

INTRODUCTION TO NOLA RESISTANCE

Grades 6–12

LESSON 2: Young Leaders of New Orleans

Introduction

On February 1, 1960, a student-led movement swept over the southern United States. Four students at North Carolina A&T University sat at a whites-only lunch counter and refused to move until they were served. This act of defiance against segregation began the sit-in movement that spread rapidly throughout the South in the 1960s. Nearly two months later, seven students from Southern University in Louisiana sat at the lunch counter of the Kress store in downtown Baton Rouge. In both instances, the students leading these protests were a part of an organization called the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). The actions taken by these students inspired university students from New Orleans to create a local CORE chapter in an effort to join the civil rights movement.¹

CORE was founded in 1942 in Chicago, by James Farmer and a number of students from the University of Chicago. Following an experience dealing with racism, Farmer had a moment of awakening. When Farmer went home to his native South, he was reminded of the humiliation of segregation when he was forced to walk up the steps to the “crow’s nest” reserved for Negroes in the local movie theater. Afterwards, Farmer circulated a memo calling for actions to end racial discrimination.² CORE emphasized a non-violent strategy of civil resistance to combat racial inequalities in the United States. The first successful US sit-in had been staged in 1942 by a group of University of Chicago students. In its early inception CORE was a white-dominated, integrated organization centered in northern cities, supported

by middle-class intellectuals who were pacifists.³ CORE drew students because it was an “intellectually oriented organization, concerned as much with broad intellectual issues as with racial equality.”⁴

CORE would expand as it began to develop summer training institutes for leaders of local chapters around the country. It would first enter the South in 1957 starting with South Carolina, and almost from the beginning there was a far higher percentage of black members in these southern chapters.⁵ As CORE grew larger and moved into new communities, the organization adapted their techniques of resistance to address the issues faced in various locales.⁶

Leadership of the New Orleans CORE chapter took root during the Consumer League Boycott of the Dryades Street business sector. In 1959, Dryades Street was the second largest shopping district in New Orleans after Canal Street. It was estimated that black consumers constituted 95 percent of the clientele on Dryades Street; however African Americans were not hired as clerks or managers there. The Consumer League Boycott occurred simultaneously with the growing sit-in movement in southern cities. The future leaders of New Orleans CORE—Rudy Lombard, Jerome Smith, and Oretha Castle—met on picket lines of the boycott.⁷ Inspired by the sit-ins of North Carolina A&T University and Southern University in 1960, the group organized themselves into the New Orleans chapter of CORE by the summer of that year.

New Orleans’s CORE members felt connected to an exciting student movement that offered them dramatic risks, visible political victories, and intense intellectual stimulation. In December of 1960, leaders of CORE organized 200 black college students to march to protest recent events in Baton Rouge, where 292 people were arrested.⁸ Throughout 1961, the students in the New Orleans chapter staged pickets and protests on Canal Street and at other major shopping areas. They participated in the dangerous Freedom Rides of 1961, and fed and housed waves of riders who came to New Orleans.⁹

The local chapter increased tremendously because of their visibility from demonstrations and because they served as the welcoming chapter for the hundreds of Freedom Riders. Initially, the New Orleans CORE chapter supported around 20 members, and this relative isolation increased the black CORE leaders' allegiance to each other. However, the membership swelled to 350–400 people, with a huge influx of new white students from Tulane University and LSU–New Orleans. With the increase in members, internal frictions took place, largely due to racial tensions. A number of CORE members felt as though some of the new white male membership had ulterior motives in joining the local New Orleans chapter. In 1962, the chapter leadership decided to expel a great number of whites from the chapter. Some members left to pursue other community organizing opportunities in 1963 and 1964, further depleting its leadership. Following these events, the local CORE chapter in New Orleans began to slowly lose its influence.¹⁰

The young activists who gravitated toward the New Orleans CORE chapter were part of a worldwide generational youth revolt, taking a stand against racial injustice in the mid-1960s. An estimated 69 percent of all black students in the South took part in civil rights movement's activities and politics.¹¹

As you read the transcripts of New Orleans CORE chapter members, do you recognize similar issues facing your country and your community today? How can you implement non-violent strategies to effect positive change on issues you deem unjust or discriminatory? Should other methods be considered?

[1] Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 124.

[2] Marvin Rich, "The Congress of Racial Equality and Its Strategy," in *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 357, "The Negro Protest" (January 1965): 114.

[3] Rich, "The Congress of Racial Equality and Its Strategy," 114.

[4] Rogers, *Righteous Lives*, 123.

[5] Rogers, *Righteous Lives*, 123.

[6] For a firsthand account of this experience, see Dodie Simmons-Smith's oral history.

[7] Arnold R. Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 285.

[8] For a firsthand account of this experience, see Claude Reese's oral history.

[9] For a firsthand account of this experience, see David Dennis's oral history.

[10] Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," 286.

[11] Rogers, *Righteous Lives*, 123.