



CYNTHIA Y. LEVINSON

As a teenager, Cynthia Levinson knew that police hosed and set dogs on protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1963. Decades later, while working on an article about music of the civil rights period for *Cobblestone* magazine, she discovered that all of these protesters were children. Awed by their courage, she tracked down and interviewed dozens of participants and others and spent four years researching and writing *WE'VE GOT A JOB* to share their stories.

Levinson holds degrees from Wellesley College and Harvard University and also attended the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. A former teacher and educational policy consultant and researcher, she has also published articles in *Appleseeds*, *Calliope*, *Dig*, *Faces*, and *Odyssey*. She and her husband divide their time between Austin, Texas, and Boston, Massachusetts.
www.cynthialevinson.com

PRINTED AND BOUND IN CHINA

www.peachtree-online.com

"After the mass meeting, I told my mother, 'I want to go to jail...'"
—AUDREY HENDRICKS, AGE 9

*"When [my mother] took me to school Monday morning, I went straight through the school. In one door, right out the other. There must have been **three to four hundred kids** leaving the school, headed toward downtown."*
—WASH BOOKER, AGE 14

*"[We were] hugging together, and the water just washed the two of us down the street. **The water was piercing.**"*
—ARNETTA STREETER, AGE 16

*"I was shocked that they were doing that; that they were in authority; that **they hated us so much.** They didn't even know us..."*
—JAMES STEWART, AGE 15

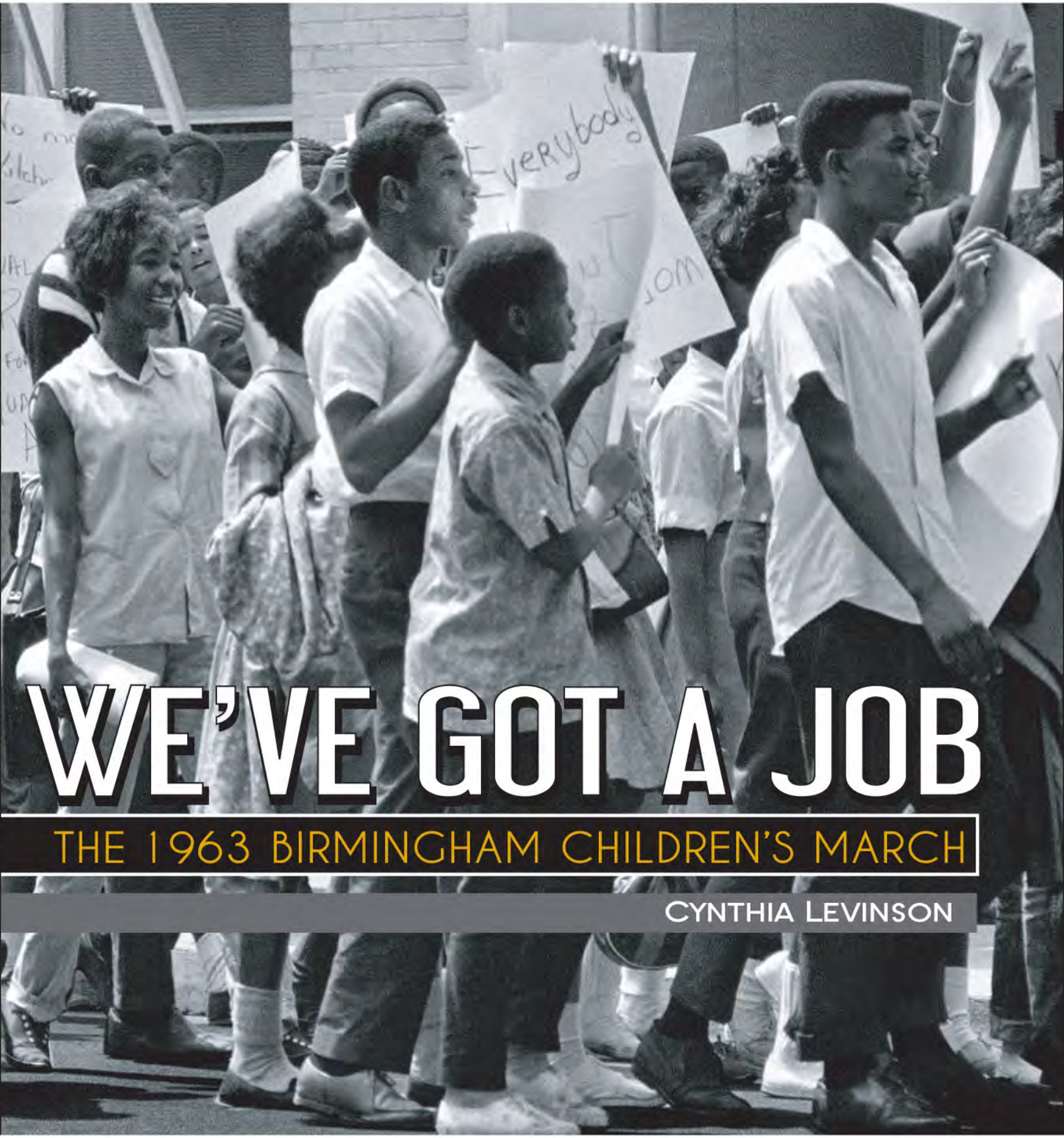
Praise for **WE'VE GOT A JOB**

*"With **WE'VE GOT A JOB**, Cynthia Levinson tells the incredible story of a key piece of civil rights history that many young people today may not know about. Readers will be riveted by the true stories of children like Audrey, Wash, James, and Arnetta and be reminded that just like them, they are never too young to stand up and make a difference."*

—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, PRESIDENT, CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND



LEVINSON
WE'VE GOT A JOB
THE 1963 BIRMINGHAM
CHILDREN'S MARCH



WE'VE GOT A JOB
THE 1963 BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S MARCH

CYNTHIA LEVINSON

978-1-56145-627-7

\$19.95

WE'VE GOT A JOB

By May 1963, AFRICAN AMERICANS in Birmingham, Alabama, had had enough of segregation and police brutality. But with their lives and jobs at stake, most adults were hesitant to protest the city's racist culture. Instead, children and teenagers—like Audrey, Wash, James, and Arnetta—marched to jail to secure their freedom.

At a time when the civil rights movement was struggling, Birmingham's black youth answered Dr. Martin Luther King's call to "fill the jails" of their city. In doing so, they drew national attention to the cause, helped bring about the repeal of segregation laws, and inspired thousands of other young people to demand their rights.

Combining extensive research and in-depth interviews with protesters, Cynthia Levinson recreates the events of the Birmingham Children's March from a new and very personal perspective.

PEACHTREE
ATLANTA





CYNTHIA LEVINSON

WE'VE GOT A JOB

THE 1963 BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S MARCH


PEACHTREE
ATLANTA



Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112
www.peachtree-online.com

Text © 2012 by Cynthia Y. Levinson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Book and jacket design by Maureen Withee

Text and titles set in Century Schoolbook
and SF New Republic SC.

Printed in October 2011 by RR Donnelley & Sons
in South China
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Levinson, Cynthia.

We've got a job : the 1963 Birmingham Children's March /
written by Cynthia Levinson.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56145-627-7 / 1-56145-627-6

1. African Americans—Civil rights—Alabama—Birmingham—History—20th century—Juvenile literature. 2. Civil rights movements—Alabama—Birmingham—History—20th century—Juvenile literature. 3. African American students—Alabama—Birmingham—History—20th century—Juvenile literature. 4. African American youth—Alabama—Birmingham—History—20th century—Juvenile literature. I. Title.

F334.B69N4476 2012
323.1196'0730761781--dc23

2011031738

To my thoroughly splendid
family—Rachel, Ariel,
Sarah, Meira, Marc,
Rebecca, Gabriella,
and, especially, Sandy,
my *sine qua non*.
And to Peace Ponies
everywhere.

—C. Y. L.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	“I Want to Go to Jail”	2
CHAPTER ONE	Audrey Faye Hendricks..... <i>“There wasn’t a bombing that I wasn’t at.”</i>	5
CHAPTER TWO	Washington Booker III	13
	<i>“I was too rambunctious to be a little black kid in the South. That put me in a position to be killed.”</i>	
CHAPTER THREE	James W. Stewart.....	21
	<i>“No. I am not going to be confined.”</i>	
CHAPTER FOUR	Arnetta Streeter	29
	<i>“We needed to do something right then.”</i>	
CHAPTER FIVE	Collision Course.....	37
	<i>“We shall march until victory is won.”</i>	
CHAPTER SIX	Project C.....	47
	<i>“Overwhelmed by a feeling of hopelessness”</i>	
CHAPTER SEVEN	The Foot Soldiers.....	61
	<i>“We got to use what we got.”</i>	
CHAPTER EIGHT	May 2. D-Day	71
	<i>“They’re coming out!”</i>	

CHAPTER NINE	May 3. Double D-Day.....81 <i>“You wondered how people could be so cruel.”</i>
CHAPTER TEN	Views from Other Sides91 <i>What were they thinking?</i>
CHAPTER ELEVEN	May 4–6, 1963.....103 <i>“Deliver us from evil.”</i>
CHAPTER TWELVE	May 7–10, 1963.....117 <i>“Nothing was said...about the children.”</i>
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	May 11–May 23129 <i>It was the worst of times. It was the best of times.</i>
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	Freedom And Fury139 <i>The walls fall down.</i>
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	Afterworld.....151
AUTHOR’S NOTE.....157	
TIMELINE.....158–59	
MAP160	
THANK YOUS161	
NOTES162–69	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....170	
PHOTO CREDITS.....171	
INDEX.....172–76	

We've got a job,
We've got a job to do.
We can't get freedom
'til we get through.

“We've Got a Job”
*Words and music by Carlton Reese
and the Birmingham Movement Choir*

PROLOGUE

“I WANT TO GO TO JAIL”

On Thursday morning, May 2, 1963, nine-year-old Audrey Faye Hendricks woke up with freedom on her mind. But, before she could be free, there was something important she had to do.

“I want to go to jail,” Audrey had told her mother.

Since Mr. and Mrs. Hendricks thought that was a good idea, they helped her get ready. Her father had even bought her a new game she’d been eyeing. Audrey imagined that it would entertain her if she got bored during her week on a cell block.

That morning, her mother took her to Center Street Elementary so she could tell her third-grade teacher why she’d be absent. Mrs. Wills cried. Audrey knew she was proud of her.

She also hugged all four grandparents goodbye.

One of her grandmothers assured her, “You’ll be fine.”

Then Audrey’s parents drove her to the church to get arrested.

Wait a minute! What kind of nine-year-old volunteers to go to jail? And what kind of parent would make sure she gets there? And why would she get arrested at church?

Is this real?

Yes. Audrey Hendricks, her mother, Lola, and her father, Joe, are real. So is this story.

Audrey was the youngest of three to four thousand black children who marched, protested, sang, and prayed their way

to jail during the first week of May 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama. Their goal was to end segregation in the most racially divided and violent city in America. Many young people suffered attacks by snarling German shepherds and days of being crammed into sweltering jail cells. Some wondered if they would survive. And if they did survive, could they accept these punishments with dignity, as they had been trained to do? Or, would they retaliate against the white policemen who were abusing them?

Audrey and three other young people—Washington Booker III, James Stewart, and Arnetta Streeter—will be your guides through these harrowing events. Along the way, you'll hear from others who lived through these times as well.

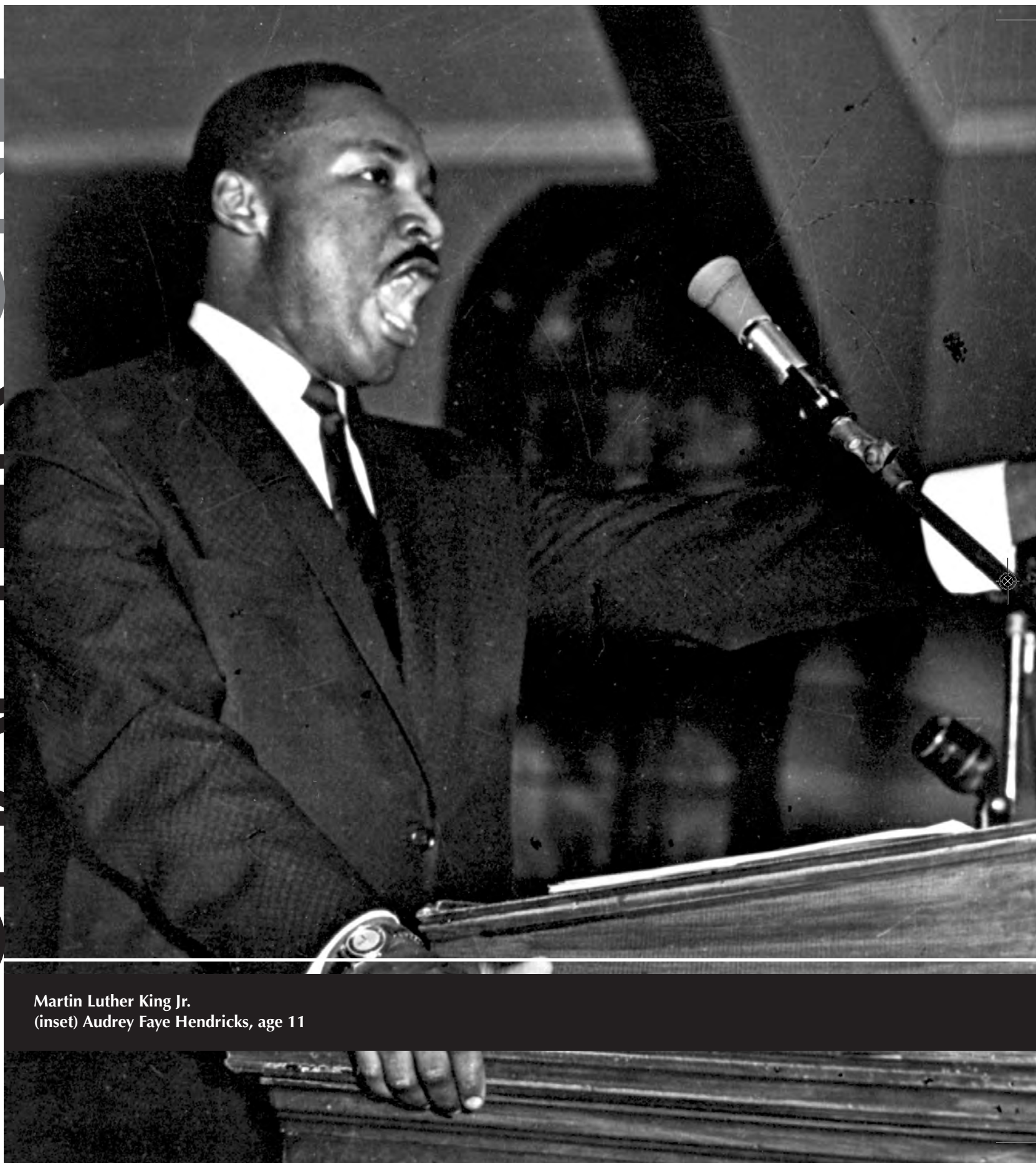
A NOTE ON NAME-CALLING

White people in the South sometimes referred to black children as “pickaninnies.” This insulting term allowed whites to lump all black children together and ignore them rather than to see each child as an individual.

Whites used even more offensive terms for black adults: “boy,” “uncle,” “nigra,” and “nigger.” In return, blacks were expected to call all white people, including children, “Miss” or “Mr.” followed by their first name, or else “ma’am” or “sir.”

Preferences in how people identify themselves change. In the early twentieth century, black people referred to themselves as “colored” and founded a civil rights organization that they named the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Today, that term is considered demeaning (although “people of color” is still considered a term of respect). Later, “Negro” was preferred, then “African American.” This book uses “black” because that’s the term Audrey, Washington, James, and Arnetta use.

CHAPTER ONE



Martin Luther King Jr.
(inset) Audrey Faye Hendricks, age 11



AUDREY FAYE HENDRICKS

“THERE WASN’T A BOMBING THAT I WASN’T AT.”

“NO WAY FOR ME NOT TO BE INVOLVED”

AUDREY LIVED WITH HER PARENTS and her younger sister, Jan, in a tidy brick house that sat on a small plot of trimmed grass in the Titusville (pronounced Tittisville) section of southwest Birmingham. Each afternoon, when Audrey came home from Center Street Elementary School, she did her chores, played with other kids in the neighborhood—all of them black, of course—and sat down to dinner with her family.

Audrey’s mother, who had graduated from business college, did clerical work for an insurance company owned by a black man. Audrey’s father went to elementary school, but starting when he was five, he planted and picked crops with his parents in fields owned by white people around his hometown of Boligee, Alabama. Later, in Birmingham, he worked as a laborer and security guard at a dog food company and at a slaughterhouse.

But the Hendrickses’ lives were not as orderly and quiet as this description makes them seem. Audrey was three years old on Christmas night 1956, when the home of a local minister was bombed by a group of

segregationists led by Robert “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth was a good friend of the Hendricks family. Six months earlier, he had founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), an organization that urged blacks to demand their rights. In particular, ACMHR had been pressing the city of Birmingham to hire black policemen and to allow blacks to sit beside whites in the front of the bus, in train-station waiting rooms, and even in schools. The explosion literally blew Shuttlesworth into the air and demolished his bedroom and kitchen. Astoundingly, he walked from the rubble uninjured. His wife and their three children were also unharmed.

Audrey knew that this attack against civil rights activists was far from unique. Many black people called their hometown “Bombingham.” And, said Audrey, “There wasn’t a bombing that I wasn’t at.”

No one would have blamed Mr. and Mrs. Hendricks if they had decided to keep quiet about civil rights following the bombing of their friend’s home. But Audrey’s parents weren’t intimidated. The very next day, her father and about fifteen other blacks sat down in the front section of a bus, where only whites were permitted. When the driver demanded they move to the back, Audrey’s father politely refused, saying “We [are] comfortable where we are sitting.” As

a result, Mr. Hendricks was arrested and spent six nights in jail. When he was released, he volunteered to guard the Shuttlesworths’ home.

As he drove there one night, more than a dozen police cars, headlights turned off, surrounded him. Told to hand over his driver’s license, Mr. Hendricks accidentally pulled his ACMHR membership card from his wallet instead. He heard a policeman ask the others, “What we going to do with this nigger?” After debating whether or not to kill him, the officers decided to let him go. Audrey’s father thanked God for saving him that night.

Despite such dangers, ACMHR held mass meetings every Monday night in churches around town. And every Monday night from June 1956 to April 1963, Audrey attended with her family and as many as six hundred other people. Audrey’s father sang tenor, alongside three of her uncles and an aunt, in ACMHR’s Movement Choir. The choir’s director was Carlton Reese, a teenager who wrote the freedom song “We’ve Got a Job,” which he practiced on the upright piano in the Hendricks’s living room. It became one of Audrey’s favorites.

“It was no way for me not to really be involved,” Audrey said. “My parents were involved from the point that I could remember... My church was involved... You were there and just a part of it.”

Listening to the grownups talk, she learned the painful details of her hometown's deep-seated racism.

"NEGROES AND WHITE PERSONS NOT TO PLAY TOGETHER"

Segregation in Birmingham wasn't just a way of life. It was the law. The city's Racial Segregation Ordinances, adopted in 1951, demanded almost total separation of blacks and whites.

Many southern cities mandated separate drinking fountains, bathrooms, schools, and seats on buses for blacks and whites. But Birmingham's ordinances went even further: city law and local custom also required separate spelling bees, arts festivals, parties, YWCAs, meeting places, church services, courtroom Bibles for swearing in witnesses, seating in restaurants, and entrances to movie theaters, where, if blacks were allowed to enter at all, they had to sit in the upper balcony.

Blacks worked in white-owned restaurants, but they had to eat their own meals in areas that were separated from both white customers and white employees. The University of Alabama's hospital was segregated by floor, and most white doctors didn't bother to learn the names of black patients, using made-up names, such as "Bo" for all the men and "Bessie" for the women.

SEGREGATION ORDINANCES

Revised periodically, the Ordinances' seven chapters eventually covered every aspect of daily life. Here is a small sample.

CHAPTER 14 DRUGS AND FOOD

Sec. 369. Separation of races.

It shall be unlawful to conduct a restaurant or other place for the serving of food in the city, at which white and colored people are served in the same room, unless such white and colored persons are effectively separated by a solid partition extending from the floor upward to a distance of seven feet or higher, and unless a separate entrance from the street is provided for each compartment.

CHAPTER 23 GAMBLING

Sec. 597. Negroes and white persons not to play together.

It shall be unlawful for a negro and a white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers. *[In 1950, the City added to the list: baseball, softball, basketball, or similar games.]*

Any person, who, being the owner, proprietor or keeper or superintendent of any tavern, inn, restaurant or other public house or public place, or the clerk, servant or employee of such owner, proprietor, keeper or superintendent, knowingly permits a negro and a white person to play together or in company with each other at any game with cards, dice, dominoes or checkers, or any substitute or device for cards, dice, dominoes or checkers, in his house or on his premises shall, on conviction, be punished as provided in section 4.

During the annual state fair, Thursday night was reserved for “niggers and dogs.” Officials even banned a children’s book that showed pictures of a white rabbit marrying a black rabbit.

In case blacks somehow forgot who was in charge, chimes in the tower of the Protective Life Building played “Dixie” every noon. This unofficial anthem of the Confederacy reminded listeners that, almost a century after slavery’s end, blacks were still not truly free.

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

Birmingham adopted the Racial Segregation Ordinances during a time when a system called “separate but equal” was legal in America. Developed by the Louisiana Legislature in 1890, this policy was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896, in a case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The Court wrote that “separate accommodations for the white and colored races” were allowable, as long as the accommodations for each group were equal.



Classroom for African American children in a segregated school

Under this doctrine, Art Hanes, the mayor of Birmingham, could justify segregated parks. “We have four swimming pools for whites and four for Negroes,” he pointed out. “Four and four, now how is this discrimination? Have a golf course for ’em. Cost the taxpayers \$22,000 a year to subsidize it, for the Negroes to play golf. Now what is so wrong to ask them to play golf on their own golf course...?”

There were several things wrong—above all, the concept of “separate but equal” itself. Separation on the basis of race is simply unjust.

Segregation was a poisonous residue left over from slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, the period when southern whites felt that northerners imposed integration on them against their will. In retaliation, whites established segregation codes and other means to draw strict lines between themselves and blacks.

Not only were the lines unjust, but also the ways of life on either side of those lines were unequal. Public facilities, such as schools, parks, and libraries assigned to blacks, were always inferior to those for whites. And, through laws, customs, and intimidation, whites blocked blacks’ access to the better jobs, nicer houses, and greater political influence that whites enjoyed. Black people throughout the South were

quarantined and treated as if they might contaminate white people with an infectious disease.

In any case, by 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court, acknowledging these inequities and injustices, had effectively overturned *Plessy*. In a series of decisions beginning in 1954, the Court declared that segregation of public facilities was “inherently unequal” and, therefore, unconstitutional.

Birmingham ignored these decisions. City ordinances continued to mandate segregation of private businesses, which was legal, and of public places, which was not.

“I HAD TO LEARN THE LESSON OF GIVING”

Blacks debated about which tactics to use to end segregation. Audrey’s parents tried legal measures. In 1959, they sued the city of Birmingham to integrate its public parks. They won that case, but in 1962, the city closed all of its parks, swimming pools, playgrounds, and golf courses—white as well as black—to avoid having to integrate. The city even filled the holes on the putting greens with concrete.

Other activists used different strategies. Shuttlesworth led protests. One approach was to organize a group of black people who would then defy the law by sitting in the front seats of a bus. Students at Miles, a





Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth speaks to supporters, 1957

local black college, organized bus boycotts, lunch counter and train station sit-ins, and prayer vigils.

In 1962, with help from ACMHR members, the students organized what they called a “Selective Buying Campaign.” Birmingham’s downtown department stores did not allow blacks to try on clothes before they bought them, eat at their lunch counters, or use their bathrooms. (Some black parents carried a jar with a tight lid in case their children had to go to the bathroom while shopping.) The stores’ owners also refused to hire black employees except as janitors.

The Selective Buying Campaign urged black customers not to shop at these stores. The students at Miles hoped that if the businesses lost money as a result, the own-

ers would give in and agree to integrate. Students picketed the stores, carrying signs with messages like, “Don’t Shop Where You Can’t Eat” and “Wear Your Overalls to Church.” They handed black shoppers copies of a poem called “Dollars and Sense,” written by C. Herbert Oliver. One verse went like this:

*I cannot be happy to trade at a place
Where my mother and father have
suffered disgrace,
Where my children can’t work
because of their race,
Where not one clerk has an ebony face.*

The Hendricks family abided by the campaign and didn’t buy new clothes or toys for months. Instead, when Audrey’s mother traveled up north to ask white people who supported civil rights to donate money to ACMHR, she also asked them to send toys and clothes for poor black families in Birmingham for Christmas. By mid-December that year, games, puzzles, train sets, dolls, and stuffed animals filled Audrey’s living room.

“There was one particular bear,” Audrey said. “It was white. I was in love with it.”

Her mother told her, “You aren’t needy. The people who sent these trusted me to give these things to people who are needy.”

Audrey was desolate as she watched her mother wrap the soft, white bear in Christ-

mas paper and ribbons for another child. “I had to give it up. It was tough for me. I had to learn the lesson of giving.”

As the daughter of activists, Audrey learned and lived many lessons about racism and witnessed the battles her parents and their friends fought to overcome it.

AUDREY: APRIL 1963

Despite seven years of boycotts, protests, lawsuits, and sit-ins by ACMHR members, Birmingham’s blacks remained dismally segregated from the city’s whites. Finally, in early 1963, Shuttlesworth called on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Andrew Young—civil rights leaders with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Atlanta, Georgia—for help. King and Young met with local black leaders, including Mrs. Hendricks, to plan new strategies for ending segregation in Birmingham. Sometimes they gathered in Audrey’s house, where she got to know these leaders on a nickname basis.

“Mike (that’s what we called Martin), Andy, Fred—they’d stand in the kitchen while my mother made dinner,” she said. “Mike would lift the top off a pot and say, ‘What’s cookin’, Lola?’”

What they cooked up was a scheme to intensify pressure on the city by increasing

both the number of demonstrations and the number of demonstrators. While watching one of these events, Audrey saw an incident that shocked her. “I was standing on the steps of the Sixteenth Street [Baptist] Church, watching an elderly black man walking in the park across the street with other people, two-by-two,” she remembered. “A policeman allowed a dog to attack that man—[just] because he was walking. It was unbelievable.”

At that moment, nine-year-old Audrey made a decision. She would no longer just attend meetings. Somehow, she would act on her own.

She saw her opportunity before the month was out.

SPECIAL NOTICE!

NEGROES IN BIRMINGHAM and JEFFERSON COUNTY ARE
NOW ENGAGED IN A

**SELECTIVE BUYING
CAMPAIGN!**

NOW and as long as segregation remains!
THEY ARE TRADING WITH STORES WHICH RESPECT THEM AS
HUMAN BEINGS!

Stop buying where Negroes cannot be hired!!

PLEASE NOTE — AND TELL YOUR FRIENDS:

- 1.—NEGROES ARE NOT TRADING WITH LOVEMAN'S and PIZITZ STORES!! WHY? — LOVEMAN'S AND PIZITZ REFUSE TO HIRE NEGROES AS CLERKS and SALESMEN ACCORDING TO THE MAY 1963 AGREEMENT!
- 2.—KRESSES, WOOLWORTH AND BRITTS STORES HAVE NEGROES IN SALESMEN POSITIONS AS AGREED. NEGROES APPRECIATE THIS AND WILL TRADE WITH THESE STORES.
- 3.—ACHMR Committees are contacting other stores NOW concerning their hiring policies. Watch for other bulletins soon telling what to do.

ATTEND ALL ACMHR MASS MEETINGS—And be ready to ACT as Christian Soldiers for FREEDOM, JUSTICE and HUMAN DIGNITY.

Remember: Our Slogan is: "MORE IN '64"

Alabama Christian Movement For Human Rights, Inc. — Rev. F. L. Shuttlesworth, President
Southern Christian Leadership Conference — Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., President

A flyer for the Selective Buying Campaign