In 1961 Marv Davidov was a Freedom Rider who had an epiphany while imprisoned in Mississippi – He had a dream that he would spend his life fighting for social change through nonviolent agitation. For the next 50 years he did just that -- he lived that dream. Marv died on January 14, 2012, 80 years old, smiling, laughing, joking and happy right up til the end, comfortable that he had indeed spent his life as a successful catalyst for justice. One of the Great Ones has passed.

Time magazine in December named “The Protester” as Person of the Year and draws a direct line from the 60s civil rights marches to last year’s Arab Spring and Occupy movements. No one better than Marv Davidov exemplifies how this spirit of “Speak Truth To Power” was kept alive though those 50 years.

The Freedom Riders were people who purposely broke segregation laws in the deep South in order to challenge institutions of white privilege. These were brave folk who often were beaten severely by racist whites, including local sheriffs. In June 1961 one group of Riders included Marv Davidov, a 29 year old army veteran, beatnik Jew and self-described “art dealer” from Minneapolis. He ended up at Parchman Prison Farm with other Riders, and from then on he was devoted to “The Movement,” the groundswell of progressive activists fighting for civil rights and world peace and opposing the Military-Industrial Complex.

During the early 60s Marv got to work with leaders of SNCC, NAACP, SCLC, CORE, the Albany Movement, CNVA and similar organizations. Marv was on the National Mall in Washington D.C. when Martin Luther King Jr gave his “I have a dream” speech on August 28, 1963. He was part of the “Canada to Cuba March,” that year and spent time in jail in Macon and Albany, Georgia for being part of the interracial group which was agitating for both racial justice and world peace. He was an early supporter of the Black Panthers and American Indian Movement. “Racism is

used to exploit people and divide poor whites against blacks,“ he taught. “We must cherish youth and honor elders, return tribal lands, make reparations to black people for the crimes of slavery and racism.”

Marv was also one of the early organizers against the Vietnam War and against the military-industrial complex. In December 1968 he was one of the founders of the Honeywell Project, a group dedicated to opposing the manufacture of anti-personnel fragmentation bombs by Honeywell Corporation, then headquartered in Minneapolis.

In January 1969 he was part of a group of whites who supported the University of Minnesota’s African American Action Committee (AAAC) when it held a sit-in at Morrill Hall, the U’s administration building, in order to advocate for increased minority recruitment and black studies at the U (at that time there were only about 85 blacks among the 40,000+ students at the U’s Twin Cities campus, and that included the athletes). Rose Freeman Massey was AAAC President at that time. 43 years later she still remembers Marv as “a warrior, a true soldier” and says “The world is a smaller place with him gone.” When AAAC leaders were indicted for the sit-in, Marv was a central figure in The Liberation Coalition, a university-community coalition which provided some of the first civil rights organizing experience for a generation of student activists, who were widely inspired by Marv’s sonorous voice telling tales of his already-extensive experiences.

That voice carried on for many years to come. One of the most telling memories of Marv was written by ABC7 Washington D.C. TV News reporter (formerly of WCCO and CBS) Sam Ford: “I met Marv during a visit to Minnesota nearly a decade ago and he held me spellbound. Though I am a black man and student of Civil Rights history, the closest I ever felt to the movement was the two hours I sat listening as this white, one-time "freedom rider" described his experiences, including his gut-wrenching fear as he sat in a Mississippi prison wondering whether he would ever make it out alive. I live in DC where I am one of the organizers of our Martin Luther King parade on Monday [1/16/12]. I'm going to give a shout out to Marv Davidov, a Civil Rights hero. And it is noteworthy he died on this weekend. The federal holiday is about Martin Luther King, but it is also about so many others who struggled in the fight for equality from the Fannie Lou Hamers of Mississippi to the Marv Davidovs of Minnesota. Thank you Marv. Sam Ford.”

During this late 60s/early 70s era Marv ran Liberty House, selling handmade crafts from rural Mississippi in a building at 6th and Cedar on the West Bank, a building which also housed the Twin Cities Draft Information Center, Hundred Flowers newspaper, the Minnesota 8 Defense Committee and innumerable meetings of other peace and justice activists. Marv’s place was for years a central hotbed of radical activism.

Marv always believed in the admonition of James Baldwin “You have to take freedom; it’s not given.” He was a believer in Gandhian civil disobedience, in Martin Luther King’s admonition “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” and "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." With these thoughts in mind, Marv was an unapologetic advocate of “civil disobedience,” i.e. getting arrested in order to create non-violent conflict to heighten social

problems.

The Honeywell Project (later Alliant Action) was Marv’s main focus for years, but he also was on the lines in support of central Minnesota farmers fighting power line siting; the Black Hills Alliance to stop uranium mining in South Dakota; the Plowshares anti-nuke movement; the striking workers at Hormel, Normandy Hotel, and elsewhere; the Minnesota Campaign to Ban Land Mines; the Minnesota Peace and Justice Coalition; the Midwest Institute for Social Transformation; and more. While many of the others involved in these issues soon left “movement” activism to pursue careers and make money, Marv never considered doing anything else but being a full-time organizer for social change.

Throughout history pacifist activists are periodically scorned as quaint but foolish dreamers; as not-sensible pragmatists. Marv occasionally faced such scorn. After all, he was in many ways a community scold, in the best and most uncommon use of that phrase. And while folk around him sometimes tired of the constant demonstrations and arrests and agitation, and sometimes Marv himself got quite depressed by the need for constant struggle, at the same time he never doubted his Gandhian principles. “Non-violence can win social change with minimum loss of life,” he taught. “Every movement begins small, and from that grows mass movement to change social policy.” He never lost his unerring belief that change was always needed and that good people could peacefully agitate to obtain progressive change. Because of Marv Davidov, two generations of peace and justice activists have been trained in non-violent civil disobedience. “You want to make a difference and I feel I’ve done that with my friends and comrades.”

Because of his choice to devote his life to ‘the movement,’ Marv was always broke. He supported himself by donations from friends, small stipends from the organizations he supported and for speaking, occasional poker games and, in the main, teaching. He taught at Carleton College and St Cloud University, among other places.

Even though Marv was never religious and certainly never Christian, at the same time there is a symmetry that his job for the last several years of his life was teaching an Active Non-Violence class at Catholic St Thomas University, as many of his comrades in the civil rights and anti-war movements were Catholic pacifists.

A Celebration of the Life of Marv Davidov is being held on Saturday March 10, 2012 at the University of St Thomas new alumni center at the corner of Cretin and Summit Avenues in St Paul, starting with an informal gathering at 1:00 p.m. and formal program at 2:00 p.m. The public is welcome, and any of Marv’s old compatriots from the front lines of struggle are affirmatively invited to attend and make add their comments during the program.