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A Last Will and Testament

The Freedom Riders' enduring legacy

by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D.

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JSRI Welcomes Ali Bustamante

The Jesuit Social Research Institute is excited to welcome Ali Bustamante as the new economic policy specialist. Mr. Bustamante is joining JSRI from the Center for Labor Research and Studies at Florida International University where he worked on various issues including but not limited to poverty, payday reform, and raising the minimum wage.

JSRI Upcoming Events

July 18

Dr. Mikulich's essay on the Freedom Riders will appear in the *National Catholic Reporter*.

July 31

JSRI's co-sponsor--the New Orleans Province of the Jesuits--merges with the Missouri Province to become our new co-sponsor: the U.S. Central and Southern Province. Loyola University continues to co-sponsor JSRI with the Province.

JSRI Recent Activities

July 2

Dr. Mikulich attended a Catholics for Repeal meeting concerning the death penalty.

June 30

Dr. Mikulich led a session on white complicity for Loyola's graduate "Multicultural Counseling" course.

June 19

Dr. Weishar discussed the politics of immigration reform with diplomats from India visiting the U.S. on fellowships with the Asia Foundation.

June 17

Dr. Weishar participated in a meeting about current prison reform efforts organized by the Langeloth Foundation in NYC.

June 16-21

Fr. Kammer and Ms. Baudouin led the Ministry of Management Institute held on Loyola's campus and sponsored by the New Orleans Jesuit Province.

June 13

At a time when there seems to be deepening conflict over the meaning of freedom, I invite readers to take the opportunity this Independence Day to reflect upon the sacrifices made by Freedom Riders in 1964. The Freedom Riders teach us about the deep yearning of African Americans for the full human flourishing of everyone.

Take the example of Diane Nash, one of the student leaders trained in nonviolence under the tutelage of the Reverend John Lawson at Fisk University in 1959-1960. Alongside John L. Lewis, among others, Nash helped lead the nonviolent sit-ins in Nashville in early 1960.



C.T. Vivian and Diane Nash lead a demonstration march to City Hall in Nashville, TN. Credit: The Nashville Tennessean

On May 14, 1964, KKK members firebombed a Freedom Rider bus in Anniston, Alabama, intending to burn to death everyone inside. Both Alabama Governor John Patterson and Birmingham Police Chief Bull Connor declared that they would not protect the Freedom Riders from violence.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy responded by sending John Siegenthaler, his assistant, to ensure that the Freedom Riders made it safely from Birmingham to New Orleans after the firebombing.

In an historic telephone conversation on May 16, 1964, Siegenthaler, with all the power of his position, commanded Nash and other Freedom Riders to end the bus rides in order to prevent loss of life. Siegenthaler recalls the conversation with Nash like this:

You know that spiritual—"like a tree standing by the water, I will not be moved." She would not be moved. And...soon I was shouting, Young woman do you understand what you are doing? Do you understand that you're gonna get somebody killed?[1]

After a pause, Diane Nash replied to Siegenthaler:

Sir, you should know, we all signed our last wills and testaments last night before they left [on the bus for Birmingham]. We know someone will be killed. But we cannot let violence overcome non-violence.

Siegenthaler concludes: "That is virtually a direct quote of the words that came out of that child's mouth. Here I am, an official of the United States government, representing the President and the Attorney General, talking to a student at Fisk University. And she in a very quiet but strong way gave me a lecture."

It is a lecture that every American should know. Diane Nash teaches how freedom in the fullest sense is rooted in nonviolent love and responsibility. Freedom is not primarily about individual choice or the right to possess anything. More importantly, Diane Nash and the Freedom Riders witness to a nonviolent love and responsibility concerned for the good of all others in their time and for generations yet to come.

Freedom Riders risked their lives to create the conditions for the possibility of true freedom: the full human flourishing of all Americans. Only when we join together as a people to ensure the full human thriving of every individual will we realize freedom. That is a vision and practice worth the risk and donation of our lives.

Dr. Sue Weishar was interviewed by Fox News 8 about the growing crisis of unaccompanied immigrant children to the U.S. border. [WATCH](#)

[1] The narrative and quotes here are drawn from the transcript of the film Freedom Riders, a production of the PBS series American Experiences available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wqbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/about/transcript>

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