Bob Moses at a 2014 panel discussion on the 50th anniversary of Mississippi Freedom Summer. (Photo via Wikimedia by Miller Center)

ECONOMY / GOVERNMENT / RACE/RACISM

The quiet fortitude of Bob Moses

Civil rights icon bridged the struggles for voting rights and education

MICHAEL JONAS **Jul 27, 2021**

POLITICIANS OF VARIOUS STRIPES have for years declared education to be the civil rights issues of our time. Bob Moses, perhaps uniquely, could make the case with the authenticity of someone who had been immersed in pivotal ways in both of those worlds.

A central, if less publicly visible, figure in the civil rights struggles in the South of the early 1960s, Moses went on to found a Cambridge-based nonprofit focused on math instruction for Black young people, convinced that such skills were key to their realization of the dreams that he and others fought for in their battles decades before to dismantle Jim Crow.

Moses, who died on Sunday at age 86, was remembered by those who knew him as a preternaturally calm force in the midst of the storm, a self-effacing, quiet leader who understood as well as anyone how, in the words of the civil rights anthem, to keep his eyes on the prize.

“He was not interested in people knowing his name. He was interested in making change in the world,” said Mae Jackson, who worked in the New York office of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the civil rights group Moses was part of whose young shock troops often pushed the envelope in the movement and led many of the most danger-filled efforts in the Deep South.

“Bob was fearless,” said Horace Small, who directed the Boston-based Union of Minority Neighborhoods for 20 years before retiring in January. “He had been taught the Gandhian theories of nonviolence. Part of that meant you had to endure suffering. As an organizer, he would not ask other people to suffer if he did not suffer himself.”

Bob Moses, shown outlining plans for Freedom Summer in 1964 in a 2014 documentary "Freedom Summer," by Stanley Nelson, Jr.

Moses, who grew up in a Harlem housing project, was working as a math teacher at a New York prep school in 1960 when he was stirred to join the civil rights movement by the searing images of the battles being waged in the South to secure public accommodation and voting rights. He ultimately was a principal architect of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, the 1964 initiative that brought hundreds of young activists from the North, many of them white college students, to the Mississippi Delta to work on voter registration drives and run summer school programs for Black children.

There was no mistaking the mortal danger they faced. In June, before the program had even formally launched, three young civil rights workers, James Chaney, a Black resident, and Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, white activists from New York, disappeared and were found murdered after venturing to Nashoba County to investigate a church burning. During his years in Mississippi, Moses was beaten when leading Blacks to voter registration sites and was riding in a car whose driver was shot.

The violent resistance was so strong that Freedom Summer did not actually make huge gains in registering Black voters, but Moses and the other leaders had a much bigger and longer view, said Small. "They built the groundswell that got the powers that be to put together a comprehensive civil rights and voting rights bill," said Small. "What made Lyndon Johnson, what made John Kennedy, what made Robert Kennedy do these things was every night the nation saw people suffering for [seeking] a simple right."

Moses eschewed the limelight, rejecting the model that relied on charismatic leaders to drive movements for change, embracing instead the community organizing principles that looked to empower community members to lead their own struggle.

"The biggest lesson that Bob taught all of us is humility," said Small, who first met Moses in the late 1970s. "You have to remain humble. This is not about you. You may be a catalyst to promote change. But your job is to inspire and teach people how to be bigger than themselves."

Taylor Branch, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of the civil rights movement, in a 2002 interview, called Moses "the father of grass-roots organizing — not the Moses summoning his people on the mountaintop as King did but, ironically, the anti-Moses, going door to door, listening to people, letting them lead."

By the early 1980s, Moses, who got a master's degree at Harvard in the late 1950s, had returned there and was working on his doctorate in the philosophy of math.

But he turned his focus to K-12 math after becoming frustrated by the middle school math instruction his daughter was getting in the Cambridge schools.

Using proceeds from a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant he was awarded, in 1982 he established the Algebra Project, a nonprofit focused on boosting math “literacy” among Black school children. By 2001, it was serving 10,000 students in 28 cities.

Jacqueline Rivers first met Moses when she was a Harvard undergraduate in the early 1980s. He came to speak about the civil rights movement to a campus group she was involved with. But when he learned the students were interested in community service work, Rivers and others wound up recruited as early volunteers on his math tutoring initiative before the Algebra Project was even formally launched.

Rivers later ended up directing the Algebra Project’s efforts in Boston for several years before going on to start another math-focused nonprofit that she ran for 16 years.

“Bob just emanated a sense of quiet wisdom,” said Rivers, who lives in Dorchester. “He just seemed to have great insight into not just the math he was teaching, but human nature.”

“The whole arc of his life was community organizing,” said Rivers. She said tapping young Black college students as math tutors fit with the approach he employed in Mississippi of looking to “near peers” to mobilize people to action, a tactic he embraced whether the goal was getting people to register to vote or master algebra.

Rivers said the Algebra Project used an approach to math that was very hands-on and “experientially” based. Lessons included trips on the MBTA’s Red Line, where station stops along the route were used to help students grasp the concept of integers.

“Behind all of it,” Rivers said, “was Bob’s conviction that math, and algebra in particular, was the new civil rights issue. When kids didn’t get algebra by 8th grade they were already behind.” Even those who made it to college “wouldn’t get access to the highest paying jobs,” said Rivers. “He saw it as an economic equalizer.”

Though local control of schools has long been hailed as a virtue of US public education, with districts recoiling against interference even at the state level, Moses thought education rights were no less deserving of federal constitutional protection than voting rights.

“I think of it as the job of the young people of this century to lift the issue of public school education to the level of the Constitution,” Moses said in an interview in 2014. He thought an amendment to the US Constitution guaranteeing a quality education to all should be the goal.

“The elite people in the country have figured out how to educate their kids for the 21st century, and they’re going to do that,” he said. “But there is no idea that we should also do that for everybody.”

Drawing a further line of connection between the fight for quality education today and the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, Moses referred to the often inferior schooling provided to poor Black children in the US as “sharecropper education.”

Rivers said Moses did not think improved education on its own would ensure Black Americans the level of economic and political power enjoyed by whites. It’s yet another echo of the civil rights era and the belief by Moses and other activists that they had to make those in power uncomfortable enough with the status quo that they would finally bend.

“Bob did not believe that the system was going to yield power easily and that all we had to do was educate these kids and the problems would be solved,” said Rivers. “He saw that education would empower young black people to demand justice.”

Tagged in: Bob Moses/ Horace Small/ Jacqueline Rivers/ Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

© 2021 CommonWealth Magazine. All rights reserved.