

We, the People

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Monday, 07 July 2014 15:26



We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. – Preamble to the U.S. Constitution

Those of us in Mississippi for the historic 1964 Freedom Summer anniversary know very well none of it could have unfolded in the way it did without the quiet and courageous leadership of Robert Moses and David Dennis. Bob, a Harlem-born son of a janitor and graduate of Hamilton College who had studied philosophy at Harvard, left a job teaching mathematics at New York City's private Horace Mann School to work for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and in 1961 began leading a voter registration project in Mississippi where voting was a White sport with no or few Blacks allowed to play in many counties. Dave, who grew up in a Louisiana sharecropping family, had been a Freedom Rider and sit-in organizer in Louisiana before becoming the Mississippi director for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In 1962 they became co-directors of the newly formed Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of the major national and local civil rights organizations working in Mississippi.

After continuing frustrating and dangerous struggles to gain visibility for their efforts against Mississippi's racist violence and exclusion of Black citizens from political participation, including the right to vote, with the collusion of state and local officials and law enforcement officers and White terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, Bob Moses created the Freedom Summer strategy seeing the need to engage White volunteers that the country would care more about. He and Dave worked tirelessly with others to plan and coordinate the logistics for recruiting mostly White students aided by Allard Lowenstein who reached out to campuses across the country. Those students converged in the state to join with local Black citizens, SNCC workers, and local civil rights workers to fight for the constitutional rights of Black citizens including the right to vote.

Fifty years later, Bob Moses and Dave Dennis are still fighting passionately on another critical frontier in the Civil Rights Movement and our nation: to ensure a quality public school education as a federal constitutional right for all children. Every child in America regardless of the lottery of state geography should have the right to a quality education. A child in Mississippi should have

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no less right to be prepared for the future than a child in Massachusetts.

In 1982 Bob founded the Algebra Project using math as an organizing tool—with a special focus on bringing math skills and advanced math courses to poor children, especially non-White children of color. The Algebra Project believes math literacy is the key to 21st century citizenship, opening up the doors of opportunity required to succeed in our technology-based society. Lack of advanced math opportunities is often a symptom of other shortcomings in a school's failure to provide a high quality education for its students. After a career as a lawyer in Louisiana, Dave became a director of the Algebra Project's Southern Initiative.

In June, the Children's Defense Fund honored them both with our Ella Baker Leadership Award at our national training for nearly 2,000 college age young people preparing to teach and lead Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® programs for over 12,600 pre-K through 12th grade students in 29 states and 102 cities across the country this summer. CDF Freedom Schools quality summer literacy and child empowerment programs are inspired by and build on the experience of the 1964 Freedom Summer movement. Children need quality year round summer and after school educational opportunities to avoid learning loss and we are grateful that Bob Moses and Dave Dennis reminded CDF's newest class of young educators and mentors of the key role they must play in this 21st century struggle.

Dave made the connection between their work today and the 50th anniversary celebration of Freedom Summer very clear: "We're looking at quality education as a constitutional right . . . And this is where you play that role . . . When the sharecroppers and others stood up and made the demand that 'I want to be a first-class citizen,' that's when this country began to say, 'I've got to look at this.' Well, now, in terms of education, those sharecroppers—you are the sharecroppers. You have to make that stand and say, 'I demand a quality education for myself and my children in the future.' So we're calling this to action this summer. Mississippi Freedom Summer is not just about a celebration. It's about organizing, bringing young people together from around the country, where we can begin to share with you our stories, but also our skills, what we know about organizing. And we want you to go out and continue to do what you're doing now."

Bob with his trademark powerful quiet simplicity and directness began by asking the young leaders to repeat the Preamble to the Constitution after him—"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Bob then said: "It does not say we, the President—it couldn't, because there was no President. It does not say we, the Supreme Court, or we, the Congress, because they were not in existence. It did not say what it could have said—it could have said we, the citizens of the several states, but it did not say that; if it had, we would be a very different country. It just says we, the people. So, we, the people, have to take over this country . . . We, the people, folks. You, the people." And with those words the crowd of young Freedom Schools leaders—and educators everywhere—were given their marching orders to do their part to finish the unfinished

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business of the Civil Rights Movement by establishing a constitutional right for every child to a quality education in our nation and creating a level playing field regardless of lottery of geography.

I traveled to Mississippi this week along with Bob Moses, Dave Dennis, and hundreds of others including young leaders from around the country to celebrate the anniversary of Freedom Summer. Many of us retraced the tragic last trip James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner took to Neshoba County and visited their killing site where the violent racial hatred of the Ku Klux Klan ended their lives but ignited the movement towards a more just Mississippi and America. As much progress as has been made in Mississippi over the last half century, so much remains to be done. Mississippi ranks 50th, the worst, among all states in the percentage of children who are poor (34.7%); 49th in the percentage of households that lacked access to adequate food; and 49th in the percentage of high school students graduating on time. It is tragic that in 2013 79 percent of Mississippi's fourth grade public school students were unable to read at grade level and 74 percent were unable to compute at grade level; 89 percent of Black fourth graders could not read and 89 percent could not compute at great level.

We often say with pride that Mississippi has the largest number of Black elected officials in the nation—yet the political leaders of that state still feel they can deny more than 137,000 people health care and refuse the Medicaid expansion. I hope Black elected officials will demand that health care be made available for those who need it and demand quality education for the children who cannot read or write or compute and are being sentenced to social and economic death and the prison system without education and jobs and hope for the future. Fifty years later it's time for another movement to demand a fairer and more just Mississippi and America and end the violence of poverty and illiteracy. Repeat after me: We, the people.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.