

Courage Won the Victory

John Lewis and I are about the same age and we are both native sons of the Deep South. That makes us soul brothers in a way, but there's an obvious difference—he's black and I'm white.

And that means that I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s with my civil, social, economic, and political rights taken for granted, and John grew up with those same basic American rights mostly denied to him.

Those rights that were mine for taking, John Lewis had to fight for—and fight for them, he did. He was one of the leading civil rights activists of the 1960s, was directly involved in many major confrontations, and was arrested 40 times between 1960 and 1966.

There has been an eon of change in the past decade and a half and Lewis is now director of the Voter Education Project in Atlanta, was named a "Living Saint" by Time magazine last year, and this past week he served as director of the Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change meeting in Atlanta.

Speaking to the Institute, which was sponsored by the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change, the 36-year-old Lewis said the philosophy of nonviolence, which held together the civil rights movement of the 60s, is as important today as ever.

"Some people say it's silly and out of date to talk about nonviolence, but if we're going to remove the scars of hate from America, we must understand this principle," he said.

Tracing the events of the civil rights movement, Lewis told how demonstrators of the 60s withstood violence at the hands of police and angry crowds without responding with violence, recalling how Dr. King urged the demonstrators to "understand the human conditions of their attackers.

"Dr. King tried to teach us that the means and the ends are inseparable. He said if the community is to be free of hate, free of violence, then our methods must not be means

of hate and cannot be means of violence," Lewis said.

And those statements by John Lewis take me back to Nashville, Tenn., where I went to college and where I first met the civil rights movement in 1961 and 1962 and where my admiration for the tremendous courage of the civil rights activists was formed.

At that time and in that place, the movement's concentration was on the sit-ins at lunch counters where blacks had always been denied access. Blacks had to get food to go or find "one of their own" cafes if they wanted to eat. But that was not America and the blacks and civil rights activists were determined to make it change.

The sit-ins were one of the first civil rights tactics and Nashville, because of the number of black colleges and universities there, was one of the first cities to experience them. And I experienced them, not in the courage of action, but in silent observation.

When there was word of a sit-in at some downtown Nashville lunch counter, in one of the old 5-and-10 stores or such, I'd cut classes and take off and usually get there in time to witness the tragic, majestic event.

The demonstrators would come quietly in and sit down. All the whites, or nearly always all of them, would get up. The waitresses would serve no more food. There were always cops and cops and more cops around, and sometimes they would arrest the demonstrators for "trespassing."

But there would nearly always be violence, not by the black demonstrators, but by some white onlookers and hecklers. They would call the blacks by all the vile names imaginable. They would throw ketchup on them, flick ashes on them, even touch them with burning cigarettes, sometimes knock them off the stools. But, in those days, the demonstrators never fought back, and I've never witnessed a more gut-level show of courage.

Had I been one of the black demonstrators, I'd have struck back instantly, and beaten to a pulp all the white attackers I could. But those black sit-in demonstrators didn't—and they persevered to victory by awakening the consciousness of a nation.

