

YALSA
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SPEECH BY
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As school and public librarians, you know as well as anyone that children create their own worlds. In her head, a child piecing together a puzzle visualizes and immerses herself in the scene as she makes it emerge. A boy IS, he simply IS, a super-being; whether he's the hero or the villain or both, he exists in the body of that being and wields its power. Beyond that, every child—or, at least, we hope, every child—triumphs in his or her own world. “I win! I did it! I figured it out!” These exclamations ring, along with foot-stomping and arm-pumping, when kids play. You know this about children—the totality of their imaginings and the boundlessness of their capabilities. As a nonfiction writer, I envy them. I have to search for my puzzle pieces before I can put them together; they rarely arrive boxed. And, unlike children playing roles, I can't make things up.

It's not only as a single individual that a child conceives of a universe. Veritable hordes can all see the same nonexistent-to-us reality and find their places in it. Just drop by any playground or community center or birthday party. When you look closely, you can discern patterns of movement and communication in what might otherwise appear to be an aimless scrum.

But, 4,000 kids? Can 4,000 of them share a vision of a totally new world, adopt roles, and foresee their own success in it—without relying on the Internet? Very few grown-ups would think so. Yet, 50 years ago, 4,000 black children in Birmingham, Alabama, not only conceived of a new reality and took action to create it, they also made the real world see it, too, and, then, inhabit it. They showed us what was in their collective minds—a town where they could play ball in the same parks as white children; crack open brand new books at the beginning of the school year, rather than have to accept worn-out, hand-me-down books; eat ice cream while sitting at the lunch counter, rather than ordering and eating out back. And, forced to peer into this new reality, the adults had to acknowledge, “You win. You did it. You figured it out.” Although some people were unconscionably slow to do so, they eventually re-aligned Birmingham in accord with what the children had envisioned.

Furthermore, the children accomplished all of this without fighting. Well, actually, they fought—fear and heat and cold and starvation and inhumane jail conditions. What I mean is that they didn't get into fights, either with each other or with the apparent super-powers who were in charge of those jails. They fought, instead, by marching, singing, banding together, and praying. They hewed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "10 Commandments of Nonviolence."

When I learned, belatedly, that it was school children who salvaged Birmingham and, along with it, the civil rights movement, which had not had a success in nearly seven years, I knew I had to write about these events for kids. But, you can't write about 4,000 of them; no one could invite that many to their birthday party. So, I chose four, who, fortunately, allowed me to invade their lives and their pasts. I hope you share my gratitude for their sharing their stories.

- As we sat together in her living room, Audrey Faye Hendricks said to me, "I went and told my mother I had decided I was going to march. 'I want to go to jail.' And, she just said, 'OK.'"
Audrey was nine when she marched, was arrested, and spent a week in jail.
- Arnetta Streeter confessed to me that the first time she picketed a segregated store, she fibbed to her parents: she had told them she was going to a movie. Two weeks later, her parents watched as water from firemen's massive monitor-gun hoses swept Arnetta down the street.
- James W. Stewart told me that, before he led 800 young marchers out of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Dr. King asked him if he had any weapons. James handed over a file. After being arrested, he spent three frightening days and nights in a suffocating jail cell.
- Unlike the others, Washington Booker III did fight back. Over pancakes, 45 years later, he said that he thought at the time, "it was the craziest thing in the world for them to turn themselves over to the police." Eventually, though, he redeemed himself by marching and going to jail, too.

These four heroes taught me—and, I hope, they, in turn, will teach young readers—about the super-powerfulness of nonviolence and about how to change the real world so that it comes closer to the idealized worlds we play in.

Although these comments about my book, *We've Got a Job*, focus on imagination, never did I imagine that I would have the opportunity to thank the Young Adult Library Services Administration for

choosing it as a finalist for the 2013 Excellence in Nonfiction Award. I am honored. Thank you, dear YALSA Nonfiction Committee, for making something even beyond my dreams come true! Thank you, too, to my agent, Erin Murphy, and to my editor, Kathy Landwehr, publisher, Margaret Quinlin, and designer, Maureen Withee, and the other fantastic team members at Peachtree Publishers.

May all of us, as the children of Birmingham pledged, "Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart." May reading help the children you serve establish worlds without violence.