He Led the Children’s Crusade

**Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth (1922-2011)**

Trying to enroll his daughters in an all-white High School in 1957, Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth was attacked by Klansmen with brass knuckles and bicycle chains. The doctor who examined him afterwards was amazed he didn’t have a concussion. Rev. Shuttlesworth said, “Well, doctor, the Lord knew I live in a hard town, so he gave me a hard head.”

That “hard town” was Birmingham, Alabama. After the Rev. Shuttlesworth’s home was bombed on Christmas Day 1956, one of the policemen that arrived on the scene said, “Reverend, if I were you, I’d get out of town fast.” Rev. Shuttlesworth replied, “Officer, you’re not me. You go back and tell your Klan brethren if God could keep me through this, then I’m here for the duration.”

In 1963, Rev. Shuttlesworth persuaded Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to bring the civil rights movement to Birmingham. And in April and May, led by Rev. Shuttlesworth, the city’s African American children and young people took to the streets of Birmingham to demand equality. It became known as “the Children’s Crusade.”

Birmingham’s racist Police Commissioner, Bull Conner unleashed police dogs and turned fire hoses on the young demonstrators. When that didn’t turn them back, the police arrested everyone they could lay their hands upon—more than 2,500 people were jailed, including the children. Rev. Shuttlesworth suffered chest injuries when the high-pressure hoses blasted him. Bull Connor told reporters afterwards, “I wished they’d carried him away in a hearse.”

America was watching it all on the evening network news as the Birmingham police brutalized the young demonstrators. Many people were sickened by what they saw, including President John F. Kennedy, who declared the struggle for civil rights a moral issue, and ordered his aides to draft a civil rights bill, which became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Our nation’s first major civil rights law since Reconstruction was forged in the streets of Birmingham.