Students Acting Out With A Purpose

African American students in the 1950s and 1960s were not happy with what little the world had to offer them. They were aware of their surroundings and extremely displeased. So through marches, protest, and sit-ins they demanded a change come. The change did not occur overnight and there were almost never any immediate results. Luckily that did not stop them from standing up for themselves and what they believed in for years on end. In 1948 on the campus of North Carolina College (NCC), as it was known then, and what is now North Carolina Central University (NCCU), the President of the university, Alfonso Elder spoke in an essay about implementing a concept known as student “self-direction[[1]](#footnote-1).” Through this concept students and even faculty would learn more about democracy as Elder wanted and they would learn to stand up for what they believed in. The two main phases of self-direction was the “idea of independence” and “student-faculty cooperation.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

When it came to the idea of independence Elder felt students needed experience with taking on the responsibility of completing and following the process of proposing, deciding, executing, and evaluating. This would allow students the power of independent control. He also felt that having students participate in faculty decisions was valuable in promoting growth in the process of democratic living. As Elder enforced self-direction for activities on campus students decided to take the concept with them off campus[[3]](#footnote-3). They found the courage within themselves to make an attempt at changing how society treated them. This essay will depict the civil rights activism of students from North Carolina College. It will also highlight the activism of young individuals in Durham, North Carolina.

One of the first acts of courage occurred in Durham, North Carolina in 1957 at a place known as the Royal Ice Cream Parlor. A pastor and six young individuals acted in a sit-in on the white side of the parlor demanding to be served ice cream in an attempt to change or at least alter Durham’s laws on segregation[[4]](#footnote-4). As a result of the sit-in the students were charged with trespassing and needless to say, they never got served their ice cream. That event did not receive much coverage in the news and some do not even know it occurred. There is a historical marker in Durham dedicated to the protest that was placed there November 30th of 2009. Even the marker does not mention how significant the sit-in was nor was credit given to the fact that it was one of the first in the south.[[5]](#footnote-5) When people discuss student activism they tend to think of the sit-ins done in Greensboro, North Carolina.[[6]](#footnote-6) The students in Greensboro also got arrested and charged but their persistence got them the results that they sought after. The sit-in at Royal Ice Cream Parlor led to a court case testing dual racial facilities.[[7]](#footnote-7) Despite that overlook in history Durham still became a great area of protest and received recognition for the student activism that led to an ever changing world around them. NCC students supported the sit-in movement in Greensboro and decided that they would stage their own sit-ins in Durham to show support for Agricultural & Technical State University students and at the same time increase awareness on civil rights at NCC. There was an appeal made after the students were charged in the Royal Ice Cream Parlor sit-in but the North Carolina Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court rejected the appeal. One could assume when students got results like this after demonstrating it would kill their hope of change but it actually had a completely opposite effect on them. The negative results were like fuel to their flame of hunger for change.

By February 8, 1960 the next major sit-in occurred when NCC students staged a sit-in at F.W. Woolworth’s Lunch Counter and this sit-in began the student’s participation in the sit-in movement. Student leaders planned a meeting two days before the sit-in and two hundred students were in attendance. Surprisingly the manager let the students sit but refused to serve them, giving them an excuse about following local customs on segregation.[[8]](#footnote-8) They sat peacefully from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. when the local police reported a bomb threat and closed down the lunch counter for the day. Some black students from Hillside High school along with white students from the neighboring Duke University would come aid in the protests but there were not enough students in Durham to picket more than one business at a time. The students had planned to go sit-in at other places such as S.H. Kress and Walgreens that day but those businesses closed their lunch counters before the students could get there. A week or so later students began to get support from the black community. Then white officials began to pressure President Elder about keeping the students on campus and putting a stop to their participation in protests but Elder and his faculty had a different perspective on the situation.[[9]](#footnote-9) Elder and the faculty at NCC felt that what the students were doing “reflected student self-direction” and believed their actions were “democratic and Christian-like.” So instead of stopping students and enforcing college rules they helped them by keeping the dining hall open late for them and providing them with transportation.

There was also support coming from a higher level, Martin Luther King Jr. King and Ralph Abernathy visited Durham in February of 1960 and urged students to fill the jails and for the black community to support them.[[10]](#footnote-10) The students continued to protest and sit-in until the Mayor called for negotiations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The students, to white officials, were acting out and they wanted it all to cease.

The officials were missing the purpose of it all it seemed. Students just wanted to be equal with their white counterparts. They were displeased and tired of being treated as less than in society. To the people who had never felt that feeling did not and could not understand the logic of the students or the black community. According to the North Carolina college student newspaper, The Campus Echo, in early February of 1960 the NCC Welfare Committee was formed for negotiations.[[12]](#footnote-12) In late February after the failed negotiations students resumed the sit-ins.[[13]](#footnote-13) White business owners held their grounds like never before. They were now willing to call the police quicker and also press trespassing charges against the students. White patrons were also standing by waiting to inflict physical harm onto demonstrators[[14]](#footnote-14).

Now to account a more personal perspective of the history of student activism throughout the 1960s, in an interview conducted with Mrs. Emma Richardson who attended North Carolina College from 1962-1966, She recalled participating in the student activism that occurred in downtown Durham with her fellow classmates. She was also a member of the NAACP. The first experience Mrs. Richardson could recall was marching downtown to the Howard Johnson restaurant. Some of her classmates went in and asked to be served, they were refused service, and they stood around for a while on the outside and inside of the restaurant and then left. The second demonstration she recalled was marching around the Carolina Theater. The students marched around the theater and some would go up to the box office and attempt to get tickets but were turned away. People driving past in their cars yelled derogatory things and harassed her and her fellow classmates but they just continued to protest, ignoring the intolerance of others. The next place she recalled demonstrating was the Harvey Cafeteria. Blacks could not obtain service there but ironically they were hired to cook in the kitchen. At the time, though she was unaware, an African-American man, David Richardson, who was employed as a cook who would surprisingly later become her husband recalled after they married, witnessing her and her classmates’ protest at Harvey Cafeteria. Mrs. Richardson remembered her husband saying he saw students demonstrating a lot during his time there as a cook. The last demonstration she recalled was a sit-in in the parking lot of the Sears department store with her classmates and some of the black community. She remembered singing “WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED.” A white man who drove up in his car apparently felt the exact opposite of their song. He drove up slowly toward an elderly black lady of the community and she refused to move. So since she would not move he drove slowly onto her back, as she hunched over. Male student protesters, highly upset, rushed towards his car, and picked it up off the elderly woman.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Though incidents did occur, there were not any major outbreaks of violence in Durham. According to another student at NCC during the time, Earl Miller, recalled there being jeering between his cousin and himself with white students from across the streets during peaceful marches downtown but never any physical altercations. He mentioned despite it being mostly peaceful the students still got things done.[[16]](#footnote-16) Mrs.Richardson was never arrested during demonstrations but her roommate and first cousin were. She recalled passing by the jail seeing her fellow classmates hang out the windows, waving, and she could hear them singing inside the jail as the remaining protesters marched past. The officials would fill up the jails, charge what demonstrators they could, and then let them out so that more could be arrested and charged. Most would probably think students hated jail and were harassed even more after they got arrested. Some students probably were harassed and abused in jail but Mrs. Richardson was told differently. Her arrested classmates told her that jail was fun; people played in the judge’s chamber, sat in the judge’s chair, and made fun while imprisoned. [[17]](#footnote-17)

All those events spanned from 1962-63 but the biggest event that many students and people of communities all over the United States were anticipating was to take place on August 28 of 1963, The March on Washington. It was a march for jobs and freedom initiated by A. Phillip Randolph and organized by Bayard Rustin.[[18]](#footnote-18) The planners of the march focused on racial equality and President Kennedy’s Civil Rights Bill to increase support for the march. Originally President Kennedy opposed the march for the fear of violence.[[19]](#footnote-19) He also opposed the march because he feared congress would view it as external pressure on them when it came time to pass his Civil Rights Bill into law.[[20]](#footnote-20) Over 200,000 Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics gathered at the Washington monument to begin the march to the Lincoln Memorial for the largest rally in history during that time. Amongst those people were students from NCC and people of the communities in Durham North Carolina. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have A Dream Speech,” which became known as one of the most famous orations in American History.[[21]](#footnote-21) King had frequented Durham many times before so to see him again on such an amazing day in history was probably quite inspirational.[[22]](#footnote-22)

At the time of the march Emma Richardson stated that she and her first cousin Carolyn were home working on the farm preparing for the upcoming school year and Earl Miller was home during the march working as well.[[23]](#footnote-23) Mrs. Richardson and her cousin wanted so badly to be in attendance at the march and she stated that her mother told them, “y’all are crazy” for wanting to attend it. Her mother did not believe in fighting against the laws set in place because being born in 1918, segregation was all her mom was used to. [[24]](#footnote-24) Mrs. Richardson recalled there being a lot of hype in the media and around campus leading up to the march. She could not recount any major changes on campus directly after the March on Washington. She did notice gradual changes that occurred over time such as the integration of stores, restaurants, and the movie theaters. Overall she noticed a change in things in Durham as a whole after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed.

After the Act was signed she could not recall any personal discriminatory experiences while still attending NCC. She along with Mr. Miller felt things did change in Durham as a result of student activism even before the Civil Rights Act was signed. They both could recall being discriminated against in the workforce after college. A white man told Mr. Miller that his town, Kinston, was “not ready for a black head football coach.” Mrs. Richardson was almost overlooked in job interview when a white test administrator automatically assumed a young white guy scored the highest on a test for a job as a computer specialist in Detroit. She was a young black woman so the man automatically assumed she could not be the highest scorer on the test but she was and she recalled the man being shocked but having to accept this harsh reality.

When asked which time period they’d rather live in, then or now, Mrs. Richardson and Mr. Miller both said now. She expressed she would rather live now than then because there are more job opportunities and there is access to more services now than there was in the past[[25]](#footnote-25). Mr. Miller said the present because of the change in salaries, economic conditions, and housing. He stated, “As a people we are making more money and doing more things. We are more educated than what we were back then.” [[26]](#footnote-26) There was a time when African-Americans as a people could not walk around without being harassed. They could not go into stores, restaurants, or movie theaters and expect to be treated as whites. They were not granted the same opportunities in employment and were treated as second-class citizens.

Brian Allen Robinson said it best in his thesis “Student Power: A History of Student Unrest and Protest at North Carolina Central University.” “Student Activism is a remarkable subject that is not limited to the United States boundaries; instead it is one that transcends international lines. Student activism has taken place in every part of the world including Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. It must be mentioned that Black Student Activism in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States influenced numerous other students around the world to express open dissent.” The world had no idea that they had a fight or anything else in them. African-Americans would not sit back as the world passed by before their eyes and held no place for them inside it. They as students, employees, activists, and last but not least human beings would get up. They got up and fought to bring change to the world they lived in. They saw no place there for themselves so they created one. The students of NCC and people of the communities in Durham had to stand up. The students all over and even outside the United States acted out but with a great purpose and it was highly effective. They faced two choices, stand up or be pushed aside forever. They were exhausted with being pushed aside so they stood up and demanded a change come.

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1. Elder, Alfonso. “The Evolution of a Concept of Student Self-Direction.” University Archives, Records and History Center in James E. Shepard Memorial Library, North Carolina Central University. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2 Elder, Alfonso. “The Evolution of a Concept of Student Self-Direction.” University Archives, Records and History Center in James E. Shepard Memorial Library, North Carolina Central University. Elder stressed that though he was always in support of self-direction what happened off campus was not “Student-Faculty Cooperation Type. It was instead the “Independent Type of Self-Direction.” He felt a new level of independence hag been reached and there was a new conviction within the students about equality. They were now denying gradualism because as he knew and now them, gradualism set no time limits for achieving equality. The students wanted equality and they wanted it right then. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robinson, Brian A. “Student Power: A History of Student Unrest and Protest at North Carolina Central University, 1933-1974,” M.A thesis. North Carolina Central University, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Milliken, Matthey. “Dedication of the Royal Ice Cream sit-in historical marker.” <http://scienceblogs.com/terrasig/2009/11/29/dedication-of-1957-royal-ice-c/> November 30, 2009 (accessed June 10, 2013): The marker reads “ ROYAL ICE CREAM SIT-IN; Segregation protest at the ice cream parlor on this site. June 23, 1957, led to court case testing dual racial facilities.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. "Greensboro Sit-In and the Sit-In Movement ." Becker, Meghan. N.p.. Web. 29 Sep 2013. <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/durham-students-sit-us-civil-rights-1960>.In history people automatically assume that the sit-ins in Greensboro North Carolina were the first but they were only the first to get noticed by so many people due to higher news coverage. The major difference in the two events was that the sit-in in Greensboro at Woolworth’s lunch counter changed segregation laws and is credited for the outward spiral of sit-in movements all throughout the south. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Dedication and Unveiling of The North Carolina Highway Historical Marker for The Royal Ice Cream Parlor Sit-In*. Durham: Union Hill Baptist Church, 2008. Print. : The actual program pamphlet for the dedication of the site reads “ Segregation protest at an ice cream parlor on this site, June 23, 1957, led to court case testing dual racial facilities.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robinson, Brian A. “Student Power: A History of Student Unrest and Protest at North Carolina Central University, 1933-1974,” M.A thesis. North Carolina Central University, 2011. The manager of Woolworth’s stated, “The national chain required segregation at the lunch counters because local customs had to be followed.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Robinson, Brian A. “Student Power: A History of Student Unrest and Protest at North Carolina Central University, 1933-1974,” M.A thesis. North Carolina Central University, 2011: “NCC Urges Negotiations in the student’s sit-down,” Durham Morning Herald, February 13,1960. Elder and the faculty at NCC felt that what the students were doing “reflected student self-direction” and believed their actions were “democratic and Christian-like.” So instead of stopping students and enforcing college rules they helped them by keeping the dining hall open late for them and providing them with transportation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Collection, North Carolina. "Martin Luther King, Jr., Visit - 1960." *Durham Civil*

    *Rights Heritage Project*. Durham County Library, 18 May 2010. Web. 23 Jul 2013. <http://durhamcountylibrary.org/exhibits/dcrhp/mlk.php>. Martin Luther King Jr., urged people not to fear being placed in jail if that was what it would take "to arouse the dozing conscience of our nation." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robinson, Brian A. “Student Power: A History of Student Unrest and Protest at North Carolina Central University, 1933-1974,” M.A thesis. North Carolina Central University, 2011. The black community and city officials were willing to negotiate with the downtown storeowners but students were not. They felt that it was “a bad idea” and wanted to continue protesting. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Robinson, Brian A. “Student Power: A History of Student Unrest and Protest at North Carolina Central University, 1933-1974,” M.A thesis. North Carolina Central University, 2011. The committee negotiated with white Durham business owners and hoped they would come to view blacks as equals. Unfortunately the storeowners refused to negotiate. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Need to Negotiations, “*The Campus Echo.* February 28, 1960; “Cool Off’ is Urged in Sit Down Protest: Issue Put in Hands Of Adults” *Norfolk Journal and Guide,* February 27, 1960; Chris Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 37-47; “Protest Resumed here,” *Durham Morning Herald* February 28, 1960, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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15. Richardson, Emma. Interview by author. Arlington, Virginia, July 18, 2013. Notes in author’s possession. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Miller, Earl. Interview by author. Wilson, North Carolina, July 24, 2013. Notes in author’s possession. He recalled that him and his peers were tired of being treated like “second class citizens” so they peacefully did what they could to change things.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Richardson, Emma. Interview by author. Arlington, Virginia, July 18, 2013. Notes in author’s possession. Some people’s experiences, I have no doubt been more serious but she was told the fun of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. "A. Philip Randolph." 2013. *The Biography Channel website*. Jul 31 2013.

    <http://www.biography.com/people/a-philip-randolph-9451623>. A. Phillip Randolph was a labor leader, social activist, and the lead planner of the march.

    "Bayard Rustin." 2013. *The Biography Channel website*. Jul 31 2013. <http://www.biography.com/people/bayard-rustin-9467932>. Bayard Rustin was involved in civil rights protests and was known as the key adviser to Martin Luther King in the 1960s and A. Phillip Randolph was his mentor. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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    *and Civil Rights From 1619 to the Present.* Arizona: The Oryx Press, 1996. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Trueman, C. N.p.. Web. 31 Jul 2013. <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/john_kennedy_and_civil_rights.htm>. Kennedy felt the congress may vote against his Civil Rights Bill due to the pressure placed on them by the Civil Rights leaders of the March on Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Levine, Michael. *Social Issues in American History Series: African Americans*

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    *Rights Heritage Project*. Durham County Library, 18 May 2010. Web. 23 Jul 2013.<http://durhamcountylibrary.org/exhibits/dcrhp/mlk.php>. King had visited Durham five times during the Civil Rights Movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Miller, Earl. Interview by author. Wilson, North Carolina, July 24, 2013. Notes in

    author’s possession. He attended NCC at the same time as my grandmother. He was a student athlete, a part of SGA (Student Government Association), NEA (National Education Association), Geography Club, and the president of PMM (Physical Education minor and major club). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Richardson, Emma. Interview by author. Arlington, Virginia, July 18, 2013. Notes in author’s possession. She spoke about how her mother was more comfortable with keeping things the way they were. It is understandable from her point of view though because it was all she ever knew being born in 1918 and raised in the country area of North Carolina. President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2, 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Miller, Earl. Interview by author. Wilson, North Carolina, July 24, 2013. Notes in author’s possession. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)