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# 'A huge privilege': Youth leaders prepare for civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama



by [Angela Hill](#) March 2, 2020



Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center youth leader Jayda Gray practices public speaking for the 2020 Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage while her colleagues Ellie Lee and Jaylin Brown watch and coach her. (Photo courtesy of the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center)

To see the sites where it happened, to walk in the footsteps of those who changed the course of American history — it’s the opportunity of a lifetime for seven youth leaders from Oakland’s Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center, and they’re taking full advantage of it.

The teens will attend the 2020 Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Alabama this weekend (March 6-8) as guests of Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, accompanying dozens of members of Congress to historic spots in Alabama that were key to the struggle for racial equality.

“This means we get to see history before our own eyes, walking on those streets, walking the bridge in Selma,” Jaylin Brown, a ninth-grader from San Leandro High School, said Saturday at the Freedom Center, based at Merritt College in Oakland, during a prep meeting for the trip. “We can’t understand history as well if we’re not there where it happened,” she said.

Fayth Njenga, a senior from Kentwood in Kent, Washington, is also part of the group and joined the prep meeting via a video conference. “Being able to go on this pilgrimage is a huge privilege,” she said. “No, we’re not being trampled by horses or beaten by police, but we’re learning from our ancestors’ experiences. Plus, just being in a room with members of Congress is going to be such an opportunity to learn and teach.



Clockwise from lower right: Ellie Lee, Dr. Roy D. Wilson (Freedom Center), Jayda Gray, Jaylin Brown and Ursa Kaiser are joined via video by Ayanna Boateng in Sacramento, and Fayth Njenga and Jennifer Hernandez in Washington.

“We want to teach them that today’s youth are ready to fight for the future,” Fayth added. “We hope to leave them hopeful about what this generation can do.”

Along with Jaylin and Fayth, students going on this year’s trip are Ayanna Boateng, a senior from Sacramento Charter High; Jayda Gray and Ursa Kaiser, both 10th-graders from Oakland Tech High School; Ellie Lee, a senior at Alameda Science and Technology Institute; and Jennifer Hernandez, a freshman at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington.

The semiannual congressional pilgrimage to sites in Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, Alabama, started in 1998 by civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, and is a program of the Faith in Politics Institute.



Rep. Barbara Lee, third from left, and Rep. John Lewis, are shown with youth leaders and supporters during last year's civil rights pilgrimage stop at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala.

Lewis, who was beaten by Alabama troopers 55 years ago while trying to march for voting rights, may attend this year's visit despite a serious cancer diagnosis in December. Supporters were delighted to see him at the annual commemorative march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on Sunday.

Lee, a longtime participant on the pilgrimage, is the only member of Congress who regularly takes young people on the trip, said Roy D. Wilson, the Freedom Center's executive director.

“This is the 10th year we’ve been doing this with Congresswoman Lee,” he said. “The students will get to visit places where democracy was enriched and changed in America because of the work in Selma and Montgomery and Birmingham, and we want them to go there with Dr. King’s views clearly in their minds.”



The civil rights pilgrimage will also make a stop at the 16th Baptist Church, the scene of a church bombing in 1963, in Birmingham, Ala.

Indeed, to prepare for the trip, Wilson has had the teens studying Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” an open letter written on April 16, 1963, citing the strategy of nonviolent resistance to racism.

“The fact that he was writing this in jail – that symbolizes so much to highlight the points he’s making in the letter,” student Ursa Kaiser said during the group’s discussion. “He wouldn’t allow institutions even like a jail to break his will or his purpose.”

The theme of the 2020 pilgrimage focuses on youth voices. The students will meet with congressional leaders, make speeches, present on panels and take their experiences back to their classrooms and fellow students.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center promotes the principles of nonviolence and offers an environment where young people actively seek peaceful, nonviolent solutions to difficult challenges in today’s communities, <https://mlkfreedomcenter.org>.

**TAGGED:** [2020 Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Alabama](#), [Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center](#), [Oakland](#), [Rep. Barbara Lee](#), [Rep. John Lewis](#), [Roy D. Wilson](#)

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