

On the road with Jonathan Daniels

By [Gary G. Yerkey](#)

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Fifty years ago today, Jonathan Daniels was shot and killed in Hayneville, Alabama.

Earlier that year, the young Episcopal seminarian was striding happily along the road from Selma to Montgomery. So was I. We didn't know each other, and we didn't see each other. But we shared that Alabama road and that commitment to justice—along with some 3,000 other activists, participating in what would become the most celebrated civil rights march in U.S. history.

After the march, I returned to Wisconsin to complete my college education. Daniels, who had just turned 26, also went back to his studies, at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But later that spring he returned to Alabama, joining in nonviolent protests and other actions in Lowndes County, despite warnings from local white segregationists to stay out.

“Something had happened to me in Selma,” he wrote, “which meant I had to come back. I could not stay by in benevolent dispassion any longer.”

After being arrested at a protest, Daniels and others spent six days in the county jail in Hayneville. On August 20, 1965, they were released, and Daniels, accompanied by young black activists Ruby Sales and Joyce Bailey and white Catholic priest Richard Morrisroe, walked to a small grocery store to buy a cold drink. They were met at the door by Thomas Coleman, a deputy sheriff and a prominent Klan member, who told them to leave. Before they could react, Coleman opened fire with a shotgun.

Daniels threw himself in front of Sales to protect her. He was killed instantly. Morrisroe was seriously injured by a second blast and later recovered.

On hearing the news, Martin Luther King Jr. called Daniels's selfless defense of Sales “one of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry.” Daniels has been designated a martyr by the Episcopal Church.

This past weekend, several hundred Episcopalians and others gathered in Hayneville to celebrate Daniels's life and work. In Haynesville's town square on Saturday, speakers included Michael Curry, who will soon become the first African American presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. Those gathered marched in solemn procession to the site of the store where Daniels was killed to unveil a plaque honoring his name, singing freedom songs along the way.

I watched the festivities from the bed of a nearby pickup truck with Ray Simmons, a retired black schoolteacher and bus driver from Hayneville. He told me he was happy to see so many people come to Hayneville—a mostly black town of about 1,000—around this time each year to celebrate Daniels's life and work. Before Alabama's schools were integrated, Simmons taught in an all-white school. He said that the children often addressed him with racial slurs, echoing the deep-seated racism of their parents. That has changed in Hayneville, he said—but many older white people still harbor ill will toward the black population.

The young people in the area, however, have moved on, according to Simmons. He said that one young white boy recently decided to join a predominantly black baseball team, which enraged his father. Yet the boy stuck with his decision.

The struggle continues, Simmons said, and it may not be over for some time. But as a Christian, he said, he has to believe that what Jonathan Daniels and others sacrificed will not be in vain.