

Gray to speak at Arts & Issues

On this week's episode of *Segue*, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premiere radio show that discusses ideas and events on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, co-host Greg Budzban, PhD, College of Arts and Sciences dean, interviews Fred Gray, nationally recognized civil rights attorney for Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The duo's conversation will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 28.

Gray's speech, "Bus Ride to Justice - the Montgomery Bus Boycott," will be presented by SIUE's Arts & Issues and is based, in part, on his autobiography, *Bus Ride to Justice: The Life and Works of Fred Gray*.

The Arts & Issues event will be held at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 5 in the Morris University Center's Meridian Ballroom.

"I love to start our interviews by talking about our guests' early life and how you came to be involved in the law and the civil rights movement," Budzban asks. "What was your early life like and what was your educational experience?"

"My father was a carpenter and my mother was a domestic worker with little formal education," Gray answers. "I was the youngest of five children, and my mother told us that we could be anything that we wanted to be if we kept Christ first in our lives, stay in school and got a good education, and

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stay out of trouble."

As a teenager, he attended the Nashville Christian Institute (NCI) with aspirations to become a preacher. He assisted noted preacher and NCI president Marshall Keeble recruit students throughout the South. Upon his graduation from the school, he enrolled in Alabama State College for Negroes (now Alabama State University).

"While I was traveling on the buses back and forth from the west to the east side of Montgomery to get to class each day, I saw the blatant mistreatment taking place," Gray recalls. "Even though the bus was 70 percent black, we had to sit there and take the verbal and physical abuse. One black man even died as a result of one incident."

While pursuing his undergraduate degree, he met E.D. Nixon, president of the local chapter of the NAACP. This new friendship changed the course of Gray's life forever.

"Mr. Nixon was always looking for lawyers, and he told me that lawyers wanted to help people," Gray says. "As a result of the problems people experienced on the buses, I made a personal commitment that I was going to finish at Alabama State, get enrolled in a different law school, pass the



Fred Gray, civil rights attorney, preacher, activist, and former state representative.

bar exam, and destroy everything segregated I could find."

In 1955 as a young attorney, Gray defended Claudette Clovin, and nine months later, Rosa Parks. Each woman was charged with disorderly conduct for refusing to give up their seats on a bus to white passengers. After Parks' arrest, the local chapter of the NAACP and the Montgomery Improvement Association worked quickly to organize a protest of the bus system to renounce its segregation policies.

"We didn't have a spokesman to speak our message," Gray says. "If I stood out, I would've been disbarred. Normally, E.D. Nixon would have been that voice, and Rufus

Lewis was in town, but he was only interested in getting people out to vote. That is great task, but not what we needed.

"He said 'My pastor, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., would make a great spokesman!'"

"And the rest is history!"

Budzban exclaims.

While Parks' act of defiance became a symbol of the nearly year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott, King Jr. became the voice behind the civil rights movement for combating racial inequality through nonviolent resistance.

Gray, determined to systematically take down segregation, approached three women who had been discriminated by drivers enforcing the segregation policy in Montgomery. The trio agreed to become plaintiffs in a federal civil action lawsuit, bypassing the Alabama court system, and took the case, *Browder vs. Gayle*, directly to the U.S. District Court on February 1, 1956.

In June of that year, the court ruled that the enforced segregation in the City of Montgomery was unconstitutional, because the conditions deprived people of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. The city of Montgomery appealed the decision, causing the case not to be completed until the U.S. Supreme Court heard it November 13, 1956, when the Supreme Court

upheld the U.S. District Court's decision.

On December 20, 1956, over one year after Clovin and Parks' brave moments of resistance, the Montgomery buses were officially desegregated.

Tickets for Gray's speech, which range from \$15-\$20, can be purchased at artsandissues.com, by phone at 1-866-698-4253 or at the Morris University Center (MUC) Welcome Desk.

The Madison County Regional Office of Education, SIUE Office of the Provost and SIUE Department of Political Science sponsor the show. This program is also partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Arts & Issues is tied to the academic mission of the University. For more than 34 years, the series has presented some of the world's finest performing artists and showcased speakers from across the spectrum in areas such as science, history, literature and politics. The program also offers unique opportunities for students, faculty, staff and the community to engage with these performers and speakers through master classes and special sessions.

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By Madelaine Deardeuff, SIUE Marketing & Communications