

## New lenses of understanding

By Scott Friedman  
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Back against the stiff seat of the greyhound bus, my ears burning with anger at the booming slurs barked at me, I experienced the simulation of



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Rosa Parks' courageous effort which launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Inside the walls of the National Civil Rights Museum, I felt the courage Parks and those before her had, even more so, the necessity to move the ideal of friendship between races and religions forward today.

Cultural Leadership, a non-profit leadership development organization for Black and Jewish high school seniors in St. Louis, gave me this opportunity. Serving as the culminating stop on our 22 day tour, the museum (in Memphis) noted with great detail many of the people I poke with, sites I walked on and vents I read and learned about.

As a result of this journey, I have

changed eyes and ears—a new perspective.

When one thinks of the Civil Rights movement, often times names such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Reverend Ralph Abernathy arise. I discovered the movement was a “people’s movement”.

As I heard the personal stories of local community heroes I further realized the wide scope of those affected—everyone. For instance, Hollis Watkins recounted his near-death experience during a jailing in the 1960s. Watkins was told he would be hanged and the prison guards brought the noose in to the room; rather than respond in fear, Watkins smiled. This shows the remarkable courage he and other activists had to display. Furthermore, as I sang Freedom songs such as “This Little Light of Mine” with Watkins I felt his spirit of unwavering belief.

Another little known figure I met was JoAnne Bland. At age 11 she had already been imprisoned 13 times; the absurdity of this never ceases to amaze me. Bland spoke with deep emotion and passion as she explained the importance of understanding the root of problems like education for blacks, knowing one’s history to know one’s future and respecting those who

paved the way for the opportunities Americans have in 2005.

The Civil Rights movement is traditionally cited as beginning with the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* in May, 1954 and concluding with the assassination of King at the Lorraine Motel in April, 1968; but the effort for civil rights continues today.

Seven months ago, before Cultural Leadership began, I thought the Civil Rights movement was simply a collection of isolated events, but I now realize it was a constant struggle. Since 1619, when the first blacks entered America as slaves and indentured servants, African-Americans have been “inferior”, and the burdensome stain of slavery remains attached to blacks in this twenty-first century.

With this in mind, Blacks and Jews do have a common history beyond the parallel of the Holocaust and slavery. Julian Bond, Board chair of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons, said, “Sadly today, much of the common history of Blacks and Jews rests in popular memory on the lonely shoulders of the civil rights movement’s 1964 martyrs, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner.” As a tribute to Chaney, we visited his grave in Meridian, Mississippi.

The collaboration of Blacks and

Jews extends beyond that brief era. For example, immigrant Jewish professors taught at historically black universities, for no one else would employ them.

Although Jews once-held prominent positions as mayors and business owners in towns across the South, Jewish communities in the South are rapidly dwindling. I was saddened to see the vacant synagogue in Greenwood, Miss., and the 13 member congregation in Selma, Ala.

At the same time, I was thankful to attend Shabbat services with my Black and Jewish friends in Montgomery, Ala.

During the course of my trip, Cultural Leadership filled seats and pews every Friday evening and Sunday morning. Experiencing the unique practices of Judaism in the South and lively church services was special. Parallels between classical reform Judaism and church services became evident, for southern Jews simply wanted to assimilate into Christian society. Even though church services are not standard—as there are different sects of Christianity—the common thread in each predominantly African-American church we attended was the sense of community and joy.

With my own Cultural Leadership family I explored issues of religion, race, culture and history.

While in Memphis we met with

Rachel Shankman, director of the Memphis office of Facing History and Ourselves, an organization which assists teachers and students in exploring racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism to develop a more compassionate and knowledgeable society.

People can easily “divorce” themselves from history. Besides trying to distance oneself from reality, people often make false assumptions, Mrs. Shankman said.

I realize all human beings carry preconceived notions with them. As Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson said, “To change things you have to be willing to believe things you have not seen.”

Although closing one’s mind to new ideas remains simpler, after becoming an eye-witness to a disappointing chapter in the history of America, I cannot ignore the social ills our country faced. I accept my responsibility to confront them—as great leaders before me have—today.

Reverend Samuel “Billy” Kyles, friend of Martin Luther King and with him in room 306 of the Lorraine Motel when he was assassinated, quoting Langston Hughes said, “If dreams die you are like a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”

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