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American Heroes

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Heroes

By MELANIE MARQUEZ I
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 Riders, 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

FREEDOM WRITER
USF St. Petersburg professor Raymond Arsenault spent nearly 10 years researching the Freedom Riders. His award-winning book was the basis for a PBS 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.

Before they participated in the Freedom Rides, C.T. Vivian, Diane Nash (front row on left) and other demonstrators marched to Nashville City Hall on April 19, 1960. In Anniston, Ala., an angry mob stoned and firebombed the Greyhound bus carrying some of the original Freedom Riders.