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# BEHOLD THE WALLS

Clara Luper

*Clara Luper was born in a rural area of Okfuskee County and went on to earn degrees at Langston University and the University of Oklahoma. Her book *Behold the Walls* was a moving personal account of her days as advisor to the Oklahoma City National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Youth Council. In one part of the book she wrote a series of letters to her country, including this one: "Dear America: This morning, James Arthur Edwards started singing from the 'Shores of Tripoli.' Listen, we are waiting. Waiting for a hamburger, and in that hamburger, the whole essence of Democracy lies. Your citizen, Clara Luper." Indeed. It is sometimes hard for youth today who didn't live through it to see the significance of the civil rights movement. Personal accounts, like the following story of the successful sit-ins at Katz Drug Store and Luper's relationship with Mrs. John A. Brown, should help.*

## CHAPTER I

The same group of NAACP Youth Council members had congregated at my house located at 1819 N.E. Park in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It was August 19, 1958. The long hot summer's heat seemed endurable in the small five-room, white frame house, but the mosquitoes were in complete control outside and the youngsters

"Behold the Walls," by Clara Luper, first appeared in *Behold the Walls*. Reprinted with permission, Jim Wire, Oklahoma City, 1979.

remained inside where they, with sweat on their faces, held their weekly meetings. Gwendolyn Fuller, president of the Council, was presiding. Ruth Tolliver and I were in the kitchen preparing grape Kool-aid and lunch meat sandwiches.

There was no advisor-youth council membership relationship then. It was a far deeper feeling that I had for the NAACP Youth Council members. I had watched them grow up from infancy. I had seen their minds develop and the values which they would carry through their lives change. I knew their parents and knew how much their parents loved them. I knew how unpopular it was to have your children involved in the NAACP Youth Council activities. It was even more difficult to get adults involved in the Council.

This was not the first NAACP Youth Council to operate in Oklahoma City. Mrs. Lucille McClendon had worked untiringly with a group some years before. Non-participation and non-support had spelled doom for the youth council. Through the leadership of John B. White and the insistence of Mr. and Mrs. D. J. Diggs and others, I had decided to take over the responsibility of reorganizing the Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council. The fact that I was teaching American history at Dunjee High School in Spencer, Oklahoma and was a member of the Fifth Street Baptist Church furnished me with an ample number of young people who would become the nucleus of the Youth Council. William Miles, a student from Dunjee School, had been elected as the first president.

Each year at school, I'd present plays during Negro History Week, as it was called then. In 1957, I presented "Brother President," the story of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the non-violent techniques that were used to eliminate segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. The cast consisted of 26 students that were talented, ambitious and dedicated. The leading characters were William Miles, Joseph Hill and Maxine Dowdell. This play had filled the auditorium at Dunjee High School and drew tremendous turnouts all over the state.

In 1957, it was presented at the East 6th St. Christian Church, where Herbert Wright, the National Youth Director of NAACP, was in attendance. He was so impressed with the play that he invited me to present it in New York City at a "Salute to Young Freedom Fighters Rally." He agreed to pay the main characters' expenses;

however, I thoroughly understood the financial plight of the NAACP's national office and we worked out a compromise. We would raise the money for transportation, and he'd take care of our hotel and food bill in New York City.

Reverend J. S. Sykes, a very active C.M.E. minister, Mr. A. Willie James, the number-one NAACP membership writer, and Doc Williams, well-known bondsman and real estate dealer, helped me to raise \$1,895.00 in order that we could make the trip. The Oklahoma City community responded rapidly and shared in our adventure.

The cast, most of whom had never been out of Oklahoma City, stopped in St. Louis for dinner and experienced their first integrated lunch counter service. This they continued to enjoy and appreciate on the trip. Words are inadequate to describe the expression and action of young people who, by tradition and custom, had been separated by the strong Visible Walls of segregation.

The group stayed at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York City and the play was presented in both Manhattan and Harlem. The youth met freedom fighters from the south and the excitement and adventure of such a trip had a permanent effect on their lives.

In planning the trip, we decided to go the northern route and return by the southern route. On our return trip, we stopped in Washington, D.C. and visited the top historical spots including Arlington National Cemetery. As we stood in the Cemetery and watched the change-of-the-guard, each youth had an opportunity to think about Freedom. One asked, "What do you think would happen in this country if the Unknown Soldier's casket was opened and they would find out that he was black?" Joan Johnson said, "I don't know."

Barbara Posey, the secretary of the Youth Council, told the group that since all of these people had died for our freedom, we need to really get busy and do something for our country. Yes, these people, that are buried at Arlington Cemetery did all they could for freedom. I don't think the color of the unknown soldier's skin is important. I think it's what he did, and we have to do something.

Silently the group left Arlington Cemetery, after pledging that they'd do something for their country and loaded on the Greyhound bus. As the bus headed southward, the walls of segregation became

so visible. In Nashville, Tennessee, the bus driver admitted that he did not know of any place where blacks could sit down and eat. So paper-sack lunches became the order of the day through Tennessee, Arkansas and into Oklahoma.

John White's words, "The Sooner State, The Sooner we get rid of segregation, the better off we'll be," were repeated continuously by the group. "True, you know segregation just doesn't fit in with my personality," Williams Miles said with a quick smile that faded back to a face of solemnity. The group applauded with loud outbursts of "*Freedom Now! Freedom Now!*"

Back in Oklahoma City, the group decided to break down segregation in public accommodations for all time and pay any price for it. "That will be our project—to eliminate segregation in public accommodations," the group said.

A strategy was worked out, where the public accommodations' owners and managers would be approached directly by a small delegation. There was never to be over three in the delegation and Mrs. Caroline Burkes, a stately freedom-loving white woman, was to accompany the groups on all occasions. This she did with a dedication that was followed up with letters and personal visits. This campaign was followed by a direct private approach to the city manager and city council which told the groups, "We are sorry, we do not have the power to interfere in private businesses. We don't tell the businessmen who to serve and they don't tell us how to run our city government." The campaign turned into a letter-writing campaign to churches—the white church leaders turned a deaf ear as their beautiful buildings stood as monuments to their dedication to Christianity. The black churches did not want to get involved at this time and told us that we could meet in their churches. They would take up a collection for us and make announcements concerning our worthwhile activities.

The meeting continued with a warm-up chanting rally. The group was chanting:

We want to EAT—eat!  
We want to EAT—eat!  
NOW! NOW! NOW!  
We don't want any more excuses!

We want to E-A-T—eat!  
We want to E-A-T—eat!  
NOW! NOW! NOW!

Gwendolyn Fuller leaned back in her chair and looked at the group as the singing and clapping grew louder and louder. Barbara Posey, the spokesman for the Public Accommodation Committee, made her report. "The owners of all public accommodations in Oklahoma City say they will not serve blacks. Now, what are we going to do?" Marilyn Luper spoke out: "I'll tell you, Barbara. I move that we go down to Katz Drug Store and sit down and drink a Coke." "I second the motion," said Areeda Tolliver. The motion was carried unanimously by the group.

"When shall we go?" the group asked as if in a choir. "Gwen, let me tell you, you know that I made the motion to go, and I feel that I should have the privilege of deciding when we should go," said Marilyn Luper.

A silence fell over the meeting and after a few minutes with Marilyn staring into the future, she said, "Tonight is the time and as I read in Mr. Wisener's typing book, 'Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party.'" "That doesn't mean that we will have to go tonight!" shouted Calvin.

A brother-sister debate occurred and in a high-toned voice, Calvin said, "Don't you ever think that I'm afraid to go!"

Barbara Posey said, "We have waited for over fifteen months, and Oklahoma has waited fifty years. Let's go down and wait in front of the manager so that people can see our problem."

Portwood Williams Jr. said, "The men in the NAACP Youth Council are ready to go right now and we are able to take care of any situation."

"We wouldn't doubt that," Gwendolyn said, and a bit of laughter sparkled in the air and echoed back into moments of silence.

Barbara Posey was recognized by the president, Gwendolyn Fuller, and she said, "We had better see what Mrs. Luper thinks. After all, she is the Youth Advisor."

I could feel the eyes of the members on me. I thought for a brief moment and traced the steps that we had taken. We had been *patient* and I saw in the children's eyes reflections of my restless childhood

when I wanted to do something about a system that had paralyzed my movements and made me an outsider in my own country. Yet, these were children whose ages ranged from seven to fifteen years old.

I thought about my father who had died in 1957 in the Veteran's Hospital and who had never been able to sit down and eat a meal in a decent restaurant. I remembered how he used to tell us that someday he would take us to dinner and to parks and zoos. And when I asked him when was someday, he would always say, "Someday will be real soon," as tears ran down his cheeks. So my answer was, "Yes, tonight is the night. History compels us to go and let History alone be our final judge." We had another problem, we didn't have any transportation. Ruth Tolliver and I discussed the situation and decided to call three people that we knew wouldn't turn us down. Portwood Williams Sr., Lillian Oliver and Mary Pogue were selected.

I called Portwood Williams first. He lived in the next block. Mr. Williams was a talkative man with a sharp tongue, quick wit, and an adequate supply of words. He said, "I want to volunteer to drive car number one down to Katz Drug Store. My car is clean and ready. I don't blame you. I shined Mr. Charlie's shoes, and my mother washed Miss Ann's clothes. Now, I'm an upholsterer, the best in town, and my car is ready. I'll be there."

My next call was to Mrs. Lillian Oliver, a quiet, dignified, tall, school teacher and one who had served as an assistant NAACP Youth Council Advisor. I had known her since 1940 and through the years. We had been very close friends. I told her that I needed another car to take the NAACP youths down to Katz Drug Store. She didn't ask any questions. She said, "I'll be there in a few minutes. If you all are crazy enough to go, I'm crazy enough to take you!"

Lillian Oliver's cousin, Mrs. Grace Daniels, had related some of her experiences in Phoenix, Arizona, to the group and as I put the telephone down, I thought about Grace and how proud she would be of us. Lillian would have to call and tell her that we had started a direct-action campaign. I walked out on the porch where the kids were singing, "I want to be ready to sit for Freedom, just like John."

I hurried back into the house and called Mary Pogue, the mother of two of the youth. I knew that she would make me explain everything to her in detail . . . and she did! After I had finished, she said, "I'll be there in a few minutes."

I put the telephone down and heard it ring again. I had a feeling that it was my mother and I knew that it was not the proper time for me to tell her what we were going to do. I picked up the telephone and she said, "I just called to see if the NAACP Youth meeting was over." I said, "No, mother, it is not over. In fact, we are just beginning." She said, "Well, Clara, don't keep the kids up too late. You know tomorrow . . ." I said, "Yes, Mother, I'm going to take you downtown to eat for your birthday, which is only two days away." She said, "Clara, you aren't going to take me anywhere tomorrow. I'm not thinking about those white folks. What day is tomorrow, anyway? Well, Clara, we won't worry about it for tomorrow is just another day." I said, "Yes, Mama, tomorrow is just another day."

I rushed out of my house and on a still, hot, August night, August 19, 1958, we headed to Katz Drug Store in the heart of Oklahoma City. I went to the three cars and called the following names: Richard Brown, Elmer Edwards, Linda Pogue, Lana Pogue, Areda Tolliver, Calvin Luper, Marilyn Luper, Portwood Williams Jr., Lynzetta Jones, Gwendolyn Fuller, Alma Faye Posey, Barbara Posey, Goldie Battle and Betty Germany.

## CHAPTER II

Are we ready to behold the walls, non-violently?

All the way downtown, I wondered if we were really ready for a non-violent war.

For eighteen months, the members of the NAACP Youth Council had been studying non-violence as a way of overcoming injustices. Basically, the doctrine of non-violence is rooted in the fundamental truth that whites are human. Being human, they will probably react with fear if they are threatened, but in the final analysis, they are likely to respond with good will. The white man's reaction may be one of surprise because we aren't answering injustices with injustices. He may then become angry because we are not. Then he may attempt to provoke us in a desperate attempt to try to incite us to violence.



He will become very suspicious and think that we are trying to make him do something that traditions and customs have taught him not to do. He recognizes that blacks are in the minority and that our belief in non-violence stems from weakness and therefore proceeds to take advantage of us. But gradually, if we have the tenacity to hold on to our non-violent approach, the white man will gain respect for us. We aren't defeating him, we'll be just removing his hostility and insecurities which will prepare him to function as a whole man in a Democratic Society.

Four basic rules had been used: First, we had defined our objective—to eliminate segregation in Public Accommodations. Second, we had to be honest. "Non-violence is not an approach to be used by hypocrites—honesty pays!" Third, you must love your enemy. "A doctrine as old as time, but as newsworthy as this hour's news story. You are to remember that you aren't up against a deep-eyed monster, you are up against a man who has been handed an overdose of segregation and who knows that segregation is wrong, yet he practices it. You are not to ridicule, humiliate, nor villify him at any time or in any way. Keep your goal in sight, you aren't out to defeat him, you are out to establish justice." Fourth, give the white man a way out. Non-violence demonstrates a kind of strength that shows up the weakness of injustices. Recognize that he has weaknesses and can be embarrassed for mistreating his brother. Find a way to let him participate in victory when it comes.

For over a year, the four strategic steps in non-violence had been used and had been reviewed over and over again.

The steps were investigation, negotiation, education and demonstration. Investigation: Get the facts. Make sure that an Injustice had been done. A non-violent approach will fail if it is based on false or shaky assumptions. Negotiation: Go to your opponent and put the case directly to him. It could be that a solution could be worked out and that there could be a grievance that we didn't know about. Let the opponent know that you are going to stand firm in order that you'll be ready to negotiate anywhere and anytime. Education: Make sure that the group is well informed on the *issues* and that men have always hated change, yet change must come. Demonstration: This is the final step only to be taken when all others have failed. Non-violent demonstration call[s] for discipline that is firm. Every

provocation must be answered with continued good will. You must be ready for self-sacrifice that will leave no doubt as to your integrity, your dignity and your self-respect. Suffering is a part of the non-violent approach. It is to be endured, never inflicted. This approach will give you the *moral* victory upon which the eternal struggle for Freedom, Justice, and Equality can be won.

So non-violently, we were on our way to Katz Drug Store.

Katz Drug Store was located in the southwestern corner of Main and Robinson in downtown Oklahoma City. It was a center of activity with its first class pharmacy department, unique gifts, toys, and lunch counter. Blacks were permitted to shop freely in all parts of the store. They could order sandwiches and drinks to go. Orders were placed in a paper sack and were to be eaten in the streets.

This was the kind of wall that the older people should have undertaken years ago instead of financing this type of treatment. This was the kind of wall that the white Christians or the Jewish brothers should have fought. Maybe, this is the kind of battle that the atheist should have fought and now these thirteen little children could be enjoying an evening at home with their parents.

As I was thinking about what should have been done, Lana Pogue, the six-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Louis J. Pogue, grabbed my hand; and, we moved toward the counter. All of my life, I had wanted to sit at "those counters and drink a Coke or a Seven-Up." It really didn't matter which, but I had been taught that those seats were for "whites only." Blacks were to sweep around the seats, and keep them clean so whites could sit down. It didn't make any difference what kind of white person it was, thief, rapist, murderer, uneducated; the only requirement was that he or she be white. Unbathed, unshaven—it just didn't make any difference. Nor did it make any difference what kind of black you were, B.A. Degree Black, Dr. Black, Attorney Black, Rev. Black, M.A. Black, Ph.D. Black, rich Black, poor Black, young Black, old Black, pretty Black, ugly Black; you were not to sit down at any lunch counter to eat. We were all seated now in the "for whites only territory." The waitress suffered a quick psychological stroke and one said in a mean tone, "What do you all want?"

Barbara Posey spoke, "We'd like thirteen Cokes please."

"You may have them to go," the waitress nervously said.

"We'll drink them here," Barbara said as she placed a five dollar bill on the counter. The waitress nervously called for additional help.

Mr. Masoner, the red, frightened-faced manager, rushed over to me as if he were going to slap me and said, "Mrs. Luper, you know better than this. You know we don't serve colored folks at the counter."

I remained silent and looked him straight in the eyes as he nervously continued. "I don't see what's wrong with you colored folks—Mrs. Luper, you take these children out of here—this moment! This moment, I say." He yelled, "Did you hear me?"

"Thirteen Cokes, please," I said.

"Mrs. Luper, if you don't move these colored children, what do you think my white customers will say? You know better, Clara. I don't blame the children! I blame you. You are just a trouble maker."

He turned and rushed to the telephone and called the police. In a matter of minutes, we were surrounded by policemen of all sizes, with all kinds of facial expressions. The sergeant and the manager had a conference; additional conferences were called as different ranks of policemen entered. Their faces portrayed their feelings of resentment. The press arrived and I recognized Leonard Hanstein of Channel 9 with his camera and I sat silently as they threw him out and a whole crew of cameramen.

The whites that were seated at the counter got up, leaving their food unfinished on the table and emptied their hate terms into the air. Things such as "Niggers go home; who do they think they are? The nerve!" One man walked straight up to me and said, "Move, you black S.O.B." Others bent over to cough in my face and in the faces of the children. Linda Pogue was knocked off a seat; she smiled and sat back on the stool. Profanity flowed evenly and forcefully from the crowd. One elderly lady rushed over to me as fast as she could with her walking cane in her hand and yelled, "The nerve of the niggers trying to eat in our places. Who does Clara Luper think she is? She is nothing but a damned fool, the black thing."

I started to walk over and tell her that I was one of God's children

and He had made me in His own image and if she didn't like how I looked, she was filing her complaint in the wrong department. She'd have to file it with the Creator. I'm the end product of His Creation and not the maker. Then, I realized her intellectual limitations and continued to watch the puzzled policemen and the frightened manager.

Tensions were building up as racial slurs continued to be thrown at us. Hamburgers, Cokes, malts, etc., remained in place as pushing, cursing, and "nigger," became the "order of the day."

As the news media attempted to interview us, the hostile crowd increased in number. Never before had I seen so many hostile, hard, hate-filled white faces. Lana, the six-year-old, said, "Why do they look so mean?"

I said, "Lana, their faces are as cold as Alaskan icicles."

As I sat quietly there that night, I prayed and remembered our non-violent philosophy. I pulled out what we called Martin Luther King's Non-Violent Plans and read them over and over:

First, resist the evil of segregation in a passive, non-violent way. We must refuse to cooperate with injustice; we shall not pay to be insulted. Segregation is an evil, it is contrary to the will of God, and when we support, or submit to segregation, we are condoning an evil. Every man has a right and a personal responsibility to ignore certain local laws, when they are contrary to the Constitution of the United States, no matter what the consequences are.

Number Two: Use the weapon of love in our everyday relations—violence must be avoided at all cost. We must not fight back, but we must resist peacefully and in a spirit of love. I mean the highest form of love—that love that seeketh nothing in return.

Number Three: We must mobilize for an all out fight for first-class citizenship—we must have leaders who live first-class citizenship as a symbol.

We must have slogans, for we will have to make these rights simple and understandable, so that they will filter into the hearts and the minds of people.

Fourth: We must get out the vote. The chief weapon of the Negro is the ballot. None of these other privileges will mean anything unless we also get the power of the ballot. We must vote and teach our children to vote.

Fifth: We must continue the legal legislative fight. We must continue our struggles in the courts, and above all things, we must remember to sup-

port the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. We must ever keep in mind our major victories have come through the work of this great organization. At the same time we must support other organizations that are molding public opinion.

Sixth: The Church must be awakened to its responsibility. Religion is the chief avenue to the minds and the souls of the masses. The masses go to church; they listen to the minister; they have a great deal of respect for him. The minister, more than anyone else, has the ear of the people. The ministers must be awakened to their responsibilities, for the individual Negro must hold on to the one thing that has made them great, their "Spiritual genius." There is still hope, we must not give up, but we must push on.

Seventh: We must close the gap between the classes and the masses, for we are laboring to eliminate this existing evil. Therefore, it is imperative that the people—professionals, ministers, laborers, and all citizens—work together to achieve this freedom.

Last, but not least. We must be prepared. Whatever you choose for your life's work, do it well. We must prepare ourselves skillfully and intellectually to live in an integrated society. Whatever you as American citizens choose as your life's work, do it well. Do not be content with a job that is half done. Do your job so well that all the hosts of Heaven and earth will say, "Here lived a man that did his job as though God Almighty had called him at this particular moment in history to do it." Be not afraid, for God being with us is more than all of the world against us.

As I folded the paper, I looked up and saw a big burly policeman walking toward me. When he got within two feet of me, another officer called him to the telephone. I wondered why the policeman had to stand over us. We had no weapons and the only thing that we wanted was 13 Cokes that we had the money to pay for.

Amid the cursing, I remembered the words of Professor Watkins, my elementary principal and teacher in Hoffman, Oklahoma. He told us to "consider, always, consider the source."

There were some blacks entering the drug store. I saw some of the cooks and janitors. I opened my purse and wrote,

"When the time comes for cooking the food, blacks are all right;  
When the time comes for washing the dishes, blacks are all right.  
But when the time comes to sit down and eat, the blacks are all  
wrong and that's not neat."

My daughter, Marilyn, walked over and pointed out a big, fat, mean-looking, white man, who walked over to me and said, "I can't understand it. You all didn't use to act this way; you all use to be so nice."

We remained silent and as he bumped into me, the police officers told him that he had to move on. An old white woman walked up to me and said, "If you don't get those little old poor ugly-looking children out of here, we are going to have a race riot. You just want to start some trouble." I remained silent. "Don't you know about the Tulsa race riots?" the woman asked.

I moved down to the south end of the counter, then back to the other end. This was repeated over and over. As I passed by Alma Faye Posey she burst out laughing and when I continued to look at her, she put her hands on the counter and pointed to a picture of a banana split.

It had been a long evening. Barbara, Gwen and I had a quick conference and we decided to leave without cracking a dent in the wall. Mr. Portwood Williams, Mrs. Lillian Oliver and Mrs. Mary Pogue were waiting. We loaded in our cars and left the hecklers, heckling.

We passed our first test. They pushed us, called us niggers and did everything, the group said.

"Look at me, I'm really a non-violent man," Richard Brown yelled. "Look at me. I can't believe it myself."

Small details of events were written out by Goldie Battle and it was not easy to make plans for the next day because of the large number of obscene telephone calls and threats that I was receiving. The call that really caught me unexpectedly came from a black man who would not tell me his name, but he told me how good the white folks had been to him and I was disgracing my race by taking those poor innocent children downtown.

"Sir, do you have any recommendation on what we can do to eat downtown?"

He said, "No, I do not."

Then I said, "I have one for you sir."

"Okay."

I said, "Sir, since the white folks are so good to you, where do you urinate when you are dressed up in your fine suit downtown?"

He said, "I take my can with me."

“Then, sir, I feel that it is time for you to go and empty your can.”

Another black caller said that she was so embarrassed that she could hardly hold her head up. One black lady said she was working out in Nichols Hills and the lady told her to look and see what those people were doing. “Do you know them?” She said that she said *no*. She continued to do her work and when she got home she called me and I had never talked to my friend when she was in such a state of fright.

To my surprise, my mother and Mary Pogue came up to the house and explained to me all the dangers that I had gotten “all of us in.” Mary had taken us downtown, but she said, “Oh! It was awful. Those people mean business. You should have heard the things that they were saying about you.” The conversation continued and finally they went home.

As the crowd left my house, I hurried to bed, slept as soundly as a log. The robins reminded me that it was another day. The telephone started ringing, mostly hate calls. Then, Mary Pogue, my mother, Mrs. Pearl Chiles and Ruth Tolliver called. They were all saying, “Be careful, Clara—please, be careful.”

As the calls continued to come in, I wondered if the kids would return. What are their parents saying? Will the parents be afraid of reprisals? Will there be violence today?

“Well,” Reverend W. K. Jackson said in a sermon, “If you believe that you are right, go on and God will take care of you. Let His will be done.”

I couldn't believe the kids were all back with new ones, including Edmund Atkins, Robert Lambeth, Elmer Smith, James Arthur Edwards, Carolyn Edwards, Henry Rolfe Jr., Leon Chandler, Willie Johnson, Arnetta Carmichael, Thomas Taylor, David Irving and Theresa Scruggs. Cars were lining up in front of my house. I had calls from Rolfe Funeral Home, Temple Funeral Home and McKay Funeral Home. They sent cars over to take the children downtown.

Blanche, the owner of Blanche's Drive-In, called to say, “Clara, I'll send some food and anything you need.” We all started jumping up and down for truly, “This was the beginning, oh no, it was not the beginning, it was the continuation of man's desperate struggle to

be free and Oklahoma City would never be the same.” I joined the freedom band and we all began to sing:

“I want to be ready,  
I want to be ready,  
I want to be ready,  
To walk for freedom  
Just like John!”

In two days, the walls had fallen, not only at Katz in Oklahoma City, but Katz billed as the world’s leading cut-rate drug store announced that its 38 outlets in Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas and Iowa would serve all people regardless of race, creed or color.

No longer could anyone go to Katz Drug Stores and say, “Behold the walls!”

...

Who are these white folks that do not want to eat with Blacks? Where did they come from? Are these the people that Black people raised their children? Are these the white boys and girls that Black maids use to feed and take care of?

How long have Black maids been controlling white folks’ homes and kitchens? How ungrateful? Why, I would much rather eat at a restaurant with a person, than to let him in my house, with all of my valuables.

Something is drastically wrong here. What are the Black people saying? Some are telling the whites that we are going “too fast” and that we do not represent the majority of Blacks.

I know that those Blacks who aren’t participating in the movement will be the first ones to eat in the restaurants, the first ones to sleep in the hotels and the first and only ones to be placed “by their good white folks, on boards, commissions and in “top paying jobs.” While those of us that are at John A. Brown’s today will continue to be isolated from the fruits of Democracy.

I cannot continue to think about what’s happening. I’ve got to make something happen. I know what I’ll do, I’ll call John A. Brown’s and talk to Mrs. John A. Brown. She must be waiting for me to call her.



I called and received the same response that I received in 1957, 1958, 1959 and 1960.

Okay if Mrs. John A. Brown doesn't want to talk to me, I sure do not want to see her. We have nothing in common anyway. I still can't understand Mrs. John A. Brown, however. She has never had us arrested in her store, and we have not discriminated against her with our sit-in techniques—maybe—oh—I just can't understand her. There is only one thing that I am sure of—if she doesn't want to see me, I DO NOT want to see her.

Mrs. John A. Brown was the Wall and the sit-ins and boycott continued with John A. Brown's as the main target.

In 1961, I received an emergency call from the John A. Brown Company asking if I would come down to the store immediately.

Why? I asked—because Mrs. John A. Brown wants to talk to you, the voice on the telephone stated.

Mrs. John A. Brown wants to see me—I do not want to see her—after all that she has done to me, why, my feet are aching now and Mrs. Brown wants to see me—she has nerve—the nerve of her telling me to come down immediately. No, I shall not talk to Mrs. Brown—thank you for calling, but now I'm busy—too busy.

How about tomorrow? I'm all filled up. I'm just too busy taking care of business.

This continued for several weeks.

I could hardly wait to tell my friends and relatives that Mrs. John A. Brown wanted to see me.

I called my mother first and she told me that she thought that Mrs. Brown was a nice lady and that I should go and see her immediately. My mother called my aunt, Mrs. Alberta Felder, and they both talked and fussed at me. I invited them to come on and go down to John A. Brown's with me. They both laughed and told me that I must be the biggest fool in the world. I shouldn't have told them any way.

I called Vera Pigeo in Clarksdale, Mississippi and she said Clara, I don't know how you sophisticated Blacks do in Oklahoma, but in Mississippi, when white folks want to talk, we put down everything that we are doing and we go to them and talk. You see, when white folks stop shooting and start talking, we are happy to talk.

The sit-inners also contended that I should talk to Mrs. John A. Brown.

I decided to call Mr. Charlie Bennett, the managing editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City's great newspaper. Charlie Bennett was one of the few white men that I really trusted. I would indirectly get his advice on my seeing Mrs. John A. Brown. Charlie and I talked about the mayor's committee and some of the problems that we were facing and I casually mentioned the fact that Mrs. Brown had invited me in to have a conference and I had refused. He had no comment and silence fell over the telephone, and I said, "I don't understand, can't you see my side of it. She refused to see me when I wanted to see her and now that we're boycotting her store, she wants to talk. Frankly, I don't see what we have to talk about."

He said, "I'm surprised at you! Now if you want to keep the lines of communication open, you had better forget about minor problems and stick to the real issue. The lines of communication must be kept open at all times. Anyway, what do you have to lose?"

I didn't want to answer him and I tried to change the conversation but he brought me right back to the question in his own way. He was the undisputable executive and now he was compelling me to answer him. I hesitated. He pressured me and I finally answered.

"No, I don't have anything to lose."

"Pure common sense, or any kind of statistical data would show that you might have something to gain."

I hurriedly made up an excuse and terminated the telephone conversation. Why did I call him anyway? I should have called Dr. Charles Atkins. I called him immediately. He was my doctor and his advice had always been respected and carried out, through the years he had been our family doctor. We had depended on both his medical, recreational, and educational advice. He had never missed an opportunity to support the Sit-ins. Mentally or financially. He checked on our welfare daily. His son, Edmund Atkins, was over to my house practically every day. His advice and encouragement had been appreciated. His wife had been helpful in supplying us with new information and materials. Dr. Atkins said, "You had better see her. This is part of being a winner. Never miss the opportunity to do right."

I wrestled with my conscience and after talking with about ten more people, and since I was convinced that I was not going to get any support for my way of thinking, I decided that I would see Mrs. John A. Brown.

Her secretary called and I told her I was so busy that I could not see Mrs. Brown until the next Tuesday, a week later.

In the meantime, the sit-ins continued at John A. Brown's. Every day I was wondering what our conference would be like. During the years, we had been at John A. Brown's, we had never seen her. However, the week was so full of activities that I did not have time to think.

On the next Tuesday, the telephone rang. Mrs. Brown had asked if I wanted her chauffeur to pick me up for the meeting. "No," I said, "I shall have my chauffeur to drive me down." (I was my own chauffeur.) I got into my car and headed for John A. Brown's Department Store.

It was common information at John A. Brown's that Mrs. Brown and I were going to meet. And I could feel the tension as I walked into the store alone and toward her office. I was graciously welcomed by her attractive secretary. She talked to me briefly and told me to go into Mrs. Brown's office and she would be with me in a few minutes.

That day I was ready for Mrs. John A. Brown. All of the frustrations that had been building within me for the last four years were going to come out "right in her white face."

When the secretary opened the door, I walked into an office. I was overcome with history because that office was Mr. John A. Brown's former office. The furniture, the pictures, the papers and in spite of the improvements and re-furnishings that had happened at John A. Brown's, that office was just as it was when Mr. John A. Brown died years ago. My frustrations began to diminish and when Mrs. Brown opened the door, we both stood speechless before each other and with tears in our eyes, we embraced each other as if we had been friends for years. Oh, I know this couldn't be, but it was, and now we were talking. Two women, one black and one white. One rich and one poor.

Historical circumstances had brought us together. We talked about our families and some of the problems that we had faced as we

both tried to compete in a man's business world. We both cried again as I told her how I had tried to make it. How I was working on three jobs trying to educate my children and to provide them with the necessities of life. She told me about her husband and how he had died. We talked about how much we had loved and how much we had lost.

Finally, she said, "I have been told that you hate me, is that true?" I said, "No, Mrs. Brown. I do not hate you. I respect you. You have challenged the male oriented business world; you shall always have my respect."

"I have been told that you hated me," I said.

"Oh, no, Clara, I've heard that, but it is not true. I admire your courage. I have stood here and have wondered day in and day out, what you and your children were saying about me. Clara, tell me, please tell me, what the children think about me? What do they say, Clara?"

As I looked at her, I knew that I had to tell her the truth. Her penetrating eyes stared directly into mine.

"Mrs. Brown, they say that they wish you had died in place of Mr. John A. Brown. They said if he were living they believe that they would be able to eat here," I said.

For a few minutes there was complete silence and then she spoke.

"Clara, day in and day out, I have worried about this thing. I just don't know how to deal with it. You see, Mr. Frank Wade has leased space in my store to operate the luncheonette and under his lease he has the sole right to run it in his own way. You see my hands have been completely tied."

"Yes, Mrs. Brown, but we don't know anything about Frank Wade and care less, but John A. Brown's that's different. This is the store where we have spent our money and we can't see how we can be discriminated against under the roof of a John A. Brown store. Even the name John Brown reminds us of the martyr that died for our cause."

We talked for nearly an hour. Mr. Anderson came in and brought us some lemonade. He offered her the first glass and she said, "Serve Clara first."

Finally she said, "Take this message back to the children. Segregation will end at John A. Brown's."

I was so proud of her. She admitted to me that the first time I was arrested, she called and offered to pay my bond. She never missed calling to see if I were all right, she said.

She asked me to do her a favor. To come and meet with all of the executives of the John A. Brown's store and tell them why we selected John A. Brown's Store.

I followed her to a spacious conference room where I told my story. I liked everybody there immediately except Attorney Lyle. He continued to harass me about insignificant things. I had already been warned about him. I started to raise my voice at him, but I looked at Mrs. Brown and she smiled at me. Then, I knew everything was going to be alright.

When I left John A. Brown's that day, I had respect for Miss Ambrosia, Mr. Hardwick and I knew, I had a life time friend in Mrs. John A. Brown.

An agreement was made that day that John A. Brown's Segregation Walls would fall and in less than a week, Blacks were eating at John A. Brown's.

Mrs. Brown and I continued to talk to each other by telephone. She invited me to go to Europe with her. I turned it down because of other commitments and before she went into the hospital for the last time, she called me and told me that she was going into the hospital under a different name and she probably would never see me again, but she wanted me to know that she appreciated what we had done for this city, a city that she loved so well.

Mrs. John A. Brown acquainted me with loneliness in a way that I had never known it before. When she died, I couldn't control my emotions. I went to her funeral and followed the procession to her final resting place.

A white executive of the store said, "I'm glad you came."

She was my friend, I loved her and I had to come.