

EQUALITY IN BLACK AND WHITE:

A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF THE 1963 BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

By **Susan P. Santoli, Paige Vitulli, and Rebecca M. Giles**

“When they saw those children suffering . . . millions of people said, ‘I need to do something about this.’”¹

In May 1963, thousands of African American elementary, middle, and high school students accomplished what adults had been unable to do—take positive steps in the desegregation of America’s most segregated city, Birmingham, Alabama.² Years of protests, lawsuits, sit-ins, and boycotts had little effect in Birmingham. Many adults were afraid that their participation in overt protests to fill the jails, and thus overwhelm the police force, would cost them their jobs or lives.³ Faced with a stalemate, civil rights organizers turned to a new source for protesters—children.⁴ On May 2, 1963, more than a thousand children began a march through Birmingham to peacefully protest segregation. Hundreds were arrested, but the next day, hundreds more marched. The children were sprayed with high-powered fire hoses, beaten with batons, and attacked by police dogs, all at the order of the Birmingham police commissioner.⁵ Hundreds more were arrested over eight days. The jails were full, so incarcerated children were held at fairgrounds in animal pens.⁶ Despite this, more and more children showed up on successive days to protest and, consequently, be arrested.

Photographs of the treatment of the children appeared in newspapers while film footage was aired on nightly news across the country and around the world. These visual images led to outrage from across the globe. Marches and arrests continued until May 10, 1963, when efforts by these brave children led to agreements between the U.S. Department of Justice, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and local officials to desegregate stores and public facilities in downtown Birmingham and release the children from jail.⁷ Although much violence would continue in the struggle for civil rights, “the Children’s Crusade turned the tide of the movement.”⁸ The compelling photographs that served as a catalyst to rally worldwide support for the children marching in Birmingham can also serve as a means to connect today’s youth to the historically significant events of 1963.

Truly engaging students in historical events can be a challenge. Most history classrooms are textbook-centered, which means that students may receive limited information on topics and that the information they do receive requires them to do very little critical thinking.⁹ Even if teachers supplement the text with lecture, students are passively receiving, rather than actively creating knowledge. These types of learning experiences can be especially challenging for middle school students whose developmental characteristics include a preference for active involvement in learning¹⁰ and learning activities that allow them to use their natural curiosity.¹¹ Middle school is also a time when students “are forming values and making decisions that will impact them for the rest of their lives,”¹² so presenting opportunities to analyze, discuss, and draw conclusions may aid in the way they problem-solve and form their values.

“One of the most exciting ways for kids to connect with the past is with primary sources.”¹³ Primary sources allow students to use critical thinking skills and engage in the work of a historian.¹⁴ Through primary sources, students connect with people and events from the past in a way that textbooks cannot.¹⁵ Photographs can be especially powerful primary sources because they allow students to “see” what may have been only represented through words in their textbooks. Most students are familiar with the use of photographs as a mode of visual representation. The increased use of photography in the realm

of social media has greatly increased the need for teaching the visual literacy skills required for analyzing photographs. According to Baker's 2012 study, 83% of American teens take pictures with their cell phones.¹⁶ Photographs provide an effective portal of learning for students who struggle with reading.¹⁷ In photographs, the attitudes and emotions that are part of the human experience can be viewed in powerful ways different than what text alone may convey.

"The Civil Rights Movement transformed the country."¹⁸ Examining the sometimes overlooked role of young people in the quest for social justice makes clear the evolutionary nature of the movement across age lines and expands understanding of the movement beyond "a handful of heroic figures."¹⁹ As teachers, we are to prepare students both intellectually and ethically. Examining what other young people have accomplished may help today's youth realize that merely knowing about injustice is not enough. Injustice requires action, and young people can be part of the solution for social justice issues that challenge our country and world today.

Notes:

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4. Lottie L. Joiner, "How the Children of Birmingham Changed the Civil-Rights Movement," *The Daily Beast*, May 2, 2013, accessed June 25, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/05/02/how-the-children-of-birmingham-changed-the-civil-rights-movement.html>.
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18. Julie Weiss, *A Time for Justice: America's Civil Rights Movement* (Southern Poverty Law Center: Teaching Tolerance, n.d.), 3.
19. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Why the Civil Rights Movement Matters," September 2011, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/teaching-the-movement/why-the-civil-rights-movement-matters>.



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