



Michael Carnevale

The

Dick Gregory is fighting

Flesh

our "spiritual bankruptcy"

Is

with humor,

Willing

marches and fasting.

By
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Davlin

There's white sprinkled in his beard now and his eyes are those of a weary man nearing 50. But, Dick Gregory, night club comedian turned social activist, is still marching and shows no signs of slowing down.

On September 11, Gregory took a 24-hour break from St. Louis, a scene of current black protest and outrage, to bring the word to the students at Point Park College in downtown Pittsburgh.

Gregory proved he can still play the crowd. Coming on at times like the comedian he once was and then holding forth like a down-home preacher, Gregory held the large audience in his hand for more than 3½ hours through a wandering discourse which managed to touch just about every base in existence.

Before his talk, however, Gregory sat down with us and spoke about his graduation from the night clubs to the streets.

"It wasn't really such a great change," he says. "See, I was doing that type of humor anyway. I was active in the Civil Rights Movement and that radically changed my consciousness. This was reflected, for instance, in my book of routines, *From the Back of the Bus*. What I'm doing now is really the same thing. See, I'm still in the publicity business. I publicize the issues I'm fighting for by being a media personality, that's part of the game."

Hospital sit-in.

One of the issues Gregory is currently publicizing is the closing of Homer G. Phillips Hospital in St. Louis, his birthplace. Phillips is the only complete-care hospital serving the poor North Side neighborhoods of St. Louis.

On August 17, dozens of protestors were arrested as they tried to block the forced removal of the hospital's last few patients. Again on August 30, more than 700 people, including Gregory, were arrested on the steps of the St. Louis City Hall as they staged a sit-in to demand the hospital's re-opening. The sit-in followed a four-mile march from the hospital in the predominantly black North Side to the City Hall downtown where protestors blocked rush hour traffic for almost an hour. Gregory and others were released on bail and stood trial on October 2 for the disruption.

On September 4 another 200 black protestors marched from Phillips Hospital to the City Hall, ending with a rousing speech from Gregory. On September 10, the day before his Pittsburgh appearance, Gregory led a 25 hour non-stop protest march around City Hall. "And," he said, "I'll be back tomorrow morning marching again!"

Gregory stated that the closing of Phillips Hospital is merely the most outrageous example of a national trend. In the past few years, over 200 inner city hospitals have been closed as unprofitable. Phillips, however, is one of the best hospitals in the nation and is the only accredited public hospital in St. Louis. Its reputation is such, says Gregory, that almost half of all black MDs in the nation did their internships at Phillips.

Both St. Louis University and Washington University are affiliated with the unaccredited and sole remaining public hospital located in the mostly white South Side, a considerable distance from the black neighborhoods presently served by Phillips. However, Gregory claimed, white flight to the suburbs is causing problems for the South Side hospital. They can't find enough warm bodies to fill their beds. Their solution, says Gregory, is to close the black hospital.

Blacks and Jews.

St. Louis Mayor James Conway has another version. Conway claims St. Louis needs only one public hospital and the 40-year old Phillips was closed to save the city \$6 million by transferring health care services to the South Side hospital.

Black community leaders have condemned the Mayor's consolidation plan, saying it will deprive the North Side community—already cited by HEW as medically underserved—of its only access to health care.

Gregory said the black community is going to win. "You know they're going to re-open Homer Phillips Hospital. As long as we keep doing what we're doing, you know it's going to happen."

"When we demonstrate, some days we march for six hours and have a confrontation; some days we march for 12 hours and have a confrontation; some days we'll march 24 hours round-the-clock and have a confrontation. We're going to march for 18 months if need be until they open that hospital!"

Although deeply involved in the struggle for black rights, Gregory sees himself as fighting for all the people. The real enemies, he said, are the "One hundred super-rich families in this free democratic society that don't pay taxes at all."

"Being white ain't got nothing to do with it. Listen, my man, if you don't have some big bucks to back you up, you're a nigger just like me. It took me a long time to realize whites are afraid of whites also. But, you see, there's only a couple of whites in this country. The rest of you people are niggers who just happen to *think* you're white!"

In particular, Gregory made a point of emphasizing his opposition to anti-Semitism. After our discussion, he drew loud applause from the mostly black Point Park College audience by saying: "Blacks hear all the anti-Semitic slanders Jews don't hear. But, you say nothing! You'd be angry if a Jew didn't oppose a racist remark, but you keep silent when you hear anti-Semitic remarks. You're just as guilty! And you can bet those same people say the very same things about you when you're not around!"

Run and fast.

During his youth, Gregory was a long-distance runner and cultivated the nickname "Iron Man." He is still noted for his devotion to running, having run across the continent to protest the Vietnam War, and for his periodic fasts. His fasts, he said, are a means of cleansing his system—and just happen to be effective publicity tools as well.

His first was a 40 day water-only fast to protest the Vietnam War. "My cousin kept telling me I was going to kill myself. So, every morning I turned to the obituary column to see how many fasters died in the night—nope, only eaters!"

"Recently, I was in jail in Georgia for protesting jail conditions. They didn't like that, so they gave me a taste of the conditions I was angry about. Since a jail is a very polluted environment, I went on a fast to cleanse myself."

"On about the sixth day of my fast I woke up and felt like I was dead. I couldn't remember where I was or how I got there. And I heard my cousin's voice saying, 'You're gonna die!' And then I heard the news on another prisoner's radio: The president had fired Andy Young, but Andy said he'd still work for the re-election of the president."

"Then I *knew* I was dead!"

But Dick Gregory is not dead. He is alive and well and marching in St. Louis. Rather, it is the country he sees as dead.

"America," he said, "is morally and spiritually bankrupt. The problem with our society isn't racism, sexism, capitalism, or anything like that. The root problem is that society is totally degenerate, spiritually dead."

And then he left us to speak to the students.

"Better wake up," he said, "we haven't got much time..."