



“Freedom has always been an expensive thing. History is fit testimony to the fact that freedom is rarely gained without sacrifice and self-denial.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The 2013 MCHR Freedom Tour



On June 16, 2013, the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights' 2013 Freedom Tour commenced its two week journey into the southern states of our nation with a diverse group of high school students to learn about the price that people in our country paid for equality. The tour was dedicated in loving memory of one of MCHR's founders, Bishop H. Coleman McGehee, Jr. The students were selected after submitting essays about why they wanted to go on the trip and being personally interviewed by the adult mentors. Ultimately, there were 34 students and 13 adult mentors selected to go on the trip. The students came primarily from Detroit area high schools (Mercy, U of D, Cass Tech, Dakota, Renaissance, Cody, Southfield Lathrup, Ferndale, Cesar Chavez, Chandler Park, Redford Union, Loyola, Grosse Pointe North, Detroit Aerospace, Spain Middle School, home schooled). We also had 6 students on the tour from the Suttons Bay/Traverse City area. The students ranged in age from 14 to 18. The mentors included teachers, a nurse, civil rights attorneys, and social activists.

Organizational and fundraising efforts for the tour started approximately a year beforehand. MCHR raised over \$100,000 through its Annual Dinner and Freedom Tour fundraising efforts and, as a result, was able to fund the tour 100% without placing a financial strain on the organization. The adult mentors provided educational programming about the civil rights movement along with Nonviolence training to the students in the months leading up to the tour.

The Freedom Tour departed from Detroit's Central Methodist Church at 7 am, with a send off ceremony attended by parents and supporters. MCHR board member and Methodist minister, Bill Wylie-Kellerman, provided the group with inspirational words and a send off prayer.

Atlanta, Georgia

Our first stop was the **MLK Center** in Atlanta, Georgia where the students and the mentors attended Nonviolence Training for 5 days. The students were taught the philosophical and practical aspects of Kingian nonviolence by gifted and dedicated facilitators. At the end of the week, they were given an exam that included a written test and verbal presentation. This was followed by a graduation ceremony where each student was given a certificate signed and presented to them by Dr. King's youngest daughter, The Rev. Dr. Bernice King. The students learned that nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people, that the beloved community is our goal, and that the universe is on the side of justice.



While in Atlanta, we took a day trip to Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama. In Birmingham, we visited the **16th Street Baptist Church** where the four little girls were killed when the church was bombed. In Montgomery, we visited **Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church** and the **Parsonage** where the students gathered around the kitchen table where Dr. King was given the courage and grace to continue to lead the movement despite receiving months of death threats and the bombing of his home. We also met 90 year old Mrs. Harris, who along with her husband, a local pharmacist, opened their home and harbored the Freedom Riders after they had been brutally beaten by a white mob at the Montgomery Greyhound bus station in May of 1961.

Meridian, Mississippi

From Atlanta, the Tour traveled to Meridian, Mississippi, where we joined the **Annual Mississippi Civil Rights Martyrs Memorial Service Caravan and March** through downtown Meridian paying tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for equal rights. Our bus snaked down the wooded highway of Philadelphia, Mississippi, with a police escort, where we visited the spot where civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were murdered and Chaney's gravesite. We ended the day at a small Baptist church where Diane Nash talked to us about love, leadership, and nonviolence.



Montgomery, Selma, Tuskegee, and Lowndes County,
Alabama



From Mississippi, we traveled back to Alabama where in Montgomery we visited the **Rosa Parks Museum** accompanied by founder, Elaine Steele; the **Civil Rights Memorial Center**; the **Southern Poverty Law Center**, where its co-founder, Morris Dees spoke to us, and; the **Freedom Riders Museum**. From Montgomery, we traveled to **Tuskegee** and took a tour of the hanger of the Tuskegee Airmen and visited Tuskegee Institute. While in Tuskegee, we had the honor of meeting with 107 year old Dr. Amelia Boynton Robinson. Dr. Robinson spoke from her heart about her efforts to teach voting rights and register voters and the harsh retaliation she endured as a result. She told us about being brutally beaten during Bloody Sunday as she marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Through her life's example, she demonstrated to us the power and freedom offered through forgiveness, reminding us of King's imperative: "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

In Selma, we visited the **National Voting Rights Museum**. Later that day, we walked across the **Edmund Pettus Bridge**, on the same day that the Supreme Court issued its decision eviscerating the Voting Rights Act- a sad irony. We then visited the roadside memorial where **Viola Liuzzo**, a white mother of five from Detroit, was shot and killed by Klansmen while driving a black student to the airport following the Selma to Montgomery march. We also visited **Freedom House** in Lowndes County where MCHR board member and Freedom Tour organizer, Dorothy Aldridge, spent time in the 1960's.

Albany, Americus and Plains
Georgia

From Alabama, we traveled to Albany, Georgia, where we visited **Koinonia Farms** in Americus, the interracial community founded in 1942 by theologian-farmer Clarence Jordan. While visiting the farm, we discussed food security, permaculture, and intentional communities. We also visited **Jimmy Carter National Historic Site** and the **Albany Civil Rights Institute**.



Berea, Kentucky

On the last day of our trip, we visited **Berea College**, where we learned about this exceptional college founded in 1855 as the first interracial and coeducational college in the South that charges no tuition and admits only academically promising students, primarily from Appalachia, who have limited economic resources.

At every stop on the tour, we met with civil rights heroes, including: **Dr. Bernice King, Diane Nash, John Steele, Curtis Muhammad, Charles Alphin, Elaine Steele, Dr. Amelia Boynton Robinson, Morris Dees, Joanne Bland, Rutha Harris, and Charles and Shirley Sherrod.**

Except for a flat tire in Kentucky on the way down, the trip went without a hitch. The students were smart, engaged, moved, touched and inspired, and most importantly, committed to peace, justice, and human rights. Each student committed to serve their beloved communities upon their return by sharing their rich experiences with their peers and others, reminding us that everyone can be great because anybody can serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.

**Thanks to all who supported and participated in the Freedom Tour-
You made a difference!!!**



