

[USFSP News Center »](#)

Freedom Riders Film Premieres on PBS Monday, May 16 at 9 p.m.

Posted May 12, 2011 at 12:15 pm by [Melanie Marquez](#)

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (May 13, 2011) – The Freedom Riders documentary, based on the book by USFSP Professor Ray Arsenault, premieres Monday, May 16 at 9 p.m. on PBS stations around the country. In the Tampa Bay area it will air on WEDU.

In advance of the national premiere, Arsenault has traveled with a group of 40 college students from around the country as they re-trace the 1961 route of the freedom rides and learn about this pivotal event in the history of Civil Rights in the United States.

Arsenault has chronicled his trip experience on the Oxford University Press Blog.

St. Petersburg Times reporter Eric Deggans has also participated in the trip and chronicled his experience on his Tampabay.com blog, The Feed.

Arsenault appears in the American Experience documentary based on his award-winning book, Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Justice. In the book, Arsenault recounts how in 1961, emboldened by federal rulings that declared segregated interstate transit unconstitutional, groups of volunteers – blacks and whites – traveled together through the South, defying Jim Crow laws in buses and terminals and putting their lives on the line for racial justice.

“The film tells the story of a democratically based movement,” Arsenault said. “No one person dominates it. The film also reminds us where we were in 1961, that the notion of whites and blacks sharing a cup of coffee or sitting on a bus together was utterly unthinkable in the Deep South in the Jim Crow era, when some people were willing to resort to violence to stop others from living their lives as full citizens. It’s absolutely chilling.”

Named an Editor’s Choice by the New York Times and one of the best books of 2006 by the Washington Post, Freedom Riders won the Southern Historical Association’s Frank L. and Harriet C. Owsley Prize as the most important book published in the field of Southern history in 2006.

“The Freedom Riders had the courage to defy their elders, to buck the political establishment, and to risk their lives to advance the cause of freedom,” Arsenault said.

The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded \$1 million to WGBH Boston for the production of the documentary.

The film's director, Stanley Nelson, is a 2002 MacArthur Fellow known for groundbreaking historical documentaries. He won a Primetime Emmy in Best Direction, nonfiction, for his film, *The Murder of Emmett Till*, which was broadcast nationally on American Experience and helped reopen the investigation of a 14-year-old black boy murdered by white supremacists in Mississippi in 1955.

The documentary is part of the National Endowment for the Humanities' We the People project, an initiative to encourage and strengthen teaching, study and understanding of American history and culture through projects that explore significant events and themes in U.S. history and culture.

Arsenault is a specialist in the political, social and environmental history of the American South. *Freedom Riders*, the product of extensive research over many years, is widely recognized as the definitive work on the Freedom Rider movement.

-USF St. Petersburg-