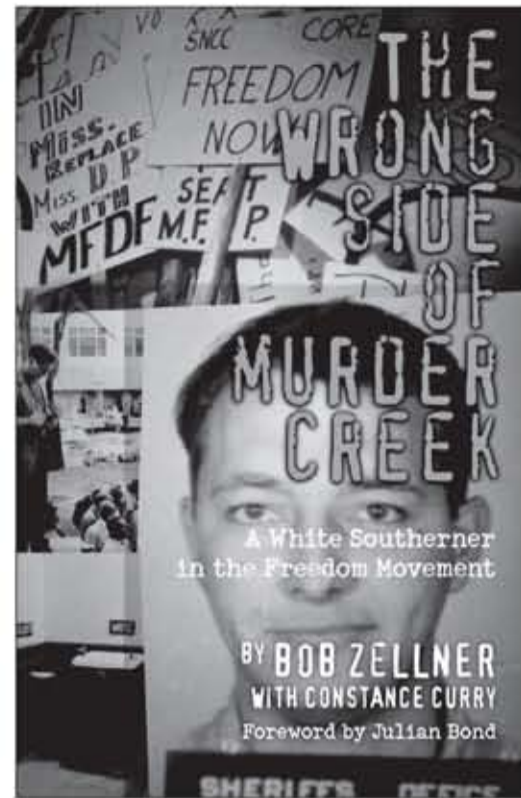


EDUCATION



News-Review photo by Barbaraellen Koch

Community organizer and civil rights activist Bob Zellner spoke to Roanoke Avenue Elementary School third- and fourth-graders Tuesday afternoon about his experiences as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Right: Bob Zellner's book, published last November.

Kids meet civil rights legend

Bob Zellner fields questions on old pals, like MLK, Rosa Parks

By Tim Gannon

The third- and fourth-graders at the Roanoke Avenue Elementary School had already learned about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks in class.

But on Tuesday, they heard from a man who actually worked with both of them, and even spent time in jail with Dr. King in the early 1960s.

Bob Zellner of Southampton grew up in Alabama and was the first white person to serve as field coordinator for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a group that sought to end racial prejudice in the South.

He spoke to the students on Tuesday about his experiences. Mr. Zellner is a friend of Cynthia Richardson, whose son, Jim, teaches at Roanoke Avenue

and arranged the speech.

"It's such an honor to have Mr. Zellner here," principal Debra Rodgers told the students.

Mr. Zellner recently wrote a book about his life called "The Wrong Side of Murder Creek," which he said has been optioned by director Spike Lee, who plans to make a movie out of it.

He recounted how he first became involved in the civil rights movement, despite the fact that both his father and grandfather were once members of the Ku Klux Klan and that, at the time, a white person could go to jail for going into a black church, which Mr. Zellner did.

In fact, he said, he was arrested a total of 18 times in seven different states for his actions in the civil rights movement.

In 1960, Mr. Zellner was attending Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Ala., and was assigned to study racial segregation as part of a sociology class.

At the time, Dr. King and Ms. Parks were in Montgomery, Ala., where they'd led a protest against segregation on the public buses.

Mr. Zellner said he and four other white students decided to go down and see Dr. King and Ms. Parks.

"And do you know what my professor said?" Mr. Zellner recalled. "He said, 'You can't go meeting Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks because you'll get arrested.'"

Mr. Zellner said he was told that simply talking to a black person could get someone arrested in Alabama

See **Civil rights legend**, page 28

Civil rights legend...

► From page 14

at the time because of the segregation laws that existed then.

"We kind of didn't believe it, so we went anyway and we met Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks," he told the students. Dr. King told them he would be preaching at the Rev. Ralph Abernathy's church that Sunday and they were welcome to come. But he warned them, saying, "I want you to know that you might be arrested."

The students went anyway, Mr. Zellner said, and sure enough, the church was surrounded by police.

When Mr. Zellner and his friends told Dr. King they needed to escape, he told them that he'd go to the front door and draw all the police, and they could escape out the back door.

When they did, Mr. Zellner said, "Rosa Parks told me, 'Bob, if you see something wrong, eventually you're going to have to do something about it. You can't just study it.'"

Mr. Zellner said he and the other four students were later told by the col-

lege president that they'd have to leave the school because of their actions.

It was after that they joined SNCC, he said, and began working on the civil rights movement.

The Roanoke Avenue students got the chance to ask some questions, and wanted to know why it was called Murder Creek and what Mr. Zellner's father thought of his helping black people.

Mr. Zellner said the creek was so named because there had been lynchings there, and explained that his father did not object to his involvement in the civil rights movement and even quit the Ku Klux Klan.

Asked what happened to people who participated in so-called "Freedom March" parades after the parades were over, he told the students that marchers were sometimes hit with fire hoses or attacked by police dogs.

Mr. Zellner said he spent 18 years writing his book, and recently received an honorary doctorate from St. Joseph's College in Patchogue.

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