

# The Macomb Daily

## 'The Rev.' discovered his calling during 1961's Freedom Ride

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*Gleason to speak at 25th King dinner*

Growing up dirt poor in rural Michigan, Richard Gleason found hope through faith. He's spent most of his life trying to help others find the same thing.

"It was at church I found hope," Gleason said. "Without hope, what does opportunity mean?"

Now the Rev. Richard Gleason, he participated in a 1961 Freedom Ride from Montgomery, Ala., to Jackson, Miss., one of the early events that marked the civil rights movement in the Deep South.

Gleason will share his story Jan. 16, when the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice hosts its silver anniversary Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Celebration at the Royalty House in Warren.

The 25th King dinner, held annually on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, comes on the heels of the 50th anniversary in 2011 of the Freedom Rides, often-underpublicized events that marked the early stages of the civil rights movement.

"We just felt we needed to honor the Freedom Riders," said the Rev. Michail Curro, executive director of the Interfaith Center, host of the King dinner. "We feel it incumbent on us to teach every generation whose shoulders we stand on."

Ordained as a minister in 1957, Gleason soon realized God's plan for his life. He packed up and moved to the south side of Chicago, where for several years in the late 1950s and '60s he worked with gang members in a housing project he described as "worse than (the notorious) Cabrini Green."

"I wanted to be in the most-needy area," he said.

Shortly after his arrival, Gleason was beaten by those same members he sought to help. But Gleason persevered, eventually gaining some acceptance, if not trust, of some of the neighborhood's toughest characters. They dubbed him "The Rev."

"We had a meeting every Sunday morning," Gleason said. "It was my church, but they didn't call it a church."

Gleason would continue that work for 20 years. One day in 1961, he saw a television news report about the burning of a bus carrying Freedom Riders in Alabama. Again, he heard God calling.

"Jesus would be there," he said. "How can I not be there?"

Freedom Riders rode buses across state lines to draw attention to illegal segregation that was still the law in states like Alabama and Mississippi. Often, they were beaten and usually arrested.

Massive marches and the integration of previously all-white institutions like the University of Mississippi gained more notoriety, but the Freedom Rides of 1961 played an integral role in advancing civil rights in America.

"Without you, I would not be here today," Oprah Winfrey told Gleason and other Freedom Riders who appeared on her program.

Freedom Riders often received nonviolence training; tips and suggestions to avoid confrontations that could cost them their lives. Gleason received no such instruction.

He traveled to Montgomery, Ala., on his own and then boarded a bus for a ride to Jackson, Miss. Along the way, the bus stopped in places like Selma, Ala., and Meridian, Miss., where riders received less than warm welcomes.

"When we stopped in Selma, one of the Freedom Riders got off the bus to use the restroom or something," Gleason recalled. "He never got back on. It was kind of scary."

But quitting was not an option.

"I had no idea I would come back," he said. "That was not a factor. I had no choice."

When the bus arrived in Jackson, Gleason immediately walked into the "colored" waiting room. That assured his arrest. He was jailed for about a week before he returned to Chicago to continue his work.

Now a resident of Franklin, Gleason teaches horticulture at Macomb Community College. He continues to work with the homeless and others in downtrodden situations in metro Detroit. At 75, he said he hasn't lost his zest.

"I have a passion for hope," he said.

Reservations are being taken for the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Celebration on Jan. 16. The cost is \$40 per person or a table of 10 for \$300. For information, contact the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice at (586) 463-3675 or online at [www.icrj.org](http://www.icrj.org).