

Journey to Justice, Grand Launch, April 4 2015, Newcastle

Discovery Museum, Newcastle on Tyne

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Marcia Heinemann Saunders, and I have the great privilege of helping to launch Journey to Justice here in the North East.

I've been asked to say a bit about what we did in Fayette County, Tennessee in the voter registration drive in the deep south of the United States in the summer of 1964, now known as Freedom Summer.

1. I was part of a team of 50 Cornell University students who had been invited by black community leaders to support their struggle for the right to vote, which they had had in theory since 1870, but were prevented from exercising by poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation and threats. They saw voting not as a gesture but as the key to equality – and they linked it to their campaigns for education and the rise from poverty. Inequality was evident in the names of the segregated schools: Fayette County High School for white kids, and Fayette County Training Center for blacks.

Four years earlier hundreds of people had been blacklisted from shops, supplies, medical care and work, and evicted from their homes because they had tried to register to vote. They set up a “tent city” which became famous when Pete Seeger wrote a song about it, “Born in Fayette County.” Ebony magazine ran an article called “Cold War in Fayette County.”

Several days before we arrived the bodies of three murdered civil rights workers – James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner (a Cornell graduate) – were found buried in a ditch fifteen miles south in northern Mississippi.

2. For six weeks to two months we lived in same-sex pairs in the homes of courageous black people – in my case a single mother and her teenage daughter – in flimsy shacks with no electricity and no running water. We paid five dollars a week for room and board; that was their average weekly wage.

We worked regularly with community leaders and ministers to arrange meetings and speaking slots at the end of Sunday church services. The main work was very routine: when the terrible heat of the day had receded and people were home we'd drive down rutted dirt roads visiting people who worked ‘chopping cotton’ – gruelling work in the cotton fields - or as maids and cooks or cleaners, and who had in return a tiny wage and a small piece of land on which to grow their vegetables – a share of the boss's land, so they were called “sharecroppers.” (I tried chopping cotton – I lasted twenty minutes. They worked for ten hours.)

As we drove along young white men would chase and try to force us off the road, throw things out their windows at us and once or twice take a shot. One of my jobs was to toss large tacks out the window so they'd get flat tires. This worked pretty well except when the following day we'd be driving along the same road and we'd get the flat tire – that happened once or twice a week and I learned to change tires.

We'd talk with the people we visited about the dangers and logistics of voting – particularly how to fill in the registration form. A single error – a misspelled word, a punctuation mistake, a blank space, an inkblot, the wrong colour ink - would invalidate the application. We'd drive them to town to register in relays, and drive them home again after they'd waited for hours and if they were lucky, got registered.

There was a similar routine on election day itself, when a local white man who supported free and fair elections ran for sheriff and a local black minister ran for tax assessor. Black people lined up for hours to vote, and were allowed in only when there were no white people in the room or waiting. The election was lost because of election fraud – ballot boxes were stuffed or stolen, and many dead people voted. It wasn't over though and the rest is history from Martin Luther King to Barack Obama.

When I went back a few years ago I saw that there was now one modern high school for everyone – Fayette County High. I don't know how integrated it really is, and I know there's still a long way to go; it was good to say but as Gary Younge says in the exhibition, "everything has changed and nothing has changed."

3. Journey to Justice has led me to look back and consider how being involved in the civil rights movement has informed my life.

- I came to this country forty-odd years ago and decided to stay, for lots of reasons and not least because I saw a great personal opportunity to work in areas – particularly education, social services and the NHS - where there was an inspiring national commitment to equality.
- This was symbolised for me when I first came here by the abolition of the 11+ and transformation to comprehensive education and I got my working permit as a teacher in a shortage specialty (I am now a citizen).
- Commitment to equality sits among the values underpinning Barbara Castle's 1974 NHS Act, which was called Democracy in the National Health Service, and is the base of some of her other achievements, for example the Equal Pay Act (*Made in Dagenham*) and the Invalid Care Allowance.
- I have always worked in public services with wonderful, dedicated people. Now the services are under threat – not for the first time – but I'm sure we shall overcome.
- And I think the most important thing I learned is about connections. No one here is suggesting that we replicate the Freedom Summer or other campaigns that are part of the exhibition, but I think the message is about connecting your beliefs with your life, and choosing to work with like-minded people you trust on things you believe in – the fight against inequality, injustice, poor health and poverty. As E.M. Forster wrote, "only connect."
- I was extremely fortunate to have had that experience in the summer of '64, and I am certain – like everyone I know who was involved - that I received more from it than I gave to it.

4. So in the summer of '64 as a privileged white person I lived among people who had almost nothing except courage, who welcomed me with great generosity, despite the fact that they had everything to lose – indeed the woman who took me in lost her job.

- I came to share the anxiety that the black people of Fayette County lived with every day. Although I stuck it out, I was never as brave as they were, and I had much less to lose and could always go home.
- I learned how leadership comes from within communities, and how important it is for people coming from outside to understand and respect that, to work within that and not try to take over.
- And I learned to change tires!

5. I want to end by pointing out that the summer of '64 happened in the run-up to the Vietnam War: many in our team were part of what was a very tiny and unpopular opposition movement with almost no political support. I had gone to Fayette disillusioned and believing that all politicians were the same. I came away realising that this simply wasn't the point, and I became determined never to belittle or underestimate the act of voting or betray the right to vote. It's worrying now that young people are being exhorted not to vote, or voting with their feet. Men and women in both our countries have fought and died for that right.

On that final note, thank you Carrie and colleagues for Journey to Justice. It's a wonderful exhibition.

Marcia Heinemann Saunders

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