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Nashville Movement enticed civil rights pioneer to South

Andrew Young’s decision led to him becoming MLK aide

By Michael Cass
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The courage and dedication of Nashville’s young civil rights activists inspired Andrew Young to move back to the South, where he ultimately became a top aide to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Young, who received an honorary degree from Nashville’s Meharry Medical College and spoke at the school’s convocation ceremony Monday, said he and his late wife, Jean, were living in New York when they saw an NBC program on the Nashville Movement. The group staged sit-in protests that led to the desegregation of downtown lunch counters in 1960.

After the program, Jean Young turned to her husband, a native of New Orleans, and said, “It’s time for us to go back home. I want you to quit your job, and let’s sell this house, and then we’ll figure out where we go next.”

Andrew Young said he and his wife were moved by the bravery of the Nashville college students who led the protests, including John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette and Diane Nash, and the ministers who trained and mentored them, such as James Lawson and Kelly Miller Smith.

“I had never met people who were so completely dedicated that they were ready to give their lives for what they believed in,” Young told The Tennessean. “I realized that was what it was going to take, and they did it with no anger, no bitterness.”

Young, who later worked closely with those activists and others who emerged from Nashville, said he received a job offer from Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tenn., after he began looking to move from New York. But Highlander was closed by the state in 1961 “for being ‘Communist,’ which meant integrationist in those days,” Young said.

Andrew Young delivers the keynote address at Meharry Medical College’s 138th Convocation Monday in Nashville. Young also received an honorary degree. LARRY MCMANNACK / THE TENNESSEAN

Hear Andrew Young speak on early years in civil rights movement at Tennessean.com.

He eventually wound up at King’s Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference, one of the nation’s leading civil rights organizations.

He started by helping keep up with King’s mail, but then he was “pulled right into the middle of the whole thing” and became the SCLC’s executive director, despite his intentions to stay

» YOUNG, 48
Bravery of Nashville students inspired Young

somewhat on the outside of the movement so he could write about it as it unfolded.

Young, 81, said he's happy with how things worked out.

"It was 10 of the most productive years of my life," he said. "In fact, they were the best years of my life."

Political career

After leaving the SCLC in 1970, Young was elected to Congress in 1972 and later was appointed U.S. ambassador to the United Nations by President Jimmy Carter. He served as mayor of Atlanta from 1982 to 1990. He now runs the Andrew Young Foundation.

Young said King, who was assassinated in Memphis in 1968, had a calm leadership style that people gravitated toward. King was willing to put his life on the line, but only for a cause he believed in, not for "anybody else's ego trip."

"He had already had his home bombed. He'd been sued two or three times. He'd been stabbed, he'd been put in jail. He knew that every decision he made could cost him his life.

"So he was not anxious to get involved in anything. It had to be really thought through and analyzed, and he had to make a decision that this was something that was worth risking your life for."

After President Lyndon B. Johnson told King in December 1964 that pushing through voting rights legislation would be difficult because a president wasn't as powerful as many people thought, King told Young, "I think we have to figure out a way to get this president some power."

Young said he laughed at the idea, because "we had no money, no army, no cell phones."

"And at that time we probably had less than 50 people on the staff working nationwide and a budget of less than a half a million dollars a year," he said.

But a few days later, a woman named Amelia Boynton came to Atlanta from Selma, Ala., with a plea for King to get in-

Visit Tennessean.com/civilrights to read about the struggle in Nashville.

volved in a voting rights push there. On March 7, 1965, Lewis and King aide Hosea Williams led a march across Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. They and other marchers were attacked by state troopers and local lawmen with billy clubs and tear gas, shocking the nation.

Johnson then introduced the legislation that became the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He said in a nationally televised speech, "And we shall overcome."

"We found a way to give him some power," Young said. "It cost three or four people's lives, and a lot of people got beat up on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. But I think it was the right thing to do. And even those who gave their lives, I think, realized it was for a cause that they believed in that transformed America."

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