



# Jasmine Thomas

**Freedom Fellow, Youth Coordinator,  
& Youth Leadership Board Member  
2009 - 2014**

*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?**

My dad was at the library on 95th and Halsted and saw a flyer that had the Freedom Fellowship on it. He was like "Oh you should apply with your sister." At the age of 13, I didn't want to do anything, like "Why do I need to go to school in the summer?" But I applied after reading over the mission statement and thought, "Okay, maybe I should do it." So I had the interview. I thought for sure I didn't get it because I was nervous and I was young. I had just graduated eighth grade. I remember the day CFS called. They said "Aren't you excited?" I said "Yeah!" Ever since then, I have been in love. I always wanted to be around the Freedom School. Every time I would come to the Freedom School, it was like me escaping reality in a way. I could come there and really feel safe and comfortable. I could be myself while focusing on the things that made me feel unsafe.

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

To always fight for what I believe in no matter what people around me may think about it. I learned this the hard way. When people would sit in circle, I would never say anything out of fear of being wrong. But then I started opening up. I was like okay, you don't have to

fear being wrong. You need to speak up and stand by what you believe.

Another thing is to embrace my struggle. Basically the things that I have struggled with made me who I am today. Struggling with being a black girl on the South Side of Chicago and coming from a single parent household. Those things are the things people want me to be ashamed to admit. But being around people from similar backgrounds, it made me feel comfortable to say, "Yes, I grew up without my father," or "Yes, I come from a neighborhood where they expect me to be pregnant by 16." The staff at CFS helped me embrace my struggle and fight for the rights of others.

To take care of myself. Don't get so wrapped up in working to make things better for myself and others that I forget that I'm human. I still need to focus on my health and my happiness. Often times I would be so focused on school and making sure everyone around me is happy that I forget to do simple things like eat. I forget to tell myself you are where you are supposed to be. Take it one day at a time. That's a big shout out to Mia and to Tony. Those two personally impacted life.

## **How are you involved with activism work currently?**

Last semester I joined the National Association of Colored Women's Club. Our focus is on youth and women in our community. With us being on campus, what we do is we have different events that focus on the struggles that our community has been through. A recent annual event was "Hear My Cry." We brought to (Continued on the next page)

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life the ways black women have have fallen victim to police brutality. We did it because the media always focuses on black men who have fallen victim, which is important, but when doing the research I saw how many black women have been victim to police brutality. I didn't know about a lot of them. The media doesn't talk about it. So at that event we had different students perform things that highlighted the lives of black women. It was really successful. People read the stories of these black women. They were in shock because no one knows.

My major is Africana Studies and minor is Criminology. I want to go to grad school with a focus on social justice. There is not a day in my life when I am not thinking about social justice. I am that person who is like, "This can't be happening. Something needs to be done." We need restorative justice instead of hard core punishment for little things they do in the schools. I want to go into position that has a large impact.

## **Do you have advice for young organizers? What do you want them to know?**

Don't be afraid to ask for help. When it comes to talking with adults who have already been involved in activism, they know the work. So if you are a youth who wants to start something, it is always good to talk with someone who has done the work, instead of going into it on your own. It's good to have input from someone who has already done it.

To be open minded when it comes to organizing with other people. Don't just think your idea is the only way it can be done. Get people from other walks of life. Reach out to people who are not just struggling with being a woman, but reach to men who are in relationships with women. Intersectional activism is important.

My first year at CFS, I was the youngest in the group. My mind was really closed to a lot of things so I spent a lot

of my time just listening and thinking because I wasn't exposed to things like that. So when it comes to people reading about CFS, especially youth who are interested, I want them to know it's okay to not know when you enter the organization. Because other youth are not there to bash you for not knowing. Just be okay with admitting when you don't know, but also be willing to understand it.

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

To continue to give youth the opportunities I was given. I feel like a lot of people underestimate the influence that nonprofits have on youth. They say, "Why are you doing that instead of getting a regular job?" At CFS, it wasn't just a summer job. It was an eye opener. It was a chance to meet people whose backgrounds were different than mine but we were still able to connect.

I wish for the Freedom School to grow in every way possible. I cannot stress how much I want more people to go through that experience. It just allows you to be open with yourself and others and open with the way society is being rigged. A lot of people on campus don't know what's going on. They are just going day to day. But with me coming from CFS, the smallest thing can make me mad. Like don't say I can't do this because I'm a woman. Because I learned these things at such a young age, it's imbedded in the way i think. Yes, I'm that student in class that always has to bring race into it. People say "Oh you always got to say something about race." But when you look at certain situations, you do not have a choice but to talk about race. You have to throw out little facts that make students mad, but it also makes people think more deeply about these issues than just the surface level.

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