

In the summer of 1963, before Virginia's Prince Edward County Public Schools re-opened, volunteers from Queens College, New York tutored area students shut out of education by the closing of County public schools...

(Source: Robert Russa Moton Museum: A Center for the Study of Civil Rights in Education [www.motonmuseum.com/Media/2009Articles/September232009/ tabid/213/Default.aspx])

Ex-Queens College Students Reconnect With 1963

(Source: Queens Tribune Online [www.queenstribune.com/news/1255621984.html]. Reach reporter Joseph Orovic at jorovic@queenstribune.com, or (718) 357-7400, Ext. 127.)



1963 students (l. to r.) Shirley Reed Ray, Rebecca Lee Randolph and Patricia Lee Adams with Stan Shaw in the back; that same photo was duplicated Oct. 3 at the banquet honoring the Queens College students.



The summer heat caused a rise in temperatures. The air grew with not just humidity, but the clash of the Jim Crow South's racial tensions and the Civil Rights movement in 1963 in Prince Edward County, Virginia.

Into this unfriendly climate stepped 16 Queens College students, volunteering for a populace of 1,700 black school children who had not seen a classroom in more than four years.

That June, the volunteers' lives centered on bringing an education back to the kids. Two weeks ago, Virginia's Robert Russa Moton Museum honored their work with a reunion and a keynote speech by Former Mississippi Governor William F. Winter.

"It was a little overwhelming. I was shocked that as we talked to people, we were being called heroes and told we did tremendous things," said Stan Shaw, who was just a 20-year-old student at the time.

The former volunteers said a sense of duty and feelings of overwhelming injustice fueled their decision to go. John F. Kennedy's famous inaugural address, saying "Ask not what your country can do for you" rang in their minds.

"A lot of us had that sort of line ringing in our ears and we were looking for things we could do that would fulfill that mantra," said Mike Venger, 67.

But just reaching Prince Edward County proved difficult. The volunteers were helped by a Carnegie Hall fundraiser, featuring performance from the likes of Dick Gregory and Quincy Jones. It brought in \$7,200 out of the \$10,000 raised in total, which was put towards expenses - namely two truckloads of school books.

Before the volunteer's work began, 23 percent of the county's black children could not read or write due to the closing of their schools. Some of the younger students did not even know how to hold a pencil.

The 20-something volunteers did not exactly bring an arsenal of experience with them.

Regardless, about 500 students showed up that muggy summer, attending classes in six churches around the county.

"I was surprised by how committed they were to coming to school," Venger said. "They showed up regularly and they didn't have to be there."

The college students took the unusual step of completely immersing themselves into the black culture and community. All but one was white.

Some were housed by their students' parents, others by volunteers. The white community mostly paid them no mind.

"We were, for the most part, seen as benign," Shaw said. "We were just there to teach the kids. Still, we tended not to go around a lot at night."

The QC students avoided "Whites Only" signs, living the full-on segregation experience of their students. In fact, Shaw spoke his first words to a white person in Prince Edward County on his most recent visit, 46 years after that eventful summer.

Both Venger and Shaw could not exactly gauge the effect their work might have had.

"I don't think any of the students actually caught up," Venger said. "In six weeks, you can't make up for four years."

But with their summer winding down, the volunteers ended their stay with what Shaw called the "world's best school field trip," a jaunt to Washington D.C. and the historic chance to witness Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have A Dream" speech.

Fast forward to 46 years later, when Shaw came to the reunion to find three of his female students.

"It was a special time for reasons I can't fully explain," Shaw said.

He showed a picture he had saved from the summer, himself peeking over the shoulders of three of his students.

"They were impressed that I held onto that picture for 46 years," he said.