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# **Always the Backbone, Rarely the Leader: Black Women Activists and the Reconceptualization of Respectability during the 1960 Nashville Sit-in Movement**

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*In 1960 Nashville, change came from an unexpected place. Black college women renounced the protective environment of their campuses to participate in, and often lead, civil rights demonstrations alongside their black brothers. Yet, these black women's valiant actions were not initially met with praise and gratitude from the city's black community, who feared the women's new radical behaviors transgressed the gendered boundaries of middle class respectability. Supportive male leaders claimed these young women's actions were simply extensions of traditionally respectable black female attributes. Through the framework established by supportive male leaders, black college women continued to challenge and succeeded in shifting women's respectable role in racial uplift work from that of invisible supporter to public leader, all the while maintaining the black community's support — and admiration.*

## **Introduction**

In 1960 Nashville, change came from an unexpected place. As their mothers watched in horror, black college women renounced the protective environment of their campuses to participate in, and often lead, civil rights demonstrations alongside their black brothers. Frustrated by slow progress and encouraged to join the movement by female friends, young black women could no longer tolerate sitting on the sidelines while black men led the way in the fight for first-class citizenship. Black college women, like Fisk University's Diane Nash, faced jail time, publicly confronted white community leaders, endured abuse, and led marches through the streets. Yet, despite the fact that their efforts had indisputably moved their cause forward, these black women's valiant actions were not initially met

with praise and gratitude from the city's black community. Instead, black adults, especially women, condemned the college women's new radical behaviors, fearful that their actions transgressed the gendered boundaries of middle class respectability that many adults believed were essential to achieving equality.

To calm their fears, many black adults turned to trusted, older male civil rights leaders for assurance that college women's actions were not blemishing their respectable reputations. Supportive male leaders, like Rev. Kelly Miller Smith of Capitol Hill First Baptist Church, claimed young women's actions were simply extensions of traditionally respectable black female attributes, particularly their willingness to sacrifice for black men and a heightened sense of Christian morality. In reality, black college women's own words reveal a divergent understanding of respectability that had little to do with religion, but called on women to take forceful, direct action in order to secure equal opportunities for all black citizens. As more women entered Nashville's historically forward-thinking black universities and engaged in classroom debate as equals with their male peers, black women felt increasingly confident in their ability to play an integral part in the fight to eradicate Nashville's insufferable Jim Crow laws. With civil rights a daily topic of conversation on college campuses, black women believed racial uplift to be such an urgent and paramount cause that all respectable black citizens, regardless of gender, should participate to their fullest ability.

Despite the evident break between gendered rhetoric concerning respectable behavior and the dreams and realities of college women who shared their aspirations with their black brothers, college women developed trusting relationships with those male leaders willing to situate the women's activities in a familiar, though broadened, context of respectability. Through this framework, black college women continued to challenge and succeeded in shifting women's respectable role in racial uplift work from that of invisible supporter to public leader, all the while maintaining the black community's support — and admiration.

### **Changes in the College Environment, Changing the Meanings of Respectable Race Work**

Numerous changes in black women's college experience in the late 1950s caused a shift in the way young women envisioned their respectable participation in the fight for racial equality. African American students were immersed in racial uplift work in ways differing drastically from their parents' generation. Students attending college witnessed an unprecedented amount of court victories for black citizens, read accounts of school desegregation in local papers, and watched daily news reports featuring black civil rights activists. Nashville's college students did not ignore these civil rights activities, and campuses often served as locations to talk through problems and debate correct courses of action. Female students were not left out of these discussions, and they drew on their more egalitarian position within the school setting to become leaders and equal participants after forming the Nashville Student Movement, a student-led affiliate of the local clergy's Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC).

After the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision declared segregation illegal, changes in curriculum at black universities helped create an intellectual environment where students could more readily engage with the issues of race. After *Brown*, the United Negro College Fund, a major white financial backer of black private colleges, including Nashville's Fisk and Meharry Medical College, was saddled with a difficult task — it

had to show philanthropists as well as the nation that its institutions were still viable. Previously emphasizing that black students learn labor skills, such as yard management and car mechanics, the United Negro College Fund began trying to demonstrate that black colleges were of sufficient quality to attract the attention of both white and black students. Like white institutes of higher learning, the arts and sciences became the focus of black universities' curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Though the United Negro College fund attempted to attract white students, the schools remained overwhelmingly black institutions. Armed with a black student body and an intensely intellectual curriculum, black colleges in Nashville began to emerge as centers of thought, debate, and activism.

As black college curriculum improved, steady increases in post-World War II wealth allowed a higher number of women to attend college than in previous years. From 1945 to 1950, Fisk University had a female student body that fluctuated between nine and thirteen percent. Between 1955 and 1960, the number of female students dramatically increased to between twenty-six and thirty-two percent.<sup>2</sup> Women attending black universities in the late 1950s had opportunities to engage in intellectual debate alongside male students. University honors societies often had a relatively equal number of male and female members and leaders, and the humanities department had a male/female balance proportional to ratios of attendance.<sup>3</sup> Though university rules often differentiated between male and female students, the classroom served as a more level playing field for female students to voice their opinions and display their intellectual talents.

Nashville's black students were not only engaging in intellectual debate about race issues with each other, but they were increasingly exposed to students from all over the U.S. and the world. Prestigious universities such as Meharry Medical College, Fisk, and American Baptist Seminary attracted black students from diverse sections of the United States, as well as white and black exchange students from abroad. Many college students, like Angeline Butler, actually became involved in the NSM through Fisk University's International House, which local students from all of Nashville's universities frequented. Marion Barry, Angeline Butler, John Lewis, Diane Nash, and Peggy Alexander, all students who would go on to play leading roles in the movement, met at the International House.<sup>4</sup> Young students from the South were exposed to others to whom Jim Crow was a bizarre, foreign concept. African liberation movements along with Jim Crow laws were regular topics of discussion that greatly influenced, intrigued, and raised the consciousness of black southern college students.<sup>5</sup>

Through Fisk's International House, students learned about yet another opportunity to discuss and engage with the topic of race. The International House sponsored weekend retreats at the nearby adult education center, Highlander Folk School. Founded in the 1930s in Sewanee, Tennessee, Highlander was a center of grassroots political activity and work towards social change. Focusing mainly on Appalachian white poverty and the formation of labor unions in the 1940s, the fight for desegregation and racial equality was added to Highlander's agenda in the early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Highlander opened its doors to students in 1953 by creating "Annual Highlander Folk School College Workshops" where students could come to discuss civil rights. For example, the Highlander workshops in April 1959 focused on "campus censorship; integration of college faculties and student bodies; exchange opportunities between Negro and white colleges; and the treatment of minority students." Both women and men participated and led formal discussions and workshops in which they worked to formulate solutions to the South's problems.<sup>7</sup>

Along with providing a forum for southern students to discuss race, Highlander also gave black female students an opportunity to meet older black women who took leadership

roles in the earlier years of the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks regularly attended seminars at Highlander as well as Septima Clark, a well-respected leader and organizer of the Highlander school. Introductions to female civil rights activists made a memorable impact on young Nashville college women spending time at Highlander. Angeline Butler proudly recalls Clark's accomplishments and remembers her as an outspoken participant in all discussions.<sup>8</sup>

Race leaders' increasing rhetorical ties to religion also opened up new opportunities for women's participation in the civil rights movement. Instead of characterizing racial inequalities as legal flaws that could be reversed through the court system as the NAACP had previously claimed, new activists like Nashville's James Lawson framed the issue of civil rights in terms of good versus evil, the will of God versus the work of the devil, and immorality versus morality. Equality was not something that could be earned or in any way proven — it was a God-given right. Due to their historically active participation in the black church and being viewed as the "more moral gender," black women were often able to justify their heightened race activities.

Though religious rhetoric did justify women's equal participation in the movement in the minds of some black community members, the black church was not the main vehicle through which most young women came to the student movement. In fact, many women claim that affiliation with the black church had very little to do with their decision to participate in the movement. Angeline Butler, who was the daughter of a local Nashville Methodist preacher, expressed dissatisfaction with local black churches and entered the movement partly due to her exploration of other religious sects. Butler said:

We met the Fusons [at Fisk University's International House] and they were the American Friends. They were the Quakers. And so we began to go to their meetings because we were in rebellion to the black church. You know, we were all looking for something else than what we had.<sup>9</sup>

Nellie Hall, when directly asked if involvement in a church community helped encourage her to become a NSM participant, flatly answers "no." Instead, like many of the women involved in the movement, encouragement by a female friend enticed Hall to participate.<sup>10</sup> The Christian faith remained an important part of young black women's lives, and many students did frame calls for equality in religious terms. But, the black church seemed to be outdated and too conservative to press for racial equality at the pace college women were beginning to demand.

Experiences on black college campuses in the late 1950s prepared and encouraged young women to actively participate in Nashville's sit-in movement. While attending college, women discussed the decade's victories and disappointments not only with other women, but also with black men and diverse students from all across the globe. Young women's mothers often found themselves executing black men's strategies for racial uplift, but young black college women began to participate in strategic development alongside men in the classroom, International House, and during weekend visits to Highlander. The more egalitarian environment existing between black men and women on campuses narrowed — though did not eliminate — the gender gap evident in the different forms of men and women's racial uplift activities during the previous years. These women would take that particular male/female dynamic with them as the Nashville Student Movement formed. Even as their parents looked on disapprovingly, black college women sensed change was occurring and that new opportunities were becoming available for them. Angeline Butler wrote of her father's lack of support for her participation in the sit-ins: "He didn't really

support that at all. He wanted me just to come home and teach. Because he figured he'd sent me to Fisk and he'd groomed me, he'd given me the best education and I should come home and be a good little girl and get married and teach." Yet, instead of obeying her father's wishes, Butler continued to participate in the Student Movement. "I didn't agree with that [her fathers' advice]. I wanted something else in my life," wrote Butler. "I didn't know what it was yet, but I knew it started with the movement."<sup>11</sup>

### **Bridging the Generational Gap**

Evelyn Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent* argues that "the black church functioned as a discursive, critical arena — a public sphere in which values and issues were aired, debated, and disseminated through the larger black community."<sup>12</sup> In line with Higginbotham's thesis, black churches in 1960 Nashville proved to be a central location where middle class African American adults negotiated and debated which actions to collectively deem a part of respectable women's racial uplift work. Concerned that college women were blemishing their reputations by participating in the sit-ins, adults often sought advice and guidance from trusted, older male African American race leaders and ministers who were supportive of the students' new activities. Many of the local clergymen were previous leaders of the NAACP and were now active members of the student-supportive Nashville Christian Leadership Conference. With a large captive audience every Sunday comprised mostly of adults,<sup>13</sup> ministers addressed students' sit-in participation during church services and, in effect, functioned as bridge leaders between activists and the adult community by situating students' new activities within the framework of traditionally respectable black male and female attributes.<sup>14</sup>

Rev. Kelly Miller Smith is the perfect example of a race leader serving in this capacity. Minister of the largest black church in Nashville and leader of the student-supportive NCLC, Rev. Smith had a considerable amount invested in his ability to convince black adults of the positive qualities of the student sit-in movement. Since the sit-ins began, distressed black community members turned to Rev. Smith with their grievances. Some adult African American women went as far as to send Rev. Kelly Miller Smith letters recommending young women in the sit-in movement participate in classes teaching social graces to remind them of what it means to be a respectable woman. Dorothy Brody, one of the Capitol Hill First Baptist Church's congregation members, wrote:

Success will follow once they [young women in the civil rights movement] realize that everyone outside their home expects them to act properly and that nobody but nobody will want to sit beside them, eat with them, or attend school with them regardless of their color unless they're respectable.<sup>15</sup>

Another woman writes, "We are fighting to end second class citizenship, let's also end second and third class attempts at morale manner and social graces."<sup>16</sup>

In response, Rev. Smith dedicated a large portion of his time at the pulpit and in the community from February to May 1960 to attempting to prove to his congregation that the students were "not rebellious youths, but fine young people armed with a dream."<sup>17</sup> Rev. Smith's sermons, newspaper interviews, and church bulletin quotes demonstrate his ability to situate students' new, more radical civil rights activities within the framework of the older discourse of respectability. Whenever Smith discusses young female activists, they are spoken about in terms of self-sacrificing femininity, and he repeatedly draws on the view that black men were more discriminated against than black women. In one sermon

at the end of February 1960, Smith said, “They even throw our women in jail, innocent women who do nothing but sacrifice for their men.”<sup>18</sup> In a March 5 interview he claims, “Persecuting our men is one thing, but harming our innocent women is another.”<sup>19</sup> Smith invoked the same image of women as innocent toilers for men’s betterment as he did in his eulogy devoted to Nannie Helen Burroughs months earlier.

While depicting black women as sacrificing for men, Smith goes to great lengths to demonstrate black male youths’ manliness in contrast to the white male teenagers who tormented sit-in participants. Reported in the Capitol Hill First Baptist Church bulletin, Smith refers to the young whites present as “leather jacketed white teenagers” and describes insults as coming from “raspy and cracking teenage voices.”<sup>20</sup> In Smith’s unpublished memoir of the movement, all the white men’s words, including adults, are recorded in dialect, but black men’s words are typed in perfect English. “Awright, awright, git back there! You ain’t s’posed to be talkin’ to ’em,” a white police officer tells NCLC leaders speaking with students after their arrests. “I apologize, sir. We were just trying to take care of some business,” Smith records C.T. Vivian responding.<sup>21</sup>

In reporting to the local chapter of the NAACP on March 1, 1960, Smith said, “Can you really expect a muscular, athletic young man to see his girlfriend abused without lifting a finger? I know that they [the black college men] could take care of themselves in a fistfight. Of course, they had no way of knowing whether there would be brass knuckles, knives, or even arms to contend with.”<sup>22</sup> Not only did Smith feel the need to demonstrate that the whites were much less able to “fight like men,” but also that the black men’s restraint was assuredly not due to their inability to physically defend themselves or black women. In reiterating black college men’s manliness, Smith also demonstrates that young women’s participation and leadership has not emasculated black males in any way. He ensures adults that young black men are still more than willing to defend black women’s honor. Smith even claimed the movement began in reaction to mistreatment of black women. When discussing the origin of the sit-ins, Smith said:

Back in 1958, we heard complaints from quite a few Negro women about their treatment at local stores. They had been denied use of all dining facilities except the lunch counter in the sub-basement ... Some said they had been publicly humiliated when ordered out of the ladies’ rest rooms and told to use the segregated rest rooms in the basement.<sup>23</sup>

The ability to defend black women’s honor may have been particularly important to black men who were long forced to remain silent while whites took advantage of black women.

Smith worked especially hard to ease the minds of adults whose daughters were serving time in jail, which had especially negative connotations for respectable blacks. To justify students going to jail, Smith drew heavily on religious imagery, going as far as suggesting students had a “crucifixion complex” in one March sermon.<sup>24</sup> He also described their appearance as “the battered, the beaten, the tired, the hungry.”<sup>25</sup> By presenting women as Christ-like figures, Smith guided the adult community away from associating jail with stereotypical low-class black immorality and towards association with Christian morality and martyrdom — characteristics highly praised in African American women.

Through his carefully crafted words, Smith emphasized that students participating in the sit-ins were publicly displaying their respectability for the entire Nashville community to see, including whites. He wrote in a March 10 Capitol Hill First Baptist Church Bulletin:

The Negro Student who has participated in the sit-in movement has shattered the mental image of the Negro held by the average white southerner. This is confusing because he has believed that the Negro is fundamentally a foot-shuffling, hat-doffing, always smiling person. He is happiest when allowed to roam undisciplined through his community, content with handouts from his white boss. This is what has been taught by his parents and, until recently, in his schools. It is understandable that the average white southerner is puzzled when he finds himself confronted by the Negro of the sit-in movement — the neatly dressed, quiet spoken, articulate and determined person who is assuming leadership among southern Negroes in general.<sup>26</sup>

According to Smith, students were not only behaving respectably in public, but they were achieving what middle class African American adults had worked for decades attempting to accomplish: students were succeeding in eliminating unrespectable stereotypes of blacks from the minds of white southerners.

Though black male leaders like Rev. Smith drew on images of black women as innocent victims and self-sacrificing martyrs in the battle for civil rights in an attempt to demonstrate to adults that women's activities did not differ a great deal from previous race work, black college women did not understand their activities within that same context. Instead, they often described their experiences as exciting and empowering. Diane Nash said her participation in the movement was the first time "a group of people were suddenly proud to be called 'black,'" and in each student "was born a new awareness of themselves as an individual."<sup>27</sup> Nash later said:

The movement had a way of reaching inside me and bringing out things that I never knew were there. Like courage, and love for people. It was a real experience to be part of a group of people who put their bodies between you and danger. And to love people that you work with enough that you put your body between them and danger.<sup>28</sup>

Women's participation in the sit-ins was also accompanied by feelings of accomplishment and self-worth. Nellie Hall recalls, "I was scared out of my mind, but I knew for the first time I was doing something important."<sup>29</sup> Angeline Butler described her sit-in experience by saying, "Sitting-in was such a rush that you forgot to be afraid. We knew we were making history."<sup>30</sup>

Women did not see their actions in terms of a fight for men to be able to "achieve their rightful positions as leaders." They had a more holistic vision of emancipation from racism that included men *and* women's increased ability to experience the privilege reserved for whites.<sup>31</sup> As Historian Cynthia Fleming argues in "Black Women and Black Power," many female civil rights participants did not feel their actions or aspirations were circumscribed because of their gender.<sup>32</sup> Though from a present day standpoint it is easy to see continued gender discrimination, these young black women were operating in a more egalitarian setting than they had ever experienced. To these women, equality did not mean strictly gaining the right to become a respectable middle class wife and mother, though undoubtedly this was many of the young women's plans. They also wanted to be able to continue to pursue their education, walk on sidewalks, ride public transportation, eat at lunch counters, and raise their future children without being forced to humble themselves to often less educated or successful whites.

Another area Smith greatly embellished, though perhaps unknowingly, when attempting to win the support of adults was the amount of control the NCLC actually had over the students' activities. Smith went to great lengths to make it clear to adults that the students, especially women, were not without guidance and adult leadership. In recounting the story of the first sit-in in Nashville, Smith said, "Once Ellie Mays, a Fisk student, strongly denied that there was any organization connected with the student group to a local reporter." Smith goes on to admit, "This is hardly the kind of statement that would secure community support, although it was perhaps innocently made."<sup>33</sup> Despite Smith's beliefs, the students were actually highly critical of NCLC leaders' attempt to control their activities. Ellie Mays was probably voicing the feeling of most of the student activists instead of making "an honest mistake." In April 1960, when Nashville was in the midst of its sit-in movement, two important meetings occurred that fully showcased the students' independence and growing dissatisfaction with black male NCLC leadership: the first at Highlander Center April 1 through 3 and second at Shaw University April 16 through 18.

On April 1 through 3, 1960, eighty-two participants gathered at Highlander center for the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Highlander Folk School College Workshop. The Nashville students were asked to present a report discussing the way leadership was used in their college group. During their presentation, the students spoke appreciatively of the support they had from the NCLC but said they were uncertain about the wisdom in seeking to work directly with the organization in the future. Interestingly, Nashville's young black women were some of the most vocal people about their dislike of adult leadership, perhaps because of the weak images of female sit-in participants disseminated by the NCLC ministers. Angeline Butler claimed that the student movement represented "the kind of direct action against immediate injustices of discrimination which the average adult finds difficult to undertake, regardless of how sympathetic they may be with the movement." Diane Nash emphasized, "Adults are essentially conservative and, because of this, the movement is especially suited to students alone."<sup>34</sup>

On April 16 through 18, NSM leaders attended yet another conference at Shaw University in North Carolina where they again voiced their reluctance to affiliate with adult leadership. On the invitation of Ella Baker, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), student activists from around the county gathered at the conference.<sup>35</sup> Baker encouraged the students to form a national organization all their own. Students agreed, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed. Rather than being closely tied to any adult group, students, supported by Baker, demanded SNCC stand alone. Many of the students in the Nashville Movement went on to play prominent roles in SNCC. In fact, Peggy Alexander and Diane Nash wrote SNCC's bylaws that weekend, which assured rotated group leaders and only distant affiliation with the adult-run SCLC.<sup>36</sup> Despite Smith's claims of control, women like Peggy Alexander and Diane Nash actively sought to participate in and create organizations with the least possible restrictions placed upon their participation.

Though women's realities clearly differed from Smith's rhetoric of respectability, Rev. Smith helped transform the students into "respectable" agitators by displaying public support for the students within his church. And, as he legitimized women's actions in the eyes of the adult community, he effectively assisted black women activists in broadening the very meaning of women's respectable race work. Though respectability still remained important to the adult community, now women's aggressive, public activism and leadership could be viewed as respectable. As church leaders like Smith continued to justify student's actions by drawing on safe and familiar images, black adults in the community

felt more empowered to support students. During the first few sit-ins in Nashville, students and NCLC leaders had trouble finding adults willing to transport students, and few adults came out to support the college youth. But, by the end of March 1960, the United Church Women had issued a statement in support of the students in both local papers.<sup>37</sup> That same month, churchwomen bought candy and snacks for the students in jail, and made sandwiches for the students waiting at the First Baptist Church to be transported to the sit-in sites.<sup>38</sup> NAACP leaders also assisted with transporting students, defending students in court when necessary, and raising funds to help the students' cause.<sup>39</sup>

### **Through Different Eyes: The Bombing of the Looby Home**

Black Nashvillians united in support of the students even further when someone threw a bomb from a passing car window into the home of prominent civil rights attorney Z. Alexander Looby on April 19, 1960 at 5:30 am. When the bomb struck, Nashville Student Movement members lay peacefully in their beds after returning home late at night from the meeting at Shaw University where they voiced their discontents over NCLC adult leadership. Many students from nearby Meharry Medical College heard the explosion and immediately gathered at the Capitol Hill First Baptist Church.<sup>40</sup> Students were relieved to hear Looby and his wife successfully escaped, though barely, and were without injury. With emotions high, word spread that the students wanted to hold a silent march towards the courthouse steps in protest of the bombing. Knowing a large public demonstration was imminent, the Nashville Student Movement and a few NCLC members met at Smith's church and prepared a joint statement to present to the mayor once the rest of marchers arrived. The group decided Diane Nash and American Baptist Seminary student C.T. Vivian should be the ones to deliver the grievances to the mayor. As the marchers passed black universities and moved through the streets of black neighborhoods, surprisingly, more and more people joined the procession. People waited in yards and on street corners for the procession to pass so they could add to the marchers' ranks. Hearing the group was on the way, Nashville's Mayor Ben West waited for them on the steps of the courthouse. By the time the group arrived at city hall, 2,500 black Nashvillians of all ages and backgrounds were following in line, the only noise arising from the sound of shoes on blacktop.<sup>41</sup>

Once the marchers arrived at the courthouse, C.T. Vivian read the NCLC and NSM's hastily drafted joint statement, which charged the mayor with having ignored "moral issues" surrounding segregation. West immediately responded without directly addressing Vivian's statement: "I appeal to all citizens to end discrimination, to have no bigotry, no bias, and no hatred." After a pause, 21-year-old Diane Nash pointedly asked, "Do you mean that to include lunch counters, too?" Pausing to collect himself after the unexpected direct confrontation from the young woman, Mayor West simply responded with, "Yes." The crowd erupted in a barrage of applause. The young Diane Nash had shrewdly backed the mayor of Nashville into the corner. For West to say he opposed desegregation would have been impossible — and a media fiasco with 2,500 black citizens silently waiting for his reply. During the previous months, West had skirted direct confrontation by claiming he had no control over a business's choice to remain segregated. Diane Nash's question was the first time the Mayor was publicly asked about his personal opinion on the issue.<sup>42</sup>

Interestingly, adults did not look to Looby or his peers to guide their actions after the bombing occurred. Instead, the same adults who had previously warned their children against participation in the sit-ins, joined the student-led march to the mayor's front steps. Breaking further with traditional race work, Diane Nash, a young woman, was part of

the leadership chosen to address the mayor. Furthermore, her unexpected and aggressive words breached the boundaries of previously understood respectable women's behavior but did not result in apprehension and discomfort among black adults. Young Diane Nash had distinguished herself as a leader and spokesperson for the entire black community.

Diane Nash's image was constructed in a way that allowed her to be a respectable leader to all who witnessed her actions on the mayor's steps. Nash operated in a complex framework of multiple, shifting discourses of respectability. Perfectly dressed in her skirt and cardigan with elite features shining, articulate language demonstrating her education, Nash's middle class status was displayed for all to see. At the same time, she practiced the aggressive confrontational tactics encouraged among the student community. Nash did not remain quiet while C.T. Vivian spoke to the mayor. Instead, she presented NSM grievances with Vivian as an equal, and then further pushed the mayor towards a more definitive answer while Vivian remained speechless. While some black community members understood Diane Nash's actions as differing from women's previous roles in racial uplift, Kelly Miller Smith's rhetoric in his sermons and speeches demonstrates that many African Americans understood Nash's drastically different words and actions within the same definitions of respectability present in the 1950s.

Adults may have viewed her blunt remarks to the mayor as her avid fighting for black men's rights or her sacrifice as an innocent Christ-like figure attempting to right the "moral wrong" of segregation. Mayor West's comments to the *Nashville Tennessean* even allude that he understood Nash's question within that context. He said, "She asked me a pretty soul-searching question — and one that was addressed to me as a man. And I found that I had to answer it frankly and honestly ... It was a moral question — one that a *man* had to answer, not a politician."<sup>43</sup> As characterized particularly by James Lawson's rhetoric, her confrontation with West could also have been viewed as a conflict between good and evil: a giving, religious woman versus evil epitomized by Mayor West and his support of segregation. Furthermore, if men were believed to bear a larger burden of racial discrimination, Vivian's silence could be understood as an intelligent avoidance of imminent harsh retaliation from the white community. His silence could also be seen as a manifestation of his manly self-discipline, previously emphasized by Smith in his explanation of young black men's ability to suppress their innate desire to retaliate when black women were abused by white teenagers. Though Diane Nash's actions differed greatly from the race women who came before her, NCLC ministers, like Smith, helped situate her words and actions within the context of respectability.

Generational differences in the way black women remembered Diane Nash's confrontation with the mayor especially highlight the fluidity of African Americans' understanding of respectability. Though they contextualized Nash's position in different ways, most adult and college women present at the courthouse approved and were impressed by the Nash's actions. While adults often viewed the scene in the context of respectability, students understood Nash's words as a challenge to authority. Young women especially felt a sense of unity with Diane Nash and were extremely proud about her words. "[It was] quite exciting to see her stand, and question him, and speak back to him, and for him to admit what he did. We [referring to herself and her friends who marched beside her] were cheering her on up there," said Catherine Brooks.<sup>44</sup> Angeline Butler said:

We were just so proud that day because you got to remember that that statement that Diane made that day was the one that we had all dreamt up. That happened to be Diane that day. It could have been me or Catherine Burks, or it could have been Eleanor or Peggy Alexander, you know?<sup>45</sup>

Nellie Hall said:

I was in awe of her up there — telling that mayor exactly what we all wanted to say. Diane said it for everybody. All we was thinking about was changing the Establishment, the commerce of the city, and to let them know we was, as young people, not going to stand up and take this mess any longer.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, Carrie Gentry, an adult member of Smith's Church, while still impressed by Nash's actions is quick to allude to her respectable mannerisms and dress code. Gentry said:

I remember Diane Nash. Very active in that sit-in movement. Very attractive and well mannered. She just looked straight out of the movies the day she spoke to Mayor West. Very fair-skinned lady. That day I thought, 'Well, gee whiz, they might think that she's a white person and will go and hang her for being out there with all these black folks.'<sup>47</sup>

Nashville's black adults tied women's more aggressive outspokenness and leadership positions into older understandings of respectability. Though the rhetoric and words adults used to discuss respectability had not changed, acceptance of Nash's actions demonstrates an expansion of women's respectable civil rights activities. In the face of such a tragic bombing, older black community members felt comfortable turning to Diane Nash as a race leader because she now personified the new, broadened notion of respectable black female leadership — empowering, beautiful, educated, respectably dressed, and aggressively and publicly demanding equality. For years, respectable adult men like Z. Alexander Looby attempted to defend and protect the black community against racial injustices. But, on the courthouse steps in April 1960, Diane Nash was the one who spoke in reaction to injustices committed against Looby.

## Endnotes

1 Marybeth Gasman, *Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 51-64.

2 Data compiled from Fisk University Yearbooks, *The 1945-1950 Yearbooks*; *The 1955-1960 Yearbooks*; (Nashville: Midtown Press), Fisk University Special Collections.

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12 Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7.

13 For example. 84 percent of registered church members at Capitol Hill First Baptist Church in 1960 were married adults and their children, widows, or married women who attended alone or registered alone. This is designated by couples listed together and women listed as "Mrs." See Capitol Hill First Baptist Church Membership Handbook, January 1960, Box 31, Folder 1, Kelly Miller Smith Papers, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

14 For further analysis of bridge leaders see Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Robnett defines "bridge leaders" as those who "foster ties between the social movement and the community; and between the prefigurative strategies and political strategies. They are able to cross the boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private sphere of adherents and potential constituents," 19.

15 Dorothy Brody to Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, 26 February 1960, Box 43, Folder 12, Kelly Miller Smith Papers, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

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