

Walking in their footsteps

Civil Rights Mini-Term shows students that struggle continues

**BY ERIN DEMUTH JUDD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JARED GOURRIER '10**

Sarah Tardiff looked at her shoes and marveled at the floor beneath their soles. Her head spun knowing slaves had walked the worn, shale tiles before her. But something about the magnificent antebellum home in Charleston, S.C. didn't seem right.

"Our tour guide was an affluent, elderly white woman and it was evident she wasn't used to groups like ours, groups interested in the slave quarters of the house," said Tardiff '10, a participant in the College's first Civil Rights Public History Mini-Term.

"The Aiken-Rhett House was preserved there, mostly untouched, to demonstrate the wealth and grandeur of Charleston's old, elite families," she said. "That's what most tourists go there to see. Our

guide didn't have much to say about the spaces the slaves occupied, yet she could talk endlessly about drapes, gilding and fine art."

It was an enlightening experience for Tardiff and 11 other students who participated in the 18-day, December mini-term. Their journey through nine cities in seven states—along the path of the fight for equality—would reveal much, some of it hard to handle, some of it wonderful to embrace.

"By travelling to places where the battle over civil rights was fought, students learned more about this heroic movement and the unfathomable courage of its participants than they ever could in a classroom," said History Department Lecturer Melinda Lawson, who co-led the trip.

The mini-term is part of Union's new public history program, instituted last year and directed by Lawson. Together with Maggie Tongue, director of the Scholars Program and Office of Post-Graduate Fellowships, Lawson spent several years planning the trip.

Their efforts were supported by students Jared Gourrier, Ewodaghe Harrell and Peter Haviland-Eduah, all seniors who participated. The mini-



term was also supported by generous contributions from Dr. Estelle Cooke-Sampson '74 and other donors to the Union College Civil Rights Public History Mini-term Scholarship Fund. This fund allowed applicants to be accepted on a need-blind basis.

"Public history is the way that people outside an academic setting learn about history. It's the way events are presented to the public, and in some sense, the way these events are remembered," Lawson said. "Because this is a public history mini-term, we wanted students to think about the way Americans have chosen to remember—or sometimes forget—different parts of the Civil Rights struggle."

At another Charleston landmark, a plantation called

Boone Hall, the slave quarters had been renovated. "What shocked me was how the cabins were decorated with luxuries that would not have been available, most notably a large pantry full of food and nice clothing," said James Schellens '10. "Especially provoking for me was a video about progress that ended in a crescendo showing President Obama, signifying the struggle is over."

"I felt as though the historical picking and choosing took away from the significance of Boone Hall," he added.

There was no picking and choosing in Atlanta, only listening.

Shaking hands with history

Dr. C.T. Vivian, a colleague



of Martin Luther King Jr. and a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was frank about life at the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movement.

"He said, 'We looked at death as if it were a daily expectation,' Jared Gourrier '10 recalled. "It is mind boggling that a black man, woman or child had to fear for his or her life every time they left home because of ignorance and hatred.

Top: Some somber, some awed, all deeply touched, students cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. where hundreds marched for black voting rights and were brutally beaten on "Bloody Sunday."

Inset: Students burst into freedom songs at the capital building in Montgomery, Ala., the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery march.



Students explore the slave cabins at Boone Hall, a plantation in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. just outside Charleston.

“This forces me to wonder, are blacks today able to see what their parents and grandparents went through? For whites, are they able to understand that struggle, not for sympathy but for understanding, and contribute to change?” he continued. “We all have an obligation and are equally invested in the future of this country.”

In Selma, Ala., Joanne Bland encouraged students to continue to ponder this obligation to be socially responsible.

Bland, who participated in the march for black voting rights on “Bloody Sunday,” didn’t just relate the harrow-

ing beating of hundreds of marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. She discussed the state of civil and social equality today, and the response she got was passionate.

“I think Joanne was making it clear that the battle is not over yet and that we are the generation that must continue to make changes,” Sarayfah Bolling ’11 said. “I am making a pledge to make her dream a reality through my life’s work.”

Such commitment makes Lawson and Tongue proud. Part of their goal was for students to see that the Civil Rights Movement was carried



Seniors Peter Haviland-Eduah and Ewodaghe Harrell take a moment to reflect on the “Bench by the Road” on Sullivan’s Island, a point of entry for hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans. An estimated 40 percent of African Americans today have ancestors who came to America through Sullivan’s Island.



On the steps of the Atlanta home where Martin Luther King Jr. was born. First row, from left, Elizabeth Mariapen '10, Jared Gourrier '10, History Department Lecturer Melinda Lawson, Peter Haviland-Eduah '10; second row: Sarayfah Bolling '11, Director of Union College Scholars Program and Office of Post-Graduate Fellowships Maggie Tongue; third row: Sarah Tardiff '10, Georgia Swan-Ambrose '11, Marissa Gaines '10, Jessica Johnson '12, Amanda Egan '11; top row: Aaron Ray '10, James Schellens '10, Ewodaghe Harrell '10.

out by ordinary people, many of them people their age. They wanted them to understand their power to shape the world.

"There was a moment in Birmingham I will never forget," Lawson said. "At a meeting, the students started strategizing about what they could do to make things right. We had not asked them to. They just came to it on their own, and they've continued that discussion since their return to campus."

"The students definitely look at the world differently now," Tongue added. "Rather than saying, 'I have the right to vote,' they say, 'I have met the people who made it possible

for everyone to vote, and when I thanked them, they asked me to continue to make the world a better place."

This newfound sense of responsibility also comes with a newfound sense of wonder.

"They marched anyway"

Peter Haviland-Eduah '10 was humbled to realize that so many crossed the Pettus Bridge between Selma and Montgomery knowing they would be beaten.

"They marched anyway, because they wanted to and because they had to," he said. "There was no other option—living in oppression was not an alternative.

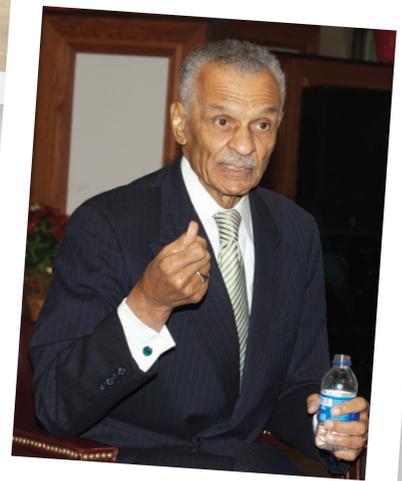


Students speak with C.T. Vivian, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader and close ally of Martin Luther King Jr. at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

"I doubt I will ever forget what it was like to cross this bridge," Haviland-Eduah added. "It's a symbol of moving from the past to the future and I was privileged to make this physical connection to history."

Another landmark had a similarly profound impact on Georgia Swan-Ambrose '11. At the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, where Martin Luther King Jr. died, she discovered she knew him better as a person—not just a leader—after visiting so many places he'd been.

"We came full circle with the life and death of Dr. King," she said. "I saw his birth home in Atlanta. I stood at the pulpit where he preached at Dexter Baptist Church in Montgomery. I stood around the table where he formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I touched the bars behind which he wrote the famous 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail.' I touched



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Joanne Bland, a participant in the “Bloody Sunday” march for black voting rights in Selma, Ala., hands a pebble to Georgia Swan-Ambrose '11. Bland gave each student a tiny rock so they'd always have a piece of the ground freedom fighters walked on, and be inspired to continue to work for social justice.



Jared Gourrier '10 with docent Hattie Minter at Martin Luther King Jr.'s home in Montgomery, Ala.



Balcony at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tenn., where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

the pulpit he used during his famous speech at the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery March. And I saw the balcony where the assassin killed the dreamer but not the dream.”

“Through these places I got to understand the dynamics of a remarkable man. He worked

and died to correct the triple evils of racism, poverty and war,” Swan-Ambrose continued. “He was a man whose life, death, struggles and triumphs have allowed me to follow my dreams.”

Then, now, tomorrow

All 12 students came full circle in a more general sense as well. In the Big Easy, their final destination, they connected the Civil Rights Movement to present challenges. On a guided tour of New Orleans, passing deserted golf courses and leveled homes, they thought about the roles race and politics played in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

“One cannot deny the racial undertone of Katrina, with the majority of victims being people of color or lower income,” Swan-Ambrose said.

“Katrina is a prime example of how America still has a long way to go to obtain full social, economic and racial equality.”

“But Katrina also showed that Americans are willing to help each other rebuild their lives and homes,” she continued. “This trip taught me everyone must work together to change society for the better, but most importantly I learned the truth of what Frederick Douglass once proclaimed.

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

Students who joined Swan-Ambrose, Tardiff, Schellens, Haviland-Eduah, Gourrier and Bolling on this journey are junior Amanda Egan, seniors Marissa Gaines, Ewodaghe Harrell, Elizabeth Mariapen and Aaron Ray, and sophomore Jessica Johnson. ■

On the Web

To learn more about the mini-term, or to read student reactions, visit <http://ublog.union.edu/hst277t/>.