



Minneapolis Students Take Civil Rights Tour

by Yvonne Brekhus and Searcie Cassidine, Southside Family School

Note: Southside Family School (SFS) in Minneapolis is a 30-year-old K-8 alternative school with a strong social justice curriculum. Yvonne Brekhus and Searcie Cassidine, both 8th graders, are members of the Student Association for the Advancement of Children as People (SAACP), an organization started by SFS students. The SAACP has been active, through letter writing, speeches at demonstrations, and picketing, on behalf of welfare and civil rights, and against police brutality, the death penalty, and the current "War on Terrorism." Members of the SAACP are currently educating themselves on the race and class aspects of redistricting. --Frieda Gardner, WAMM.

As student activists, we were happy to study the Civil Rights movement and then visit some of the states where that movement took place. We wanted to see the places where history was made, and especially to meet people who as young students made that history. On March 26, 2002, eighteen SFS students, ranging in age from eleven to fourteen, boarded a tour bus, accompanied by our teachers, several Americorps volunteers, a writer, and a photographer. We never just sat on this bus; we were always reading or discussing history, performing skits about our readings, watching historical videos, or singing freedom songs. The ride was actually fun!

Our first stop was Nashville, Tennessee, where we met Kwame Leo Lillard and Bernard Lafayette, former student activists who later became founders of the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They emphasized how setbacks during a struggle can also be opportunities. For example, in 1960, the home of Alexander Looby, an African-American activist lawyer, was bombed by White supremacists. Before this terrible event, many Nashville adults were too scared to become involved. But after the bombing, Kwame and Bernard, instead of getting discouraged, organized a protest march, and soon thousands of adults joined them. When they got to city hall, Nashville's mayor was persuaded to admit that as a man, he thought segregation was wrong. At the time, this was a revolutionary thing for a White elected official in the South to say.

That march started to turn things around in Nashville, but Kwame and Bernard told us that working against injustice is the work of a lifetime. Legal segregation may be a thing of the past in the South, but racial and economic injustice continues throughout the country. Bernard fights the prison-industrial complex. Kwame supports the reparations movement and soon led us on a chanting, singing march to the Tennessee State Legislature, where we met a representative who has advanced a reparations bill.

In Birmingham, Alabama, once known as Bombingham for its racist violence, we met Myrna Carter Jackson and Audrey Faye Hendriks, who were both part of the Children's Crusade of 1963. Kids as young as six years old faced state troopers, vicious dogs, high-powered fire hoses, and days in crowded jail cells. In the six days of the Crusade, over 2,000 children were arrested. Their actions and the publicity they received forced the city "fathers" to begin desegregating public facilities. Myrna and Audrey talked about the excitement and pride involved in making history. And they said how important it was to stand and sing together when they were afraid.

We will always remember how Hollis Watkins of Jackson, Mississippi, mixed singing freedom songs with

teaching about voter registration struggles of the past and present. He and his friend Jimmy Travis described the constant threats, beatings, bullet wounds, and brutal treatment in the jails of the civil rights time. Watkins also told us about his current organization, Southern Echo, which does everything from voter education to promoting sustainable agriculture, to attacking the catfish farms that put toxic chemicals in local water.

At our last stop, Memphis, we were sad to see the motel where Martin Luther King was killed. But the motel is now part of the MLK museum, where the work of all the heroes and "sheroes" of the fight against racism is celebrated. We also talked to Arun Gandhi, grandson and student of Mohandas Gandhi. He helped us make connections between history past and present, and between our individual and political actions.

In every place we visited, we toured churches, meeting places, memorials, and parks related to the civil rights movement. Sometimes we got guided tours of whole cities, seeing integrated schools and city council rooms, or neighborhoods still suffering from economic violence. But no place was as exciting as the inspiring people we met and talked to about their lives and ideas. They helped us understand that history will repeat itself if we don't learn from past mistakes. And they showed us that all of us can make history, and make a better world.

Peace and Justice School Resources

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