

FANNIE LOU HAMER'S AMERICA

Discussion Guide



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NOTE TO EDUCATORS AND ORGANIZERS

This discussion guide is designed to help with processing and reflecting on the film, Fannie Lou Hamer's America, to engage more deeply with its ideas, and to present options for further learning and discussion. It can be used individually as a prompt for personal writing, and it can also be used collectively to drive conversations with a group or community.

This film can be challenging to watch. It contains descriptions of violence, historic injustice, racial hatred, and events that are being actively erased from the teaching of American history. It is important to open up space for discussion and processing of these difficult topics. It is not wrong to feel uncomfortable in discussions like these. Growth can be uncomfortable, but so can healing.

We urge students of all ages to embrace the spirit of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer by looking unflinchingly at the truth and converting that discomfort into positive change.

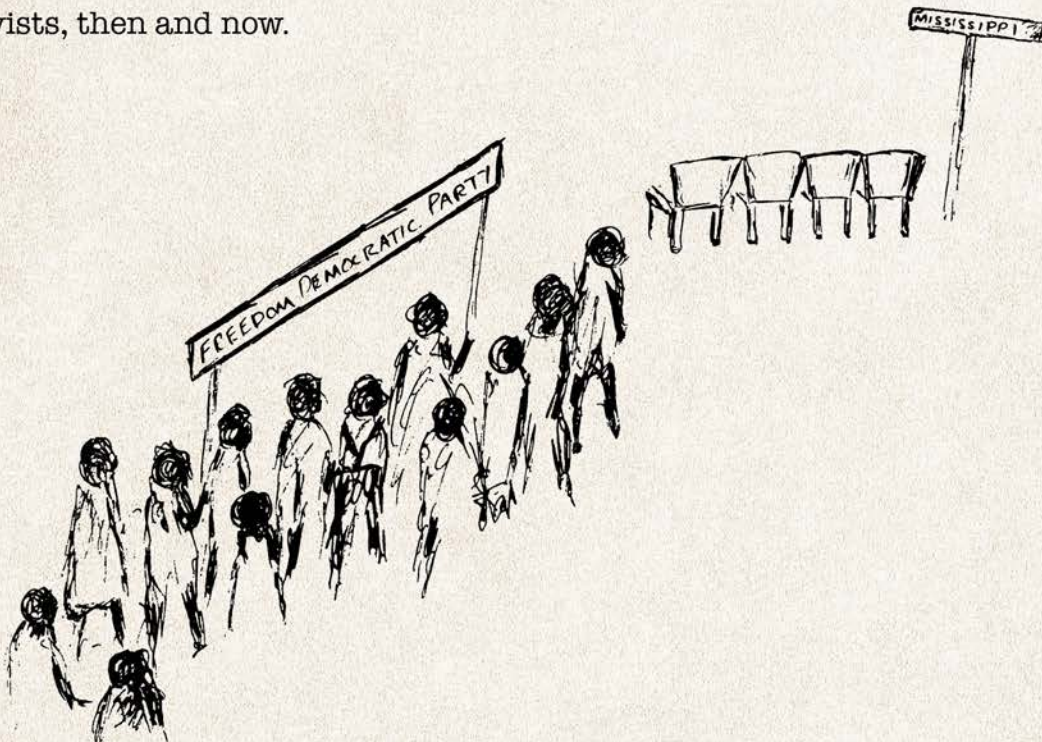


NOTE ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Freedom Movement in Mississippi was not only about the right to vote. It was about empowering people in every aspect of their lives, creating new mutual aid programs among poor communities that were left behind or actively oppressed by the institutions of white supremacy.

Education was a major focus of their efforts. They created volunteer-run Freedom Schools in underserved rural areas where students and teachers of all ages shared skills and knowledge. They also ran small press shops around the state, producing handmade pamphlets on topics like the Constitution and the right to vote. These zines were simple to understand, with charming hand-drawn illustrations.

This guide borrows the style of those Freedom Primers, and is submitted with the same radical love and hope that animates young activists, then and now.



FILMMAKER'S NOTE BY JOY DAVENPORT

Fannie Lou Hamer's voice is undeniable.

I want this film to be a platform for her prophetic voice, for her words and her songs, because it is wrong that we do not remember her. It is wrong that her voice was silenced. As a filmmaker, as a white woman telling a Black woman's history, I have no right to speak for Mrs. Hamer. She is the only one who can tell her story. Not an omniscient narrator, not a talking head expert, just Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer from "626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi."

So this film was constructed using speeches, interviews, oral histories, television appearances, and performances that were recorded over the course of her life. The rest was shot in and around Sunflower County, including the place where she is laid to rest next to her husband, Pap, on the first forty acres of their Freedom Farm.

When she speaks about America, she speaks about a broken promise. "The land of the tree and the home of the grave." But she also speaks of hope, of the young generations who will make the promise of democracy real. I hope this film reaches them. I have hope because her message reached me, too. Her words are prophetic because we have continued to ignore them.

To those still in thrall to the American dream, her message is an alarm:
"It's time to wake up."

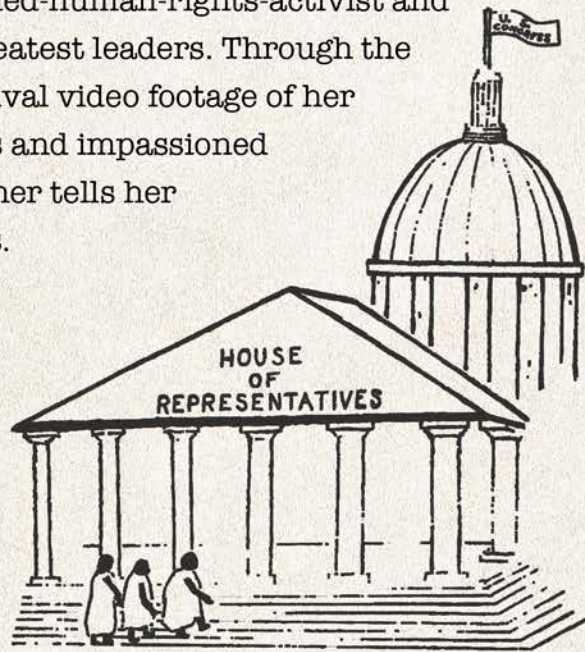
This is Fannie Lou Hamer's America.

FILM SYNOPSIS

“Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

With those words at the 1964 Democratic Convention, Fannie Lou Hamer changed the course of Civil Rights forever. By working in the cotton fields of Mississippi from the age of six, Fannie Lou Hamer was keenly aware of the racial injustices that forced her family to labor so much while earning so little. Encouraged by her participation in groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Fannie Lou Hamer devoted herself to voter enfranchisement and increasing Black political representation. Her efforts would mobilize thousands of Black people to register to vote and inspire her historical run for Senate.

Fannie Lou Hamer’s America explores and celebrates the lesser-known life of a Mississippi sharecropper-turned-human-rights-activist and one of the Civil Rights Movement’s greatest leaders. Through the layering of audio recordings and archival video footage of her powerful speeches, soul-stirring songs and impassioned pleas for equal rights, Fannie Lou Hamer tells her extraordinary story in her own words.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE VIEWING

Fannie Lou Hamer's America is told from a first-person perspective and is dense with historical facts and references. It is also constructed largely from archival footage, so it contains attitudes and events that may be challenging to encounter for the first time. We recommend making space to consider your relationship with the subject matter before your initial viewing. Consider putting aside half an hour to engage with these questions as writing prompts. If watching as a group, encourage your peers to do the same, and then share your reflections. What can you learn about this subject and about each other before watching the film?

Ask yourself how much you already know about Fannie Lou Hamer.

- Is this the first time you've heard of her?
- What is your impression of her?

It is worth considering your knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

- What do you already know about it?
- Who comes to mind when you think of this struggle for racial justice, and why?

Issues of identity are also central to this story.

- Who gets to be treated as a full human being, and why?
- Who does not? Why?

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE VIEWING

Think about your own identity and how you fit in with the world around you.

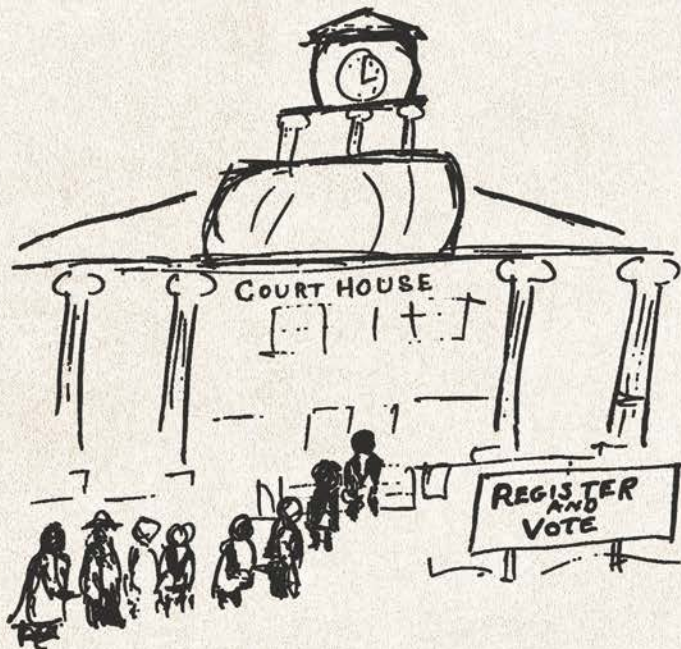
- How has your life been comfortable?
- How has your life been difficult?
- How may your identity categories have factored into this?

This story is also about democracy in the United States.

- What do you know about voting rights where you live?
- Do you think that it is important to vote? Why?

And finally, this is a film about community and coming together.

- Do you know your neighbors?
- What kinds of communities are you involved in?
- Why are they important to you?



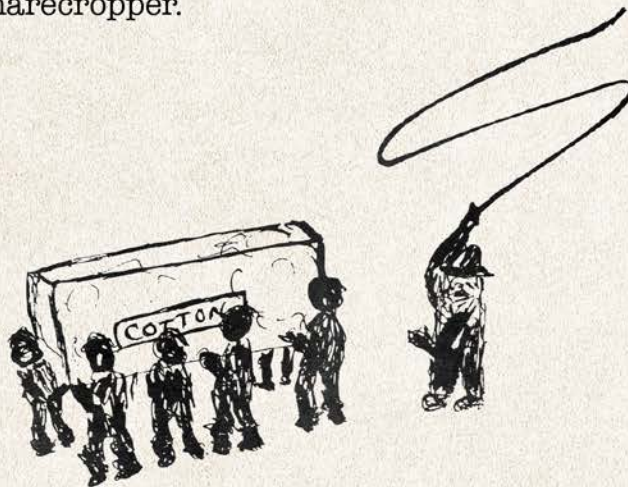
KEY POINTS

Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer speaks bluntly about her experiences growing up and living in Mississippi. The following is a timeline of key points in her life. The additional details here may help to provide more context or to expand upon the stories told in the film. They may also provide starting points for your own research and discussion.

Early Life

Fannie Lou was the youngest of twenty children in a very poor family of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. She had to stop going to school at age twelve so she could help her family pick cotton. That doesn't mean she was uneducated. She learned a lot from her parents. Her father taught her to read from the Bible, and her mother taught her to sing, among many other things. Most importantly, they instilled in her a sense of dignity and pride in being exactly who she was.

She eventually moved up the ranks and became a timekeeper on the plantation. Her job was to weigh the cotton that people harvested, and to keep track of what they were owed. She was expected to skew the results in favor of the plantation owner, but she resisted because that was unfair. The seeds of her later human rights activism were planted as she learned to resist white supremacy as a sharecropper.



KEY POINTS

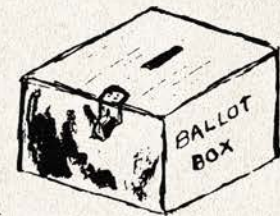
Civic Awakening

In the summer of 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer attended a mass meeting in Ruleville organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The purpose of the meeting was to teach local Black people about their constitutional right to vote. A majority of citizens in Sunflower County were Black, but very few of them were registered to vote. This is because generations of Black people in Mississippi and across the South had been harassed, beaten, and killed for trying to register and vote.

She listened to people like Bob Moses, James Bevel, James Forman, and Lawrence Guyot talk about constitutional rights. She had been interested in Black activism in the past, but she never knew that these rights were constitutionally guaranteed. She realized how much she could change if she could vote out the racist officials who were in charge.

Registering to Vote

Mrs. Hamer was inspired by what she heard at the mass meeting, so she volunteered to go to the courthouse in Sunflower County to try to register. She was denied after failing a literacy test. Literacy tests were created to prevent people like Mrs. Hamer from registering, since they weren't able to access formal education.



On the way back, they were pulled over in the borrowed bus they were driving and issued a ticket because it was "too yellow." This was another way that white supremacists tried to harass Black people who wanted to vote.

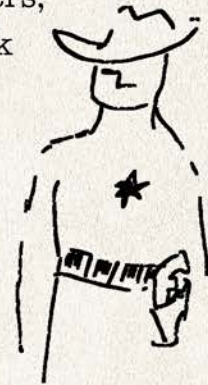
When she got back home to the plantation where she worked, the owner of the property fired her for trying to register. She had not even successfully registered yet, but so far she had lost a day of travel, the cost of a traffic ticket, her job, and her home.

KEY POINTS

Winona

In 1963, Mrs. Hamer and a group of SNCC activists were arrested in Winona, Mississippi, while driving back from a voter education workshop. Some of them had tried to use the white washroom facilities. Mrs. Hamer did not try to enter the rest stop, but remained on the bus. She was arrested anyway.

At the jail, the police officers viciously beat the SNCC volunteers, including 15-year-old June Johnson. They even made some Black male prisoners participate in the beating under threat of death. Mrs. Hamer would never fully recover from this beating. When the SNCC office heard about the arrests and assaults, they sent a group of people to bail Mrs. Hamer and the others out of jail. These volunteers, including Lawrence Guyot, were then arrested and beaten, too.



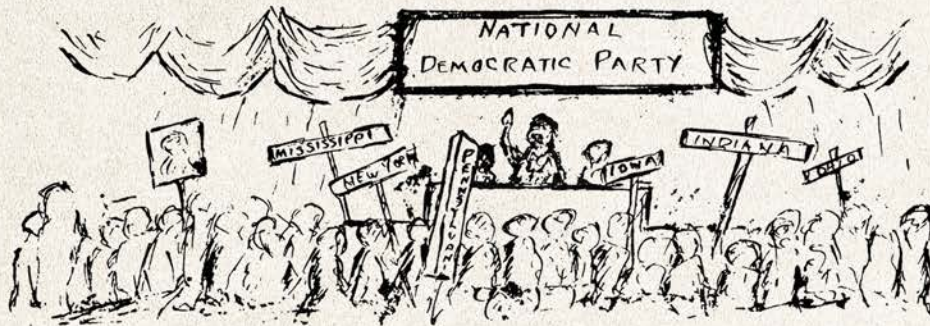
When they were finally released, James Bevel told Mrs. Hamer that Medgar Evers had been shot and killed while they were in jail. Medgar Evers was the State Secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi and had also been involved in helping people to register and vote. This is what happened to some Black people in Mississippi who wanted to vote.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

Mrs. Hamer and her friends in SNCC were not dissuaded by the arrests, beatings, and bombings happening around the state. They knew that they were right, so they not only continued their efforts but expanded them. They organized a Freedom Vote campaign in 1963, holding a mock election to teach Black people how voting worked, and to show that Black citizens of in Mississippi truly were interested in voting.

KEY POINTS

They planned an even bigger project in 1964, bringing in white college students from around the country for a massive campaign that they called Freedom Summer. As part of this effort, they organized their own political party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). They said that the regular Democratic Party in the state was illegal because it would not allow Black people to participate. They MFDP would allow all people to participate, regardless of color or social status, so long as they would subscribe to the party's principles.



Atlantic City

In August of 1964, the MFDP went to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Their purpose was to be seated as the only legal and legitimate Democratic delegation from the state of Mississippi. Although their legal argument was correct, and their cause had support, President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) did everything in his power to prevent them from being seated.

When Mrs. Hamer appeared live on television to address the Credentials Committee to argue for being seated, LBJ forced the major networks to cut her off by calling a press conference of his own. He was afraid of the power in Mrs. Hamer's story, and he was afraid of losing his coalition of 'Dixiecrats'. This backfired on him, since the networks later ran Mrs. Hamer's speech in full.

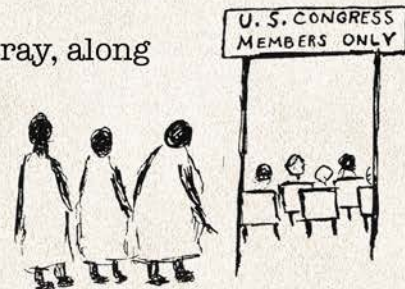
KEY POINTS

The Democratic Party offered the MFDP a compromise. They would still seat the regular Mississippi delegates, but the MFDP could have two at-large delegates seated in the balcony. Some political leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP argued that they should take accept the compromise. The MFDP refused to do so, arguing that it was morally wrong. They went home disappointed, but the DNC bylaws were soon changed so that no segregated delegation would be seated at future conventions. The MFDP would be seated at the 1968 DNC, and Mrs. Hamer was a national delegate in 1972.

Congress

Mrs. Hamer ran to become a US Congressional Representative in 1964 and Mississippi State Senator in 1971, both times without success. But she still managed to have a major impact on national legislation. After the MFDP was rejected in Atlantic City, they reorganized and brought their challenge to Washington, DC, in 1965.

Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Victoria Gray, along with many of their friends in the MFDP, traveled to the US Capitol to argue that the five congressional representatives from Mississippi had been illegally seated in an election that was neither free nor fair. They had to fight to be heard, but they were eventually the first Black women to ever speak from the floor of Congress.



The Congressional Challenge came within a small handful of votes of succeeding, but ultimately it failed as well. Yet one of the results of their activism was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, passed in part because of the constant grassroots pressure from the MFDP.

KEY POINTS

Vietnam

Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the first prominent civil rights activists to speak out against the war in Vietnam. She spoke about it months before SNCC made a formal statement against the war, and two years before MLK did. She saw the fundamental unfairness in the fact that the United States would send soldiers to fight for freedom abroad when she couldn't get it at home.

Even worse, Black soldiers represented a disproportionate number of casualties in the conflict. This was personal for Mrs. Hamer: the father of two of her adopted daughters was permanently maimed in Vietnam. She saw the intersections of politics, class, wealth, and color. Poor people with no education or economic opportunities would sign up for the military hoping for a better life. Instead, they were sent overseas to secure someone else's freedom.

Women

Fannie Lou Hamer's experience as a daughter, mother, and caregiver in Mississippi contributed greatly to her perspective as a human rights advocate. She knew all about poverty and hunger, as well as the lack of education and access to proper medical care. She also understood the power that women could wield, as she worked alongside other amazing women such as Ella Baker, Annie Devine, Victoria Gray, Gloria Steinem and many others. She was a co-founder of the National Council of Negro Women, as well as a founding member of the National Women's Political Caucus.

She also experienced a horrible violation at the hands of a Mississippi doctor. While undergoing surgery to remove a uterine tumor, she was given a hysterectomy without her knowledge or consent. It was such a common practice to forcibly sterilize Black women that the procedure was given a nickname, the "Mississippi appendectomy." This horrific and racist practice targeted women of color across the country well into the 1980s, and there is evidence that ICE is continuing it today.

KEY POINTS

Race and Class

Mrs. Hamer's experience in Washington had disillusioned her to the reality of political power. She saw people who she thought would support her because her cause was right. But instead, they had been more concerned with preserving their own power and position. She saw that race was not the only dividing line in American politics. Class also played a big part.

This revelation changed the direction of her activism. She still traveled the country to drum up support for her cause, but she stopped trusting that national institutions would make things right. She aligned herself with the Black Power movement and with local efforts to build political, economic, and educational resources for her people.



Freedom Farm

In 1969 Mrs. Hamer received a \$10,000 grant from a charitable organization to buy forty acres of land in Ruleville, the first investment in what would become Freedom Farm Cooperative. Freedom Farm was the first program of its kind in Sunflower County. By 1970, it had grown to almost 700 acres, providing cash crops, food, clothing, jobs, and housing to the community.

The only qualification to be a part of the cooperative was to be poor. They welcomed people of every color. Since the program was not-for-profit, it never received sufficient institutional support. And after seven years of serving the community, the cooperative was forced to shut down.

KEY POINTS

Family, Health, and Death

Fannie Lou Hamer struggled with health issues throughout her life, starting with a childhood experience with polio that left her with a limp. After her beating in Winona, she was left with a permanent kidney injury, nerve damage, and a blood clot in her eye.

She and her husband Pap had four adopted daughters: Dorothy Jean, Vergie Ree, Lenora, and Jacqueline. Dorothy Jean suffered from fibroid tumors and died in 1966 of internal hemorrhaging. It could be difficult to get quality medical care in the Delta, both because they were Black and because of Mrs. Hamer's activism. Jacqueline and Lenora were Dorothy Jean's daughters, and Fannie Lou and Pap raised them as their own.

Mrs. Hamer passed away on March 14th, 1977, at age 59. Her cause of death was complications from hypertension, breast cancer, and her existing health issues. She is buried in Ruleville next to her husband, Pap, who passed away in 1992. They are laid to rest on the first forty acres of Freedom Farm. There is now a garden and a statue at her grave site.



FANNIE LOU
HAMER

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

After watching Fannie Lou Hamer's America, we suggest taking a moment to sit with your experience. Allow yourself time and space to unpack and process what you learned and felt. If you watched the film with others, plan some time for a discussion. If you watched the film alone, consider writing down some of your thoughts and feelings. Below are some discussion prompts to start with.



This film can be an emotional experience, delving into painful topics from an unflinching perspective.

- What emotions did you feel throughout the film?
- Why does it make you feel this way?
- What can you do with those feelings?

Many stories from Mrs. Hamer's lifetime have been forgotten or misremembered.

- What was something in the film that surprised you?
- What was surprising about it?
- Why do you think some stories are told, but not others?

Fannie Lou Hamer and her friends in the movement made a lasting mark on the history and laws of the United States.

- How did Mrs. Hamer's story influence your understanding of United States history, particularly the Civil Rights Movement?
- What does the concept of activism mean to you?
- How does her story reflect on our present moment?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

Young people from around the country were inspired to become volunteers in Mississippi after hearing Mrs. Hamer speak.

- If you were involved with Freedom Summer, what would you have worked on?
- What improvements or changes need to be made in your community?
- What skills do you have that can help improve your community?
- Who do you know doing similar work today?

Mrs. Hamer was an extraordinary woman who worked with and inspired many other extraordinary women.

- How did her experience as a woman affect her trajectory as an activist?
- How have things changed for women since the 1960s in the United States?
- Who are some extraordinary women in your life who inspire you? And why?

This is a film about United States history as told from the perspective of one of its unsung heroes.

- What do you think of Mrs. Hamer's assessment of America?
- How has the United States changed since her lifetime?
- How has America not changed?
- How do you view America? For good or bad? And why?

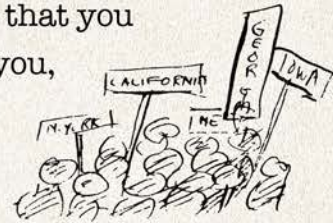
Mrs. Hamer told the story of her life to relate to other people around the country and to advocate for change.

- What stories from her life most resonated with you?
- What was similar about her life and yours? Or different?
- What stories would you tell about your own life?
- What stories have family members told you that you found interesting?

POST VIEWING ASSIGNMENTS

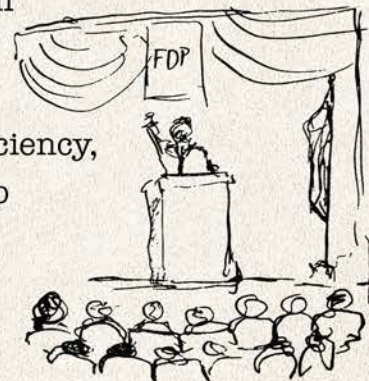
As Fannie Lou Hamer would say, “You can pray until you faint, but God isn’t going to just put something in your lap.” Now that you’ve spent time with her story, how will you take the lessons you’ve learned out into your community? The following are some suggestions for extending the ideals and goals of Mrs. Hamer outside of the classroom or film screening.

- Fannie Lou Hamer believed deeply in the power of grassroots organizing. What is happening in your community that you can be involved with? Find a group that interests you, learn more about them, attend a meeting. Become an agent for positive change in your world.



- Fannie Lou Hamer believed deeply in the power of intergenerational bonds. Who do you know that is older, or younger, who may benefit from her story? What can you teach your elders, and what can they teach you? Whatever your generational position, reach out to someone in your family or community and encourage communication across age barriers.

- Fannie Lou Hamer believed deeply in the power of the vote. Are you registered to vote? Do you know how? Find out the law in your home state, and educate yourself on the issues affecting your community.



- Fannie Lou Hamer believed deeply in self-sufficiency, both individual and collective. How can you help create pockets of self-sufficiency in the spaces you care about? Start a garden, learn to knit, design a zine. You are your own best resource for making the world a better place.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Fannie Lou Hamer's America website

<http://fannielouhamersamerica.com>

PBS - Fannie Lou Hamer's America

<https://www.pbs.org/video/fannie-lou-hamers-america-9knshm/>

Civil Rights Movement Archive

<http://crmvet.org>

SNCC Digital Gateway

<https://snccdigital.org>



The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

<http://nmaahc.si.edu>

Mississippi Department of Archives & History Digital Archives

<https://da.mdah.ms.gov>

Freedom Primers (and other papers)

<https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/40885/rec/37>

Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, held at Tulane Amistad Research Center

<http://amistadresearchcenter.tulane.edu/archon/?p=collections/controlcard&id=3>

Speech by Fannie Lou Hamer: "We're On Our Way"

<https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/fannie-lou-hamer-were-on-our-way-september-1964/>

Fannie Lou Hamer: America's Freedom Fighting Woman by Dr. Maegan Parker Brooks

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538115947/Fannie-Lou-Hamer-Americas-Freedom-Fighting-Woman>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America by
Dr. Keisha N. Blain

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/676267/until-i-am-free-by-keisha-n-blain/>

Fannie Lou Hamer's America short videos from World Channel

<https://worldchannel.org/episode/america-reframed-fannie-lou-hamers-america/>

PBS Learning Media

<https://unctv.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/dpla-tg-067/teaching-guide-exploring-fannie-lou-hamer-and-the-civil-rights-movement-in-rural-mississippi/>

History of Zines

<https://bookriot.com/history-of-zines/>

Zinn Education Project

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/>

Voter Registration Information

<https://vote.gov>



For educational purchases or to host a screening, visit Women Make Movies

<https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/fannie-lou-hamers-america/>