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HEADLINE: The profound sit-down;
PEACEFUL PROTEST BY 'GREENSBORO FOUR' IN 1960 PUT RENEWED SPARK IN CIVIL RIGHTS FIGHT

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BODY:
TV PREVIEW

"February One: The Story of the Greensboro Four"

11 tonight on WPBA, midnight on GPB

If their meticulous plans had unexpectedly gone right on that cold North Carolina afternoon 45 years ago today, Franklin McCain would have ordered a cup of coffee and a simple glazed doughnut.

"Like a Krispy Kreme," he says recently by phone. "It would have been real good."

Joseph McNeil sat next to him at the lunch counter. McNeil would have asked the waitress for coffee and a slice of pie. "Cherry pie," McCain says. "Joe was thinking he wanted cherries."

Jibreel Khazan (whose name then was Ezell Blair Jr.) and David Richmond sat side by side a few stools away from McCain and McNeil at the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter in downtown Greensboro.

All were college freshmen. All had come to the store together that day. All were refused sit-down dining service.

McCain, McNeil, Khazan and Richmond, who died in 1990, are the Greensboro Four, the small band of determined African-Americans who balked at the segregation era's whites-only rules. On Feb. 1, 1960, they began a nonviolent equal-rights sit-in at the Greensboro Woolworth that within two months had sparked demonstrations by blacks at lunch counters in 54 cities, including Atlanta and Savannah. Their actions helped reignite the civil rights movement.

Tonight their story is remembered in an hour-long PBS documentary, **"February One: The Story of the Greensboro Four,"** airing on WPBA and GPB. It's part of the series "Independent Lens."

The early '60s were a time of 65-cent turkey dinners at lunch counters and TV series like "The Andy Griffith Show" and its fictional, all-white town of Mayberry that spun the Southern lifestyle in sweet homilies and simple humor. But it was also a time, especially in the South, of often brutally enforced racial segregation, with separate entrances for white and black patrons at white-owned businesses and strict rules on buses and at lunch counters.

Black staffers could prepare food for all customers. Often, black patrons could stand at designated counters to eat. But the main counters, with seating, were for whites only.

Inspired to act by the festering tragedy of the lynching of Chicago teen Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta in 1955, the Greensboro Four reignited a civil rights movement that some say had gone dormant since Rosa Parks and others launched the Montgomery bus boycott in late 1955.

"What is remarkable and what makes Greensboro distinctive is that this really took off . . . from four the first day to 23 [participants] the second day to 66 the third day to 100 the fourth day," Duke University historian William H. Chafe says in "February One." "And within six months you've got a four-page segment of The New York Times every day that's doing nothing but talking about civil rights demonstrations."

By July 1960, the Woolworth in Greensboro had become integrated. In 1995, a portion of the lunch counter became part of a permanent exhibit at the Smithsonian in Washington. Four years ago, a 10-foot statue of the Greensboro Four was unveiled at their old school campus, North Carolina A&T State University.

"February One" follows not only the teens' step-by-step planning of the sit-in, but the development of their strong friendships and the events in their lives that helped influence their thinking.

Each was roughly the same age as Till when the Chicago teen, visiting relatives in Mississippi, was accused of whistling at a white woman and, later, abducted in the dead of night by at least two white men and murdered. Both men, who admitted taking Till, were tried and acquitted of murder. Last year, the Justice Department announced the case was being reopened.

McCain and Khazan say that as youths they saw the frightening photos of Till's ravaged face that were published in Jet magazine and black newspapers after the teen's open-casket funeral in Chicago.

"I found it hard to accept and horrible," says McCain, now 63 and living in Charlotte. "Emmett Till never had a chance. My young mind would never let me accept that or forget it."

In a separate phone interview, Khazan, also 63 and living in New Bedford, Mass., says it was McNeil, who was returning from New York to school and was denied service at the bus station in Greensboro, who first urged the group to do something. That was in late 1959.

"He was hot," recalls Khazan, who shared a dorm room with McNeil. "He came in and slammed the door. . . . He called in Frank and David and started talking about it. 'We got to take action, and soon. We're not going to take segregation from anybody.' "

McCain says that when they decided they would begin a sit-in on Feb. 1, he didn't believe they would ever return to school safely.

"Knowing the setting and the times and the people we were going to face and the kind of sentiment, I imagined the worst," he says. "But I had concluded that this thing was really worth us giving our all. Otherwise, we were without dignity and manhood."

They weren't served on Feb. 1, but they did return to their dorms unharmed. And they vowed to come back. Which they did again. And again. And again.

Khazan says it was an extremely stressful time.

"We were deep, deep into demonstrations and trying to go to class and there were lots of people calling us and threatening us night after night. 'You come back and we're going to kill you. Set you on fire. We know where you live.' We had no guards."

But Khazan says his simple action has meant so much more.

"It meant I got a chance in my lifetime to help uplift humanity and hopefully make American society and the world a better place for all to live," he says.

Like McCain and McNeil, Khazan had food in mind if he could have ordered on Feb. 1, 1960.

"I wanted a cheeseburger with french fries," he says. "I wanted vanilla ice cream on apple pie. If I had a soda, I would have liked a cherry soda and maybe a banana split. Though I didn't have enough money for all that."

Eventually he got the apple pie at a downtown counter. That, he says, was in 1975.

Why did he wait so long?

"It wasn't about the eating," Khazan says. "It was the idea of being American citizens. We should have been served like everybody else."