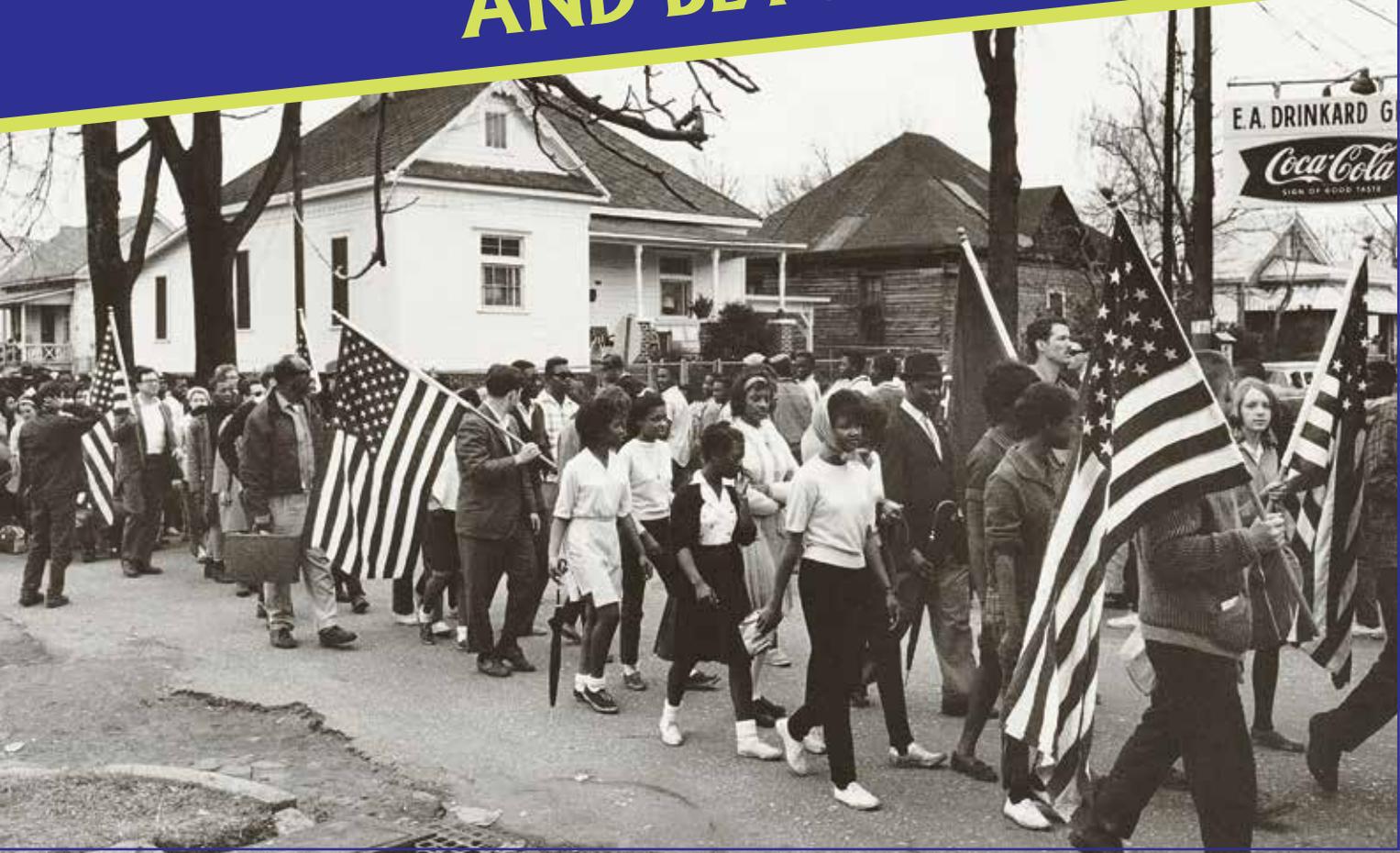




Shirley Jefferson grew up in Selma, Alabama, in the 1950s and 1960s. Her experience as an African American girl in the South during the height of the civil rights movement made a strong impression on her. When she was 12 years old, Shirley joined the Selma-to-Montgomery March for voting rights. That event had a huge impact on her own future. Today, Jefferson is an associate dean at Vermont Law School, in South Royalton, where she works to foster diversity and support law students of color. She shared some of her march memories with *COBBLESTONE*.

# MARCHING TO MONTGOMERY AND BEYOND

by Christy Mihaly



Shirley Jefferson was inspired to join people of all ages as they marched from Selma to Montgomery.

## What do you remember about growing up in Selma?

When I was growing up, we couldn't have an ice cream cone because the restaurant didn't serve black people. We couldn't go to the movie theater, because we were black. Later, they did start letting us into the theater, but we couldn't sit just anywhere—only in one section of the balcony. When we went shopping, we had to use the back door of the store; white people went in the front. At a white person's house, we couldn't use the front door. We had to go around to the back.

## Were the schools integrated?

No. There were separate schools for white students and black students. I remember the white school looked so much newer and nicer than ours. Our school just looked poor. Even though *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 declared school segregation unconstitutional, my high school was all black until 1971, my senior year. That's how long integration took to get to Selma.

## Were you in Selma on "Bloody Sunday" when police attacked peaceful protesters [on March 7, 1965]?

I was 12 years old. My older sister marched. I remember watching at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, as the marchers headed across. Then they stopped. I saw people turn and run back towards us. The police

used [high-pressure] fire hoses, police dogs, and tear gas on the people. They chased people and beat them with clubs. I saw people bleeding, people being carried away.

## How did you feel?

I thought those police and KKK [Ku Klux Klan members] weren't acting human, they were just barbarians. Why were they so hateful? Why did they attack folks who just wanted equality?

## Were you afraid?

Yes! They were beating up and killing people—black people, as well as white people who supported the marchers. It was so frightening. I didn't know what they would do to us.

Jefferson remembers scenes such as this one, where people came out to see the marchers and show support.



Jefferson says that the marchers kept going, even in the rain. They didn't care. They sang and shouted, "Freedom Now!"



### *But two weeks after Bloody Sunday, you joined the march to Montgomery?*

Yes, I marched from Selma to Montgomery. We walked right across that bridge, out of Selma. I was with my cousin Nancy, my older sisters, other cousins, and neighborhood kids. I walked for days. And hundreds, thousands, of others marched, too.

### *Why did you march?*

I just felt I had to. My parents didn't want me to go. Daddy was afraid he'd lose his job if I went. White employers told their black employees, "If we find out you or your children are out there protesting, you'll get fired." Luckily for my Daddy, they didn't find out.

Jefferson remembers that some people joined the march as it reached Montgomery. It was quite a scene, with people of all races and ages coming together.



Lots of kids marched. We marched for the vote, for our freedom. Our parents talked about not being able to vote, being scared to register. Our teachers and preachers said the right to vote was sacred. So we marched.

### What was the march like?

What I remember most is how much fun everyone was having. It was just exciting because we were marching for our *freedom*. We sang songs together. We camped along the way. It rained some of the time, but we didn't care. There was just so much excitement. People gathered along the road to watch us and to wave to us. People of different races and religions marched together. There were ministers, priests, and rabbis.

### You left Selma for college and then got a scholarship to Vermont Law School. Was it difficult to move north?

I'd wanted to be a lawyer, to work for justice, since I was a girl. So I was willing to move to Vermont. For two years, I was the only African American person in the whole area. In town, people would say, "Oh, you're that black woman that came from Selma to the law school?" It bothered me at first. But after a while, it didn't matter. I'd lived with people saying I couldn't do things because of the color of my skin. Here, people weren't treating me badly because of my color. I just stood out. Well, I wanted to be a lawyer so badly, I figured standing out was nothing. I could handle that.

Today, Shirley Jefferson (seated, lower left) teaches at Vermont Law School. These students are part of a summer enrichment program to encourage more students of color to attend law school.

### After years of practicing law in Washington, D.C., you returned to Vermont Law School, where you teach about race and the law. What do you tell your students about the civil rights movement?

I always tell people, it's not just my history, or African American history, it's *our* history. Going from Jim Crow laws to integration, that's the whole country's story. That story is still going on. And I remind them not to be afraid to take up a cause. The rewards are worth the fight. #

Christy Mihaly is a lawyer and author of nonfiction for young readers. She has had the pleasure of knowing Shirley Jefferson since she moved to Vermont 10 years ago.

