

# a personal mission



**SAMUEL YOUNGE JR.**  
1944-1966  
Student civil rights activist killed in dispute, Tuskegee, Ala.

**“This is an era of social revolution. In such revolutions, individuals sacrifice their lives.”**

SAMUEL YOUNGE SR.

Sammy Young Jr. could have had an easy life. He grew up in a prominent middle-class family in Tuskegee, Ala. — a town dominated by a famous black university and noted for its progressive race relations. Young attended a New England boarding school for a while, and served two years in the Navy. He was a bright, exuberant youth, brought up to have pride in his race and confidence in himself.

Although prosperity and prestige were his, they were not what interested Sammy Young. He required adventure, and the biggest adventure going on in Alabama in the late 1950s was the Civil Rights Movement. Even as a child, Young saw the struggle for equal rights as a personal challenge. He was light-skinned enough to pass for white, and he would sometimes fool store clerks or train porters to gain entrance to white facilities as a way of mocking segregation laws.

## REJECTING HYPOCRISY

Sammy Young entered the prestigious Tuskegee Institute in the fall of 1964 with the intention of getting a degree in political science. But he quickly became dissatisfied with the hypocrisy he saw among black leaders in Tuskegee. While blacks in Birmingham and Montgomery had succeeded in integrating their cities, it seemed the well-to-do blacks in Tuskegee were content to live with segregation and voting abuses as long as their own prosperity was not threatened.

Other students at the Institute, who had long heard the praises of Tuskegee’s racial progress, looked around them and saw blacks being shut out of jobs, turned away from the voter registration office, and black children denied the chance to swim at a public pool in the summertime. They formed the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League (TIAL)

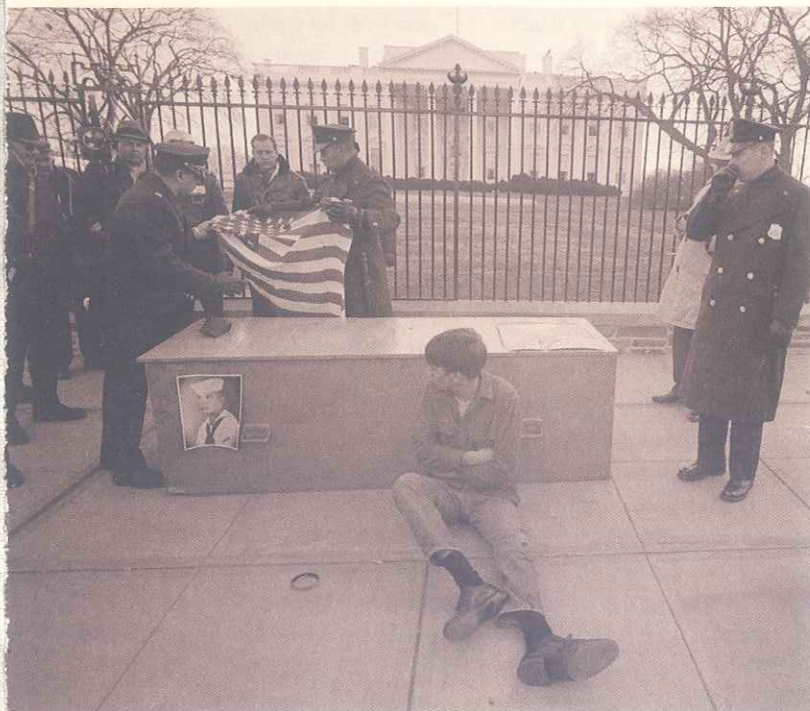
to push for stronger reforms. Sammy Young became one of TIAL’s most active members. He participated in boycotts, which forced businesses to hire blacks, and worked in successful campaigns to integrate local restaurants and the public pool.

Yet it was the plight of poor rural blacks that most concerned Young. He had been isolated most of his life from the black farmers outside Tuskegee, but now he felt he had more in common with them than with his middle-class peers. Soon he was spending more time in the countryside recruiting voters than he was spending in class.

Then Young began to feel the full impact of white resistance. In the summer of 1965, he was among TIAL students who were beaten while trying to attend a white church in town. Weeks later, someone threatened to blow up the home where Young’s mother lived. Then someone fired







shots at a truck he was riding in. Finally, on the first day of September, Sammy Younge was arrested along with about 60 others who were trying to register to vote in nearby Opelika.

### CONFRONTATION

The violence and arrests frightened Younge, and when the new school term started, he tried to concentrate on his studies. But he could not get the movement out of his blood. When the accused killer of civil rights worker Jonathan Daniels was acquitted in Lowndes County, Ala., Younge organized a protest march. He even traveled to Lowndes County to help black tenant farmers who had been evicted because they tried to vote.

On January 3, 1966, Younge was back in Tuskegee, organizing blacks to go to the Macon County Courthouse to register to vote. (It was one of the two

days a month the registrar's office was open.) A man at the courthouse tried to scare him with a knife, but Younge waited until the last voter was registered. By the end of the day, about 100 black voters had been added to the rolls.

That night, there was a party. Younge danced and drank for a while, then went out to buy some cigarettes. At the local service station, he asked to use the restroom and was directed to the back of the station. Convinced he was being sent to a "colored" bathroom, he argued for a moment with the 67-year-old attendant, Marvin Segrest, then left. As Younge walked away from the service station, a shot was fired. He tried to run for cover, but the second shot struck him in the head and killed him.

The murder touched off immediate demonstrations. About 2,000 Tuskegee students and

faculty marched through downtown in a steady rain the next day to protest the killing. They were openly angry, and they continued to express their rage in demonstrations the following week. The City Council urged students to restore calm, but racial tensions mounted.

Then the man who shot Sammy Younge was found innocent of murder. Marvin Segrest admitted to an all-white jury that he killed Younge, but claimed he shot in self-defense after an argument over the restroom. (In fact, the service station did not have segregated restrooms, Segrest said.)

When they heard about the verdict, the students could no longer contain their rage. They set fires on the town square and threw rocks and bottles into store windows.

The threat of further violence finally forced Tuskegee's black leaders to act. They pushed for, and won, a city ordinance banning discrimination in hotels and restaurants.

But it was the impoverished rural blacks — many of whom registered to vote because of Sammy Younge — who won the biggest victory. In the fall of 1966, they elected Lucius Amerson the first black sheriff in the South since Reconstruction, despite the lack of support from Tuskegee black leaders who felt a black sheriff could not be elected.

Tuskegee was transformed, and Sammy Younge's father was satisfied that his son had not died in vain. "This is an era of social revolution," said Samuel Younge Sr. "In such revolutions, individuals sacrifice their lives." ❁

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Samuel Younge Jr. was shot to death between this bus station and the Standard Oil Station at left.

### LEFT

Student Leslie Bayless leans on a mock casket he and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee placed in front of the White House, in protest of Younge's murder. Police remove a flag before taking the casket away.