

Eldrewey Stearns and Houston's Student Civil Rights Movement

By Michael Anderson

Justice. Equality. Freedom. . . . Eldrewey Stearns contemplated the words over the doorways of the council chambers at Houston City Hall while he waited to protest what he viewed as police brutality against him during a traffic stop.¹



Students picket outside Foley's in downtown Houston to protest segregation, March 23, 1960.

Photo from the Foley's Collection courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s young people in Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Tennessee held sit-ins that caught the eye of Texas Southern University (TSU) students in Houston. A growing disconnect existed between the younger generation and their elders on how to assert their rights as citizens. Those in Houston who remembered the horrific events in 1917 when violence erupted between white residents and African American soldiers guarding Camp Logan had no desire to see that repeated. Parents and grandparents told their children to wait, mind their own business, and focus on their education. The students chose

to employ methods of peaceful protest preached by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.²

Eldrewey Stearns was twenty-eight years old when Houston's student civil rights movement began. Born and raised in Galveston, Stearns served in the U.S. Army and graduated from Michigan State University (MSU) in 1957 before attending law school at TSU. In 1959 Stearns was pulled over in an upper-class white neighborhood late one night after dropping off his boss from the Doctor's Club. Stearns had a defective light on his car and was asked to step out of the vehicle during the stop. He recounts, "I told

them I had constitutional rights, and I was a law student.” He expected to get a ticket and leave, but the officers noticed a picture of a white girl, a friend of Stearns’s from MSU, in his wallet and told him, “Boy what are you doing with a white girl’s picture?” The officers arrested Stearns who claims they told him he had no rights and upon reaching the station, said, “This is a smart nigger here and we’re gonna do something about him.”³

Stearns was brutally beaten by the officers before being thrown in a segregated cell and given a phone call. At around 4:00 or 5:00 a.m., Stearns was taken to the inspector’s office. He remembers, “I was told I was lucky to have my head on my shoulders after talking back to a white policeman in the South.” Stearns goes on, “He said I’d better take my little black ass away from here and never look back, and I promised him I wouldn’t.” That experience was “the shot in the arm [Eldrewey] needed” to get involved with the students active in the Houston civil rights movement, especially TSU’s student protest movement.⁴

Stearns pleaded his case to city council, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Houston Post*, and the NAACP. With the NAACP’s help Stearns filed a nationally publicized lawsuit. Although the case made him a household name as newspapers picked up the story, he points out, “I didn’t particularly like being a celebrity for getting my butt kicked.” He lost his job as a waiter but was hired at the South Central YMCA working as a youth director under Quentin Mease, who became his civil rights mentor. In February of 1960 Mease suggested that Stearns emulate the peaceful protests of students in the North. The next day Stearns discovered a group of TSU students were planning a Greensboro, North Carolina, style sit-in. He recalls that the group was trying to pick a leader with suggestions of Martin Luther King and then TSU Baptist Student Union director Reverend Bill Lawson. Stearns explains a white Jewish classmate sitting in the front row said, “We don’t need Martin Luther King. We got Eldrewey Stearns! I’ll follow him!”⁵

On March 4, 1960, fourteen TSU students gathered around the flag pole in front of the TSU administration building holding hands and singing the “Star Spangled Banner.”



TSU students staged a sit-in at the Weingarten’s lunch counter on Alameda Road. This frame is from a film of the protest discovered by Channel 13 News in 2016. You can access the footage at <http://label13.com/news/civil-rights-protests-in-houston/1164468/>.

Lunch counters were the initial targets for the protests, and the students marched to the Weingarten’s store at 4110 Alameda Road. Among the protesters were Deanna Lott, Guy Boudouis, John Hutchins, Jessis Parvis, Curtis Graves Burrell, Holly and Pete Hogrobrooks, Clarence Coleman, Eddie Rigsby, Pat Patterson, and Eldrewey Stearns. As they marched, they were joined by other students who accompanied them to the store. By the time they arrived, their numbers had reached over one hundred. They easily filled all thirty lunch counter seats, politely requesting service. Within minutes, store officials closed the lunch counter. Despite the arrival of law enforcement and reporters, Holly Hogrobrooks recalls, “everybody stood around.” The students were denied service until the store closed at 8:30 p.m.⁶

Three days after this first peaceful protest, white men kidnapped Felton Turner, a twenty-seven-year-old black man who had not participated in the sit-ins, and took him into the woods where they beat him with a chain, carved two rows of “KKK” into his abdomen, and hung him upside down from a tree. Despite the assault multiplying the older generations’ fear of white violence, the student sit-ins spread to other lunch counters and were reported by the media. Black parents, teachers, ministers, community leaders, and others in Houston tried to dissuade the students from continuing the protests; however, this new generation believed the time for waiting had passed; now was the time to act.⁷

Not long after these protests, a Houston council member, Louie Welch, came up with an idea he called “vertical integration,” a term usually associated with a business structure. Welch suggested that since blacks and whites already

The students agreed to follow these rules created by student protesters elsewhere in the South:

Do show yourself friendly on the counter at all times.

Do remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.

Do feel that you have a constitutional right and democratic reason for what you are doing.

Don’t strike back or curse if attacked.

Don’t speak to anyone without stating your purpose for being in the movement.

Do sit straight and always face the counter.

Do refer all information to your leader in a polite manner.

Do continue if your leader is discouraged and placed in confinement.

Don’t laugh out.

Don’t hold conversations with floor walkers.

Don’t leave your seat until your leader has given you permission to do so.

Don’t block entrances to the store and aisles.

Source: Thomas R. Cole, *No Color is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston*.



Student protestors gather to sing in front of Reisener Street Jail, 1961.

Photo by Benny Joseph from the Thomas Cole Collection courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

stood side by side vertically when using the elevator, they could do the same when served food at a counter. Despite moderate success initially, soon the busy lunch counter at Weingarten's became a ghost town.⁸

When the students learned that Argentina's ambassador was visiting Houston, Stearns sent a group of TSU students to City Hall. On March 25, 1960, the students marched around City Hall carrying picket signs and singing church songs. After about an hour the group walked into the building's cafeteria and asked to be served, and to the students' surprise, they were. Welch announced, "We don't all have to be fools," grabbed his tray, and sat down next to the black students. That day John Miller became the first black man to have a cup of coffee at the City Hall cafeteria.⁹

With all the racial tension and protests throughout the city, Mayor Lewis Cutrer announced the students would be arrested if they did not stop the protests. Later Houston police chief Carl Shuptrine told the mayor that the students had broken no laws and he would not arrest them, suggesting the mayor lock them up himself. Without the police chief's support and threats of violence escalating, Cutrer set up a biracial committee to study the issue and make recommendations. Cutrer guaranteed police protection for peaceful protesters but called for a moratorium on the demonstrations. The TSU administration and black leaders such as Rev. Bill Lawson, Earl Allen, and Charles Lee supported the mayor's moratorium to let the biracial committee do its research; however, a small group of demonstrators sent a telegram to the mayor stating that demonstrations would resume if lunch counters were not desegregated within two weeks of April 12, 1960.¹⁰

The biracial committee voted nineteen to three to integrate Houston. The mayor quickly disbanded the commit-

tee. According to the TSU president at the time, Dr. Sam Nabrit, "This left the mayor in a dilemma. He wanted to make sure no one knew what had transpired behind those doors."¹¹

On April 25, 1960, Stearns and 150 to 200 students met at the South Central YMCA to discuss whether or not to resume protesting. The majority followed Rev. Bill Lawson's advice to wait for the committee report. Nevertheless, about fifteen students rallied around Eldrewey Stearns's call to resume the protests. That afternoon Curtis Graves led that group to the Greyhound Bus Station cafeteria at 1410 Texas Avenue. Stearns and Otis King waited by the phone at the YMCA for a call from Curtis to say he had been arrested, but instead he said, "Drew [Eldrewey], they're feeding us." King remembers that Curtis was disappointed and said, "He didn't realize how momentous this was, that the tactic had worked."¹²

After the first protests ended, the students regrouped and began targeting supermarkets, department stores, bus and railway stations, restaurants, and theaters. They quickly learned that peaceful protests such as sit-ins, picketing, and boycotts were effective in a city devoted to making money. TSU students asked black people across the city to boycott Foley's department store in an effort to show their support for the movement. Eldrewey Stearns went on KYOK, a local black radio station, to ask customers not to shop at Foley's the Saturday before Mother's Day in 1960. These protests became a powerful economic weapon because many of the targeted stores lost business. With Chief Shuptrine attempting to protect the students from harm and preserve their right to protest, the students were not arrested during the first year of demonstrations.¹³

In February of 1961 the Houston Police Department

(HPD) made its first arrests at Union Station after students requested food service. The students had learned that in *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that denying food service to interstate travelers in the terminals violated federal law. Curtis Graves recalls of their arrests, “Everyone laughed.” While on the way to jail the protesters celebrated getting arrested and the older generation, who previously stood against the students, now rallied around them, knowing they were not criminals. Rev. Bill Lawson explains, “As fast as you could put students in jail, someone would bail them out.” Curtis Graves remembers spending time in jail, “The prisoners treated us like royalty. The baddest prisoner in the joint said, ‘These people have been doing this for us.’ People were getting told to get out of their bunks.”¹⁴

George Washington, Jr., Hamah King, and Andrew Jefferson represented the students who were bailed out of jail. The arrests fueled the student civil rights movement, and they began demonstrating daily. Frequently they hit a single location several times, forcing the store to integrate or close. Every time police arrested the students, leaders of the community such as Irma Leroy, Rev. Bill Lawson, Quentin Mease, Sam Nabrit, and A. W. Whitcliff raised money to bail the students out of jail. Their lawyers advised them that classes were more important than demonstrations. The students disagreed.¹⁵



Holly Hogrobrooks, an active member of the Houston student protest movement, receives an award for her activism presented by Eldrewey Stearns, *Mother's Day* 1961.

Photo by Benny Joseph from the Thomas Cole Collection courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Charged under Texas state law with unlawful assembly, the students hoped to evoke a federal right to dine but that required travel across state lines. Holly Hogrobrooks was one of the TSU students who met Freedom Riders from New York at Houston's Union Station. Hogrobrooks notes, “There were twelve of them and twelve of us. They had the

interstate tickets. We went into the coffee shop and were arrested.” Holly reflects, “I remember singing. We would sing. The guys would pick it up and we would sing back. We would have the whole building rockin’! It would drive the jailers crazy!” The students’ lawyers appealed the unlawful assembly charges, and the state’s highest court ruled in their favor.¹⁶

Sam Nabrit made a trip to New York City where he spoke to NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall, who had won numerous civil rights cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, including two Houston cases, *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) and *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Nabrit recalls, “Marshall suggested that we alert the students to the fact that the one way they would be arrested would be to block an exit to a theater. Well the students wanted to get arrested so they did just that.” Many students were arrested and the ones who were not walked up and down the street raising bail money. According to Nabrit, “About two weeks later, Mr. John T. Jones called me from Washington, D.C. I had alerted him to the fact that the manager of Loew’s Theater had indicated he would see this segregated theater [be] desegregated.”¹⁷

Many businesses in Houston were interested in desegregating, but most opposed it in fear of an all-out boycott from the white community. Despite racial tensions, a group of business leaders, led by Bob Dundas of Foley’s, got together and decided to quietly integrate their stores. On August 24, 1961, several black business leaders were contacted and told that all lunch counters would be open the next day. Owners and managers instructed newspapers, radio, and television stations not to report the events, for fear of a race riot. In the fall of 1961 another media blackout took place to cover up the desegregation of restaurants and hotels.¹⁸

A backdrop of the civil rights movement was the city’s ambition to have a Major League Baseball (MLB) team. After an effort in the 1950s to persuade MLB to come to Houston, the owners agreed on October 17, 1960, to expand the league and include the Bayou City. Plans to build the Harris County Domed Stadium called for the use of public funds, so Mease and other black leaders threatened to oppose the bond election unless the stadium opened fully integrated. He had spent fifteen years building the South Central YMCA into a successful branch that regularly held large interracial business meetings. With the help of the TSU students, Mease made sure it was known that if there was any attempt to segregate the Dome, protests would be held, and he sent that message in a letter to MLB as “insurance.”¹⁹

Stearns, along with Otis King, Curtis Graves, Earl Allen, Charles Lee, and Holly Hogrobrooks knew that media visibility provided their movement with momentum. According to Thomas Cole, “Eldrewey Stearns was a media hound.” On May 23, 1963, Houston hosted a parade for NASA that put the city on TV screens across the globe. Stearns and the rest of the students knew this was their chance to get the media attention they deserved by protesting the fact that Houston’s theaters remained largely segregated. Otis King recalls on the night of May 22, “Bill Lawson worked with us very closely in his garage. We spent the whole night get-

ting these signs ready and planning everything and getting people lined up.” He adds, it felt like “a military operation where we had, perhaps, as many as 100 people downtown.”²⁰

The protestors planned to break out of the crowd once the parade reached Main Street by stepping out on both sides of the street as the parade passed, pulling signs out from under their coats, and rushing into the road. Otis King recalls, “We were gonna reach a failsafe point where at a certain time we wouldn’t be able to call it and it would have really embarrassed the city.” King continues, however, “At the last moment, with about ten to fifteen minutes to spare, they [the theater and business owners] told us that they would open up all the downtown theaters and they would integrate them.” Rev. Lawson sums it up saying, “Another page in history was turned.”²¹

Dr. Thomas R. Cole researched and reported on the events as both writer and editor of books with Eldrewey Stearns and Quentin Mease. He was also the creator and executive producer of the film *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow*. His research uncovered previously unknown information about secret deals between white and black business leaders along with local media blackouts of the movement’s success. Cole explains, “It took me years to figure out a secret. I knew there was a secret [and] that there had been an agreement, but I didn’t know who instigated it, who it was between, and I wanted to find out what it was. I wanted to find out who dreamed this up, who agreed to it.”²²

Cole admits that he missed one thing that should have been mentioned in the film: “the mixed blessing that desegregation was to the black community.” After blacks and whites were no longer separate, many black businesses that relied on black customers took a tumble. Holly Hogrobrooks notes, “Too many blacks saw integration as



Foley’s front facade was a major bus stop that attracted protesters during efforts to desegregate Houston’s downtown public facilities in July 1960.

Photo from the Foley’s Collection courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

integration, and not desegregation.” For example, after segregation ended, blacks began going downtown to watch movies. Holly recalls, “As a result, we lost practically every movie theater in the black community.”²³ Similarly, as housing desegregated and people moved to other neighborhoods, they took their business out of Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards and began shopping at the new malls springing up in the suburbs, causing the once thriving black business centers to fade into memory.

Despite Cole’s films and books chronicling desegregation in Houston, many people still do not know this history or the role the TSU students played in leading local civil rights protests between 1960 and 1963. Few realize the importance of people like Eldrewey Stearns who acted as a catalyst and leader for the local student protests, or African American community leaders like Quentin Mease and Rev. Lawson working alongside white businessmen like Bob Dundas of Foley’s and John T. Jones of the *Houston Chronicle* who were willing to make a change and saw it as critical to Houston’s progress. Peaceful methods and cooperation made it possible for the student movement to force Houston to integrate lunch counters, department stores, theaters, restaurants, and hotels, followed by the Astrodome in 1965, without experiencing the violence seen in other cities.²⁴

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Eldrewey Stearns shared his memories about desegregating Houston with historian Thomas Cole during an oral history project that spanned nearly ten years. Material from this project was used in Cole’s No Color is My Kind.

Photo by Roger Haile from the Thomas Cole Collection courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.