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FINDING INSPIRATION IN THE STRUGGLE AT RESURRECTION CITY

By Maurice Berger, October 24, 2017



Devastated by the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jill Freedman quit her copywriting job at a New York advertising agency and headed to Washington, D.C., to protest poverty and live among shacks and tents on the National Mall. Little more than an amateur photographer at the time, her commitment to racial and economic justice made her the only photographer who stayed and documented the entire six-week encampment known as Resurrection City.

Her striking photographs are on exhibit at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York and featured in a book, “Resurrection City, 1968,” published by Damiani with photographs and texts by Ms. Freedman and essays by John Edwin Mason and Aaron Bryant. These photographs document, and invite us to reconsider, one of the most controversial episodes in civil rights history.

Resurrection City was the centerpiece of the Poor People’s Campaign, organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and, initially, by Dr. King. The campaign departed from earlier demonstrations — which had touched on economic issues but emphasized racial discrimination — to focus on jobs, education and a fair minimum wage. Its

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expanded platform helped attract a wide range of participants, including poor whites, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans.

It was initially conceived as a series of nonviolent demonstrations, marches, and meetings with government officials in Washington and other cities. But after the King assassination, and under the direction of the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, S.C.L.C.'s new president, the campaign focused on Resurrection City, a temporary settlement built of plywood and canvas near the mall's reflecting pool.

Construction began on May 13, 1968. Soon, several thousand people were living in a settlement that buzzed with activity. Rallies were held. Celebrities visited. Speeches were delivered. Demonstrators made daily pilgrimages to federal agencies. And Ms. Freedman photographed what she witnessed. "I knew I had to shoot the Poor People's Campaign when they murdered Martin Luther King Jr.," she later recalled. "I had to see what was happening, to record it and be part of it. I felt so bad."

Gaining the trust of its residents, Ms. Freedman intimately documented life in the settlement: people congregating outside their makeshift shelters; demonstrators walking past a line of grim-faced policemen; a dapper man selling copies of Muhammad Speaks, the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam; children in rain boots frolicking in the mud; a kneeling man, his back to the camera, playing the flute; litter scattered on the marble steps of a building; and numerous portraits of residents — dignified, resolute and sometimes weary.

These photographs present a measured view of a historical event that has been more typically labeled a failure by journalists and scholars. The campaign resulted in little substantive change in federal policy. And the encampment itself was beset by problems: fragile structures endangered by intermittent rain and flooding; sanitation and health issues; petty theft; and rifts between organizers. On June 24, more than a thousand police officers cleared the encampment and evicted its remaining 500 residents.

But Ms. Freedman's photographs affirm it was also a place of quiet defiance. These images depict solidarity among activists of all races. They reveal the dignity and courage of parents determined to provide their children with a better life. They portray a range of faces — beautiful, radiant, serious, laughing, or animated in song and protest. They remind us that, for some, the settlement provided a respite from the unremitting poverty of home. "I'm living better here than I ever did there," was the way one resident then described it to The New York Times.

Ms. Freedman's images underscore the vital role played by photography in the movement. Dr. King conceived the Poor People's Campaign as a "new kind of Selma or Birmingham" — an event that might serve as a catalyst for change. He was keenly aware of the power of visual media, whether in print or on television, to spur change, commenting on several occasions about the authority of pictures to shift public opinion. His own popularity, and that of the movement he led, waning, Dr. King viewed the campaign as a way of reinvigorating support for the movement, given its broad platform of economic justice.

But the images of Resurrection City had the opposite effect. Seen in its time as a fiasco, the event was generally represented by images of desolation, filth and decay. Ms. Freedman's photographs of Resurrection City are neither idealized nor derisive. Instead, they offer a compassionate and candid view of a historic event shrouded in myths and stereotypes.

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“If you forget about things like traffic lights, dress shops, and cops, Resurrection City was pretty much just another city. Crowded. Hungry. Dirty. Gossipy. Beautiful,” Ms. Freedman wrote. “It was the world, squeezed between flimsy snow fences and stinking humanity. There were people there who’d give you the shirt off their backs, and others who’d kill you for yours. And every type in between. Just a city.”