

A gifted student and natural leader, Bernard graduated from the all-Black Middleton High School in 1958. His leadership and work on the school newspaper earned him a full scholarship to Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. Yet when the time came to choose his path, the words of his grandmother remained with him. Honoring her wish that he pursue ministry, Bernard turned down the scholarship to Florida A&M and instead enrolled at American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, where his life's work would begin to take shape.

While in Nashville, Bernard became part of the generation of young leaders who helped transform America through disciplined nonviolent action. At American Baptist Theological Seminary, he shared a dorm room with a young student from Troy, Alabama who would later become Congressman John Lewis. Together they joined other committed students studying the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence under the guidance of Rev. James Lawson and Rev. C.T. Vivian. Alongside fellow organizers such as James Bevel and Diane Nash, Bernard became a leader in the Nashville Student Movement, which helped organize the historic lunch counter sit-ins that successfully desegregated Nashville's downtown businesses.

In 1960, Bernard helped co-found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), joining fellow activists such as Stokely Carmichael—who would later become a founding member of the Black Panther Party—and many others dedicated to dismantling segregation through disciplined nonviolent direct action. The work demanded extraordinary courage. Bernard participated in the Freedom Rides of 1961, where interracial groups challenged segregated interstate bus travel throughout the South. The riders were met with brutal violence, arrests, and imprisonment. Bernard himself would be beaten and arrested 27 times during the Civil Rights Movement, yet remained steadfast in his commitment to nonviolence.

In 1962, SNCC sent Bernard to Selma, Alabama, to help organize voter registration among Black citizens who had long been denied their constitutional rights. Working closely with local leaders such as Amelia and Samuel Boynton, he helped galvanize the community and lay the groundwork for the movement that would bring national attention to Selma. During this period Bernard survived a deadly tri-state assassination conspiracy organized by members of the Ku Klux Klan that targeted three civil rights leaders. The plot sought to take the lives of Bernard in Alabama and Benjamin Elton Cox in Louisiana; while both men survived their attacks, the conspiracy succeeded in claiming the life of civil rights leader Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi.

The organizing work in Selma helped set the stage for the historic demonstrations that followed. After the fatal shooting of Jimmie Lee Jackson in 1965, the movement culminated in the Selma-to-Montgomery marches, including the violent events of "Bloody Sunday," where peaceful marchers were attacked by state troopers. The courage and nonviolent discipline displayed by the movement helped awaken the conscience of the nation and ultimately led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

A LIFE OF COURAGE,

