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Reed recalls 1960 'sit-down' at Montgomery County Courthouse

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Not long after black students challenged a segregated lunch counter in North Carolina, a group of Alabama State University students did the same thing at the Montgomery County Courthouse.

Instead of mustard and ketchup being dumped on them as in Greensboro, N.C., the ASU students faced expulsion and suspensions for what happened Feb. 25, 1960.

One of those ASU students was Joe L. Reed, who has never forgotten what would become known as the "courthouse sit-down" instead of sit-in.

"What we did that day at the courthouse was to protest at a public facility, not a private business like what happened up in Greensboro," Reed said Thursday. "I think both groups accomplished what we set out to do."

Reed, chairman of the Alabama Democratic Conference, stood before a large crowd at the Alabama Department of Archives and History auditorium Thursday and detailed what the protest was all about and how it became the forerunner of other civil rights movements in Alabama.

"It was an idea whose time had come," Reed said of the protest. "I was asked if I'd go with them, and I said I would."

Unlike the Greensboro sit-in and angry response from white customers at the lunch counter, no one abused the ASU students at the courthouse.

The protest did lead to a court case, gubernatorial displeasure and disciplinary action at ASU, but, in the end, Reed and others in his group were placed on probation and not expelled.

Of the 29 ASU students who took part in the protests, all but nine were put on probation. The others were ordered expelled.

"We were told we were trespassing in a public facility," Reed said. "We were called agitators because we simply wanted a level playing field."

Reed said most of the protesters eventually returned to ASU and completed their college education before moving on to a variety of careers.

In the years that followed the courthouse demonstration, other civil rights events spread across the South, especially in Alabama, and Reed followed each one closely.

The ASU protest and its aftermath will be examined Thursday on the 50th anniversary of the event. A variety of events are planned during the day on the university campus.

During his speech, Reed mentioned increased frustration within the black community during the 1950s until frustration turned to action in places such as Greensboro and Montgomery.

"We saw students all over the Southland who were tired of being sick and tired," he said. "We young

blacks struck the match and set the signal across the country that 'gradualism' was no longer acceptable."

By that, Reed said court cases challenging segregationist policies in the South "could drag on for years." That began to crumble in Greensboro.

"By sitting down, they stood up for freedom," said Reed, 71, referring to the lunch counter sit-in. "And that brought us to Montgomery on the 25th day of February 50 years ago."

Reed said it was a movement by young people instead of adults and would pave the way eventually for passage of equal rights legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
