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**50<sup>TH</sup>**  
**FREEDOM  
RIDES**

**ANNIVERSARY**





# All Aboard

With its strong ties to James Farmer – the larger-than-life force behind the Freedom Rides – the University of Mary Washington was ready to get on board as the prime venue for an all-out celebration of the 50th anniversary of a crusade that not only opened the door to unfettered interstate travel but also put America on the path to equal rights for all.

| By Neva S. Trenis

The old bus lumbered up the hill behind Lee Hall, the first light of the frigid morning reflected in its silver panels. Its blue paint was peeling and its rims were rusted, but

the crowd on Ball Circle erupted in cheers at the long-awaited sight. In response came three deep and dissonant notes from its aging horn.

This wasn't just any bus pulling into the University of Mary Washington. This was the vehicle to tell how ordinary individuals showed extraordinary courage and risked their lives for justice. This was the reminder of

how hundreds of Freedom Riders banded together a half-century earlier to change America.

This was the bus that would carry the University's



All photos in this article by Norm Shafer

The University of Mary Washington chose a 1960s-era motor coach as the canvas on which to tell the story of the 1961 Freedom Rides, a long and dangerous campaign through the Deep South to secure equal access on interstate buses and in facilities. Here, the bus arrives on Ball Circle in the early morning of Feb. 4, 2011.

Pride bubbled up during the many campus events tied to the Freedom Rides. And no sentiments could be stronger than those for one of Mary Washington's own, James Farmer, the brilliant man who was the strategist behind the Rides. He touched the lives of scores of UMW students with his lived-it-myself lectures on the civil rights movement. He and hundreds of others used Gandhian tactics to strike down Jim Crow laws in the South and bring equality to interstate travel.

To tell the story of these courageous individuals, people from all areas of the University – academics and AV specialists, electricians and editors – banded together. They installed an exhibit around a bus, which was parked on Ball Circle, of archival images of the Riders and of the government officials and everyday people who threatened, beat, and bombed them. The bus bore the Riders' words and was surrounded by sounds of the songs they sang together to strengthen their resolve.

Over the course of the semester, the University celebrated “the living daylights out of the Freedom Riders,” as one of the speakers said. It brought in the foremost scholars on the Freedom Rides to share history through stories, facts, and photographs. It worked with PBS to host a preview screening of its American Experience film *The Freedom Riders*. It mounted academic courses around the Rides – studying the words spoken and every aspect of the successful campaign. Students filmed, photographed, and interviewed the four original Freedom Riders the University brought to campus as part of the commemoration. UMW invited the Fredericksburg community to hear from the Riders, and diverse people gathered from all corners. They were mesmerized by stories of fear, of being disowned by family, of clandestine prison diaries, and of being steeled by the deep voice of James Farmer.

UMW asked two more Riders to speak at its 100th Commencement. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia left college in Nashville 50 years ago to get on the bus with Farmer and the other original Freedom Riders. Rep. Bob Filner

semester-long commemoration of Professor James Farmer and the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides.

After the bus arrived, Riders came. Four Freedom Riders in all visited the Mary Washington campus to reunite and reminisce. Their presence had a profound impact.

Upon meeting the quartet of individuals who boarded a bus and transformed the course of history, UMW President Richard V. Hurley said, “I don't think I could feel more proud of the University of Mary Washington than I do at this moment.”

of California left Cornell University a month later, one of hundreds of reinforcements who flocked south in 1961. Lewis and Filner would come asking today's students, as other aging Riders did, "What is your cause? What bus will you board today?"

## ***First Stop: Ball Circle***

On Monday, Feb. 7, just three days after the bus rolled onto campus, it was ready to meet the public. The exhibit *James Farmer and the Freedom Rides* was about to open.

Students handed out "Freedom Ride" buttons. University staff set up microphones, platforms, and chairs. Administrators dashed in and out of Lee Hall. Most wore sunshine yellow T-shirts that matched the huge banners that hung from the Lee Hall balcony. In bold black letters, they asked, "WILL YOU? GET ON THE BUS."

By noon, a crowd of 600 packed the walkway in front of the exhibit. The mix of University and community onlookers included staff from all over the school, faculty from across disciplines, and lots of enthusiastic students.

Senior **Joe Calpin** was struck by the diverse crowd and the growing anticipation and chatter. "Everyone was really excited," Calpin said. "Students were taking pictures with their cell phones. And it helped that it was a beautiful day."

Just before noon, the crowd quieted as a lone woman's deep voice rolled along Campus Walk.

"Buses are a-comin' oh yeah, buses are a-comin' oh yeah." The powerful song was one that Freedom Riders had sung in a Mississippi prison to fortify themselves and to remind prison guards that more Riders were on the way.

The two most honored guests at UMW that day, Reginald Green and Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, once sang the song in the Mississippi Delta's Parchman Farm prison, where they spent the summer of 1961. The Freedom Riders were college students when they were arrested in Jackson, Miss. Standing before the UMW crowd, Green and Mulholland held their 50-year-old mug shots, their youthful faces mirrored in the college students who came to hear them.

"It wasn't until the celebration started that I realized how much historical importance was attached to those people and to that bus," Calpin said.

UMW Chief of Staff Martin A. Wilder Jr. welcomed the Freedom Riders. He introduced Eric Etheridge, author of *Breach of Peace* and an expert on the Rides. And he acknowledged American Experience project manager Lauren Prestileo, who worked on the PBS film *Freedom Riders*.

Civil rights leader James Farmer, the architect of the Rides, was a distinguished professor of history and American studies at Mary Washington from 1985 until 1998, Wilder



said, the same year President Bill Clinton awarded Farmer the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

“We have a special appreciation for, and reverence of, the role Dr. James Farmer played in our nation’s history,” Wilder told the assembly. “For hundreds of Mary Washington students, Dr. Farmer’s class was one of the most influential and memorable experiences of their undergraduate years.”

In recognizing Green and Mulholland, Wilder said that all Americans today are indebted to them. “The Freedom Rides demonstrate how a handful of committed individuals can literally change the course of history.”

UMW senior **Charles Reed** of Jersey City, N.J., echoed that appreciation. Reed said he didn’t know much about James Farmer or the Freedom Rides before he came to Mary Washington four years earlier, but once on campus he wanted to learn more about the civil rights leader who “actually taught at UMW.”

Besides his major classes in business administration and accounting, Reed took intensive classes on Farmer, worked in the James Farmer Multicultural Center, and was a leader in the Black Student Association and Brothers of a New Direction.

“Since I have been at UMW, it has been embedded in my soul and way of thinking that no one should feel oppressed because of what they may look like, who they may be friends

with, or what they may believe in,” Reed said. “No matter what race, nationality, or ethnicity, we all are members of the human race.”

Farmer has become one of Reed’s heroes, and the Freedom Rides one of the most courageous stories he’s ever heard. “The Freedom Riders stared death in the eye every time they got off the bus,” he said. “The opportunities I have should not be taken for granted. I am inspired by their devotion and commitment, and I am indebted to them.”

So is Eric Etheridge. When the editor, photographer, and Mississippi native discovered the more than 300 mug shots of the 1961 Freedom Riders preserved by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, he saw a picture of the emerging civil rights movement. He published 80 of the mugs beside the modern-day faces and stories of the Riders, including those of Green and Mulholland, in *Breach of Peace*.

“The movement is much bigger than its leaders,” Etheridge told a group gathered at UMW. “One of the things that I really love about the Freedom Riders is that most of them were just ordinary citizens who did an incredible and extraordinary thing.”

He told the history of the Rides and of many of the Riders photographed for his book. But mostly, he was eager to let Mulholland and Green share their stories.

Mulholland grew up in the white world of Arlington,



Above: With a lot of help from across campus, a committee of five got the bus exhibit rolling, including, from left, Courtney Chapman, Neva Trenis, Elisabeth Sommer, and Maria Schultz. AJ Newell is not pictured.

Right: Life-size images flanked the bus.

Previous page, clockwise: Visitors posed for a shot in front of the bus on opening day; a basketful of buttons; a student answers the question, “Would you get on the bus?”



Va. The only African Americans she knew worked in her home – and she didn’t even know they had last names. What led her to the civil rights movement was “growing up in Robert E. Lee’s hometown,” she said.

She attended a Presbyterian church, where they talked about ideals such as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” They sang songs that said Jesus loves all children – red, yellow, black, and white. But, when the church doors shut after worship, Mulholland said, they left all that behind.

“I could see that the lives we were leading were a contradiction to what we talked about on Sunday morning.”

She resolved that she would do everything she could, in keeping with her faith, to make the South the best place it could be for all of its people. As a freshman at Duke University, she joined picket lines and sit-ins in Durham, N.C. Duke kicked her out.

She returned home, where she sought out activists at Howard University. Among her new friends was one of the original 13 Riders who set out with Farmer on May 4, 1961. A few days later, Mulholland was horrified to see images of smoke pouring from a firebombed bus in Anniston, Ala., in the morning newspaper. She packed her bags, took a plane to New Orleans, and headed into Jackson, Miss., knowing she would be arrested.

Green, a Washington, D.C., native, was a student at

the historically black Virginia Union College in Richmond when he heard about the firebombing in Anniston. He was a veteran of the movement, too, having participated in sit-ins at Richmond’s White Tower Restaurant.

Like Mulholland, he saw images of the burnt hull of the bus. He got a call from an older Virginia Union student, Charles Sherrod, who was looking for reinforcements for the original 13 Riders.

Green, now a Baptist minister, recalled the words of the biblical James. “Faith without works is *dead*,” he told the audience. So Green got to work.

He and two classmates, in their best jackets and ties, boarded a Trailways bus at Ninth and Broad streets in Richmond and ended up in jail in Jackson, Miss., with James Farmer and 400 others.

“As I look back on it,” Green said, “it was the proudest moment of my life.”

Hearing the stories of Green and Mulholland carried Fredericksburg artist Johnny Johnson back to the great sacrifices people made for justice, many in his local community. A civil rights activist and the first African American to teach at Mary Washington, Johnson attended the opening of *James Farmer and the Freedom Rides*. He and Farmer were friends. They spoke often, and Farmer’s students sought out Johnson as a living voice of the struggle for civil rights.



Left: Joan Mulholland holds *Breach of Peace* open to her 1961 Jackson, Miss., mug shot.

Above: Mulholland, fellow-Rider Reginald Green, center, and the book’s author, Eric Etheridge, attended the exhibit opening Feb. 7 and spoke on campus that evening.

# Putting the Movement on Wheels

The Freedom Rides from start to finish:

- **The Freedom Rides were designed to test a 1960** Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in public transportation terminals. According to James Farmer, the strategist behind the Rides, "Our intention was to provoke the Southern authorities into arresting us and thereby prod the Justice Department into enforcing the law of the land."
- **On May 4, 1961, a group of 13 racially mixed Riders** boarded two commercial buses in Washington, D.C. They planned to arrive in New Orleans on May 17 to mark the day seven years earlier that the Supreme Court had outlawed public school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. They meandered from Virginia to Georgia with few incidents.
- **On Mother's Day, May 14, 1961, just after church,** one of the buses rolled into Anniston, Ala. Led by a local Ku Klux Klan leader, a mob – many still in their Sunday best – smashed bus glass with brass knuckles and battered its metal with crowbars. A firebomb flew through a shattered window, and the motor coach filled with acrid smoke. Frantic riders squeezed through broken windows and dropped to the ground. Others clawed and kicked at doors, but the rioters held them shut, screaming, "Burn them alive!" And worse.
- **Later that same day, the other bus was met** in Birmingham by what the city's segregationist commissioner of public safety called a "welcoming committee." The Birmingham police chief told Klan leaders they could have their way with the Riders. "We're going to allow you 15 minutes," he said. "You can beat 'em, bomb 'em, maim 'em, kill 'em....There will be absolutely no arrests."
- **In Alabama, citizen vigilantes threatened, and civil** unrest nearly consumed Birmingham and Montgomery. A young U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy negotiated round-the-clock with state officials. In the end, the federal government flew the nearly broken original Riders to New Orleans in what Kennedy called a "Freedom Plane." The nation and its president, John F. Kennedy, breathed a sigh of relief, thinking the Rides were over and the crisis had passed.
- **A student group in Nashville, Tenn., knew that** if the Freedom Rides ended, it would prove to racist hate groups that violence could prevail. The Nashville students rode buses into the heart of the unrest, Birmingham, and on to Montgomery to continue the Freedom Rides.
- **In Alabama, the Nashville student Riders were met** by rioting segregationists. The Freedom Riders holed up for days in Montgomery, and newspapers and television screens were awash with graphic pictures and accounts of riots and civil unrest in the Alabama capital. Attorney General Kennedy called in federal marshals.
- **As mob rule threatened to govern Montgomery,** Attorney General Kennedy asked the Riders to consider a "cooling-off period" to restore peace. James Farmer responded:

*My objective is not just to make a point, but to bring about a real change in the situation. We will continue the Ride until people can sit wherever they wish on buses and use the facilities in any waiting room available to the public....We have been cooling off for 350 years. If we cool off any more, we will be in a deep freeze. The Freedom Ride will go on.*
- **Inspired by Farmer's words and the courageous** Nashville students, Riders of all races, religions, and ages got on buses. With a Mississippi prison as their certain destination, Riders from all walks of life and all parts of the country flocked to the Deep South.
- **During the summer of 1961, 436 Freedom Riders** were incarcerated in isolation in the Mississippi Delta's maximum security Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm.
- **On Nov. 1, 1961, the Interstate Commerce** Commission forced the removal of all "whites only" signs in any terminal serving interstate travelers.
- **The Civil Rights Act passed on July 2, 1964.** Victory was achieved.

Johnson remembers when the Fredericksburg City Council wouldn't permit the Virginia NAACP to meet at a local church; that changed when the group threatened to have their statewide meeting on the street in front of City Hall.

While Farmer and the Freedom Riders traveled South, Johnson taught in segregated Fredericksburg schools and welcomed students from Prince Edward County, Va., where the schools were shut down rather than integrated.

Johnson was impressed by Mary Washington's efforts to get Farmer the recognition he deserves. "I'm very sentimental, and I had a few tears as I listened and reminisced," he said. "It was deeply moving to me; I was kind of high the rest of the day. It felt very good."

While Freedom Riders were walking into segregated bus stations, Fredericksburg's Gaye Adegbalola and other young black people were sitting at a Fredericksburg lunch counter with whites gathered behind them waving Confederate flags, hurling racial epithets, and spitting.

At the exhibit opening, Green and Mulholland were "radiant," she said. "I just yelled, 'Thank you! Thank you!'"

Adegbalola, a blues musician and retired Fredericksburg teacher, was moved that Mulholland, a young white woman, "went out looking for activism and really put her life on the line."

The exhibit was more of a living history than anyone could find in a textbook – something priceless in education, Adegbalola said. "If you give them the feeling of what it was like to be in the experience – that teaches so much."

Adegbalola returned to the bus many times, but at night – with the photos bathed in the soft glow of exhibit lights, and with



**Top to bottom:** When Fredericksburg's Gaye Adegbalola saw the Freedom Riders, she cried, "Thank you! Thank you!"

**Cade Sparks backs the bus onto Ball Circle.**

**Two years ago, Multicultural Center Assistant Director Courtney Chapman dreamed of a bus on campus to celebrate the Rides. When the bus arrived Feb. 4, she squealed, "I feel like a kid, and I got a bus for Christmas!"**

the subtle music playing – she found it even more powerful.

"Sometimes you just need to see the images to reaffirm what my people did with the help of good white allies. To have that exhibit just really was a way to drive that point home – to see just how much gain there has been since I was a kid. Another thing that was moving was to see all the mug shots of the Freedom Riders; they were college students. I am sure for students up there [at UMW], it was like looking at themselves."

For senior Joe Calpin, the images transformed the Riders from history book characters to real people – who probably pondered the same issues he does.

Photos in the exhibit of two Mary Washington students made him consider his role today. The two slim dark-haired women seem to stand side by side. But one student, photographed in 1961, is in black and white; the other, a recent image, is in color. Beside them are the words, "Be it 1961 or 2011: WOULD YOU GET ON THE BUS?"

"It is as if the exhibit gives the Rides this pressing relevance: There are buses to ride today," Calpin said. "Seeing the pictures of Freedom Riders when they were our age, and seeing Rev. Green and Joan Mulholland today, you get a sense of what one can accomplish in a lifetime. It makes you think of how fast time goes, how much you *can* do in a lifetime, and also just how much change you can accomplish in one generation."

## ***Setting Up the Ride***

With the anniversary of the Freedom Rides on the horizon last year, President Hurley wanted the University to be the

epicenter of spreading the word about how Farmer and the Riders made and changed history.

“We were honored with James Farmer’s presence on this campus for more than 10 years, and what he did in being a leader in the nation’s civil rights movement deserves recognition at the highest level,” Hurley said.

With the green light from the president, Chief of Staff Wilder assembled a group from across disciplines and throughout campus to plan a semester’s worth of events, including classes, seminars, and speakers. Wilder needed “doers,” he said, so he called Courtney Chapman, assistant director of the James Farmer Multicultural Center, who brought boundless enthusiasm and a big idea – bring a 1960s-era bus to campus.

You can’t miss a “big ol’ bus,” Chapman said, and everybody has ridden them. “Most of the UMW students rode a bus to school every day when they were kids; they ride the bus to Wal-Mart. Yet they have no idea what buses symbolize in U.S. history. The fact is that two friends could not sit on the bus together because the color of their skin was different.”

By illustrating the Freedom Rides against the backdrop of something so familiar and with such visual impact, Chapman said, UMW could tell the story of how the U.S. has progressed from mandated segregation to a nation where everybody can get on a bus, sit where they want, and accompany whom they please.

But you can’t just order up a vintage bus – Chapman even trawled Craigslist and eBay to find one. Fall semester began with just five months until the exhibit was to open, and UMW still was without its wheels. Then, in September, Wilder was heading home from the groundbreaking for the new UMW Dahlgren campus. As he drove through rural King George County, he spied it! Off in the woods, nestled among computer parts, discarded furniture, and other treasures, was a beautiful 40-foot bus.



**During installation, workers used Maria Schultz’s exhibit design as a road map. Above, a scale model of the exhibit balances on a wheel barrow heaped full of Ball Circle soil.**

Enter Cade Sparks, owner of the “Big Mac,” once the private touring coach of McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc. Wilder braved the barking of a dog and knocked persistently on Sparks’ door. Wilder was shocked to find that Sparks was not only willing to team up to celebrate the Freedom Rides, but that he already had them on his mind. Sparks’ friend, the curator of the Greyhound bus museum in Hibbing, Minn., had approached the bus aficionado about working with *him* to commemorate their 50th anniversary.

Sparks got on board with the UMW project almost immediately, with one caveat regarding the aging “Big Mac.” “What you see is what you get,” he told Wilder.

With the bus under contract to UMW, Wilder assembled a group to plan an outdoor exhibition with the bus as its backbone. Five people from among University Design and Editorial Services, the James Farmer Multicultural Center, and the Department of Historic Preservation were assigned to get the exhibit rolling.

Elisabeth Sommer, a museum specialist and a visiting professor of museum studies, guided the group to articulate the one idea it most wanted to convey – *the Freedom Rides of the early 1960s were a powerful example of student action for social justice in the face of real danger.*

# Lessons from the Rides

Since January, UMW has made local, state, and national headlines for visits by Freedom Riders and top scholars of the civil rights movement and for exhibits such as *James Farmer and the Freedom Rides*, which was built around an aging bus.

In classrooms, the celebration has been academic – and just as enthusiastic.

Semester-long classes were devoted to James Farmer and the Freedom Rides. Elisabeth Sommer, visiting professor of historic preservation, led her **Museum Interpretation and Exhibit Design Lab** students in creating the exhibit *Down Freedom's Main Line* in the lobby of Dodd Auditorium. They installed much of it before the March 30 screening of the PBS movie *Freedom Riders*. "I'm extremely proud of what the students accomplished in a short amount of time," Sommer said. "It was an extraordinary feat of teamwork and creativity."

Ray Arsenault, a foremost Freedom Rides scholar and professor of Southern history at the University of South Florida, was so impressed by the exhibit that he invited the professor and her students to the PBS gala in honor of the Freedom Riders at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.

Faculty from the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication, Anand Rao and Tim O'Donnell, coordinated two classes around the commemoration. Students in Rao's **Documenting Social Movements** class learned the story of the 1961 campaign and explored the role of media – old and new – in social change. O'Donnell's **Freedom Riders** course focused on applying the lessons of the Rides to contemporary circumstances by asking students to answer the question, "What would you get on the bus for today?"

Together, the classes worked to capture and document the sights and sounds of the semester-long commemoration in addition to creating an online archive of student-generated content inspired by its themes.

University-wide, plans are also under way for an annual first-year seminar beginning next fall – **James Farmer and the Struggle for Civil Rights**. With seven faculty members

from across disciplines teaching sections of the class, many UMW freshmen will start their college careers with a deep knowledge of the civil rights leader who once taught at their school.

Colin Rafferty of the English department taught a first-year seminar on Farmer's legacy this spring; in American studies, Jess Rigelhaupt and his students studied the Freedom Rides in the context of events of the 1960s. UMW also has established a Postdoctoral Fellowship in Civil Rights and Social Justice.

To round out the semester and the celebration, two Freedom Riders were scheduled to deliver Commencement addresses on campus: U.S. Rep. Bob Filner of California at the graduate commencement ceremony and U.S. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia at the undergraduate ceremony. They will be at Mary Washington nearly 50 years to the day after the first 13 Freedom Riders, including Lewis and James Farmer, boarded buses from Washington, D.C., for New Orleans.

The last UMW tribute of the semester to the Freedom Riders was set for Sunday, May 8. PBS American Experience is retracing the route of the first Ride with a bus full of original Riders and modern-day students, including UMW senior **Charles Reed**. The 2011 Freedom Ride leaves D.C. that morning. Its first stop will honor the man who started it all – James Farmer – at his memorial on Campus Walk.

– Neva S. Trenis

For more information on UMW's celebration of the Freedom Rides, go to [freedomrides.umw.edu](http://freedomrides.umw.edu).



PBS chose Charles Reed '11 to be on board the 2011 Freedom Ride, which is retracing the 1961 route. Reed is the only Virginia college student invited to ride.

Research began on everything from accurate information about the first Rides, to how to acquire photos, how to design an exhibit around a bus, how to make panels hold up through the harshest winter months, what to do to get the word out about the exhibit, and a whole lot more.

It fell to UMW designer Maria Schultz to figure out how to tell a story on a bus exterior. On the motor coach and on the two 8-by-40-foot panels that flanked it, Schultz carefully arranged photos, quotes from Riders, and narrative about

what happened. She became overwhelmed as she studied images of bloodied passengers and hate-filled faces, and as she read the words of Southern officials who failed to protect those they labeled "agitators."

Schultz was born 20 years after the Freedom Rides, and the story of the long, hard struggle was new to her. "I just couldn't believe all this happened in *our* history and I didn't even know about it," she said.

She guided installers as they applied images to bus

windows. She watched as electricians and AV specialists wired for light and sound. And one cold February day, she worked alongside carpenters from sunup to sundown as they built the exhibit on Campus Walk.

Schultz loved the work; it made her proud to see how the University community got behind the exhibit. Painters, gardeners, professors, librarians, campus police officers, students, housekeepers, and everyone who was asked to help gave it their all.

“Everybody I worked with got on our bus,” she said.

That included owner Cade Sparks. After he delivered the bus to a Spotsylvania County garage, he stayed as the images went on the windows. In the quiet, he contemplated the horrible scenes, knowing the most graphic photos never made it to the morning papers. Mobs beat photojournalists and destroyed their cameras.

“It was very powerful for me,” he said.

The next morning, Sparks drove the bus, with those images in the windows, to campus. On the highway, he said, in car after car, people were looking at the pictures, pointing, talking to one another, trying to figure out what the bus was about.

As he turned onto Sunken Road by the University, he got a surprise. “I just got this big smile on my face,” he said. The sidewalk was lined with dozens of people. “For lack of a better word, it was humbling. I was driving along, and every construction worker, every student, every person on the side of the road who had a cell phone was snapping pictures of the bus. To be a part of that gives you a very warm feeling.”

## Front Row Seats

For some Riders, Mary Washington’s March 30 screening of the American Experience film *Freedom Riders* was a reunion. Freedom Rider Charles Person, then a Morehouse College freshman, left D.C. with James Farmer on the first bus in May 1961. So did *Jet* magazine reporter Simeon Booker and photographer Ted Gaffney.

On the Ride from Atlanta to Birmingham, Klansmen seized the bus as the journalists looked on. They beat Person unconscious and, at the Birmingham, Ala., station, delivered him to a crowd wielding iron pipes, bats, and brass knuckles.

Booker knew what Southern racists were capable of. He had covered the 1955 trial of two white men for beating



**Left: Charles Person, top, was 18 and the youngest Freedom Rider to leave D.C. with James Farmer in 1961. Theodore Gaffney, bottom, was *Jet* magazine’s embedded photographer on the bus and saw Person beaten by Klansmen. Here Gaffney stands by a photo of himself, Riders, and *Jet* reporter Simeon Booker in the student exhibit *Down Freedom’s Main Line*. Person, Gaffney, and Booker attended the UMW March 30 screening of the PBS film *Freedom Riders*. Bottom: Lindsay Hansome ‘12 reacts to a difficult scene from the film in Dodd Auditorium.**



14-year-old Emmitt Till to death; they said the boy had whistled at a white woman. But the 1961 Alabama Ride “was a frightening experience, the worst encountered in almost 20 years of journalism,” Booker wrote for *Jet* after the harrowing trip.

In that same June 1961 *Jet* article, Booker described how the driver and local Klansmen colluded to enforce the “blacks in the back” rule of the South. The fresh-faced Person sat near the front of the bus. “Without a word of warning, a fist crashed against the head of Charles Person,” Booker wrote.

Person, now 68, still finds it difficult to talk about the Freedom Ride. When he came to Mary Washington and saw Booker and Gaffney for the first time since he was 18, words failed again. He wept.

The surroundings that evening of the film premiere added to the poignancy of the reunion. A historic preservation class had created an exhibit, *Down Freedom’s Main Line*, in the Dodd Auditorium foyer. Before the film screening, visiting Freedom Riders were surrounded by mementos there, including 1961 photos, some shot by Gaffney.

Buttons from the civil rights movement were on display, including CORE and Freedom Rider buttons. Above a life-size photo of Riders waiting at the Birmingham station hung an authentic, battered wooden “whites only” sign. A June 1, 1961, edition of *Jet* was open to Booker’s first-person piece recounting the violent Atlanta-to-Birmingham journey.

Person and his wife had traveled to UMW from their home in Atlanta for the screening of *Freedom Riders*; Catherine Burks-Brooks had come from Birmingham; Green and Mulholland had made their return to UMW from Washington, D.C. All came at the request of Raymond Arsenault, a historian and author they had come to know well through hours of interviews about the Rides. Arsenault wrote *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Freedom*, on which the film they were about to view was based.

Dodd Auditorium was full that March night as today’s students looked across the room at aging versions of themselves. The very Freedom Riders UMW students had seen in black-and-white archival photos came to life in front of them – now with gray hair, weathered faces, and slower movements – but with strong and steady voices that told of risking their lives to make America rise to its promise

of liberty and justice for all. When the four Riders were introduced, the enthusiastic crowd rose to its feet with thundering appreciation.

As the film *Freedom Riders* rolled, the audience met the Riders in their youth. Footage of students in their Sunday best boarding a Greyhound to face the unknown was followed by images of hate-filled mobs and burning buses. Interviews included eyewitness accounts of segregationists colluding with officials – they planned to breathe new life into Jim Crow by nearly murdering Freedom Riders.

During the darker scenes, some viewers shook their heads in disbelief; others averted their eyes. At the front of the auditorium, a Rider’s tears reflected thin streams of light from the screen.

But when the soul-steadying songs the Riders had sung in prison rang through the auditorium, all the Freedom Riders joined in full voice.

“We shall not, we shall not be moved! We shall not, we shall not be moved.”

When the final credits rolled, the audience again sprang to its feet, this time for the powerful story, and still more for the heroes who found the power to better America.

## ***Integration: Great Lives and Freedom Rides***

Just a day after the screening of *Freedom Riders*, its writer, author Ray Arsenault, returned to Dodd Auditorium as part of the popular UMW Great Lives lecture series. All of the 436 brave individuals who made their way through the South in 1961 were “great lives,” Arsenault told the audience.

While the American civil rights movement might have appeared to have been orchestrated by charismatic orators in suits and ties, the key element of the Freedom Ride movement was its individuals.

“The power of the foot soldiers – the bonding of people who put their lives on the line – is the power of this movement,” the foremost historian of the Freedom Rides said.

Arsenault, a professor of Southern history at the University of South Florida, told the crowd in Dodd about many of them. He told about the blind 44-year-old white housewife from Rochester, N.Y., whose husband read her

the paper each morning. After reading to her the account of the Anniston firebombing, despite all odds, she got on a bus. Another was an Indonesian exchange student who got on the bus only to have the Jackson police puzzle over whether he was white or black – it mattered deeply to officials in the racially segregated prison.

Arsenault also talked about theology student William Barbee, a “gentle soul” who rode the bus only to have his head held tight beneath a Klansman’s boot as another drove a pipe through his ear. Barbee survived but never recovered. Committed to nonviolence, he wouldn’t sign the warrant for the arrest of two KKK members, though they were widely witnessed as the perpetrators of Barbee’s injuries. No one man, Barbee said, should be held responsible for the Jim Crow system of the South.

“That is the truest expression of the ethic of love and redemption – these were people who were looking for the beloved community,” Arsenault said. “The Freedom Rides tell story after story of great lives, stories of triumph, but also of incredible sacrifice.”

Arsenault characterized the Freedom Riders as individuals who had “no right” to think they could change society – they were young, they had little money, and movement elders told them they were crazy, or worse, that they would set back “the cause.”



**Birmingham native Catherine Burks-Brooks, left, was one of four Freedom Riders who spoke in Dodd Auditorium on March 31. One very late night in 1961, she recalled, notorious Birmingham police commissioner Bull Connor delivered Burks-Brooks and other Riders from jail to the Tennessee state line, and he told them not to return. “I told my friend, Bull, we’d be back in Birmingham by high noon.” Here, she is part of a panel that included fellow Rider Reginald Green.**



**Ray Arsenault wrote *The Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. He visited campus for the screening of the American Experience film based on his book and to deliver a Great Lives lecture. When Arsenault stopped on Campus Walk to photograph the James Farmer memorial, he caught a photographer’s eye.**

“Can’t you wait? Can’t you be patient? Do you really have to have freedom *now*?” Arsenault mimicked parents asking. “Their answer was, ‘YES!’” Arsenault told the audience. “There was a truth-telling power to their lives – 436 stories of courage and commitment.”

With that, Arsenault introduced the people who had lived great lives – Freedom Riders Charles Person, Catherine Burks-Brooks, Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, and Reginald Green. For a second night, they were greeted with resounding applause as the crowd in Dodd Auditorium rose to its feet.

Burks-Brooks was among the Riders who provided backup from Nashville after the first attacks at Montgomery and Birmingham. The Tennessee State senior, like most of the student Riders, missed final exams for the cause. At UMW, she recalled how Birmingham’s storied Bull Connor, commissioner of public safety, piled her and other Riders from the Birmingham jail into police cars under cover of night. With no idea where they were headed, the spunky 21-year-old bantered with the segregationist, even inviting him to have breakfast with the group.

When they got to the Alabama/Tennessee state line a couple of hours before dawn, Connor told her, “This is where you’ll be getting out,” adding that the students better

get on home and save themselves a whole lot of trouble.

Burks-Brooks, then a big fan of Westerns, shot from the hip. "I told my friend, Bull, we'd be back in Birmingham by high noon."

As a child Burks-Brooks thought something was wrong with the way African Americans were treated in her hometown of Birmingham. By fifth grade or so she *knew* something was wrong, so she started speaking – and acting – up. "Something *was* wrong," she said. "And I thought everyone should know about it."

Once, on the way home from high school, she threw the "colored only" sign out the window of a city bus. She trained in nonviolence and participated in sit-ins before she became a Freedom Rider. She said that all along – despite their youth – she and others were thinking of making things better, not just for themselves, but for their children and grandchildren.

Arsenault asked Burks-Brooks what her parents thought of her ways. "My mother used to tell people, 'Well, you all know she came out feet first.' And I have been just kicking all the time since."

Rider Charles Person grew up on the campus of Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he was involved in boycotts and civil rights action. An exceptionally gifted math and science student, he had been accepted at MIT, but Georgia Tech turned the promising youngster down for one reason – his skin color. Person was only 18 when he heeded CORE's call for Freedom Riders.

He headed to Washington, D.C., and trained with CORE's original Riders, who included James Farmer. The night before the first Ride departed, the adults went out for Chinese food, he recalled. But Person, the youngest Freedom Rider, drank water and ate pumpnickel bread alone in the CORE office.

"Because they were going to serve 'adult beverages,'" he said.

The student of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and James Farmer was raised to avoid violence. Though he came from a line of hunters, he and his brothers were trained to handle guns but were cautioned not to carry them – or even pen knives – as many boys did. Any weapon would invite retaliation, Person's father warned his sons.

But Person said neither his training nor his upbringing prepared him for what he and others experienced on the Freedom Rides.

"We had no idea of the things that awaited us in Anniston and Birmingham," he said.

Being raised in a culture of civility, Person didn't believe an adult man would beat up a "kid" or a woman, he said. He was ready to have things thrown at him, to have cigarettes extinguished on his skin, and even to be spat upon. But he wasn't prepared for faces that betrayed hearts filled deep with hate.

"What does it take to make someone hate someone they've never even seen before?" he pondered, as he has done for 50 years. "How could our just being there bring out these kinds of emotions? That is what I don't understand."

Though Person's face has aged from the boy in the Freedom Ride photos, there is still something young about it – a look of slight vulnerability and deep kindness. Person didn't only study nonviolence; he chose it as a way of life and even stuck to those principles when he served the U.S. in Southeast Asia.

"I was a better Marine because of the movement," Person told the crowd at Dodd Auditorium. "If it hadn't been for that experience, I don't know if I would have survived Vietnam. I was cool. Nothing rattled me."

Arsenault, who was invited along with all living Freedom Riders to appear May 4 on television's *Oprah Show*, said that these courageous individuals "have been forgotten for decades." On the 50th anniversary, he's glad they're being remembered in such a big way.

## ***The Bus Rolls On***

In the two months *James Farmer and the Freedom Rides* was on Ball Circle, it was visited by church and school groups, by families, by out-of-towners, by UMW applicants and their parents, and by the Mary Washington students who passed the bus each day.

Like President Hurley, many in the UMW community said they were "moved by the message and the beauty" of the old bus.

What Farmer and the Freedom Riders did so all could enjoy more equality today, Hurley said, is worthy of an unprecedented celebration. "And I also think it is important for today's students to understand the courage young students had back then because they believed so strongly in the cause and the sacrifices they made."

But the original Freedom Riders who came to UMW during the celebration brought more than stories of the past. They brought challenges for the future.

In 1961, Joan Mulholland had no intention of participating in the Freedom Rides, but “when the occasion presents itself, one has to act,” she said. Then a teenager, Mulholland had ribbed her friend Hank Thomas about leaving for a “vacation” down South when he joined the very first Freedom Ride. But when she saw the image of Thomas choking and beaten beside the bus in Anniston, she knew her occasion had arrived.

“In keeping with Gandhi’s teaching, if one person fell by the wayside and couldn’t continue, the next person stepped up to take his place,” Mulholland said. “I was there.

“Us old gray hairs are sort of past our prime, perhaps, but to the students, I say, you have to seize *your* moment. What we hope is that by knowing what we did, you will have the

inspiration and the knowledge to move forward in a new direction, whether it be right here or on the streets of Cairo.”

Green told UMW students that he and other college-aged Riders who spent the summer in the maximum security state penitentiary became James Farmer’s students. “I remember him singing in Parchman, ‘Which side are you on, boys? Which side are you on?’ with that big, deep voice.”

The young Freedom Riders changed America, Green said, and today there is still more to be done. “Now is the challenge from all of us,” he told the crowd at Mary Washington. “Young people, college students, find some project, some issue that you are passionate about. Maybe it’s hunger. Maybe it’s ecology. Maybe it’s education. Maybe it’s about all that.”

Find *something*, Green implored. “We’ve come too far to turn back now.” 🏠



Reporter Simeon Booker, left, covered the original Freedom Ride for *Jet* magazine. He and Rider Reginald Green sit before a life-size image of the Birmingham Greyhound station waiting room. The archival image is part of *Down Freedom’s Main Line*, the student-created exhibit that also featured Booker’s original June 1961 *Jet* magazine article about the brutal Ride through Alabama. The sign above the photo is authentic, purchased by students on eBay.



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**“In the end, it was a success.”**

– James Farmer, on the Freedom Rides

When Freedom Riders Joan Trumpauer Mulholland and Reginald Green, above, first saw the exhibit *James Farmer and the Freedom Rides* on Ball Circle in early February, they instinctively reached out to touch the long-ago photo of a friend recovering beside a bombed bus in Anniston, Ala. Half a century ago, both Mulholland and Green heeded the call of the Freedom Rides, a strategy designed by the late UMW Professor James Farmer. Their sacrifice and that of the other 434 Riders paid off with open interstate bus travel for all.