

Dockum Drugstore Sit-in

By Prisca Barnes, Founder and CEO of Storytime Village

Originally Aired 10/1/2020

Let me tell you a story of a people with pride and promise. This is the story of the Dockum Sit-in, America's first successful student-led lunch counter sit-in. Ron Walters was a 20-year-old college student and president of the Wichita NAACP Youth Council when he organized the Dockum sit-in in 1958. Many African Americans worked in downtown Wichita, and during Ron's summer break from college, that is exactly where he chose to work. But working downtown in the 1950's, as you could imagine, didn't turn out to be what Ron expected. Blacks were not allowed to sit and eat at lunch counters because they were reserved for Whites only. Ron and his friends had to take their food to go from the back.

It was clear that if something was going to be done about the segregation issue in Wichita it had to begin downtown and what better place to begin than the Dockum Drugstore. The Dockum Drug store was a part of the national Rexall chain and was the largest chain of drugstores in Kansas. It also had one of the worst reputations for discrimination. Ron proposed to the Youth Council the idea to host a sit-in at the Dockum Drugstore and they agreed. They were fed up with being treated unfairly and they were ready to take action. They were fueled by Emmett Till's lynching and the Montgomery Bus Boycott that occurred just a few short years earlier. The youth council began preparing for the sit-in in the spring of 1958. They spent months training. The students prepared by role playing in the basement of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church.

The sit-in officially began at 10 am on July 19, 1958. The students took turns filling the lunch counter stools and just as they expected they were refused service. Determined, they intended to stay at their posts until they were served. But the manager was not pleased and would rather close the fountain than serve the black students. A sign was placed on the counter stating, "This Fountain Temporarily Closed." One week. Two weeks. Three weeks the students sat with patience, waiting to rightfully be served. They endured threats, scare tactics, and a continued denial of service at the Dockum Drug Store. The sit-in participants were getting weary, but on August 11, 1958, with a new courage the youth began filling the lunch counter stools at the Dockum Drugstore.

And suddenly, the door to the drugstore opened and standing in the doorway was Mr. Dockum, the store's owner. He walked in and stated: "Serve them; I'm losing too much money." Those words ended the sit-in. The lunch counter at the Dockum Drugstore was no longer whites-only and was now open to everyone in Kansas and eventually all Rexall stores in cities all across the nation large and small. Now you know the story of the Dockum sit-in, the sit-in that took place right in the heart of the nation. Share it with others so that we can continue to inspire generations with the story of a people with pride and promise.

This transcript of "Dockum Drugstore Sit-in" is part of the Humanities Kansas Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.