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Willie Ricks biographical sketch

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Willie Ricks

Written by Mary Claire Comperry.

February 18, 1943, Willie Ricks was born to parents John D. Ricks and Eileen “Casey” Ricks. In his adolescence he showed to be rowdy and disruptive, which later got channeled into passion for the Civil Right movement. Ricks began his work for the Civil Rights movement in his hometown, Chattanooga, TN, with local students from Howard High School. In the beginning he started fighting oppression by participating in sit-ins and trying to get into white movie theaters, in no time he was recruited as a field agent for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Ricks is known for his change of tactics and aligning himself with the Black Panther party, as well as coining the term “black power.”

Ricks is one of nine children; he has four sisters and four brothers. His mother was a homemaker, and his father was a concrete finisher. Both of his parents were born on cotton farms in Alabama. He grew up on the west side of Chattanooga, which at the time was a place where everyone knew each other and was filled predominantly with poor African Americans. He recalls his youth in Chattanooga to be a “city experience,” in comparison to experiences he had witnessed in the cotton fields of Alabama during the summers of his early teenage years. After having attended James A. Henry Elementary school and 2nd District Junior High, Ricks dropped out of school in the seventh grade. In his late teen years, he started waiting tables at a Chattanooga hotel. He reflects on this job fondly as it “gave him responsibility.”¹

It was not until his late teen years that Ricks started to get involved with the Civil Right movement. Ricks and his twin sister, Betty Joyce, started instigating sit-ins with students from Howard High School. One of the sit-ins turned violent and mobs were formed. Due to the violence taking place in Chattanooga the NAACP intervened and taught black Civil Right advocates how to participate in demonstrations without violence. After hearing from the NAACP, Ricks started using non-violent tactics and fought only when provoked.²

Due to Ricks involvement with the Civil Rights movement in Chattanooga white racist groups, such as the KKK, started to terrorize his family and himself. There were multiple threats made against his family, shootings at his house, and there was even a cross burned in his yard.³ In an interview he recalled the death of a friend and fellow advocate, Fredrick “Fish” Jackson, who was killed in front of him during a demonstration at a Chattanooga whites only theater.⁴ This was one of the first deaths Ricks had witnessed that was a result of a demonstration, it had stirred something up in him and kept him awake

¹ Willie Ricks, “Willie Ricks Interview (part 1 of 2),” interviewed by Carole Merritt, Atlanta History Center, January 24, 2006. <https://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/digital/collection/VACL/id/69>.

² Willie Ricks, “Willie Ricks Interview (part 1 of 2),” interviewed by Carole Merritt, Atlanta History Center, January 24, 2006. <https://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/digital/collection/VACL/id/69>.

³ “Cross burned at Midnight in Yard of Negro Boy Fined in ‘Look-ins’,” Chattanooga News-Free Press (Chattanooga, TN), April 16, 1961. <https://chattanooga.pastperfectonline.com/archive/A29F8B04-434F-4801-80EF-869041052687>.

⁴ Willie Ricks, “Willie Ricks Interview (part 1 of 2),” interviewed by Carole Merritt, Atlanta History Center, January 24, 2006. <https://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/digital/collection/VACL/id/69>.

at night. Ricks and fellow advocates had been practicing in demonstrations at the theater for quite some time before the incident.⁵

By getting himself involved in Chattanooga politics Ricks caught the attention of SNCC. In 1963 he was approached by SNCC, and he agreed to become a field agent for them. He did work for SNCC in several places throughout Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. During his time with SNCC he helped organize demonstrations, help with black voter registration, spoke at demonstrations and more. Through SNCC Ricks befriended and aligned himself with Martin Luther King Jr. MLK very much so held nonviolent beliefs and at Selma they were tested, and the crowd complied. Ricks on the other started to see differently and questioned the use of violence. For him and many others violence became a way to defend themselves and confront white people who were using force as well. Ricks and other advocates had reached a point of frustration and had “had enough.”⁶ In September of 1966 a white man killed a black child, and it triggered several days of racial violence in Atlanta, Georgia. Ricks and others threw rocks, bottles, and firearms at police officers out of frustration due to the injustice and oppression they were facing.⁷ This demonstration was an effort made by Ricks to show how his tactics had changed.

In an interview Ricks was asked what it was like participating in demonstrations and having to deal with white supremacists. He answered by saying, “You always felt like your life was right there in your hand, and that you could die right there, any moment any second.”⁸ Willie Ricks dedicated his life to advocate for black advancement. He did what he did best and “preached” to the crowds and let them know exactly what basic rights the black community was lacking in comparison to their white neighbors. In recent years it appears that he has been quiet, but he has participated in several interviews in the 2000’s. Willie Ricks is known among many as someone who stands tall and proud for what they know is right.

⁵ “Negro Priest Hit By Ex-Convict,” The Nashville Tennessean, (Nashville, TN), March 17, 1961. <https://search-proquestcom.proxy.lib.utc.edu/hnpnashvilletennesseanshell/docview/1900322603/EA4363F810794B3BPQ/41?accountid=14767>.

⁶ Willie Ricks, “Willie Ricks Interview (part 2 of 2),” interviewed by Carole Merritt, Atlanta History Center, March 16, 2006. <https://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/digital/collection/VACL/id/70>.

⁷ “Violence Rips Atlanta Again,” The Nashville Tennessean, (Nashville, TN), September 13, 1966. [https://www-proquestcom.proxy.lib.utc.edu/pagelevelimagepdf/1900494194/pagelevelImagePDF/\\$N/1?accountid=14767&t:lb=t](https://www-proquestcom.proxy.lib.utc.edu/pagelevelimagepdf/1900494194/pagelevelImagePDF/$N/1?accountid=14767&t:lb=t).

⁸ Willie Ricks, “Willie Ricks Interview (part 1 of 2),” interviewed by Carole Merritt, Atlanta History Center, January 24, 2006. <https://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/digital/collection/VACL/id/69>.