

Touring the National Civil Rights Museum



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November 7, 17 -- I really had no idea what to expect. Once I entered the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, it became very clear that it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The museum (as it's informally called) was the last stop on my tour of Atlanta and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolence.

“Our mission is to empower you to take the protection of every human’s rights personally.”

-Center for Civil and Human Rights



The King Center was impressive in its own light—certainly the first and oldest (nearly 50 years) repository of the life and works of Dr. King. But the museum chronicles the breadth of the Civil Rights Era, from 1954 to present day struggles of equality and human rights.

When I approached the civil rights museum, I was struck by the modern architecture, the angled-roof line, floor-to-ceiling walls of windows, and the diversity of people milling around snapping photographs. After paying a reasonable entry fee (senior rate), I walked through the metal detectors, greeted the imposing park rangers, and stared, mouth-gaping, at the oversized-colorful collage of civil rights images and statements of the past and present (see cover photo).

After a couple of minutes, I passed through the entryway to the first exhibit, “Rolls down like Water: The American Civil Rights Movement” gallery. On the right was a massive photo array of black suffrage (the oppressed). On the left was a similar black-and-white collage of white oppressors wearing sheets and carrying torches. The year was 1954, two years before my own birth. It was like entering a time warp. My childhood memories flooded back as I viewed in-your-face- images that screamed “NO COLOREDS ALLOWED,” and “WE WASH FOR WHITES ONLY” on the windows of the neighborhood laundry.

Walking further into the dimly-lit space, I was met with the sound of old news reel playing on antique television sets. The walls of the room were covered with familiar photos of race riots, peaceful protests and little-known, soon-to-be-famous activists. I viewed personal items in the “Voice to the Voiceless: the Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection” gallery, that offered insight into the life a man who changed the world.

On the third floor, I toured the “Spark of Conviction: The Global Human Rights Movement Gallery, curated by Jill Sevitt, where I came fact-to-face with human rights champions, including a gallery of stunning, lifelike portraits by Rossin.

But the exhibit that truly “rocked” me was “The Lunch Counter,” a virtual reality, simulation of the 1960 North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sit-in. I stood in line and waited to be seated at “the lunch counter.” After putting on headphones and closing my eyes, my world was transformed back to the F.W. Woolworth store where four freshmen were not served but stayed until closing. I heard pounding and shoving and curse words in my ears. I cringed as I “felt” people banging on my shoulders with fists. It seemed like it went on for hours, but it lasted all of 90 seconds.

These protests happened all over North Carolina college campuses, which spurred the creation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The students’ bravery in the face of verbal and physical abuse led to integration in many Woolworth stores, way before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Lunch Counter

“This was the most violently attacked sit-in during 1962 and is the most publicized. A huge mob gathered with open police support while the three of us sat there for three hours. I was attacked with fists, brass knuckles and the broken portions of glass sugar containers, and was burned with cigarettes. I’m covered with blood and we were all covered by salt, sugar, mustard, and various other things. “

--Coming of Age in Mississippi

My tour ended (as does this article) with a display of photographs from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination at the Lorraine Motel, his funeral procession where he was carried in a wooden box by a mule and a donkey, and the crushing bombing of four little girls in a church basement. The Center for Civil and Human Rights, located in downtown Atlanta, is an engaging cultural attraction that connects the American Civil Rights Movement to today’s global Human Rights Movements. The museum is number one on my list of must-see historical venues in the country.

