of relationship we had, but I think that was kind of imposed by people like Spencer Love and the Chamber of Commerce. They wanted [to be able to do] business there.

Q: A lot of progress has been made since 1960, but what in your opinion still needs to happen in terms of race relations and equality in this country?
A: I look around at schools, and I look at the disparity in the performance of African-Americans and Hispanics versus whites, and I look at the kinds of schools they still attend, and I look at employment. Just pick those few things. And I look at health disparities. They are so, so great.

Q: What advice would you have for young people today who are seeking social justice?
A: My advice to them would be act on your conscience and don’t wait for the masses to come and help you—because they ain’t coming. Trust me, they ain’t coming. I don’t care whether it’s your mother, your brother, your sister, or your aunt. If there’s something you want to address, go ahead and do it. You’ve got not only yourself to depend on, but you’ve got history on your side.

Our history is replete with examples of where one person, or just a small number of people, made revolutions. Multitudes don’t make revolutions. They participate in them. That’s what I say to young people. Don’t get frustrated because you don’t have those 20 people you needed to address something or to accomplish something. I would also tell them absolutely never, never ask permission to start a revolution, because you will never get it. People hate change. They despise it—and they despise it because they become anxious.

I would also tell [young people] that if there are things they are troubled with, or things that they want to do—even though there seem to be obstacles that are insurmountable—the facts don’t ever matter if the dream is big enough. Facts never matter. If the facts mattered, we would all be calling ourselves today subjects of the [British] Crown. Just a handful of dirt farmers with muskets turned around the mighty British army. And if you don’t believe that, ask the people of India how they kicked the British out of their country. Ask [Mohandas K.] Gandhi.

Q: Was Gandhi an inspiration for you?
A: Absolutely. Absolutely. My greatest inspiration. My two heroes—and I’ve got very few heroes aside from my mother—are Gandhi and Christ.