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NEH to distribute “Freedom Riders” documentary to 500 U.S. communities

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Ray Arsenault at the U.S. Supreme Court with former student Earl Lewis, Ph.D., president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

In observance of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) will distribute *Freedom Riders*, the documentary film based on USF St. Petersburg professor [Raymond Arsenault](#)'s award-winning book, to 500 U.S. communities.

It is one of four films the NEH will distribute as part of its [Bridging Cultures](#) initiative, [Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle](#). The initiative highlights what scholars call “the long civil rights movement,” from before the Civil War through the 1960s, a period that “saw

America struggle to make the ideals of freedom and the pursuing of happiness a reality for all,” wrote James A. Leach, chairman of the NEH.

The package of films, all of which were funded by the NEH, will be accompanied by “programming resources to guide public conversations about the changing meanings of freedom and equality in U.S. history,” according to the NEH. Each participating site will receive up to \$1,200 to support public programming exploring the themes of the *Created Equal* project.

The other three films in the set are [The Abolitionists](#), [Slavery by Another Name](#) and [The Loving Story](#).

Arsenault, the John Hope Franklin Professor of Southern History and co-founder of the [Florida Studies Program](#) at USF St. Petersburg, attended a reception and dinner Feb. 20 honoring the project at the U.S. Supreme Court. The event featured Justice Stephen G. Breyer and Earl Lewis, Ph.D., president of the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), who was a student of Arsenault’s at the University of Minnesota in the late 1970’s.

The PBS documentary *Freedom Riders* was based on Arsenault’s , *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. The film won [three Emmy Awards](#) and a [Peabody Award](#).

“The sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation is an important milestone, and I feel honored that the NEH selected “Freedom Riders” as one of the four films to be featured in its commemorative initiative,” Arsenault said.

Norine Noonan, vice chancellor for academic affairs, said this is the latest example of high-quality scholarship at USF St. Petersburg. “Ray Arsenault’s book has illuminated an important chapter in American history,” she said. “We are all extremely proud of his accomplishments.”

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