

Cannady, Mary: At Dr. King's House ^[1]

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Mary Cannady: At Dr. King's House

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 10/9/2005. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Mary Cannady was 50 years old in 1965 when three civil rights activists were killed in Alabama. The deaths of Jimmie Lee Jackson, the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo shocked the nation, including the shy social worker who had grown up in Oxford, 40 miles north of Raleigh. At the time, she was single, bookish and 30 years older than most of the college students going into the Deep South to protest for civil rights. She had also been frail since a long battle with a crippling childhood disease. And yet, when she heard of the killings in Alabama, Mary Cannady made a decision that thrust her into some of the biggest events of the civil rights movement. At her home in Oxford, Cannady, now a week shy of 90, told me, my children and a group of my college students about that summer. Then she served us punch and cookies.



Mary Cannady. Photo by Chris Seward, 2005. To request permission for Mary Cannady to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I went South in that summer of '65 when those three people were killed, the two white people and the black man. That weekend there was to be the march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., and I decided that I was going to take a plane and I was kind of a loner anyway. I'm still like that. So there I was, middle-aged, middle class and an NAACP type. But in talking about those three young people and explaining why their deaths hit me so hard, it just came out how much anger I had. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was hosting this big march from Selma to Montgomery, so when I landed in the plane in Montgomery, there was somebody there to take me to Selma. They put me up in Selma, and they gave me a room. After that weekend, I just came on back home. I had a whole month of vacation saved up, so I decided I'd do the whole month with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I started in Atlanta at Martin Luther King Jr.'s house. He was there one day there was a rally being held down in Americus, Ga. I got in the car, two cars of us, groups of kids. Oh, I shouldn't say kids -- people. But the rest of them were kids. I was the only old person there, because I was in my 50s. This will sound weird. Anyway, they laughed at me, I know, but they accepted me, so I ended up at Martin Luther King's house.

My first trip was to Americus. There were two cars of us, black and white. We got to some place and the police stopped the car. They held us for a long time. We stayed and stayed. I don't know why they stopped us. Finally, somebody in the car said, "Well, you know, if you got to die, you got to die." And no, I never regretted being there. No, no, never, never, never once. If I die, I die. I die for a cause, an important cause. Unless we are ready to die, this will never change. We finally got to Greensboro. They set me up in the home of a woman who had been a nurse. This was during a period of a very bad boycott. She had been arrested during a protest and put in this horrible jail, just miserable. She told me about it. During this period, we finally did get to this rally at the church in Birmingham. That bombing had happened a long time before. This was a celebratory thing. We stayed in the white hotel. It was the first time it was open to us. We attended this thing. The most rewarding experience was -- this was in '65. Mr. Johnson, the president, had already signed the voting rights bill, and they were registering people to vote. I stood along the line as these poor folks went up for the first time in their lives.

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