Commemorating the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Houston’s First Sit-in

A symposium, march and unveiling of a Texas Historic Marker will take place March 4 to commemorate the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Houston’s first sit-in. The events will start at Texas Southern University and move to 4110 Almeda, the site of Houston’s first sit-in.

The activities start at 9a.m. with a panel session in the MLK auditorium featuring several of the original TSU students who led that first non-violent protest five decades ago.

“The movement was a stepping stone that led to monumental change in Houston,” said Holly Hogrobrooks, journalist and civil rights organizer. “Because I had been close to people who had worked with landmark legal cases like Smith v Allwright and Sweat v Painter, cases that helped to chip away at Houston’s segregation laws, I knew what we were doing was the right thing to do.”

After the panel discussion, current TSU students will march with the pioneering student leaders to the actual location of that first sit-in. Fifty years ago 4110 Almeda was a Weingarten’s supermarket; today it is a U.S. Post Office.

A ceremony will be held at the Almeda location to unveil a 27’ by 42’ Texas Historic Marker at noon. The Texas Historic Commission, Harris County Historic Commission and TSU are the marker’s sponsors.

The marker highlights the students’ crusade to end segregation in Houston.

They began their movement at a flag pole on TSU’s campus Friday, March 4, 1960. At 4p.m. they lined up in pairs and marched to their destination -- 4110 Almeda Road, Weingarten’s supermarket.

They arrived at 4:30 p.m. with a simple objective --to be served at the lunch counter. However, for hours the students sat quietly—never to be served.

“We felt our time had come,” said John Bland, TSU student and sit-in organizer. “We just wanted to be treated like American citizens.”

Many attribute the initial success of the movement to Eldrewey Stearns, who was a TSU law student. He became deeply passionate about desegregating Houston after he was stopped by a Houston Police Department officer in August of 1959, placed in jail and severely beaten.

“Eldrewey Stearns had a brilliant mind,” said Bland, one of Houston’s first black transit employees. “He put all of this [sit-in strategies] together.”

However, unlike many of his contemporaries who went on to become successful professionals, Stearns became lost in “the cause” and succumbed to a mental illness.
“The movement actually stole the brother that I once knew,” said Shirley Stearns, Eldrewey’s sister. “But we are so proud of him because he gave his life to the movement. I don’t want anyone to forget that.”

Damaged but not broken by bipolar disorder, Stearns, who now resides in an assisted living home in South Houston, vividly recounted the movement.

“We wanted change, and it was something you had to be willing to die for,” said Stearns. “And, I was willing to die for a noble cause.”

Like bricks tumbling after being pummeled by heavy machinery, the stronghold laws of segregation began to fall. From March 1960 through August 1960, the students’ bold sit-ins, demonstrations and subsequent arrests ultimately led to the desegregation of nearly 70 public lunch counters (including the police cafeteria).

The genius of these brave young warriors’ strategies was lauded all across the city, especially in the black community.

“I think that the movement showed that you could get some things done by direct action that might also be accomplished through legal action, but usually it would take longer. We had won in Brown v Board of Education. The movement showed us that there is an alternative to lawsuits, direct action,” said Otis King, Houston’s first black city attorney and civil rights organizer.

Now, 50 years after that first sit-in, their story will be told to a new generation.

“We stood on the principles of equality and justice,” said Rev. Earl Allen, pioneering sit-in organizer. “History has proven we did the right thing.”

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Texas Southern University was founded in 1926 and became a state institution in 1947. Texas Southern possesses an impressive array of undergraduate and graduate programs, a diverse faculty, more than 80 student organizations, and an alumni network comprised of educators, entrepreneurs, public servants, lawyers, pilots, artists, and more, many of whom are change agents on the local, national and international stage. Nestled upon a sprawling 150-acre campus, Texas Southern has served as a cornerstone for developing the greatest potential in leaders from various socioeconomic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. Texas Southern is located in the heart of the city, giving its students and faculty easy access to the Museum District, neighboring educational institutions, the Texas Medical Center, downtown Houston, two major airports and all of the city’s major freeways. More than 9,487 students, along with nearly 1,500 faculty and staff comprise the University’s community making it one of the nation’s largest Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s). For more information, visit [www.tsu.edu](http://www.tsu.edu).