

What the Civil Rights Movement Can Teach Us Today

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In the summer of 2005, four of us decided to open the San Francisco Freedom School. We were inspired to offer free Saturday classes on Civil Rights history because of how important the 1964 Freedom Schools were to the success of the Civil Rights Movement, which culminated in the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964. The seeds of Freedom Summer were planted many years before 1964. One of the planters of seeds was Myles Horton who founded the Highlander School in 1932.

Septima Clark went to Highlander in 1954 (as did Rosa Parks). Clark developed the idea of Citizenship Schools at Highlander. These schools were a crucial part of the voting rights work that King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began doing after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Some of the Citizenship School graduates, like Victoria Gray, and some members of SNCC, like Bob Moses, planted the seeds of a movement that ended fear and segregation in Mississippi.

But those seeds could not have been planted without fertile soil, soil cultivated by native Mississippians such as Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers. Upon returning from fighting in World War II, these men and countless others were determined to continue fighting for democracy at home. They each became involved in organizing local chapters of the NAACP. These chapters were crucial building blocks of an infrastructure that allowed the Freedom movement to create the coalition that broke the back of segregation in Mississippi and the South.

Knowing the specifics, the nitty-gritty detail, of this history and its long and complex roots became one of the most important parts of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom School curriculum. Public school students today do not study this kind of history. They do not learn that fundamental, systemic reform happens only in the context of a social movement. And that social movements only happen at the right historical moment after everyday people have been working together for many, many years learning how to organize the community, how to deal with the media, and understand what the issues are.

Everyday people must lay the groundwork for a social movement by doing very ordinary acts—having meetings, developing infrastructure, developing a cadre of experienced organizers, printing leaflets, researching issues, debating those issues, printing more leaflets, having vigils, planning boycotts, doing more research, planning and executing sit-ins, die-ins, kneel-ins, jail-ins. That is what Esau Jenkins, Jo Ann Robinson, E.D. Nixon, Diane Nash, Herbert Lee, Annelle Ponder, Fannie Lou Hamer and thousands upon thousands of others did.

But our public schools do not teach the history whose lesson is that everyday people must do their part in organizing and empowering their own communities. We have created the SF Freedom School in order to teach this history. Enlisting the help of the Bay Area Civil Rights Veterans (as our speakers), we have designed a curriculum each summer since 2005 that uses the history of the Civil Rights movement to teach us today how to develop local leadership, use nonviolent direct action, understand the relationship between education, the arts and organizing, analyse power relationships, overcome contradictions within the movement and know our place in the stream of history—seven topics for seven Saturdays in July and August. We looked to the 1964 Freedom School Curriculum to help us develop these topics. The 1964 Curriculum argued: Your life can be better than it is right now (Unit I) but going north will not improve it (Unit II). You need to stay and fight to improve the schools, housing, and hospitals in Mississippi. This fight has not been waged in the past because Negroes [original terminology] have internalized the myths about them (Unit III) and face a white power structure (Unit IV). The rich white elites have been able to enlist poor whites by playing on their fears—poor whites are victims too (Unit V). As long as poor Negroes and poor whites desire “material things” over “soul things,” they can be manipulated by fear and thus deprived of both material *and* soul things (Unit VI). Direct action is essential (Unit VII).

Please join us this summer and be inspired by the recent past and those who lived it. Visit our website:
EducationandDemocracy.org