Address at Bob Moses’ Celebration of Life

Given by Mark B. Rosenberg
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Bob Moses: A Remembrance

The comforting aphorism— it’s not the years in life but rather the life in years— aptly fits our appreciation for Bob Moses—

Our condolences to the Moses family and all his friends and supporters.

We have lost someone who found a way to make a difference and left things much better than he found them. At FIU, we pride ourselves on our willingness to take responsibility for our community. We also remind our fiduciaries that we do not want to lighten our load, we just want broader shoulders to do more.

Bob Moses exemplified for us how to lead life in an exemplary fashion. Here is a giant of a person who engaged at the most difficult levels in the early 1960s to advance the cause of human rights in our country through his efforts to enfranchise people with their rights—especially their voting rights. It was a life-and-death battle then. We can still draw lessons from his commitment to bringing people together through the power of his organizational and critical thinking skills.

When I first met Bob in the early 2000s in my capacity as provost and chief academic officer of FIU—a public university that then enrolled 30,000 students (now we enroll nearly 60,000), I got to admit I was puzzled: how could a battered but unbowed civil rights icon, and a man of action and engagement be so enamored with algebra and more broadly mathematics education? There was a huge disjunction in my mind.

But as I began to learn more about Bob, I came to understand that his powerful intellect was nurtured by the works of Camus, Fanon, and Sartre—and in particular, their sense of opposition to whatever disrespects the human condition.

Thus, his view that mathematics could be a tool of liberation just as powerful as the vote and essential to the next phase of his batter to secure the economic rights of the Black community in the same way that he had fought for the political rights decades earlier.

In fact, listen to Bob: this is from his book Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project:

So today… the question remains: how do the people at the bottom get into the mix?

In the 1960s in Mississippi, it was the sharecroppers.
In our time, across the country, it is Black, Latino, and poor white students who are trapped at the bottom with prisons as their plantations.

Are we going to have a society where only a small group of people are prepared for the future, where there’s a huge knowledge gap?

How does such a society stabilize itself?

His answer became the next phase of his life’s work: math literacy and economic access are how we are going to give hope to the young generation.

And I am so proud of his willingness to associate with us at FIU, the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, and more recently, the Broward County Public Schools as we work through the “crawl space” to foster deeper math literacy for freedom and citizenship.

And here was Bob at this best.

Using the power of his vision to see the invisible and the blessing of his organizational acumen to address the segregated political landscape and voting rights, now the fragmented and unequal economic landscape and citizen math literacy.

As we stand on the shoulders of this giant Bob Moses, we must ask the question: how can we sustain the Algebra Project and our own off-shoot—the Florida Local Alliance for Math Literacy and Equity, to engender evidence-based results that honor Bob Moses and his lifetime of seeing a better future and organizing so that it happens.

Bob—we honor you for your years in life and most certainly for your life in years—a long life—well-lived, and we will do our best to keep the hope and progress that you initiated alive and well.

Thank you.