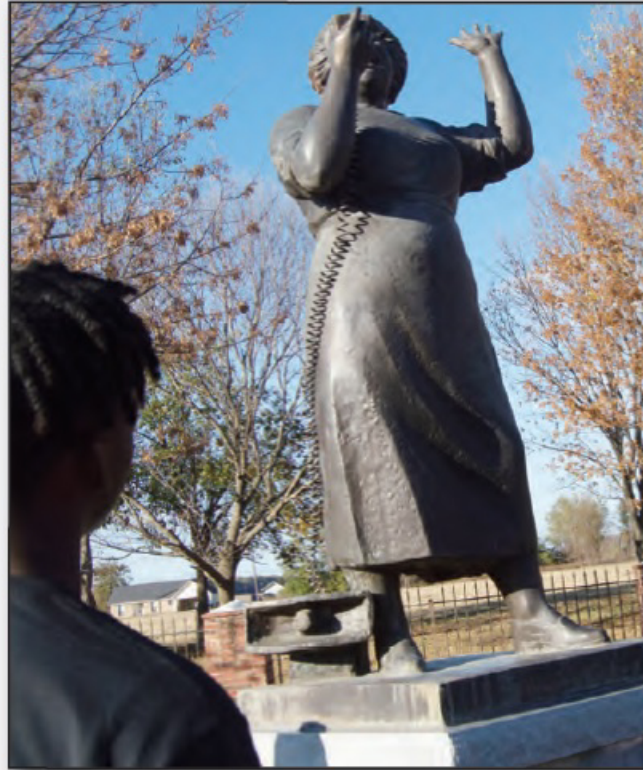


Stories from Freedom Summer



**Tracy Sugarman's rendering of
downtown Indianola, 1964**



**Fannie Lou Hamer's statue at her
grave site in Ruleville**



**Charles McLaurin at the Sunflower
County Courthouse**



**Fannie Lou Hamer talking to Freedom
Summer workers in 1964**



**The jail at the Sunflower County
farm in Moorhead**



**Mrs. Irene McGruder, who
opened her home to Civil
Rights workers**

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Remembering Fannie Lou Hamer

Monica Land, niece of the famed Civil Rights activist and Ruleville native pays tribute to her aunt

By **MONICA LAND**
Special to The E-T

Everything I know about Fannie Lou Hamer, I learned from someone else. And that will forever haunt me as a tremendous loss of opportunity considering that she was my great-aunt.

Growing up, I often heard my family speak of her as an almost mythical figure. A woman, who not only prayed for change, but vowed herself to bring it. They'd laugh when they recalled the funny things she said or did. But their faces turned somber, cold and sad when they remembered the pain and sufferings she endured.

As a youngster from Chicago, I recall visiting my Uncle Pap and Aunt Fannie Lou during the summer. When we walked into their Ruleville home, I remember she was always lying down or sitting. As was customary, I spoke and gave her a hug, but then off I went to play with her two daughters, Cookie (Jacqueline) and Nook (Lenora).

It was the 1970s, and I deeply regret that I was too young to know that I should have stayed and talked to her - listened to her and asked her questions. As a teenager, I regret not asking my Uncle Pap or my maternal grandparents - who were very close to her - questions about her life and her childhood. And now those opportunities are gone.

As a writer and an aspiring filmmaker, I was determined to learn more about her life and to tell her story, and it took me more than 15 years to do it.

That film, Fannie Lou Hamer's America, allows audiences to see and hear a side of Aunt Fannie Lou that many never have before. In fact, during the research phase of that project, I learned things myself that I had never known. Things

that both surprised and horrified me.

Aunt Fannie Lou was an exceptional person. While many remember her as a fierce proponent of voting rights, who was "sick and tired of being sick and tired," Aunt Fannie Lou did so much more, providing food, clothing, housing, educational opportunities and even jobs for the marginalized residents of the Mississippi Delta, while she herself had nothing.

My research into her life took me deep into the trenches where I met many of her fellow freedom fighters. Unfortunately, many are now only remembered for their work, while still others, decades later, are still fighting the good fight.

And now, in the midst of the 60th anniversary of Freedom Summer, which Aunt Fannie Lou helped organize, I recall the kindness of four people in particular who helped me on my cinematic journey: Heather Booth, Rita Bender, Charles Prickett and Richard Beymer.

During what was called the Mississippi Summer Project or Freedom Summer, hundreds of college students - mostly middle- and upper-class whites - descended upon Mississippi as volunteers to build support for the MFDP's challenge; to teach at the Freedom Schools and to encourage Black residents to register to vote.

Richard Beymer had heard about the struggles in Mississippi, and he and his friend, Charles Prickett, another young volunteer, wanted to help. Richard was a hot commodity in Hollywood at the time. Five years earlier, he portrayed Peter Van Daan in the 1959 Academy Award-winning film, "The Diary of Anne Frank". And in 1961, he played "Tony" in another Oscar winner, "West Side Story" oppo-

site Natalie Wood.

An independent filmmaker, Richard is the only known person to document the events of Freedom Summer and then compile them in his 1964 film, A Regular Bouquet. Aunt Fannie Lou was heavily featured in the film, which was narrated by another well-known actor of that era, Robert Ryan.

Richard and Charles traveled across Mississippi filming and documenting the Freedom Schools, voter registration projects, mass meetings and other like events that summer.

"One of our stops was in Sunflower County...at the home of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. She was very welcoming and gracious, and invited us to stay at her home, which we did," said Charles Prickett, activist, attorney and author. "Mrs. Hamer had love and compassion for everyone, and we were privileged to accept her kindness...There is so much more I can say about the intensely caring person Mrs. Hamer was. She was very clear about what she wanted to achieve and how your individual contribution could help. She was open to sharing her home to anyone, to us - strangers. She was always in the moment and that says a lot about her."

Freedom Summer officially began on June 14, 1964, and one week later, three volunteers, two white men, and one Black, went missing. The local man, James Chaney, was from Meridian. The others, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were from New York.

During an extensive search for the trio, federal investigators combed the woods, fields, swamps, and rivers of Mississippi, ultimately finding the remains of eight other Black men, including two college students

who had been missing since May. The battered and bruised bodies of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were found buried 14 feet deep in an earthen dam on August 4. All had been shot. Chaney had been castrated and Goodman was buried alive.

Aunt Fannie Lou was devastated by the murders and spoke of them often. In an iconic photo, she is comforted by Schwerner's mother, Anne, while his father, Nathan, stands nearby.

Following the murders, the media sought to turn the story of Schwerner's young widow, Rita, into a national tragedy. But an activist herself, Rita converted that attention to the many overlooked victims of racial violence and disparities in Mississippi. Rita, still an activist and a civil rights attorney, credits Aunt Fannie Lou with helping her through that ordeal.

"Mrs. Hamer was a remarkable woman," she said. "and certainly, was one of the people who helped me to get through a difficult time. She was not only emotionally strong, but truly kind and caring. Mrs. Hamer's support was a major contribution to my personal path forward."

Heather Booth, now a renowned organizer, activist and filmmaker, was another Freedom Summer volunteer.

"I met Mrs. Hamer at her home in Ruleville...and her moral courage, her clarity, her deep commitment to decency and caring has stayed with me my whole life. She treated me, an 18-year-old student, with the same kind of caring and decency as she did with everyone else. I try to carry on her legacy. And...one of the greatest honors of my life [was] to have met Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer."

Aunt Fannie Lou truly motivated and empowered others. And her former col-



Fannie Lou Hamer's statue at the Memorial Park in Ruleville.

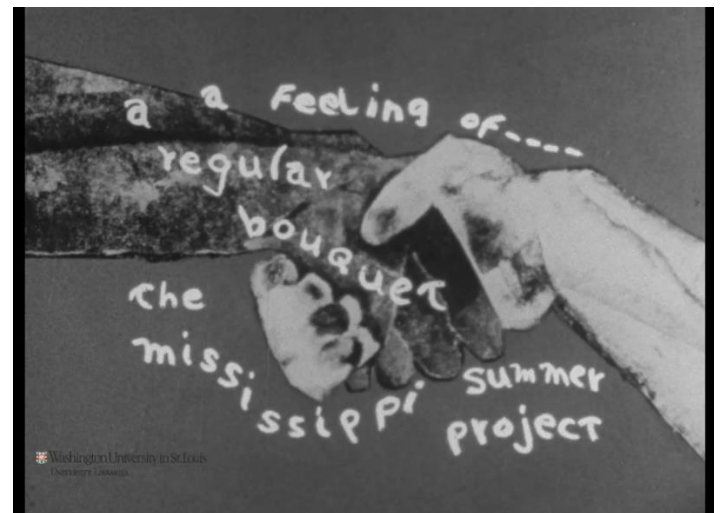
leagues and friends all agree that her legacy must be preserved and amplified since there is so much we can still learn from her.

Aunt Fannie Lou experienced things that many people today can't even begin to imagine: The atrocities of Jim Crow and segregation, gross miscarriages of justice and the constant threat of intimidation and death.

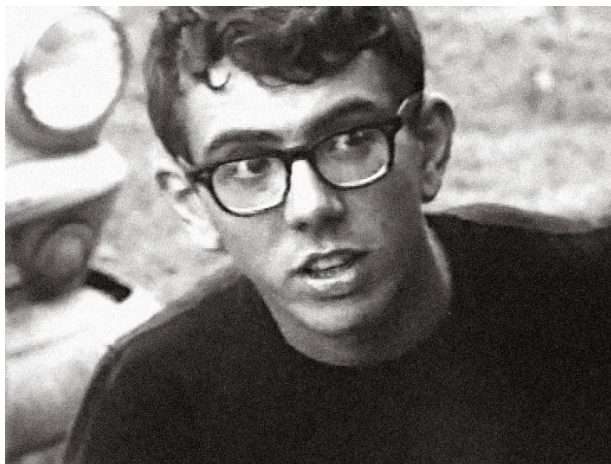
Her vision of equal rights

for everyone has yet to fully materialize. But her sacrifices and her efforts to achieve that goal should never be forgotten.

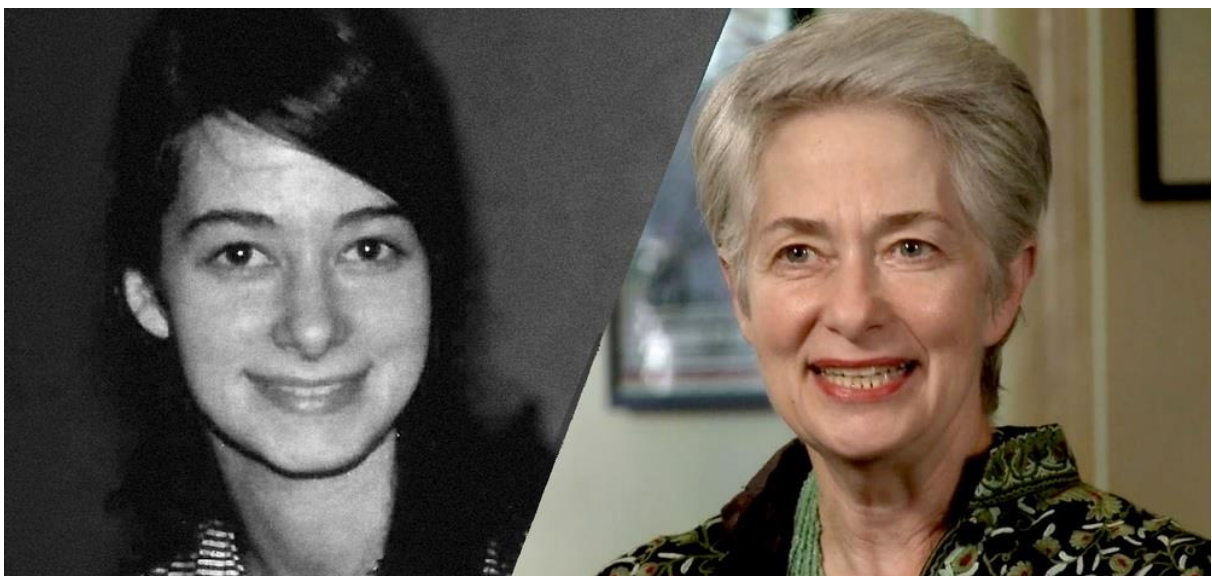
Aunt Fannie Lou accomplished so much. But deep down, she confessed to a dear friend that she wondered if she was truly making a difference. She did. And that's something we all can be grateful for.



Actor, activist and filmmaker Richard Beymer with a young boy in a sugar cane field during Freedom Summer in the Mississippi Delta in 1964. His film, A Regular Bouquet chronicles the events of that historic summer. The film, Fannie Lou Hamer's America, features several scenes from a Regular Bouquet courtesy of Richard Beymer.



Activist and attorney Charles Prickett in 1964 during Freedom Summer.



Activist and organizer Heather Booth in 1964 during Freedom Summer.



Heather Booth (left with guitar) and Fannie Lou Hamer during Freedom Summer. Photo by Wallace Roberts



Dr. Aaron Henry (left) of the MFDP, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mrs. Anne Schwerner and Mr. Nathan Schwerner at a protest outside the Convention Hall over the seating of Mississippi delegates in August 1964 with a photo of their son, slain activist Michael Schwerner. (Right) Fannie Lou Hamer and Anne and Nathan Schwerner. Photos by Bettman/Getty.



Mrs. Rita Schwerner (seated) and Ella Baker in 1964. Photo by Stan Wayman. (right) Rita Schwerner Bender, activist and Civil Rights attorney. Photo by Matthew Ryan Williams.