



THE NEW BLACK

FREEDOM SUMMER TOUR FAQ

MAY 2014

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“So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind—it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact. I can only submit to the edict of others.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., May 17, 1957

The New Black Freedom Summer Tour, curated by Spectrum Queer Media, commemorates the 50th Anniversary of Freedom Summer, when student volunteers from around the country joined organizers and African-Americans in Mississippi to support freedom schools and voter registration activities. The multi-city public education and engagement campaign will bring the award-winning documentary *The New Black* to communities around the country, and include workshops, plenaries, and discussion panels featuring local and community faith leaders, LGBT activists and members of *The New Black* team.

The tour kicks off April 2014, with stops in Chicago, Oakland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Atlanta and a dozen other cities, before arriving at its final destination—the official commemoration of Freedom Summer in Jackson, Mississippi—on June 28, 2014. To find out more—about the documentary *The New Black*, the historical and contemporary importance of Freedom Summer, or how to attend or support the tour—please review the FAQ below, which also includes contact information for the film team and tour organizers.

WHAT WAS FREEDOM SUMMER?

Freedom Summer was a nonviolent 10-week campaign to challenge Mississippi’s historically racist voting policies by registering African-Americans to vote during the summer of 1964. The “Mississippi Summer Project,” as it was then called, enlisted volunteers from around the country—most of them young, white students from colleges in the North—in an effort to help black Mississippians gain their Constitutionally granted voting rights and shine a national light on the state’s longstanding history of voter suppression and intimidation. The project also established freedom schools and the integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), a direct challenger to the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party.

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WHY WAS FREEDOM SUMMER NECESSARY?

By 1964, a decade into the Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi had proven itself “the home of white supremacy.”¹ While modest civil rights gains had been achieved in other parts of the South, white Mississippians remained steadfastly segregationist, rendering the state’s African-American citizens among the most politically, economically, and educationally disenfranchised and disempowered in the country. In 1962, though home to one of the largest black populations in the U.S., just 6.7 percent of Mississippi’s eligible black citizens were registered to vote,² the lowest rate in the country.³ The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had been working in the state since 1961, had difficulty recruiting black Mississippians to attempt to register in the face of virulent and violent white opposition. There were 539 lynchings of African-Americans in Mississippi between 1882 and 1964, and countless other acts of intimidation and violence that proved the most minor black resistance could incur life threatening consequences. The federal government, for its part, turned a blind eye to what Mississippi segregationists called a “states rights” issue.

HOW WAS FREEDOM SUMMER PLANNED?

In late 1963, determined to bring national attention to the Mississippi situation, SNCC activist Robert Moses—in coalition with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and NAACP—organized the “Mississippi Summer Project.” The campaign would recruit hundreds of volunteers, primarily young white college students from the North, to come to Mississippi and spend 10 weeks registering African-Americans to vote, teaching in freedom schools and supporting the creation of a new, inclusive political party. Despite cautionary warnings about the likelihood of arrest, physical attacks and other potential dangers, student response exceeded expectations. After a training and orientation held in Oxford, Ohio, some 700 student volunteers were dispatched to African-American communities around the state of Mississippi.⁵

WERE OTHER, NON-STUDENT VOLUNTEERS INVOLVED IN FREEDOM SUMMER?

Yes. Other volunteers provided support services to students and SNCC activists working in the field. For example, attorney volunteers from the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, National Lawyers Guild and NAACP Legal Defense Fund provided free counsel in response to arrests and other legal issues. Medical professionals from the Medical Committee for Human Rights offered emergency health care to both volunteer field workers and black Mississippi residents. Christian and Jewish clergy from the National Council of Churches brought religious ministry and participated in protests. It’s also critical to recognize the tremendous bravery of African-American Mississippi residents who took part in the campaign, all of whom knew petty and violent reprisals might come—perhaps long after the departure of the student volunteers and the national spotlight that followed them. For these black Mississippians, registering to vote, attending freedom schools, participating in the political process—merely providing room and board for volunteers, as hundreds did—put their lives and livelihoods at risk.

¹ Original “Mississippi Summer Project” Brochure. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1964.

² McAdam, Doug. *Freedom Summer*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 26.

³ Congress of Racial Equality, 2014.

⁴ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*. 26.

⁵ “Freedom Summer.” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.

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WHAT TOOK PLACE DURING FREEDOM SUMMER?

The very first day of the campaign saw the disappearance of three young activists: James Chaney, who was black, and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who were white. Whereas the bombings, burnings and beatings of local African-Americans had drawn little attention from outside the state, the disappearance of two young white men brought unprecedented national media and public attention to Mississippi. President Lyndon B. Johnson, suddenly moved to action, sent hundreds of FBI agents and sailors to search for the missing volunteers. On August 4, 1964, the bodies of the three slain activists were found. (The search also led to the unintentional discovery of the bodies of eight additional black men, three of whom were identified as known civil rights activists.⁶) An act of intimidation that was surely meant to end Freedom Summer before it started, the murders instead provoked national outrage and condemnation that helped garner support for the civil rights cause around the country.

There were also successes. More than 40 freedom schools, which taught fundamentals including math and reading—and subjects prohibited by state law to black students, such as constitutional rights and black history—opened throughout Mississippi, serving more than 3,000 students, young and old.⁷ The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), although unsuccessful in being recognized by party leaders at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, held a statewide convention and engaged tens of thousands of African-American Mississippians in the political process for the first time. And while few blacks were able to register to vote as a result of the campaign, national awareness of the brutality of Jim Crow helped gain white sympathizers around the country. The net effect of that support bolstered the strength of the Civil Rights Movement, both in Mississippi and throughout the South.

DID FREEDOM SUMMER HAVE ANY LEGISLATIVE IMPACT?

With public sentiment in favor of the protesters, Congress and President Johnson had the political will to ensure the passage of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. Just over one year later, on August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act, which effectively prohibited racial discrimination in voting. The bill also made unconstitutional the use of literacy tests, grandfather clauses, poll taxes and other tools that had been used throughout the South to disenfranchise black voters. The Voting Rights Act is widely considered one of the most effect legislative achievements in the U.S.'s history.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

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WHY IS THE STORY OF FREEDOM SUMMER SO RELEVANT NOW?

Voting rights protections currently face threats not seen since the civil rights era. In a landmark 2013 ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the Voting Rights Act. The 1965 bill had previously served as a bulwark against racism and discrimination at the ballot box by requiring states with histories of minority voter suppression to seek federal approval for changes to voting laws. The court's invalidation of a core pillar of the act didn't just chip away at the law's effectiveness, but essentially dismantled it wholesale. Within hours of SCOTUS's decision, Texas, Alabama and Mississippi announced plans to institute voter I.D. requirements previously held unconstitutional under federal law. The story of Freedom Summer, and the lessons it holds, seem more relevant than ever.

Voting rights are crucial because voting is power. Because the notion of democracy rests on equal access to the ballot and the democratic process. Because your vote is your voice. As we see in *The New Black*, voting can be a tool—in many cases, the best and only tool—against oppression. It may serve as a weapon in the battle for civil rights, or a mechanism for positive social change and progress. Find out what you can do to help protect the right of every American citizen to vote.

HOW CAN I BE INVOLVED WITH THE FREEDOM SUMMER TOUR TO CONTINUE THIS CONVERSATION?

The New Black tour is produced by Spectrum Queer Media. For questions about attending a screening or to learn more about sponsorship and other ways to provide support, please contact Monica Anderson at 510-239-7197 or via email at ourKinFolkz@gmail.com

For more, check out *The New Black* Freedom Summer Tour trailer at <http://bit.ly/freedom-summer-tour>



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