Remembering civil rights fighter Bob Moses

Segue • SIUE

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On this Sunday's episode of Segue, the weekly talk show airing on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Greg Budzban, PhD, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), welcomes prolific American educator Robert Parris "Bob" Moses, an architect of the civil rights movement. They discuss Moses' place in the movement as well as his success in education.

In the 1960's, Moses worked to build alliances between several social and political organizations to register black people and sharecroppers to vote. After decades of work in the civil rights movement, he received the MacArthur Fellowship in 1982. With this fund, he created the Algebra Project, which aims to improve education for the bottom quartile of students in mathematics.

Moses was at the center of the civil rights movement. After graduating from Hamilton College in 1956, civil and human rights activist Ella Baker, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Secretary Jane Stembridge encouraged Moses to travel to Cleveland, Miss. In 1960, he begin working on NAACP chair Amzie Moore's voter registration campaign. Approximately nine months later, the Freedom Riders penetrated Mississippi and focused on direct action and public accommodations for black people.

After organizing several protests, numerous points of direct action, some of which were frowned upon by the NAACP, SNCC decided to instead focus its attention on equal voting rights.

"The right to vote became the SNCC goal," Moses says. "That allowed us to enter into an alliance with the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Martin Luther King Jr.'s organization.

"The Mississippi theater became the only theater in the movement where the four major civil rights organizations were working together on a common goal, program and strategy," he says. "Having that alliance was crucial to gathering resources into Mississippi around the right to vote."

The subtext behind the right to vote began with targeting sharecroppers and teaching them how to read.

"Sharecroppers were assigned a certain kind of work and got the education, at best, for the work that had been preassigned," Moses says. "They were told they didn't need an education except what they might have needed to be a sharecropper. Those of us working on voting rights said the country can't use politics to set up the standard of literacy, then turn around and say you can't participate in politics because you are not literate."

This same argument ultimately led to the 1965 U.S. Supreme Court decision that the state of Louisiana's voter registration literacy requirements were unconstitutional.

After stepping away from the civil rights movement, Moses went on to study the philosophy of mathematics at Harvard University. He began teaching high school math in Cambridge, Mass. As he moved forward in his career as an educator, Moses was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship and founded the Algebra Project.

The Algebra Project stresses the vital importance of the student population in the U.S. to gain mathematical literacy necessary for the knowledge work that is available in the 21st century. This project follows the same basic ideals of his original push to educate sharecroppers. In order for one to participate actively in our current information-age economy, one must possess the required quantitative literacy. Moses stresses the importance of reforming education models to become sustainable and focus on the bottom quartile of students, especially minorities.

“Building alliances nationally to ensure that this fundamental transformation occurs is so incredibly important,” Budzban says, “It must occur, so that quality education for the bottom quartile can be something that happens in this country.”

Moses commends Budzban for his own work in transforming mathematics education. In the early 2000s, Budzban was investigating a research problem called the Road Coloring Problem.

“I figured that kids down in Mississippi could work on this problem - got some hula hoops and color-coded sticks, and called you,” Moses reminisces.

“I had to come down to Mississippi to see it for myself!” Budzban says.

As a result of that meeting, Moses and Budzban began a collaboration that continues until today. In 2001, they co-wrote a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to transform the way mathematics is taught. The NSF has continued to be a key supporter of both Moses’ and Budzban’s work in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education. In fact, the NSF is funding a national conference in St. Louis that the two are organizing the weekend of February 17-19. Moses plans to showcase the efforts of the Algebra Project and then work on implementing it around the country.

“We want to form this program around the students themselves, the teachers who teach them, the school leaders who house them and the communities to support them,” Moses says. “We are bringing all these people together, and we are going to explore if we agree on this goal about bottom quartile math literacy, and how it’s appropriate for 21st century knowledge. From there, we can move toward establishing alliances that can operationalize such a goal.”

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 The Sound at 9 a.m. Sunday to listen to the conversation in its entirety. Segue allows listeners to hear about the ideas and issues on the SIUE campus.

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