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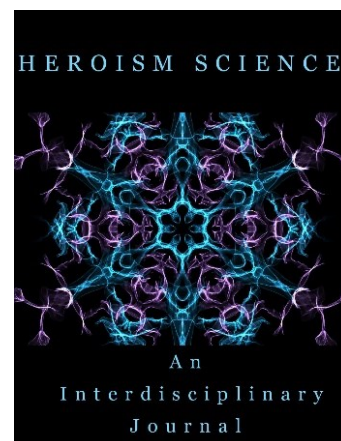
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# Heroes of the Memphis Civil Rights Movement: Maxine A. Smith and Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.



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**ABSTRACT:** Two intertwined leaders of the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in Memphis, Tennessee, were Maxine Atkins Smith and Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., both of whom were African American. Both were born in Memphis in 1929, and they shared commonalities in their personal histories and rose to become key leaders of the Memphis movement. Along with displaying courage and persistence, they were true pioneers in the Black freedom struggle in Memphis and Shelby County who employed organizational skills and community involvement as key to their social activism. This article examines their early activism from the mid-1950s until 1964.

**KEYWORDS:** *Maxine Smith, Russell Sugarmon, Memphis Civil Rights Movement, community involvement, grassroots mobilization*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Smith and Sugarmon were not just leaders; they were what not all leaders are: heroes. A look at a definition of heroism reveals how they meet the criteria. Heroism is a multi-faceted concept that has been defined, discussed, and debated throughout time by scholars, artists, intellectuals, laypeople, and numerous others. Psychologist Scott T. Allison (2024) has reviewed the field and identified key defining features of heroism, several of which apply specifically to Smith and Sugarmon. Allison (2024) describes a hero as having compassion, fortitude, imagination, and humility. Smith and Sugarmon both had a compassionate community outlook and were determined to unite their fellow African Americans against racial discrimination and for social justice. They also had fortitude, which Allison (2024) defines as showing “emotional and physical courage, resilience, competence, and determination” (p. 23). Furthermore, they creatively used their imagination to engage in civil rights and political strategies to better Memphis and Shelby County such as through their organizing work. Finally, they had humility. They were down to earth and recognized that they needed to rely not mainly on themselves but in large part on their community to mobilize for civil rights. And, in fact, Smith had problems with being called a leader, believing that leaders could misuse their position (Smith, 2004).

Born on October 31, 1929, Maxine Atkins Smith grew up in Memphis and graduated from Booker T. Washington High School at age 15 in 1945, which was one of two Black high schools in Memphis. She graduated from Spelman College in Atlanta in 1949 with a bachelor’s degree in biology with honors; she remembered meeting Martin Luther King, Jr., there when he was a sixteen-year-old student at Morehouse and that he studied all the time (Hoppe & Speck, 2015). Because the state of Tennessee did not want Black students in its white colleges and universities, it paid for her tuition and travel so that she could receive her

graduate education at Middlebury in Vermont (Hoppe & Speck, 2015). In 1950, she received her Master of Arts degree there in French.

In 1953, Smith married Vasco Smith who was to become a partner in her civil rights activism, and she accompanied him while he was in the service at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois not far from St. Louis. They returned to Memphis in 1955 and never left. They immediately looked for the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People branch and became members (Smith, 2000a). After she unsuccessfully tried to integrate Memphis State (now the University of Memphis) in 1957, she became a member of the NAACP board and quickly became its membership chair and voter registration coordinator. She was a full-time volunteer for the Memphis NAACP, and she coordinated the Black community's 20-month direct-action movement of 1960 and 1961. Smith became executive secretary of the NAACP branch in 1961, a position that she held until 1996. The chapter was consistently recognized as the most outstanding branch in the country (DeCosta-Willis, 2008). Smith was elected to the Memphis School Board in 1971 and served until 1995. She remained active in civil rights matters for years after then. No one was more associated with the modern civil rights movement in Memphis, Tennessee. She passed away in 2013 at age 83.

Born on May 11, 1929, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., attended Booker T. Washington High School at the same time as Smith. He graduated at age 15. He was kicked out of Morehouse College for some mischief after attending for a year, a sign of his rebelliousness to come in challenging the system with his civil rights and political work (Sugarmon, 2000). He met Martin Luther King, Jr., there, who was a year ahead of him (Sugarmon, 2000). Also, in a sign of his future savviness as a leader and political strategist, he told his father his true reasons for leaving Morehouse after he graduated Rutgers University, which he attended next, from 1946 to 1950, earning his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in 1950

(Sugarmon, 2000; DeCosta-Willis, 2008). He graduated with honors (Burgess, 2019). Like what happened with Maxine Smith, the state of Tennessee paid his tuition, transportation, and fees to attend Harvard Law School, where he received an LL.D. degree in 1953 (Sugarmon, 2000). Sugarmon then served two years in the Army, receiving a letter of commendation for his nine-month tour of duty for Japan. Upon his discharge in 1955, he married Miriam DeCosta, and, using the G.I. Bill, he completed a year of graduate study at Boston University in finance, figuring that this was useful information when he returned to Memphis if they had economic development work going on in addition to civil rights activism (Sugarmon, 2000).

Sugarmon returned to Memphis with his wife, who went by the name of Laurie, in 1956. They immediately became involved in the city's NAACP branch (DeCosta-Willis, 1991). Sugarmon also joined the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs, the Black civic club association (Sugarmon, 2000). He opened a law office and became active in politics as well. He represented the NAACP branch on several major desegregation cases (DeCosta-Willis, 2008). In 1959, he ran for the most powerful city position that an African American had sought up to that point in the twentieth century in Memphis and Shelby County when he ran for public works commissioner; he came in second. Following that election, he revitalized the Shelby County Democratic Club, the Black Democratic organization, and served as its executive director (DeCosta-Willis, 2008; Sugarmon, 2000). He expanded the organization statewide in 1962 by co-founding the Tennessee Voters Council, and he won election in 1966 as a state representative, serving until 1968. In 1967, he was a founding partner of the first integrated law firm in the city and the state, Ratner, Sugarmon, Lucas & Willis (DeCosta-Willis, 2008). His first marriage ended in divorce, and he married Regina Spence, a white woman, in 1968. Their interracial marriage, which caused a stir in the city, occurred just months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr. in racially fraught Memphis and came a year after the Supreme Court ruled bans on interracial marriage unconstitutional (Cohen, 2024). In 1987, Sugarmon became General Sessions Court Judge for Division Four, and he retired from the bench in 2006. He died in 2019 at age 89.

## 2 SMITH AND SUGARMON AS COURAGEOUS PIONEERS

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Smith and Sugarmon were part of a new cadre of leaders, including A. W. Willis, Jr., H. T. Lockard, and Jesse Turner Sr., all of whom were African American, who were pioneering and injected new life into the Black freedom struggle in Memphis in the mid-1950s (Green, 2007; Hoppe & Speck, 2015; Smith, 2000c). They were emboldened by the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which ruled school segregation unconstitutional and overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 with its infamous "separate but equal" clause; they were determined to make real *Brown's* promises. Smith remembered about *Brown*, "It was like the Emancipation Proclamation to us. It was just that important" (Downing, 1994, p. 1B). She recalled that when she and her husband returned to the city in 1955 there had been no movement made to comply with *Brown* (Smith, 2000a). These leaders had more freedom for their activism than past leaders because of the death of longtime Memphis machine boss Edward H. Crump in 1954, who had maintained a firm clutch on the city and county for decades (Dowdy, 2006; Gritter, 2014). Lockard assumed presidency of the Memphis NAACP branch in 1955 and headed its legal committee; its lawyers filed lawsuits for desegregation in the 1950s (Green, 2007; Hoppe & Speck, 2015; Lockard, 2000; see also Brown-Nagin, 2011). Maxine and Vasco Smith, Sugarmon, Willis, and Turner were all active in the NAACP and involved in political work and formulating strategies (DeCosta-Willis, 2008; Sugarmon, 2000; Smith, 2000b; Smith, 2000c). In the 1950s, they saw legal and political action as the two prongs of their movement, and, when the

sit-ins hit in 1960, direct action was added as the third prong (Sugarmon, 2000; Smith, 2000a).

In 1957, Smith and Laurie Sugarmon were pioneering in two significant ways. First, they joined the ranks of those who sought to desegregate schools in the mid twentieth century; most were female (Devlin, 2018; see also Clinton & Clinton, 2019; Hutchinson, 2007; Bacher, 2018). At the time, all Memphis schools at all levels were segregated. Laurie Sugarmon recruited Smith to desegregate graduate education at Memphis State. They were rejected despite Smith's and Sugarmon's educational qualifications. Laurie Sugarmon was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Wellesley. Second, because of that experience, the Memphis NAACP branch recruited them to serve on the board. In an oral history interview forty-three years later, Smith did not think that any women were on the board at that time (2000a). Smith was further a trailblazer four years later when she assumed a key leadership role of the branch in becoming its executive secretary after serving as a full-time volunteer for it. It was unusual in the modern civil rights movement for a woman to be a formal leader and recognized as such at a time in which men such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were typically in these positions, although women made up "in many people's views, the backbone of the demonstrations" throughout the South (Greene, 2005, p. 102). To be sure, Smith and Sugarmon were courageous in attempting to integrate Memphis State. As Ryan Holiday (2021) writes in his book on courage, "Courage forces us to ask, 'If not now, when?' and 'If not me, then who?' It pushes us to be bold" (p. 237). Smith and Sugarmon boldly stepped up by taking it upon themselves to desegregate the school.

Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., was a pioneer when he made the most major bid for public office of any African American locally up to that point in the twentieth century when he ran for public works commissioner in 1959. He would have become one of the five most powerful city officials. Unlike most other places in the South at that time where African

Americans were disenfranchised, African Americans had a long history of voting in Memphis because of machine politics, skilled Black leadership, grassroots mobilization, and less restrictive statewide conditions (Gritter, 2014). Sugarmon ran as part of the “Volunteer Ticket,” which consisted of four African Americans running for public office locally. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Memphis to speak on their behalf as did Daisy Bates, the leader of the Little Rock Nine who desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. More than a campaign, it was a civil rights effort. The Black community mobilized on their behalf while the white community rallied against them. All the Black candidates came in second in an election with record turnout. “We won everything but the election,” Sugarmon told the press (Palmer, 1959, p. 1). Sugarmon (2000) later explained, “It was a democratic activity. There were more people expressing themselves than ever. What we won was a politicized group who didn’t want to stop” (pp. 13-14). Indeed, after the election, Sugarmon and other leaders restructured the Shelby County Democratic Club into a precinct-based organization and thus revitalized it. It and the NAACP were the most powerful civil rights organizations in Memphis. They used the energy and mobilization employed in 1959 to fuel future political work (Sugarmon, 2000).

Both Smith and Sugarmon demonstrated courage in their civil rights and political activities, which were intertwined. In addition to her other activities, Smith was a member of the Shelby County Democratic Club (DeCosta-Willis, 2008). Smith did not cower when she received rape threats late at night over the phone when she tried to integrate Memphis State (Smith, 2000a). Similarly, death threats that she and her husband faced because of their activism did not stop them (Smith, 2000c). Smith and Sugarmon operated at a time in which civil rights activists were being killed, beaten, and harassed for their work not to mention that Memphis was just north of Mississippi, the worst state in the United States when it came to race relations. Sugarmon himself was shot at when a bullet was fired into the car that he



shared with two other attorneys and a minister in 1963 after they traveled to Fayette County, a nearby rural county with a nationally known voting rights movement, when they sought the release of those who had sat in (Mitchell, 2019). He was not injured but two of his companions were cut by flying glass (Mitchell, 2019). When Sugarmon ran for public office in 1959, he faced death threats and harassing phone calls (Wright, 2000; “Can Memphis,” 1959). Yet, he persisted in his activism. Smith and Sugarmon epitomized what Holiday (2021) writes about courage: “It is essential that we understand that courage is more than just the stand . . . . One then has to *walk* that hard road” (p. 92; see also Brinson, 2020; Lewis, 1999; Abrams & Gray, 2022; Horowitz & Theoharis, 2021).

### **3 SMITH AND SUGARMON’S COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT, GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS**

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As leaders, Smith and Sugarmon relied on community involvement and grassroots mobilization as well as organizational skills, all of which were intertwined. In doing so, they shared a “power-with” leadership style, where “empowerment stems from a collective sense of community and stands against unconnected individualism” (Terry, 1993, p. 34). Smith’s NAACP work, both initially as a full-time volunteer and then as NAACP executive secretary, as well as her partisan political activism depended on this. Sugarmon’s 1959 campaign and subsequent political work heavily relied on this as well. In addition, leadership and membership of the NAACP, Shelby County Democratic Club, and the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs overlapped, giving both leaders an organizational network to tap into and providing coherence and unity in the Black community (Smith, 2000b). Furthermore, Smith and Sugarmon’s own activism in organizations led to their civil rights leadership. This has not been unique for African American leadership. Political scientists Ronald W. Walter and Robert C. Smith (1999) wrote in their study on Black leadership:

Since the 1930s there has been remarkable stability in the structure of Black

organizations, at the local level in particular, which is of course important to any community's leadership. These organizations, whether civil rights, civic, religious, or professional, have traditionally contributed to the leadership class of the Black community at the local level (p. 251).

Early on, as membership chair of the NAACP branch, Smith along with community members, including Lorene Thomas, the wife of the famous singer Rufus Thomas, did the groundwork that led the chapter to become the South's largest NAACP branch in 1961 (Wilkins, 1961). Activists of the modern civil rights movement often drew on pre-existing resources for mobilization, and the same occurred in Memphis (Morris, 1986; Greene, 2005). For instance, Memphis NAACP workers utilized the ward and precinct people, the civic clubs, neighborhoods, and churches for recruiting members (Smith, 2000a). Smith (2000a) remembered:

I guess during that first or second year, if we had 300, we went from 300 to five thousand, five or six thousand and a few years later, over 10,000. That's not a lot of people, but that was the biggest branch in the South . . . . People were just in the midst of the most exciting thing that had happened in Memphis. There was a ray of hope that we would get out from under the yoke of complete discrimination and racism . . . . It was a matter of love and wanting to go somewhere, tired of the old status quo (p. 25).

In her book on minority leadership, politician Stacey Abrams (2018) writes, "Wielding power demands we use the resources at hand . . . . We can become conditioned to believe . . . that whatever we have at hand is inherently inferior. The creative ability of minority leaders lies in excavating the valuable in what is available" (p. 157). Society deemed Memphis's segregated community inferior, but Smith did not internalize this belief and drew on community resources for her activism.

Smith became voter registration coordinator for the branch in 1957 under the tutelage of W. C. Patton, a national official for the NAACP who operated out of the Memphis office of the NAACP and was a regional director for political action. As with her membership work, she utilized existing organizations for voter registration and education drives (Smith, 2000a). Smith (2000a) remembered:

We knocked on doors. We went through churches. We went, but the precincts gave us the neighborhood structure, and it also included organizations. Churches were given a program. Greek letter organizations were a group. Everybody was given a goal and a program. We had very active civic clubs in those days that had the same sort of structure in a sense, as a precinct club, that the political group had. They were neighborhood-oriented, so we had two shots at the same neighborhood, which one may not have been inclusive of all but close enough. We had labor organizations.

We used everything that was organized with a big percent of Black citizens (p. 7).

Smith (2000a) further recalled that when she and her husband returned to Memphis in 1955 that fewer than ten thousand African Americans were registered to vote in the city and the county. Because of the work of Smith and other African Americans, Black voter registration numbers reached more than 60,000 by 1960 (Jalenak, 1961). Smith's voter registration activism continued into the 1960s and beyond. Patton (1994) remembered that the Memphis chapter was one of his top branches for voter registration work.

Smith threw her energy behind Sugarmon when he ran for political office in 1959. She (2000a) recalled that she engaged in voter registration, education, and participation work on behalf of the campaign. In addition, she served as co-chair of the Volunteer Ticket Youth Committee, which played an important and unprecedented role in the election and further attests to her emphasis on community mobilization ("Freedom Rally," 1959). Laurie Sugarmon directed the committee ("Volunteer Ticket," 1959; "Freedom Rally," 1959).

Composed of more than 100 youth, it provided a venue for those too young to vote to participate in the campaign; the voting age was 21 at the time (“Youth Committee Busy,” 1959). The Youth Volunteers were scheduled to engage in various tasks in support of the Black candidates: distributing campaign literature and urging Black Memphians to vote for the candidates, holding rallies and marches, and organizing a motorcade on Election Day through African American areas (“Youths to Parade,” 1959; “Youth Committee Busy,” 1959). They conducted an “enthusiastic rally” at Mt. Olive Cathedral, the church of Volunteer Ticket candidate Rev. Henry C. Bunton, where Volunteer office seekers delivered “inspiring addresses” (“Youths to Parade,” p. 3; see also New York Public Library Archives & Manuscripts, 1992). Perhaps most significantly, they served as campaign cheerleaders--they provided a youthful enthusiasm and energy that added to the momentum of the crusade (Williams, 1959).

When he ran for public office in 1959, Sugarmon himself and the other candidates relied extensively on community involvement and mobilization as well as organizing skills. Both men and women played significant roles in the campaign. Smith and Laurie Sugarmon were unique in taking on more formal leadership roles whereas most women in the campaign engaged in grassroots, behind-the-scenes roles (Sugarmon, 2004; Smith, 2004). Women’s work faced opposition. For instance, after Black women finished typing canvassing lists of the registered Black voters, their work was stolen (Sugarmon, 2000). Volunteer Ticket workers had obtained a list of all the registrants from the Election Commission, which identified voters by race and gave their address (R. B. Sugarmon, Jr., personal communication, February 9, 2005). Using cutting-edge technology at Universal Life Insurance Company, a prominent Black-owned insurance company, these women spent two weeks working day and night to type the canvassing lists and ordered them alphabetically by streets within thirty-six precincts (Sugarmon, 2000; R. B. Sugarmon, Jr., personal

communication, February 9, 2005). After they got that done, the Volunteer workers moved the lists to the campaign headquarters on Beale Street and within a couple days they were gone (Sugarmon, 2000). Somebody or some people had broken in through a window and only taken them (“Campaign Office Burglarized,” 1959). Police said and Sugarmon agreed that it was an inside job (“Registration List Missing,” 1959; R. B. Sugarmon, Jr., personal communication, February 9, 2005). Sugarmon called the stolen material “the unspectacular heart of any campaign” (“Registration List Missing,” 1959, p. 1). Deciding that the lists would take too long to re-type, the campaign workers subsequently contacted people door to door and through the campaign’s telephone committee (R. B. Sugarmon, Jr., personal communication, February 9, 2005). They solicited Black Memphians to contact their neighbors in order to garner support for the Volunteer Ticket (R. B. Sugarmon, Jr., personal communication, February 9, 2005). As a result, the effort to reach voters snowballed because they reached them through personal contact and not mechanical cold calls (R. B. Sugarmon, Jr., personal communication, February 9, 2005).

To help keep the momentum of the effort going after the 1959 campaign, Sugarmon and other Black leaders restructured and therefore revitalized the Shelby County Democratic Club, the Black Democratic organization in Memphis and Shelby County. Relying on the community, both men and women, it became a precinct-based organization with precinct clubs, and it became one of the most powerful Black organizations in Memphis as the club’s efforts were aimed to improve conditions for African Americans. It endorsed candidates, and its leaders and members campaigned for candidates. The decision-making process of the association relied on the precinct leaders from each precinct club who made up the central committee (Sugarmon, 2000). Sugarmon (2000) explained that they set up the organization as follows: “The central committee would be responsible for electing county-wide officers of the club, and the central committee would be responsible for determining what issues should

be raised in elections and screen candidates to decide and endorse who we supported by vote” (p. 14).

#### **4 THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF SMITH AND SUGARMON’S EFFORTS**

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The Shelby County Political Club was immediately effective and recognized as powerful. Maxine Smith and her husband were volunteers for the club (DeCosta-Willis, 2008). The next election year, 1960, thirty-five to forty precincts were organized (Sugarmon, 2000). For the 1960 county election, Sugarmon and other Black leaders negotiated with politicians who were former Crump officials and mostly segregationists in order to gain civil rights measures and jobs for Black Memphians in exchange for votes (Sugarmon, 2000; Wright, 1962; Jalenak, 1961). As a result, “For Whites Only” and “Colored” signs were taken down from public facilities and more than forty African Americans were appointed to political jobs in Memphis including the first Black deputy sheriffs (Sugarmon, 2000; Wright, 1962). This move shifted the dynamics from Black support being the “kiss of death” to being necessary for getting any viable campaign going (Sugarmon, 2000, p. 31). That same year, Jesse H. Turner, Sr., received *New York Times* coverage when he became the first African American to win a spot on the local Democrat Party executive committee since Reconstruction (“Memphis Democrats,” 1960).

Recognizing the power of the Memphis Black vote, campaign manager Robert F. Kennedy met with Sugarmon and A. W. Willis, Jr., to win their support for his brother in 1960, and he called the local Democratic Party headquarters on election night to find out the returns of the Black precincts (Sugarmon, 2000; Jalenak, 1961). Black Memphians cast nearly 73 percent of their votes for John F. Kennedy, a dramatic switch from the previous presidential election in which 57 percent had backed Dwight D. Eisenhower (Jalenak, 1961).

In appreciation, Kennedy administration officials sent inauguration invitations to the Democrat club precinct leaders (Sugarmon, 2000; see also Gritter, 2018).

By 1961, the Democratic club had become the largest and the most influential Black political organization in the city, consisting of sixty-five precinct clubs with some including as many as one hundred members (Gritter, 2018). In 1962, Sugarmon, Willis, and other leaders expanded their political organization statewide by forming the Tennessee Voters Council, which mobilized African Americans as a force in senatorial, gubernatorial, and presidential races. Sugarmon and other Black leaders continued to rely on their emphasis on organizational skills and community mobilization for the Tennessee Voters Council. For instance, they compiled a list of all the Black barbers and beauticians in the state to help recruit them when they organized the council (Sugarmon, 2000; see also Gill, 2010; Greene, 2005; Slate, 2022).

The 1964 election signified the high-water mark for the Tennessee Voters Council and the Shelby County Democrat Club. The Tennessee Voters Council provided the structure for the Black vote to help provide crucial votes to turn the state for the senatorial candidate in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and provided the balance of power for President Johnson to win the state (Parks, 1966; Smith, 2004; SNCC, 1964). Locally, Black Memphians cast 99 percent of their ballots for Democratic candidates, which resulted in the defeat of the entire Republican slate that espoused the Barry Goldwater philosophy, the Republican presidential candidate who had voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (“Analysis of,” ca. 1964). They put in office an all-Democratic delegation to the state legislature as well as ousted the incumbent Congressman in favor of one supportive of integration and social welfare liberalism (“Analysis of,” [1964]; Parks, 1966). The election of A. W. Willis, Jr., to the Tennessee General Assembly and H. T. Lockard to the Shelby County Quarterly Court (now the Shelby County Board of Commissioners) marked the first

time that African Americans had won state and city or county positions from the area since Reconstruction (DeCosta-Willis, 2008). In this time before the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black voter registration was higher in Tennessee than anywhere in the South, with some 70 percent of eligible African Americans on the rolls, and 95,000 registrants in Memphis (Parks, 1966). All these achievements prior to 1965 had been made possible in part by the leadership of Smith and Sugarmon, who had spearheaded political action efforts through their acumen at community mobilization and organizing strategies.

## **5 THE DIRECT-ACTION MOVEMENT IN MEMPHIS AND THE PERSEVERANCE OF SMITH AND SUGARMON**

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While Smith and Sugarmon engaged in formal political work, they also became highly involved in the direct-action movement in Memphis. On February 1, 1960, four young African American men in Greensboro, North Carolina, kicked off the sit-in movement that swept the South. The sit-in movement came to Memphis on March 18, 1960, when several young African Americans sat-in at a downtown five-and-ten cent store (Westin, 1964). They departed before being arrested (Westin, 1964). The next day, twenty-three Black students were arrested for sitting in at the main branch at the local public library (Westin, 1964). A member of the NAACP branch's legal committee, Sugarmon immediately defended the students who sat in and proceeded to over the course of what became a twenty-month direct-action movement, which Maxine Smith coordinated (Sugarmon, 2000; Smith, 2000a). The movement was led by the Memphis NAACP and its Youth Council (Current 1962). African Americans of all economic and educational levels picketed Main Street while conducting a boycott of its businesses (Sugarmon, 2000; Smith, 2000a; Smith, 2000b; Smith, 2004).

Both Smith and Sugarmon and the African American community displayed perseverance in engaging in the movement for twenty long months, similar to how African



Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, had waged their bus boycott for 381 long days following Rosa Parks's arrest the previous decade. During the direct-action movement, buses and the zoo were desegregated (Westin, 1964). The movement was called off in November 1961 after the Memphis NAACP successfully negotiated with downtown merchants to desegregate eating facilities (Current 1962). Following their agreement, in February 1962, downtown lunch counters and restaurants were desegregated (Current 1962). The *New York Times* reported in April 1964 that Memphis had "made more progress toward desegregation with less strife than any other major city in the Deep South" (Herbers, 1964, p. 45). By this time, schools had integrated as well. All this progress came in Memphis before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law, which made discrimination in public accommodations unlawful.

## 6 CONCLUSION

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Maxine A. Smith and Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., displayed pioneering leadership, courage, and perseverance in their civil rights and political efforts, which were intertwined. As leaders, they knew that they had to rely on community mobilization in their efforts, and they employed astute organizational skills in doing so. Both these heroes remain underrecognized in civil rights movement scholarship, history, and memory although Sugarmon more so than Smith. An authorized biography was published on Smith in 2007, but she is still not a well-known female leader of the Black freedom struggle outside of Memphis (Hoppe & Speck, 2015; see Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2001; Bell, 2018; Ling & Monteith, 2004; Robnett, 1997; Dierenfield & White, 2012). Both were honored in their lifetimes, again with Smith receiving greater recognition than Sugarmon. Among other recognitions, Smith received honorary degrees from Spelman and LeMoyne-Owen College. Honored alongside former President Bill Clinton, she also received the National Civil Rights

Museum's Freedom Award. It is undeniable that Smith and Sugarmon had an impact on countless lives in their efforts for a better Memphis, a better South, a better country, and a better world. And, their heroic efforts should be better known for posterity. To be sure, Smith and Sugarmon were outspoken at times, but they were heroic in quiet, unseen ways as well. As Holiday (2021) writes, "History is written with blood, sweat, and tears, and it is etched into eternity by the quiet endurance of courageous people" (p. xxii).

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## 8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*