Sit-in protester visits Kress building again

By SARA BONGIORNI

On March 28, 1969, just before noon, Kenneth Lavon Johnson sat down at the whites-only counter at the S.H. Kress building and requested a cup of tea.

A few minutes later, police arrested Johnson, then 22, and six other Southern University students seated at the counter and led them to a police wagon outside.

The sit-in at the downtown Kress was the first of its kind in Louisiana and set in motion a case that went before the U.S. Supreme Court. The court's ruling helped end racial segregation at U.S. public facilities.

Until Wednesday, Johnson had never been back to the long-vacant Kress and adjoining Welsh & Levy building, slated to be demolished and replaced with a parking lot.

"I was scared," the now 66-year-old retired judge said of the lunch-hour sit-in while on a visit Wednesday from Baltimore. He described the few minutes at Kress as more frightening than coming under live fire in Vietnam, where he served in the U.S. Army.

"I was ready to meet my maker," he said of his emotions during the Kress sit-in. "But it didn't matter if we'd died because we were on a mission."

On Wednesday, Johnson walked around the buildings at Third and Main streets. He smiled and pointed at the faded Kress name on a broken marquee.

"I love it," he said softly to himself. "Wonderful. It's wonderful to see it again."

Johnson said he had never really wanted to revisit the building, which he entered for the first and last time on the day of the sit-in. He changed his mind a few weeks ago after his sister, 78-year-old Sonia W. Jefferson of Baton Rouge, sent him a recent news report describing its possible demolition.

Johnson traveled to Baton Rouge this week after a visit to the Mississippi home of his 102-year-old mother.

He said losing Kress to the wrecking ball would be a blow to history that would deprive Louisiana and the nation of a symbol of racial progress of the past 40 years.

"It's wrong to tear down a piece of history," Johnson said. "It's like erasing a part of history and pretending that it never happened."

Developer Bob Dean's plans to destroy the building have sparked an outcry from preservationists and proponents of a revived downtown. Dean, who has revived many historic buildings in Baton Rouge and around the state, received a permit in September from the city-parish Department of Public Works to demolish Kress's and replace it with a surface parking lot.

A date for the demolition has not been set and Dean still must seek a permit that would allow for a temporary closure of traffic lanes, according to city-parish officials.

Dean has not spoken publicly about his plans for the building, which he bought in August for $500,000, court records show. He did not return a Wednesday afternoon telephone call.

Johnson said he could envision the Kress building used as a museum that focuses on the city's important role in civil-rights history.

His visit to the site seemed to evoke vivid memories. He recalled entering Kress with another student, Marvin Robinson, through the main doors on the building's Third Street side. The rest of the group entered the building through doors to the rear and joined him and Robinson at the counter, he said.

The police paddy wagon was waiting on the Main Street side of the building after the arrest, he said.

Johnson said the police had synchronized their watches so that they would enter the building at noon sharp. Johnson said he had to rely on other members of the group to keep track of the time because he did not own a watch.

"It didn't matter ..." said the soft-spoken Johnson, a Mississippi native who grew up in a house without electricity or indoor plumbing.

He also said the group of students had not mentioned their plans to anyone out of fear that word would get out and their plans would be derailed.

His sister said she learned of the sit-in during the hours after it happened when her younger brother called her from jail. It was her birthday and she was cooking in her kitchen, Jefferson said.

"I was frightened, of course," she said.

Her younger brother was living with her at the time, "but that day he didn't come home."

Johnson and the other students were released the evening of March 28 after supporters posted bail, he said.

Johnson was expelled from Southern's law school as a result of the sit-in. He received his law degree from Howard University and eventually settled in Baltimore, where he worked as a city circuit court judge.

Other members of the original student group are scattered across the country and include lawyers, a real estate developer and a university administrator.

The Kress building started as two structures but has since merged into one. The Welsh & Levy building was built in 1885 at Main and Third streets. The "L" shaped Kress building, built in 1910, wraps around it.

The building's would-be saviors got a symbolic boost this week when the Downtown Development District's seven-member board voted unanimously on Tuesday to ask Dean to reconsider his plans.

Downtown planners say tearing down Kress and putting another parking lot on Third would hurt their efforts to bring new life to the city's historic center.

Parking is scarce in some parts of downtown, in part because of construction of a new arts center near the Old State Capitol.