A Long, Hard MARCH

"Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote."

President Lyndon B. Johnson, March 15, 1965

Today, every time an African American citizen votes in an election, Joanne Bland and Lynda Lowery have a reason to smile. In a large part it's thanks to them and the many thousands of other people who marched for equal voting rights in the 1960s that African Americans can vote freely today.

Joanne and Lynda are sisters from Selma, Alabama. When they were young girls, African Americans living in the South were frequently prevented from voting. They were beaten, forced to take difficult tests, and made to pay fees when they tried to vote. This violated the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which states that a person cannot be

Often, police officers enforced unfair voting practices.

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The Selma marchers on their way to Montgomery

As used here, a **march** is an organized public walk by a group of people for a specific cause or issue. Often, marchers are protesting something they believe is unfair. When they arrive at their destination, marchers often continue their protest with speeches, chants, and songs.

denied the right to vote because of the color of his or her skin. During the 1960s, many Americans protested the violation of African Americans' rights.

On March 7, 1965, 15-year-old Lynda and 11-year-old Joanne began to **march** with 600 people to Alabama's capital city of Montgomery. After only six blocks, they were attacked by 200 police officers with tear gas and nightsticks. (Tear gas irritates the eyes and nose and makes people cough. Nightsticks are wooden clubs sometimes used by police officers.)

Lynda remembers how the tear gas caused blinding tears and burned her nose. She panicked. She was running for safety when a police officer grabbed her and hit her in the face and head with his nightstick. Somehow, she managed to find Joanne and get to safety. Later, she needed 24 stitches to sew up her wounds. That terrible day became known as Bloody Sunday.

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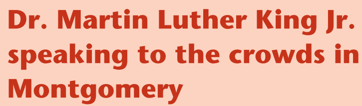
Just a few weeks later, on March 21, more than 3,000 people set out from Selma to march to Montgomery. People had come from all over the country to take part in the march. This time, the marchers were protected by military police. Joanne participated in that march, and Lynda walked the entire 54 miles to Montgomery. She and the other marchers walked 12 miles a day—sometimes in the rain—and slept in tents at night.

By the time they reached Montgomery five days later, 25,000 people had joined the march for equal voting rights for African Americans. They were met by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a powerful civil rights leader and Baptist minister.

When Lynda reached Montgomery, she felt that she had really accomplished something. She had feared for her safety throughout the march, but she kept going. Five months later, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It prohibits all unfair voting practices due to race and color.

Joanne has kept memories of the march alive by becoming the director and one of the founders of the Voting Rights Museum in Selma. She says that the purpose of the museum is "to teach the younger generation the awesome things that ordinary people can do."

Adapted from an article by Chris Graf



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking to the crowds in Montgomery

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