



# George McLaughlin: Fought for Civil Rights at a Woolworths Lunch Counter

Nonviolent protests and lunch counter sit-ins sparked national interest in the fight against segregation.

BY CARRIE STETLER

Day after day in 1960, a group of courageous African-American college students refused to leave the segregated lunch counter of a Woolworths store in Greensboro, North Carolina. They endured taunts and threats from angry whites, who tossed lit cigarettes, food, and drinks at them.

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**George McLaughlin retired in 2015 from the Rutgers School of Dental Medicine as a clinical associate professor.**

But they kept showing up—eventually sparking a flood of student sit-ins at lunch counters across the United States. Today they are remembered as heroes of a key turning point in the civil rights movement.

Rutgers alumnus George McLaughlin was one of them.

McLaughlin, who retired in 2015 from the Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences School of Dental Medicine as a clinical associate professor, was among a small but growing wave of

students who turned out to support the “Greensboro Four”—and kept showing up for months.

At first, they made no difference. Woolworths issued a statement saying it would “abide by local custom” and continue refusing lunch counter service to African Americans. But on July 25, five months after the protests began, and business dropped dramatically, the Greensboro Woolworths store served three black protestors.

The gesture marked a symbolic end to segregation at five-and-dime counters throughout the South, although some were still “whites only” until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when desegregation was mandated.

The victory didn’t come easily. “We just kept sitting there. We would line up behind the stools and when one student would get up another would sit down,” recalls McLaughlin, who graduated from the School of Dental Medicine in 1975, becoming one of the first 10 black students in its history.

In 1960, he was studying to become a mechanical engineer at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro. The four initial protestors were



**The Woolworths sit-ins spread to lunch counters across the country—and changed history. Pictured here are some of the Greensboro protestors.**

fellow students, and although he didn't know them well, he felt an immediate sense of solidarity. Like them, he grew up in the Jim Crow South. His hometown of Raeford, North Carolina, had separate but unequal schools for black students and one for Native American children, who were subject to the same laws of segregation as black residents.

As a child, McLaughlin remembers white students shouting racial slurs out the bus windows as black students waited for their own bus to school. Sometimes there was violence. It wasn't uncommon for white drivers to intentionally run black pedestrians off the road, he says.

"We hoped that things would change through education. That's the reason we all tried to go to school. That's what our parents always told us: 'Get an education, because that's something no one can take away from you,'" says McLaughlin, whose parents were farmers.

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical was a historically black college, whose students often shopped at the Woolworths store in downtown Greensboro. "We would go buy school supplies and something to eat, but we couldn't sit down and eat it," he says.

That year, the civil rights movement was already under way in the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till. But the four freshmen students who first refused to leave the lunch counter weren't initially part of any organized movement, McLaughlin remembers.

"They decided they would sit down until they were served," he says.

After graduation, McLaughlin went on to take engineering jobs with the U.S. Department of Defense and Westinghouse before deciding to pursue a dental degree.

But his activism didn't end at the lunch counter. In New Jersey, he fought discriminatory housing practices, joining protests in Essex County during the 1960s and 1970s. Fifty-five years after the milestone Woolworths protest, McLaughlin views it as a reminder that everyone has the power to create change.

"We made a difference," he says. "It shows that it doesn't take a lot of individuals to start a movement."