

SEEDS OF HOPE:

Shawn Raymond, Gregg Costa, and the Sunflower County Freedom Project

In the summer of 1994, 21-year old Gregg Costa stepped off a plane in Memphis, not knowing what to expect. Fresh out of Dartmouth College, he was starting his first summer with Teach for America (“TFA”)—the then-chaotic-startup-but-now-stalwart nonprofit that recruits college graduates for two-year teaching stints in underserved public schools. A TFA representative told Gregg that someone would be waiting for him at the gate. So, when he saw a shaggy-headed young man wearing a torn t-shirt, shorts, and Texas, he thought it was nice that TFA had sent one of his soon-to-be students to retrieve him. That “disheveled” (according to Gregg) youth was 22-year-old Shawn Raymond, who was not one of Gregg’s students, but rather one of his fellow TFA colleagues. Shawn had just graduated from George Washington University, and TFA had sent him—like Gregg—to Helena, Arkansas, for what they thought would be an introduction to their teaching assignment before orientation. Though they had no way to know then, that summer day in Memphis would be the start of their lifelong friendship and commitment to public service, which would grow from teaching in two Mississippi public schools to creating a lasting legacy helping students across the state with the Sunflower County Freedom Project. Along the way would be quite the ride.

After a short time in Arkansas, Shawn and Gregg met the third major player in this story—Chris Myers Asch. They all went to Houston for a six-week orientation before heading to the Mississippi Delta for their permanent teaching assignments. That assignment sent the trio, along with a fourth corps member, Linda Liang, to Ruleville, in Sunflower County, where they met with principals in a tiny, un-air-conditioned high school conference room. During the meeting, Bessie Gardner, then the principal of East Sunflower Elementary School, burst through the door and asked if any of them wanted to teach elementary school. Gregg and Chris spoke up first, and she immediately claimed them, ushered them into her pickup, and headed for Sunflower—a town of a few hundred about 14 miles south of Ruleville. Linda was scooped up by Ruleville’s elementary school principal, leaving Shawn alone with the high school principal.

Stunned by the quickness of it all and not sure if he would ever see the others again, Shawn was given two high school options: (1) replace the choir teacher, who had just died; or (2) special education. Shawn joked that he had a terrible singing voice, so the principal at Ruleville Central High School

stood up, smiled, shook Shawn’s hand, and announced “then special ed it is.” Gregg often jokes that Shawn’s experience—not speaking up and receiving a tougher, high school assignment—must have taught Shawn quite a lesson because that was the last time Shawn stayed quiet. In any event, they would all teach in Sunflower County—a place that Principal Gardner described as Mayberry on weekdays and Gunsmoke on weekends, and a place they would all soon come to love.

Sunflower County sits in Mississippi’s northwest quadrant. It is part of the Delta, an area rich in soil and music but poor in



(L to R) Shawn and Chris at the “Arboretum” in downtown Sunflower circa 1998.

power and wealth for Black people, who have long been the majority. The vestiges of slavery—and its kin, Jim Crow—have long shadows there. By the mid-nineties, its population had declined to below 40,000, including thousands

of inmates of Mississippi’s oldest and most notorious prison: Parchman. And, like other places that played a role in the Civil Rights Movement, Sunflower County was once home to those staunchly opposed to equal rights—like U.S. Senator James Eastland—and those made famous for their tireless efforts in pursuit of equal rights—like Fannie Lou Hamer. As Chris later wrote, these paradoxes continued long after the 1960s: “It stood at the epicenter of the civil rights movement, yet still suffers from racial inequality.”¹

Walking into this atmosphere, the trio did not receive the warmest welcome. They found a rental near East Sunflower Elementary. The house was across the abandoned railroad tracks on the so-called “White side” of Sunflower; the school was across the tracks on the so-called “Black side.” A few weeks after school started, several students from the school came by to play baseball in their front yard. Soon, though, a pickup truck appeared, with an older white man and his grandson in the cab. The old man

screamed threats: “You have two minutes to get these [N-word]s out of here, or I will do it for you.” After the kids took off back across the tracks, the older man said the kids did not belong on that side of town, though he acknowledged that the trio obviously did not yet know “the rules.” The man calmly explained, “I send my kids to Indianola Academy—one of the many “segregationist academies” that popped up after school integration began—to get away from those [N-word]s.” He drove away. The guys would later find out the man had been the county’s deputy sheriff in the 1960s and had a long history of enforcing the racial “rules” in the county—his wife was the mayor of Sunflower.

That was not the last pushback. A few days later, Gregg, Shawn, and Chris found broken glass bottles underneath their vehicle tires, which were parked on the street. A few weeks later, they learned of a petition going around the “White” part of town that was seeking to run them out of Sunflower—it was not successful.

After their jarring introduction, Gregg and Shawn had two life-changing years teaching. Gregg taught third and fourth grade. Shawn taught high school special education. He also coached special teams for the high school football team (legend is that he led the team in personal fouls). While teaching, they saw both the promise of many of the kids and the toll that some of the lingering issues in Sunflower County were already taking on them. Despite the struggles they sometimes saw, Gregg and Shawn found teaching extraordinarily rewarding.

They left Sunflower County in 1996 as different men than when they arrived. And though they bid farewell to Chris, Gregg and Shawn went straight to Austin, starting law school (and rooming together again) in the fall. Both adjusted quickly to the rigors of law school but never forgot the impact that TFA and Sunflower County had made on them. They were constantly trying to think of ways they would give back to the place that had made such an impact. It was at the

end of their 2L year, when Gregg was editor in chief and Shawn was managing editor of *The Texas Law Review*, that they and Chris devised the Sunflower County Freedom Project (“SCFP”).



(L to R) Shawn, Gregg, and Chris in Sunflower, August 22, 1994.

At first, the SCFP was meant to be a summer program that supplemented the public school curriculum in reading and math but also added instruction that the three had seen

that their schools lacked—like music, art, physical education, and field trips (despite being just 50 miles from the Mississippi River, many of their students had never seen it). But they also wanted it to be a place where children could understand and appreciate the gravity of the place they were in, where Fannie Lou Hamer and others had worked so hard for equality. In 1998, to make sure they could truly meet the community’s needs with their new project, they held town halls in Ruleville and Sunflower churches. It was during this “roadshow” that a local Black farmer casually observed that “education is the seed of freedom.” This turned into the project’s mantra and reflected Gregg’s, Shawn’s, and Chris’ belief that if you give children opportunities to learn by planting a seed of knowledge and curiosity, they will grow on their own and have the freedom to choose the kind of life they want to lead.

The SCFP started in 1999 as a summer program in a small classroom at a community college building in the middle of a Moorhead, Mississippi, field—mostly with kids that the three had taught with TFA. The program had math and reading, but also taught website design, organized a play, and had the kids complete an oral history project where they interviewed their grandparents about their early lives and involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. In the years to come, the SCFP continued to grow, changing to meet the children and their parents where they were and expanding to reach more students. It eventually added a year-round after-

school and summer program and built the LEAD (Love, Education, Action, Discipline) Center to serve as the hub of the SCFP and various programs and affiliates throughout the state.

With all this growth, though, they needed a permanent building. In downtown Sunflower, there was an empty strip of dilapidated buildings that had been that way for many years and were filled with weeds and trees. Gregg, Shawn, and Chris called it the “Arboretum.” Their owner? The same racist former deputy sheriff who had years before schooled Gregg, Shawn, and Chris about the racial “rules” in the county. The SCFP bought the buildings at a steal and wrote off the gap between the sales price and market price as a donation, which made the former deputy sheriff—for some time—the largest single donor to the SCFP.

Today, the SCFP is part of the Freedom Project Network, an umbrella nonprofit that Gregg, Shawn, and Chris created, which



SCFP students in front of the LEAD Center in Sunflower.

serves more than 100 students a year and has two other locations across the state. It has expanded to serve elementary through high school students, and even students beyond. One of

its programs, the Freedom Fellowship, is a 10-year commitment between students and the SCFP. In the seventh grade, fellows begin to participate in school-year arts workshops, study sessions, and trips. During high school, fellows then participate in the SCFP’s school-year workshops and begin to think about their post-graduation future. They also participate in the Freedom Summer Collegiate Program, where they take college-level courses with PhD candidates and have the opportunity to receive college credit. Then, during college, the fellows can join the Alumni College Success Program, where they are supported through weekly check-in calls with peers and mentors and with academic tutoring, mental health resources, and a monthly stipend.² It has helped hundreds of students since its founding.

The monumental impact of the SCFP is, of course, hard to quantify, but its successes are plain. Many of its former students have gone

on to highly successful careers and some have even grown into its current leaders—two of the SCFP’s current board members were part of its earliest classes, and the executive director is a former Freedom Fellow, too.

Desiree Norwood is a striking example. Gregg taught her in third and fourth grade. When SCFP got off the ground, she was one of its first Freedom Fellows. During her fellowship, Gregg was clerking for Chief Justice William Rehnquist and arranged a summer internship for Desiree and another SCFP student at the U.S. Supreme Court’s library and print shop—housing them with local families for the several-week stint. Today, Desiree is the mayor of Sunflower and has a particular passion for providing quality primary and reproductive care throughout the Delta using mobile medical units.³ Desiree is perhaps the epitome of the SCFP’s purpose: to provide education and opportunities for Sunflower County students to flourish in today’s world but also instill a sense of pride and giving back to the place where so many others worked so hard to advance the cause for equality.

The impact of TFA and SCFP on Gregg and Shawn, too, has been huge. After law school, Gregg clerked on the D.C. Circuit and for Chief Justice Rehnquist. Though he first joined Weil, Gotshal & Manges, he soon became an Assistant U.S. Attorney where, among other high-profile cases, he successfully prosecuted Ponzi schemer Allen Stanford. He was appointed as a federal district judge in Galveston in 2012 and then elevated to the Fifth Circuit in 2014. He left the court in 2022 to join Gibson Dunn, where he chairs the firm’s Trial Practice Group. He is still involved with SCFP and remains a fervent supporter of educational initiatives of all types. Gregg believes his experience in Sunflower County was the best training he ever received for becoming a lawyer—it taught him how to educate. “The best trial lawyers don’t argue, they educate,” he said. Given that the key is always simplifying the issues, teaching third and fourth grade taught him much more than law school. The teaching mindset he learned through TFA and SCFP has infused everything, from his legal arguments in complex fraud cases as a practitioner to his Fifth Circuit opinions.

As for Shawn, after law school and a federal district court clerkship in Galveston, he joined Susman Godfrey in 2000. Susman successfully recruited him there because, in part, it made what was then the second-largest single donation to the SCFP (behind only that of the former deputy sheriff). At Susman, he has litigated and tried cases worth hundreds of millions of dollars. But he continues supporting the community—here and in Sunflower. His service has included the Houston board for TFA, the Houston Area Women’s Center, and KIPP Texas. Shawn is also still involved with SCFP and has taken his four sons to Sunflower to witness for themselves its amazing work. He knows that TFA and the SCFP matured him greatly and believes that the biggest lesson for him was to always be authentic. This lesson has been a “huge gift,” Shawn says, to his legal practice, where juries can be just as unforgiving as high schoolers—juries, too, can identify disingenuousness and can impose quite the hurt in their own right.

Both Gregg and Shawn remain convinced

that TFA and the SCFP helped make them into the lawyers they are today. They hope to continue giving back—something they feel is their duty to society as people who have had the types of opportunities and accomplishments that they have had—both here and in Sunflower County, the place that so shaped them into who they are today. 🏛️



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Endnotes

1. The Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator & the Sharecropper* (cover) (2008).
2. *The Freedom Fellowship*, Sunflower County Freedom Project, <https://www.sunflowerfreedom.org/the-freedom-fellowship>.
3. Camilla Potts, *Meet Desiree Norwood—A Young Woman with a Heart for Youth and Community*, The Enterprise-Tocsin (July 4, 2024), https://www.enterprise-tocsin.com/local-content/meet-desiree-norwood-young-woman-heart-youth-and-community?e_term_id=All.

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