



Mariame Kaba

**Co-Founder & Founding Board Co-Chair
2004 - 2013**

In celebration of Chicago Freedom School's Tenth Anniversary in 2017, we are publishing interviews with some of the individuals who helped build and sustain CFS over the years. We hope that sharing these stories will honor our history and inspire action today.

How did Chicago Freedom School get started?

CFS began because of a gathering that was sponsored by the Girl's Best Friend Foundation (GBF). They brought people together in January 2004 for a dinner and brainstorm where they asked, "What kinds of youth-driven initiatives, projects, and ideas does Chicago need that don't currently exist?" People went around the table to share ideas. I was at that meeting and so was Cyndie McLachlan (the founder of GBF), Alice Cottingham (Executive Director of GBF), and other staff from GBF. There were also organizers and executive directors of organizations that did work with girls and young women.

When they [GBF] asked what was needed, I--and I always do this when I go to a meeting, I am always prepared to answer an open-ended question like this--brought a statement. I said that Chicago needs its own freedom school that would actually be a next-level space where the youth could get training, have discussions, and receive political education about history and social movements.

I said that and I didn't expound on it. But afterward, Jobi Peterson, Director of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health (ICAH) at the time, said, "That's a really good idea. That would be a great space for organizations like ICAH to send youth. We need another holistic space

where our youth can get broader training since we do issue-based work. We need that in Chicago."

A few days later, I got a call from Alice who said, "I would love it if you could come to lunch with me. I want to talk with you more about the freedom school idea." At the time I was working full time, in grad school, and the primary adult ally for the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team (YWAT). I had so much stuff going on, but I agreed to go. The other person Alice reached out to was Jobi. At lunch, Alice said to us, "Listen, Cyndie and other board members were very intrigued about the idea of a freedom school. We would consider giving you a planning grant to see if it's even feasible. Is that something you would be interested in taking on?"

How did Chicago Freedom School come into fruition as an organization?

So GBF gave us seed money to really have time to plan. It was such a luxury. We eventually hired Pam Smith to do a feasibility study. We had the first gathering in the spring of 2004 to hear the results of the [feasibility] study. In the fall, we created the Steering Committee. Jobi and myself were the Project Coordinators at the time. Jobi allowed us to use ICAH as our fiscal agent so ICAH had a big role in housing and incubating the planning process.

The first Steering Committee was made up of people from various backgrounds and focus areas. The Committee included myself and Jobi, Nadeja Wesley, Micaiah Kline, Kevin Brown, Lamont Boswell, Keisha Farmer-Smith, Linda Hannah, Lesley Kennedy,
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Mia Muhammad, Pam Smith, Melissa Spatz, and Daisy Zamora. We then built out some working groups that came together to work on different aspects of what we needed. We had fundraising, programming, and logistics. We had young people like Kevin Brown, Kristiana Verom, Lucky Mosquada, and more. They organized events with youth in which they brainstormed what a freedom school could offer. We also brought out Kathy Emery for two days to talk about the organizing of freedom schools.

Everyone was a volunteer. They all took significant amounts of time out of their lives to build CFS. We then hired Mia Henry as the first Director and Stephanie Gentry Fernandez as Associate Director. They were supposed to be complementary. One would be in an administrative role and the other would be in an organizing role. Then Alex Poeter was hired as the first Director of Organizing at CFS.

We opened in the summer of 2007, so we basically had three years to plan for the opening of CFS. It's really unheard of to have that much time to build together and learn together.

So that's how it all officially began. The list of people who were involved with starting CFS is much longer than who I mentioned.

How does the Chicago Freedom School connect to the history of freedom schools during Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964?

Our idea had been that the summer fellowship would be the parallel. That youth would come together for the summer—at first six weeks and now a month—to learn about these things. During the first summer, young people had two weeks of anti-oppression training and then picked a track: sports and social change, arts and

social change, etc. In the original Freedom Schools, youth learned theater and history. They would learn black history. We really wanted that for youth of color in Chicago. So that's where we saw the connections in that first summer.

If freedom schools continued in the south, they would have evolved. Their original focus was to train people to pass tests so they could vote. It was connected to a larger program of struggle for voting rights and civil rights. We were feeding into something different. We did talk about voting rights and civil rights, and we also had a communiversity to also teach about the prison industrial complex, environmental issues, etc.

We are looking to build the capacity of youth to act on the issues they are interested in. CFS has also evolved to not only build the capacity of young people, but also of adults so they can be better allies and co-strugglers with young people. So CFS is different than the Mississippi Freedom Schools were in that way.

What about Chicago Freedom School makes you proud?

I'm most proud of the young people who have come through the space and seeing their growth in terms of opening up their understanding about struggle and their own power. It has been wonderful to be part of over the years. Many youth who came through CFS are now at the forefront of other issues---trans issues, Movement for Black Lives, LGBTQ issues. To be part of their journey in any way...that feels really great.

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CFS has become a space in Chicago where people who are interested in social justice and transformation gather. When there are difficult things happen in our community, CFS opens as a healing space. People trust the quality of the work that CFS does with young people. That says a lot. That is something to be proud of.

CFS is an idea and a space. It doesn't limit itself to the four walls of the organization. It's in the community through trainings. It is portable in many ways in that leaders we help develop go out into the world and participate in struggle. It is defuse while still having a base where people can work.

We know that while young people are creative, energetic, and amazing, it's not just because they are young. We know that young people can be reactionary and liberatory. We know older people can be liberatory and reactionary. Young people have an important role to play in where we are going and how we will transform.

CFS is really focused on understanding that we will not get anywhere if young people do not have an integral role in determining where we are going and what fights we take on. CFS is just unique in Chicago as a space.

What advice do you have for young organizers today?

I would say to young people of all kinds who don't see themselves as organizers, you have a stake in this world. The burdens of this world will be falling on you the heaviest. You have an opportunity to shape the future so that the issues you care most about are heard and taken seriously. This is your time. Step out. Come forward.

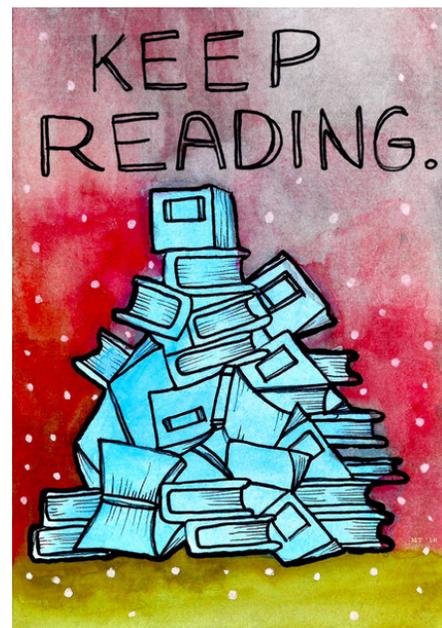
Connect with organizations like CFS and many others and figure out where to plug in. Find a community of people who are like-minded who will buffer you.

For those who are already involved, try to think about what you're doing as a long struggle. Don't think that things are going to change in a minute, that you will actually see the fruits of what you put in right away. If you take on campaigns, you are going to lose more than you win. That's the nature of struggle. Be prepared for that. Try hard not to internalize it. It's not about you and don't become embittered against people. People are complex and have multiple interests. They have their failings too. We all need to be pushed beyond what we see. Imagination is important.

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Please read books. It's important to read about the things that you care about. Read about the people who came before you. Studying is important. It is important to raise your consciousness to see what you can bring from the past into the future, to learn from mistakes

Make sure you also have a community of people you are traveling with in this journey. It makes this so much more joyful. We need to build power together.



Art by Monica Trinidad