Preserving civil rights history

Union members commemorate Freedom Summer with archival collection

WHEN 10-YEAR-OLD Gwen Thompson walked to her first day of “Freedom School” in Meridian, Miss., she had never been next to a white person in her life. Now, white college students had come down from New York to teach her. It was exciting—and dangerous.

That summer, in 1964, three activists were shot and killed in Mississippi by the Ku Klux Klan. “My mother was very afraid, but very tolerant,” remembers Thompson, now Gwen Thompson-Chamberlain and an AFT member. “She knew the importance of letting us go with ‘strange young white people’ who would teach us.”

Those “strange people” included many students from Queens College in Flushing, N.Y., and at least two became faculty there, where they snapped by activists who snuck into a Ku Klux Klan rally. (“It was a crazy thing for us to do,” admits Dean Savage, now a sociology professor and PSC member at Queens.)

While the Freedom Schools shaped people like Thompson-Chamberlain—she now tells civil rights-era stories professionally, and works as a tutor and teacher in the San Diego Community College District, counseling families on welfare-to-work strategies—they also shaped the lives of the young teachers.

Mark Levy, a Queens alumnus and former PSC and United Federation of Teachers member who helped start the archives with his photos, also donated notes from training sessions: “Most important thing to teach is that students must think, ask questions, respect themselves,” reads one. “Not black and white but ‘people’ coming down. No insider and outsider.”

“I learned how effective you can be when you’re organizing and getting people together,” he recalls. Ordinary people can make a big difference—like the woman who showed up every day with lunch for the teachers. “You learn all the different things that it takes to be a part of a movement and all the contributions that people can make.”

“It was life-changing,” says Mike Wenger, who went on to a career in social justice. In 1963, he taught in Prince Edward County, Va., where public schools were closed for five years in defiance of integration. White children attended private schools; beyond the Freedom Schools, black children were largely shut out of an education. “We found kids who were ... 9 years old who’d never held a pencil,” says Wenger.

The archives shed light on this forgotten chapter of the movement, he says. “Our hope is that it will inspire today’s students to be involved in issues of concern to them. If they see that [their] predecessors at Queens College were involved in social justice issues and that it changed our lives, [we hope] it will inspire them to be more activist in their lives.”

AFT offers scholarships and grants

Applications for the 2012 Robert G. Porter Scholars Program are available online. AFT members and their children are eligible to participate in the program, which awards four $8,000 scholarships to graduating high school seniors who are dependents of AFT members and $1,000 grants to AFT members who are continuing their education.

TO APPLY:
• Download the application from the AFT website at www.aft.org/aftplus/scholarships;
or
• E-mail an application request to: porterscholars@aft.org.

APPLICATION DEADLINE IS MARCH 31, 2012