Fifty years after African-Americans demanding their voting rights were flogged unconscious by billy clubs on a Selma, Ala., bridge, we routinely defile the memory of what became known as Bloody Sunday.

In last week's special election in the majority-black 74th House of Delegates District, less than 13 percent of the district's registered voters cast a ballot.

The film "Selma" should be required viewing for those under the impression that we reside in the Promised Land that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of hours before his death. The film depicts the 1965 voting rights marches between Selma and Montgomery, Ala., led by a group that included King and John Lewis, the young activist-turned-U.S. congressman whose skull was fractured during the first Selma march.

While adults of a certain age have no excuse for their apathy, too many young people have too little knowledge of the courage, bloodshed and sacrifice of yesteryear.

A local activist and a Baptist minister are leading a drive to make Richmond part of a national movement to provide free screenings of "Selma" for students. Their goal is to raise $10,000 to send 1,000 seventh-, eighth- and ninth-graders to see the Academy Award-nominated film.

Viacom's Paramount Pictures, which is distributing "Selma," is coordinating the programs with participating theaters, which admit young people who show a current student identification or report card at the box office.

"I was just empowered after seeing the film," said Melissa Ansley Brooks, who is leading the fundraising drive along with the Rev. Dr. Rodney D. Waller, pastor of First African Baptist Church.

"This is our American history. And if we don't tell this story and let the kids experience it, it's an injustice to them. And I refuse to let that happen."

The "Selma" campaign so far includes more than two dozen cities nationwide, with prominent African-American business leaders as catalysts. More than 275,000 middle and high school students across the U.S. will see the film free at participating theaters, according to a Paramount news release.

How long "Selma" remains in Richmond depends on how well it's doing, but Paramount will extend the movie as long as there's an ongoing campaign, Brooks said. She's looking for local businesses, politicians and religious leaders to step up "to show what success looks like and how you give that back to the community."

She enlisted the help of Waller, whose church's history is intertwined with her predominantly white congregation, First Baptist Church. First African was founded in 1841 by a group of black members of First Baptist.

"I thought it was a great idea," Waller said about the film drive.

"I thought students need to see and to know the sacrifices of past generations and to come to the place where they can appreciate where we are now. It wasn't like we just arrived at this place."

Based on his conversations with students, they know little about Selma, whose vivid horrors — broadcast into the living rooms of astounded viewers — sparked the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Waller said students need to see this history "to witness people from all over coming together, to see change. I think it would inspire them. I think it would challenge them. And I think it would cause them to look at the generations of the past differently and become more appreciative of the struggle."
Brooks is married with a 4-year-old son and lives in Church Hill, where she volunteers at Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School. Brooks, who has a law degree, teaches adjunct at L. Sargeant Reynolds Community College and does part-time fundraising for ChildSavers, a nonprofit mental health clinic for children.

"I've always been involved in things, but I'm not always the person who likes to be in the forefront. I'm a worker bee," she said.

"It's one reason I got called into law: to be a voice for people who don't necessarily have a voice."

Reared in an impoverished county in rural Iowa, she has come to embrace Richmond as home.

"I thought if we can bring the Foo Fighters for Richmond, we can do this for the youth of our community," Brooks said.

We cannot afford to let our young people of all races remain disconnected from this history. There will always be another bridge to cross in the journey toward justice and equality. They can't navigate that journey unless they're armed with knowledge of those who left mighty footsteps to follow.

"It would be a marvelous sight," Waller said, "to see children marching into the movie together."

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Selma for Students RVA

Donations can be made:
- at any local SunTrust branch;
- by contacting Melissa Ansley Brooks at selmaforstudentsrva@gmail.com; and
- online through GoFundMe at www.gofundme.com/k6yur8.

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