

We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March

By Cynthia Levinson

PROLOGUE: "I WANT TO GO TO JAIL"

On Thursday morning, May 2, 1963, nine-year-old Audrey Faye Hendricks woke up with freedom on her mind. But, before she could be free, she knew she had to go to jail.

"I want to go to jail," Audrey told her mother.

Since Mr. and Mrs. Hendricks thought that was a good idea, they helped her get ready. First, her father bought her a game she'd been eyeing. She imagined that Operation, in which you take the bones out of a plastic figure and put them back together, would entertain her if she got bored during her week on a cellblock.

Then, her mother took her to Center Street Elementary so she could tell her third-grade teacher why she'd be absent. Miss Wills cried. Audrey knew she was proud of her.

She also hugged all four grandparents goodbye.

One of her grandmothers assured her, "You'll be fine."

Finally, Audrey's parents drove her to church to get arrested.

Wait a minute! What kind of nine-year-old volunteers to go to jail? And, what kinds of parents make sure she gets there? And, why would she get arrested at church?

Is this real?

Yes. Audrey Hendricks, her mother, Lola, and her father, Joe, are real. So is this story.

Audrey was one of the youngest of about 3,500 black children who marched, protested, sang, and prayed their way to jail during the first week of May 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama. Their goal was to end segregation in the most racially separated and violent city in America. Many young people suffered attacks by snarling German shepherds and days of being crammed into sweltering sweatboxes. Some wondered if they would survive. And, if they did, could they accept these punishments with dignity, as they had been taught? Or, would they retaliate against the white policemen who were abusing them?

Audrey and three other young people—Washington Booker III, James Stewart, and Arnetta Streeter—will be your guides through these harrowing events. Along the way, you'll hear from others as well.