



Joseph McNeil, left, and Franklin McCain sign autographs after the screening of a documentary about their 1960 sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter. The two were members of the Greensboro Four, freshmen at N.C. A&T.

STAFF PHOTOS BY TAKAAKI IWABU

PIONEERS RETURN

By DANNY HOOLEY
STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH

An estimated 400 people on their way to Daniels Auditorium on Sunday afternoon first had to walk under a built-to-scale replica of the Wright brothers' first airplane, which hangs 20 feet above the security desk of Raleigh's N.C. Museum of History.

Being first in flight is, without a doubt, the greatest event in the history of the state.

But filmmakers Steven Channing and Rebecca Cerese were in town to remind Sunday's spectators — many of them children from schools and churches across the state — of the second-greatest event. Everyone was there to celebrate the birth of the civil rights sit-in movement in Greensboro on Feb. 1, 1960.

"I don't think there's been an event in North Carolina that has impacted the nation as much as this has, in being the catalyst for the whirlwind that became the sit-in movement in the '60s," Channing said in the lobby before the screening.

Channing and Cerese's film "February One: The Story of the Greensboro Four" premiered in slightly different form at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival two years ago, and the final version will be broadcast at 10 p.m. Tuesday on PBS.

Through archival footage and re-enactments, the film tells the story of the day four African-American freshmen from N.C. A&T State University walked into the Wool-

worth's on Elm Street, sat down at the "white-only" lunch counter and politely asked to be served.

The men — Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair Jr. and David Richmond — were refused service, and a police officer hovered over them threateningly, tapping his nightstick in his palm.

But they didn't budge. And they vowed to come back.



Visitors watch 'February One: The Story of the Greensboro Four,' at the N.C. Museum of History.

"I felt as though I had gained a little bit of my manhood by that simple little act," McCain says in the film, years later.

It didn't end there. A reporter from the Greensboro Record reported that the students would be back the next day.

When they did return, 23 people showed up, including supporters and white antagonizers. But as much as the opposition jeered and jostled the young men, they stuck to their principle of nonviolent re-

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City & State

'A little skinny brown-skinned guy out of India with a diaper wrapped around him led a movement for independence and nonviolence.'

JIBREEL KHAZAN, FORMERLY EZELL BLAIR JR., ON MAHATMA GANDHI

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sistance, based on the example of Mahatma Gandhi.

"I couldn't believe it," Blair, now named Jibreel Khazan, says about Gandhi in a filmed interview. "A little skinny brown-skinned guy out of India with a diaper wrapped around him led a movement for independence and nonviolence through the teachings of Jesus Christ."

Before long, protests crippled the street and its businesses for nearly six months. The movement spread to other cities.

Channing recalls former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt telling him that when he heard about the Greensboro protest on the radio, he and his high school friends in Charleston, S.C., staged a sit-in of their own.

The Greensboro sit-in ended July 26, 1960, when the management of Woolworth's relented.

Since then, three of the four men have moved away. Richmond stayed in Greensboro, where the

only employment he could find was as a school janitor because of his notoriety.

He died in 1990 from liver disease after years of heavy drinking.

However, the survivors say the experience made them better people. Even Richmond said so, in interviews with NBC and UNC-TV preserved from the 1970s and included in the film.

Change and survival

Two of the men, McCain and McNeil, attended the screening Sunday and answered questions afterward.

Channing said the men did not initially set out to change the world, but McCain quipped that he was out to change "my world."

McNeil, who retired from the Air Force in 2001 as a major general, said the experience made him tougher.

Years later, when he received prisoner of war survival training, he realized he had already been through it as a civilian.

"They were dumping water on

us and beating ... us, and calling us all kinds of names," he said. "It occurred to me that I had already been through that. I had an advanced degree in survival."

A young boy in the audience asked them how they had felt walking to Woolworth's that day, knowing they could be met with force.

"I felt like Superman," McCain said.

That feeling rubbed off on some of the youngsters in attendance.

Cousins Gregory and Telvin King, 13-year-olds from Battleboro, said they were impressed by the story of the Greensboro Four even before they saw the film. They were especially awed that the civil rights movement was jump-started by 17- and 18-year-olds.

"It made me feel great, because it made me feel like we can accomplish anything," Gregory said.

"We have more power than we think we do," Telvin said.

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