

Jonathan Daniels for Kids

Jonathan Daniels worked to help oppressed black families in Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement.

When did he do this? 1965

How old was he? 26 years old

Jonathan Myrick Daniels

Born: March 20, 1939 in Keene, New Hampshire

Died: August 20, 1965 in Hayneville, Alabama

Biography

What was Jonathan Daniels known for?

In 1965, Jonathan Daniels answered Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for people of all faiths to travel to Alabama to participate in the Civil Rights Movement, fighting for the equal treatment of black Americans living in the south.

Growing up in Keene

Jonathan Daniels was born in Keene, NH on March 20, 1939. His father was a popular doctor in town and his mother was a teacher. The family lived on Summer Street and Daniels went to grade school in his neighborhood, the Tilden School. He loved to play with friends and go sledding. Each Sunday, he and his family went to church at the First Congregational Church.

As a teenager, Daniels became very interested in theater, playing music, writing, and religion. His friends remember that he was always kind to everyone. Daniels was often the first person to protect another student who wasn't being treated fairly.

During high school, Daniels decided that he needed more discipline in his life. He changed his religion to Episcopalian and became a member of the St. James Episcopal Church in Keene. He also decided to go to military school after high school.

Before he joined the Civil Rights Movement

In 1961, Jonathan Daniels graduated first in his class from the Virginia Military Institute. He thought often about what kind of job he wanted to do in the future. Finally, Daniels came to realize that he was called to serve God and help people; he wanted to become a minister. He became a student at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Martin Luther King & Bloody Sunday

Jonathan Daniels was in school to become a minister on March 7, 1965 when he saw something terrible on the television. Dr. Martin Luther King, John Lewis and about 600 civil rights marchers were attacked by Alabama police officers with billy clubs and tear gas. They had been marching from the town of Selma to the state capital in Montgomery to protest injustice towards black people in Alabama. News cameras were there to videotape the violence. Martin Luther King called on clergy of all faiths to come to Alabama and join him in the fight for the fair treatment of all people. Jonathan and his friend Judy Upham left immediately to go offer their help.

Jonathan's Work in the Civil Rights Movement

Jonathan Daniels traveled to Alabama in 1965 to assist Civil Rights leaders with voter registration efforts in the South, because people of color were not yet able to vote freely. Daniels joined other civil rights activists in marches and demonstrations for voter rights in the South. He also worked to end poverty and to integrate local Episcopal churches. He believed he had found what God wanted him to be doing— helping to end injustice.

Jonathan Daniels is jailed

In August 1965, Jonathan Daniels and priest Father Richard Morrisroe were asked to help a group of young people who were peacefully demonstrating for equal justice in the town of Fort Deposit, Alabama. This region of Alabama was known as one of the most racist, and most dangerous, places at the time. Daniels was arrested along with 22 others. They were taken to the county jail in nearby Hayneville in the back of a garbage truck.

Jonathan wrote letters home to his family and friends describing the terrible the conditions in the jail during that hot August week. His mother feared for his safety, especially on August 20th when her son did not call home to wish her a happy birthday. Daniels had never missed her birthday. What Mrs. Daniels did not know is that her son, Father Morrisroe, and a group of student activists had been suddenly released from jail that day.

How did Jonathan Daniels die?

Shortly after being released from jail on August 20, 1965, Jonathan Daniels, Father Morrisroe, and a few of the young activists went to a nearby store to buy sodas. Included in the group were Gloria Larry, Joyce Bailey, Jimmy Rogers, and Ruby Sales. They were met on the steps of the store by Tom Coleman, a construction worker and part-time deputy sheriff, who was carrying a shotgun. Coleman aimed his gun at 16-year-old Ruby Sales; Daniels pushed her to the ground in order to protect her, saving her life.

The shotgun blast killed Daniels instantly; Coleman then shot at Father Morrisroe who was seriously wounded. Gloria Larry remembers running through the neighborhood knocking on doors to beg for help. Nobody answered their screams. After a long while, an ambulance came to take both Daniels and Fr. Morrisroe. The students waited in town for friends to come find them, while also fearing for their own safety.

The Trial

News of the shooting was reported on televisions and radios across the country. Civil Rights leaders and the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, were also informed that day. When he heard of the tragedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "One of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels."

At Coleman's trial, an all-white jury found him not guilty, saying he acted in self-defense after Coleman claimed that Daniels had a knife, though no weapon was ever found. A year later Coleman said in a CBS interview that he had no regrets, declaring "I would shoot them both tomorrow."

Jonathan Daniels death and the deaths of those who supported civil rights helped awaken the country to the continued violence against those who peacefully fought for civil rights and against discrimination.

How is Jonathan remembered today

In the years since his death, Daniels' selfless act has been recognized in many ways. Five books have been written about his life, and a film was produced in 1999. A Daniels memorial has been built in Hayneville, Alabama, and a limestone sculpture of Daniels has been created inside the Washington National Cathedral.

People in the Episcopal Church who had stayed silent on civil rights became more outspoken. Today the Episcopal Church honors Jonathan Daniels every year on August 14, the day he became arrested, and Daniels name is among the fifteen honored in the Chapel of Martyrs in England's Canterbury Cathedral. In his hometown of Keene, a school is named after him and a mural is painted on the wall near the church he attended.