

Opinion | Chaney, Goodman & Schwerner live on

Jay Hershenson :: 6/21/2024



FBI

On June 29, 1964, the FBI began distributing these pictures of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, left, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, who were killed near Philadelphia, Miss.



By [Jay Hershenson](#)

June 21, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

It was a warm summer day in Neshoba County, Miss. in June 1964. Three young men arrived to investigate a church fire bombing. It was about to become red hot. James E. Chaney, Andy Goodman and Mickey Schwerner were recruited along with hundreds of Black and white volunteers to register voters, develop schools, and secure better health care in the deep South. The project was known as Freedom Summer.

Andy and Mickey were Jewish; James was of the Catholic faith. Andy attended [Queens College](#), Mickey went to Cornell University, and James was a plasterer's apprentice. All three were volunteers working with the [Congress of Racial Equality \(CORE\)](#).

On June 21, 1964, just one day after arriving, the three students were jailed, released, kidnapped and brutally murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. An extensive search was initiated.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and many civil rights leaders aided in the quest to bring the murderers to justice, speaking out on multiple occasions and consoling the bereaved families. After 44 days, their bodies were found, along with those of several African-American boys long abandoned by local authorities.

King visited Queens College's Colden Auditorium on May 13, 1965 for the inaugural President John F. Kennedy lecture series.

"It was Queens College that gave to America, and indeed the world, Andrew Goodman, whose creative witness will certainly live for generations yet unborn. He, along with the others, paid the supreme price for this struggle, and I'm sure that we will see in many ways that his death was not in vain."

It was a long, arduous struggle to bring those responsible to justice. Forty-one years later, the lead perpetrator of the murders, Edgar Ray Killen, was sentenced to 60 years for manslaughter. He died in prison.

The murders of one African-American male and two white men shined a glaring spotlight on the horrors of long-standing racism and helped usher in the federal 1964 Civil Rights Act. This historic legislation prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal.

The [Andrew Goodman Foundation](#) was created in 1966 to carry on the purpose and spirit of Andy's life. The foundation organized the "Vote Everywhere Campaign," a national, non-partisan, civic engagement movement of student leaders and university partners.

They provide extensive training and a peer network to support Andrew Goodman Ambassadors. They work to register voters, bring down voting barriers, and tackle social justice issues on their respective campuses.

David Goodman, Andy's younger brother, recently said, "My brother said, 'I want to do something about it.' And we're seeing an uptick in 18- to 29-year-olds interest in public policy that impacts them. They want to have an impact. And in order to have an impact, you've got to vote. Democracy is not guaranteed, and we've got to work over the long haul."

On May 30, 2024, at the [Queens College commencement](#), President Frank H. Wu presented president's medals to David Goodman, the Rev. Julia Chaney-Moss — the youngest sister of James Chaney — and Steven Schwerner (brother of Mickey Schwerner and former Queens College director of counseling). Cassie Schwerner, Steven's daughter, accepted the award.

The medals — the college's highest administrative honor — were bestowed in recognition of their longstanding work in civil rights and for carrying on the enduring legacy of the three fallen heroes.

In 2014, President Barack Obama presented the presidential medals of freedom posthumously to Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. He said, "On June 21, 1964, three young men, two white and one Black, set out

to learn more about the burning of a church in Neshoba County, Miss... And in that Freedom Summer, these three Americans refused to sit on the sidelines. Their brutal murder by a gang of Ku Klux Klan members shook the conscience of our nation. It took 44 days to find their bodies, 41 years to bring the lead perpetrator to justice. And while they're often remembered for how they died, we honor them today for how they lived — with the idealism and the courage of youth.”

In this all-important presidential election year, the right to vote is the cornerstone of democracy in America. Let us remember and honor how these heroes sacrificed their lives for that right and be inspired to remove whatever barriers are erected to prevent voter enfranchisement and assure the highest turnout ever.

To learn more about the 60th anniversary, please visit: www.qc.cuny.edu/FreedomSummer.

Hershenson is vice president for communications and marketing and senior advisor to the president of Queens College.

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