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The Bravery of Birmingham Children

The year is 1963; the paved streets are lined with people, most of whom are children, and many who are intently grasping signs with the strength that hope brings for the future. They are part of a movement that will alter the course of American history. The Birmingham Children's March marked a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. Since many adults were afraid to protest from the risk of getting fired, their involvement in the cause had dwindled prior to the March (Clark, 2020). On account of this, leaders of the Civil Rights movement constructed a new type of March. On May 2, 1963, over one thousand black children skipped school to march the streets of Birmingham to protest the segregation and racism in their city (Clark, 2020).

Over the years, many have been critical of Martin Luther King's decision to allow children to be a part of the marches in Birmingham. Although it may appear harsh to let kids protest as they could easily be harmed, Birmingham already had a history of violence towards black children. According to Harrison Salisbury's article, "Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham," this occurred to a black kid and his family in 1960 Birmingham, "An evening or two later, seven carloads of hooded men roared into the street where the youngster lives with his mother and sister. Armed with iron pipes, clubs, and leather blackjack into which razor blades were sunk, the men attacked the boy and his mother and sister" (Sailsbury, 1960, p. 2).

Not only did many black kids face physical violence, but they were also experiencing racial segregation and discrimination daily. In Alabama, facilities like hospitals, buses, railroads,

scholar's
and restaurants, black people were separated from white people (Jim Crow Museum, 2024).

Although Martin Luther King Jr's decision to allow children to protest may seem alarming, it was essential. These children were experiencing the same bigotry and hatred for their race that black adults were experiencing; they deserved to speak up for themselves. Seeing those children protest was also powerful to the cause, as it clearly portrayed to the white people of the time how miserable and awful racism had affected those young, innocent souls. It takes a lot to stand up for a cause, knowing that one may get hurt, so the protest of these children shows how serious the problem of discrimination was. These kids were more than willing to march for this cause because of all the hardships they had faced, and protesting was a way to let their voices be heard.

The photographs of the march are truly horrendous, as they captured the blatant cruelty that racists imposed on black Americans. There are pictures of young black people being sprayed with water from firehoses (Moore, 1963, p. 25). The people who were sprayed were in clear pain; some were up against walls, while others had fallen to the ground. There are also photographs depicting dogs gnawing people who were protesting, these dogs were led by white sheriffs (Moore, 1963, p. 30). The sinister actions that were committed by racists were heavily portrayed through these photos, and they are upsetting to peer at. These pictures, which *Life Magazine* published, impacted their national readers by quite literally showing the people of America the injustice black people were facing in the country. It also impacted international readers, as it informed them of the severity of segregation in America. The backlash the white people of Birmingham gained for their actions towards the protesters forced them to think about the sheer hatred they had been imposing on their black neighbors. (201)

The responses the white people had towards the Birmingham Children's March are fascinating. According to an article in *Life Magazine*, "Query for Southern Whites-What Now?",

a white woman states, "If they keep trying to shove this thing down people's throats, there is going to be real trouble. They are just making people mad" (Moore, 1963, p. 36). In that article, many of the white people's responses to the march were exceedingly similar to that white woman. They truly believed that integration was just some wild, radical idea, as if a world where people of all races were unsegregated was ludicrous. Their statements towards this topic are the same as the statements people nowadays make about queer people, as it has become common for people to say that gay people are shoving some sort of agenda into people's throats. It is an eerie realization when one discovers how human behavior has been repeating itself through the course of history.

There were also a sum of white people who sided with the protestors on this situation. For example, there was a white teacher who spoke about how the education system limited learning when it came to social change (Moore, 1963, p. 36). They said that teachers could not even mention the possibility of social change, and that she wished to remain anonymous in the article as she did not desire to get fired. At the time, integrated schools lost funding, which enabled staff to fire teachers who supported integration (Rimer, 2024). Since it was difficult for teachers to educate students on social problems, many kids were not educated about them, which led to more ignorance. Taking this into context, the Birmingham Children's March brought light to many who were ill-informed about the treatment of black people, which was partly because of the faulty education system.

The Birmingham Campaign was a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. It depicted the hardships black people went through at the time, while simultaneously illustrating the utter bravery of the children who participated. White people saw and read about how the *local* government reacted to this protest, which caused many to realize how harsh black adults and

children alike were being treated. Even in the present day, the bravery and resilience of the children who marched are inspiring. America is far from perfect nowadays, so Americans could learn a lot from how the children of Birmingham reacted to their difficult situation. Americans can either stand by and allow unforgivable things to occur to our people, or they can be brave and rise up against injustice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to the author, is located in the top right corner of the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a distinct 'S' at the beginning.

Works Cited

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