

Ordinary People. Extraordinary Stories

AARP and LCCR Building World's Largest Civil Rights Archive

"The picket line rules were very simple: no talking, laughing, or chewing gum. Walk on the sidewalk in front of the store, never confront anyone who might cross the picket line to enter the store, and never respond to or initiate any verbal or physical abuse.... After losing revenue for the three years that we boycotted, the store owners relented and hired blacks as store clerks and opened their lunch counters to us."

Priscilla Robinson
South Carolina

February 25, 2004

WASHINGTON, DC -- AARP and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) today are unveiling a year-long, multifaceted project to build the world's largest archive of firsthand accounts of the civil rights struggle in America, supported by an array of media ventures, exhibits, and special events. The archive will ultimately be donated as a permanent collection of the Library of Congress.

"Americans have stories and we want to hear them, to collect them, and to archive them at the Library of Congress. For unless we remember, neither we nor future generations can understand," said AARP CEO Bill Novelli. *"The archive is just the beginning of this powerful, far-reaching project."*

LCCR Executive Director Wade Henderson stressed that the project will go beyond collecting stories of the Freedom Rides, lunch counter sit-ins, and the 1963 March on Washington to include the memories of those who worked—and continue to work—to stamp out discrimination against women, people with disabilities, Hispanics, and others.

"In the civil rights struggles of the '50s and '60s, those who fought to end segregation and promote racial equality showed us the way," Henderson said. *"Those fighting for civil rights today can derive inspiration from the tens of thousands of Americans who peacefully confronted discrimination, intolerance, and resistance."*

A cornerstone of the project will be an online collection of previously untold personal stories of the quest for justice and equality. **Voices of Civil Rights** is also the inspiration for a book, television and radio programs, educational materials, public performances, commemorative publications, and more. The website (www.voicesofcivilrights.org) officially launches in March with the online archive, articles on contemporary civil rights issues and activists, interactive features, project updates, and more.

The project will move into high gear in May as the nation commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which declared "*separate but equal*" schools to be unconstitutional. A book will be published entitled *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience*, written by journalist Juan Williams, with a foreword by David Halberstam and afterword by Marian Wright Edelman. **Voices of Civil Rights** will be prominently featured in a six-month Library of Congress exhibit on *Brown v. Board*. Additional stories, features, interviews, and essays will appear in a special edition of AARP

The Magazine, followed by coverage throughout the year in all AARP publications and radio programs as well as on the LCCR website (www.civilrights.org).

"The Library of Congress houses the most comprehensive civil rights collection in the country," said Librarian of Congress James Billington. *"These rich and heavily used resources will be greatly enhanced by the addition of these important voices."*

Throughout 2004, Voices of Civil Rights will continue to collect and preserve thousands of poignant memories of people who witnessed or took part in the civil rights struggle. From the heroic battles of African Americans to end racial segregation and discrimination in the 1950s and '60s to the struggles of women, people with disabilities, Hispanics, and many others, Voices of Civil Rights will capture memories that the nation cannot afford to forget.

To date, more than 1,000 personal stories have been collected. Grassroots programs are being launched to collect even more, through projects and partnerships with local institutions. Some students at Spelman College in Atlanta, for example, will collect oral histories from civil rights pioneers.

Voices of Civil Rights is also preparing to crisscross the country over the next several months conducting in-depth interviews with civil rights pioneers, recording oral histories, and taking part in community events.

"We are making every effort to save and share stories that transformed individual lives and society as a whole," Project Director Rick Bowers said. *"The eyewitnesses to history are a vanishing breed, and we must save the memories of those who brought us where we are today."*

Those with a story to tell can mail it to Voices of Civil Rights, AARP, 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 or submit it online at www.voicesofcivilrights.org.

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to making life better for people 50 and over. We provide information and resources; engage in legislative, regulatory, and legal advocacy; assist members in serving their communities; and offer a wide range of unique benefits, special products, and services for our members. These include AARP The Magazine, published bimonthly; AARP Bulletin, the monthly newspaper; AARP Segunda Juventud, a quarterly newspaper in Spanish; NRTA Live & Learn, a quarterly newsletter for 50-plus educators; and the website, www.aarp.org. AARP has staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) is a coalition of more than 180 organizations committed to social justice and equality. Founded in 1950, it is the nation's oldest, largest, and most diverse civil and human rights coalition. LCCR member organizations represent persons of color, women, children, labor unions, individuals with disabilities, older Americans, major religious groups, gays and lesbians, and civil liberties and human rights groups. Its mission: to promote the enactment and enforcement of effective civil rights legislation and policy.

The Library of Congress is the world's largest library, with 128 million items in nearly every language on 530 miles of shelves.