

BY JAN GARDNER



A police officer takes away signs from children at a civil rights march in Alabama.

In May 1963, about 3,500 children marched in Birmingham, Ala., to protest segregation. They were charged by police dogs and battered by jets from high-pressure water hoses. Many were jailed. It wasn't the first nor the last time during the civil rights movement that children put their lives on the line.

How many parents today allow their children to risk their lives in the name of social justice? Cynthia Levinson, whose first book is **"We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March"** (Peachtree), wonders about that, too. "It's hard to imagine parents today packing their children off to jail," she wrote in an e-mail.

Even at the time, the notion was controversial. Many black leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., did not want children involved in the protests. And some white leaders, such as Robert Kennedy, condemned the civil rights movement for "using" kids, wrote Levinson, who divides her time between Brookline and Austin, Texas.

In **"We've Got a Job,"** the story belongs to four of the young protesters whom Levinson interviewed over a number of years. James W. Stewart recalled that the jail cell he was in was packed so tight that most of the young prisoners were forced to stand. "We had to sleep in shifts," he said.