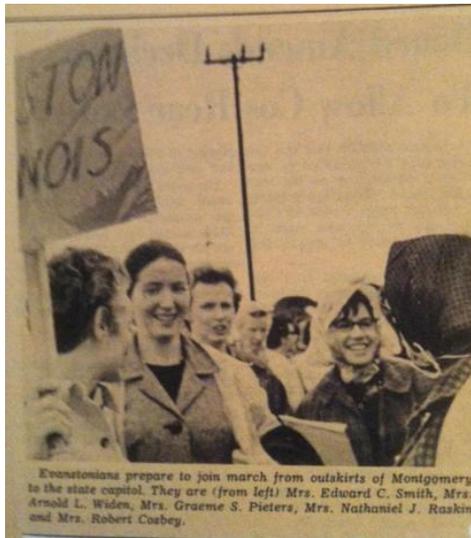


# North Shore Summer Project

## Activists: Past and Present



*Helen Widen (2nd from left) with Nina Raskin (right)*

### Helen Widen

Helen Widen was an activist long before Dr. King's speech on the Winnetka Village Green. She served on the board of the Peace and World Affairs Center of Evanston and became active in the civil rights movement there as well. In the early 1960s she joined forces with some of her Evanston neighbors to purchase a 19-unit apartment building on Sheridan Road for the purpose of moving in people of color. They effectively integrated southeast Evanston and, as Helen reports, "No one lost a penny on the deal."

She also played a major role in integrating Evanston schools. Helen describes her role as a bussing pioneer in the late '60s, "They made a school in a black ward a lab school, and lots of us white families bussed in our children and bussed out African American kids to other districts to integrate our schools."

In March of 1965, when Helen and her neighbors Nina Raskin and Gracie Mertz heard about the bloodshed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, along with the call for people to join the marchers, they felt compelled to go there. They chartered a Greyhound bus and quickly filled it with young, white, suburban mothers and housewives. They could have filled a second bus if they'd had one. Helen left her four kids at home with her mother for the 48-hour trip.

The group boarded the bus at 1pm, slept on the bus all night, and arrived in Montgomery the next morning. They marched, listened to Martin Luther King, Jr. speak mid-day, and got right back on the bus for home. President Johnson had called out the National Guard to protect the marchers, but the group didn't want to take chances by staying longer than necessary.

Helen's strongest memory from Dr. King's speech in Winnetka later that year is of "a sunny day at the Green with our families and having a sense it was an important thing – being there and feeling we were making a stand."

After 1965, Helen continued her activism until she went back to school and began a long career as a psychotherapist. She says, "I had a season where I stood up for peace and social justice, which are still passions of mine."

Helen still lives in Evanston.

[July 2015, by Nancy Pred]

