

## Open Housing (1965-67)



The Chicago Freedom Movement, the most ambitious civil rights campaign in the North, lasted from mid-1965 to early 1967. It represented the alliance of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO). In 1965, SCLC, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., was looking for a site to prove that non-violent direct action could bring about social change outside of the South. Since 1962, the CCCO, headed by Al Raby, had harnessed anger over racial inequality, especially in the public schools, in the city of Chicago to build the most sustained local civil rights movement in the North.

The Chicago Freedom Movement declared its intention to end slums in the city. It organized tenants' unions, assumed control of a slum tenement, founded action groups like Operation Breadbasket, and rallied black and white Chicagoans to support its goals. In the early summer of 1966, it focused its attention on housing discrimination. By late July it was staging regular marches into all-white neighborhoods on the city's southwest and northwest sides. The hostile response of white residents and the determination of civil rights activists to continue to crusade for open housing alarmed City Hall and attracted the attention of the national press. In mid-August, high-level negotiations began between city leaders, movement activists, and representatives of the Chicago Real Estate Board. On August 26, an agreement, consisting of positive steps to open up housing opportunities in metropolitan Chicago, was reached. The Summit Agreement was the culmination of months of organizing and direct action.

My involvement in the housing issue was limited because I was a full-time college student and had a part-time job to help pay for my tuition. But I did participate in one relatively small bottom-up fair housing issue at Loyola University in Chicago where I was a student. I joined many black and white students who marched to protest student housing discrimination at Loyola. The University changed its housing policies to be non-discriminatory.

The next opportunity I had to make a difference from the bottom-up came in 1969 and 1970, again as an assistant to the Village Manager in a south suburb of Chicago. At that time, "Steering" of potential home buyers was not uncommon. Steering basically meant that if a potential home buyer contacted a realtor to start the process of looking for a new home, the realtors would "steer" those buyers to communities based on the race of the buyer to a community which was predominantly populated by members of the same race. White home buyers were "steered" to homes for sale in predominantly white communities and black home buyers were "steered" to predominately black communities.

Again, with support of our elected officials, top administrators, and our Community and Human Relations Commission, we developed a group of citizens to test the real estate market to ensure equal opportunity in housing within our community. This group of citizens went out as couples looking for a new home. Some of the couples were white and some were black. Some of these potential buyers were "steered" to communities which matched their race and some were not. After doing this testing for several weeks, we asked to meet with the realtors who we found to be "steering" potential homeowners. We told them that such a practice was not legal in our community, and we asked them to stop doing that. The realtors agreed. Several months later we sent out another group of couples to test the marketplace. There were no instances of "steering" this second time around.