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Sowing the seeds of hope

The Rev. Richard Gleason, Freedom Rider and MCC instructor, to speak at MLK dinner
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By Brian Louwers
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WARREN — His hair has grayed over the years, but the resemblance between Richard Gleason now and the young man captured in a mug shot taken by Mississippi police in 1961 is unmistakable.

And when you get him talking, there's no question that the man who left his work on the mean streets of Chicago's South Side to champion the cause of civil rights as a Freedom Rider is still the same person.

Gleason's fiery spirit and white-knuckled grip on the concept of hope remains undimmed by the passage of time.

Who knew that this man — born in southwest Michigan, raised in northern Ohio, called to serve the Lord in the grittiest of Chicago's neighborhoods, and eventually, plucked from a Mississippi bus terminal and tossed in jail — would find himself living in metro Detroit, teaching students about plants at Macomb Community College?

"Life at home had its pain. It was at church I really felt, you know, it was family," said Gleason, now 75 and living in Franklin. "It was hope. It was strength. I, at a very early age said, 'God, if you make me strong enough, I'll help people when I get older.' Church was my life."



Photo by Brian C. Louwers
The Rev. Richard Gleason rode by bus from Montgomery, Ala., to Jackson, Miss., as a Freedom Rider in 1961. He now teaches horticulture and floriculture at Macomb Community College. Gleason will be the keynote speaker at the Interfaith Center For Racial Justice's 2012 MLK Silver Anniversary Holiday Celebration of Macomb County at 6:30 p.m. Jan. 16.

Grown, educated and ordained by 1957, Gleason looked to go where he could make a difference. He wanted to bring hope to those in need of it.

He didn't have to look far, but his destination the next year — the Robert Taylor Homes on Chicago's South Side, at the time the largest public housing project in the country — seemed a world away from the small town of 500 where he grew up.

Gleason said he lived on the streets when he got there, working with young people from the bleak expanse of projects that was 3 miles long and a block wide, with few stores, and “no support system.” There were 18 gangs, he said, and he mainly worked with members of two of them.

“I looked younger than the kids I was working with,” Gleason remembered. “I had no idea of working with gang kids. I was going to do Sunday school work. I soon found out, after being in the hospital for a week, that I had to regroup.”

His growing network of contacts on the project's front line helped open the local YMCA to his programs. Gleason worked with the tough kids from the gangs seven days a week. He hung out with them, became part of their lives, learned about their culture and earned their trust.

But in May 1961, events unfolding in the Deep South drew him, at least temporarily, from his work with the kids. A group of civil rights activists led by volunteers with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and later, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), began testing the region's Jim Crow laws that segregated public transportation facilities.

Gleason said he learned about the Freedom Rides through news reports, and he knew he needed to join the movement because it was, he said, what Jesus Christ would have done.

He recalled learning about how the riders were greeted by angry mobs in Alabama.

“I am so wired to the word ‘hope.’ I was passionate about the systemic racism. I saw the effects of that in the projects, the hopelessness that it created,” Gleason said. “I was on the next bus.”

He would become the 59th Freedom Rider, when he made the trek from Montgomery, Ala., to Jackson, Miss., in June 1961.

“The Freedom Riders were organized by CORE and SNCC. I was just a little preacher. I had no connection to anybody else — no training, no nothing. I just went down by myself,” Gleason said. “The law said we could do it. We weren't breaking any law. It was ‘breach of peace, the local ordinance. The Supreme Court said we were doing what we were allowed to do.”

Gleason recalled keeping a low profile during the ride. Others went looking to immediately test boundaries, even though it placed them in peril.

“I wanted to get to the ‘colored’ waiting room in Jackson. That was my goal,” Gleason said. “One guy, when we got to Selma, he got off to get water. He never came back. I think he had his arm broken or something. I was being very careful.

“When we got to Jackson, Miss., just before we got into the town, I changed seats and got in the back seat. When I got to the station, I got to the ‘colored’ waiting room. I was going to do that no matter what.”

Gleason was arrested when he got there, as were hundreds of others who rode into Mississippi between May and September 1961.

He said the ride and imprisonment were frightening experiences, during one of the most volatile eras of modern American history.

“It was scary. I mean, it was, when we crossed the Mississippi state line, Mississippi was understood to be the worst place in the world in terms of black and white people getting along,” Gleason said. “I felt in Mississippi that I was out of America. I felt I was in, I don’t know how to say it, it was like, I was out of every sense of safety.”

After a about a week in jail, Gleason went back to his work in Chicago.

But he continued to stand on the side of civil rights, alongside his friend Mahalia Jackson, marching in Chicago and across the south, and with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement’s other leaders.

Six years after he went to Chicago, moved by the anguish of 12 teenage funerals in a single month, Gleason opened the South Side Christian Center. He began working with the little brothers and sisters of those taken by violence, and with their parents, through an all-encompassing program built around the word “hope.”

“It was just very intense,” Gleason said. “We went to the Grand Ole Opry. They met Lily Tomlin. I want them exposed to all sorts of American life, and then choose for themselves. They were exposed to everything, and positive.”

After King was assassinated and rioting devastated South Side neighborhoods in 1968, Gleason hatched a plan to take his kids out of Chicago for weekend trips and summer camp programs in the countryside of western Michigan.

The 260-acre New Hope Ranch in Berrien County, with an apple orchard and a private lake, became the South Side Christian Center’s rural annex for the next decade.

Gleason learned horticulture, and his “kids” learned about things they never would have imagined growing up in the Chicago projects.

His work eventually bore fruit, in more ways than one.

Of a group of 33 kids from the center, 22 got together for a reunion last spring. Nine had earned bachelor's degrees, two of them had earned their master's degrees and one had earned a doctorate.

Gleason spent 20 years working in Chicago, including the 10 years they operated the farm. He retired in 1978 and married his wife, Cheryl.

The couple later moved to Franklin, and Gleason began teaching horticulture and floriculture at Macomb Community College in 1991.

When Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States in January 2009, Gleason and Cheryl were there.

In 2011, they traveled to the Deep South where officials in Mississippi hosted a group of Freedom Riders for an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the rides.

The same weekend he reunited with his kids from the South Side last May, he joined a group of Freedom Riders on the "Oprah Winfrey Show."

But in the years after the rides, he said no one — black or white — wanted to talk about it.

"I came back, and for 50 years, if I mentioned it to a black person, there was no comment. If I mentioned it to a white person, there was no comment, anywhere," Gleason said. "The first person to thank me was Oprah Winfrey. And after that, everybody was wonderful about it."

Much has changed since Gleason rode that bus to Jackson.

The Interstate Commerce Commission issued a definitive ruling banning segregated facilities for interstate bus and rail passengers in September 1961, but the struggle for civil rights continued throughout the next decade and beyond.

Gleason's "kids" from the South Side had a chance to grow up, and did, with many making wonderful lives for themselves.

But much remains to be done, and while the seeds of hope have been sown, Gleason said it's going to take love and understanding — working on a one-on-one basis — to bring those seeds into bloom.

"If every organization, church organization, would take two or three young people when they're young and give them everything those other kids have, to make it an equal playing field, then we'd have a different world," Gleason said. "It takes the system, but it also takes the individual. It takes hope. It takes individualizing the message. Because

it's all about hope and feeling that you are someone, and not in an arrogant way, but really feel that you are someone, a special person that God made. That's where I'm coming from.

"We can be better than what we are right now. I think hope is one of the biggest, most important words in the world, even more than opportunity. Because if you don't have hope, opportunity means nothing," Gleason said.

The Interfaith Center for Racial Justice is honored to welcome The Rev. Richard Gleason as the keynote speaker for the 2012 MLK Silver Anniversary Holiday Celebration of Macomb County. The event will be held at 6:30 p.m. Jan. 16 at Royalty House, 8201 Old 13 Mile Road, in Warren.

Tickets for the dinner are \$40 each or \$300 for a table of 10. To register for the dinner or for more information, call (586) 463-3675 or visit www.icrj.org.

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