

Reverend Ben Elton Cox, Sr.

Early Childhood

Ben was born in Whiteville Tennessee, the seventh of sixteen children. At the age of five his family moved to Kankekee Illinois where he and his family lived in the “colored” section of town with no paved streets. As early as age 5, his parents instructed him that when he went into town he could not look white people straight in the eye, he had to get off the sidewalk if a white person was passing and tip his hat to that person, and say “Yes sir” and Yes Ma’am” if spoken to by a white person. He could only drink out of the “colored only” drinking fountain. If he attended a movie, he had to pay for his ticket at the front ticket booth and then walk to the back of the theater, climb a long flight of stairs, and enter the back door that led to the balcony. The balcony area had no seats—only wooden crates, no water fountain or concessions, and no bathroom facilities.

As a child in elementary school, he and the other black children were treated kindly by their white teachers—given some breakfast food in the morning because most came to school without breakfast, and gave them used coats and gloves in the winter time. This is one reason Ben has maintained throughout his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement that much of the progress blacks have made during and since the Movement has involved assistance from white people, especially women.

In elementary school Ben also remembers saying the Pledge of Allegiance everyday, and the phrase “for freedom and justice for all” stuck in his mind as being diametrically opposed to his everyday life experiences. Based on these school experiences, he determined to help bring “freedom and justice for all” to reality for everyone when he became an adult.

Young Adulthood

Ben had to drop out of school to work to help his family pay the bills. He eventually was able to get his GED, and then graduated from Livingston College in North Carolina with a bachelor’s degree in sociology and a minor in history. He then attended Hood Seminary in North Carolina and Howard University in Washington DC. He received a Master of Divinity degree from the School of Religion at Howard University. He did post graduate course work at the University of Virginia, Old Dominion University, and the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge MA.

Prior to joining the Original Freedom Ride in May of 1961, Reverend Cox was field secretary for CORE (the Congress on Racial Equality). In this capacity, he traveled to various universities teaching students to use non-violent protest techniques to achieve social change. Before he left to join the Freedom Riders in 1961, he wrote his will and sent it to his parents. Even though the Riders were trained in nonviolence, they knew violence and even death were distinct possibilities during the Ride. Ben was one of six blacks on the Original Freedom Ride and the only minister on the Ride.

Rev. Cox is no stranger to violence during his participation in the Civil Rights Movement. "I've been in 37 states for civil rights and in jail 17 times. My life has been threatened 87 times in writing," Cox said.

Rev. Cox also has a 1965 Supreme Court decision in his favor, Cox vs. Louisiana, which is widely considered to be a landmark decision.