

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ACTIVIST

Is It Wrong to Discriminate?

Diane Nash and the Nashville Reckoning

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Contribution Track • ERA VI • Raleigh, North Carolina

Who She Is

Diane Judith Nash was born May 15, 1938, in Chicago, and by her own account did not fully confront Jim Crow until she transferred to Fisk University in Nashville around 1959 and encountered segregated facilities she had never had to reckon with at home. Trained in Gandhian nonviolent direct action by Rev. James Lawson, she became one of the Nashville Student Movement's principal leaders while still an undergraduate — and one of the sharpest strategic minds the movement produced, credited with turning points in three separate campaigns: Nashville, the Freedom Rides, and Selma.

The Nashville Sit-Ins

Sit-ins began in Nashville on February 13, 1960, days after Greensboro, organized by students Lawson had trained — Nash alongside John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, Marion Barry, and C.T. Vivian. Nash later admitted candidly how frightened she was through all of it.

"People used to tickle me, talking about how brave I was... because I was so scared. All the time. It was like wall-to-wall terrified." — Diane Nash

The campaign's turning point came April 19, 1960, after a bombing destroyed the home of Z. Alexander Looby, the Black attorney defending arrested sit-in students. Several thousand marchers walked to Nashville's City Hall, where Nash put a direct question to Mayor Ben West on the courthouse steps: whether he personally believed it was wrong to discriminate against a person solely because of race. West said yes. Nashville became the first major Southern city to begin desegregating its lunch counters.

Founding SNCC — a Raleigh Story

That same spring, Ella Baker — then executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference — convened a student conference over Easter weekend at her own alma mater, Shaw University in Raleigh, funding it in part with \$800 from Martin Luther King Jr. and insisting the gathering stay youth-led rather than become an SCLC recruitment drive. Roughly 120 to 200 student delegates attended, including the whole Nashville delegation: Nash, Lewis, Barry, Lafayette, and Bevel. Out of that meeting came the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Nash is counted among its founding leaders.

Keeping the Freedom Rides Alive

When the original CORE-organized Freedom Riders were firebombed and beaten in Alabama in May 1961 and CORE moved to suspend the rides, Nash argued for continuing immediately — reasoning that stopping in the face of violence would prove violence could always win. She helped organize the new wave of Nashville student riders who resumed the campaign from Birmingham to Jackson, coordinating with Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth in coded telephone language to avoid tipping off police.

"We know someone will be killed, but we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence." — Diane Nash

Selma

After the September 1963 Birmingham church bombing killed four girls, Nash and her then-husband James Bevel began organizing what they called a nonviolent "army" in Alabama for voting rights — the

germ of what became the Selma Voting Rights Movement. In 1965 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference awarded Nash and Bevel jointly its Rosa Parks Award, its highest honor, for initiating the campaign that led directly to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. She remains a living public figure, honored in 2022 with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

NC Local Lens

Nash's North Carolina connection runs through Raleigh and Shaw University — the same founding-SNCC story that anchors the Two Americas entry for Ella Baker — not Cumberland County. No Fayetteville-specific connection is documented, and none is claimed here; this entry stands on the Raleigh tie rather than a local one.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Exact wording of the Ben West exchange: sources agree on substance but differ on precise phrasing; no verbatim transcript was located in this research pass. The exchange was filmed by NBC and aired in December 1960 — that footage would be the strongest primary source.

Shaw University conference dates and attendance: sources vary between April 15–17 and April 17–21, 1960, and between roughly 120 and 200 delegates.

Date downtown Nashville counters actually desegregated: given inconsistently as "three weeks later" or a specific date in mid-May 1960 — not reconciled here.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Diane Nash," SNCC Digital Gateway, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://snccdigital.org/people/diane-nash-bevel/>.
2. "Founding of SNCC," SNCC Digital Gateway, Duke University Center for Documentary Studies, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://snccdigital.org/events/founding-of-sncc/>.
3. "Diane Nash (1938–)," BlackPast.org, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/people-african-american-history/nash-diane-judith-1938/>.
4. "Nashville—Confrontation at City Hall," The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom (exhibit), Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia/nashville-city-hall-confrontation.html>.
5. "Ella Baker's Vision: How a Shaw University Student Sparked the Birth of SNCC," Shaw University, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.shawu.edu/ella-bakers-vision-how-a-shaw-university-student-sparked-the-birth-of-sncc/>.
6. "Meet Diane Nash, the Civil Rights Icon Awarded the U.S.' Highest Civilian Honor," Smithsonian Magazine, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/diane-nash-presidential-medal-freedom-civil-rights-180980380/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.