

# The day the Black Knights led a civil rights protest

What we stand for is sometimes just as important as who we are.

More than 30 years ago a group of 80 kids on their way to represent Kewanee for the first time in national competition staged a spontaneous walkout at a truck stop in Mississippi when two of their members — African Americans — were refused service.

The incident involving the Kewanee Black Knights Junior Drum & Bugle Corps was never reported back home at the time — they were on a bigger mission — but it apparently made a big enough impression on one man who called WKEL's "Open Line" program Friday to tell the story.

The unidentified caller was apparently responding to a list of "This Day in History" events read over the air earlier in the day.



## Around town

Dave Clarke

On Feb. 1, 1960, a group of black Greensboro, N.C., college students began a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in what was to become a milestone in the civil rights movement which you will be hearing about during February which has been designated Black History Month.

The caller incorrectly gave this reporter credit for leading the walk-out. I was there, as publicity director for the corps, but it was actually the kids -- all teenagers from a dozen small communities around Kewanee — who got up and walked out when they saw the waitresses taking their orders for food, but telling Tom Roulds and Marilyn Smith they would have to leave the restaurant.

Looking back, what they did makes me even prouder now of these young people than I was in August of 1970 when they and their parents gained the admiration and support of the entire community in the quest for their dream — to compete for the first time in a national contest.

Working at the radio station at the time, I had gotten on the bandwagon through the arm-twisting of a few adults, like Walt Kubiak and Bill Andrew, and had a few younger friends who were members of the group.

The junior corps was founded around 1966 after the legendary Black Knights, and many other senior corps disbanded in the early 60s. Drum corps is like no other activity in the amount of time, work and stamina that goes into rehearsing music and drill. It takes uncommon dedication and extreme commitment, but being in a drum corps was the experience of a lifetime for most of these kids. Because of the time spent together and teamwork necessary, they

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became an extended family.

The incident along the road in Mississippi hit them out of nowhere. We, in this part of the world in 1970, grew up in was what at least officially an integrated society. There were no separate seating areas for black and white, no separate water fountains with one marked "Colored Only," and in my grade school class, a black child and white child shared the same two-seat desk. No one (at least openly) thought otherwise.

Sure, even in the '70s, blacks in Kewanee who didn't want trouble "knew their place" and there were places they were not welcome to eat or shop, but all of that was unspoken and, for the most part, we knew each other as

friends, classmates and coworkers.

Tom Roulds Jr. and Marilyn Smith, both students at Kewanee High School, were also boyfriend and girlfriend. Tommy played a horn and football, and Marilyn, who had just been voted Miss Congeniality in the queen pageant, carried a flag in the color guard.

They were both well-liked by the rest of the corps and no one thought of them as any different than themselves — until the busses pulled into that Interstate 55 truck stop.

The corps had left Kewanee Aug. 11 on the way to their goal of making it to the VFW Nationals Aug. 18 in Miami Beach, Fla. On the way, they were to compete in three regional contests — two in the New Orleans area and one in Pensacola. It was the first time away from home, and the first major trip for many.

But no amount of distance or hunger could pre-

vent them from rising, en masse, some with food already on the table, and walking back out to the buses when two of them were treated with a rudeness they may have heard about or seen on the TV news, but never experienced firsthand growing up in the north.

I have no idea where Tom or Marilyn are today, but I wonder if they have ever forgotten how 78 kids and about 20 adults, all from white small, rural and blue collar communities, stood up to bigotry when they could have just as easily told the two black kids to go back and sit on the bus.

But they didn't. They were first and foremost Knights — all for one and one for all. The color of their skin mattered not in the least. It's not always the great causes we stand for that make a difference in the world. Sometimes it's something as simple as the right to order a cheeseburger.