

### Following the Leader

On a chilly afternoon in Memphis, Tennessee, young Civil Rights advocates James Orange, Andrew Young and James Bevel were taking a break from their normal advocacy duties and play-wrestling inside the Lorraine Motel room in Memphis, Tennessee. James had Andrew over his shoulder as Dr. King shouted his last words, James, don't hurt Andy and Bevel. And in a matter of seconds, all of their lives changed with the sound of a single gunshot. Pow! Dr. King was dead as James pointed to where the shot came from.

James recounted April 4, 1968 to me as if it happened just yesterday. He talked about the many delays that occurred before they were to leave for dinner at a friend's home. The people kept calling saying the collard greens needed to boil some more, the cornbread and macaroni weren't ready. They never had dinner and James has never been the same since as he continues the fight for equality.

Rev. James Orange didn't start off being a Civil Rights leader. He actually had intentions of playing professional football in the NFL. But a chance meeting with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King at a Birmingham church changed his course in life.

In the 1960's, young men were forbidden to "court" a young lady unless they planned to marry her. One evening, James made plans to meet a young lady for their first courtship date at the infamous Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where four little girls died during a horrific church bombing. The church was hosting a mass meeting that evening and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the featured guest and speaker. James arrived late. The church was packed but he managed to find a seat in the front row. It was a special row for reasons he would later learn.

All the persons seated in the front row were going to be part of a voluntary sit-in the following day and would likely be arrested. They were volunteering to go to jail for freedom. Dr. King made a point to acknowledge the brave volunteers and asked them to stand during the meeting. That's when James, the youngest of those seated, learned he was going to be part of a famous movement and make history.

Over the years after the first sit-in and arrests, James was confronted by the KKK and jailed 107 times, even more than Dr. King himself. "We wouldn't let the KKK put fear in us because they would have won." He talked about a few years ago the KKK planned a demonstration in front of Dr. Martin Luther King Center but he and other leaders warned the community to stay at home and let them march. This stopped a racial incidence. "I've seen quite a few Klansmen's turn their life around because we didn't use hostility with them because they are still our brothers."

Rev. Orange has scars on his mind as well as physical scars from beatings he endured by unsympathetic police officers and others opposed to the Movement, including fire hoses and police dog attacks. He was even scheduled to be lynched while beaten in jail in Marion, Alabama but a night march saved his life. James recounts how the town drunk named "Honeybun" was released from jail and stumbled down to the church to inform Albert Turner that they were planning to lynch him.

The movement turned James's life around and he ended up following Dr. King as one of SCLC's first field staff member in 1963 and not becoming a professional football player. He said it's okay to be a football player but know what you are going to do after your finish playing.

Rev. Orange also worked with the Voting Rights Movement and has written freedom songs about the movement. He said singing inspired them in the movement. He changed the lyrics of a song and created this song based on what was going on in the movement about the mistreatment by Governor George Wallace.

*I read in the paper just the other day.*

*The freedom fighters are on their way.*

*Coming by bus, coming by plane*

*We even walk if you ask us to.*

*This is a message that I want you to hear.*

*We want our freedom by '65.*

Rev. Orange describes how in 1995 before Governor Wallace passed, he apologized to them at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma, Alabama. "God said we had to forgive. Who are we to judge?"

Rev. Orange recalls spending ten days in solitary confinement and no one knew where he was. He fasted while in jail and because of this, the inmates were able to get the word to Civil Rights Leaders. He took his children to work with him. One daughter told him that when she gets grown, she is going to be a police officer so he want get arrested. Three of his children are in law enforcement. He said that his kids are proud of what he did and he's glad they are taking over nonviolently.

Rev. Orange is responsible for opening doors for thousands of African American and others in our country. He enjoys talking to young people because he knows they have the power to keep the dream alive. Rev. Orange inspires me to know where I've been so that I will know where I'm going.

