



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 3

Andrew Goodman Ambassador Tamia Fowlkes interviews [Robert Masters](#), who attended [Queens College](#) and participated in the [Freedom Summer of 1964](#) training program with [Andrew Goodman](#).

Transcript

Robert: Everybody you talk to understands the value of voting, understood the potential power that they had, but the intimidation factor was so incredible, so real, that it really kept a lot of people from voting.

Mo: This is [Live the Legacy](#), a podcast presented to you by the [Andrew Goodman Foundation](#). This week, we are joined by Robert Masters. Robert is a lifelong New Yorker who attended Queens College during the same period as Andrew Goodman. Robert and Andrew drove together from NYC to Oxford, Ohio, in June of 1964 to participate in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Freedom Summer Training to prepare for their volunteer work in Mississippi, registering Black Americans to vote. Robert is now retired and lives in New York with his wife Carla. They have three children and five grandchildren.

Tamia: Yeah, I think this past year was really incredible. On our campus especially, we saw a lot of students just become activated in a way that I think is unparalleled to any time in my life. It was really exciting to know that young people were finally understanding that they had the capacity to make a change.

Mo: We are also joined by Tamia Fowlkes. Tamia is a rising senior and an Andrew Goodman Ambassador at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, majoring in journalism and political

science with certificates in Gender and Women's Studies and Leadership. Driven by her passions for politics, education, and youth activism, Tamia co-created the Student Civic Immersion Program, which aids high school students in crafting service projects centered around civic engagement and policy issues like environmental justice, racial equality, and voter suppression. Tamia co-hosts her own podcast called [Podcast Your Vote](#), which aims to mobilize and empower youth voters. All of her experiences have heightened her passions for politics, journalistic writing, and activism. Without further ado, please enjoy this week's episode of Live The Legacy as we bridge the past and the present to move forward together.

Tamia: All right, well, thank you so much, Robert, for taking some time out of your day to speak with me. I'm so honored to be here talking to you, and I'm so excited to hear some of the advice and the insight that you have to share today. I first wanted to start with the first question of how you got involved in the civil rights movement. It's obviously an extremely impactful time that all of the people in my generation have learned about in the history books. But for you, what was it that catalyzed you to join the movement? And also, what was it like to be on the ground?

Robert: Well, you ask a very good question, and I've been trying to focus a little bit on the origins of my involvement. I would say that I was a child of the sixties, and what that really means to me is that we were really young people in the fifties. I was born near the end of World War II, so the war didn't mean anything to me. I was way too young, and there was a real optimism in the country during the postwar period. And what happened was there was a big election in 1952 and Eisenhower got elected, and by then I was eight years old. And I remember being, not to disparage Eisenhower, but, you know, our family were big supporters of Adley Stevenson, and I felt like we were the only ones in the whole neighborhood we lived in that were not Ike fans. It was very strange. Everybody walked around with *I like Ike* buttons. And I think one of the things that happened during his administration was the situation in Little Rock. It was the decision of the Supreme Court in Brown versus the Board of Education, which theoretically was going to integrate the school systems.

Then following that, it was, I think, in '57, there was an attempt to integrate the public school system in Little Rock, Arkansas, and it required the National Guard to come out to protect those kids. I've seen some of those people. I mean, now they're obviously like me. They are senior citizens, but I can vaguely remember just feeling admiration for them, for their courage, because the intensity of their connection with what was going on at the time just seemed impossible to imagine. So I think that might have had some impulse. It gave me a little bit of an impulse to be interested in that. And then other things happened, Emmett Till being murdered. These are big news items, and unlike today, when the news seems to come and go before you've had a chance to digest it, these news items stayed with you, because there was newspapers were much more important, number one. Number two, there was really uniformity in the amount of the news you saw on television. There weren't, you know, every flavor of the week. You could watch MSNBC, or you could watch CNN, or you could watch Fox or OAN or one of those other stations. So you didn't have a choice. You watch what you watched. It was basically a much more factual presentation.

And I think those big events really, I was young enough to be very much moved by them, but I would say that I had no organized activity until I got to college. In high school, I don't think we were hearing about it. I was growing up in an area that was kind of isolated, and so we didn't really know as much about what was going on. Maybe if I'd grown up in New York City instead of Long Island, I would have been more aware of things, I don't know. But I went to college, and in college it was like a complete awakening. I got, I guess I'll use the term radicalized when I was there. I was very much into exploration in college without necessarily having a prejudgment as to what my political ideas were and so forth. I was very open to hearing all kinds of ideas. I think the things that most spoke to me and most persuaded me were, I think, civil rights issues. Certainly, even though it was early, the war in Vietnam was a pretty heavy motivator. It was an activity called a group called Same, this is People Against Nuclear Weapons. So these are big items and when you're 18 years old and you're away from home for the first time and you hear all these ideas, they can really resonate with you. And I think that's what happened. The first year I was at Denver University and then I transferred to Queens College.

And so I had now become much more politically focused, I think, at that point. And in 1963, 64 it was an effort to create a volunteer group of about 1000 people, mostly from Northern colleges, to go to Mississippi, primarily to help register Blacks to vote, but also to run what they called Freedom Schools, and there were some other activities going on. And Queens College had a long reputation and history of working in the civil rights area which preceded me by years and continued after I was gone. For example, they had a very large education school. And when the concept of desegregation of the public school system came about in Virginia, what happened was they shut down the entire public school system in the state. So the white kids all got to go to what they call private academies, which are probably the same buildings that had been their white-only schools. And the Black kids had no school. So I don't know a lot about it because it really happened before I got to Queens College. But kids in the education school would take a semester and go down to Virginia and organize schools to help educate these Black kids who are being denied even a basic education. And eventually in school they reopen the public schools. So there was a history of that at Queens College.

So what happened is Nick started to do a recruiting plan at Queens College. About a dozen of us, including some friends of mine who I knew, applied to join the summer program. Eventually, for different reasons, people washed out or decided to change their mind. And Andy and I were the two that remained. I do seem to recall going to off campus meetings and I would say there was a real focus on talking about the dangers of what it would be like to be in Mississippi for the summer to try to register people to vote. There is a long history of lynching people who registered to vote or tried to register to vote. It was a long history of punishing people. If they didn't lynch people, they would lose their jobs. Fanny Blue Hamer was thrown out of her house that she lived in for years. The irony is her husband wasn't thrown out. The plantation owner where she lived wanted him to continue to work, but he had to throw her out because she tried to register to vote. So there was a lot of telling us how dangerous it was going to be and be careful and make sure you're ready and willing to do it. I think it's an advantage to be young when you hear about these things, because when you're 18 and 19 years old, you feel like

you're going to live forever and nothing's going to harm you. So I think I became very intrigued about this.

And the other thing I would say is that there's a part of me that just cannot tolerate unfairness, injustice, maltreatment of people, and that's clearly what was going on here. And it just rubbed me the wrong way. I just said, this is just completely unacceptable. So Andy and I got to know each other a bit, going to these meetings, and we didn't see each other much during the year in the campus, but we decided to travel together out to Ohio for a week of training before we went to Mississippi. And Andy's neighbor had a car and he was going to go, so the three of us decided to go together. And I got to spend a night at Andy's house, met his mother, and then we left early the next day from New York City, headed out to Ohio. Ohio was a very interesting experience because we did a lot of role-playing while we were there and at times became very realistic. White people playing Black people, Black people playing White people threatening the people who would have been the volunteers. Sometimes you would be threatening somebody and sometimes you were being threatened. And it was a very real experience at the time.

Tamia: I was wondering also, just in being in those types of situations, what kind of conversations were you having in between those trainings or like, those moments when it got very real? What was that like to then walk out of the space that you were in and look towards what type of work you're going to be doing? Was there fear there? Were you nervous to go out after some of those sessions? Or did being in the group kind of help you through that?

Robert: Well, the passage of time has dimmed my memory quite a bit, which is helpful, I think. I honestly can say that I don't remember particularly being afraid. I think we all felt very dedicated. We really believed in the mission that we were going there to do. We really believed that we were going to change things. And I'll tell you one thing that really was very inspirational, and when I would do these fundraising events for AGF, I always tried to make music part of it and part of what we experienced. However we felt, whether we were afraid or confused. Confused is probably a better word. I think we would all gather and we would sing a song or two or three. Not that, well I'm a terrible singer, as were a lot of the volunteers, but there were still enough people who were good singers and could keep us going in the right tune. Those songs, I think, were so inspirational. I don't know if you've ever heard any of them. You probably have. Everybody knows [We Shall Overcome](#).

I think what really happens when you're in those circumstances, they're not just words. You really feel the message. It reverberates in your soul. And I know when I was in Mississippi, many evenings we would have what they used to call mass meetings, usually in a church, and we would go there. Where I was, I was in Greenwood, Mississippi. I worked with [Stokely Carmichael](#), who probably know the name. And one of the things that really impressed me about Stokely was his sense of providing a very clear and strong message. So he often spoke at these mass meetings. He'd get up and he would talk, and then we would all link arms and we would sing two, three, four songs. These civil rights songs, they really were very essential. I realized that looking back.

Tamia: And you also spoke a little bit about your experience with Andy, being one of two people who ended up really going down and starting to do this work, registering people to vote. Can you just share a little bit more about your relationship with Andy and kind of how you both felt going into that situation?

Robert: Well, again, it's really hard to bring back specific memories, but I think we were both excited and proud to be selected to go down there. This was going to be, I don't think we thought about it in these terms specifically, but to be part of history, to make a real contribution to something that would be for the benefit of a lot of other people, it's an amazing feeling. And I think we were very idealistic in that sense. I didn't think in specific terms that even though I knew about the risks and all the stuff. We would every day hear about the latest outrageous comments from the Ku Klux Klan or whatever, the governor of Mississippi, etc. The inactivity of the federal government to protect us and to protect the other civil rights workers who had already been down there.

And to protect the local people in Mississippi from these terrorists. I guess we call them now. We didn't know that word back then, but I don't think we really thought about the risk as much as the excitement and the feedback of being part of a movement. It's a shared thing. So if you can't be in a movement by yourself, you have to have lots of other people with you. And if you get to that, to the right state of mind, the one time I can remember in my life that I didn't feel as much of being an individual as we normally do, you submerged yourself to some extent into the cohort itself, and there was a great camaraderie among all of us. There were lots of people I met that week in Ohio, for instance, I probably never would have met them normally and wouldn't necessarily be friends with them, but we all became friends. It was a great sharing, a sharing of risk and sharing of opportunity and sharing of belief in a better, I guess, a better world, a better tomorrow.

Tamia: For sure, and I'm wondering also, one of the things that we hear as Ambassadors now in the present, when we're trying to register students to vote, especially, is that they feel like they don't know enough to vote or they don't feel like they'll make a difference in voting. So for you, what were some of the strategies at that time to get people out to vote and to make sure that they knew the power that they could potentially have?

Robert: Well, it was a very different world back then. The basic strategy in Greenwood, which was a reasonably sized small city. There were several Black neighborhoods. So first of all, they housed us with black families for our own safety, not the safety of the people that housed us, because the white power structure would know who did what, and if they could seek revenge on them, they would. But for our safety, we were all housed with Black families, and we basically stayed within those Black neighborhoods. It was not really safe to go walking around all over Greenwood unless we were in a large group, an organized group of some kind. So the basic strategy was to go out and talk to people. We would basically go knock on a door. Somebody could say, hello and hi, ma'am, I'm here to talk to you about registering to vote, or however our

introduction would be. And we would sit down, usually on a porch, and just talk to them about how they thought about voting. Have they tried to vote? What we were looking to do. I would say that we didn't have to educate people about the idea of voting. They knew about it. The voting was not open to them. That was the problem. It was a real repression. And people would tell us, listen, I'm a teacher. I know about voting. I went to college. But if I went down there to register to vote, I'm going to lose my job. And it's a decent job, I'm not going to get a better job here. So what I would say to you in terms of everybody you talk to understand the value of voting, understood the potential power that they had, but the intimidation factor was so incredible, so real, that it really kept a lot of people from voting.

Tamia: Yeah, I think that context that you provided is so valuable. I'm wondering that after over 50 years ago, you were working to help get people registered to vote. What is it like now to witness these record breaking voter turnout numbers by young voters and Black voters? And also just in looking at the 2020 Presidential Election

Robert: Well, I'll go back a little bit before that. I have to tell you, when Obama got elected, I was very moved, and we made that speech in Chicago. I broke down and cried. It was something I never thought I would see, and I think that was an inspiration for a lot of people, both good and bad. I think it inspired a lot of really bad things that happened during his term and subsequently, the four years of Trump were just unabashedly awful from the civil rights point of view. So I was very pleased to see that he got defeated, to be honest with you. I know we're not supposed to be partisan, but he stood for everything that we were against, and it was really heartwarming to see that kind of turnout that happened. I know the AGF was active, and many other organizations. It was really heartwarming, but the reaction has been equally awful. As high as my spirits were with the positive things, the negative things, it is not as bad as it was in 1964 or 63 or 1955 or 1941, but they're trying to bring those days back, and it's just completely unacceptable.

Tamia: Yeah, and knowing that there are policies on the floor in a lot of states to limit voter registration access or just access to voting generally, what advice would you give to student activists today, or just people who might come across this conversation who are still fighting for the right to vote? What would be your advice to them in trying to ensure that we can achieve change?

Robert: I think it's a question of internal faith. You've got to believe in the cause. You've got to look at yourself as part of a bigger movement and not think about yourself as much. And that's not easy to do, especially the last year with COVID and people not being able to physically be in the same space. You know, the Zoom calls are helpful, but they're not the same thing. There's nothing like being in a group, marching together, getting that feeling of being part of a positive flow, positive movement. That's what I would tell them. I'd say listen to the words and think about what you're trying to do and just don't lose hope.

Tamia: Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for answering these questions today, and if there's anything that you think that I missed and asking that you would want to share, I would love to hear it. But otherwise, thank you so much. And thank you for sharing your insight. It's so valuable.

Robert: Well, thank you very much. I love what you've been doing, Tamia, and you too, Mo, and I'm grateful for what you're doing and for your belief in what I think is just the just cause.

Mo: This concludes this week's episode of Live the Legacy podcast. Thank you to our guest Robert Masters and Tamia folks, and a special thank you to Tabeeq Music for all of the music that you heard throughout today's episode. If you enjoyed this episode of Live the Legacy podcast. Please leave us a review and don't forget to subscribe so that you never miss an episode. Until next time, this has been your host, Mo Banks, with the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Bye, everyone.