Queens College exhibit to honor civil rights role

BY NICHOLAS HIRSHON

QUEENS COLLEGE cemented its place in civil rights history when student-activist Andrew Goodman — on a mission to register black voters in Mississippi in 1964 — was slain by Ku Klux Klansmen.

Decades later, the Flushing school — whose clock tower is named after Goodman and two of his fallen comrades — plans to exhibit memorabilia of other pupils’ crusades against racial injustice.

A pair of alumni, Art Gatti and Mark Levy, are donating buttons, photos and posters they collected while also registering voters in Mississippi in the mid-1960s — a turbulent chapter in the school’s past.

“The story of the civil rights movement (at Queens College) is much bigger and more exciting than the story of just one person who got killed,” said Levy, 66, who graduated in 1964.

Among the unique items — headed to the archives for use by students and researchers — is a Shell gas station map of Mississippi’s five congressional districts, a reference tool for the activists’ registration drives.

Scores of buttons convey messages of both unity — like a black hand shaking a white one — and rebellion, such as the acronym GROW for “Get rid of Wallace,” referring to pro-segregation Alabama Gov. George Wallace.

“It finds a way to make relevant what happened to the past and relate it to the present,” said Gatti, 66, of the West Village, who graduated in 1965.

Added Levy: “The lesson of the struggle is they didn’t just happen. They were struggled for.”

Those lessons are already beginning to resonate with the current student body.

“It speaks volumes to know these students committed to this (civil rights) movement — and we students cannot be complacent,” said senior Donaldson Converse, 21, of St. Albans.

Photos by Susana Bates

Queens College alumni Art Gatti (l.), Class of ’65, and Mark Levy (r.), Class of ’64, show their collection of civil rights memorabilia with senior Donaldson Converse, Class of ’66, at the college. Gatti and Levy, who both helped register black voters in Mississippi in the mid-1960s, donated buttons, posters and other items to the college’s archives.