

## HISTORY This Week EP 424: Children's Crusade EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.*

**Sally Helm:** HISTORY This Week. April 20, 1963. I'm Sally Helm.

At 12:30 in the afternoon, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. steps out of the Birmingham jail. He was arrested just over a week ago for peacefully protesting racial segregation. And, though the public doesn't know it yet, King has spent much of his time behind bars writing a letter to the world. To everyone watching what's happening in Birmingham. The Letter from Birmingham Jail.

It is an impassioned defense of the movement's tactics. Sit-ins, boycotts, peaceful marches. He's responding, in part, to a full-page newspaper ad from eight white clergymen who say that he's demanding too much too soon. *Put this campaign in Birmingham on pause, they say. Just wait.*

But... it's been almost a decade since the Civil Rights movement began. And, still, Black citizens in Birmingham don't have equal access to basic things. Buses. Restrooms. Offices. Department stores.

"For years now," he writes, "I have heard the word 'wait'... and this 'wait' has almost always meant 'never.'" So, he says... we're not waiting any longer.

Now, on this April day, King is released from jail on bond. So, he can get back to leading the protests in Birmingham. But the truth is... despite the urgency of his letter... despite his fervent belief that the time is now... King and the Civil Rights movement are at a low point. It even feels like a dead end. They've been absorbing blow after blow from Jim Crow law enforcement. And they're running low on activists willing to lay their bodies on the line.

That's why, soon after King's release, some people start to suggest a new tack. They say *a good number of students in Birmingham have begun to join the protests. We need troops? Why not rally thousands more?*

King says, definitely not. We can't have kids taking those risks.

Today: The Children's Crusade. Why did Dr. King change his mind about putting kids on the front lines? And how did this Children's March change many Americans' minds about Civil Rights? Many of the kids involved told their stories in a HISTORY Channel documentary—now, we bring those stories to you.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Janice Wesley Kelsey grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. The heart of the Jim Crow South.

**Janice Wesley:** Growing up in Birmingham I lived in a segregated society. I really did not encounter people of a different race because the communities were completely separate.

**Sally Helm:** Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the entire United States. There's fierce resistance to integration.

**Archival:** 2, 4, 6, 8, we don't want to integrate! 2, 4, 6, 8, we don't want to integrate!

**Sally Helm:** And there's often violence. One neighborhood has seen 40 bombings by the Ku Klux Klan in 20 years—so many that it's become known as dynamite hill.

Janice remembers that of course, she knew all this was wrong. But it also just felt... inevitable.

**Janice Wesley:** I was bothered by it, but I did not realize I could really do something about it.

**Sally Helm:** By the time Janice is sixteen, in 1963, the Civil Rights Movement has come to Birmingham. And the city is seething. An Alabama state court has handed down an injunction against the protests. One of many efforts to stop the marches led by Dr. King.

**Archival:** “You will not be allowed to march without a permit. Is that clear to everyone?” “No!”

**Sally Helm:** Janice hasn't been involved with the movement. But one day, a friend suggests that they drop by a meeting at a Birmingham church. Remember, these are teens. Janice says the main selling point at first was not a sober discussion of important political issues.

**Janice Wesley:** We didn't talk about civil rights. She talked about the meetings, the music, the ministers, the crowds, the cute boys. And I thought, yeah, I wanna go to one of those.

**Sally Helm:** The conversation at the church surprises her. It turns to the injustices that she and her friends face every day. Like how at Janice's high school, there's only one electric typewriter, while the white school has three rooms full of them. Or how her brother's high school football team has to paint their helmets to match the school's colors—because they're hand-me-downs from a white school. So, they decide to do something about it.

These students—kids, really—decide to take to the streets. Join the Birmingham campaign.

It's a bold idea... and not everyone agrees with it. Some movement leaders, and parents, say that young people don't belong on the front lines of this battle, where there's so much volatility and violence. But other leaders see it differently. They say look. It's actually *harder* for adults to risk arrest. That could mean separation from the people who depend on them.

**Janice Wesley:** Your parents can't, but you really don't have anything to lose.

**Sally Helm:** In 1963, Jessie Shepherd is also 16. She knows about the debate within the civil rights movement in Birmingham about whether...

**Jessie Shepard:** They should use the children. And the reason for that is because if the adults would do anything like that, they would lose their jobs, probably beating or whatever, you know. I was told Reverend Martin Luther King at first didn't want to do that.

**Sally Helm:** He's not the only one. Malcolm X dismisses the idea, saying “real men don't put their children on the firing line” U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy says in a statement: “School children participating in street demonstrations is a dangerous business. An injured, maimed, or dead child is a price that none of us can afford to pay.”

But the idea won't go away. Young people start attending nonviolence workshops. A plan is emerging for them to take to the streets *en masse*. To bring energy and help shed light on the realities of segregation.

**Jessie Shepard:** Birmingham was just such a racist place. I mean, a lot of people that comes here, they say that they could never imagine somebody being treated like that because of the color of their skin.

**Sally Helm:** Martin Luther King gets out of jail on April 20th to find that momentum is building for this youth movement. But King still isn't sure. Like others, he's worried about the young protesters' safety. He's also worried that if kids get hurt or spend too much time in jail, adults could turn against the whole Civil Rights movement.

But King feels the pressure of time and fears the campaign is losing momentum. So, this new plan is starting to sound better.

It sounded good too to Jessie Shepherd, too.

**Jessie Shepard:** At that particular time, I was just one fed up little black girl. I really was. So, I was ready to go.

**Sally Helm:** Finally, after much deliberation, King agrees. On May 2nd, the next wave of protest will begin. It'll come to be called, "The Children's Crusade."

Janice Wesley Kelsey attends a nonviolence training to prepare. She says, the main lesson was no violence, no matter what.

**Janice Wesley:** If somebody calls you a name, they hit you. Even if they spit on you, you cannot respond except to pray or sing a freedom song. You could bow your head, cover your head, but do not strike back.

**Sally Helm:** Finally, the day arrives. Thursday May 2nd, 1963.

**Janice Wesley:** I woke up that morning with my mind on freedom. I was so excited.

**Sally Helm:** Janice's mother is not as excited. She doesn't want her daughter arrested.

**Janice Wesley:** She cautioned me before I left home and said, *don't you go and get yourself in any trouble. I don't have the money to get you out.* And I said, *yes, ma'am.* But I went anyway.

**Sally Helm:** On her way to school, Janice meets up with some friends.

**Janice Wesley:** We were singing freedom songs as we walked to school and going to let nobody turn me around and before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and just singing and thinking about we gonna make this thing happen.

**Sally Helm:** The school day starts off just like normal. But when the bell rings for a class change, instead of going to class... Janice and the other student protesters march off the school grounds. They go to the chosen gathering point: the 16th Street Baptist Church in the heart of Birmingham. College kids show up too. And more high schoolers. And even children as young as eight.

When everyone is ready, they leave the church, heading towards City Hall and the segregated downtown shopping district. Singing as they go.

But... on the streets of Birmingham, they don't make it far.

**Janice Wesley:** We got maybe a block from the church before we were stopped by the police.

**Sally Helm:** An officer tells the kids they need a permit. And that gathering without one is illegal.

**Janice Wesley:** He said, get out of the line. Nothing's gonna happen. Stay in the line. You're going to jail.

**Sally Helm:** The kids stay in the line.

**Janice Wesley:** So, they called for paddy wagons, which were these little jail-like trucks.

**Sally Helm:** There are so many kids under arrest that the trucks are soon full. So the police call in county school buses. Those are usually reserved for white students. Now, they carry black students away from this peaceful protest.

**Janice Wesley:** That's how we spent the night there at county jail.

**Sally Helm:** More than 600 children and teens are arrested that day. The first day of the Children's Crusade. Other Black students in Birmingham now face a decision: join the protest and risk jail... or do what many adults are urging them to do. *Stay put.*

One of those students is Charles Avery, who goes to a high school on the outskirts of Birmingham. He's senior class president. A role model. So, some adults at his school encourage him to protest, while others tell him not to associate with these troublemaking kids who are getting themselves locked up.

**Charles Avery:** We had a very strict principal. He dared any of us to go.

**Sally Helm:** It's a Monday. As students are milling around, getting off the school buses, Charles decides to get everyone's attention.

**Charles Avery:** I took my jacket off and I swerved around my head, and I said, let's go. And we went out about three blocks from the school and looked back. And as far as we could see was students.

**Sally Helm:** They head towards the 16th Street Baptist Church. But police officers are waiting to arrest them. The jails are full, so they bring the protesters to the local fairground. Some they put into livestock pens.

**Charles Avery:** And here we are in fair park and it's about to rain. It was a ferocious thunderstorm that day and lightning and flashing. And we were wet and cold, and the lightning was so fierce it bounced off of the barbed wire.

**Sally Helm:** That evening, they're transferred to the Birmingham City Jail.

**Charles Avery:** We were put in a cell block; I understand it holds 650 people. And this cell block had over 1500 people in it.

**Sally Helm:** The students are crammed together so tightly they can barely move. Charles squeezes into a corner with his friends. They're getting ready to spend the night. Try and get some sleep. But then...

**Charles Avery:** They turned the ventilator fans on over in the night and we was already wet, mind you. And it got so cold that you could just shiver.

**Sally Helm:** Charles and many other protesters spend several nights in jail. And all these arrests are making news. In and outside of Birmingham. But it's not yet enough to create what Martin Luther King is really after. He describes it in his Letter from Birmingham Jail: A sense of crisis. "Such a crisis," he writes, that the majority of Americans will finally be forced "to confront the issue" of segregation.

For too long, the cruelties that prop up segregation have happened out of sight. In the shadows. A beating in an alleyway; shots fired in the night. But now, a local official is about to provoke that sense of crisis... He's the Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety. A man everyone knows as Bull Connor.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Janice Wesley Kelsey is familiar with Birmingham's infamous Commissioner of Public Safety.

**Janice Wesley:** Bull Connor was, was really a bully.

**Sally Helm:** A bully... and a proud segregationist.

**Janice Wesley:** He would spew out a lot of negative statements over the air, you know, the radio and tv.

**Bull Connor Archival:** "You can never whip these birds if you don't keep you and them separate. You've got to keep the white and the blacks separate.

**Sally Helm:** Bull Connor was bent on getting his way.

**Bull Connor Archival:** Let the law enforcement agency, that's what you've got 'em hired for, and the governor of the state of Alabama, handle this thing.”

**Sally Helm:** Birmingham preacher Fred Shuttlesworth has told Martin Luther King all about Bull Connor. He’s “the symbol of police brutality in the South,” Shuttlesworth says. But he also has this feeling that Bull Connor could actually “do something to *help* the cause,” if he overplays his hand.

Which Bull Connor seems ready and willing to do. He has warned that further protests will “cause incidents of violence and bloodshed” and “irreparable injury to persons and property.”

These are the threats that hang in the air as another wave of student marchers takes to the streets of Birmingham. Jessie Shepherd is among them. She goes out to protest one day. And finds that the authorities have escalated things.

**Jessie Shepard:** We were faced with the dogs, and they put the water on us. I'd be lying if I didn't say I was afraid.

**Sally Helm:** City firemen corner groups of protestors and pound them with high pressure streams from their hoses. Water strong enough to break ribs. To knock people off their feet.

**Jessie Shepard:** The water was so strong; it just rolled some people around on the ground and we were all trying to get away from the water. Now I still was determined to march or whatever, but I didn't expect that.

**Janice:** The water was a hundred pounds per square inch.

**Sally Helm:** Janice Wesley Kelsey wasn't struck herself. But she heard stories from people who were.

**Janice Wesley:** I know one girl who reported some of her hair was sheared off her head. I know the bark of the trees. It was taken off. People were pushed against buildings. They had bruised skins and torn blouses. People pushed down the street just like tumbleweeds.

**Sally Helm:** And if you escaped the water, you might run into the dogs. Police used trained German Shepherds to attack the protesters.

**Janice Wesley:** There were some kids who went to the hospital with dog bites. It was a madness scene, and it was Bull Connor who was orchestrating all of that. He was the person who instructed the firemen to turn hoses on the kids to disperse the crowds.

**Sally Helm:** Connor knows how to break up a crowd. He has done this before. But this time, what he doesn't fully grasp is that photographers and camera crews from across the country are on the scene. Recording this protest as it unfolds.

Soon, *Life* magazine runs a full-page photo of three young people desperately grabbing the edge of a building while a blast of water bends their backs. Headline: “The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham.”

Millions of Americans have been *hearing* from Martin Luther King and others that segregation is a national crisis. Now they’re *seeing* it. On their TV screens. And in magazines. *Time* runs a photo of marchers pinned down by fire hoses next to a photo of Bull Connor in a hardhat. The caption says: “Unwittingly, he and his city brought millions of people to the Negroes’ side.”

Ahmad Ward, former head of education at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, told us, Bull Connor did not see this coming.

**Ahmad Ward:** Mr. Connor did not have a good grasp on how important television had become, and so in a backhanded kind of way, he did more for the movement in that one day than anybody could have thought.

**CBS News Archival:** “These are the front lines of the battle between Dr. Martin Luther King’s Negro disciples of nonviolence and the uniformed forces of Birmingham led by Commissioner Eugene Bull Connor, who says, “we were trying to be nice to them, but they won’t let us be.”

**Ahmad Ward:** He made the miscalculation of thinking that he could do this with all this national media here in town, and it wouldn’t have a negative effect.

**Sally Helm:** Bull Connor was wrong. Coverage of the Children’s Crusade leads to a huge outcry. So huge that city business owners are forced to sit down with civil rights leaders and commit to what they have resisted for so long: desegregating the city. But the repercussions are still unfolding.

**Ahmad Ward:** When this becomes international news, it becomes a black eye, not just for the state of Alabama, but also for the United States of America.

**Sally Helm:** The crisis spreads all the way to the White House.

**Ahmad Ward:** Kennedy had to get involved and he was pushing his civil rights action after what happened in May.

**Sally Helm:** In June 1963, President John F. Kennedy announces his support for federal civil rights legislation.

**JFK Archival:** “If an American because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public. If he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him. If in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life, which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?”

**Sally Helm:** This is a clear victory for the civil rights movement. And the Children's March was the catalyst. Because it put the horrors of segregation on front pages across the world. And helped deliver this breakthrough political moment.

In the story of Civil Rights, there's always this horrible pendulum swing. Victory, and then backlash. In September of 1963, there is a bombing. At the same church where the Children's Marchers had gathered and sung freedom songs before setting out to protest. The 16th Street Baptist Church. Four young choir girls are killed. Their names are Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley.

**Janice Wesley:** It was just so painful to know that these girls were killed at church.

**Sally Helm:** Because church is supposed to be safe.

**Janice Wesley:** For a long time, I wondered if the persons who planted those bombs, if they were doing that in retaliation for the children's march. So, I carried around a weight of guilt for a while for that.

**Sally Helm:** A crowd of around 8,000 people attend the funeral for the girls. Dr. King delivers the eulogy.

**MLK Archival:** "In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence."

**Sally Helm:** King was reminding the crowd, even in the face of this horrible violence, that nonviolence is powerful, too. The children of Birmingham had proved that. And King was saying: "We have to keep going. There's no other choice."

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

Watch the enhanced version of *Can't Turn Us Around: Alabama's Foot Soldiers* with an additional 20 minutes of never-before-seen footage. Available commercial-free June 16th only on HISTORY Vault.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, [HistoryThisWeek@History.com](mailto:HistoryThisWeek@History.com), or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests: Children's Crusade participants Jessie Shepherd, Janice Wesley Kelsey, and Charles Avery. And Ahmad Ward, former head of education at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and current Executive Director at Historic Mitchellville Freedom Park.

This episode was produced by Corinne Wallace. Sound designed by Dan Rosato, and story edited by Jim O'Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.



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