

# WALKING BY FAITH NOT BY SIGHT

by T. Dianne Harris

## THE YEAR WAS 1965 ...

My brother and I were eating lunch with our classmates on the steps of Bakke Hall at Alabama Lutheran Academy and College (ALAC), now Concordia College Alabama, on a chilly, January day when a student from the local black high school came to campus.

It was 1965 in Selma, Alabama, and he told us we could help make history.

We knew, from listening to the radio at night, that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had come to Selma to help blacks get the right to vote. My mother had tried many times to register, but she was always refused. (In 1964, only 2 percent of the black population of Dallas County were registered voters.)

Isaac and I were just students; he was 13 and I was 15. We thought we were too young to join. But inspired by our new friend's speech, 12 of us ALAC students hurriedly gathered our books and followed him to join the meeting. As we were leaving, our school administrator shouted, "You will all flunk if you do not come back right now!"

My brother and I were third generation Lutherans. Our grandfather, Mr. Walter Hill, Sr., inspired by Dr. Rosa J. Young, helped found Zion Lutheran Church and School at Tait's Place, an old plantation in Wilcox County, in 1919. Our mother and her 10 siblings attended. That's why our mother — Mrs. Mollie H. Howard — even as a single divorced parent, was determined to give her children a Lutheran education, even though it was a struggle to pay tuition.

We never missed Sunday services either, at St. Timothy Lutheran Church, where we had been baptized and confirmed.

Thankful for our strong Christian education, we walked that day in faith, not knowing what was ahead of us as we stood up to injustice.

As we walked to Brown Chapel AME Church, our friend taught us a new song, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around, turn me around, turn me around; Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. I'm gonna keep on a-walking, keep on a-talkin, marching up to freedom land."

Music was a vital part of the movement. Songs and chants gave voice to our hopes in Christ and our dreams for a better tomorrow.

I remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently reciting the words to "Jesus Loves the Little Children," reminding us that all of us — regardless of the color of our skin — "are precious in His sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world." Dr. King's voice was powerful, filled with the promise of hope and justice. He opened our hearts to understanding our Father's color-blind love, reminding us that we are all the children of God in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26). I was glad to know that we were part of a faith-inspired movement.

That evening, half scared, Isaac and I went home to tell our mother we had left school to join the Voting Rights movement. To our surprise, she wasn't upset! She knew the importance of the vote, and she also knew she couldn't participate without the risk of losing her job at the local cigar factory.

*Dianne and her brother, Isaac, were among these youth incarcerated at Camp Selma and the armory.*



*The brutality of Sunday, March 7, 1965, led it to be called Bloody Sunday and roused support for the Selma Voting Rights Campaign.*

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With her blessing, we headed to Brown Chapel for the next several days, where we heard great messages about equal rights and how to stand up to injustice with nonviolence. We learned how to protect ourselves from billy clubs and how to keep calm in the face of spitting and name calling. We also learned to take pride in our heritage.

We lived in two worlds in the South; Jim Crow laws legalized segregation. As blacks, we drank from “colored” drinking fountains, sat in the segregated balcony of the movie theater, and rode in the back of the bus. We were the last to be waited on at white-owned businesses, where we had to use the back door, and we often were turned away from doctors’ offices. We were always fearful a misstep would lead to Klan violence. I’ll never forget the joy I felt when we learned the freedom chant: “Jim Crow has got to go!”

On February 1, 1965, we joined over 500 students — carrying hand-lettered signs, “Let our parents vote” — as we marched to the courthouse. My brother and I were shocked by the whites who lined the streets calling us names and spitting on us. We were glad we had grown up with some white pastors and teachers in our Lutheran experience, so we knew there were good people of both races filled with Christ’s love, not hate.

After that march, Sheriff Jim Clark arrested us and took us to Camp Selma, a state-run, chain-gang-style prison out in the bogs west of the city. The prison was cleared out to house us. We were finger-printed and photographed. We were shoved into crowded cells for several hours.

We marched again a few days later and were arrested and sent to the National Guard Armory in town. Once again, we were finger-printed and photographed. This time we spent the whole night. Our mother didn’t know where we were. There were no phone calls, just empty silence ... worry ... and violence. The posse men — local white men (including our milk man!) hired by the sheriff to “keep order” — wielded their billy clubs and cattle prods freely. I will never forget the searing pain of the electric shock the cattle prod sent through my body that night.

After we were released, we had to go to court. My mom took off from work twice — after each arrest — to appear before the judge. “Mollie,” he sneered during the first hearing, calling a woman he had never met by her first name. “Can’t you control your children?”

“Yes suh, Judge, I can control ‘em,” she said, speaking with the drawl she knew the judge wanted to hear. He said he did not want to see us again. Mom assured him that he would not. After leaving the courthouse, Mom said that we could

continue marching.

The next court appearance was more frightening. “Mollie, if you don’t control these chilluns of yours, I will personally see that you lose your job.”

Once again, Mom assured him he wouldn’t see us again. She told us we could still go to meetings, but she didn’t want us to march anymore.

My brother and I went back to school after the marches but continued to attend all the night meetings. We were surprised one night to see two of our ALAC professors, Mr. James Gildersleeve, my ninth grade civics teacher, and Mr. Ulysses Blackmon, my eighth grade geography teacher. We had no idea they were involved in the movement. Only later did we learn they were among eight courageous people who had supported voting rights since the 1950s.

We joined hundreds of people at Brown Chapel on Sunday, March 7, when emotions were running high after a state trooper murdered young civil rights worker Jimmie Lee Jackson, while he was protecting his mother from a beating. We were going to march from Selma to Montgomery to see the governor about the murder.

Our mother had told us not to march, but I couldn’t keep my feet still. Singing and praying, I was so moved by my faith in God’s justice and love for His people that I had to go. I grabbed Isaac’s hand and we marched.

We were near the end of the long line — everyone was walking peacefully two-by-two to stay on the sidewalk, singing songs of freedom. When Isaac and I got near the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we were shocked to see clouds of smoke and searingly painful tear gas (40 canisters of tear gas, 12 cans of smoke, and 8 cans of nausea gas). We heard the pounding of horses as dozens of state troopers, sheriffs deputies, and posse men chased after marchers, striking them with billy clubs and whips. They had been ordered by the governor to stop the marchers.

Isaac and I turned around and started running, locking arms with an elderly woman as we ran to bring her back to safety at Brown Chapel. But she couldn’t keep up with us and let go, shouting at us

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to keep running. As we looked back, we saw a posse man on horseback, crashing his billy club on her head and shoulders. We were chased all the way back to Brown Chapel, but the horse couldn't get up the steps, so we escaped.

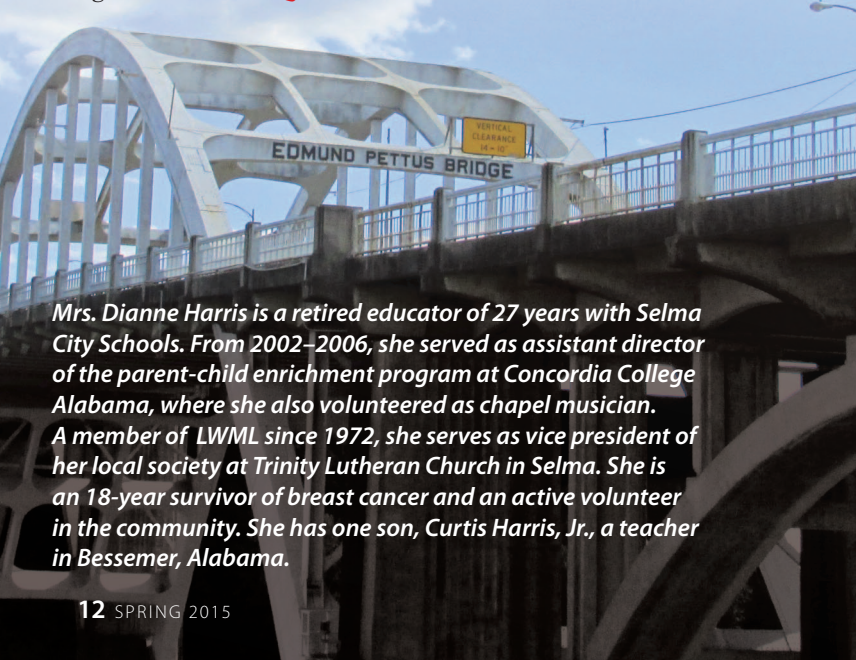
After that terrible day, when over 100 marchers were hospitalized with injuries, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for clergy and compassionate folk across the country to join our cause. Thousands arrived and my mother, along with hundreds of blacks, made room in our small home for a young white couple who came from New York.

On March 21, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. started the successful march from Selma to Montgomery. On March 24, my brother and I rode the Greyhound to Montgomery where we spent the night, in soggy tents, with other marchers. The next day, March 25, we joined tens of thousands of people of all races and backgrounds at the steps of the State Capitol, where we heard Dr. King's powerful speech, "Our God is Marching On." My heart swelled with pride because I had stood up for the rights of my people.

"They told us we wouldn't get here," he said. "And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies. But all the world today knows that we are here, and we are saying, 'Ain't going to let nobody turn us around.'"

A few months later, on August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Voting Rights Act as a result of the courage of the African American people in Selma, Alabama.

Our mother proudly registered to vote that year and never missed an election afterwards. When I was old enough, I registered to vote with a sense of awe at how far we had come. Not long ago, I was back on the Concordia College campus, helping register a new generation of young voters, sharing the faith that helped make that right become law. **Q**



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