

"THEY ASKED FOR A CUP OF COFFEE" LIVING HISTORY AND REMEMBERING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

The most famous lunch counter in America, Wikimedia



UHP Staff

The black countertop is narrow – only two feet wide -- and the four chrome and vinyl swivel stools look almost delicate. Yet this deceptively small section of a lunch counter played an outside role in the American Civil Rights movement.

This is the famous lunch counter from the Woolworth Five and Dime in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Standing in front of the exhibit in the Smithsonian Museum of American History, you can almost hear the quiet voices of four young men as they attempt to order coffee, soup, and sandwiches.

On February 1st, 1960, four African-American college freshmen staged the first sit-in

to integrate lunch counters throughout the segregated South here.

Learning About a Sit-In

Slowly, a voice singing with the unmistakable cadence of the old protest songs from the fifties and sixties echoes across the museum:

"I'm gonna sit at the welcome table..."

The voice belongs to 22-year old London Edgerton, an actress at the Smithsonian. Wearing a polka-dotted dress from the late fifties, she is here, not so much to act out the sit-ins, but to teach you how to participate in a sit-in.

Edgerton plays the role of Diane Lawson, a real organizer during the sit-ins.

Edgerton begins by explaining that she is a college student at North Carolina A and T in Greensboro. When she first heard about the sit-in, she didn't know what to think. She stayed up late talking to her classmates about Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and the Little Rock Nine. She wondered what she, personally, should do.

As she begins to lay out her thoughts, she is both exhilarated and frightened by the idea of joining in the protests herself. During this discussion, the actress conveys the reality of what it was like to live in the segregated and often violent south.

“I walked in to the Woolworth Five and Dime not knowing if I was going to walk back out again. I didn’t know what might happen: jail, beatings, even death.”

That first experience was so powerful, Diane volunteered to train others in non-violent protest. And now you, a member of the audience, are among her newest trainees.

Training for a Sit-In

She passes out menus from the Woolworth’s lunch counter and explains what you need to know to participate in this effort. The sit-ins have spread throughout the south: the movement needs large numbers of people who know how to use non-violence as a tool to win the battle.

Diane (Edgerton) now asks if you believe you are able to do this. After all, fighting back is easy but turning the other cheek--- practicing non-violence---requires a special strength.

A loud “YES” greets Diane’s question. Now the training begins.

Diane provides instructions on what you will need to know to stay safe during a sit-in.

Wear a clip-on tie, she tells the men. A regular tie can become a noose if grabbed by an opponent but a clip-on tie will come off.

Don’t wear earrings, she tells the women. These can be grabbed, pulled, and twisted by those who oppose the sit-in. And no high heels!



Diane Lawson (London Edgerton), UHP Photo

But wear your Sunday best to the protest. We want to convey dignity and garner respect---even as we protest.

Be on guard, Diane warns, you may be physically attacked. Always protect your head and face, curl up into the smallest space possible.

Most importantly, stick together! Don’t become isolated or separated from the group.

If a fellow protester is being attacked, you must come to their aid without becoming violent. You can insert your body between the attackers and the victim but remember: don’t fight back.

Singing can help. She begins to sing, teaching the words, using call and response. As you begin singing and clapping, you realize that singing was a powerful response to injustice.

“This is protest singing. We are singing to make our country a better place, not to sound pretty. Everyone, no matter how good or bad their voice, must sing loudly and powerfully,” Diane explains.

The Meaning of a Sit-In

As the finale, Diane calls up four trainees who are holding the menus passed out at the beginning of the show. They take their seats at the counter.

You will act the part of an opponent of the sit-in. For this demonstration, you are not to touch the protesters or even to speak to them.

You physically crowd the trainees at the counter. Glare at them, intimidate them by your closeness, Diane instructs. After only a few moments, the trainees return to their seats.

Diane leads a brief discussion in which the trainees who sat at the counter tell how difficult it was to stay calm and quiet while being intimidated.

Slowly, the discussion moves you out of the past and back to the present.

It's hard to believe that all this lasts just twenty minutes but in that brief time, you and your fellow audience members have been trained for a sit-in.

You have also come to understand the courage needed by people who staged sit-ins and other protests across the South throughout the Civil Rights era.

This is what inspires London Edgerton every day as she does her job.

“I enjoy giving them something new to think about when they visit the exhibit,” Edgerton explains. “I change up the show a bit, depending on the audience but the message is always the same. This is not just Black History, but American History.”

For Further Reading:

William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom*
 Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Civil Rights Movement*

This Historic Theater event occurs most Sundays and Tuesdays-Saturdays at 11:30, 1:30, 3:00 and 4:30. Free. Meet at the Greensboro Lunch Counter, 2nd Floor, East Wing. Please check listings for the day of your visit at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/events/>.



Woolworth's Menu, UHP Photo