

Kathleen has written on many of the details, let me present here some background and some impressions.

In August, 1961, S.N.C.C. (pronounced "SNICK" -- the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) went into Mississippi under the leadership of Project Director, Robert Moses. Overcoming violence and hardship, SNCC workers have been able to expand their activities into all five of Mississippi's congressional districts. By fall, 1963, SNCC had joined with C.O.R.E. (Congress of Racial Equality), S.C.L.C. (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), the NAACP, and many voting and civic groups in forming a state-wide organization, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO - pronounced as "FO") and through COFO conducted a Freedom Vote campaign in which 80,000 disenfranchised Negroes cast ballots for Aaron Henry for Governor.

This summer COFO launched a massive Peace Corps - type operation in Mississippi. The backbone of this operation is 650 students from all over the U.S. and some from abroad, who have paid their own way to take part. They are organized into groups in many places in the following projects:

1. Voter Registration
2. Freedom Schools (for youth and adults)
3. Community Centers
4. Research Project
5. White Community Project

The students are augmented by "professional" workers-- most of them from SNCC. Each project has a Project Director and a Minister Counselor. In addition there are several groups independently organized but working closely with COFO and in many respects under COFO's direction. One of these is the Ministers' Project under the National Council of Churches. This project was started by the United Presbyterian Commission on Race and Religion at Hattiesburg and Canton and has since been expanded to include the Minister Counselors and other projects throughout the state. Two groups of lawyers cover every conceivable legal angle. A Medical Committee for Human Rights furnishes top doctors and nurses in a network covering the state. Several teachers' groups have furnished experienced teachers for the Freedom Schools. In addition there are editors, writers, photographers, and even radio men attached to various aspects.

The registration of voters has been slow as Kathleen has said. It is slow not only for Negroes, but also in some places for poor whites. Only the "Closed Society" seems to have easy access to the vote. In order to dramatize this fact of life and to spike the idea that "those not registered don't want to register," a freedom registration has paralleled the main voter registration effort. A Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party has been organized to send an alternate delegation to the Democratic National Convention. Those who are registered to vote and those registered in the "freedom registration" have met in precinct, county, district, and state conventions to nominate delegates. This is an impressive education for citizenship.

Now let me give some impressions:

Prior to and in our orientation we were given instruction on security. The whole time we were in Mississippi we never once were able to relax our guard. This means an over meticulous attention to speed limits and road signs (even 20 or 15 a.p.h. limits.) We habitually watched for cars following us, for unlicensed cars, etc.

To the best of our knowledge, we were never followed. Nobody stopped us or checked on our credentials on the road. However, the week before a rabbi had been beaten up, a car had been pelted with bottles and two fire bombs had been thrown. Many of the cars were air conditioned -- not for the air conditioning but so the windows could be kept closed. All of us cut off our ceiling light so as not to be exposed when the front door was opened at night. We were always careful never to be alone. You can imagine the relief as we crossed over the Mississippi line -- even upon entering Alabama.

The quality of people in the projects is another impression we will not soon forget. Local newspapers and the general white population characterized the students as best-nik, dirty, smelly and ill-educated. They also said that they were atheists, communists and subversives. It is true that we saw two students who were dirty. All of us smelled at the end of a hot, sweaty day. However, I have never been exposed to a more uniformly superior group of young people. Even our college groups (during my university pastorate days) would not have come up to this quality. True, some called themselves "not religious." Others, however, were strong church people -- Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant. Everyone we met seemed to have a strong sense of a cause that was ultimately important. I was reminded of the Old Testament stories of God calling individuals and groups to do his will. He even called other than the chosen people. I have seen these same "Non-religious" students reverently participating in a service of worship in a Negro Church and introducing religious elements into freedom meetings. Jesus preferred those who did His Father's will to those who said "Lord, Lord" and didn't. So to, I was impressed by the high spirit of these young people. Even though their best laid plans might have failed they still stayed in there. Even though they were hungry -- and some were -- they didn't complain. Even though some had resources and could eat well, they never did unless their fellow workers could eat. The white students would not participate in the white conveniences of food or entertainment unless their Negro companions were included. There was bickering and at times almost endless discussion of minor details. After all, most of these people were able to think for themselves. However, when the chips were down, these rugged individualists could move with dispatch and emotion. The "adults" in the medical, nursing, law, and teaching groups also came from all over the U.S. The ones we met were the kind you would want to know and associate with. They were not odd-balls but solid citizens. The doctors and lawyers made the most direct contacts with the white community and seemed tireless.

The "ministers" in the Ministers' Project were divided into the "one week" variety and the "two week or more" type. Most of the latter were Minister Counselors. The "one week" variety were on projects like ours at Hattiesburg. In our group we had a Canon from the Detroit Episcopal Cathedral, a Presbyterian Elder (woman) from New Jersey, a Presbyterian D.C.E., a Disciple lecturer and singer (Rosa Page Welch), and the garden variety of ministers from many denominations. Jewish, Catholic and Protestant were on a common ground. Ecumenicity was present but not contrived. Not once did I hear any complaint about living conditions, or discomforts. Adaptability was wonderful to behold. Imagine a dignified Episcopal priest "lifting" the collection in a Negro church. He stood up front while the congregation filed past and counted the money in full view? My feeling was -- why can't we be like that more often? We do seem to be able to clutter our religious expression with a lot of non-essentials.

The white community is an enigma. They are hard to take. After contacts with some of them I have come to feel that the best description of their conditions is in James W. Silver's "Mississippi: The Closed Society" (Originally delivered as a presidential address at Asheville, North Carolina, at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, November 7, 1963. It has since been published in

"The Journal of Southern History, Vol. LXX, No. 1, February, 1964, also in expanded form in a pamphlet and later greatly expanded in book form). Mr. Silver is a white professor of history in the University of Mississippi. We met, in our contacts with the white community, the dean and several faculty members at the Southern Baptist College, William Carey. We also met faculty and faculty wives from the University of Southern Mississippi (Miss's largest school). They were what you would call moderates. I admire their courage and their sincerity. But they were scared -- not of Negroes but of reprisals from the "closed society" of white people. We met some of these people at night. The noise level was kept low. Outside lights were not lit. They didn't want anyone to see us come or go. Cars were not parked near the house. Cars followed did not arrive. It made one feel like being in another country. Even in Argentina with an intensive anti-Yankee feeling abroad, I did not feel like I did with these white people. One day we visited a white educator. He was very antagonistic at first. Two of us were intercepted on the way to an appointment with the high school counselor. Our "host" who did the intercepting agreed to talk for ten minutes (he had an appointment). He checked our credentials closely. He stayed 1 hr. and 25 min. After he got most of the heat out of his system, we could discuss. All the cliches were dragged out and paraded before us. We had a feeling that this man's conscience was bothering him and that he was afraid. He is sure that the schools will be desegregated but sees only trouble. Uninterestingly enough, he does not see it coming from the Negroes nor from his teachers -- but from the white community. I would like to go into further detail on this but feel I shouldn't. It suffices here to say that Silver is correct in stating that the white community is scared and that there is a "closed society" that gives ample reason to be scared.

One of the plaintive and discouraging features at the higher education level was expressed this way by one of the professors, "A discouraging number of our students come with the 'red neck syndrome'. We're able to lead many of them into a sane position. But most of these students leave the state and do not stay to have an influence on Mississippi." How true! There seems to be an exodus of much of the top leadership -- both Negro and white.

The Negro community as a whole is not afraid. They do have reason to be afraid. They continue to be insulted, beaten and even shot. Their churches are burnt. Houses are shot at and bombed (usually Molotov Cocktails). But they see a hope of a better world. And they have the depth of spiritual insight to support it. Let me give you a few examples: I went on voter registration jaunts with a variety of companions -- two different Negro boys from Hattiesburg, the Canon, and another minister. We were treated courteously everywhere. Most places express a warm appreciation for our presence to help them get their freedom. One woman was not interested in registering to vote and would not "freedom register." Why should she? She felt that the white man will always grind the the Negro under his heel -- and that the only peace comes when you "Uncle Tom" the white man and do his will. She was bitter and beaten.

Another woman, a school teacher, was afraid to try to register to vote. She felt that when her name was published in the paper (~~they~~ for two weeks -- anyone can bring charges as to their undesirability) she would lose her job. After much discussion she signed the freedom registration. Her attitude was "if you can come here for me, the least I can do is to help myself." That woman was free.

Another, Kathleen has already written about. He was 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ years old. He told of having been sold three times, having been liberated by Lincoln, having fought with the Union, of the Hell of the post-war period and the eventual serfdom under his old "narse". I think he is 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ and the Negroes I asked said that he is telling the truth. He is a wise old man. I could have sat there for days listening to his wisdom. He is illiterate -- even though he is a minister -- now inactive

(He got "set down" because of his age). Since he is illiterate he cannot register to vote. He had been approached many times to freedom register and had always refused. This time, after much conversation, we asked him if he was ready to freedom register. His reply was that he didn't think so, after all, what good would it do him. My reply was that perhaps it wouldn't do him any good but I hoped and prayed that it would do Willie some good. (Willie was my companion for the afternoon -- a junior in high school.) He looked us over and then slowly shook his head, "Yeah, Yo is right." He filled out his form and he placed his (X). I felt I had been in the presence of a great man.

Almost all the contacts were warm and cordial -- this was particularly true when families had relatives in the North or West. The most cordial and satisfying contact of them all was with Mr. H. B. Black, Counselor at the Roman (Negro) High School. Mr. Black is not active, as far as I know, in freedom activities as such. He has a master's degree in counselling from Northeastern University. His testing and counselling program is excellent. Any child would be lucky to come under his guidance. We talked for a long time about educational problems and proposed solutions. The greatest difficulty in Natchitoches seems to be pre-school and elementary school. The greatest proportion of drop-outs occur in the elementary schools (There is no compulsory education in Mississippi). If a child gets as far as junior high he has a chance. Young people are going to college in increasing number -- many of them to out of state colleges.

Since this getting long, I'm going to stop. Words can't express all I feel of joy, hope, frustration and anguish all mixed together. We have met some giants and some scared rabbits and many in between. The only way to experience this is to be a part of it. It's a great cause.

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