

LETTER TO STUDENTS

Miami Student
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Veterans of Freedom Summer remind students to speak out

On the final afternoon of last week's Freedom Summer conference, veterans of the 1964 training in Oxford sat at a front table to offer wrap-up comments. About an hour in, David Goodman, the brother of one of the young men killed in Mississippi that pivotal summer, stood, turned to the rear of the room and asked all the students sitting in the back — dutifully scribbling notes for assignments or extra credit points — what they learned from the conference. Response was slow. Then one of the vets joined the call. "What are you doing here?" David Dennis asked, before rising from his seat, walking to the rear of the room, and escorting a scribbling student to his place at the front table. One by one, the other panel members did the same. In minutes, the faces behind the microphones were no longer the civil rights warriors of 1964, but Miami students of 2014. Several said that what they learned at the conference had moved and changed them. Several said they were now inspired to become change agents in the world. Put on the spot, no one had a specific plan of action — but at least, in that moment, they acknowledged what the veterans were trying to tell them: It is time, past time, for a new generation to take up the work they started and continued over the past 50 years.

This week at Miami, students

organized to speak out on issues related to sexual assault. They gathered to recognize the mental health issues that affect so many of them and their peers, as they mourned a classmate lost to a mental health crisis. In this very paper, they debated the pros and cons of assisted suicide in thoughtful, respectful ways on the opinion pages, while celebrating and supporting members of the LGBTQ community in a full-page ad.

When the Freedom Summer conference ended, I planned to write this letter calling on Miami students to reassess their involvements — to commit more fully to the ones that make the world a better place, to shed the ones of lesser value and to remember that time is a precious resource that should be allocated wisely.

Given the events of this week — and the growing evidence that a goodly number of Miamians are, in fact, engaged in issues that matter — I've got a slightly different POV: Remember that the veterans of Freedom Summer have been working for civil rights for five decades. Stay strong and energized for the years ahead.

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