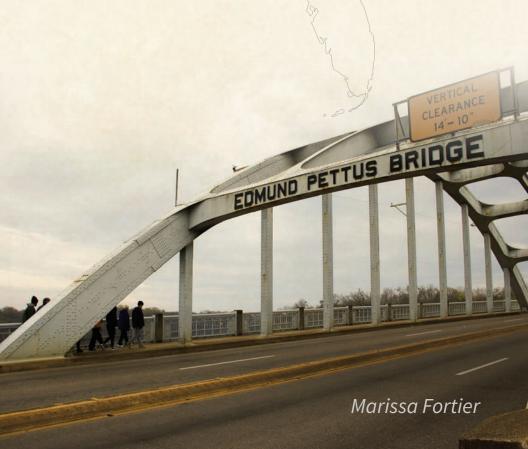
Journeying South

A Pilgrimage Experience



EDITORS' NOTE

Marissa Fortier began her Solid Ground Communications internship on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2017. It was an auspicious beginning: We sent her to Washington state's Capitol in Olympia to report on grassroots lobbying and social justice organizing.

Marissa's reporting combines a great eye for detail with a growing antioppression analysis. When she told us about her planned return pilgrimage to the Deep South through Project Pilgrimage (projectpilgrimage.org), we encouraged her to write about the experience. Marissa authored three posts for Solid Ground's Groundviews blog (solid-ground.org/groundviews) that were a fascinating combination of travelogue, Civil Rights history, and personal reflection on her journeys in fall 2016 and spring 2017. The posts have been slightly edited to suit this booklet format.

At Solid Ground, we believe in providing platforms for people to raise their voices, to stand up to power, and to stand for justice. We are honored to support young writers like Marissa as they find and claim their voices.

~ Solid Ground Communications Department

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JOURNEYING SOUTH

Fall 2016

As a Seattle native, it's not every day you walk past Martin Luther King, Jr.'s church where people gathered in attempts to elevate their second-class citizenship standing to first – or cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge that so many marched across to access the basic right to vote no matter what obstacles stood in their way.

These are just a couple of the sites I visited in the Deep South to support a deeper connection to our nation's history of oppression and inequality. Because stories of our past influence our future, the nonprofit Project Pilgrimage aims to uplift all people through an interracial, intergenerational 10-day journey to the Deep South to visit and learn from historical sites, people and organizations. I was fortunate to attend as a participant in fall 2016 and to return as one of the pilgrimage leaders in spring 2017.



As an African-American young woman living in Washington state, where racism is less out in the open than in the South, it is difficult to navigate through life in an environment seen as so progressive yet which oftentimes claims to not even see race. We live in a society where race is a social construct that reinforces negative stereotypes. This is why people need to see race. This is why I need people to see my race. I need people to understand why people like me don't have the same opportunity to be successful as others. I need people to understand that the struggles my ancestors faced decades ago still manifest in my life today.

Fortunately, I have been lucky to experience many privileges that not everyone has access to. Attending the University of Washington is one of those. I am currently a senior working to complete my Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications with a minor in Diversity. After graduation, my goal is to diminish the disparities people of color deal with today through a direct communications approach. Through a variety of courses offered at the UW, I have been able to gain a deep historical understanding of the Black Struggle.

I need people to understand that the struggles my ancestors faced decades ago still manifest in my life today.

My trips to the South with Project Pilgrimage were powerful experiences that significantly supplemented my learning. Prior to embarking on my first pilgrimage, I spent a lot of time reading and studying the history of oppression that African Americans and people of color (POC) have experienced. A lot of this helped form my thoughts about and around my identity. I finally had an understanding of what it meant to not only be Black, but a Black woman, and how those two identities intersected. I was ready to take everything I had been reading about and turn that into lived experience.



Visiting these historical sites was enough alone to affect my experience. But I didn't realize how much meeting people from southern communities and hearing their stories would impact me. People in the south are constantly

reminded about the tragedies and victories that have taken place on land they walk on every day. I could see their awareness through their actions, how they welcomed us in so graciously, and through their strong faith.

In addition, the intergenerational and interracial group I traveled with played a monumental role in my learning. The pilgrimage experience is not perfect, so of course there are misunderstandings and differences of opinion. When this happens, the ship doesn't sail so smoothly, but how we deal with conflict is when growth occurs. This allowed me to observe how race and difference is discussed and articulated, which only made me want to commit to social justice work more.

During these pilgrimages, we went to Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama to visit a variety of places with historical and contemporary significance. Some of these sites included Fisk University, the Historical Black College and University (HBCU), Highlander Center, Court Square (Montgomery, AL), William Winter Institute (University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS), University of Alabama, the city of Selma, AL and more. At each place we visited, we learned about the events that occurred there, why they are so significant, and how they impact communities today – while also reflecting on how it all affects us as individuals.

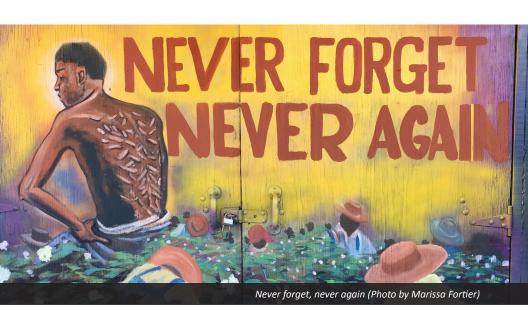
Since I had already been to many of these places, I had a decent idea about the feelings I would experience returning in the spring. But since my first Pilgrimage, I also had learned more about myself and the Black Struggle, so I was prepared for the unexpected. It was also crucial to be aware of the political climate present in our nation today, and it was interesting to observe the differences in coming from a liberal "Blue" state and entering conservative "Red" states. I was excited to take this journey as a leader! What follows is a report back with new findings and realizations from my experiences.

THE ONGOING JOURNEY

Spring 2017

Doing this work isn't easy. But each day, time and time again, thousands of us wake up to fight the systems of oppression and injustice for those who aren't able to. The struggle for freedom has come a long way, but there is still so far to go.

As a young Black woman, I went into my second pilgrimage excited to learn more about the history of my race and figure out where I fit in the puzzle of social justice. This time, everything hit me harder. Here we are at sites where some of the darkest parts of America's history occurred yet continue to go unrecognized. Since I have been lucky enough to see these sites and hear from some of the legends who lived through these times, I feel a responsibility to ensure this history continues to be shared and not forgotten.



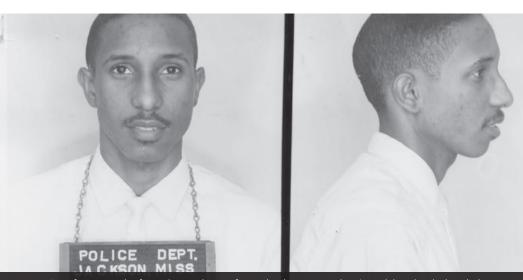
TENNESSEE

Civil Rights Organizing & Education

Tennessee is always a great starting point for the pilgrimage. It sets the tone with strength and pride before we start to dive into some of the more somber parts of Civil Rights history.

Learning from those before us

We began our journey in Nashville, Tennessee where we had the privilege of meeting with Dr. Bernard Lafayette and his wife, Kate. Dr. Lafayette was a Freedom Rider during the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) Freedom Rides. A critical contributor to the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolence approach in the Civil Rights movement, he was also a key organizer in planning and executing the Voting Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama. You can learn the history through books and research, but to actually hear it from firsthand accounts provides context you cannot receive anywhere else.



One of Dr. Bernard Lafayette's mug shots; Lafayette has been arrested 27 times. (Photo by Black Kudos)

Fisk University

Nashville is home to Fisk University, a Historically Black College & University (HBCU). Fisk produced a number of Civil Rights leaders such as Diane Nash and John Lewis, and was home to many other SNCC members. Members would often skip class to participate in counter sit-ins, marches and protests, frequently resulting in arrests causing students to miss more class. Teachers were understanding for the most part – some so supportive they would have schoolwork brought to jails.

Highlander Research & Education Center

Next, we made our way to New Market, Tennessee and the Highlander Research and Education Center. Years before our arrival, many Civil Rights leaders came to Highlander to learn the nonviolence approach. Today, they serve as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building.

While we were there, we focused on communities – specifically, looking at where each member of the pilgrimage came from, and how these communities are made up. We looked at who holds power, how change is created, and how communities are populated – all important factors, because the stories of communities need to be understood before we can attempt to make change.

I appreciate the work Highlander does and the approaches they use. They take a great interest in popular education, which is a participatory process that combines people's experiences to develop collective analysis and strategies for action for positive social change. They also focus on acknowledging the experiences people face to progress, a common theme in racial reconciliation.

ALABAMA

Breaking Legacies of Racism

First Baptist Church

Our first stop in Alabama was Montgomery, home to Dr. Ralph Abernathy and First Baptist Church, famously known as a safe place when an angry mob of whites held Freedom Riders, church members and others captive inside for 15 hours in 1961. The church opens their doors to us each pilgrimage and hosts a concert where we sing with some of the choir members. Faith was and continues to be a shared value between most in the movement, so it is important to experience the interconnectedness the church community brings.

The lasting 'heritage' of Montgomery

Equally important as understanding the past is identifying problems we see today. Since Montgomery is the state capital, we toured the Capitol building. As soon as you step on the Capitol stairs, the foregrounds are filled with monuments to the Confederacy. While confederate flags have been removed, I still have to ask: What message is being sent by continuing to memorialize this "heritage"?

American history continues to glorify the Confederacy, justifying it as having fought to protect Confederate states' rights. But whose rights were sacrificed as a result? In truth, Confederates were fighting for the continuation of slavery. Not only is this an injustice to African Americans by depriving them of their identity, but it creates a hierarchy between races and reinforces the ideology that White history is more important than Black history — when in reality, Black history is American history.

Fortunately, a nonprofit organization aims to confront history to heal the wounds of America's past. Founded by Bryan Stevenson, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, challenging racial and economic injustice, and protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.

...in reality,
Black History **İS**American History.

EJI serves both as attorneys and historians, working to unveil some of the darkest parts of America's history, such as lynching and racial terrorism. They have already documented 4,075 racial terror lynchings, and are creating a memorial to remember these victims and lynching's lasting impacts. For instance, states with the highest historical lynching rates have the highest death penalty rates today. These states also have high rates of racial disparity in incarceration; African Americans are incarcerated nearly six times the rate of Whites.

Incarceration not only robs years from people's lives, but it also takes away their voice due to disenfranchisement. All of this stems from deep racial history. I think it's time to stop criminalizing every African American and instead question the "justice" in our justice system.

Brokenness in Birmingham

Not far from Montgomery is Birmingham, home to 16th Street Baptist Church, notoriously known for the September 15, 1963 KKK bombing that killed four little girls: Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Denise McNair. There, we met Carolyn McKinstry, who was a close friend to the four murdered girls.

Hearing stories like the Church bombing provided important context during our time here. A textbook might cover the event, but rarely do you see how it affected the community long-term. McKinstry was able to convey this, recalling that "after the bombing, no one really talked about it and life carried on routinely."

In my opinion, this shows the severity of the fight for freedom. There wasn't time to sit back and pause to grieve. Bombings were so frequent in Birmingham, the city became known as "Bombingham." I don't think the actual bombing was a surprise to the community, but the painful realization that people could ruthlessly take the lives of innocent children because of the color of their skin was alarming.

Kelly Ingram Park

Kelly Ingram Park is directly across the street from the Church and served as a staging ground during the Civil Rights Movement. It was also here where foot soldiers of children and high schoolers were hosed down and attacked by police dogs in May of 1963. It wasn't until 1992 that the park was renovated as a place of reconciliation to compliment the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute located across the street. All three entities are preserved as historical monuments.

Birmingham Today

Birmingham has a dark history, and you can tell brokenness still lingers in the community. There is a heavy presence of people experiencing homelessness taking shelter in the park. Jefferson County, where Birmingham resides, went bankrupt in the fall of 2011 and continues to struggle. The city of Birmingham has one of the highest crime rates in the country. Additionally, 37% of residents have incomes below the poverty level, the public transportation system struggles, and food deserts are all too common around the county.



Coming back to Birmingham was difficult for me. It is hard knowing that many of these problems stem from racial and classist discrimination. I had to check my own privilege; even though I am a Black woman, I still have the privilege of living in the wealthy Seattle area where I attend a top university. I receive many more "passes" when it comes to people questioning my race, and I'm more accepted – or at least I'm made to feel more accepted. Of course, Seattle experiences problems with racism, but it makes you realize at least we are more accepting of differences.



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FACING MISSISSIPPI

Following Birmingham, Alabama, we headed to Oxford, Mississippi, home to the University of Mississippi (also known as Ole Miss). The University of Mississippi played a critical role during school integration. After years of racial segregation, the University opened its doors to the first African-American student, James Meredith on October 1, 1962. Of course, this was not done without a fight by white supremacists; Meredith's arrival brought a mob so big onto campus that 31,000 federal troops were called to try to contain it.



In remembrance, there is a statue dedicated to Meredith on campus comprised of Meredith and an archway in front of him with the words "courage, opportunity, perseverance and knowledge," but there has been some controversy around the statue. Meredith himself is not fond of it and thinks it's "a 'supplicant' to a system of white supremacy" that still exists in our society.

And just three years ago in 2014, three students placed a noose and a pre-2003 Georgia flag on the statue of Meredith. I found it contradictory that the statue is placed behind and a distance away from the archway, giving me the impression that integration hasn't been fully accepted and doesn't convey what Meredith overcame.

Holding onto the past

The University of Mississippi has a violent past regarding race relations, and tensions still hold strong today. In addition to the Meredith statue, the campus has Confederate statues, and many buildings are named after past Confederate members. It also doesn't help that their branding, "Ole Miss," is a term slaves used to address the wife of the plantation owner.

There is debate about completely abolishing the use of "Ole Miss," but since that won't happen anytime soon, I think it is important for the University to at least acknowledge its ties with slavery and the history the school has gone through. I'll say it again: Stories of the past need to be acknowledged.

It was an eye-opening experience touring and observing the dynamics at a university in the South. For an institution that claims to be removing divisive and racially charged symbols to make the campus more welcoming, as a Black woman, I didn't really feel welcomed. At times I scoff at the lack of diversity

at the University of Washington, but it could be worse. I am thankful to go to a school that is so relatively diverse, but there is still room for improvement.

Freedom Summer murders

Next we journeyed to Philadelphia, Mississippi, known for its heavy history as the site where three Freedom Summer volunteers were murdered during the summer of 1964. The victims, James Chaney (21), Andrew Goodman (20) and Michael Schwerner (24) were working with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) to fight for voting rights and increase African-American voter registration. Since two of the victims were white, the atrocities were treated with more urgency and received enormous national attention.

During the search for their bodies, FBI investigators found the remains of eight other African Americans, causing them to stop the investigation, since it only brought negative media attention. Six weeks after the men were murdered, their bodies were finally found – and the murder trials did not formally start until February 1967. Seven members of Mississippi's Ku Klux Klan (KKK) were found guilty. But it wasn't until 2005 – nearly 40 years later – that the mastermind behind the murders and a leader of the local KKK, Edgar Ray Killen, was convicted of manslaughter of the three Freedom Summer members.

With such a recent conviction, the town's healing is ongoing. Imagine having an accused murderer, who most everyone knew was guilty, continue to go about his life as if nothing happened? It is said that the Killen family could oftentimes be heard talking openly about the murders throughout the town. As an outsider coming into this community, I felt so uneasy. It's difficult to wrap my head around this harsh past and how it still affects the community.

BACK TO ALABAMA

University of Alabama

After learning so much from Mississippi, we made our way to Alabama, first stopping at the University of Alabama, another school that fought hard to hinder the process of integration in academic institutions. On May 19, 1963, two students came to campus in hopes of registering for classes. They were met by Governor George Wallace, who refused to allow them in. His attempts failed when President John F. Kennedy federalized National Guard troops, forcing Wallace to allow the students into the university.



Today, there is a clock tower dedicated to the two students, Vivian Malone and James Hood (along with Autherine Lucy, U of A's first Black student) across Foster Auditorium, the athletics arena for Women's Basketball and Volleyball. The tower's location is in a pretty desolate part of campus and requires some searching for, which makes you wonder how the university prioritizes this piece of history.

The current University of Alabama student body is 80% white, 11.2% Black/ African American, 4.1% Hispanic/Latino, 1.2% Asian and .4% American Indian/ Alaskan Native. As you can imagine, being a student of color on a predominantly white campus with such a harsh history of oppression is not easy – and racism continues today. A few students of color told us about their experiences at U of A, and it was absolutely shocking. Racial epithets are not unheard of on campus, and Confederate flags still wave at tailgates during the anticipated arrival of football season.

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At the University of Washington, running into micro-aggressions is common – but to have your fellow classmates explicitly go out of their way to be that ignorant is something I haven't witnessed. It is hard for me to comprehend the hatred people can show, but doesn't change the fact that this hatred is not only experienced in the South.

Selma: Bloody Sunday & Jubilee

Our last pilgrimage destination was Selma, one of my favorite places to go, but a city with ongoing struggles. With the 2014 release of the Hollywood movie Selma, media has painted an attractive image of the city but fails to show the brokenness.

Selma is the eighth most violent city in America. Its unemployment rate is nearly twice the national average, and 36% of residents – including 60% of children – live in poverty. Yet the city has a persistent will to revive. There is high awareness of inequities, and people make sure to stand up for their rights.

Each year, the pilgrimage is planned to coincide with the first Sunday in March, known as Bloody Sunday because on March 7, 1965, there was a brutal attack on hundreds of Black foot soldiers as they peacefully marched for equal voting rights across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Each year they do an annual bridge crossing known as Jubilee. Not only do they pay tribute to those who sacrificed their lives, they also hold workshops and events teaching about social justice.



Reliving the past

This year's Jubilee was especially important. In addition to reenacting the original march, people also gathered to march for ongoing full voting rights for all. Alabama currently has a discriminatory photo ID law, which requires voters to present one of seven identification options. It's extremely difficult to obtain valid identification in Alabama, especially for people of color – and specifically for Blacks and Latinos. Nationally, only 8% of voting age White citizens lack a government-issued ID, compared to 25% of African Americans and 16% of Latinos.



This law is discriminatory by blocking access to Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) offices. The state of Alabama has closed 31 DMV offices or created very specific office hours that make it difficult for any working citizen to obtain an

ID. On the surface, this may look like coincidence – but if you dig a little deeper,

you can see the target on people of color.

Since learning about the struggle to gain voting rights, I have taken my privilege to vote very seriously. Prior to my participation in the march, I was not too familiar with the voter ID law, but it is systems like these that reinforce racism. It is no accident that Alabama's Governor decided to close 31 drivers licensing offices after repeated warnings by the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund (LDF). It is so important to recognize the discrimination in these coded actions.

Again, I think about my home state of Washington. While strict photo ID isn't required, our state does not offer voting at the polls, only by mail. How does this affect people with unstable housing situations? While maybe not directly racist, this system is definitely classist – and people of color often make up a high percentage of lower socioeconomic groups, which makes them more likely to experience class discrimination.

RETURN TO SEATTLE



Since being back home, my motivation has only deepened to move my career in the direction of racial justice. The theme of education really stood out to me during my time in the South. Children are the future. If we teach younger generations about race and include histories of people of color in American history – and if differences are acknowledged – I believe we will progress as a nation.

Also, it's so crucial to acknowledge that racism doesn't just exist in Red states in the South. Seattle – and the state of Washington in general – may be viewed as progressive, but we still lack equality for all. The Seattle Public School District has the fifth largest achievement gap between Black and White kids in the U.S. Housing deeds still contain racially restrictive covenants that perpetuate segregation in neighborhoods. Plus, if you look to eastern Washington, the majority of counties vote conservatively.

It is so easy to become comfortable with our current situations, but I think in order for our country to improve race relations, it will require being uncomfortable. I know we all can't be radical activists, but we can start by advocating for equal human rights for everyone. I encourage you to look at the bills going through legislation where you live and contact your representatives if you find something discriminatory.

Educate yourself. Educate others. Many small actions like these can create a big impact.

Solid Ground works passionately to end poverty and build a more equitable community.

Our services support people experiencing poverty by helping them achieve stability and expand their skills to realize their dreams.

And that's just where our work begins!

In addition to providing immediate services, we organize people, especially those most impacted by poverty, to participate in advocacy that makes our region more just for all.

