



Ric Wilson

**Freedom Fellow & Youth Coordinator
2011 - 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.

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

I knew about Black struggle, but I didn't know about others' oppression. I didn't know that oppression was a word. The Summer Leadership Institute (SLI) showed me the intersectionality of being oppressed. And that your oppression is connected the LGBTQIA community and women's oppression. We read excerpts from Pedagogy of the Oppressed. We studied movement history. I learned how to organize as a super young age. It's super handy because I can use it in my life now.

While traveling to CFS, I realized how segregated how the city was. I didn't know anything about the North Side. There were like one or two fellows from the North Side. So I learned more about it. I learned about the YOUmedia open mic. I met all my friends there who I still hang with today. So that was a huge, huge impact.

Another thing that CFS helped with is probably just realizing and thinking about how much space I'm taking up, how my actions affect others. Even now when I write my lyrics I think about how my lyrics affect others. If I'm writing music, I want to make sure I'm not being ableist. I think some people don't think about those things when writing music.

Mia and Hilda (former Youth Programs Coordinator) were really checking us on our shit all the time. Like all the time. That was a really crucial thing. Being around Mia and Mariame (Kaba), they just really enhanced my love for history. I just think me looking at history opened up my mind to so much more things.

Also, I was a youth coordinator for the SLI. I was dealing with youth who were my age and actually organizing young people who were the same age. That really taught me how to get knowledge and how to teach knowledge to people who are my age. Me teaching to my friends. So that taught me that I can teach it to random people. When I would gather people's signatures, I learned how to engage with anyone. It taught me how to talk, as in public speaking. A lot of my skills that I have now, I can credit to CFS.

What memories or experiences were especially powerful to you at Chicago Freedom School?

We were doing a workshop on oppression and how someone could be homophobic and racist. We were doing skits. My group's skit was homophobia and we were doing homophobia in church. So I was acting a character that was like really flamboyant, a gay man. (Continued on the next page)

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Mia said, "I don't think that was funny at all." Everyone laughed, but I realized that this shit is real. And at first I was in denial and I was like "I don't want to be in this program. They are mean." But then I started thinking about it a lot. It was a really good learning moment for me. I think those are the best learning moments when you are thrown off your comfortability.

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

I think that right now people are trying to silence the youth the most. But the youth have always been the fire in any social movement and structural revolution. So it's always up to the youth to stand up. If no youth stand up then nothing really gets done. I think it's so crucial for there to be more spaces like the Freedom School so young people can be organizing and mobilizing around issues they care about. The Black Lives Matter movement is a prime example of that.

In what ways are you still involved in activism work?

I used to be a hard core organizer, like going to meetings every week. But I've been really focused on music and doing activism through that. I'm like a pop-up boy now, due to music. I think my music is like a display of my activism and what I want the world to look like. There's a huge renaissance of arts and activism in Chicago right now. My music is like a baby, a Chicago renaissance birth.

When I'm writing my music and thinking about my music, I still think about my teachers and what they would think about this line. What would Mariame Kaba think about this line? Mariame would totally call me out or Mia would totally call me out. It's not like I'm afraid of them, but I don't want to offend anyone. I'm a reflection of CFS. So I want to represent CFS the best way possible.

The people who are organizing with me and with We Charge Genocide are tied to CFS and to the arts. We Charge Genocide was a coalition of a bunch of groups. We needed to be one coalition of people against police brutality. So we decided to present the Shadow Report to the UN. After that, me and seven others were selected to go to the UN and present the report, which was mostly written by Page May. We raised \$30,000 in two weeks and went to Geneva to present to the UN about how the CPD was torturing people against the UN Treaty. I think that our trip had to do with the reparations ordinance being passed.

We got a lot of attention about this. A lot of publications were contacting me, Malcolm (London) and Ethan (Viets-VanLear). It had a lot to do with male privilege. It was like individualism. So I stepped back because I didn't want to be the frontman of the movement. I don't think there should be a front man to any movement.

What advice would you give to young organizers?

I would tell them to be confident in themselves and really focus on their story. Figure out how to tell their story before they want to tell the world what they are against. People will listen to your truth before they listen to what you don't like.

Reading. A lot of young people need to keep reading about the things they are into. I would recommend James Baldwin to anyone who wants to get involved.

Twitter can mobilize people but human to human connection is best. At the Freedom School, they would teach us this.

Mia and Hilda were really crucial on us having a goal. They don't even have to be big, they can be small goals. Small goals can lead the way to big goals.

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