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The Long March Forward

Jason Gilmore and a handful of students attend the 50th anniversary of the march in Selma. What did it mean to participate?

Selma, Alabama, was the destination for a group of USU students who called themselves 52 Strong after joining with students from other universities. The group was led by Dr. Jason Gilmore.

The foot soldiers of the revolution fought cattle prods and police batons with open palms and prayer. Scores of unarmed men and women had their faces sprayed with tear gas and their bodies broken for what they believed. Their target, Montgomery, Alabama, was a 54-mile walk from Selma, a city carefully selected because the route required marching into some of the darkest corners of the South, where a person could be gunned down in broad daylight for encouraging another to exercise his most basic of freedoms — the right to vote.

The masterminds of the civil rights movement are often remembered as orators of peace. Their stories repeated in classrooms without mention of cracked skulls or bloodstained cement. But do we truly honor the movement if we fail to appreciate the sacrifices that propelled it forward? For Jason Gilmore, assistant professor of communication studies at Utah State, those stories need course correction. “Students know there were some marches and some speeches given and that one lady was stern enough to stand up for her rights,” he says.

“What they are not told about is that this came in the face of threat and violence and death. That these people, even though they had crosses burned on their doorstep, even though they were intimidated, had their jobs taken away from them if they registered to vote, these were people who went to all these lengths to fight for their rights. Those are the parts that we miss in the education scenario.”

Gilmore knows because he missed that side of history himself. Two summers ago after completing his doctorate at the University of Washington he realized students need an updated syllabus on the civil rights movement. They need one that entails talking with people who were there. The idea was born out of a road trip with his dissertation adviser and two classmates. Their plan involved meeting with their professor’s former advisees and visiting some of the nation’s ballparks. They would visit Selma, Alabama, along the way. But everything changed the night they drove into Birmingham.

“This is where [police] turned fire hoses on children marchers,” Gilmore says. “This is where they sicced dogs on the children marchers. This is where the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist church was.”

At 11 p.m. they visited Kelly Ingram Park, a memorial that aims to capture that savagery. Statues of protesters cowering from fire hoses. Visitors pass through a metal walkway where snarling dogs are poised to bite. They were standing on sacred ground. “It just floored us how we were four academics — intelligent, well-rounded, invested in American history — and how little we knew,” Gilmore says. “Because the classic narrative is Rosa Parks sat down and King stood up and everything was hunky dory. But decades of serious work was done in the face of violence and overt racism that came in the form, not only of people in society, but in the system itself, violently treating these people for wanting their rights.”

That late night visit changed the course of the trip. The next morning they traveled into Selma where Martin Luther King Jr. led 25,000 nonviolent demonstrators across the Edmund Pettus Bridge en route to Montgomery to petition Gov. George Wallace for voting rights. The scholars began asking how people remembered the civil rights movement. They devised a new trip itinerary that scrapped baseball games for historic stops.

From Selma, the scholars visited Little Rock to see where the “Little Rock Nine” first integrated the school district under the protection of the 101st Airborne Division. They traveled to Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers were shot and killed in 1964. Everywhere they stopped they made contact with locals.
This is how the Edmund Pettus Bridge looked when the first march was conceived 50 years ago.

The first two scholarships were awarded to Miranda Vance,’15, and Adrian Bustamante,’16, who packed their bags in early March for a nine day sojourn to Selma with Gilmore and 49 other travelers from the University of Washington and Bellevue College. The group called themselves “52 Strong,” however, the experience began long before anyone stepped foot on the bus.

The 52 Strong engaged in a series of bonding exercises in the months leading up to the trip. For the USU cohort, that meant road tripping to Seattle to build cohesion with the rest of the group. The idea was that to be able to go deep with the material on the trip the 52 Strong had to be comfortable with one another.

“If you’re going to be a part of this you have to know that this is intense and you have to visit it with a lot of care and respect for others,” Gilmore says. “We prepare people for the intensity of this trip.”

Bustamante admits he was skeptical that the emotional intensity was being oversold. Once the pilgrimage began, he struggled to find his place. Some members of the 52 Strong expressed feeling guilty about events that happened in the past. Some cried. Bustamante couldn’t quite relate.

“At first I kind of felt like it was more of a black and white issue,” he says. “I am Hispanic. My family didn’t ever have slaves. I understood why I was there, but I felt like I was on the outside. I sort of wondered where do I fit in all of this?”

In a way, he has always felt like he existed on the periphery. Bustamante grew up in Sugar City, Idaho, a tiny town that is more than 90 percent white and majority Mormon. Bustamante is Mexican-American and Catholic. He has been navigating cultural differences his whole life. However, after enrolling in Gilmore’s class he found himself arriving early to find a seat. He felt locked in.

As president of USU’s Latino Student Union and a member of the Psi Sigma Phi — the first fraternity chartered to celebrate multiculturalism — a lot of Bustamante’s work involves education and outreach. That means reaching out to those who are different from him and trying to include them. It means acknowledging and respecting differences. Bustamante applied for one of the slots on the civil rights pilgrimage to see these principles in action. Everything came together for him in Selma.

“We had the opportunity to march as they did across the bridge. It wasn’t just on the sidewalk. They shut the bridge down,” Bustamante said. “You would get to the middle of the bridge and look back and see all these people back to Main Street. And then you’d look forward and see all these people in front of you.”

UPDATED COMMUNICATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The 1965 march from Selma was not a one-day affair. It was part of a mass demonstration organized over the course of two years by groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Dallas County Voters League to register black voters in the South. The voter drive was launched in the wake of the infamous 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four choirgirls. Efforts were concentrated in Selma because black registration was low due to discriminatory practices and because confrontations by police were expected. Organizers knew the entire world would be watching.

“The reason the civil rights movement was so successful in the 1960s was the advent of mass communication technologies," Gilmore says. “People had heard about black-and-white-only drinking fountains for years. People knew about lynchings in the South. But when they saw those pictures in their living room, that was when they started to not be able to live with it.”

On March 7, unarmed demonstrators planned to march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a church deacon shot by state police while protecting his mother from an officer’s night stick weeks earlier. As the protesters crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge they were met by state troopers and deputized members of the Ku Klux Klan. Activists including John Lewis and Amelia Boynton were bludgeoned on the bridge. Images of “Bloody Sunday” were published in newspapers around the world. Photos of Boynton’s unconscious body brought the civil rights movement into the homes of everyday Americans. Evidence of the violence had gone global.
On March 21, the marchers departed from Selma and made it safely across the bridge. They walked shoulder to shoulder. Blacks walked. Whites walked. Christians walked. Jews walked. Together they walked carrying American flags and singing various hymns. Fifty years later Bustamante stood in Selma as tens of thousands waited to hear President Barack Obama speak. The Edmund Pettus Bridge is named for a former Alabama senator, Confederate general and Grand Dragon of the Alabama KKK. Bustamante says it serves as a reminder of the things we need to reckon with in our nation’s history.

“You don’t have to be proud of everything that has happened in the United States — we just have to own it,” he says. “You need to remind yourself of those things so they don’t happen again.”

One group of activists at the celebration caught Bustamante’s attention. Standing amidst the crowd was Dolores Huerta, the famous labor leader who founded the National Farm Workers Association with César Chávez. At 84 she was still making noise. Bustamante met her and purchased a T-shirt and sign to carry that reminded him of rallies he had participated in back in Idaho. That afternoon Bustamante crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge carrying a sign reading: Keep families together. He noticed people giving supportive thumbs up. Bustamante realized he did belong on the bridge.

“I still have that sign,” he says.

REGULAR UPR RADIO BROADCASTS FROM THE ROAD

Throughout the trip the USU cohort contributed dispatches to Utah Public Radio. They interviewed some early civil rights activists including Bob Zellner, who joined SNCC as a college student. He rode on the bus with the 52 Strong and shared his involvement with the movement. “Several of us went to meet with Dr. King and as a result of that we were asked to leave school and we were threatened with arrest by the police,” he told them.

Zellner explained that standing up for what was right meant sometimes feeling as though you were part of the moral minority. And it doesn’t come free. He recalled visiting some of the injured freedom riders in the hospital. Some said their freedom ride was over. “Those freedom riders who were bruised and battered and broken, said, ‘Oh no, as soon as we can we’ll get back on the bus,’” Zellner said. “We said, ‘If they treat you like that in Alabama, when you get to Mississippi they are going to kill you.’ And they said ‘We know. We’ve written our wills.’ So that was our example. And so what I ask young people today, what are you willing to take a risk for? Is there anything that you are willing to die for? And whatever that is, that’s going to be your passion.”

When Gilmore was 9, his family moved to Guadalajara, Mexico from the United States. He did not want to go. Gilmore’s father tried soothing him with these words: “You do not understand it right now and I am not expecting you to, but over time, you are going to really understand this is a gift I’m giving you.”

Over time, Gilmore did. Learning Spanish and having Mexican friends gave him rich life experiences, but also forced him to recognize the relative power he has in the world simply by owning a U.S. passport. As a teenager he realized at any time he could just pack a bag and leave. His friends didn’t have the same option.

“I think one of the things that is most powerful for me is that I have a choice to care about this stuff or not,” he says. “I’m white. I’m male. I’m heterosexual. I’ve got everything in place just to ride it on out. But that’s the thing. Some people don’t. And that’s what moves me. Any time I get a pang of fear that’s what settles back in and why we’re doing this work.”

Gilmore doesn’t expect his students to become social activists after the pilgrimage. He wants them to return affected by the experience and to move through the world with intention and consideration. “We are educators, not activists,” he says. “We are saying now that you have been steeped in this and you’ve been exposed to this; what does it mean for you? How does this inform who you are as an individual and where you are moving forward?”

CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY FIRST HAND

For Miranda Vance, the experience underscored her desire to work in a humanitarian capacity. “Bettering lives was my end goal,” she says from her office in Salt Lake City where she serves as an Americorp volunteer with the city’s Office of Community Innovation and Refugee Services Office. She works on two special projects addressing issues of assault and sexual violence in refugee women’s populations and another that assists refugees who want to open small businesses.

“It’s bringing a lot of culture into Salt Lake City, which helps everybody, but it’s also a source of gainful employment and creates jobs for a lot of the refugee population,” Vance says.

During her senior year at USU she enrolled in Gilmore’s class and learned about the opportunity to go on the civil
rights pilgrimage to Selma with him and a few dozen strangers from around the country. Her knowledge of the civil rights movement prior to college was limited to the highlight reel.

“I knew who Martin Luther King Jr. was, I did know some of the bigger moments of his life, his religious background and some of his speeches,” Vance says. “As far as other civil rights heroes go, of course I knew of Rosa Parks and names like Emmitt Till rang a bell, but I couldn’t have told their stories.”

When she applied she knew if selected it would require a different type of commitment. The emotional intensity would require growth. The first stop on the pilgrimage that really affected her was the high school where the Little Rock Nine first integrated the school system — a full three years after the Supreme Court banned segregation.

“I was 20 during the trip,” Vance says. “I felt I could relate to people who were my age, people who were willing to sacrifice so much to get an education. These kids were brilliant. And they had goals they knew they couldn’t reach with the education they had. I value education so much.”

At USU, Vance studied global communication. It combined her love of history, culture, politics and language. In Selma she witnessed as her interests converged in a historic speech by the nation’s first black president as he stood beside some of the original demonstrators who made his candidacy possible.

He spoke of the accumulation of history that converged on the bridge a half-century ago — a “clash of wills” vying to change the course of the country. He described America that is a work in progress that requires engagement by its people to continue shaping its future. “If Selma taught us anything, it’s that our work is never done,” Obama said. “For everywhere in this country, there are first steps to be taken, there’s new ground to cover, there are more bridges to be crossed. And it is you, the young and fearless at heart, the most diverse and educated generation in our history, who the nation is waiting to follow.”

Fifty years ago when Dr. King embarked on the 54-mile journey he knew it was never going to be easy. The event marked the country’s reckoning with Jim Crow segregation and its racist past. He understood that the movement was never going to end once they reached Montgomery.

“The end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience,” he told marchers after they arrived in the state capital. “I know you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long.”

CHANGES ONE’S ‘FRAME OF MIND’

Three days before the 50th anniversary of Selma, the U.S. Justice Department issued a report of its investigation into law enforcement practices in Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. The report unveiled discriminatory practices and unconstitutional policing practices that undermined the trust of its citizens.

Three months after the anniversary, a 21-year-old white supremacist sat down with members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston for Bible study. That night he killed nine parishioners. The man told police his intent was to incite a race war. The long march to freedom continues.

After the pilgrimage, Vance and Bustamante participated in a public panel and many class visits at USU to discuss the experience. Vance feels she is more knowledgeable about civil rights and feels she can confidently engage in conversation about topics like race relations. It prepared her to work with refugee populations in Salt Lake City where most are people of color struggling to make it as a minority in the United States, she says.

“It just put me in a perfect frame of mind to be more compassionate,” Vance says. “If I took one big thing away
it is how all these social issues we are grappling with today — gender issues, race, education opportunity, gay rights — are all interrelated. I learned the importance of commonality and working together.”

She sees how easy it is to divide our collective capacity by focusing on our own pet interests even as it undermines the work of others. “If we take our passions and work hard without taking away from what others are doing, we could get a lot more done,” Vance says. “As hokey and cheesy as it might sound, it’s important to really remember this idea of humanity. We’re all people. We’re trying as best we can.”

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