

How Young People Made a Difference in Milwaukee

Goals

Students learn about teenagers' participation in Milwaukee's civil rights struggle by examining a NAACP Youth Council press release and listening to an interview with a woman who marched during the years 1963–68, when she was a high school student.

Central Questions

How and why did the NAACP Youth Council protest? Why did individuals decide to join and take action? What role did the Commandos have within the group and why were they necessary? What role did Father Groppi play?

Background Information

Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council played a large part in the city's desegregation efforts. In the early 1960s, as lunch counter sit-ins erupted across the South, the Youth Council adopted a strategy of local direct action. In 1963 the council campaigned against job discrimination at Marc's Big Boy restaurants, protested against the all-white Eagles Club, and demonstrated in support of a fair housing law. Father James Groppi became an advisor to the group in 1965.

As tensions rose in Milwaukee, the group formed a security unit known as Youth Council Commandos to protect marchers from violence. Eventually, many Commandos parted ways with the Youth Council to create a separate organization that became one of the city's most effective social service agencies from the late 1960s until the early 1980s.

Documents Used in this Lesson:

1. NAACP Youth Council flier, "Why We Demonstrate," describing the 1963 protest against Big Boy restaurant. <http://wihist.org/18VbblZ>
2. 2007 Interview with Mary Arms about being part of the NAACP Youth Council, 1963-1968. <https://wihist.org/2LrtZxX>

The most useful clips to play in class are:

17:40–19:50. She describes facing the Ku Klux Klan in Milwaukee in 1963, being injured by a cherry bomb, being tear-gassed, and describes other demonstrations with the NAACP Youth Council.

20:40–25:15. She describes starting fair housing work with Father Groppi, how Groppi and the Commandos planned march routes and assessed risks, and the power of freedom songs.

25:15–26:50. She recalls the death and funeral of Martin Luther King Jr.

26:50–30:55. She remembers how she coined the name "Commandos," explains why the council formed the group, discusses Father Groppi, recalls the roles of girls in the Commando-ettes, and recounts police infiltration.

On the interview web page, you can either play the audio MP3 or display a typed transcript.

WHY WE DEMONSTRATE

On March 5, 1963, a member of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council applied for a job at Marc's Big Boy's store located at 2207 East North Avenue. He was told he would be called the next day and informed whether he was hired. Not hearing from Marc's Big Boy, the youth called, on March 7th, 1963, to ascertain whether he was employed. A manager at Marc's Big Boy informed our member the job was filled.

The manager stated Marc's Big Boy policy prohibited hiring Negroes at the 2207 East North Avenue store. He further stated that a neat Negro bus boy who was a good worker had been working at the 2207 East North Avenue store but was fired because business fell off due to his employment.

The NAACP Youth Council's special employment sub-committee conferred with Marc's Big Boy's Supervisor of Personnel on March 11, 1963. He stated Marc's Big Boy employed a few Negro bus boys, 2 cooks, and a few general food preparers. No Negro managers, shift managers, or hostesses are employed by Marc's Big Boy. However, one waitress is employed at the downtown store where she is acceptable.

Since the Supervisor of Personnel made no effort to redress this wrong or further communicate with us, we contacted Mr. Ben Marcus, the owner of Marc's Big Boy, by letter on March 13, 1963. In this letter we emphasized our position that Marc's Big Boy employment pattern is not integrated. We also informed Mr. Marcus that qualified Negro young people are ready to fulfill available managerial jobs as well as hostess and waitress positions. Mr. Marcus never acknowledged our communication.

We PROTEST Marc's Big Boy's discriminatory practices by not employing Negroes in all job classifications.

We PROTEST Marc's Big Boy's discriminatory practices by not employing Negroes at all stores.

We MAINTAIN that Marc's Big Boy is not complying with the law by hiring all applicants for all jobs in all locations, without regard to race, creed or color.

We URGE the public to aid us in securing equal employment opportunities for all workers in the City of Milwaukee.

We IMPLORE citizens of Milwaukee to call upon employers to cease token employment of Negroes in stereotype positions, "safe" locations, as well as practicing blatant discrimination.

Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council
815 West North Avenue
Milwaukee 5, Wisconsin

Questions

Document 1: NAACP Youth Council flier, “Why We Demonstrate,” describing the 1963 protest against Big Boy restaurant.

With a partner, read the flier and agree on a single answer to each of the first three questions.

1. What’s the main message of the flier? What is it trying to do?
2. Who created it? Who is the intended audience?
3. Turn each of its last five paragraphs into a short phrase that somebody younger than you could understand. Start each one with, “Marc’s Big Boy should...”
4. Take sides in a debate about the issue of race and hiring. One of you is a job applicant who has been turned down because of your race—and you think that’s unfair. The other is a store manager who believes that white customers don’t want to be waited on by Black waitresses or waiters and needs to keep the customers happy.

Document 2: 2007 Interview with Mary Arms about being part of the NAACP Youth Council, 1963-1968.
<http://wihist.org/1NbsJmm>



Excerpts from transcript of oral history interview with Mary Arms

1. “Oh that was scary. The Eagles Club, that’s my first time ever seeing the Ku Klux Klan, despite all I went through in Mississippi, was the first time I saw the Klan was, they were marching against us across the street on Wisconsin Avenue when we were marching for the Eagle’s Club. And then going out to Wauwatosa ... we got cherry bombed and both of us just dazed, knocked us down, because when I woke up, it’s like, I always said when I woke up, I still had Junior’s hand. He was laying beside me. And we got up and took off running ... it was when we were protesting out in Wauwatosa in front of Judge Cannon’s house. And, you know, naturally we had all the hecklers out there, throw things at you, and they threw that cherry bomb and some kind of bomb, it just exploded. Or a firecracker, it was so loud it just knocked us flat. That was my first so-called injury. My mother used to, when we would be tear gassed, we’d come home hours afterwards and bring tears to their eyes. You know they could smell it when we come ...”
2. “We needed somebody to protect us from the police. The police would not protect us. They would let people come in the line and do things, you know so we needed protection ... the name Commandos, I don’t know. I can’t even remember how I come up with the name Commandos, but it was me. As a matter of fact Shirley had to remind me, “Mary you’re the one, you remember?” and I would say “yeah, but I, I don’t know what I was thinking about.” They looked like it when they used to wear those tams and the combat boots, and the camouflage. That’s how they originally dressed. I said they looked like Commandos, you know, like the Marines or somebody, you know the Green Berets and all of those people. So I called them Commandos and it stuck ...”
3. “That was basically our job [the Commando-ettes], and watch out for, you know, different things we need to call to the Commandos attention. And we didn’t want people in the line with weapons or people that come to be violent. We heard of the police actually putting somebody in, just to cause a disruption so they can come in and beat us up. We had to watch out for things like that. That’s basically for the Commando-ettes. ... We fought just as hard. We were right there by their side.”

Questions

Document 2: 2007 Interview with Mary Arms about being part of the NAACP Youth Council, 1963-1968.

Listen to the last thirteen minutes of the interview, beginning at 17:40, and then answer the first three questions with a partner. Complete questions 4 and 5 on your own. Question 6 might be homework.

1. When was the interview conducted? When did the events that Arms describes happen? Roughly how many years had passed between the two? Does that affect what you hear?
2. How did Arms participate in Milwaukee's Civil Rights Movement when she was a teenager? List five specific activities she remembers from when she was your age.
3. Why did the Youth Council form the Commandos? What was the purpose?
4. Compare the interview format with other kinds of historical documents you've seen, like a letter, a newspaper article, or an autobiography. How does listening to an interview affect you differently than reading something?
5. Imagine you are a Youth Council member and write a fictional diary entry based on any one of the episodes that Arms recalled. Make up any details you need to.
6. Interview a parent or a grandparent. If they were in Milwaukee (or another big city) during the 1960s, ask them what they did during the marches and protests, how they knew about them, and what they remember. If they were someplace else, ask them about things they did when they were your age.