

Learning and Reading! The Freedom School Movement

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Last year, Mississippi had the lowest national ACT test score average: 18.4. The quality of public education effects standardized test scores, and scores determine which college disciplines high school graduates can pursue; therefore, testing is a modern form of exclusion.

Historically, educators transformed sticks into pencils, the dirt into chalkboards, and church pews into desks to teach students willing to learn. The Freedom School movement grew out of Freedom Summer-1964. Alternate educational programs fueled the proposition that every citizen has the right to learn which is a significant starting point toward self-sufficiency.

Freedom Summer activists joined forces and launched a massive attack on Mississippi's racist White Power Structure. The KKK and the White Citizens Council resisted social change. Black casualties included economic reprisals, church burnings, bombings, and death. The June 21, 1964 missing person search for CORE workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman placed the national spotlight on Mississippi. Over 1,000 citizens travelled to Mississippi to do their part to help make their country a better place for everyone. Like Medgar Evers, and others, Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman became movement martyrs.

White Mississippians were notorious for maintaining exclusionary societal practices which placed brakes on the education of Black America. Black libraries were practically nonexistent and those that did exist, housed limited book collections. Blacks could not use the libraries with the largest book collections because they were reserved for White citizens. However, Freedom Schools gave educators freedom. Volunteers were empowered because they controlled the curriculum. Pupils were energized because they were welcomed.

Mike Sayer, a SNCC worker, invited his parents, Albert (Abe) and Florence Sayer, both Brooklyn teachers, to become volunteer teachers at a Freedom School in Meridian, Mississippi, during Freedom Summer. The Freedom School concept worked and it worked well. Adult residents learned non-violent protest tactics, how to fill out voter registration cards, and civics; youth were exposed to leading Negro publications such as *Ebony* and the *Chicago Defender*. Black youth identified and were inspired by the examples of people who looked like them.

Charles Cobb, Jr., SNCC, author of *Freedom's Struggle and Freedom Schools*, reported that the first Freedom Schools were ran by abolitionists who secretly taught enslaved Africans how to read and write. Freedom Schools resemble Citizenship Schools. In 1932, the celebrated Myles Horton founded a Citizenship School in New Market, Tennessee, which taught democratic citizenship. Septima Clark organized Citizenship Schools on John's Island, South Carolina, in 1952 to promote reading and writing literacy.

During the 1960s, racism was as thick in New York as it was in Mississippi. G. David Singleton, a native of Willows, California, relocated to the Bronx in 1963 under the umbrella of the United Presbyterian Church to become a youth minister at Soundview Presbyterian Church. The Bronx CORE was headquartered in the church. He candidly declared, "Gross discrimination existed in the boroughs." CORE launched Freedom Schools and worked with other organizations to fight mountains of racism. "I was glad



G. David Singleton speaking at a Freedom School graduation in Birmingham, AL in 1967

they accepted my help," he noted.

Singleton's maternal grandmother was an Indian; his mother was a school teacher and his father was a country sheriff. Singleton declared, "My heart ached because Whites treated Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans so badly. I joined the movement as a matter of fairness."

He felt New York City's refusal to extend work contracts and employment to Black plumbers because of the color of their skin was "just wrong". It didn't take long for him to see the severe tensions between the Italians, the Catholics, the Blacks, and the Latinos. White Castle restaurants was a popular hangout for youth. However, the restaurant only hired Whites, even though most of its business was derived from Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and people of color.

Ossie and Ruby Dee Davis, famous Black actors, spoke at rallies to help organizers mobilize the community. Civil rights groups joined forces and launched mass demonstrations against White Castle. "Even though the police were presence, Whites in the crowd were very hostile," he added. "One evening, a group of White youth caught me by myself, called me 'a N lover' and threatened to harm me the next time they saw me," Singleton stated.

Parents and leaders had deep grievances with the school system which taught inaccurate Black History facts; there were no Blacks on the school board, and the schools were not adequately funded. "There was a strong movement toward community control of the schools," Singleton declared. "Herb Callender, who led CORE's Bronx operations advocated Freedom Schools teach non-violent organizing tactics to support the demonstrations and academic lessons to supplement school deficiencies," he added.

On February 3, 1964, G. David Singleton took about 100 youth who lived in the Sound View Housing Projects in the Bronx to a mass rally at the New York Department of Education at 110 Livingston Street in Brooklyn. "Over, 400,000 New Yorkers participated in the demonstration," Singleton remarked. "Adam Clayton Powell and Malcolm X spoke to the crowds," he added.

"Malcolm X told the audience about his trip to Mecca. The crowd loved him. He and Powell were great storytellers," Singleton stated. "I got the opportunity to ask Malcolm X a question when he exited the podium," he added. "What role should White people play in civil rights?" Singleton asked Malcolm X. "You're here," Malcolm X replied.

During Freedom Summer, Singleton became a youth minister at Handley Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. They set up Freedom Schools to feed the minds of youth ages 10 to 16. Dr. Hurbert C. Terrell, Pastor, Miller Memorial Presbyterian Church, ran a Freedom School from 1964 to 1966. "We ob-

tained educational resources from Miles College to support the Black History curriculum; our primary focus was basic literacy, reading, and math," Singleton said.

Miles College staff introduced Singleton to books by Richard Wright. "Understanding the culture was very important to the work," Singleton concluded. "The Freedom School movement was very effective," he declared. Today, Singleton serves on the board of the Rural Development

Leadership Network, a multicultural organization based in New York City, and he works with American Indian tribes in California.

Gadsden, Alabama, SCLC member Beulah Adkins Sealey attended a Freedom School in Dorchester, Alabama, in 1965. "Andrew Young was my instructor," she noted. "We were taught state laws and how to conduct ourselves at demonstrations," she added. "It was a nice crowd there. Some people travelled from Georgia,

South Carolina, and Tennessee," she said. Sealey directed St. John Methodist Church's youth choir on 9th St. which consisted of 20 girls; shortly afterward, she organized the first lunch counter sit-in; she and the girls were arrested and jailed for 11 days. Soon, downtown Gadsden was integrated. Today, Beulah Thomas (age 95) lives in Buffalo, New York.

Beatrice Clark Shelby, Executive Director, Boys, Girls, Adults Community Devel-

opment Center in Marvell, Arkansas, operated Freedom Schools from 2007 to 2016. "We used the Children's Defense Fund's Freedom School curriculum," she stated. Marian Wright Edelman, President, Founder, Children's Defense Fund, re-established Freedom School programming in 1995; over 200 schools operate each summer across the nation. Oleta Garrett Fitzgerald directs the Children's Defense Fund's Southern Regional Office.

"We had 70 children enrolled at the height of our programming," Shelby proudly announced. The local school system supported their program. The curriculum focused on literacy, reading, health, exercise, and fitness. "One intern served 10 children, who learned Black History and received books at the end of the summer to add to their home library," she added.

Shelby declared, "Every child can benefit from the 'Drop everything and read campaign.'" The sound of the group chant, "There is no school like Freedom School," breeds optimism. Hopefully, more parents will be inspired to teach children at home from birth...



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