

Lessons from the Southern Freedom Movement

By Kathy Emery

August 15th was the last Saturday of the fifth summer SF Freedom School Summer Program. When we started in 2005, we were, primarily, inspired by the curriculum and goals of Freedom Schools of Mississippi in 1964, one of which was to teach the authentic history of African Americans in U.S. history. We created a program in which we study the DETAILS of the Southern Freedom Movement. Understanding the details—the facts of this history—is as important today as understanding that the health care bills being debated in the U.S. House and Senate do not mention “death panels.” I spend my time promoting the curriculum of the SF Freedom School because I believe that, without detailed and accurate knowledge of the past and the present, we, the people, cannot have any control of where we are going in the future.

As I have listened to our guest speakers every summer, watched the films, and read the books along with the other SFFS participants, it has become increasingly clear to me that there will be no progress today towards human rights, freedom and dignity without the following understanding by current day activists:

We need an organization like SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) was -- an organization independent of corporate and government funding so it can be committed to strategic nonviolent direct action that: (1) dramatizes the injustices that exist; (2) offers a variety of means by which bystanders can get involved; (3) develops local leadership/groups independent of itself; and (4) cuts through the current balkanized organizing by nonprofits. Today, nonprofits suffer from historical amnesia. They focus on one issue and jealously guard their work from encroachment from other nonprofits (for fear of losing their funding). As a result, nonprofits focus on helping battered women, not stopping the battering. They focus on “closing the achievement gap” instead of challenging the role that education plays in legitimizing the unprecedented wage gap in this country.

Compare this to the goals of COFO in Mississippi in 1964. The Congress of Federated Organizations was a coalition of SNCC, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality. They united in order to coordinate a successful assault on the isolated and apartheid ridden state of Mississippi during the summer of 1964.

“COFO works in two major areas: 1) Political; 2) Educational and social. [The political program is to create an alternative state political party in order to challenge the legitimacy of the all white Democratic Party at the National Convention in August in Atlantic City, N.J.] The educational and social programs are the Freedom Schools, Federal Programs, Literacy, Work-study, Food and Clothing and Community Centers. Some of these are in operation; others are in the process of being developed.

Freedom Schools are planned for the summer of 1964. There are several things which hopefully will be accomplished by the Schools. (1) to provide remedial instruction in basic educational skills but more importantly (2) to implant habits of free thinking and ideas of how a free society works, and (3) to lay the groundwork for a statewide youth movement [in support of COFO's political program.]" (from the 1964 Mississippi *Freedom School Curriculum* that can be found at educationanddemocracy.org)

We need an organization today that can forge a coalition of groups that could pursue "political programs." We also need a bunch of "freedom schools" popping up all over the place that teach the history of organized rebellion through a progressive pedagogy. These are only some of the relevant lessons I have learned from the details of the authentic history of the Southern Freedom Movement as told by people who lived them.