

Transcribed Excerpts from “Since it is my right, I would like to have it: Edna Griffin and the Katz Drug Store Desegregation Movement” Essay from *The Annals of Iowa*, 2008

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... ON JULY 7, 1948, sometime between 2:30 and 5:00 p.m., Edna Griffin, age 39; her infant daughter, Phyllis; John Bibbs, age 22; and Leonard Hudson, age 32, entered Katz Drug Store at the intersection of 7th and Locust streets in Des Moines. While Hudson went to look for some batteries, Griffin and Bibbs took seats at the lunch counter, and a waitress came shortly to take their order. The two African Americans ordered ice cream sundaes, but as the waitress walked toward the ice cream dispenser, a young white man came and whispered a message into her ear. The waitress returned to Griffin and Bibbs and informed the pair that she was not allowed to serve them, because of their race. By that time Hudson had finished purchasing a set of batteries and rejoined his companions. The three adults asked to see the waitress’s supervisor, and she obliged, summoning the young fountain manager, C. L. Gore, a 22-year-old who had come north from Florida just two years earlier. The tenor of that exchange would later be disputed: Griffin, Bibbs, and Hudson claimed that the conversation was hushed and polite; Gore said that the three black patrons were causing a disturbance. What is not disputed is that Griffin and Hudson were unsuccessful in getting any ice cream that day, despite appealing to store manager Maurice Katz. More significantly, Edna Griffin used the incident as the impetus to topple the segregationist policies of the Katz Drug Store chain. Within 18 months, Griffin had mobilized citizens to take action against the chain, launched successful civil and criminal lawsuits against store owner Maurice Katz, and earned vindication when the Katz Drug Store capitulated to African American demands by agreeing to cease all discriminatory policies in December 1949 ...

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Griffin’s efforts to end segregationist policies at Katz Drug Store preceded the efforts of the four young Greensboro students by 12 years, and occurred during a time historian Deborah Gray White describes as marking a turning point in African Americans’ attitudes about how to achieve racial reform. The late 1940s, White argues, saw a transition from upper- and middle-class individuals working toward race progress through high-status social events toward more youth-oriented nonviolent and grassroots movements such as sit-ins and freedom marches. Griffin, though constrained in some ways by her middle-class social status (as the wife of a doctor), was well situated to help usher in this more egalitarian form of social activism...