



Cesar Hernandez

**Freedom Fellow, YES Team, Youth Coordinator,
& Youth Leadership Board Member
2013 - 2017**

In celebration of the Chicago Freedom School's 10th 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 at Chicago Freedom School?

I got involved after my two old mentors, David and Andrea from Teen Reach at Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), were talking about CFS. They selected a few people to fill out a CFS application. Since I had done anti-bullying work at my middle school for a few years, they suggested I get involved in organizing. This was back in 2013 which was between my freshman and sophomore year of high school.

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

The main one I notice a lot is my leadership as a person. It really changed drastically since leaving eighth grade. I used to be someone who would follow someone else. But now I have my own voice and my own opinions. I became an LGBT activist. I now know I can be a leader.

The other thing is networking. CFS taught me not to be afraid to seek people outside of CFS. I got to do a lot of things like Queer Prom and Vives Q. Tony introduced me to the co founder of both-Emmanuel Garcia. I got involved with the prom committee. I was then the emcee for the 10th Anniversary year. It was a big deal to be a young person and doing that. I was 17 years old. Then, the next year they approached me to do Vives Q. I set a milestone. Not a lot of young people get to do these kinds of activities. It set an example that young people can do this and be up there. It was a huge privilege to do. It helped me grow as a person and embrace that young people that can go out and do things that adults can do at the same time.

Also, language. I used to say a lot of oppressive words that I didn't think were harmful to people. CFS made me change my views in life and how what you say hurts someone. I really do thank CFS for teaching me that.

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

Young people have always been at the front lines of organizing and have always been the people who speak out the most because it's their future that will be affected the most. When youth are out in the streets, it shows that they want to make a change. It is beyond beautiful. If you want to make a change, you gotta get with the young people.

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Fight for it. Let it be known...
Don't be afraid. You got this.
You got CFS by your side.**

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What we are doing at CFS is very important. We are teaching young people from an anti-oppression framework. Because we are educating young people about what's happening in the current time.

What advice do you have for young organizers today?

Don't be afraid to be radical. I always remind myself of this when I was just starting.

It doesn't hurt to work with other people.

Be conscious of your privilege as well. Me being a brown documented person, I have the privilege of being documented. Be an ally to people who want to see change.

Don't let people bring your voice down. Fight for it. Let it be known. Even if adults try shut you down, don't let them. Tell them that's adultist. Don't be afraid. You got this. You got CFS by your side.

When I stepped into activism and the organizing field, I didn't think I was going to be anything in life. I thought I was going to be a follower. I converted all that negative energy into something powerful. I wanted to prove people wrong. People would give me negativity and I feed off that to keep me going, to prove people wrong. No matter what I am a powerful person. I am a leader.

Also, you never know that in the future you never know who you are impacting. Adults are always giving young people powerless moments. Continue to do what you're doing. Continue to prove them wrong.

In what ways are you still involved in activism work?

I am currently still working with CFS and also working with a couple of other people to start an organization

That donates clothes to LGBT youth who are experiencing homelessness. There are no organizations that do that explicitly. I've been thinking for a while that I want to start that work. I also go to a lot of protests and events.

As Chicago Freedom School nears its 10th Anniversary, what are your hopes for the organization?

That we appreciate our young people. It's a space where young people can really speak their mind. CFS is not an organization where adults speak for young people. We are a youth-led organization. We have young people hiring staff. We have young people writing curriculum. If we want to see change in the organizing landscape, we need to see young people leading. And at CFS we know young people can do it. We should let young people be leaders and organizers in the city of Chicago.



CFS is one of a kind organization. We stay true to ourselves and to our values and guidelines. We appreciate our young people who step into our door no matter what. Every young people who comes into our space is different and has a story. I want to thank CFS for letting me be a part of the organization for the last four years. By the way, 2013 is the best Fellowship year! (insert tongue pop here)

CFS does such amazing work. It has been very influential. The staff are very caring people. Everyone is just a big family. I am very glad I get to call CFS my family. "We did it!"