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Oxford and Miami University reflect with pride on role in Freedom Summer 50 years ago

'These were historic times'

OXFORD, Ohio – Fifty years ago, 800 civil rights activists strode into Oxford, a college town where public pools and movie theaters were desegregated just a decade earlier. They came to train for a new kind of war, fought in the backwaters of Mississippi, where they would join a movement to help African Americans throughout the South gain full rights as American citizens.

Western College for Women, adjacent to Miami University, was the last-minute choice to host the training for what would become known as Freedom Summer. Berea College in Berea, Ky., was the planned training site until a prominent alumnus from Mississippi persuaded Berea's president to cancel.

Instead, Western, which would merge with Miami in the 1970s, welcomed students and other young people to train to help register black voters in Mississippi and teach in makeshift "Freedom Schools" to counter the unequal access to education that African Americans were experiencing.

Five veterans of Freedom Summer who eventually settled in Oxford met with WCPO and reflected on those events that occurred 50 years ago as well as the successes and failures of the Civil Rights movement since.

Culture Clash

Most Freedom Summer volunteers were white and from middle-class families. Many were idealistic, but the trainers made sure that everyone who graduated from the two one-week training sessions was there for the right reasons.

"They wanted to root out do-gooders who pictured themselves as saviors of the Negroes and also to enhance skills to teach and register voters," said Rick Momeyer, now a retired Miami philosophy professor and Oxford resident. He came to Oxford for the first time in June 1964 to help train the Mississippi volunteers.

Momeyer arrived for the second week of training just after the first set of volunteers had set off for Mississippi. The first week's training had been marred by class and racial tension between veteran activists and newcomers who some activists thought weren't taking the job seriously enough.

"Many of the volunteers were upper-middle-class college students. Their knowledge of black people was of their maids and servants," Momeyer said.

Those fractures virtually disappeared overnight when, on Sunday June 21, three volunteers – James Chaney of Mississippi, and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner of New York – failed to check in to say they were safe after investigating a recently fire-bombed church where they had planned to conduct a Freedom School, near Philadelphia, Miss.

Six more weeks would pass before the remains of the three men were found buried in an earthen dam in Neshoba County, Miss. They had been arrested in Philadelphia on a speeding charge, jailed and then released with a group of Ku Klux Klansmen waiting for them. Another 35 years would pass before seven KKK members would be prosecuted for the crime, but Bob Moses, a leader of the training, seemed to know immediately that the young men had been killed.

"Monday morning, we gathered in the auditorium. (Moses) was very soft-spoken but charismatic, brilliant, really. Bob Moses stood in front of us to give us the orientation, and three field secretaries pulled him aside to give him the latest update about our missing colleagues," Momeyer said.

"He must have stood for at least two minutes staring at his feet before he looked up at us. And then he told us that Mississippi is a terrorist state and that he had no doubt they were dead, and this was the last opportunity for us not to go. Nobody would judge us for turning back," he said.

None left of his own accord, though a few volunteers were "dragged away by their parents," Momeyer recalled.

Momeyer, who had spent time in southwest Georgia fighting segregationist policies and supporting an African-American's unsuccessful congressional run, said he helped Freedom Summer volunteers by participating in role-playing scenarios that taught them how to protect their heads and groins while being beaten.

Freedom Summer training and the tragedy that befell three of its graduates left its mark on Oxford, first by drawing a fraction of its residents to rally around the volunteers and, very gradually, for the town and Miami to embrace and celebrate their role in the much larger Civil Rights struggle.

More than 60 Oxford residents coalesced that June to form what would become Friends of the Freedom Summer project, providing housing for the volunteers while they were in Oxford, money for their missions and correspondence to keep up their spirits. Families

like Bob and Jane Strippel "adopted" individual students.

"It was just a natural concern that came out of our work on civil rights," Jane Strippel said in an interview. Her late husband was dean of student affairs at Miami in 1964. While some volunteers came from wealthy families, others didn't have the money to take care of themselves over the summer, the Strippels learned in conversations with students.

"That's how it started, people thinking about how we could bring people in the community together to help," Strippel said. "It was a beautiful thing. These were historic times, with professors, community people, different walks of life all coming together."

While some embraced the activists, most greeted them with indifference and some with hostility. An "Oxford Press" editorial that ran on July 9, 1964 – now housed in the Western College Memorial Archives – argued that Oxford residents ought to be commended "for their dispassionate tolerance, their respectful curiosity and their reasonable forbearance with these recent visitors," going on to complain about students swearing at people walking toward a church wedding and whiskey bottles littering a campus lawn.

"To the extent that this chip-on-the-shoulder, ill-kempt element is typical of those attending the conference sessions here, Lord help Mississippi!" the editorial said.

Sibyl Miller was a student at Miami who socialized with Freedom Summer participants before starting a career in social work, rising to executive director of the YWCA of Hamilton. She viewed Oxford's reaction to the trainees generally as one of neglect.

"And I would not call it a benign neglect," she said. "The town itself did not welcome the group. Thank God for the Friends of the Freedom Summer because the basic experience was that the town didn't like Freedom Summer."

Don Nelson, Miami's Adviser to Foreign Students at the time, remembers a mix of support and disapproval from the congregation at the Methodist church he attended.

"For the most part they were not vocally opposed, but I found out who my real friends were," he said.

Nelson rose to become Miami's director of international education services before retiring. He sports a well-trimmed beard today, similar to the one he grew for the first time in 1964 to the chagrin of some in his congregation, who accused him of looking like the Freedom Summer agitators.

In addition to adopting a student, Nelson spent time disabling the exterior latches on the hoods of cars destined for Mississippi to make them harder to rig with bombs.

Bill Miller, an African American Miami graduate and an Oxford native born in 1943, has very few memories of segregation, although he said his parents wordlessly steered them toward events and facilities where they would be welcomed. As a child, there were summer festivals on the north and south ends of town, and black residents knew that their

designated spot was the north-side party.

"I think that my parents just sheltered me. I don't think they ever felt welcomed in the stores in Oxford," he said, opting to drive to Cincinnati instead.

Sibyl and Bill Miller, who fell in love at Miami and later married, had participated in a voter registration drive in Greensboro, N.C. before Freedom Summer.

Bill Miller's grandfather, Simon Miller, was president of the local NAACP and led the effort to desegregate pools, movie theaters and all other facilities. His uncle Arthur Miller followed in Simon's footsteps, becoming a major civil rights leader in Oxford.

Sibyl and Bill Miller enthusiastically supported the Freedom Summer volunteer's mission. Sibyl Miller remembers the camaraderie. "The folk music, the guitar playing, the freedom songs. We sat in the sun," she said. "It was very moving to be with these people."

For years, Oxford's role in Freedom Summer stayed in the shadows. But as society changed, Miami and Oxford gradually came to celebrate their place in the Civil Rights struggle. Momeyer credits Miami President James Garland with embracing the university's inherited legacy. During his tenure in the late 1990s, the Freedom Summer Memorial was developed. It was dedicated in 2000.

Looking back over 50 years, Momeyer said the arc of history is bending toward justice, just as Martin Luther King, Jr. had predicted.

"It is, but it bends slowly. I don't discount for a minute the progress we made," he said.

Did Momeyer think, in 1964, that the country would elect a black president in his lifetime?

"Not for a moment," he said.

In October, Miami will continue its full embrace of the legacy of Freedom Summer by hosting a three-day conference, entitled, "50 Years After Freedom Summer: Understanding the Past, Building the Future."

Jacqueline Johnson, Western College archivist and editor of "Finding Freedom: Memorializing the Voices of Freedom Summer," is coordinating efforts to reunite as many of the Freedom Summer participants as possible at the conference as well as welcoming the public to learn more about the historic events.

For all the progress made, Momeyer and the others have been disheartened by setbacks like the Supreme Court's decision to remove key portions of the Voting Rights Act and the subsequent move by some southern states to enact changes to voting laws like stricter ID requirements.

"I thought that was a thoroughly racist opinion and I thought it ignorant," Momeyer said.

"People who say that racism is over don't know the first thing about what King was striving for."

In Raleigh, where Bill and Sibyl Miller canvassed to register black voters in 1965, Don Nelson's daughter was arrested in May protesting North Carolina's new restriction on voting that the Republican legislature and governor passed after they were freed from the federal control that the Voting Rights Act had imposed.

"She has a court date coming up, and she's looking forward to it," Nelson said. "Things are regressing in Raleigh, it seems. It's really kind of unthinkable that these things are going to be taken away."

Sibyl Miller said voting restrictions are creating a new generation of civil rights activists. "They're stealing our voting rights, and people are not going to allow them to do that," she said. "Activism is back."



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Left to right: Rick Momeyer, Bill Miller, Don Nelson, Sibyl Miller; Center: Jane Strippel