



GALLERY OF DISTINGUISHED CITIZENS INDUCTEE 1981

SIDNEY W. SMYER spent 33 years as a lawyer and eight years as a state legislator. His association with the Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce placed him in a leadership position as Birmingham struggled to a peaceful solution to its racial problems. In May 1961 he was in Tokyo, Japan when a photograph of the beating of a group of civil rights freedom riders at a Birmingham bus station ran on the front page of a Tokyo newspaper. He realized what a deadly effect such publicity could have and recognized that time for a change had come. He formed a powerful, confidential committee of 150 business leaders representing the executive decision makers. A subcommittee was formed to have direct dialogue with leaders of the black community in an effort to understand their grievances.

When a Birmingham Bar Association study recommended a Mayor-Council form of government, young community leaders pressed for the change. Mr. Smyer organized the business and civic leadership to support the referendum, which the people approved. This leadership coalition helped meet the crisis of the 1963 civil rights demonstrations led by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the associate Shuttlesworth invited to Birmingham to join in the fight for freedom and equality; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mr. Smyer personally convinced President John F. Kennedy that Birmingham could meet this crisis without the intervention of federal forces. It was Mr. Smyer who stepped before the television cameras to announce agreements of understanding between blacks and whites, becoming the focal point of reaction from the large and vocal elements of the community who resisted all change.