

Mighty Times: The Children's March

A Teaching Tolerance & HBO Film

Movie Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Most of the material in textbooks used to teach about the Civil Rights struggle in this country focuses on a handful of heroic individuals. Very little attention is paid to the mass character of the movement, and still less notice has been given to the critical role of young people in the fight for equal rights. Our collective failure to teach young people about the strength and courage of other students who have led the way has helped to disempower the youth of today.

In their 2004 Academy Award winning documentary, *Mighty Times: The Children's March*, Hudson & Houston go a long way toward setting the record straight by telling the story of the thousands of students and young children who broke the back of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963.

The film opens shortly after Dr. King was held in solitary confinement in the Birmingham jail, when he called on the adults of the community to join him in a peaceful protest in defiance of the local authorities. The thinking of Dr. King and others in the movement was that if they filled the jails to capacity, they would lay bare segregation and hasten its demise. Rev. Andrew Young put it this way, "We figured we'd let them kill us in the middle of the day (all together) instead of one by one in the night."

The adults of Birmingham, however, did not respond to Dr. King's call. The adults feared for their jobs and their homes, if they were seen on the picket lines. Dr. King then turned to Rev. James Bevel of Mississippi for assistance, and Rev. Bevel responded by appealing to local DJs for their support. One DJ, in particular, "Jelly the Playboy," responded by calling on his young listeners to join "the party in the park on D-Day." "Jelly" Stewart went on to remind the young people to "bring their toothbrushes" because "lunch would be served." This was all code for "come prepared to stay overnight or longer in jail." And students from all over the state responded with their feet, some walking eighteen miles to join the protest, all the while knowing that they would be arrested.

On the first day, 973 students were arrested and

held in cells for parading without a permit. On the second day, 1,922 kids were jailed, after they'd been set upon by fire hoses and vicious attack dogs. On day three, 4,163 young people were arrested and interrogated. The arrests and the demonstrations continued for a week, until the jails, the "hog-pen" and all other facilities were filled with singing students, who maintained their spirits and their demands for equal rights and freedom.

Then, President John F. Kennedy tried to get Dr. King and other leaders to remove the young

people from the struggle, but the involvement of the students was non-negotiable; these kids were thinking for themselves! The kids knew that they could be hurt or killed in the struggle for justice, but they reasoned that by "being born Black in Alabama, they'd get hurt if they didn't do something!"

On May 10, 1963, after some five-thousand arrests and 72 hours of negotiations between local white leaders and Dr. King

and his delegation, segregation was broken. The students had won!

Watching this video taught me about the courage and power of those African-American students of forty-plus years ago, but more importantly, it underscored the value of student empowerment in our current struggles to transform our schools into equitable learning communities. Designing equitable schools isn't something that can be done by well-meaning adults "for" kids. New schools must be co-constructed with all stakeholders at the table, including the young people who will participate directly in the programs.

I urge you to order this free video for your schools. My hope is that as we view it with our students, we can invigorate their leadership potential as co-designers of our journey toward social justice. ■

You can order the free video, complete with standards-based lesson plans, by visiting www.teachingtolerance.org Debbie Bambino may be contacted at dbambino@earthlink.net

