



Voice of America
 Wednesday, June 27, 2007
 Circulation: 115,000,000

<http://www.voanews.com/english/AmericanLife/2007-06-27-voa51.cfm>

National Civil Rights Museum Tries to Speak to a New Generation

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Making history a subject that jumps out of textbooks and into students' lives is difficult when the events took place centuries ago. But the [National Civil Rights Museum](#) in Memphis, Tennessee, has found that it's just as difficult to connect students to history when the figures involved are still alive. So museum officials turned to college students to develop a marketing strategy that will connect their peers not only with the past but also with current human rights struggles.



Robert Beals for Vanderbilt Univ

The National Civil Rights Museum is housed in the Memphis hotel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated



Robert Beals for Vanderbilt Univ

Beverly Robertson congratulates the Accelerator students

Museum president Beverly Robertson says she sees how difficult it is to stay relevant for a generation without firsthand knowledge of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. "While we have 40,000 school kids come through," she points out, "the balance of the 160,000 people tend to be people who range in age from 35 or 40 all the way up to 80, and not so much the younger, not so much the 30 down."

The museum's problem, explains Robertson, is that young Americans are becoming separated from their history. "So we knew that if we did not identify ways to sort of bridge the gap, that pretty soon, if we're not doing that, then we're going to lose or have die out all those folks who [remember the movement],

so we wouldn't have an audience."

That's where [Vanderbilt University](#) comes in. Its Owen Graduate School of Management runs a special, four-week summer program called the 'Accelerator' to give students interested in business some hands on experience. This summer's 45 participants met with Robertson and toured the Memphis museum, which is housed in the Lorraine Hotel, the site where civil rights leader Martin Luther King Junior was shot to death in 1968.

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Over the space of about a week, the students created youth outreach campaigns, ranging from essay contests to benefits for Darfur at the museum. The five teams were competing for marketing internships with the museum and formally presented their campaign proposals to their professors and museum officials in Nashville. They used PowerPoint presentations and video montages of still photographs to appear as professional as possible.

Ahsaki Black led the winning team. "I think one of the things to remember is not trying to force the issue of just knowing about the Civil Rights Movement," she said, in explaining her team's approach. "but knowing how taking events from what happened in the Civil Rights Movement is still relevant with what's going on today. And I think that's more so what we were trying to do with our project."

Their project was to organize road trips from all areas of the country to the museum. In the presentation, Adrian Reif said young people would upload videos of their trips onto YouTube, the popular Internet video site. "Now who in our generation doesn't love a good road trip?" he asked the audience, getting a good laugh in response. "It's so easy to jump in the car, go for a little adventure wherever you want across the country." The name of their campaign is "Show Us Your Road Trip: Destination Memphis."



Ahsaki Black stands next to a posterboard of her group's presentation



A Vanderbilt student examines a display about the Freedom Rides

Other teams also used the concept of road trips to reference the 1961 "Freedom Ride." The goal of the Freedom Riders – a group of black and white civil rights activists – was to test a Supreme Court decision that desegregated interstate bus travel. Buses set out from Washington, D.C., bound for New Orleans. They got as far as Alabama before one of the buses was bombed.

Some of those original Freedom Riders have also been trying to inspire young people. At a gathering in January at Nashville's Fisk University, Freedom Ride organizer Diane Nash encouraged the younger generations to pick up where hers left off. "I wish you could have seen your grandparents in the '60s," she told the audience. "They were all the things that the media tells you that black people are not. We were full of dignity and

pride and strength and wisdom and commitment and hardworking. And that's who you really are." Nash added that she hoped the students would "sincerely study the movement," which she called "a precious legacy."

It's this legacy that National Civil Rights Museum president Beverly Robertson is worried about losing, but not only for African Americans. Vanderbilt student Michael Gottfried, who is white, says he now understands her concern. "Growing up, I sort of thought of the Civil Rights Movement as, you know, someone didn't want to get off of a bus, and a series of speeches and change." But Gottfried says as he studied the Movement more and learned about the injustices, he understood "why something like that should never happen again."

And for Beverly Robertson, that makes the time and money she spent on the students well worth it. "Now that's a great investment," she laughs, "low cost, big return! You can't beat it."



Michael Gottfried says working on this project gave him a new understanding of the Civil Rights Movement