

Maude Jackson was part of Civil Rights struggle

March 7, 2011



Maude Jackson stands near one of the displays in the Middleburg museum she operates.

By Erik Moule

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MIDDLEBURG -- Civil rights activist Maude Burroughs Jackson of Middleburg remembers well the first time she was arrested. It was in the early 1960s when she was participating in sit-ins and walking in anti-segregation marches across St. Augustine, which became the epicenter of Florida's civil rights movement.

That arrest occurred at a St. Augustine restaurant in 1962, where she remembered hearing a waitress tell her the restaurant "didn't serve certain people."

Jackson had entered with a group of six, three black and three white. They sat down and politely waited for service ... they waited ... they waited ... and finally were asked to leave.

"The waitress finally came over and she said to the group, 'We don't serve n-----s here.'"

In mock surprise, Jackson looked at the waitress and with one part wit and one part courage replied, "We didn't order any."

That's when restaurant managers called the authorities and outside the restaurant the six were met with water hoses when they left.

"Eventually they (the police) arrived, and they carried us off to jail," she said. Jail meant being confined to open wire pens like cages used to house dogs or chickens. Jackson remembered how stifling the pens were in the humid Florida heat.

It was the first of three times Jackson was arrested for her Civil Rights activity. Today she is known, mostly, for her participation in the sit-ins and the marches of 1963 and 1964. She is also recognized for her association with prominent civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King.

Most recently, she has found herself associated with a group called the "freedom fighters." The group is an aptly named collection of civil rights activists who were recognized in December 2010 by the Florida Cabinet in its reconsideration of legal wrongs suffered by participants of the civil rights movement. Approved in legislation by the cabinet, the proclamation stated the intent of the cabinet was to expunge the participants' arrest records resulting from their participation in the marches and sit-ins.

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"The governor and cabinet, sitting as the Florida Board of Executive Clemency, express their profound regret for Florida's role in sanctioning the injustices perpetrated upon the courageous African American citizens of St. Augustine, St. Johns County, Florida, who, along with many others, were known as the "Freedom Fighters," and who participated in the historic civil rights events that took place in that city during the years 1963 and 1964," the resolution stated.

Among Jackson and the other freedom fighters present to witness the proclamation being signed by former Florida Gov. Charlie Crist was Dr. Robert B. Hayling. A St. Augustine resident, Hayling began his career there with a successful dentistry practice, but he eventually found his calling with the Civil Rights movement after becoming a local leader in the early 1960s for the St. Augustine chapter of the NAACP.

His dedication to civil rights was likely heavily influenced by a career-ending finger injury he suffered in a racially motivated altercation. He and another man were targeted by a group of Ku Klux Klansmen who cornered his car in a dead-end street, pulled the pair from their car, dragged them into a field, and severely beat them.

Jackson and Hayling's relationship actually dates back to the early days of the movement. It was in his office that she met Dr. Martin Luther King for the first time.

It was 1963, and King had come to a church in St. Augustine to attend a meeting on civil rights.

"We didn't want him to have to walk through the streets at night (after the meeting) to grab a bite to eat," she said of King. "It wasn't safe." So instead she cooked for him a steak, a piece of toast and a simple salad. All out of a toaster oven that Hayling kept in his office.

Jackson speaks highly of King, describing him as an especially motivational and uplifting person. His very presence, she said, added a sense hope to a room full of worry.

"He gave us the feeling that everything was going to be all right."

King even provided support to the 20-year-old Jackson, a college student at the time who found difficulty in juggling the demands of college and that of the movement. When she told King that some of her college teachers who were hounding her for assignments due while she was incarcerated for her participation in the marches, he replied, "If they have an issue with current situation, they can come speak to me."

Despite her deep involvement with the civil rights movement decades ago, Jackson has been reticent to speak about her experiences. The personal involvement in the civil disobedience that led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a topic she chose to avoid for the longest time.

"It was too painful to talk about it," Jackson said. "And coming back to a place like this, where people didn't express much of an interest in it, there was just nobody to talk about it with. People here either misunderstood, or didn't care. A lot of families kept quiet about it."

These days that's clearly not the case. And she still speaks up for the less fortunate.

In fact, a good friend once tried to impart sage advice. "Maude, you can't save the world." Jackson's response was at once both predictable and courageous:

"Yeah, but I can try."