



March On Milwaukee

Honoring the 50th Anniversary
of Milwaukee's Open Housing Marches



Design a Monument Contest and Exhibition: Recognizing and Reigniting the March on Milwaukee

The Project Challenge

Historical Background: Beginning on August 28, 1967, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council/Commandos, Father James Groppi, Alderperson Vel Phillips, and a host of activists and community members marched for over 200 consecutive nights to demand an end to housing segregation. The marches inspired national fair housing legislation and culminated in the passing of Vel Phillips' fair housing resolution on April 30, 1968. Until this moment, it was legal to discriminate against African Americans and to deny them from living in certain areas of the city. The fair housing resolution made it illegal to keep people from living in certain neighborhoods; now even more people had the legal right to live where they wanted to live.

The Design Call: As part of the 50th anniversary commemoration of the original marches, which includes the citywide initiative *200 Nights of Freedom*

(www.200nightsoffreedom.org), the “**Design a Monument Contest and Exhibition: Recognizing and Reigniting the March on Milwaukee**” is a way of recognizing the past marches while reigniting the spirit of activism in the present-day. 50 years after the original marches and victory for fair housing, Milwaukee still has no public monument or memorial to the youth and adult activists who worked tirelessly to promote social justice, racial justice, and fair housing. What could a public monument to the movement look like? How can we commemorate the original marches and also acknowledge current activism in our cities?

We invite young people throughout the state of Wisconsin to submit entries of a public monument to the “Design a Monument Contest and Exhibition.” The contest is open for all youth from Grades 3-12. The theme of the contest is “Recognizing and Reigniting the March on Milwaukee.” Keywords that can inspire student designs include:

- Social justice
- Fair housing
- Equal employment
- Education
- Equity
- Youth empowerment
- Civil rights
- Peace

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Photographs and scans of 2D (paper, drawings, paintings) and 3D works (sculptures, dioramas, and installations) will be evaluated based on their connection to theme, originality, and technical skills. Works will be judged blindly with judges selected from community activists, educators, and artists. Works will be judged by grade range (grades 3-5; 6-8; 9-12).

Selected works will be exhibited, in their original format, at the Walkers Point Center for the Arts during the Spring/Summer of 2018.

To submit your entries, complete the attached entry form and email it and all photos/digital works to education@200nightsoffreedom.org. The deadline for submissions is **March 31, 2018**.

Included in this packet

- Entry Form
- Monument Resources
- Copy of Erica Metcalfe's "Commanding a Movement: The Youth Council Commandos' Quest for Quality Housing," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Winter (2014-2015): 3-15.
- For additional information on the March on Milwaukee, visit 200nightsoffreedom.org

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ENTRY FORM

Design a Monument Contest and Exhibition: Recognizing and Reigniting the March on Milwaukee

Complete this entry form and email all materials to education@200nightsoffreedom.org

Submission Deadline: March 31, 2018

Submission Guidelines and Procedures

- Teachers, parents, and students in grades 3-12 throughout the state of Wisconsin are welcomed to submit designs for a monument for the marches.
- Please submit ONLY photographs or scans of your work (photographs of models and dioramas welcomed!).
- Submit 1-4 photographs per design.
- Works will be judged by grade range: grades 3-5; grades 6-8; grades 9-12.
- Judging will be based the following criteria: originality; technical skill; and the ability for the work to recognize the past marches while reigniting the spirit of activism in the present-day.
- Selected works, in their original format, will be featured in an exhibitions held at Walkers Point Center for the Arts in the Spring/Summer of 2018.

Applicant Information

Please submit one application per entry. Entries can be individual submissions or group projects.

Your Name (first and last):

Relationship to Student (check one):

- Teacher
 Parent
 Student
 School Administrator
 Artist/I am the student
 Other

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Applicant Information (Continued)

Phone number:

E-mail address:

How do you prefer to be contacted?: Phone Email Both

School/Organization Information

Name of school/organization:

Address (City, State, Zip code):

Phone number:

E-mail address:

Student Information

Grade level/s of participating students (Students will be judged by grade range):

Grades 3-5 Grades 6-8 Grades 9-12

Number of students who participated in creating the design:

Additional students' name and contact information (if applicable):

Artwork/Monument Information

Title of Monument:

Type of Work:

- Two-Dimensional (paper, drawing, or painting)
 Three-Dimensional (sculpture, diorama, or installation)

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Artwork/Monument Information (Continued)

Estimated size of work (in inches or feet):

Materials used:

Student Response/Artist Statement (Attach additional pages if needed)

High School Word Count Requirements: 100-200 words per answer

1. *Please describe why you created this work.*
2. *How does this piece recognize and reignite the Marches on Milwaukee?*
3. *Was this piece inspired by any other keywords (social justice, fair housing, equal employment, education, equity, youth empowerment, civil rights, peace, etc.)? If so, how?*

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Monument Resources

Design a Monument Contest and Exhibition: Recognizing and Reigniting the March on Milwaukee

mon·u·ment

'mänyəmənt/
noun

- a statue, building, or other structure erected to commemorate a famous or notable person or event.
- a building, structure, or site that is of historical importance or interest.



Monuments have been used throughout history to commemorate important people, events, or places. They have the power to bring people together to remember important historical moments. They also have the power to divide people, especially when the history being remembered is one that sheds light on our nation's history of slavery, racism, segregation and oppression of various peoples. During this past summer of 2017, historic monuments have become the focus of public debate. Anti-racism activists have challenged the appropriateness of monuments of historic figures who fought on the confederate side of the U.S. Civil War. For example, a group of activists in Durham, North Carolina, pulled down a monument titled, "The Confederate Soldier". This, and other related events, have led to important conversations about the role monuments play in our culture, and in the telling of our country's history.

In the past several years, contemporary artists and activists have begun to expand upon traditional ideas of monuments. They are challenging the assumptions made about the people, events and ideas represented in monuments, and are questioning who gets to participate in the creation and installation of monuments in public spaces.

The purpose of this resource is to inspire conversation with students as they begin to design a monument that will recognize and reignite the historic 1967 March on Milwaukee. Contemporary artists show us that public monuments can be created to commemorate social justice events and issues. Contemporary artists also show us that monuments can be made using a wide variety of strategies and materials (not just marble and bronze).

Do Ho Suh

South Korean, 1962

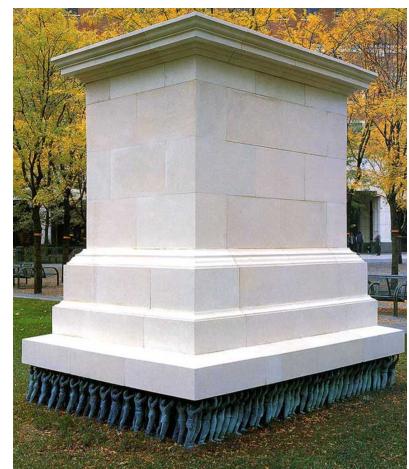
Public Figures, 1998-99

Fiberglass/resin, steel pipes, pipe fittings



In this monument, Do Ho Suh replaces the elevation of a single historic figure with a collective of small male and female figures, suggesting that the strength and struggles of common citizens are worthy of remembrance.

Metrotech Center Commons,
Brooklyn, New York 1998-1999





Carlos Colombino

Paraguayan, 1937-2013

Estatua de la Libertad, 1991

Concrete, bronze

Colombino recreated this sculpture from the pieces of a toppled statue of the deposed Paraguayan dictator, Alfredo Stroessner. Some believe this symbolizes the power of the resistance, while others believe it is about abandonment and loss in the community.

Located in the Plaza de los Desaparecidos. (Original statue by Juan de Ávalos, Spanish, 1911-2006.)

The NAME Project Foundation (Cleve Jones)

Founded in 1987

NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, begun in 1987

1,920 fabric quilts (currently over 48,000 quilts)

Each quilt is a handmade memorial to a loved one who died from AIDS. The collection of quilts continues to tour, with the money raised going to fund AIDS research. The AIDS Memorial Quilt Archive photographically preserves the image and story of each quilt.

First exhibited in Washington D.C.





Néle Azevedo

Brazilian, 1950

The Minimum Monument (Melting Men), 2009

1,000 ice figures

Originally exhibited in Berlin, this monument has been recreated in cities all around the world to raise awareness of global warming and the melting of polar ice caps.



Maya Lin

American, 1959

Civil Rights Memorial, 1989

Granite

Located in Montgomery, Alabama, this is a memorial to 41 people who died in the struggle for racial justice in the U.S. from 1954-1968 (from the Supreme Court ruling against segregation in schools, to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.). Inspired by a quote for Dr. MLK Jr, "Until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream", water flows across the monument, and rolls over its sides. A list of 74 names have become known as the "Forgotten List", additional people who are thought to have also died in the struggle for civil rights during those years.

Commanding a Movement



The Youth Council Commandos'
Quest for Quality Housing

BY ERICA METCALFE

The 1960s marked an era when indigenous leadership arose out of a group of working-class black youths in the urban landscape of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Milwaukee National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council and its security subunit known as the Commandos came to dominate the local civil rights movement. In 1967, the group joined forces with Alderwoman Vel Phillips to rally for a strong city-wide open housing ordinance. During the course of the housing campaign, the Commandos, a group that provided stability and energy for the Youth Council, positioned itself at the forefront of the movement.

1966: The Founding of the Commando Unit

Ardie Clark Halyard, a longtime member of the Milwaukee NAACP branch, founded the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council in 1947.¹ The Youth Council mostly consisted of working-class black youths, but by the 1960s, the group had a sizeable number of white members, and by 1965, it also had a white adviser, Father James Groppi of Saint Boniface Church.² During his summer vacations, the young priest often traveled south to participate in civil rights activities that included voter registration and integrating public facilities.³ With Groppi as adviser, the Youth Council accelerated its direct action activities and, in early 1966, the group began its first major civil rights campaign against the Fraternal Order of Eagles, an exclusively white club with a restrictive membership policy against minorities.⁴

In August 1966, members of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter bombed the building that housed the headquarters of the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP.⁵ Two days later, several armed male members of the Youth Council began guarding Freedom House, their community headquarters. Groppi claimed that this action had been prompted by hostile calls to Saint Boniface Church following the bombing and said that the young men would serve as armed security in case of an attack.⁶ The bombing, coupled with the hostile opposition the Youth Council had experienced during past protests, led the group to form a new security unit called the Commandos.

"We decided we should take it upon ourselves to defend these people," Youth Council member Dwight Benning explained. "You know, we asked them to march; now we had to protect their lives against people that we feared were biased toward us."⁷

The Commandos originally consisted of ten Youth Council members. On October 7, 1966, the Council unveiled an exclusively male task force unit at Freedom House. Nineteen-year-old Dwight Benning, captain of the group, announced membership qualifications. A Youth Council member had to prove himself by measuring up to a code based on his ability to follow orders. He also had to be neatly dressed, available, militant, and embrace fellow youth council and Commando members in the spirit of brotherhood.⁸

When a few female Youth Council members felt left out with the creation of the exclusively male Commando unit, Mary Arms came up with the idea for a female counterpart of the unit called the "Commandolettes." Before the Commando unit was founded, leadership and membership within the Youth Council had been evenly divided between both sexes. Girls were empowered by the leadership skills that membership within the Youth Council afforded them.

However, very rigid limits still existed in the roles they could and could not play. When voting time came around, nearly every male within the Youth Council voted down on the proposal. The role of protector remained reserved for males.⁹

The Commandos served a dual purpose. Besides offering security, the unit provided a way for the Youth Council to counter Groppi's leadership with the creation of a unit that represented strong black male leadership. This was a major priority among the Youth Council members and Father Groppi himself.¹⁰ The Commandos presented black males in a way that brought newfound respect for them in Milwaukee. When the Milwaukee NAACP office was bombed in 1966, local news stations ran footage of several Commandos standing guard outside Freedom House in their militant uniforms. Afterwards, young black men flocked in droves to Saint Boniface seeking membership in the unit. Early on, there was fluidity between the Youth Council and the Commandos, as the first



Opposite page: Commandos protest along with other fair housing activists at a rally in front of Saint Boniface Church, 1967. Protests over fair housing were a focal point of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee.

Above: The August 10, 1966, issue of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* featured this photo of Milwaukee police chief Harold Breier inspecting the NAACP's Milwaukee office after it was bombed on August 9.



Father James Groppi performs a mass at Saint Boniface Church with two Commandos at his side for protection, ca. 1966.

Commandos maintained membership in both units. However, by 1967, the Commandos had evolved into a separate unit with many new and older members who had not been Youth Council members.¹¹

In the early 1960s, the NAACP's Youth and College Division had revamped itself. At this time, Youth Director Laplois Ashford had encouraged youth councils to create special task forces. These task force members were to consist of disciplined and dedicated people who could organize demonstrations and handle tense situations.¹² Task forces like the Commandos were forbidden to provoke violence, but even though the

Commandos did not carry weapons and practiced nonviolence according to NAACP rules, they also made it clear that they would defend themselves and marchers when necessary.

The Commandos' combative appearance, which sometimes included army fatigues, black berets, and black boots, was designed to show they were a group to be taken seriously. They also believed that presenting a dignified, disciplined image of black manhood would help to counter the dehumanization young black males often experienced in a society plagued with bigotry and discrimination.¹³ By forming the Commandos, the Youth Council attempted to instill a level of militancy into its image, while inadvertently also altering the image of the Milwaukee NAACP's adult branch, which had always had a reputation for conservatism.

The establishment of the Commandos upset many blacks and whites alike. The group presented an image of black militancy that had never been witnessed before in Milwaukee. An editorial in an October 1966 issue of the local black newspaper, the *Milwaukee Courier*, opined,

The COURIER and many members of the community have very deep and grave concerns about the wisdom of a Commando unit. We are concerned first, about the welfare of these young men. We [are] also concerned about the image of the Youth Council, and by reflection, the prestige and tradition of the NAACP. Uniforms have traditionally been associated with war and fighting, not peace and love. We would like Fr. Groppi and the council members to take a long hard look at their goals and the methods which are being used to reach them.¹⁴

The Courier's commentary conveys that much of the apprehension toward the unit revolved around not just its militant



Above: Alderwoman Vel Phillips at a Milwaukee Common Council Meeting, 1967. Phillips coordinated with the NAACP Youth Council to rally for citywide open housing.

Right: The August 10, 1966, edition of the *Milwaukee Journal* included a photo of 19-year-old Dennis McDowell showing his carbine to members of the NAACP Youth Council at Freedom House where he resided. He obtained the weapon to defend the house after the NAACP headquarters building was bombed on August 9.

image but also how it reflected upon the image of the NAACP.

Some state politicians described the Commandos as an extremist and “Hitler-like group” that posed a threat to the city’s “business, labor and political establishment.”¹⁵ The formation of the unit also thwarted negotiations with the Eagles Club over its whites-only policy. Following the Youth Council’s picketing of the club and member’s homes, University of Wisconsin–Madison law professor N. P. Feinsinger managed to arrange a meeting between the National Fraternal Order of Eagles president D. D. Billings and Roy Wilkins, the executive director of the NAACP’s national office. However, Billings would only meet with Wilkins if the NAACP disowned the Commandos. Although local NAACP members offered little support to the group, Wilkins and other members of the national branch praised the Youth Council for its work. And since the NAACP encouraged its youth councils to create task forces like the Commandos, Wilkins informed Billings that they had not violated any NAACP programs, and therefore he would not disown them. As a result, the mediation efforts between the Eagles and the Youth Council came to a standstill.¹⁶

Housing within the Inner Core

The Commandos resided in what was known as Milwaukee’s inner core, a small area on the North Side of Milwaukee bounded by Juneau Avenue on the south, Twentieth Street



on the west, Holton Street on the east, and Keefe Avenue on the north.¹⁷ Historically, the city’s North Side had been inhabited by African Americans since they began arriving in the city in large numbers shortly after the onset of World War II. In Milwaukee, as well as other urban cities of the North, this migration helped intensify residential segregation and overcrowding. On the North Side, the process of ghettoization progressed as housing covenants and discriminatory federal housing policies restricted black home ownership. Moreover, competition from poor and working-class whites seeking cheap housing left African Americans with the worst homes in the city.¹⁸

The Sixteenth Street Viaduct, which connected the city’s North Side to the South Side, was often considered the “Mason-Dixon line” that connected “Africa to Poland.” Blacks resided in dilapidated homes on the North Side while the city’s



The open housing marches and protests of 1967 often led to clashes with Milwaukee police.



Commandos protest a Marquette University dance held at the whites-only Eagles Club, October 7, 1966.

South Side was overwhelmingly occupied by working- and middle-class whites. Socially, the two groups rarely interacted, as discrimination and segregation prevented African Americans from attending restaurants, theaters, or schools beyond the inner core. Economically, employment discrimination kept African Americans unskilled and in the lowest paying jobs available. Only three percent owned their homes. In contrast, South Siders had a relatively high percentage of home ownership. By the 1960s, black Milwaukeeans were left with the oldest and most rundown housing in the city.¹⁹

Journeys to the South Side

Alderwoman Vel Phillips had been introducing fair housing ordinances into the Common Council since 1962, but her colleagues defeated the proposals every time by a vote of 18–1. In May 1967, the Common Council gave Phillips's fair housing bill its fourth straight defeat.²⁰ Over the summer months, the Youth Council joined Phillips in her quest for open housing and began planning a major event to dramatize the housing issue in Milwaukee. They decided to stage a march to the South Side of the city, where they would hold an open housing rally in a city park.²¹

The South Side consisted of working-class whites of German or Polish descent, many of whom were resistant to minorities moving into their neighborhoods. In 1964, residents had welcomed George Wallace, the notorious segregationist governor of Alabama, to the South Side during his campaign for presidency and delivered more than 30 percent of the area's vote to his campaign.²² Before transferring to Saint Boniface Parish in 1963, Groppi had also witnessed a great deal of prejudice toward blacks

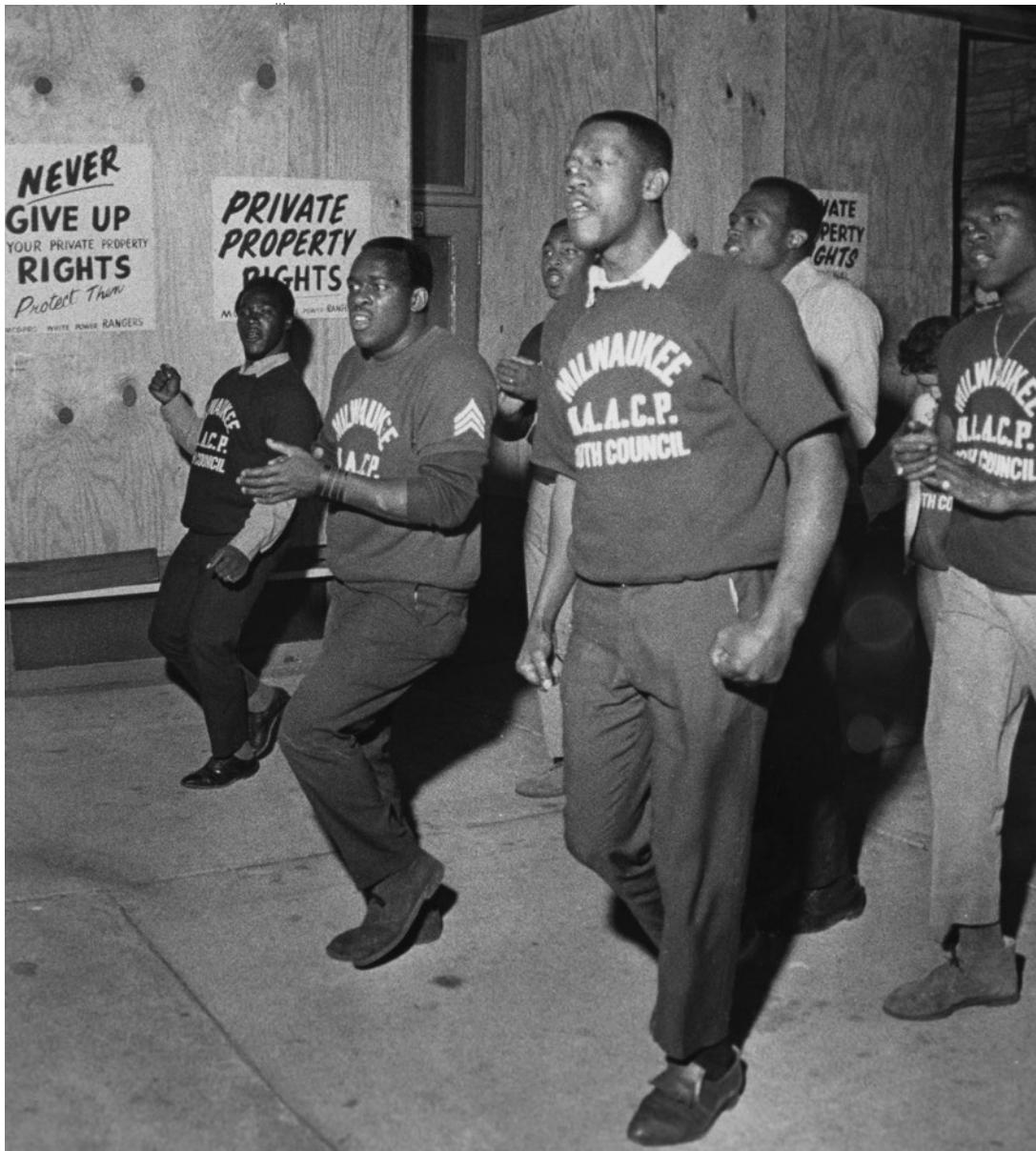
while he served as priest at Saint Veronica's Parish on the South Side. On one particular occasion he witnessed South Side housing resistance in action when local residents held a meeting to protest the building of a public housing unit that would potentially bring blacks to their side of town. After listening to the laments of the locals, he came to a grim conclusion:

They did not want public housing on the south side because they were trying to keep blacks out. . . . I went to the meeting and listened to a lot of nonsense for three hours. . . . One honest racist got up and asked, "look, what is the possibility of Joe Brown from Walnut Street moving in here?" The Alderman answered, "pretty good."²³

For the Youth Council, marching to the South Side did not necessarily symbolize a desire to live there; instead, it was more a means of confronting the obdurate racism and resistance exemplified by the issue of open housing.²⁴

On Monday, August 28, 1967, the Youth Council and Groppi, along with 250 marchers, met on the north end of the Sixteenth Street Viaduct for the trek south to Kosciuszko Park. Commandos were stationed at the head of the line and along each side of the column to shield marchers. The marchers could answer back to counterdemonstrators, but Commandos were to remain disciplined during marches. Therefore, they were not allowed to address hecklers, police, or news reporters unless it was absolutely necessary. The night ended with a total of twenty-two injuries and nine arrests.²⁵ The following day, upon crossing the bridge and reaching the South Side, marchers were greeted by a mob of an estimated 13,000 angry South Siders. As police walked amongst the marchers, they restrained and arrested many counterdemonstrators while also dispensing tear gas to disband the large violent crowd. When marchers left Kosciuszko Park to head back to the North Side, counterdemonstrators threw "bottles, eggs, beer cans, bricks, stones, cherry bombs and pieces of wood" at marchers.²⁶ They also

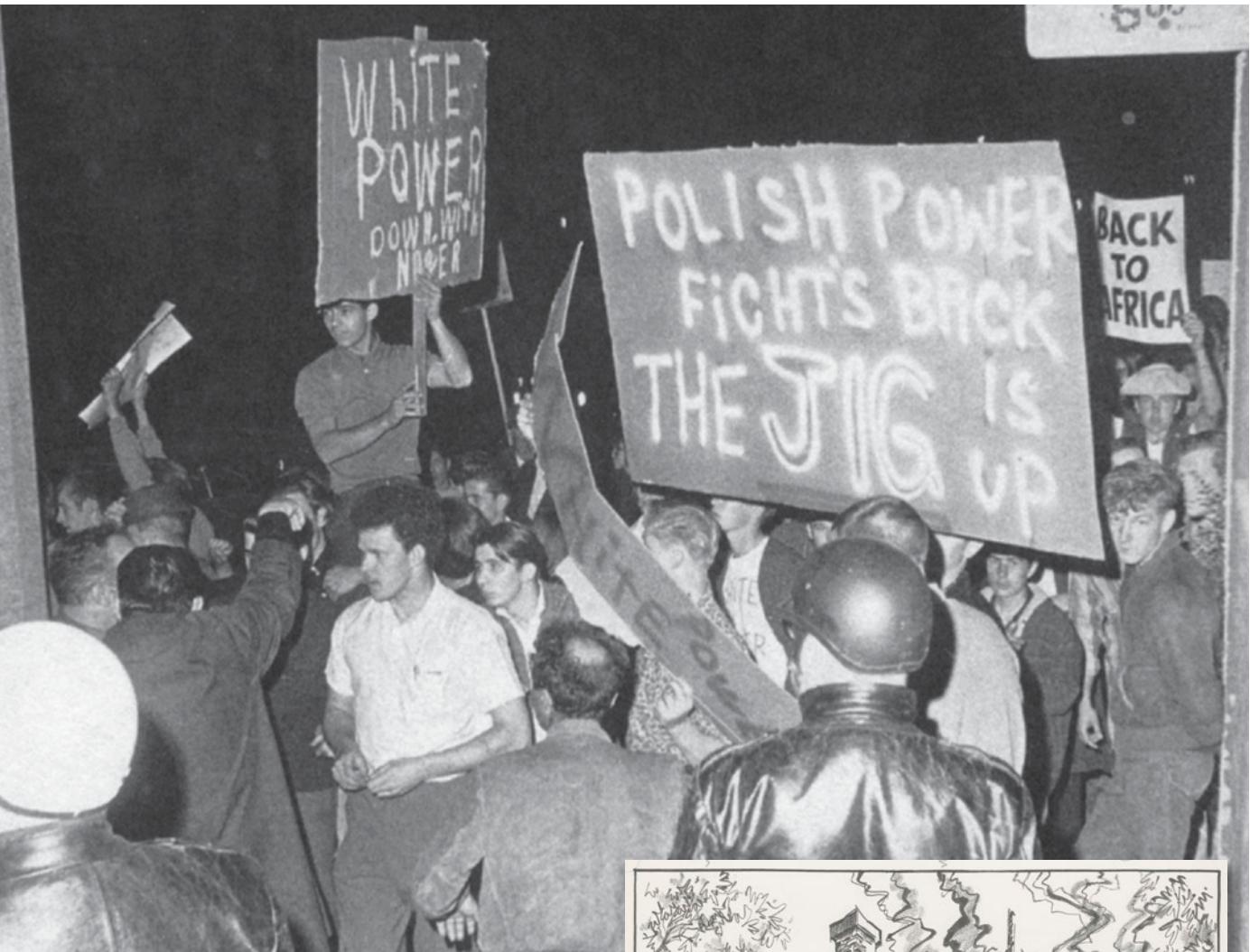
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NAACP Youth Council members march for open housing at Sixteenth Street and Greenfield Avenue, September 25, 1967.

shouted racial epithets and chants such as "we want a slave," and "E-I-E-I-E-I-O, Father Groppi got-a-go."²⁷ The march, which lasted two hours and thirty minutes, ended with a total of forty-five arrests and twenty-two people injured.²⁸ Groppi called the South Side scene "a white riot," and was so appalled by the violence and hostility that he phoned the governor and mayor to demand more protection for marchers. Both officials, however, refused to call for the National Guard.²⁹ Although their journey to the South Side was a frightening experience, Father Groppi and the Youth Council vowed to continue "agitating" and "protesting" until a strong citywide open housing law was passed.³⁰

But as the open housing marches continued, the power dynamic between the Commandos and the Youth Council



Counterprotestors took to the streets in large numbers on the South Side during the open housing marches. Some residents can be seen here carrying signs with racially charged messages.

began to shift visibly. Groppi and the Youth Council often held press conferences, which local news reporters attended. Although Groppi appears in much of the footage and does comment occasionally, the Commandos were noticeably more vocal. One Commando in particular, Prentice McKinney, began acting as the spokesman for the group. McKinney was an outspoken, charismatic, and indignant teenager who was considered by many to be “the strongest personality in the Commandos.”³¹ In footage from a rally in front of Freedom House, a news reporter, referencing the group’s next march to the South Side, asked McKinney, “What if they let you march peacefully?” McKinney quickly snapped back, “We always march peacefully!”³²

When the summer of 1967 ended, members of the Youth Council returned to school. The Commandos, many of whom were considerably older, were left in charge of leading the marches. Most were young men who varied in age from eight-

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This *Los Angeles Times* political cartoon, featured in the *Appleton Post Crescent* on September 13, 1967, satirized the open housing protests and the violence that occurred as a result.



Members of the Blackstone Rangers, ca. 1967–1969. The Rangers were a politically motivated Chicago street gang that clashed with the Commandos' approach to achieving equality in housing. They ridiculed marching and advocated for violence.



Commandos watch Milwaukee police chief Harold Breier's home in response to police surveillance of the Freedom House headquarters and Saint Boniface Church, September 30, 1967.

teen to thirty and had more life experience than the Youth Council members. Some were married, some were veterans of military service, and many had previously been in trouble with the law and had criminal records.³³ The shift in leadership was apparent in news reports. The media no longer described the demonstrations as sponsored by the Youth Council; the marches were now “Commando led.”³⁴ At the time, this passing

of power did not lead to any conflicts between the two units. The Youth Council was simply grateful that the Commandos were keeping the fight for open housing going even as local excitement and involvement around the issue dwindled.³⁵

A Shift of Power

Father Groppi reached the height of his popularity during the open housing campaign. As his national stature increased, he traveled frequently for speaking engagements. While he was away, the Youth Council and Commandos assumed increasing responsibility for directing civil rights activities in Milwaukee.³⁶ Groppi understood well how important it was for these groups to develop their leadership abilities and become more independent from him. “It raises problems in the sense that I am white, and that we are trying to develop indigenous black leadership,” he said. “Right now the Youth Council has developed to the point where I can play a more self-liquidating role . . . you can’t give yourself to the point where you will overshadow and stifle the indigenous black leadership that is developing.”³⁷ The Commandos took more independent action as they began to lead the open housing marches during fall and winter, and they took on the responsibility of planning march routes, as well as devising strategies to protect marchers. They became even more visible as they filled a void left by Groppi’s frequent absences and the Youth Council’s preoccupation with school responsibilities.³⁸



Above: The reception area outside Mayor Henry Maier's office was heavily damaged after police and protestors clashed during a sit-in on September 7, 1967.

Right: Commandos examine campaign materials for presidential candidate George Wallace, 1968.

The Commandos' marches unified the community and brought about a renewed vigor. Often the number of marchers would increase as people off the street joined the ranks. They would come out of taverns and bars to join the march. Those in vehicles would drive alongside the marchers, blowing their horns and shouting encouragement. During one particular march, a young woman holding an infant joined and described the child as "the youngest Commando."³⁹

The Youth Council and the Commandos supplemented the housing marches with campaigns aimed at placing economic pressure on local business establishments. In September 1967, at the suggestion of comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory, the Youth Council called for inner core residents and business establishments to boycott Schlitz, Milwaukee's largest and most widely distributed brewery. Commandos pressured business owners and operators to stop selling the brand by repeatedly chanting "No more Schlitz!" as they passed establishments that served liquor during marches. By October, business at



restaurants and night clubs had declined up to 35 percent due to the boycott.⁴⁰ In the following months, the city's business would continue to drop as Commandos encouraged inner core residents to boycott stores for the "Black Christmas" campaign. Inner core residents were not to buy gifts, decorations, or any other holiday materials. At a Black Christmas community meeting, one Commando declared, "We are tired of paying first rate taxes and receiving the last rate citizenship."⁴¹

A Two-Front War

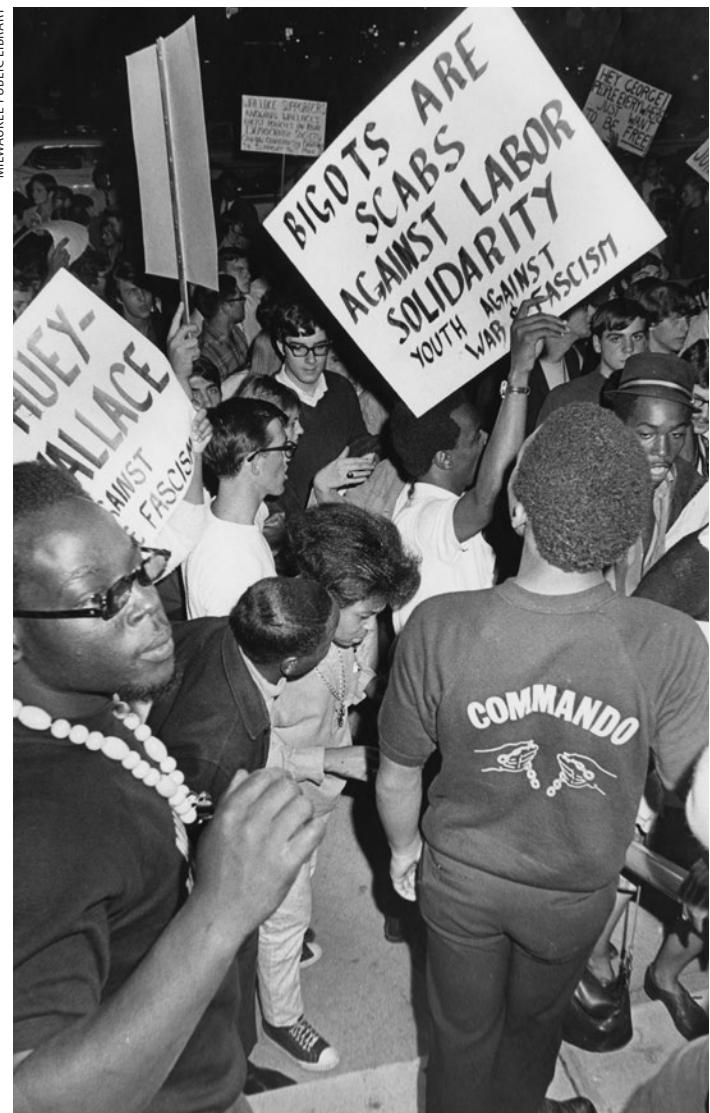
The leadership role came easily to the Commandos mainly because they had been at the forefront of a two-front war since their founding. The first front was against rival black militant groups. The Commandos were often confronted by local and out-of-town revolutionary groups looking to overthrow their leadership and promote violent action in the city. One particular group that consistently antagonized the Commandos was a newly politicized Chicago street gang known as the Blackstone Rangers. In September 1967, a group of young men preached in front of Saint Boniface Church. They insisted that the Commandos' tactics were not extreme enough to garner the attention needed to force change from white city officials. An agitator at the scene stated, "From what we see, you Commandos are doing nothing. . . . The white man in Milwaukee has called your bluff. And what do you do? You keep on marching."⁴²

The conflict with the Blackstone Rangers reveals the different levels of aggression that existed within the black freedom movement. In Milwaukee, the Youth Council and the Commandos' actions were considered quite radical for the times. However, since they didn't advocate violence, the Rangers regarded the group and their methods as ineffective.

Also in 1967, while the Youth Council and its Commando unit were in Philadelphia for an NAACP convention, members of the Blackstone Rangers were staying in the same hotel. At one point during the trip, a Commando was held involuntarily in a Blackstone Ranger's hotel room. He claimed they put a gun to his head demanding that the Youth Council and Commandos immediately have their white adviser removed and function instead as an all-black organization. Eventually, the Commando was released from the room, and he warned Groppi and the others about his ordeal.⁴³

Despite agitation from revolutionary groups, the Commandos remained committed to an integrated movement that did not use violence to obtain its goals. On several occasions they defended their ideals to outside agitators who disagreed with their philosophy.⁴⁴ Commando Dwight Benning commented on the subversive groups to the *Chicago Daily Defender*: "To all of those persons that have been trying to tell us to get violent we say that this is our movement, and we're going to continue to make the decisions. If outsiders want to join us, they're welcome to do so on our terms. But

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NAACP Youth Council members protest presidential candidate George C. Wallace at a rally at the Milwaukee auditorium, undated.

there will be no violence on our part unless our women and children are attacked."⁴⁵

The Commandos' second front was facing the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD). The police usually provided protection for marchers during open housing marches, but the Commandos believed the protection was inadequate and reported that most police officers identified with the angry white mobs. In fact, some Youth Council members claimed that police officers made such crass racist remarks as "I hope you riot, then I can shoot off a few," or "I hope you go to Vietnam."⁴⁶

The NAACP claimed that police frequently harassed Groppi and Youth Council members. Police in parked squad cars kept constant surveillance on the Freedom House headquarters and Saint Boniface Church. Milwaukee police chief Harold Breier claimed that the police merely



Father James Groppi leads a welfare demonstration alongside Commandos in the Wisconsin Assembly chambers at the State Capitol in Madison, 1969.

sought to protect protesters, but many considered him to be a bigot with “little tolerance for civil rights activism.”⁴⁷ In a complaint filed against the MPD, the Youth Council declared, “We, as American citizens, resent the fact that we cannot go anywhere without being followed. We resent the attitude of the police department towards us, but furthermore we protest the basic idea that an American citizen is not free to move anywhere without being observed, followed and photographed by the police.”⁴⁸ After a number of meetings with Breier convinced them that the chief planned to continue the surveillance, Youth Council members decided to thank Breier for his “protection” by doing surveillance on his house, and the Commandos were tasked with watching Breier’s home. Four Commandos would sit in a car outside his home for two-and-a-half hours each night.⁴⁹

The event that fully solidified the Commandos as leaders was their physical confrontation with police. The group often lamented that during marches the police were a constant nuisance to them. They would often harass and intimidate marchers and interfere with the Commandos’ attempts to maintain order. Several police officers had personally expressed a desire to battle the unit. Commando leaders decided that in order to maintain their credibility and end some of the police intimidation, there had to be a physical confrontation. In October 1967, the unit staged an altercation in which they boxed in police by sealing off four corners of an intersection during a march. Commando Shakespeare Lewis explained the plan:

The strategy was that when we tie up the traffic (at the intersection) we knew that the police (was) going to rush in. And when they rush in we opened up (the marching line) and let them into the square (center of the intersection) where we had blocked off traffic. The police started swinging fists and clubs when they saw they were trapped. The Commandos responded and the fighting was hard and bad.⁵⁰

After the altercation with police, the Commandos achieved notoriety among the community. The battle with police did not represent a rejection of nonviolence nor a change in strategy. It was symbolic. The Commandos were the underdogs who had fought on the streets against a force that symbolized oppression, and they had survived. They had achieved a reputation, and with it, fear and respect.⁵¹ Afterward, Lewis noticed an immediate change, commenting that “after that night on 20th and North, we got quite a different cooperation from the police department. They saw that we weren’t bullshitting what we were marching for.”⁵² Essentially, by challenging the police, the Commandos were not only showing that they were not afraid of them, they were also conveying they were a force that would demand and, if need be, fight for their respect. After the battle, eleven people were arrested and a total of six police officers were taken to local hospitals for injuries. One officer received ten stitches after being struck in the head with a pipe. Many Commandos also received severe injuries.⁵³

The Youth Council and its Commando unit marched for open housing a total of 200 consecutive days from August 1967 to March 1968. Over the course of the 200 days, the Commandos led marches in every corner of the city, as well as the downtown area.⁵⁴ The marches brought thousands of people, clergy and laypeople, into the city to support and march with the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council.⁵⁵

Because of their maturity, charisma, and discipline, the Commandos came to overshadow the Youth Council as the primary organizational focus for the civil rights movement in Milwaukee. In a short time, the unit had gone from an auxiliary security force to the central leadership within the Milwaukee movement, but conflict soon began to develop within the Commandos. A leadership struggle ensued, and those who wanted to continue direct action protests left, leaving leadership in the hands of those who wanted to expand and take the unit in a different direction. One Commando stated at a meeting, “We’ve got to keep the marches going. But I agree that we ought to be looking into other ways to extend the protest. Open housing is just one of the issues. Negroes need a lot more than that.”⁵⁶ Although the Commandos were an integral group to the Youth Council, they were still a subunit. They lacked critical resources, including a treasury and a separate facility. Any money raised by the Youth Council or received in donations went into the Youth Council treasury and was used for Youth Council expenses as a whole.⁵⁷

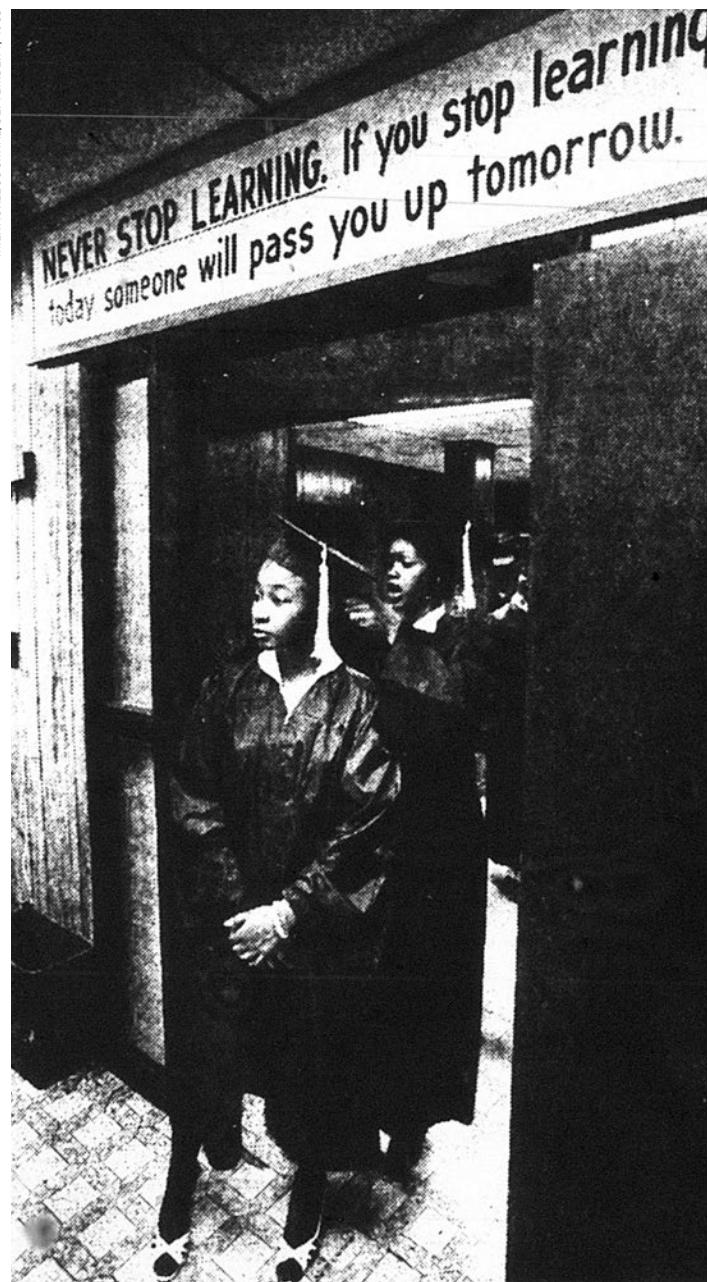
On April 4, 1968, the civil rights movement was dealt a major blow when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis. Days later, in an effort to honor the slain activist, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the federal Open Housing Law of 1968. The following day, Mayor Henry Maier followed Johnson's lead and urged the Milwaukee Common Council to pass an open housing measure that would be "as broad as the federal law." On April 29, the Common Council finally passed a strong open housing ordinance. The council voted 15–4 in favor of a bill "outlawing discrimination in the sale or rental of all but two categories of Milwaukee housing." By July 1968, twenty-six suburban communities in and around the Milwaukee area had also passed open housing ordinances.⁵⁸

The Move into the Social Service Arena

Following the riots of the 1960s, the federal and state governments began allocating public funds for inner-city programs across the country to help prevent urban unrest. In 1968, the Wisconsin Legislature authorized one million dollars for inner core projects. The Commandos applied for funds and received the first allotment to develop a work project for 268 inner core youths during the summer of 1968. They were paid an hourly wage to sweep and pick up trash in local areas. North Side residents noticed that the summers had considerably less criminal activity among youth and credited the Commandos' project for the safer streets. Thereafter, the summer work program went on annually, with the number of youths employed increasing each year.⁵⁹ Commando Jesse "Hook" Wade would eventually become executive director of the Commandos Project I and negotiate contracts with agencies such as the State Department of Public Instruction, the Division of Correction, the Division of Community Service, the Milwaukee County Department of Social Services, and the Social Development Commission.⁶⁰

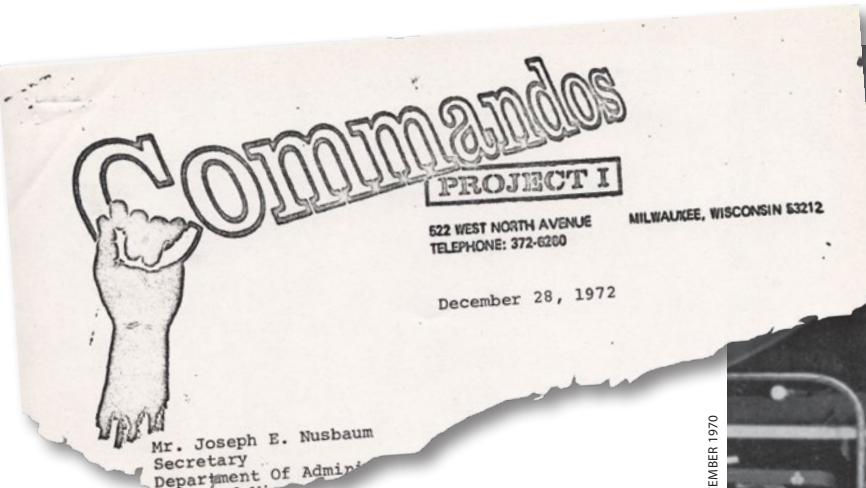
The Commandos' move into social service began while open housing marches were still being held. Commandos Hank Walters, Jimmie Pierce, and Johnnie Davis approached social worker Julius Modlinski at Marquette University about assisting them in finding employment. According to Modlinski, "During the course of discussion the idea of looking for employment changed to developing a structure wherein they could do what they wanted most to do—work with and for needy youths in their community, especially those being released from the state youth correctional facility at Wales."⁶¹ Subsequently, the Commandos decided that it was time to break from the Youth Council. The unit announced its plans during a meeting in the basement of Saint Boniface Church. Youth Council member Shirley Butler-Derge recalls that the meeting was "full of tension."⁶² She continued, "Father Groppi was very angry. . . . He screamed 'this is a sell out!' He didn't want to receive government money because he felt that once you did, you were at their mercy and they could control you. Groppi pleaded with them not to do it, but if they did, he didn't want anything to do with it."⁶³ Squire

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Delisa Moncree and Sulin Love prepare for graduation from the Commandos' alternative high school, the Commando Academy, 1983.

Austin left the Commandos shortly after its leaders decided to change the direction of the group, yet he understood the reasons for the change. "The marches were ending but they still wanted to be helpful to the Community," he asserts.⁶⁴ The departure, however, represented more than just a desire to enter into the social service field; there was also an economic reason behind the decision. Many of the Commandos were young men with familial and financial responsibilities. Many were unemployed, and although Commando membership brought respect, it failed to provide a financial means of support; therefore, moving into the social service arena offered the opportunity to perform important community work while also earning a living.⁶⁵



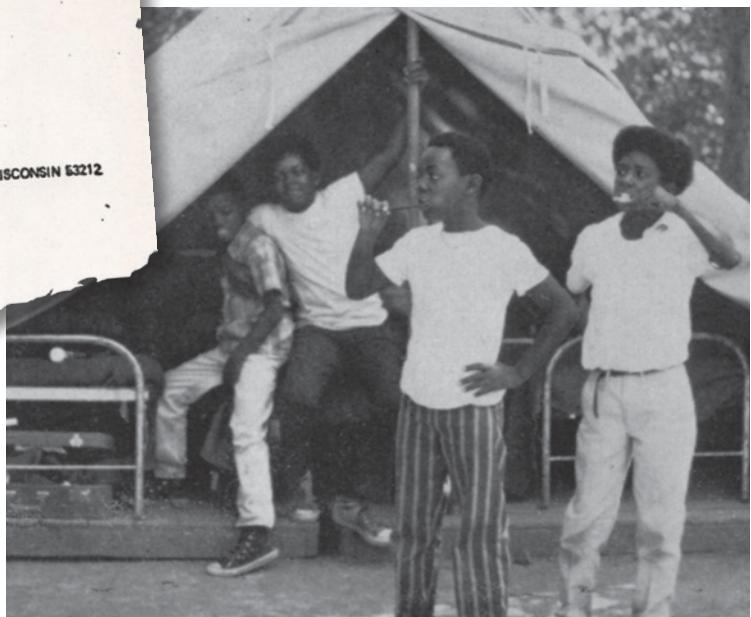
Above: Commandos Project I operated as a civil service organization after the Commandos separated from the NAACP Youth Council. This letter sent to the Wisconsin Department of Administration requested funding for a Commando program designed to aid offenders released from state prisons.

Right: Boys who worked on the Commandos Summer Urban Improvement Program were rewarded with a week at Boy Scout Camp Indian Mound near Oconomowoc, ca. 1970. Commandos supervised their activities.

Following their parting from the Youth Council, the Commandos began to expand their work in the community. The group splintered into two interconnected factions: "Commandos Incorporated," which functioned as the body that focused on civil rights issues and direct action, such as marches and protests, and "Commandos Project I," which focused on social service. Into the 1970s and early 1980s, the Commandos survived and thrived but allowed their direct action efforts to take a back seat to social service projects. By 1980, the Commandos had become a major inner-city social service agency, providing programs that included adult and youth counseling, full-time employment for ex-offenders, two group foster homes/halfway houses, youth employment during the school year and summer months, year-round recreation, an annual summer camp held in rural Wisconsin, and the Commando Academy, an alternative high school.⁶⁶

Although members lacked formal education in social work, the Commandos' programs were a success because they used their experiences on the street to relate to young people, particularly young parolees. Commando Henry Walters, who was project coordinator, confessed, "We've all served time in the joint. We know what it's like to come out and not have anybody take any interest in you."⁶⁷ Michael A. Shoenfield, assistant director of the Commandos Project I, attributed the unit's success to its unique organizational strategy. He commented, "The Commandos learned to work with the bureaucrats, even though they don't necessarily accept the bureaucratic method of delivery. When they get money for their programs, they like to run them their way."⁶⁸

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The improvement of housing within the inner core remained a top priority. In 1971, the organization took a single mother and her five children out of a rundown North Side home after the unit condemned it. The Commandos then moved the family into a newly furnished residence. The unit continued to do work of this kind, and it made a habit of contacting housing inspectors to demand that local dilapidated houses be condemned.⁶⁹ Also, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, one of the Commandos' major programs included paying juvenile parolees to paint and repair inner core houses. The parolees who were referred to the Commandos worked fulltime preparing inner-city homes for the elderly and the disabled. They also winterized homes, built ramps for wheelchair users, and provided pest control services. By 1980, Commando Project parolees had made minor repairs on close to 300 homes.⁷⁰

The Commandos went into decline after Republican Ronald Reagan became president in 1981. That year, director Jesse Wade confessed that the survival of the group was uncertain due to Reagan's proposed federal budget cuts, many of which were aimed at social service programs for the urban poor.⁷¹ By 1982, Reagan Administration budget cuts had severely reduced the number of summer jobs available for teenagers in Milwaukee, and social service agencies like the Commandos simply did not have the funds needed to provide employment to a large numbers of youth as they had in the past.⁷² By 1990, the Commando Academy was still helping young people obtain high school diplomas.⁷³ However, the organization was merely a shadow of what it once had been. Ultimately, lacking the funding needed to continue operations, the Commando Project I soon thereafter became defunct.

The history of the Commandos is one imbued with conflict and struggle as well as triumph. The Commandos' narrative conveys the distinctiveness of local civil rights movements of the North, as well as the significant role that young people often played in the movement for racial equality. In Milwaukee, the Commandos managed to gain the respect of local law enforcement and defend their movement against outside agitators, all while mobilizing a community for a sustained struggle. By combining their vehemence for inner-city issues with social service, the Commandos succeeded in carving out a niche their own. ■

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