

President's Message

by Matthew B. Moreland

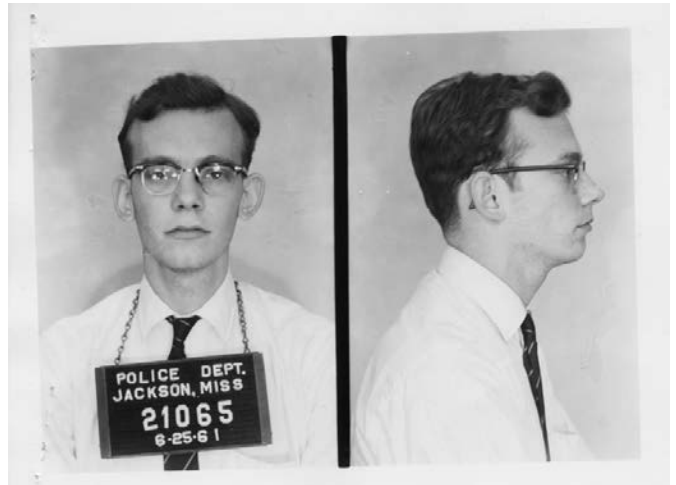


Recognizing the Fight for Equality

The Federal Bar Association and its chapters, sections, and divisions celebrated the 50th anniversary of two landmark pieces of legislation: the Criminal Justice Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As 2014 comes to a close, I would like to thank the unsung heroes whose continued, peaceful stance expedited the recognition of the Civil Rights Act in some of the states where its implementation was most opposed.

My experience with the act and the events that gave rise to it began in high school, studying the Freedom Rides and various acts of defiance by those who were staunchly opposed to change. Growing up in the South in the '70s and '80s, I believed segregation was a thing of the distant past. I never realized how recent that past actually was. I thought the black and white photographs of sit-ins and guards walking little girls to school were things no one I knew had ever seen. It was not until a family member called me in 2011 and told me to watch Oprah's 50th anniversary of the Freedom Riders that I realized how close all of this change was to my life. Watching that show, I saw a skinny little guy in the second row standing there as innocently as he had done in 1961. I was astonished to recognize my Uncle George in the ranks of Freedom Riders, being recognized for standing up to injustice. The next day I contacted him to get the whole story of what had happened and how he was involved. He modestly insisted that it was just something he did to help out and played it off as no big deal; after a little research, I was able to get the whole story on his next visit.

George M. Blevins was in art school in California in the early '60s and was an active member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), hoping to create change in what was going on in the South. He had heard several friends and acquaintances describe their plan to join in the Freedom Rides in Mississippi to peacefully protest the racial discrimination in the state and demonstrate a calm objection to the current system. Arriving by train in Jackson, Miss., he was promptly arrested for "breach of peace." In an attempt to obstruct these protests, the Mississippi State Legislature had reclassified breach of peace from a misdemeanor offense to a felony and raised the penalty to four months at a Mississippi State Prison Farm as well as a \$200 fine. He was later bailed out of jail, only to be re-arrested later for having dinner with two other white males and two African-American women. He and his two male friends were arrested as vagrants and draft dodgers, alleging their draft cards were



Uncle George when he was booked into the local jail and before he was beaten.

counterfeit. They were jailed for three days and were beaten. My Uncle George suffered scalp lacerations requiring sutures and injuries to his wrists by being hoisted by handcuffs secured behind his back. Years later, he has reconnected with the two other men with whom he was arrested, and they remain friends to this day.

During our conversation, I realized that he did not appreciate the tremendous impact he had and the significant role he and his comrades had played in the evolution and implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. To this day he asserts that he only participated because he felt what was going on in Jackson was simply wrong. He described the ordeal he and his friends experienced in objecting to the Jim Crow system as difficult and painful but necessary to bring attention to the inequality that was so prevalent.

It is for these actions that I want to thank my Uncle George and all the Freedom Riders who worked to bring this injustice to the forefront and who served to right that wrong. Uncle George is a librarian and an editorial cartoonist in the mountains of Colorado. He works to help others access the knowledge needed to right the wrongs of the world while poking fun

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at those issues that have still not been addressed. Thank you George Blevins, your friends, and all the Freedom Riders for helping make a change!

Read more about how both the Civil Rights Act and the

Criminal Justice Act have shaped history and how the Federal Bar Association has celebrated the 50th anniversary of these acts, on pages 30–35. ☉



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