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Would you sign a waiver absolving an organization personal responsibility for any injuries you sustain or legal problems you encounter as a result of your participation in a cause in which you believe?

That is what participants of the Freedom Rides did before embarking on their historic crusade to end discrimination on Interstate bus lines in the Jim Crow South in 1961. To commemorate their journeys and their continuing relevance, South Dakota Public Broadcasting hosted a special screening of half of the upcoming American Experience documentary, "Freedom Riders," at the Al Neuharth Media Center on the campus of the University of South Dakota last week.

"Racism is still with us, and it's still strong. It's taken on new complexities," Clair O'Connor, who participated in the Freedom Rides, said via telephone following the screening.

O'Connor, a resident of Eden Prairie, Minn., said the Southern Poverty Law Center continues to identify new hate groups each year.

Hate is something people need to deal with on a local and national level, she said.

"We have to confront it and fight it and change people's minds," she said. "It's easy to rest on our laurels and remember what we did, but it never changes."

The Freedom Riders consisted of groups of people of all ages, genders and ethnicities who traveled on segregated Interstate busses in the South, sitting where they pleased, often meeting with violence and arrest along the way.

Recruited and trained by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Freedom Riders began their campaign on May 4, 1961.

Through their use of non-violence, the Freedom Riders helped to put injustice into the national consciousness, said Robert Hilderbrand, Ph.D. professor of history at USD.

"There was a Gallup poll very early in the Freedom Rides that showed that only 24 percent of the American people supported the Freedom Rides," he said. "The vast majority of people thought that they shouldn't be there.

"When they can see the way that people who are on the side of one kind of law were behaving non-violently and they were being beaten and abused by people on the other side, it's possible for them to see which law had the higher moral force. And really, it was that shift in public opinion," he said.

Tom Sorensen, associate dean of the USD School of Law, agreed.

"It's not a fight, physically. It's a one-sided, 'I'm going to stand here and tell you the truth, and I'm not fighting back.' How brave is that?" he said. "That's really what makes this successful. It made people sit up and take notice, which is really what had to happen. Because this was a string of days that really brought attention."

O'Connor said that thanks in part to the methods of CORE and the Freedom Riders, non-violence became "the standard of how you bring about change, and I think that's very, very important. It's critical."

It's a legacy that needs to continue into the future, said Andre Oliver, vice president of the South Dakota chapter of the NAACP, located in Sioux Falls.

“I look at my parents, my mentors, my friends and family and I know that I am standing on the shoulders of giants. And it’s up to myself and people that care for me to continue the legacy,” he said.

O’Connor was a college student when she received the opportunity to join the Freedom Ride from CORE recruiter. With the blessing of her family, she traveled to Nashville, Tenn., for training in non-violence.

Her segment of the ride went from Nashville to Jackson, Miss., where she and her co-riders were arrested and charged with breach of the peace at the bus station where they had stopped.

“Nobody’s peace was breached. The only people there were the police and us,” she said. O’Connor spent almost two weeks in jail before she was bailed out, at which point she had to return to Minnesota for her job.

She said the reactions she received upon returning were “across the board.”

“It was not something everybody agreed with,” O’Connor said. “That is one of the myths of the ’60s, that it was a different time, and everybody was more progressive or more open to change. It wasn’t true.”

But due to movements like the Freedom Rides, positive change was eventually brought about, Hilderbrand said.

“There is less hatred in America than there used to be – plenty of problems, plenty of nutcases running around out there – but there’s less hatred,” he said. “And it’s because that foundation for racial hatred was discredited, and it was discredited not because of the force of the federal government. It was discredited because of the sole force of the power of those non-violent people who made the American people – even Southerners – confront their own hatred.”

Oliver added, “As you look across history, you go from slavery, you go to separate but equal, you go to the civil rights period and everything in between. ... What happens is over time, the hatred becomes more intelligent and can be more easily hidden, so I just encourage everyone to always be self-analyzing.

“Just because what Clair and her predecessors did happened in the 60s ... that should not make us blind,” he said. “We should be sober to the fact that at our jobs, in our families, that we should be constantly, constantly observing, looking for moments of action, choosing our battles selectively, communicating, finding the best course of action. And then finding a way to make change.”

O’Connor said people don’t have to be special or unique to help bring about change – it’s something of which anyone is capable.

“I think that’s the other message from the Freedom Rides,” she said. “Things don’t happen from the top down, as we know very well. They happen from the bottom up, and they happen because people get together and they organize.”

“Freedom Riders” will be broadcast on South Dakota Public Television May 16.

For more information, visit

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>.

For information regarding last week’s post-film discussion, visit www.sdpb.org.