

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

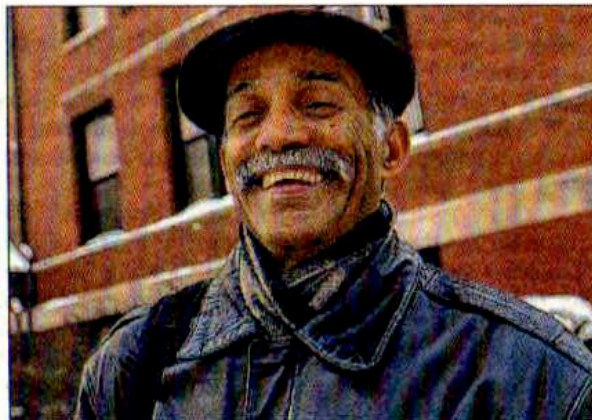
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MLK DAY 2012

A 'SMALL SPARK' THAT HELPED IGNITE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

50 years ago, Chicago parents and students (including Tony Burroughs, right) refused to accept separate and unequal schools **PAGES 2-3**



BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES

'SMALL SPARK' THAT IGNITED CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

50 years ago, parents, students refused to stand for separate and unequal schools

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It was a pivotal moment for Chicago's racially separate and unequal Chicago Public Schools system.

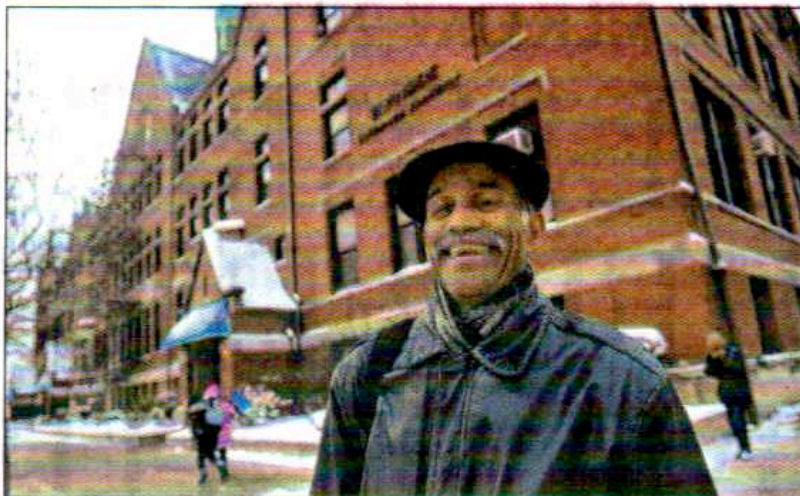
But for then 12-year-old Tony Burroughs, the three-week sit-in by African-American parents and students at Burnside Elementary School — 50 years ago this month — was life-changing.

"Historians tend to look at the big picture," says Burroughs, now 63 and a noted genealogist and author.

"You don't hear a lot about the small sparks to the fire that ignited the Civil Rights movement. This spark ignited protests against the 'Willis Wagons' [portable classrooms] and eventually led to the 1963 citywide boycott of the Chicago Public Schools where 250,000 students stayed home," he says of the incident that began on Jan. 2, 1962.

Spearheaded by the Burnside Parent Teacher Association — primarily its president Alma Coggs, member Zenia Gray, and Burroughs' mother, Mary Ellen Burroughs — it fueled the school desegregation movement of the '60s.

And the protests that followed, according to Chicago Urban League papers the University of Illinois Chicago Library holds in its Special Collections, in turn "focused the city's attention on racial segregation and inequality, created



Tony Burroughs stands outside of Burnside School, 650 E. 91st Place, where the demonstrations began 50 years ago. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES

a new militancy among many Chicagoans, and set the stage for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s decision to move his wing of the national civil rights movement to Chicago in 1966."

The Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision finding segregated public schools "inherently unequal" was being tested nationwide by civil rights activists by 1962 but predominantly down South, where law protected such schools. Challenge was slower in the North, where housing patterns championed them.

It wasn't until 1957 that the Chicago NAACP decried "DeFacto Segregation in the Chicago Public Schools" and not until 1961 that parents from the Chatham-Avalon

Park Community Council filed the first legal challenge.

But civil disobedience didn't come until 1962, from mothers angry their Burnside students were being transferred because of overcrowding at the school, writes Will Cooley in "Moving Up, Moving Out: Race and Social Mobility in Chicago, 1914-1972," his 2008 University of Illinois at Urbana doctoral dissertation.

"Burnside was so crowded that students went to school on a double shift, some starting in the early morning, while others started much later," Burroughs recalls of the school that had 1,600 students, twice its 865-pupil capacity. "Classes were even held in the auditorium, on the stage and in auditorium

seats."

Burroughs and his four brothers and sisters lived a few blocks away. Gillespie School, where an addition had been built to relieve Burnside overcrowding, was nearly a mile and a half away. Meanwhile, closer by in the white neighborhood just east of Cottage Grove, was Perry Elementary — less than a mile away from Burnside. But African Americans weren't welcome there.

"I was in seventh grade. We got the notice right before Christmas that we were being sent to Gillespie," says Burroughs. "My mother said we simply weren't going. When school started back, we returned to Burnside. We sat in chairs in the hallway along the wall. There were 17 mothers and 27 students involved."

The media came out. A Jan. 2, 1962, Sun-Times article declared it "a new kind of sit-in tactic." Tutors were brought in to teach the children. Parents, too, led lessons. Local ministers joined in support, then the NAACP. Picketing began. The school board dug in its heels.

On Jan. 16, 16 parents and civil rights activists were arrested on charges of trespassing and disorderly conduct. However, they came before a sympathetic judge.

According to a Feb. 1, 1962, *Jet Magazine* article, Judge Joseph Butler told the defendants: "I don't mind indicating I think you are correct." Then he told Board of Education attorneys, "These people have



On the second day of the 1962 "sit-down" protest against a transfer of students to Gillespie School, children attend class in a hall at Burnside School. Here, Mildred Stinson helps students with their lessons. | SUN-TIMES LIBRARY

a right — a duty — to fight segregation if there is any. I'd hate to think there is segregation here."

More arrests followed, and on Jan. 19, the parents filed a federal lawsuit seeking \$500,000 in damages from the board and CPS Supt. Benjamin C. Willis, also asking the board be enjoined from interfering with the protest.

On Jan. 25, Butler dismissed charges against 10 more of those who were arrested. "Apparently, the sit-ins were not thereafter resumed at Burnside, although similar demonstrations took place at other schools," according to "Civil Rights U.S.A., Public Schools, Cities in the North and West," a 1962 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report.

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Ultimately nine students who were still holding out, including Burroughs, reported to Gillespie School, the genealogist recalls. And the parents lost their case on Nov. 8, when a federal judge dismissed their suit.

But the tiger was already unleashed. The Coordinating Council of Community Organizations was formed that year by the Urban League, NAACP and the Woodlawn Organization, driving massive protests against Chi-

cago's segregated schools and the mobile classrooms in schoolyards.

Momentum built. Oct. 22, 1963, saw the massive boycott by students that drew federal attention, followed by further protests and boycotts in 1964. June 1965 saw daily marches against CPS segregation. And July 1965 brought a visit by King to Chicago, followed by King's decision that September to make Chicago his Southern Christian Leadership Conference's next campaign. His Chicago Freedom Movement arrived here in January 1966.

"That summer, my mother took me to see him when Dr. King came to speak at a park on 85th and South Park Avenue," recalls Burroughs, who has launched an effort to have

a commemorative plaque on the sit-ins installed at Burnside, 650 E. 91st Pl.

"That's the only time I actually saw Dr. King live. But he inspired these mothers who had watched his non-violent Civil Rights Movement in the South and the results of the sit-ins at lunch counters in Greensboro, N.C. and Nashville, Tenn.," says Burroughs. "They weren't looking for recognition. They were just looking for the best education for their kids, following Dr. King's example, and in the process, inspired a school desegregation movement that inspired King. If the students who go to that school have something to remind them of that history, it might give them the same inspiration today."