

CORE's Struggle for Fair Housing Rights in LA

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March 1, 2022



CORE members swing down Fort Hamilton Parkway, Brooklyn, toward 69th St. ferry on trek to Washington, photo by O. Fernandez (Wikimedia Commons)

It has been 60 years since the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) targeted racially segregated housing in Los Angeles. Although the main stage of the Black Freedom Movement was the American South, the struggle stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. The Black population in Los Angeles grew exponentially after WWII, settling largely in the “socially isolated and physically dilapidated South Central and Watts” while others would integrate the historically white areas of West Adams and Compton. This resulted in white flight. By November of 1961, CORE turned its attention towards integrating housing in Los Angeles with a renewed sense of power and faith in the ability to challenge and change racially discriminatory practices after the success of the Freedom Rides. Like chapters in Brooklyn, NY and Seattle, WA, CORE in Los Angeles started the “special Freedom Dweller campaign” targeting the areas of Glendale, Burbank, Torrance, Monterey Park and the Centinela Valley. The Freedom Dweller campaign executed the CORE strategy of

research and dialogue before taking nonviolent direct-action. And according to Andrea Gibbons, “By early 1962, CORE had tested thirty-three buildings, and was involved in litigation and campaigning around several of them.”

Consider the 35-day sit-in in a Monterey Park tract east of downtown Los Angeles in March and April of 1962. This effort initiated the first CORE chapter in the West to engage in housing sit-ins. The demonstrations sought to bring attention to racial discrimination when Montgomery Ross Fisher refused to sell a house to a Black family. Sylvia Richards, a spokeswoman for CORE, praised Earl P. Snyder, head of Kenbo Corp. and owner of the land for acquiring full possession of the tract through foreclosure and selling it to Bobby Liley, the 29-year-old Black physicist who purchased the house for \$25,000.¹

Philadelphia and Los Angeles CORE chapters were among the first chapters to launch “Operation Windowshop” in late spring and early summer of 1962; a strategy whereby CORE would guide Black groups on tours of suburban developments to look at model homes. In Los Angeles, CORE launched a two-day project on June 23 and 24. CORE was testing the Unruh Civil Rights Act and the Hawkins Fair Housing Act which prohibited discrimination by real estate brokers, salesmen, builders, developers, apartment house owners, and managers. Operation Windowshop sought to put individuals and businesses on notice that Jim Crow housing will no longer be tolerated in California while simultaneously acquainting racialized communities of their rights.

In November of 1962, CORE launched a campaign after Black postal worker James H. McLennan and his family were denied the opportunity to purchase a home at the Sun Rey Estates tract in Wilmington. Twenty-one CORE members began a dwell-in after white CORE tester, Charlotte Allikas, put down a deposit to give the McLennan family time to renegotiate their loan. CORE demonstrated in front of the property twenty-four hours a day. The Dwell-in and Dwell-out consisted of CORE protesters picketing, sleeping on the lawn, and sitting on the porch after doors had been locked. Some residents complained that the protestors singing caused a disturbance of the peace, and kept their children awake. The CORE members and their allies were harassed, assaulted, and stoned. CORE members suspected collusion between white residents and police. Forty had been arrested in ten days. CORE was accused of trespassing and simply searching for headlines. After being arrested and charged, Judge Howard E. Crandall of San Pedro Municipal court denied the plea of the CORE members on November 20, 1962. Charged with trespassing, illegal occupancy and disturbing the peace, “Judge Crandall ruled that such actions in a disputed sale ‘cause infractions of the law because anyone could take it upon himself to act in that manner and in so doing would destroy property rights.’”

It was CORE’s battle with one of the country’s largest suburban developers, Don Wilson, that would focus CORE efforts for approximately a year beginning in mid-1962 and through the better part of 1963. CORE simultaneously protested three major sites in the South Bay area: Dominguez Hills, Compton, and Torrance. Beginning in July and August of 1962, CORE tackled housing discrimination by picketing the Don Wilson sales office of the Dominguez

Hills tract off 190th St. and Avalon, in the unincorporated area that would become the city of Carson in 1968, for not selling homes to Black families. This area was limited to whites, Asians, and Mexican Americans. The picket line consisted of CORE, Harbor and Compton chapters of the ACLU, American Federation of Teachers Local 1386, AFL-CIO and the San Pedro- Wilmington and Compton Chapters of the NAACP.² Mildred Pitts Walter, recalls picketing and observing the police standing across the street seemingly trying to intimidate the CORE picketers and their allies. After the police left, about four cars full of white men dressed in Nazi uniforms including the swastika carried signs reading, "Ovens too good for n*****s," "N*****s, go back to the trees," and "You monkeys, go back to the trees." Davis and Wiener adds, "The white residents as well as Glendale-based American Nazi party (a frequent presence at demonstrations throughout the 1960s) harassed picket lines and even attacked CORE chairman Earl Walter." Beginning to question herself, Pitts- Walter asks, "Why am I here? Why am I doing this? Why do I want people thinking I want to live beside white people? Why am I here?" At that time, someone started singing the Spiritual, "Oh, Freedom!" She remembers the lone voice singing,

Oh, Freedom over me. And before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.

Pitts-Walter, feeling, emboldened by the words of her ancestors said to herself,

Well, I'm not here because I want to live beside white people. I'm here because I want us to be able to decide where it is we want to live, and we can have the freedom to do that.

At peace with herself and reaffirmed in the righteous struggle for freedom, Pitts-Walter and her fellow picketers continued their nonviolent direct-action standing firm in their cause.

With the restricted Dominguez Hills tract just down the street, CORE also protested Wilson for building a "colored- only subdivision" at the Centerview Estates tract at Artesia and Avalon. In January of 1963, the Los Angeles Sentinel reports that CORE members sang Freedom Songs inside the sales office while a CORE spokesperson explained the boycott to crowds of potential buyers outside, many of whom did not cross the picket line. Some joined the picket line. In early May of 1963, CORE charged Sgt. Philip Wilson of the Torrance Police Department with the assault of two CORE members. Herbert S. Mann (32) and Leo Mouton (23) accused the officer of dragging the men away from the escrow office and kicking them both repeatedly.

Don Wilson's Southwood Rivera Royale housing tract in Torrance "was an excellent theater for confrontation." Davis and Wiener state that Torrance mayor, Albert Isen asserted, "Torrance has no Negro problem. We only have three Negroes in the city." On June 26, 1963, white Torrance residents, having had enough of the demonstrations and concerned about a riot, crowded the Torrance City Council Chambers. Over 300 people booed the Chambers attempt to discuss civil rights, referred to the protests as a "dangerous situation," and urged the city to close the city on weekends to sightseers and others "who

have no business being there.” The *Los Angeles Times* reports, “Petitions were also presented requesting weekend stop signs, limited access to streets and no parking on a four-block section of Evalyn Ave.”

The Los Angeles based anti-segregated housing campaign received a morale boost on March 11, 1963, when California Attorney General Stanley Mosk filed a suit against Don Wilson charging that he and his salesmen engaged in discriminatory practices resulting in a temporary restraining order forbidding further discrimination. The campaign against Don Wilson lasted over eighteen months resulting in 250 arrests until it dwindled out in late 1963.

The Rumford Fair Housing Act of 1963 which sought to end racial discrimination in housing was repealed by Proposition 14 calling for “property owner rights.” The California Supreme Court ruled that Proposition 14 was illegal in 1966, and the U.S. Supreme Court added that Proposition 14 violated the 14th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Congress would later enact the National Housing Act in 1968 prohibiting discrimination concerning sale, renting, or financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, or sex. The CORE dwell-ins and dwell-outs were Los Angeles based contributions to the nationwide Black Freedom Movement and quest for fair housing for all.

1. “Sit-in Ends, Negro Buys Monterey Park Home,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File); April 6, 1962; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. A1; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 186; Davis and Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire*, 81. ⇐
2. “Race Picketing Continues at Housing Tract” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File); August 2, 1962; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. 18; Davis and Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire*, 82-83. ⇐

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