

Sojourn To The Past



Sojourners following the footsteps of participants in the Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights.

Report to the San Mateo County

Board of Supervisors

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The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors provided a grant of \$20,000 to Sojourn to the Past to enable low-income students from the county to learn the valuable lessons of the civil rights movement. This is an interim report on activities that have been undertaken so far.

Sojourn to the Past begins the educational process with a program on the civil rights movement that is presented to 11th and 12th grade history and social studies students. This year more than 6,000 students throughout San Mateo County learned about key events and people that shaped the civil rights movement. At the very least, students learn aspects of history that they are not taught in the classroom. But more importantly, the presentation brings the lessons of the movement home to the hallways and classrooms of each school hosting the presentations. Students are asked to think about the power that language has to destroy a life, and to think of the kind of racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise hateful language that is used against people everyday in their school. They are then challenged to no longer stand by as silent witnesses when they see or hear that kind of language being used.

Students who wanted to learn more about the civil rights movement were offered the chance to travel through the South visiting the most dramatic sites and hearing the speakers that first witnessed and created the civil rights movement. More than 160 students from San Mateo County have chosen to take part in one of the four journeys this year. Sojourn was able to reach out and serve more low-income students this year because of the funds donated by the Board of Supervisors.

The Sojourn journey lasts for ten days, and begins in Atlanta. From there, participants continue on to other sites in the South where the most dramatic episodes of the civil rights movement took place: Tuskegee, Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, Hattiesburg, Jackson, Little Rock and Memphis. During the journey, staff and contributing civil rights veterans impart essential lessons of tolerance, nonviolence, compassion, forgiveness, faith, hope, civic responsibility and community activism.

At each stop the students visit with living heroes on the spot where their actions changed history thirty plus years ago. As the *Reverend Billy Kyles* so eloquently puts it, Sojourn allows participants to “touch history, and the people who made it.” Reverend Kyles was a close friend of Martin Luther King Jr. and was standing a few feet away from Dr. King when he was assassinated. Rev. Kyles meets with Sojourners at the Lorraine Hotel, site of the assassination. Sojourners also hear *Congressman John Lewis* talk about getting beat by state troopers as he began the voting rights march in Selma Alabama. They hear *Minnijean Brown-Trickey* and *Elizabeth Eckford* tell what it was like to be the first African-Americans to attend Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas. *Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth* talks about fighting for Civil Rights in Birmingham Alabama, and shows Sojourners the site where a bomb went off feet from his head, destroying his house but not injuring him. *Chris McNair* tells of losing his daughter in the Birmingham church bombing of 1963. The *Vernon Dahmer* family talks about losing a husband and father – killed by klan members who opposed his efforts to register fellow African-Americans to vote.



Minnijean Brown-Trickey talks about her struggles as one of the Little Rock Nine.

Through the personal sacrifice of civil rights martyrs, and the exemplary lives of surviving movement veterans, participants learn the courage of their own convictions. They learn respect for one another and to grow within that respect toward love. They learn to confront and put off hurtful language. They learn to forgive ignorance. They learn not to hate the haters, that they need healing, too. They learn that indifference creates a moral vacuum where destruction and evil flourish. They learn the importance of not becoming silent witnesses to cruelty, inequity and injustice. They discover the power in nonviolence and public activism. They learn the power of the vote and how long and hard African Americans struggled for this essential right. They are stimulated to break the cycle of violence in their own lives and in the community. They discuss how to get there and what they can do to further the cause. They become a new generation of potential leaders, "ambassadors of tolerance," with a mission they must define.

The results have been dramatic. Follow-up surveys indicate that San Mateo County Sojourn alumni are committed to creating a civil society – they are tolerant of others, embracing diversity, willing to speak out against injustices, and committed to fulfilling their civic duty.

- More than 60% of the participants report that they take the incredibly courageous act of speaking out when they hear racist, sexist or homophobic language being used in their schools.
- 85% say they have used the lessons in one way or another. Examples include starting non-violence clubs on campus, teaching courses about the civil rights movement, producing a video, forgiving someone who has made hateful comments in the past, working with friends or family to help them overcome racist tendencies.
- 65% of the participants who are eligible to vote do so, and 80% of those under 18 report that they are highly likely to vote once they come of age.



**Touching the names of movement heroes inscribed on the
Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery Alabama.**