

## John Lewis to youth : Get in 'necessary trouble'

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist  
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### Child Watch

Not every speaker tells a crowd of young leaders that their job is to get into trouble. But that's part of the message iconic civil rights warrior and now Congressman John Lewis (D-Ga.) conveyed at last year's week-long Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools® National Training that began June 1 for nearly 2,000 college-age Freedom School servant leaders and site coordinators.

Freedom Schools seek to empower children through reading wonderful books, to engage parents, and to reweave the fabric of community support for children. John Lewis and Andrew Young spoke movingly at the opening training session celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Freedom Summer, when young White people from around the country joined local Black citizens and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers to open up Mississippi's closed Jim Crow society and demand the right to vote for Black citizens. Freedom Summer 1964 helped transform Mississippi and American society, but it demanded great sacrifice and courage. Three young people James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner — gave their lives after investigating the burning of a local Black church where a Freedom School was to be held, victims of state and White supremacist violence.

As he spoke to today's young Freedom Schools leaders, John Lewis told them that when he was their age getting into "necessary trouble" shaped his life's mission. As he explained, he grew up poor in rural Troy, Ala. where his father, a former tenant farmer, had saved enough money to buy his own land. He worked on the farm with the rest of his family but was always desperate to get an education.

A teacher encouraged him over and over to read all he could. He also listened to the radio to learn more about the news outside his small community, and eventually started hearing about new events that would change his life: "In 1955, 15 years old in the 10th grade, I heard of Rosa Parks. I heard of Martin Luther King, Jr. I heard his voice on an old radio, and it seemed like he was saying, "John Lewis, you, too, can do something . . . You can make a contribution."

John Lewis decided then that was exactly what he would do. He started with the library: "So in 1956, 16 years old, some of my brothers and sisters and cousins, we went down to the public library in the little town of Troy, Alabama, trying to get a library card, trying to check out some books, and we were told by the librarian that the library is for Whites only and not for coloreds." A year later, as a high school senior he decided to apply to Troy State College (now Troy University), a White college close to his home—but his application was ignored and unanswered. John Lewis was stopped temporarily—but he was not finished.

Without telling his parents or anyone else what he was doing he wrote a letter to Dr. King asking for his help, and Dr. King responded by sending the teenager a round-trip Greyhound bus ticket and inviting him to come to Montgomery to meet with him. By that time John Lewis had enrolled in his first year at American Baptist Theological Seminary (now American Baptist College) in Nashville, Tennessee. Over his spring break the 18-year-old decided to take Dr. King up on his offer: "So in March of 1958, I boarded a Greyhound bus [and] traveled to Montgomery . . . I was so scared. I didn't know what to say or what to do, and Dr. King said, 'Are you the boy from

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Troy?' . . . Meeting Martin Luther King Jr., meeting Ralph Abernathy, meeting Rosa Parks, and later meeting Jim Lawson, who taught me the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence, changed my life and set me on a path. And I haven't looked back since."

John Lewis explained that his parents and community hadn't taught him to challenge segregation: "When I would ask my parents about those signs they would say, 'That's the way it is. Don't get in the way. Don't get in trouble.'" But his experience in the civil rights movement taught him a different lesson that he wanted to share with today's young leaders: "I got in trouble. I got in good trouble, necessary trouble. I say to you, you're more than lucky. You are blessed, and you have to use whatever you see to pass it on to someone else. Bless someone else. Be bold. Be brave. Be courageous. Speak up. Speak out. You must get out there and push and pull and help change things and bring about a nonviolent revolution, a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas . . . Someone must put out and say what is going on is not right, it is not fair, it is not just, and we are here to do something about it."



*Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) .*