

Freedom Riders coming to Easton

Civil Rights activists will tell their stories of standing up to injustice

by Nancy Doniger
Editor

It's been more than half a century since Civil Rights activists set out on the first Freedom Ride on May 4, 1961. On that day, seven black and six white riders left Washington, D.C., on two public buses, bound for the Deep South.

They intended to test whether the southern states would enforce the 1960 Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation unconstitutional in interstate bus and rail stations. Roughly 425 Freedom Riders risked arrest and

attack by angry mobs to fight racial segregation in the south.

"The initial ride led to countless other Americans joining the Civil Rights movement," according to Easton resident Wiley Mullins.

Freedom Riders Reginald Green, Joan Browning and Dion Diamond will tell their dramatic stories at Covenant Church, One Sport Hill Road, Easton, on Saturday, Jan. 28, at 7 p.m. The public is invited.

Mullins arranged for the three to speak last year in his hometown of Tuscumbia, Ala.

Tuscumbia shares an important connection with Easton. Tuscumbia is the birthplace of Helen Keller, another pioneering champion of human rights, who made her home in Easton in her later years.

"Their stories were so riveting," Mullins said. "This is a piece of history that will not always be with us."

Browning is one of four white women who were Freedom Riders. She lost her college scholarship



Freedom Riders Joan Browning, Dion Diamond and Reginald Green will tell their stories on Saturday, Jan. 28, at 7 p.m. at Covenant Church in Easton. At right, a group of Freedom Riders in 1961.



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because of her activism.

Green, who left divinity school to be a freedom rider, will speak during Sunday morning services on Jan. 29 at 9 and 10:45 a.m. The public is also invited to attend, Mullins said.

Mullins has lived in Easton for 17 years after moving to Connecticut some years earlier. He suggested to his pastor, the Rev. Cary Slater, and the church's leadership team that they invite the Freedom Riders to speak at Covenant Church. Church leaders enthusiastically supported the idea, Mullins said.

"My pastor and leadership were very supportive," he said. "I felt my hometown people would be excited to meet them."

Covenant Church Eason is an Evangelical Christian church, centrally located near the Merritt Parkway near Easton's border with Fairfield and Bridgeport. It has members throughout the area, including a growing number of Latinos, Mullins said.

The Freedom Riders will make their visit just before the start of Black History Month, Mullins noted.

Standing up to injustice

Topics to be explored include:

- Standing up against human injustice.
- Creating a culture of hope.
- The power of one to make a difference.
- Igniting passion for people's hearts and souls.

"I've often felt that towns in Connecticut are so separate, and people are not working together collectively," he said. "Everyone works for themselves. These people really stood out to fight injustice. Sometimes we're ignorant of injustice others right near us might be experiencing."

The Freedom Riders called national attention to the disregard for the federal law and the local violence used to enforce segregation in the south. Riders were arrested for trespassing, unlawful assembly, and violating state and local Jim Crow laws. White mobs also attacked them without intervention.

Jim Crow refers to the racial caste system that operated primarily, but not exclusively, in southern and border states between the late 1870s and the mid-1960s. It legalized segregation between African-Americans and whites, restricting the rights of African-Americans to use public facilities and schools, to vote, find decent employment, and exercise their rights as U.S. citizens.

Joan Browning

Joan Browning was a student at Georgia State College for Women but was asked to leave in 1961 because she attended a black church. At the age of 19

she rode the Central Georgia Railroad as part of the Freedom Ride from Atlanta to Albany, Ga. on Dec. 10, 1961. When she arrived in Albany, she was arrested immediately. Thirty years after she completed her bachelor of arts degree at a historically black school, West State College.

Dion Diamond

Dion Diamond was in the second freedom ride. One of the first freedom ride buses was burned in Anniston, Ga. He was in the Greyhound bus that arrived in Jackson shortly after another bus carrying a group of Freedom Riders showed up. They were arrested as soon as the bus arrived in Jackson and were sent to the Mississippi State Prison. As a Howard University student in 1960, he became involved with the Non-Violent Action Group in Washington D.C. to break Jim Crow in the suburbs.

Reginald Green

The Rev. Reginald Green was a student preparing for the ministry at Virginia Union University. In 1961. He joined other Freedom Riders and took a bus down to a heavily segregated town in the south, Jackson, Miss. For his actions, Green and his fellow Freedom Riders were all arrested upon arrival. After that he served for more than 40 years as a pastor of Walker Memorial Baptist Church in Washington D.C.