



The Impact of Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools™ on Young Future Leaders

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By Daisha Williams, College Intern



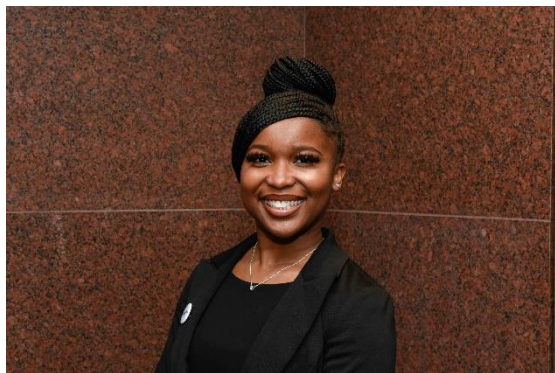
Take it all the way back to the summer of 1964, a year after four Black girls were killed in the bombing of a Birmingham church, when young civil rights leader Marian Wright Edelman helped begin the Freedom Summer Project in Mississippi. This program brought together college students across the nation to secure justice, voting rights, provide instruction to Black children on topics that

were not discussed in Mississippi schools, and keep these children safe in some of the most makeshift settings. This work was done to show children how to be thinkers, how to be advocates for change, and how to be problem solvers in their own communities. Continue onto 1995, when the first two sites for [CDF Freedom Schools](#) were opened, inspired greatly by Freedom Summer, aiming to address the needs of children who were in the most need of high-quality literacy programs during the summer.

What started from humble beginnings as a way to target the most vulnerable in our nation has manifested into a nationwide initiative with over 160,000 scholars (Freedom Schools participants are scholars; not students, not campers, but scholars) who have participated in this program, that now aims to not only provide high-quality literacy opportunities but improve multiple factors of a scholar's life, including language skills, connecting children to health services, and strengthen families to make differences in their lives and in the lives of those around them. There are 19,000 college students or graduates who have worked as Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) in the program, going through training with over 400 Ella Baker Trainers who guide the SLIs on how to implement the Freedom Schools model.

It is no secret that most children might rather be out with friends or even in the house taking a well-needed break not doing anything during the summer. However, summertime breaks from school are often correlated with widespread reading loss among school-aged children. On average, students in the 3rd through 5th grade lose [about 20%](#) of their reading gains over the summer season. [According to the NWEA](#), the average student loses at least 17-34% of the prior year's learning gains during summer break. This shows the need for programs like Freedom Schools. Well-designed summer reading programs can [prevent summer reading loss](#) for all students and at much lower cost than an in-school program like summer school that students with lower incomes may not have access to.

I am grateful that my mom tried to combat learning loss and made every effort to foster my learning during the summer. It was rare I did not spend a summer going to the library completing a reading program or at a summer camp that was sponsored by our local community center. This is what brought me to the [CDF Freedom Schools program](#).



Daisha Williams, CDF-Ohio Intern and Former CDF Freedom Schools Scholar

In 2013, my mom dropped me off to a summer program unlike anything I had ever been part of before. I walked in hearing Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" as my mom signed me in. As the scheduled day went on, all the children traveled to the gymnasium to participate in cheers and chants, sing the motivational song, listen to a read-aloud guest, hear announcements, and volunteer to share

our recognitions, an intentional moment to share appreciation of each other. It was not at this moment that I was sold on Freedom Schools, but it was when we read books that had characters that looked like me, from similar backgrounds as mine, that made me realize I would be bugging my mom every spring that she went to the community center to sign me up for this program.

One memory that has stuck with me all these years is when they split the scholars up by gender to have conversations surrounding self-love and self-esteem. They began the conversation for girls playing the song "Video" by India.Arie. I had heard this song before, but it was in that moment that I really *heard* the lyrics. The female SLIs spoke *life* into us, giving us affirmations – well before infographics and memes existed on social media – and they imparted advice to love

ourselves, protect ourselves, and preserve our authenticity. I remember that I really needed to hear those words that day. Aside from lessons like these that improved my self-image, I can say that being in Freedom Schools made me love to read, it made me be confident in what I had to say, it gave me motivation to amplify my voice because of the opportunities we had to have open discussion, practice critical thinking, and make real-life connections to what we were reading and learning.

My experience in this program is not the only one I want to highlight in this blog. I know the impact that Freedom Schools made on me, and I knew I could not be the only one that felt like this. And I'm not. That's why for my internship this summer I decided to reach out to others who had ties to Freedom Schools, friends and mentors with whom I have bonded on this experience, to see where they are now and how involvement in Freedom Schools has shaped them.



Jezene' Stephens, Former CDF Freedom Schools Scholar

Jezene' Stephens, now a college student and who was one of my peers in the program, began her journey in Freedom Schools in 2007. Being introduced to the program by her mother who also worked there at one time, it was the first summer camp she ever participated in, and she loved it instantly. She expressed how her favorite memory was starting the days with Harambe, led by welcoming and energetic SLIs who all had themes for their classrooms. There was never a boring day at Freedom Schools for her as the program kept the scholars engaged and busy while incorporating school-related curriculum and activities. Now a rising Senior at Alabama A&M University, Freedom Schools allowed her to think about her future aspirations and to be herself regardless of who was around. It helped her grow as an individual mentally and emotionally. Because she started Freedom Schools so young, Jezene' did not participate in other summer camps or programs, but she stated that working at other summer camps has shown her a difference in how Freedom Schools ran the program versus how others function. "Other camps weren't as exciting to me," she said. "Freedom Schools kept their kids more engaged and busier with the activities and field trips."

Many of those who go through Freedom Schools see an increase in engagement in school-related activities as well as improvements in social emotional learning skills. In fact, what was gathered

from [a 2019 program evaluation](#) found that over 60% of scholars maintained or improved in active engagement and academic motivation. Over 60% of scholars agreed or strongly agreed that Freedom Schools helped them improve in areas like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These are the ways Freedom Schools makes a difference in the lives of their scholars and the improvements they were able to make in scholars like Jezene'. Luckily, I was also able to connect with a former peer that could attest to the same experience and developmental gains.



Jayla Marvin, Former CDF Freedom Schools Scholar

Meet Jayla Marvin, 22 of Dayton, Ohio. Jayla began Freedom Schools the same summer I did. Though her time being a scholar only lasted the six weeks of that single Freedom Schools summer, she speaks highly about the time she spent there. She initially described Freedom Schools as “very unique in the way of helping me be comfortable with meeting new people... it helped me open up and socialize with other people.” She talks about the impact the motivational song, “So Strong” by Labi [Siffre](#), had on her and how she still plays it today. Freedom Schools showed Jayla she could learn in a positive environment, which made her love school and resulted in her academics improving. The summer program had a large impact on her life, helping her expand her learning capabilities and allowing her to be open in spaces and express herself, along with keeping her focused. The effect of this can be seen in her academic career now, as she enters her senior year at Central State University, majoring in Biology. She went to other youth-based programs during high-school but opened up to me that they did not have the same friendly, open environment that allowed everyone to connect with each other that makes Freedom Schools so special.

This friendly and open environment has been maintained for Freedom Schools even throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One may assume that because of the health crisis that struck the world in 2020 that the impact, goals, and mission of Freedom Schools would come to an end, but what has been realized by a [2021 report](#) is that not only were students still able to read as many as 12 books during the 6-week program, but they also remained safe during the pandemic. Freedom Schools provides benefits for not only children but also their families. Both children and parents said that Freedom Schools helped them prepare for school. Over 80% of parents stated that their

child had more confidence, were a better reader, learned ways to resolve conflicts, and their children believed they could make a difference. Parents were more likely to vote, volunteer in their communities, and planned to be more engaged with their child's schoolwork next year after the end of the program that summer. Over 99% of parents who completed the survey responded that they would recommend this program to other parents.

It is not just the scholars and their families that benefit from Freedom Schools, everyone who walks through the door will leave with something, even those who keep it running. Servant Leader Interns are college students or young graduates interested in summer work experience in direct service with children and youth. Many have now become young changemakers, creating even younger changemakers that gain experience in leadership and much more. Some college students or graduates go into the role of an SLI with a background in education, but like Mckenzee Moon, another Freedom Schools alum I spoke with, it is possible to bring any discipline or major into your work to make it successful and even open more opportunities for yourself.



Mckenzee Moon, Former CDF Freedom Schools Servant Leader Intern

Now 30 years old and living in Dayton, Ohio, Mckenzee was my SLI my final year in Freedom Schools. He was introduced to Freedom Schools by his sister who was an SLI, too. Coming from a background in Integrated Marketing and Communications, he initially thought Freedom Schools was a lot regarding learning the different terms, cheers and chants, and the overall culture. He was also impressed at the national scale of the organization. One of his impactful memories is going through Ella Baker training where he learned the ropes of Freedom Schools. “Just being around that much Black excellence and Black intelligence... that’s always going to be a certain type of experience to people,” he recalls, elaborating on the training that surrounded him around other Black peers all present to carry on the program. I remember my final year having Mckenzee as the leader of our level 3 (middle school-aged) classroom – he was the only male SLI, his sister was the site coordinator, and our classroom was all girls, too. It was this summer that let him gain leadership experience and to the ability to learn small skills to provide male insight and learning how to communicate in a different setting. After this summer, he would go on to be part

of other youth development programs, such as working with Dayton Public Schools and their mentoring program Males of Color. Now working as an entrepreneur with his sisters owning a youth development consulting firm, they work with schools and districts to help enrich and design youth programs. “Since Freedom Schools, my career definitely took a heavy youth development approach, and I found a way to use all those things that I learned and all those things that I care about to work in my own lane and get them done in my own way,” he said.

I reconnected with Mckenzee’s sister, too, the site coordinator at my Freedom School named Kylee Baker, who spent five years working for different levels of Freedom Schools. Beginning as a site coordinator in 2015, Kylee continued to become a project director for 2 years and an executive director from 2018 to 2020. “I remember her classroom was so functional and fit the theme,” Kylee told me, who was initially inspired to learn more about Freedom Schools watching her sister decorate her classroom prior to her own involvement in the program. “I was like, ‘This is really cool!’ ... Then the next summer, I was approached to be a site coordinator.”

Already having experience in the education field with a background in Special Education, she initially thought there was too much to take on but found peace in how everything was already planned out with there being space for her to be herself. “One of the biggest draws is understanding how much work it is but at the end watching the work pay off,” she recalled. From accidents on bus rides to field trips to finding a coworker that helped her get through a summer at a new site, Kylee had fond memories of Freedom Schools. She told me how the program gave her so much, giving young people the opportunity to speak up, ask for help, and talk to peers with the same motives. Believing that she would gain experience in her previous education background, she spoke about how she came out as a different person. “You can’t go through a full cycle of Freedom Schools and not be changed, or you weren’t doing it for the right reasons,” she said. She compared the structure and layout of Freedom Schools to other youth programs as being much more efficient and having clearer instructions, and it is what she has used to shape her own mindset and how she approaches youth development today.

Freedom Schools has proven itself to be beneficial to all who walk through the doors of their nearby site. Servant Leader Interns have [reported positive changes](#) in their leadership skills, self-empowerment, and academic/career development. With more than 70% of Servant Leader Interns in recent years being African-American and over 60% of scholars being Black as well,

scholars get clear representation in this summer program that can leave positive impacts and increase self-empowerment. Other demographics weigh evenly amongst scholars to Servant Leader Interns; there are opportunities to participate in this program no matter your background. Even if you do not look like the scholars of your group, to encourage them to be agents of change and advocate for what they believe in can be completed by anyone with the drive to work with the youth.



Alison Paxson, CDF-Ohio Policy & Communications Associate and Former Freedom Schools Servant Leader Intern

This is how the experience of Alison Paxson went. Working as an SLI for one summer in 2016, Alison was informed of the program through friends who were SLIs and a friend who was a site coordinator. Alison compares her time at Freedom School to spending the previous year working at an urban public school where the school climate was anything but positive. “It was a culture of very low expectations. So, getting to Freedom Schools, it completely flipped,” she said.

She spoke about how the Integrated Reading Curriculum, the curriculum in place for all the levels of Freedom Schools based on age and grade-level, applied to all learning styles and was interactive. “You’re never sitting too long,” she remembered. One memory she talks about is a parent coming up to her, expressing how her child struggled in reading and did not have a good history with female educators, most of which were white women. “She said in this very pleading tone that always really stuck with me. She said, ‘please don’t give up on my son,’ and I just always remember that.” Another memory that she had was her students who took up the issue of school discipline and zero tolerance policies in schools as the main theme for their Day of Social Action, creating a [video](#) about their experience coordinating a rally downtown organized with another central Ohio Freedom School. The advocacy on this topic was spearheaded by scholars, to which Alison had little to do but participate and allow the youth to lead, an empowering opportunity for young people that made the Freedom Schools’ program unique from many others.

Now a Policy & Communications Associate for Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio), Alison manages communications for the organization statewide and also leads the education policy efforts. “I didn’t come here directly from the Freedom Schools experience, but had I not

had the Freedom Schools experience, I probably wouldn't be here." Something that Alison stated that she'd always carry with her is the idea of letting children be children. "Children make mistakes and it's our responsibility as adults to be there to support them, to care for them, to be kind to them and empathetic to what it is to be a young person," she said. She also mentioned how important it is to help children channel their anger and frustration on the state of the world and nation in a positive way where they can not only change what is going on inside of them, but what is going on outside as well.

When I concluded the interviews, I asked all interviewees if they would give back or serve Freedom Schools in a bigger way in the future if they had the opportunity. They all responded "yes" with no hesitation.

At the end of our timeline, today on July 8, 2022, it is the last day of my internship with CDF-Ohio. I was able to have a full-circle experience, coming back to support an organization that provided one of my fondest memories of my childhood. I kept all my books, all my notebooks, even the plates we wrote on for an activity where everyone wrote a compliment or affirmation. I still look at those with nostalgic feelings. To invest in children is our best choice, for they became college students on the way to graduate like Jezene', Jayla, and I, and the changemakers and leaders of our future. This investment can even guide you to your life's work like it has for Mckenzee, Kylee, and Alison. What I hope I have proven in this last blog is that we need to continue to support programs and organizations that advocate for children, that want the best for children. Not because they're going to show up to the polls, not because they'll line candidate pockets and finance their campaigns, not because it will get politicians supporters when they say a buzzword on the campaign trail, but because children are the future, and we cannot ensure their futures if we do not invest in them and set them up for success. This is what the Freedom Schools program has set out to do since its creation in the 1990s, stemming from the work of young activists in Mississippi decades ago, and what it continues to do in 2022.

Putting in the effort to ensure children know they can make a difference pays off – always. I know this in my heart and soul, from everything I have done and learned this summer during my internship, given the reflections graciously offered by my colleagues in this blog, and most importantly, because of the good work, good trouble that is yet to come as I grow into the leader that Freedom Schools and the caring people in my life helped me see was possible for me.