 Heroes

By MELANIE MARQUEZ | USF St. Petersburg

Just as the message of the Freedom Riders swept through the Deep South and the broader nation in 1961, the scholarship of USF St. Petersburg professor Raymond Arsenault has inspired events of commemoration and renewal this year— the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides.

The recent celebrations honored the courage and conviction of the hundreds of young people who defied Jim Crow laws and put their lives on the line for the sake of racial justice.

Arsenault, the John Hope Franklin Professor of Southern History at USF St. Petersburg and a founder of the university’s Florida Studies graduate program, spent nearly 10 years researching the Freedom Rides, interviewing the Riders and immersing himself in a movement that ultimately desegregated interstate travel and launched a wave of civil rights reform.


“The broad dissemination of the book, the film, the traveling exhibit—and most important—the Freedom Riders’ message of nonviolence and social justice extends their legacy of hope, moral courage and personal empowerment,” Arsenault said.

Many of the 180 Freedom Riders flown to Chicago for the reunion had not seen each other in 50 years. On the Oprah Winfrey show, former Riders told stories of youthful adventure, sacrifice and commitment. And later, on the commemorative bus ride, they connected with a younger generation of aspiring social activists. Arsenault also led a group of USFSP students on a similar tour for a summer civil rights course he has taught in partnership with
"The Freedom Riders sought to use dignity and love to persuade people to do the right thing," Arsenault says. "Their strategy was to educate through the philosophy and practice of nonviolent direct action. They brought down the system of Jim Crow segregation and changed the world, not through force and violence, but through disciplined self-sacrifice and an abiding commitment to the beloved community."

In July, the documentary based on Arsenault's book was nominated in three categories for a Primetime Emmy Award from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. Directed by Stanley Nelson and produced by Laurens Grant, the documentary was nominated for Exceptional Merit in Nonfiction Filmmaking, Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming and Outstanding Picture Editing for Nonfiction Programming.

Arsenault worked on and appears in the documentary.

Arsenault's book, Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice, focuses on a civil rights effort that led more than 400 black and white Americans to risk their lives riding buses through the Deep South to challenge segregation in interstate transport. The story is one of the most celebrated episodes of the Civil Rights Movement.