



Dhameera

**Freedom Fellow, Program Volunteer
2014 - present**

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 you get involved with Chicago Freedom School?

I had a friend who was involved in CFS and she was telling me about it, about all the work. I knew that I wanted to learn a lot more about social justice and wanted to be more active. She recommend that I joined and I applied.

What are three things you learned from your time at CFS that have made an impact on your life?

The thing that sticks out to me the most was ableism and how that affects people. That was a social identity group that I knew very little about. Everything I learned about was from the medical perspective of people with disabilities. That whole workshop was amazing because I learned so much from that.

Another thing was learning about trans rights. I know that in my high school and early teens years, I was pretty transphobic. So, I was in the process of unlearning those negative behaviors. CFS helped me to unlearn my unconscious implicit biases with that.

CFS also gave me a better understanding of queerness. As a queer person of color, I feel like my community never really spoke on queerness, it was just gay,

lesbian, and bisexuality. So I didn't really understand queerness as a spectrum with fluid attractions. Going through that helped me to understand where I fit in the queer community.

Are there any powerful stories or experiences from CFS that you remember?

Honestly, there are too many to count. The retreat was a time where we all got very close to each other. Moving forward, my relationship with Tony has been very grounding, especially around organizing. I would go to Tony with a question and he would say, "You got it."

Considering the sociopolitical landscape right now, why does youth organizing and activism matter?

Because the president...the whole government is... attacking people's basic rights. I feel like we, as youth, can't be silent. We can't be because this is something that will affect us in the long run and threaten everything we have worked towards. To not push for everything we need to live would be unfortunate and for me, it isn't an option.

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In what ways are you still involved in activism?

So at the University of Illinois, I am currently a part of Q, Eu Sania, Infusions. All of these are identity-based organizations that are geared towards specific identity groups. The way I see my role in activism now is a lot more small-scaled. It's interpersonal, but I am still challenging systems through the conversations I have with people in institutions, such as housing, about what can we do to help students feel more included. I am currently having conversations about mental health services. I believe the services are sub-par at my university. The accessibility is sub-par. We cannot neglect mentally ill students.

There is also a lot of work going on around here with Black Students for Revolution and Black United Front that are presenting projects such as Project 1000 that aims to get 1000 students enrolled. Those are a couple of things that are coming up in the grand scheme organizing piece. There is also the piece that I told you about Q and I are trying to get out to there regarding bathrooms on campus and finding someone to be on the frontline of that.

What advice would you have for young activists and organizers, especially ones that are just starting in this work?

Last night, Q, an organization I am in, tried to organize and the way it happened was very interesting. We are a discussion group so we were talking about trans bathroom issues. Most of Q is cis so we didn't have the narratives to tell. A lot of people were asking, "What can we do as allies?" I was like, "We are trying to organize because there is already a trans group and they need to be at the forefront of this." We then started talking about who to target regarding the bathrooms on campus and how we would present our plan to the trans group on campus.

I don't think people in Q understood what organizing is and the work and thought that goes into it. I want young activists and organizers to understand that organizing is a long process and you might be working on a project for a year before you see results. All that of groundwork will give you the results you need. You have to remember that when you type up that write-up for the fiftieth time and are finding meeting dates for the millionth time. It's a lot of ground work, but it's necessary in the long run and to be able to look back and say we did this. One of the biggest things that I wish I would have known and it seems a little silly, is that we are not going to win every time, and that is okay. We might lose small battles. Don't let yourself give up. There is a bigger fight. Just because they don't meet with you today doesn't mean they won't meet with you next week. Just because your protest got shut down today doesn't mean you can't come back tomorrow. Persistence is what will help to push things forward. You need patience to see it through.

As Chicago Freedom School marks its 10th year, what are your hopes for its future?

I want it to take over the world. Honestly, I love CFS and the work that you do. For the future, I hope that they receive more funding than they have had in the past so that they are able to reach out to more students. I hope CFS brings in more people to have those conversations and are able to properly highlight the work they do and who they strive to be. I hope that CFS reaches all that it wants to be. It's such a powerful organization. They are really trying to make a difference and people like that who are willing to put in the hours and sit down and educate youth are godsend. It's such a painfully tedious job but the results are worth it.

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