



Mia Henry

**Co-Founder and Founding Director
2005 - 2012**

In celebration of Chicago Freedom School's Tenth Anniversary in 2017, we are publishing interviews with 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 first get involved with Chicago Freedom School?

I knew Kevin Brown through Mikva Challenge and he invited me to the Steering Committee meetings. I then joined the Logistics Committee in early 2006 and we looked for space for the organization. Later, Mariame Kaba asked me to apply for CFS' first staff position. I was working at Facing History and Ourselves at the time and wasn't very happy because I wasn't working with young people. Before that, I was a high school teacher and worked at Mikva Challenge. For me, going to CFS meetings was about reconnecting with my work with young folks in social justice.

So, I applied and they hired me. Mariame handed me all these files and we didn't have space yet, so I had all these files in my home. [laughs]

What were the main reasons why it was important to start a freedom school at that time?

At that time, we had a very provincial and segregated city. Young people did not leave their neighborhood. We knew young people were coming up with incredible solutions for the problems they faced, but they didn't have the chances to build relationships across lines. I thought the Freedom School helped young activists do collective action, see their commonalities, and build campaigns that were broader in scope.

The consciousness-raising part was important, too. Young people were not getting exposed to the historical context for the issues they were facing in their schools, whether they be public, private, or charter.

There was also this issue of identity politics where you had a lot of young men that would be sexist or homophobic. So it was this incredible opportunity to break down the reasons why they thought that way and cultivate an anti-oppressive space. It was important to create safe(r) spaces where young people could have a second home with adults that cared about the ways they were growing. It is critical for young people to have efficacy and affirmation across their identities. I felt that particularly in Chicago, there was a dearth of this kind of place. The central question driving this work was, "How do you create a space that is affirming, power building, and community building for young people?"

How is Chicago Freedom School's work similar and different than freedom schools in Mississippi in the 1960s, or other freedom schools across the country?

When we started the Freedom School, we hoped that there would be other freedom schools across the city. We quickly saw that we didn't have the capacity to incubate other places around the city. But that wasn't the most important thing. It was more important to create a model for liberatory education.

We talked about there being two strategies of the legacy of the freedom school. One focused on literacy, (Continued on the next page)

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reading, writing, and math. Freedom schools had to do this because students were not going to school because of the limits on sharecropper families and vastly under-resourced schools. Young people were not staying in school and getting a quality education because they were black. This is the strategy that the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) freedom schools mostly use. Then there is the citizenship strategy that taught young people how to build the world that they want. This is the strategy we mostly used.

I am very familiar with the CDF freedom school model and we are just different. We never envisioned ourselves to plant our model everywhere and make ourselves membership-based. We are an independent freedom school.

What were some significant challenges that CFS faced in those early years? How did you navigate them?

Everything was a challenge, oh my gosh! At the beginning when there was no staff and no office. We were doing whatever we needed to move the organization forward. Despite your title, you are doing everything.

The very first year we didn't have the space so we did it in Jones High School. That was hard because we were trying to distinguish our programming from traditional schools. We had a lot of fellows, like 40 that first summer. We were catering all of our food. We were kind of purists and had this vegan chef. None of the students ate the vegan food. They went to 7-Eleven. [laughs] We had so many classes with like 20 instructors teaching in the morning, evening, and night. That first summer we had a hard time providing so much but we created a lot of really good relationships.

We changed so much after the first year, and really hit our stride in 2008 and 2009. We went down to 30 students and had a space. Even the Freedom Fellowship was a thing that we came up after the first year. We decided to make the summer programming into a fellowship that goes across the year for young people to learn and develop their work. In the beginning, we had them do individual projects over the whole year. We then realized that we were talking about social justice history and collective work. It didn't make sense to have them do independent projects. We then moved to more cohort-based programming.

Then the recession happened and we had to reduce our programming. It was tough because we were dependent on foundation funding, but we survived. We started a membership program and I did more to cultivate individual contributions. We started what is now Moments of Justice. The first one was at Lisa Lee's house in 2008. We saw that it was such a great way to look back at the history of civil rights because this is the legacy that we based ourselves off of. This helped a lot with our money flow and it was a good way to celebrate with and express appreciation for our community that supports us so much.

For anyone who may be thinking of starting their own freedom school, what are some of the essential qualities of a freedom school?

Think about the core principles and create structures that speak to those principles. There needs to be space and time for healing. With healing, there needs to be intentional workshops, lessons, trainings on the structures of oppression and the history of resistance. (Continued on the next page)

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Young people have to have a historical context and political education for consciousness-raising. There should be some sense of safety in the way that there is food and something like stipends that removes barriers to participation and young people don't have to be worried while being there.

And an action component. Some kind of charge both to young people and adults there to actually be doing something with what they learned and the relationships they built with one another.

In the current political moment, why is Chicago Freedom School's work important?

They are trying to kill us with the blatant attacks on all the identities represented through the CFS family. This is survival work. It is so important that there are spaces that where we can heal, build community, challenge the ways we think about politics and the political, and hold each other accountable for not replicating or mimicking how we see power used in the world.

So CFS has always been a place where we were pre-figurative. We were building the world we want to see, the world we want to live in, and the world we need. The world is dying and what is it going to be replaced with? If we are not doing that pre-figurative work, then we will live in a world where we are completely suppressed and repressed.

CFS has always been a lab for challenging our own internalized oppression and thinking about loving each other radically. We are constantly thinking about how to create a new world so when the time comes, we can do it well. We cannot walk away from that work.

What advice would you have to young people (or people in general) who are getting involved in organizing for the first time?

My advice is that I want people to be gentle, courageous, and resilient. There is only so much we have control over because we don't know what we are going to face. So how do we ground ourselves? We have to own the work that we do to create a liberatory world and create a world where all people have power.

Sometimes we stay in a space where we are thinking about the ways that the world is oppressing us. That is a place of anger. If you stay in part of the corner, you will

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feel like a victim. If you are in a place where you constantly thinking about the ways that you oppress others, you are in a place where you are always feeling bad, guilty, and defensive. That's not a good place to stay either. Then you go the third place and you say, "I go to the CFS and I do all of this activist work." That's also not a good place to stay because that is a place of self-righteousness.

So, my advice is to stay in all three of these spaces at once so you know that we are living in a world that targets us and we know we to heal. We can then go back into a place where we are an oppressor and know we need to be accountable. And we are in that third place where we are working for liberation, that there is more to do, and we need other people. In the end, we are acting in humility and with others. Find spaces to heal, be accountable, and act with humility.