

2014 Brown Fund Awards: A Mississippi Civil Rights Journey

By Jane Current

In July 2014, my sons Jon and Ben and I participated in a pilgrimage to sites from the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, also known as Freedom Summer. Our Mississippi Civil Rights Journey was organized by the UU College of Social Justice and the UU Living Legacy Project.

The trip was led by several talented and committed people, including the Rev. Gordon Gibson, who lived in Mississippi from 1969 through 1984 when he was the UU minister in the state, and Jimmy the bus driver, who lived in Birmingham, Alabama, “when the history came through.”

In Memphis we met our travel group, UUs of varied ages from many states. We toured the National Civil Rights Museum at the motel where Dr. King was shot. We attended Sunday worship at Centenary United Methodist Church, which in 1968 was led by the Rev. James Lawson, who asked Dr. King to come to Memphis.

In Mississippi, our bus traveled to Jackson, Hattiesburg, Meridian, Greenwood, Money, Ruleville, and Oxford. In most of these places we were introduced to civil rights veterans and family members of veterans who generously shared their personal and often harrowing experiences. These meetings made a great trip outstanding. And we visited three UU congregations who welcomed us with potluck suppers, each with a distinctive style of celebration.

In Jackson we stood in the house where Medgar Evers lived and died. At Tougaloo College, the Rev. Ed King, a major Movement voice, spoke to us in the chapel from which many protests marched. In Hattiesburg, Mrs. Vernon Dahmer and her son and daughter welcomed us to the farm where voting rights leader Vernon Dahmer died in the 1966 firebombing of their house.

In Meridian, we met Roscoe Jones. As a teen Roscoe struck up a connection with Michael Schwerner, a white newcomer who was starting a Freedom School and organizing voter registration. When they learned that people leaving an African American church in nearby Philadelphia were attacked, and that the church was burned, James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman went to investigate. The murder of these three civil rights workers, unlike many such murders, received national attention.



Jon (left) and Ben Current, shown with their mother, Jane, were the 2014 recipients of Brown Fund scholarships.

I learned that the big moments in the Movement that were pictured in the news or history class were made up of individuals. I was humbled by my poor awareness of life in a South iron-bound by segregation. Every day black people were threatened and, yes, terrorized. To step into voting rights work or direct action in their home communities, people had to wrestle with family opposition, loss of college scholarships or employment, a Movement leadership that was decidedly male, and fear for their lives. They did it anyway. On this trip we met people who acted for justice in the same way that they opened their hearts to a group of Unitarians on a bus.

