

Gwendolyn Harris-Middlebrooks – “Fox Theatre”

A young man came to the house and asked my family, my mother if he could take me out, and he took me to a movie. He thought he was taking me to a nice movie and a nice place; took me to the Fox Theatre. When I got home my dad asked, "Well, how was the movie?" I said, "Fine." "What did you see?" When I told him, he said, "That's not playing at the Royal Theatre. Where did you go?" I said, "Fox Theatre." He screamed and yelled; "You went to a segregated theatre." Well my dad was very upset. He said, "Only Negroes sit up there. You were in a segregated theatre. You couldn't go in the front door." I was really stunned. The young man had gone home of course, and didn't hear all of that, and I knew he -- and my mother intervened and said, "Well he was trying to take her somewhere nice." He said, "Well you are never to go to that theatre again." And I didn't. Until I was, I was a student at Spellman, it was so funny. I was determined to go back to that theatre. And there was a woman from India who was teaching at Spelman and it was her last year. There were only six of us in her class, six young ladies, and she said this was her last year. We got together and decided we wanted to do something special. We wanted to take her to dinner, and we'll take her to a movie. So we asked her about it and she said yes. So we decided we were going to the Fox Theatre, and we convinced her that -- we did like her a lot -- that we loved her so much we wanted to take her to the Fox Theatre and we wanted to wear some of her clothes.

So we dressed in her outfits, you know with our, pulled our hair back as tight and as straight as we could get it, put a little red dot right there -- I remember we laughed as we tried to get the red dot right -- and walked right in the front door of the Fox Theatre. I don't remember what played. We laughed the whole time. And it was so much fun to go to concessions because we pretended we couldn't speak English. When we got ready to pay to get in we asked her to pay for us, you know, we gave her the money. It was so funny. And we sat right down front with everybody else. So people of color who weren't Negroes could go in the front door of Fox Theatre but we couldn't; but we could when we were dressed in her beautiful clothes. We talk about that now; that was a fun evening. She never knew. We never told her because she didn't know that we couldn't go in, because she could go in. But we knew we couldn't go in unless we wore the same clothes that she wore. She never suspected. She was in Atlanta, Georgia, enjoying all of the privileges that white people enjoyed, even though she was from India and her skin was darker than mine. But because her hair was straight and she wore different clothing, she could go in places that I couldn't go.

Gwendolyn Harris-Middlebrooks– “Capitol Building”

We went inside of the capitol, in the basement. And it was packed. There were so many people. We had to squeeze through them; went in absolutely unnoticed. And in order that no two women would end up in a police car alone, we made a decision before we left campus that we were always supposed to alternate a male, a female, a male, a female, in the line. So that's the way went in. And of course, we went in, went right into the cafeteria. And there was no one in there. We never expected to eat. And of course we got in; when we walked in we expected to be thrown out. But the white lady who was the cashier was counting the money. You could hear her jiggling; she was counting. And there were three black ladies behind the area where the food was located and food was packaged. And we stopped; we didn't know what to do because here we were in there and nobody was throwing us out. And they motioned for us to come on. The ladies started telling us to come on. The cafeteria lady did, the black, the Negroes who were back there. And we went up and you know, the people who were n front of me were kind of picking, and she started shoving food, looking at the lady at the cash register and shoving food. And so we just got anything. I have no idea what I put on my tray. And all of us suddenly had trays with food and we were moving down the line, and she still hadn't noticed us. And the first man in our group was an albino. He was as light in color as you are. And he gave her his money and she took it, and never looked at him in the face. And when the next person extended her hand, she screamed, jumped off the bench and she said, "They're here! They're here! Lock the door, lock the door! Don't let them out!" I don't know why she would want to do that. So we stood there for a while at the counter, then we took our food and were sitting at the table. And since we were trying to follow instructions, they hadn't told us to eat because they didn't think we'd get food. We were sitting there. Finally Rev. Moss said, "I think we need to eat because this probably will be the last meal we get today." So we ate. And as we ate, the entire wall of the cafeteria was glass. People were walking by, looking at us. Over and over again they just paraded by, looking at us. And finally they came in and asked us to come out. They decided to arrest us.

Gwendolyn Harris-Middlebrooks – “Protest and Arrest”

They decided to arrest us. And we went out single file, man, lady; male, female. And I was aware that someone else was coming in behind me; it was Otis Moss, Jr. And we were riding silently. We circled the block a long time in those police cars, and they were talking on the walkie--- two officers were in the front talking to each other, and then they were radioing back and forth; we could hear what was happening at the other restaurants. Then, all of a sudden, I was aware of Otis speaking. And the officers had been just talking and joking. And he was reading the, he reached in his pocket and pulled out a Bible, and he was reading the 23rd Psalm. And the officers stopped talking. They stopped talking when he was reading. And I said wow, they've got a sense of value. I remember thinking that they're nice guys, I remember thinking that. They stopped talking while he was reading the 23rd Psalm, and they never spoke to each other again. And we got to, they were very polite when we got to the police station, and they said would you get out, and we got out. They were very polite. I said, “wow, they have manners.” He was reading from the Bible and they stopped talking. Not at all. And maybe it was numbers, maybe it was numbers. I didn't know Otis. I knew his name, because he was introduced. And actually I knew his wife and didn't know she was married to him. During the day while we were in jail, I found out, Your wife is a friend of mine! Because he started talking about his wife and we were chatting, there were a lot of people there but we were talking and sharing, and we were congratulating each other because we had been well mannered and there had not been any violence. And people did not talk and joke; we were serious, we let them know that this is, we're not playing. This is very serious. This needs to be done. And to get a group of people to do that, to dress appropriately, last-minute notice, to be well mannered, to be quiet. Even in the jail cell, the big holding cell, people were polite. And though we hugged each other and congratulated each other it was quiet politeness, it was not all this boisterous screaming and yelling. We wanted people to treat us with respect and we tried to act like we had respect for each other and for them.

Gwendolyn Harris-Middlebrooks – “AUC Support Protests”

The day after we went to jail, when I saw all the students pouring off Spelman's campus, it was just-- my heart, I thought my heart would just break with joy. They just decided they were coming. I knew we were doing something right, that was just-- from Morris Brown's campus, from Clark's campus, from Morehouse campus, they were just coming to join in something that they knew was worthwhile. That was a wonderful feeling. When you're poor and you think, you know money is power. And then you suddenly see-- this is what moves mountains. You know, this is what people can do when they unite for the right reasons. That was a really good feeling, to know I was a part of this and although I couldn't make them understand the night before last, they understand now. And this is good. And they're going to take this with them. They'll understand the power of unity, sticking together for a cause. That was really satisfying.