**The Children's Crusade**by Kate Rohde

Martin Luther King was trying to lead the black people in Birmingham in a struggle to end segregation. In King's day, segregation meant that black people were not allowed to do the same things or go to the same places as white people: Black people couldn't go to most amusement parks, swimming pools, parks, hotels, or restaurants. They had to go to different schools that weren't as nice as the schools for white kids. They had to use separate drinking fountains, and they could get in big trouble for drinking out of fountains marked for white people. They weren't allowed to use the same bathrooms; many times, there was no bathroom at all that they could use. They weren't allowed to try on clothes before they bought them. Black people didn't think that was fair; there were white people who agreed with them. But in many, many places, especially in the southern part of the United States, segregation was the law--and if black people tried to go someplace they weren't supposed to go, they could get arrested, beaten, and even killed.

Many thousands of people were working in the 1950s and 1960s to end segregation. But one spring, Martin Luther King was in one of the largest and strictest segregated cities in the south--Birmingham, Alabama. There he could find only a few people who would help. Four hundred people would show up for a meeting, but only thirty-five or so would volunteer to protest; and not all of them would show up to march.

You see, the people were very scared. The sheriff in Birmingham was a man named Bull Conner. And black people didn’t know what Bull Conner might do to them if he caught them protesting. Martin Luther King had already been in jail once, and others were afraid to follow him. Besides, they weren’t sure protesting would do any good.

So things were very bad. Martin Luther King had run out of ideas. He was about ready to give up. And then that night, at a meeting, something surprising happened. When King asked who would demonstrate with him and is ready to go to jail, if necessary, a whole group of people stood up, and everyone's mouth dropped wide open. The people who had stood up were children. The adults told them to sit down. Martin Luther King thanked them and told them he appreciated their offer but that he couldn't ask them to go to jail. But they wouldn't sit down. They wanted to help. That night, Martin Luther King talked with his friends. "What are we going to do?" he asked. "The only volunteers we got were children. We can't have a protest with children." Everyone nodded, except Jim Bevel. "Wait a minute," said Jim. "If they want to do it, I say bring on the children." "But they are too young!" the others said. Then Jim asked, "Are they too young to go to segregated schools?" "No!”Are they too young to be kept out of amusement parks?" "No! "Are they too young to be refused a hamburger in a restaurant?" "No!" said the others. "Then they are not too young to want their freedom. That night, they decided that any child old enough to join a church was old enough to march.

The children heard about this decision and told their friends. When the time came for the march, there were a thousand children, teenagers, and college students. And the sheriff arrested them and put them in jail. The next day even more kids showed up-and some of their parents and relatives too--and even more the next day and the next day. Soon lots of adults joined in. Finally, thousands of children were in jail, and there was no more room for anyone else.

Sheriff Conner had done awful things to try to get the children and the other protesters to turn back. He had turned loose big police dogs and allowed them to bite people. He had turned on fire hoses that were so strong; the force of the water could strip the bark off trees. He had ordered the firemen to point the hoses at the little kids and roll them right down the street. People all over the country and all over the world saw the pictures of the dogs, the fire hoses, and the children, and they were furious.

Now the white people of Birmingham began to worry. All over the world people were saying bad things about their town. Even worse, everyone was afraid to go downtown to shop because of the fire hoses and the dogs. So they decided they might have to change things. A short time later, the black people and the white people of Birmingham made an agreement to desegregate the city and let everyone go to the same places.

Today, when people tell this story, many talk about Martin Luther King. But we should also remember the thousands of brave children and teenagers whose courage defeated Bull Conner and helped end segregation in Birmingham, Alabama and the rest of the United States.