

[Student's Name]

[CICS Course]

[Date]

### Belief in Oneself and a Cause Make all the Difference

A handful of ordinary black college students, seemingly no different from us, came together under the guidance of Jim Lawson to fight segregation in 1960. “That they were even thinking of challenging the status quo in early 1960 marked these young people, in so quiescent an age, as being dramatically different from the black college norm,” (73) so these students were, actually, extraordinarily courageous. One of the most courageous members of this group of students is Diane Nash. I empathize with her contrasting experience as a young woman moving from a northern city to a southern one. The outrage she felt from this experience led her to the Movement, but equally important to understand is her personal battle between her self-image as a coward versus how others perceived her as a strong-willed leader in the Movement.

Diane Nash experienced a few segregation events worth investigating leading to her involvement in the student sit-in group. The first case of overt segregation she experienced was while she still lived in Chicago. She wanted to attend a charm school, but she was denied entry because of her race (147-148). This instance only seemed to shock her; she was not driven to action, just shame. Later on, the contrast between shopping in Chicago and in Nashville with her girlfriends angered her more. In Chicago, shopping was an event in which they bought items from a department store and then ate lunch at the store's counter. In Nashville, on the other hand, blacks were allowed to spend money at the stores, yet they could not eat there. For Diane, this was unjust, but she still was not driven to fight for equality, perhaps because she was afraid of the consequences or she did not know how to go about it. The tension was building, and the last

straw for Diane was the segregated bathrooms at the Tennessee State Fair. Though the separate bathrooms were ridiculous to Diane, the real issue for her was the fact that everyone accepted it. The black community's seemingly universal acceptance of segregation throughout the country drove Diane to Jim Lawson's workshops.

Another aspect of Diane Nash that intrigues me is the fact that she was light-skinned and could pass for a white person occasionally; therefore, her quality of life did not depend on integration as much as those of her friends did. Diane grew up in a middle-class Chicagoan black family that ignored racial tensions. They believed that God loved white people more than black people, and that explained why whites' rights and lives were better than their own (146). It is amazing that Diane grew up to become a leader in the Civil Rights Movement with this kind of background. Perhaps we can attribute her family's acceptance of the status quo, or rather, their cowardice to change it, as an explanation for Diane's self-image. She saw herself as a coward, but I disagree. If she really were a coward, she would have lived her life fuming internally at the injustice she observed but not fight against it. Instead, she fought for equality. The fact that she believed so much in the cause without reaping as many benefits intrigued many members of the student sit-in group. They saw that Diane *wanted* to be there, not that she needed to be there (144). Her belief in the cause accounts for her strong leadership ability.

Even though members of the group then, and us now looking back, see that Diane was a strong leader in the student lunch counter sit-in movement, Diane was reluctant to accept the position because she had convinced herself of being a coward. Others in the group saw her as sophisticated because she was from a northern city, beautiful, and light-skinned; all of which connoted sophistication at the time. Whenever Diane considered stepping down from her role, which occurred frequently, she always thought of the other students. If she could not risk her life

and future in the fight for equality, how could she ask the others to do the same (10)?

Furthermore, how could she step down from this leadership role and remain in the movement?

The other students would still look to her for guidance, or worse, they would see her as weak.

Diane knew that if she left her chairman role, she would have to leave the movement, and she could not make that decision when there was still so much to achieve. With that, she stayed.

Ultimately, Diane and the other students involved in this movement were different from other black students who stayed out of the conflict in that they were courageous and truly believed in the cause. Diane became a leader not just because of her blackness or lightness or her transition from Chicago to Nashville, but because she was courageous. I think she was courageous because she overcame her personal fear and self-doubt to think of the greater good. It takes a strong person to be able to overcome their fear, and it takes a selfless person to prioritize themselves last. She exemplified both these characteristics when she accepted and continued her leadership position within the group to fight the injustice of segregation. We can attribute part of her courage to Gandhi's teachings of nonviolence in Jim Lawson's workshops Diane attended. Diane's humility also distinguished her from others who stayed out of the movement. She knew she alone was nothing special. As a group, the students could make a difference. The other students responded to her humility; thus, it made her a better leader because they rose to action when she called for it. Another example of this is her conversation with James Bevel about which one of them should get arrested one day to make the most impact despite her fears of going to jail (141). Diane Nash was not a passive person. She did not complain about the injustice of segregation and wait for someone else to change the status quo as some of her peers did. She went out and did whatever she could to change it, even if it was just sitting at a lunch counter.

Diane Nash and the rest of the students who attended Jim Lawson's workshops and joined the sit-ins at the lunch counters were admirable people and achieved a lot during the Civil Rights Movement by demonstrating that a non-violent approach to protest could be effective in achieving their goals. After the sit-ins she went on to marry James Bevel and played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s. A lot of progress has been made since Nash and the other students began their sit-ins, but there is still more work to be done. Even 50 years later, as a white high school student in Alabama attending a public school, I can attest to the fact that a certain amount of segregation remains. Though the hallways demonstrate the ideal blend of white, black, Asian, and Latino students, the classrooms tell a different story. The honors and AP classes are compiled vastly of white and Asian students; meanwhile, the black and Latino students fill the low or regular courses. This still creates a power difference and segregation that we cannot seem to escape, but I doubt that student sit-ins in AP classrooms will change the situation.