



Live the Legacy Podcast

Live the Legacy podcast captures bold conversations between civil rights icons and today's student activists. These conversations bridge the past and the present in order to move forward together. Listen today on our [website](#) or your favorite podcast app.

Season 1, Episode 1

This episode features a conversation between Andrew Goodman Ambassador Wyn Garfinkle (Rising Senior) and Bernice Sims, a veteran of the civil rights movement and author of *Detour Before Midnight*. During their conversation, you will hear about some of the final moments of the lives of Andrew Goodman, James Earl Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, as Bernice Sims was one of the last people to see the three men alive. This conversation highlights voter registration tactics used in the 1960s and 1970s, and how the fight for the right to vote continues today with young activists who are taking bold actions to make their voice heard.

Transcript

Bernice: I was running behind the car that day as they left, and as I make the turn, light the signal, and turned on their way to Nashoba County.

Mo: This is Live The Legacy, a podcast presented to you by the Andrew Goodman Foundation.

Wyn: The Black community and the Jewish community have so much in common, and also, I believe, you know, fighting antisemitism and fighting racism also go hand in hand.

Mo: Today's guests include Bernice Sims: A veteran of the civil rights movement. She has been an active member of the [NAACP](#) and [C.O.R.E.](#) since she was a teenager in the early 1960s. She's also the author of the book "[Detour Before Midnight](#)", which is her personal account of the last few hours she and her family spent with [Andrew Goodman](#), [James Earl Cheney](#), and [Michael Schwerner](#) before they were abducted and murdered by the KKK on June 21st, 1964.

We will also be joined by Wyn Garfinkle. Wyn is a student, a rising senior, currently 20 years old at the University of Louisville, studying Communication and Jewish studies. For the past two years, Wyn served as the president of U of L's Hillel, as well as an Andrew Goodman Foundation My Vote Everywhere Campus Ambassador and an Ambassador for [Ban Conversion Therapy KY](#). As a queer Jewish woman, Wyn believes that voting is one way we can stand up to the unjust systems that are currently in place. Without further ado, please enjoy the first episode of Live The Legacy as we bridge the past and the present to move forward together.

Wyn: So, Bernice, could you tell us what it was like growing up in Meridian, Mississippi? And then as you're talking about that experience, can you talk about how Meridian became a sort of epicenter for the civil rights movement?

Bernice: Okay. All right, well, what it was like growing up in Meridian, Mississippi. I came up as uh, in the 50s, I was born in the 40s, as you can imagine, I'm a baby boomer, and it was very much referred to as the Jim Crow South. It was very clearly defined lines in terms of the role of segregation within my community. I went to an all-Black school. Whenever I went downtown, I visited -- I saw the colored the white water fountains, the colored only water fountains. It was the same thing when we went to the restaurants. We could not really use the restaurants unless it was through the back door. We didn't have Burger Kings and things of that nature as they have now. It was, for the most part, in terms of our utilizing the hotels, there were some Black-owned businesses in Meridian. We did have some Black or African American doctors and dentists that, for the most part, we used. It was for the most part, everything was segregated, and we understood that, that was something that we basically understood.

But at the same token, there was some resistance to living in a segregated society, especially when I began to learn about the government. I was a student that loved the government, I love history. And I started learning about the three branches of government and the fact that in our Constitution and the amendments. And the fact that we were supposed to be free and entitled to the same things as every other human being. That particular strong interest in government and also my religious upbringing really helped me to realize that what was going on, the environment that I was living in was wrong, and something felt very uncomfortable for me even at a very young age. And I think that I began to, at a very early age, begin to rebel against a system that seems so suppressive of me as a human being.

Wyn: I'd love to hear a little bit more about your experience as you continue growing up. So in your book "Detour Before Midnight", you give your personal account of the last few hours of the lives of Andrew Goodman, James Earl Cheney and Michael Schwerner. Will you describe for us in your own words, now, what that night was like and why your home served as a host home for many civil rights workers during that time?

Bernice: Okay, well, first of all, I want to clear -- it was morning, it was Father's Day. It was Father's Day. June 21, 1964 was Father's Day. It was a Sunday, it was during the day. Now, prior to that day, I had been involved. Michael Schwerner had been in, and his wife Rita, I call

him Mickey. If I say Mickey, I mean Michael Schwerner. If I talk about James Cheney, I might say JE, because JE was my next-door neighbor and I just had just met Andrew Goodman that day. That same day that he came to Meridian, to Mississippi. Because I had been involved in the early part of the NAACP and the protests with Medgar Evers. And also I had been involved with the - some call - We were trying to get the Freedom Vote, the work that Fanny Lou Hamer, I had been involved with that. Somehow when the Freedom Summer workers came, they were aware of the fact that there were a bunch of us, it was probably about twelve of us youth that had been involved already, been young activists. So they knew that also my home was a place that served two points. It was a host home, but also my home was very popular because my brothers, two older than me, Marshall and David, actually David, my brother was a student barber. He cut all of their hair. They got haircuts the day before they were -- the same day that they were murdered. They came by my home. My brothers were student barbers. They were active in the youth activists along with me and about twelve others. They were also good barbers. They could cut anybody's hair. They could cut white, black, anybody's hair. They were good barbers.

In Mississippi, because of the accent, when the Freedom Summer workers came, they could recognize the southern, the white supremacist there in the Klans, They recognized the voice if you were from the North. So they couldn't go to the barber shop and ask for a haircut because right away they would be ostracized and God knows what else might have happened to them. So our home, we was known, this is where everybody could come. All the white civil rights workers from everywhere could come to my home and get their hair cut because my brothers were very good at it. Plus, we were involved in the movement. Also my home was a place where my mother, why she opened her home up, she said, what these people are fighting for is things that should be ours anyway; if they're going to go change their lives, leave the North, come away from safety to come here to help us in fighting for things that we should have been entitled to. And they realized it was theirs by their birthright, then we have a responsibility to help and do whatever we can. So my home kind of opened up.

Also, the fact that my father had a union job, and many people were being fired and homes were being bombed and our church was burned as well. Anything that they felt was set up for voter registration, they got rid of. But my father, in terms of his job he went through a lot on his job that I found out about later. But they couldn't fire him because of the union that he was connected with. So we were kind of free to bring people in and out of our homes give them a free warm meal, warm bath. My mother was very good at that. These people are traveling from a long way. Anything she could do to help the cause, that was her feelings, and she was willing to do it and take that risk. So that's part of why, and there were other homes like that in the South, but ours was in terms of trying to lose, the loss of the job, my father didn't because he allowed the civil rights workers to come into the home.

On that day, As I said, it was Father's Day and they had brought Andy. They mainly wanted us, my brothers and myself, to meet Andy -- we called the new recruit. Now, Andy was supposed to go somewhere else in northern Mississippi. He had another site, but he was selected because

of his relationship with Michael Schwerner and James Cheney, when they met in Ohio for the training, they found that they were a good match. So he ended up coming to Meridian instead of going to a place he was originally assigned to go. And he wanted them also to meet my family because we have been involved months and months earlier. Here's a place that you can go, feel comfortable, you can eat, sleep, these people are here for you. You don't have to watch your back. Many of them have spent overnight in my home. So "we want you to meet the new recruit Andy" that day.

It was a very good day, in many ways in my home, that exchange with us, those few hours. For a long time, I didn't want to talk about it because I remembered the good times, but after I found out what happened, it was very difficult. It was a very difficult thing for me to juggle. But as I remember that day, we had a lot of fun. We had a lot of laughs. We sang, we played games. I was getting -- working to get to know Andy because he was shy, but he just didn't know us. I spent a lot of time going to him and bringing him fried chicken and cupcakes and things like that. My mother was getting prepared for a long Sunday because those two things, fried chicken and cupcakes had a long shelf life -- so you can travel. It was a beautiful day, and it was fun and Michael Schwerner always got into conversations with my mother about atheism and being agnostic. And she didn't understand because she's a Christian, she didn't understand someone being agnostic.

Michael Schwerner -- Mickey was telling her about he didn't disbelieve in God, but he was agnostic. He believed in the possibility. And she thought that meant, oh, he's an atheist. So she spent a lot of her time trying to -- she thought, for months and months and months trying to convert him to Christianity. She didn't understand Jewish religion and belief. In that day, we had a minister, a Black minister was on the radio preaching one of these hellfire, damnation kind of sermons where you have to do the call and response. For some reason, as I said, my mother had been working on him for months. And that morning, for some reason, that particular day, I think he decided to have a little fun with my mother. I'm not really sure to this day, I don't know what happened, but he started mimicking the African American minister on the radio, and said, "yeah, yeah, amen". And he was going on and on, and then he was singing.

And then eventually Andy came inside of the house. He was sitting on the porch. And also J.E, who was like a brother to me because he lived next door to me most of my life, came in and they start singing. They start singing hymns and going on and just reacting to all of this, it was like church. And as a matter of fact, it was so much so that my father, who had to go to work later that day, he said to me many times, he said, "I don't want to go to church, I feel like I've been to church already." So it was that kind of exchange. It was so wonderful. And everybody was involved. And also I kept saying, "Why can't I go?" Because I had been on what we call missions before. I had gone with them when we went and tried to find sites that we would pick out for voter registration or a community center or something very similar to what we had in Meridian.

Meridian had one of the first Freedom Schools, and it was like the premier school where all the other Freedom Schools around the state came to have their national convention. So I had been involved in going out in the field and trying to set up sites with them. I had gone with them before, not that particular station wagon, but another one, and to do the work out in the fields with no fear because we had our group. So I didn't know why I couldn't go with them that day. And Mickey talked me out of it, and we had a little fight about it, and he said, "it's not a place for a girl to go. There's a burnt church. They burnt it down. It's not a place for girls to walk around in dresses." At that time, we wore dresses. We weren't wearing pants. It's not a good place for a girl to be. So I said, "Well, I've gone before. I don't know why you give me such a hard time." And then he said, "Well, we'll come back for your brother."

And my brother wanted him to come back. He had a lot of heads to cut because he put them in the front of the line because he knew they were going on to Nashoba County to also, to interview some of the people who had the week before had been beat up in the church ground. They were looking for Mickey, looking for them, if you know the story, they were looking for them. They were in Ohio at the time, in the training center. So they had gone on to a Wednesday night prayer meeting and beat up a lot of the parishioners looking for Mickey and looking for James Cheney. So some of them had gotten hurt up badly, and they were hospitalized and beat up. So they felt responsible because they had been there and got them to agree for this site. So they wanted to go and interview them and talk to them and see how they were.

And I had been there in the past, I've been there before, so I wanted to go. And he talked me out of it and said, Bernice, you're more needed in the office for the phones, answer the phone. And any time he would say to me, well, you're more needed here, I believed that. And I accepted that. I respected that. So that's pretty much what that morning was like. And then I settled with, well, you know, wait a while, let me pack some lunch. My mother and I got together and packed up some more fried chicken and cupcakes. And I remember when the car left my home, I was running down another batch of fried chicken that come in, and I was going to give it to them. And I'm running down the street on 31st Avenue. It's now called Martin Luther King Drive, and with this bag, shaking it up in the rearview mirror. So maybe they would see me, and I was trying to get them to stop. I was running behind the car that day as they left, and I make the turn, light the signal and turn on their way to Nashoba County. So it was a nice day. It was a fun day. In some ways, it was a spiritual day. James Cheney was saying, "I'm doing this. I'm doing this for my child."

I thought sometimes they had a kind of premonition about something that wasn't that clear to us that day. And as I think back, maybe they did feel something. But the thing, the biggest gift that Mickey Schwerner or Michael Schwerner gave to my mother when he responded to the minister on the radio, and when he left, she said, well, I think I finally converted him from Judaism, from being an agnostic, to a Christian. She thought her work was done. They had a very fun, unusual relationship where they had these beautiful fights, and we would see them, these love spats,

and we would leave them alone because they would be in the kitchen, he would be eating the food, and they would have their wonderful spats. And he believed in a sense of fairness.

And I remember talking to Andy about this as well. We were talking about believing in the good, ultimately believing in the goodness of man. And on the other end, you had another James Cheney, my brother, saying, you don't know these people here. They don't care about that. Basically, they were saying they have no conscience. Some people don't believe in anything else but white supremacy, and they see anything that's going to dampen that, stand in the way of maintaining this thing, that they hold onto, this ideology, because that's all it is, of white supremacy. They will step on their mother, they'll kill their mother to fight for that. So it was an innocent and a beautiful, innocent, and wonderful people who were just trying to do the right thing for someone else who they felt as though we're being disenfranchised and not living up to the dream of our Constitution, says, *we hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal*. They really believe that they were idealists. I was an idealist and I'm still an idealist. I do believe it's something worth fighting for in terms of our democracy, because that's what we're talking about.

Wyn: Wow, that was so amazing to hear about that day. I think sometimes before tragedy strikes, we only think about just the horror of it. But to hear about how that day was for you, spiritual and a good day, a fun day, it's very powerful. So thank you so much for sharing that with us.

Bernice: It added to the guilt of me not wanting to talk about it for so long, because when you're juggling the horror, when you find out what happened, and then you think about that, it really added to my guilt. And being some of the last people to maybe see them alive, I never felt as though that was my right. It really added to my collective survival guilt for many years.

Wyn: Could you tell us a little bit about what were some of the strategies that you used to get people registered to vote during that time?

Bernice: Yes, I can. Well, the Freedom School had been established in Meridian, and that was ran by you know, it started off with that was the whole idea, who had set the thing in motion was Michael Schwerner and his wife Rita. They had come down, they had collected books from the North, they had a library, they had a center there. There was people there that had medical backgrounds that was able to offer some support medically for the people, was able to extend that into the community that some of the other the Freedom Schools used. There were snacks, there was entertainment. There was a situation whereby they had an opportunity to learn a lot about their own Black History that wasn't being taught in the school's place. They'd be involved with dance, some languages. There was a person there, I remember we had a person in the Freedom School, one of the teachers who knew French. They were teaching languages, and they were also joined together to go to the local pools, the swimming pools, to teach swimming. There was some also equestrians, and I had a younger sister who was learning to ride a pony.

One of the things was the incentive to get the as you said, the strategies. The whole idea was to get people, the older people there to register and vote, even some of the ones that could not read or write. We had gone out earlier in the communities with sharecroppers and people who had not had the education; that Freedom Vote, that Fanny Lou Hamer was part of her Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Early on, we had gone out and found people who could not write their names and they would put an X, but we knew who they were. We put their names down. Once the Freedom School opened, a big piece of it was teaching literacy, teaching people to read and write their names, excuse me. And when they came to the Freedom Schools, we had fabric there. Some people could sew, the children were able to attend and participate in a lot of the social activities after school and on the weekends because they would agree to, if they agreed to participate in the literacy program that's just well enough to read and write.

Their children could participate in all of the extracurricular activities that was offered in the Freedom School in terms of snacks and dance and plays and wonderful activities on the outside and fabric. A lot of them did sewing, and they taught sewing. So you can come and collect, get some fabric or you're able to get these books and all these kinds of things if you sign up for the literacy program. That was one of the strategies that was used in the Freedom Schools to get people to get some of the adults involved. And they wanted the children to participate in this very nice, fun, safe learning activity at school in addition to what they were getting in their regular schools. So that was one of the things that we got them to sign off on that Freedom Vote. And they would sign to learn to read and write and they could sign their name.

There were other things that we offered them, we used food, we went to places and we set up places where they could come and cook or bring their exchanges of favorite meals. And through the churches, we did things like that. People like things that were culturally that they were culturally sensitive to. And as I said, the idea of coming and learning about your own Black History and seeing plays, and we also had the help of a lot of the folk singers at the time. And there was a group that was going around putting on plays that sometimes Black kids have never seen before. I can't think of the name of the group, but they went throughout the South. Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary. A lot of folk singers came down and they performed. And this was part of the, they were invited into the Freedom School. It was part of the performances. So Bob Dylan and I can think of, there was a lot of staple singers, there were some gospel singers and things like this. Entertainers, they're using that today, probably not as much, but we had the entertainers at the time who came around that was very, very supportive of the movement.

But the clothing, the sewing, things of that nature, the books that kids could get and things of that nature was very active as an incentive. And also with the nurse, the medical staff there, they could offer some medical treatment. And then I remember a situation where a person was hospitalized and they acted as social workers, social activists to advocate for better care within the medical community and the hospitals, things of that nature, they acted as those kind of catalysts to help in those areas. Whatever the person's needs were medically, socially, whatever, they were advocates. They were advocates in all those areas. That was the

composition of the Freedom Summer college students who was helping the community to solve whatever problems that were within their community in addition to getting them to register and vote.

Wyn: Yeah, wow. So what I'm hearing is that the foundation of the community was such an important part and uplifting different sectors of the community that might have needed more attention. And I think that relates even to today, and what you had said about the entertainment industry and folks getting involved reminds me there's an organization now called [Headcount](#) that goes to different big concerts and partners with really big musicians and celebrities to help their fans get registered to vote. So I think it really still translates to now, how community and just bringing people together is such an important way to get folks registered to vote. Yeah, so moving now more towards present day, what was it like for you to witness record breaking turnout by young Black voters in the 2020 Presidential Election?

Bernice: Well oh, my goodness. Two opposing feelings. I was so proud and I was so proud and so relieved. And another feeling was oh, my God. We thought we had paved the way and cut out a lot of these obstacles. We didn't want to see our children and generations at this 50 some years later, having to do the same thing. First of all, gut wrenching. I was very angry about that, and I felt very sad and resentful and all the feelings, all the negative feelings that you can imagine associated with that - why now that they have to go through this, we thought we had paved the way we thought we had made to go forward. And we find out we go ten steps forward and then we go nine steps backwards. But at the same token, a realization that the young people were not going to allow this to defeat them. It was a similar attitude that we had, was that we knew that we were fighting for something. We looked at the history of our country with all the wars and all the people who lost their lives, and we knew, even going back to slavery, all those people who died in slavery and then all the ones that survived, we knew that they knew somehow, they were not just doing it for themselves.

They were doing it for something bigger. They were fighting for a cause much bigger than them. You have to always know that you're fighting for a cause bigger than you. The cause has to be bigger than you. That's why egos was not as much involved. It was there, but it wasn't as much involved. We always knew that we were fighting for an ideal – an idea that we believed in, that we adhere ourselves to, a philosophy. And so that kept us moving and it kept us going. And at one point I thought, well, maybe the younger people don't really hold on to the same ideas that we held onto, but to see how they took risks. And there's been other lives lost. Young people have been, I've seen the Black Lives Matter people, they've gotten beat up and they just refuse to accept this defeated attitude that I am less than a human being like us. I feel as though they are fighting for their dignity. And the thing that happens is -- there's a war. There's always going to be a war when you have opposing ideologies, you might not completely win the war, but you can win some battles. We won some battles.

That's why we're where we are today. You won't win the war, but you will win some battles. And in order to win some battles, you have to fight. You have to continue to fight, you have to

continue to fight. There's no such thing as letting go. You have to keep fighting. And you will win some battles, and you will see some movement, and you have to not think about just yourself. You have to do it for the generations to come. And that has to be written in that book, too. That has to make a mark in that indelible ink as well. If you give up, then you're saying that you don't believe in yourself anymore. You don't believe in the people who fought before you. You don't believe in anything anymore.

Wyn: Yeah. Persistence and resiliency, I think, are such strong identifiers of the current movement.

Bernice: Tenacity, tenacity, tenacity. Because you're doing it for something bigger than you are. The idea is bigger than the person. These young people cannot be stopped. You will not stop them, so you'll forget it. You will actually exhaust yourself trying to stop them. But I have every confidence that we will survive, and we will get rid of a lot of these voter suppression laws. We will find ways around them, and we will win, and we will be victorious.

Wyn: So before our final question, I wanted to ask you something related to experiences I've had being on a college campus and trying to increase voter registration and engagement. Something that we hear often is that people believe that their vote doesn't matter. And so, I just wanted to hear from you. What would you say to someone who thinks that, that their vote doesn't matter?

Bernice: I'll say something that someone said to me a long time ago. The person that said that their vote does not matter does not see the connection with voting and whether or not the sanitation man come by your street to pick up your garbage. People that say that don't understand, by the time you have a birth certificate, you're born into this world. you have a birth certificate. You're in the system, you're involved in the system. And if you think that your vote don't matter, look at places where people don't vote as much and look at the services that they have. And look at the places where people do vote and look at the services that they have. All you have to do is make comparisons. If you can take them on a tour, take them on a tour, take them to a school, take them to a community, and you tell me whether or not your vote matters.

And the mere fact that people died for the right to vote, people lost their lives. And they're not the only people that lost their lives. Medgar Evers had gone out and fought in World War II, had been in World War II. He was shot down in his garage in front of his house. He had been a soldier. He had gone out and fought for the ideas of trying for this country, for what we represent. He was killed. And a lot of people have lost their lives for that right to vote. So you're going to say all of their lives are in vain? I bring it up all the time. Mickey, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, James Cheney. They died because they were trying to get people to increase their voter registration so they would have some power to be able to place a person in Congress, to place a person in office. They died. Did they all die in vain? Was that for nothing? How can you say that your vote don't matter? So you're saying that everybody who lost their

lives for that right to vote, then you're saying their life didn't matter at all. You have to do it, if nothing else, to respect those persons who, those fallen heroes before you.

Wyn: Definitely. That's what it comes back to a lot of times for me, especially like we're doing with this podcast, Living the Legacy, and especially for those who have lost their lives fighting for our rights to vote. So thank you so much for answering that question. So, our final question is what advice would you give to student activists today who are still fighting for the right to vote?

Bernice: Well, what advice I'll give I probably mentioned it in what I said earlier. Don't give up. And you have to pick your battles and you have to get involved in the things that you get involved with that means something to you if not for you, the people that's going to come after. Do not get discouraged, be tenacious, be determined and continue to fight because you will not win the war. But you can win many battles and that's what you're after. You want to win those battles, small ones, little ones, big ones, medium sized ones, because all of that would lead to the end of the war. But I think as long as you're living in your life here on Earth, you're going to be involved in a war. It's a war just to survive living here. So you've got to accept that. Don't think that it's going to be easy and continue to be tenacious and never, never ever give up, because when you give up, that means that you say, I no longer have dignity. I no longer have a reason to be respected. I'm not a human being anymore. I am a human being, I deserve to be respected and my dignity is at stake. My dignity is at stake, any battle that I go into, that's what's at stake.

Wyn: Thank you. Thank you for those very powerful words and just the idea and the need to never give up. So thank you so much. It's been such an honor talking to you today and getting to hear more about your story and also getting so much great advice from you as a young person myself. So thank you.

Bernice: Thank you for having me.

Mo: This concludes this week's episode of Live the Legacy. Thank you to Bernice Sims and Wyn Garfinkle for this amazing conversation. And a special thank you to Tabeek Music for all the music that you heard throughout today's episode. If you enjoyed today's episode, please rate us and leave a review. And don't forget to subscribe so that you never miss an episode of the Live The Legacy podcast. Until next time has been your host Mo Banks with the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Bye, everyone.