

# ***The*** A CHILD OF THE MOVEMENT ***Movement***

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*Sheyann Webb was 8 years old and the seventh of eight children when she became a civil rights activist. In this excerpt from Ellen Levine's book Freedom's Children (to be published by Putnam in 1992), Sheyann remembers her childhood in the movement.*

My house was right behind the Brown Chapel AME Church. The civil rights movement in Selma really began at this church. I had to pass it to go to school, and this is where I played most of the time. I remember this particular morning on my way to school, seeing something that was different. A lot of blacks and whites mingling together.

As I began to cross the street, I was still watching and wondering what was going on. I looked back and saw them as they began to go into the church. I decided I'd cross back over and follow behind them. I didn't think about what may happen if I was late to school. It didn't even cross my mind. I went into the church and sat in the last pew in the back. I began to listen to what the people were saying on the pulpit. I remember Hosea Williams being the presiding officer that day. He began to talk about blacks in Selma not being registered. He talked about Dr. Martin Luther King. I didn't know anything about any of these things, but it was something that seemed exciting. It was like something was about to happen.

When I got home that afternoon, all I could think about was being whipped. (*Sheyann's teachers informed her parents that she had been late for school.*) Then I began to see how inquisitive they were as they talked to me about what was going on. It made my parents nervous not only for me, but about what was about to happen in Selma. They were fearing something. This made it even more interesting to me.

I wanted to know about voting. I didn't know what that was about. And then I wanted to know who was this man, Dr. Martin Luther King. My parents knew his name, but it was like I shouldn't know him or want to know him. This made me even more inquisitive. I was told to stay away from around there. I had no business being there.

Rachel, who was my best friend, lived right next door. After I saw I wasn't going to get a whipping, I was anxious to tell her about what happened. We talked, and I told her I was going back out there.

It started off with Rachel and me going to mass meetings. We'd sit in the front row and sing. The first song we learned was "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." That song itself told me a lot about what freedom was.

The more mass meetings I attended, the more I began to learn. The words equality and justice was mentioned so much. I put all the pieces together just with those words. I may not have understood it well, but I understood enough.

When Dr. Martin Luther King had first come to one of the mass meetings, we were sitting in the front row. We had already led a few freedom songs, and we inched up to the pulpit and sat on his lap. He remembered us, and every time he would come, we would go up there and sit on his lap. We looked forward to him being there. It was just a thrill. The more we saw him come, the more mass meetings I attended. I became a very disobedient child. That's how deep I got into it.

I remember the first march I went on very well. I had gone to a mass meeting, and they were talking about marching to the Dallas County Courthouse. It was a march about blacks getting registered to vote, and you had to register at the courthouse.

It was exciting to me, seeing all the people walking. We sang as we marched. Looking at the hostility, now that was a little frightening. You could see it and feel it as you walked. You know, whites standing at the side and looking and saying nasty things. I remember the policemen having their billy clubs. On this one march we went to a certain point, and we prayed and then turned around.

I remember my mom telling me that morning that I better not go. I left a note saying something like I'm sorry, but I must go on.

With my family, it was always that fear factor. This lasted a long time. I recall one time, coming and talking to my mom about what they were saying at the meeting. I remember her telling me that I could cause her to lose her job. I didn't understand that, and I began to ask her how could she lose her job with me being there. "White folks don't like that. If they knew that you were involved and you're my child they would fire me."

But I didn't have any fear. I used to tell my momma, "I want you and daddy to be free. I want you to be able to vote just like the white folks. They couldn't do it. They just couldn't do it. We ain't free. We're not gonna be free. This really made me be motivated more and more.

My parents had given me the example of the four girls killed in the church bombing in Birmingham to keep from being involved. They said it could happen in Selma at Brown Chapel Church. And there were several bomb threats.

Why children? Why us? It made me realize that it didn't matter who you were. If you were black and you were in the area they didn't like or where the cause for freedom was being fought, you were at risk. It didn't matter – children, boy, girl or whatever.

My father and I went to Jimmie Lee Jackson's funeral. There were a number of situations that I knew of as a kid where death actually happened. Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Reeb, Jonathan Daniels, Viola Liuzzo, the four kids in Birmingham. Three of the people were white, but they were part of the struggle. And in the struggle it didn't matter if you were black or white, we were all just like a big family.

### **Bloody Sunday**

I remember being afraid on the first attempt of the Selma-to-Montgomery march (March 7, 1965). That was the first time that I was really afraid. The night before the march I slipped to the mass meeting. They began to talk about the strategies, like not fighting back. That right there told me that there was a possibility that there could be some fights. They were saying if you're hit, or if something is said to you, just bow down. Out of all the times my parents had talked to me about what could happen, this is when it really came to me. But somehow I was still determined to go.

I got up the next morning, frightened to march. The people began to congregate and line up. I was looking for Mrs. Moore (a teacher who had befriended me) and I found her. I remember not wanting to get close to the front of the line because I was afraid. I remember Mrs. Moore telling me that I should go back home, and I was saying I was going to march. As usual, we knelt down to pray, and after we had prayed, we began to sing. A little of that fear began to leave me as we sang, because people were still joyful.

As we marched down the street to the downtown area, I began to see more spectators, blacks as well as whites, and this was different to me. Normally you didn't see a whole lot of spectators. And I began to see more police officers riding around on motorcycles. It was a little bit more exciting. We still clapped, and we sang all the way down. The closer we got to the bridge, the more I began to get frightened. At this time I could see hundreds of policemen. The helmets, state troopers, dogs and horses, police cars. I got even more frightened then. I began to hold Mrs. Moore's hand tighter, and the person's hand on the other side of me. My heart was beginning to beat real, real fast. I looked up at Mrs. Moore, and I wanted to say, "I want to go home," but I didn't. She was looking straight ahead. Then the people began to kneel down and pray again.

We were still on the Edmund Pettus bridge. Going up, you can't see what's on the other side. But I had gotten up to the top, which is midway on the bridge, and you could see down. The big picture that I saw frightened me more. When we were asked to kneel down and pray, I knelt down with everybody. Shortly after we got up a burst of tear gas began. I could see the troopers and policemen swinging their billy clubs. People began to run, and dogs and horses began to trample them. You could hear people screaming and hollering. And I began to run. I don't know what happened with Mrs. Moore. All I wanted to do was make my way back home. As I got almost down to the bottom of the bridge, Hosea Williams picked me up. I told him to put me down 'cause he wasn't running fast enough. I just continued to run.

### **Funeral arrangements**

You began to hear sirens. You could still see the dogs and horses trampling people, who were running all the way back from the Edmund Pettus bridge to Brown Chapel Church. When I made my way back home, I saw my mother and father and even my sisters and brothers there. My father was standing in the doorway. They were just waiting for me to get home. I remember him opening up the door and taking a deep breath seeing me, that I was safe. I went straight upstairs. He stood at the door watching what else was happening after I had come in. I was crying, and my mother came upstairs to comfort me. I was shocked at what I had seen.

I was still determined to go back out to Brown Chapel Church, but my parents wouldn't let me. I was shut up in my room. I remember taking a pencil and writing down how I felt and what I saw. Then I wrote down my funeral arrangements because even with what I saw, I still wanted to go out and fight. And I said if I did that, I would probably die. So I wrote my funeral arrangements.

I realized on that day everything about what Dr. Martin Luther King was trying to say. It was wrong to be beaten for something that you was trying to fight for that was right. I realized it more on that day than on any other day. It all came together.

Meetings after that were filled with people. They were fired up. Teachers, the ministers, the grass roots from all walks of life. People began to come from all over the world. I remember the first mass meeting my parents came to. My mom and dad, they were telling me that they were gonna come to one of the mass meetings. I was already there and it was a great thrill for me to look back and see them. Then after they had gone to the meeting, we talked about them getting registered to vote. They promised me for my birthday that they would be registered. That was going to be my birthday present.

*Sheyann again defied her parent's wishes by joining in the triumphant Selma-Montgomery march, which led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.*

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I felt I was part of the change. Really, anyone who was a part of the struggle at that time contributed to a change. So I think anyone, young or old, who participated in the movement was a contributing factor to the good things that are happening as a result of the Selma movement.

But now (25 years later), right here in Selma where the struggle actually took place, it looks like voter registration is declining. There are a lot of reasons why people don't vote. Some people say they don't like who's running, but that's not the point. When I went to register, that was something I looked forward to. When I go vote, I probably don't feel like most people feel. When I pull the switch, I just feel good about it. It's like a proud thing to me because I know what happened for us to get that.

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**FUTHER READING**

*Selma, Lord, Selma*, by Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson with Frank Sikora. University of Alabama Press, 1980.

*Selma, 1965: The March that Changed the South*, by Charles Fagar. Beacon Press, Boston, 1985.