

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

‘Keep on Pushing’: Dore and Joyce Ladner Reflect on Movement

Decades after Freedom Summer, two Mississippi sisters press the fight for voting rights

By **Brentin Mock**
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Georgetown University history professor Michael Kazin is seated among the students for his class, “U.S. in the 1960s.” He has surrendered his stage today to Dorie Ladner, 72, who is talking with the class about her years in Mississippi working to

desegregate buses as a Freedom Rider, and her experiences organizing Freedom Summer in 1964.

The names of many of Freedom Summer’s martyrs and survivors flutter by quickly in her lecture. At least twice she mentions the name Marion Barry, an organizer in Mississippi before later becoming mayor

of Washington D.C., and it seems to whiz past the students each time.

Near the end of Ladner’s visit, a student asks how the movement ended.

“It hasn’t ended,” says Ladner.

Ladner knows this in more than an academic sense. She helped coordinate a great number of the civil rights sit-ins

leading up to Freedom Summer, and she participated in every major civil rights march from 1963 to 1968. Her work started in the early 1960s with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), with which she helped desegregate lunch counters and buses. She was a founding member of the Council of Federated Or-



Dorie Ladner reflects on organizing during Freedom Summer, and the ongoing push for voting rights.



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From January 12 to 18, we’ll lend a hand at book banks and food banks. We’ll help refurbish a mental health center for youth and provide dental clinics for low-income adults. And we’ll pause to reflect on Dr. King’s message of service, equality, and community.

“Everyone has the power for greatness, not for fame but greatness, because greatness is determined by service.”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

ganizations, or COFO, the umbrella organization covering SNCC, the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1962.

Her sister, Joyce Ladner, younger by just a year, also worked with these critical civil rights organizations and built on that experience to later author a considerable block of scholarship on African-American girls and black leadership. She went on to serve as president of Howard University in D.C. in the late ’90s, and then as a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution’s government studies program.

Dorie Ladner, meanwhile, kept the spirit of Freedom Summer alive by continuing to mobilize around social justice and through her work with the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta.

‘The violence kept coming down harder’

The sisters are living proof that the movement hasn’t ended. It’s for this reason that I reached out to them to talk about how the lessons of Freedom Summer apply today, when the voting rights they fought for seem to



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so many to be crumbling.

Dorie Ladner likes to speak about the difficult choices and sacrifices she and her colleagues made to develop those sit-ins and Freedom Rides into an effective movement. One of those decisions involved drawing white activists down from the North to help with the Freedom Summer voter registration drives — a decision that some of her SNCC and COFO colleagues didn’t view favorably.

But there were few alternatives, a fact Dorie’s sister Joyce is quick to hammer home. Joyce said recruiting White Northerners for Freedom Summer was absolutely necessary in the face of the violence, the Klu Klux Klan, the police, the dogs, the fire hoses, the bullet that took Medgar Evers’s life in front of his family — the terror.

“We were really playing guerilla warfare,” says Joyce. “It was like we just kept putting out fires, but the violence

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will also coincide with monthly associated programs to engage the community, including untold stories of women of color and a family day.

And while the 1960s and 70s was an unprecedented time of social and cultural upheaval, today’s politic climate — and the public uprising in opposition — has been

compared to the similar vigor of those days.

“Racing to Change” doesn’t leave that out either.

It includes references to Black Lives Matter and current social justice movements.

“Some of the stuff that’s happening now was the very stuff that was being fought for in the ’60s and ’70s,” said Richardson. “So there’s a continuum in helping young folks see that.”

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