Get on Board

The Mississippi Movement through the
Atlantic City Challenge, 1961–1964

Is that freedom train a'coming? Is that freedom
train a'coming? ... Get on board, get on board.

—Freedom song

Most women who joined the Mississippi Movement did so with a level
of fear and trepidation. The state was known for its exceptionally brutal
treatment of its black residents and for its extremely strict enforcement
of segregation, yet, early on, SNCC made the Magnolia State its ma-
jor project. The many women who entered the Mississippi Movement
worked undeterred by frightening attacks and the murders of their close
friends and allies. Using Denise Nicholas's metaphor, Mississippi civil
rights activists got on board the freedom train, gave it some steam, and
helped push it down the track.

SNCC staff believed that if the Civil Rights Movement could de-
fend racism in Mississippi, other states would fall in line. In addition,
SNCC organizers noted, black Mississippians make up 42 percent of
the state's voting-age population, presenting the greatest potential for
change of any southern state. SNCC's focus on Mississippi stood in
stark contrast to other national civil rights organizations which, by the
summer of 1961, thought it best to focus on the more liberal southern
states and on major southern cities in an effort to surround and isolate
the Deep South rather than attack it directly.

However, other national organizations still had members, representat-
ives, and programs in the state. In February 1962, SNCC project director
Bob Moses brought together local representatives from the NAACP,
CORE, and SCLC. Using the name of an earlier ad hoc committee, they
formed the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). With the larg-
est number of field secretaries in the state, SNCC remained the most influential member of the group and many of SNCC's programs were carried out under the COFO banner.

Mississippi's rigid enforcement of segregation codes and laws frequently captured national and sometimes international attention. During the summer of 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was beaten to death in the Delta hamlet of Money, apparently because he broke the southern code of black male behavior either by speaking too familiarly to or whistling at a white woman. White Mississippians registered their support for Till's treatment by acquitting and praising his murderers. The memory of the lynching of such a young person, publicized by a picture of his bloated and disfigured body in JET magazine, informed the activism of a number of the women in this book.

The nation and the world received another glimpse into the Mississippi way of life when James Meredith desegregated the University of Mississippi in 1962. Spurred on by Governor Ross Barnett's inflammatory defiance, a crowd of several thousand white students and spectators rioted after Meredith, heavily guarded by federal marshals, entered the school. Two people were killed and more than 150 marshals were injured, almost 30 of them by gunfire. It took more than 20,000 U.S. Army troops to restore order, and a rotating force of more than 200 soldiers remained with Meredith throughout the school year.

Mississippi has a long roll call of lynch victims and civil rights martyrs. At least five of these killings were of people especially close to SNCC's organizing efforts. In September 1961 Herbert Lee, the father of nine children, a local NAACP official, and one of the first men to work with SNCC's project in the small town of McComb, was killed by a Mississippi state legislator. Two years later, in June 1963, two months before the March on Washington, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, who had worked with young people throughout Mississippi, was gunned down at the entrance to his home. In January of the following year, Louis Allen, another early SNCC supporter and witness to the Lee killing, was murdered. Then in June three young men from a COFO project in eastern Mississippi—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—disappeared and were presumed murdered. Chaney, a native of Mississippi, and Schwerner, from New York, were experienced CORE activists; Schwerner's wife, Rita, was working on the project as well. Goodman, a summer volunteer, had just entered Mississippi. While looking for these three young men, searchers found the bodies of three other young black men—Charles Moorer, Henry Dee, and an as yet unidentified teenager wearing a CORE T-shirt. All three were lynched by white terrorists who thought the youths were civil rights workers. In early August the bodies of the three actual civil rights workers were finally found buried beneath an earthen dam on a Neshoba County farm. Then in January 1966 three members of the Klan bombed the Hattiesburg home of Vernon Dahmer, a Mississippi Movement stalwart, head of the local NAACP chapter, and another early SNCC supporter, causing his death the following day.

In the accounts that follow, several women discuss their relationships with the older civil rights martyrs and how they experienced the martyrs' deaths. Other writers describe events and emotions surrounding the disappearance of the three young COFO workers. Although the incident is barely mentioned by the authors, all civil rights activists in Mississippi after early June 1963 were also aware of the awful beatings that female civil rights workers suffered in a Mississippi county jail. On their way back from the South Carolina Citizenship School run by Septima Clark, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and four of her younger companions—June Johnson, Rosemary Freeman, Annelle Ponder, and Euvester Simpson—were arrested after several members of their party entered the white side of the Winona bus station. All five women were beaten badly. June was only fifteen years old.

Annelle Ponder and Mrs. Hamer received the worst beatings after the local lawmen identified Annelle as an SCLC staff person and learned that Mrs. Hamer had been urging black people to register to vote in Ruleville. Annelle was beaten mostly about the head and face, after she refused to use "sir," when answering the jailers. Barely able to speak afterward, she chose to utter only one word, "Freedom." The officers ordered two black male prisoners to beat Mrs. Hamer. Taking turns, they used a weighted leather strap and beat her so badly she received lifelong injuries. She recalled being in so much pain during the beating that she wished "they would have hit me one lick that could have ended the misery that they had me in." Neither she nor the young women were dissuaded, though, and they remained staunch civil rights activists in Mississippi. Their treatment underscores the reality, as do John Christian's and Prathia Hall's experiences, that movement women were not exempt from physical attacks.

Many women—both students and adults—were in the forefront of SNCC's Mississippi efforts. For example, Joyce Ladner, whose story opens this section, and her older sister, Dorie, had already been expelled from Jackson State College for their movement activities when SNCC arrived. Diane Nash, whose story appears earlier in the book, was among the
first SNCC field secretaries to enter Mississippi. High schoolers Brenda Travis and Emma Bell quickly joined SNCC efforts in their hometown of McComb. Young women like Freddie Greene, Ida Mae Holland, and Mary Lane stepped forward when SNCC workers arrived in Greenwood. In her story Mrs. Victoria Gray Adams describes how she and others in Hattiesburg provided support and refuge for the young SNCC workers.

Women from Mississippi, like their Southwest Georgia counterparts, usually came from families that provided them with an awareness of racial inequalities, some protection from racial injustices, and the tools for surviving without a loss to their pride. On their own, they took steps to assert their dignity or to maintain their independence within a racist society. The Mississippi women who joined SNCC projects also had prior protest and organizational experience. Their stories suggest that many black women from the Deep South were savvy and active resisters to racism. Local civil rights activists were softening the ground, as Joyce Ladner writes, long before the sixties Civil Rights Movement began. They saw the sixties movement as part of an ongoing struggle rather than an event with a distinct beginning and ending.

SNCC and COFO efforts to register black voters had begun with accompanying individuals to the courthouse, then groups, then sponsoring “Freedom Days,” which attracted even larger numbers of participants. In August 1963, hundreds of disenfranchised black Mississippians had presented affidavits at polling places for the Democratic primary, stating they had been prevented from registering to vote. That fall COFO also sponsored a statewide mock election running long-time NAACP activist and pharmacist Aaron Henry for governor, with white, Mississippi-born Tougaloo chaplain Ed King for lieutenant governor. Prospective black voters cast eighty thousand freedom ballots for Henry and King. Throughout the campaign for the vote, SNCC workers broke with the established civil rights practice of asking for fair application of literacy requirements and instead called for banning literacy requirements altogether. All the while COFO workers kept track of registration attempts and the attendant reprimands, filed voting rights suits, and followed up on the few legal efforts of the Kennedy administration to chastise racist registrars.

In the winter and spring of 1964, the SNCC staff in Mississippi engaged in a highly charged debate about the efficacy of the proposed Mississippi Summer Project, which would bring large numbers of white northern volunteers to the state. Many on the staff were convinced that their existing practice of using mostly black and mostly local staff and of helping to build grassroots community organizations in a step-by-step, deliberate fashion best represented SNCC’s organizing goals. Staff members finally agreed to the project, however, hoping the volunteers’ presence would focus national public attention on the racist repression and violence in Mississippi. The Mississippi Summer Project sponsored two major programs—the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and the Freedom Schools.

Through the MFDP, black Mississippi residents pushed for the franchise by challenging the legitimacy of the Democratic Party in Missis-issippi, the dominant party in the state. For almost one hundred years the Democrats had comprised the state’s entire political power structure. Repeatedly reelected, Mississippi’s congressmen and senators chaired important congressional committees, giving them significant power in the national government as well. Throughout that summer, Mississippi’s black citizens, assisted by COFO workers, tried to participate in the five-stage all-white state Democratic Party process of choosing delegates to the Democratic National Convention. Anticipating rejection, they simultaneously established a parallel statewide organization that operated from the precinct level to the final selection of delegates at a state convention. Beginning with existing projects, COFO workers fanned out across Mississippi, establishing new projects, thus creating a statewide MFDP organization.

In early August, Ella Baker, who was then coordinating the MFDP’s D.C. office, gave the keynote address at the MFDP’s state convention, held at the Masonic Temple in Jackson. The nearly twenty-five hundred people present selected COFO activists for key positions. SNCC field secretary Lawrence Guyot was elected chairman of the party; Aaron Henry, chair of the sixty-eight-person delegation chosen to go to Atlantic City; and Fannie Lou Hamer, vice chair. Victoria Gray, a businesswoman and SNCC supporter from Hattiesburg, and Ed King were chosen as representatives to the Democratic National Committee. At least twenty of the delegates were women.

At the end of August SNCC field secretaries and office staff traveled with the MFDP representatives to Atlantic City for the convention. There the MFDP delegation, integrated by gender and race, challenged the legitimacy of the all-white, all-male delegation from Mississippi and asked to replace them on the convention floor. Instead the national party offered to seat only two members from the MFDP—Aaron Henry and Ed King. Citing the seriousness of their struggle for the vote, MFDP delegates rejected this offer, shortly afterward ended their demonstrations, and returned home. Mrs. Hamer played an influential role in the group’s
decision to reject the two seats, and her heart-wrenching, nationally televised testimony before the credentials committee about the hardships she had endured in her attempts to register to vote was a major factor in creating favorable public opinion for voting rights legislation.

The Freedom School program was formalized and greatly expanded during the summer of 1964. Before the Mississippi Summer Project, SNCC workers had set up small Freedom Schools here and there for local student participants who were interested in learning more about movement issues or who had been expelled from school because of their movement activities. During the summer of 1964, the summer project established a statewide system of nearly fifty schools serving more than twenty-five hundred students of all ages. The schools offered classes in basic skills in response to the vast discrepancies in the state’s educational system. Mississippi spent four times as much money on white schools as on black schools. In rural areas local funding was even more one-sided. The Freedom School curriculum reflected its movement origins and also included black history and encouraged political thinking by asking students to define their needs and pose solutions. In keeping with the Movement’s organizing style, Freedom Schools employed non-authoritarian, student-focused teaching methods. Many of the women who went south that summer set up the schools and taught in them. Often they also established Freedom Libraries in or next to the Freedom Schools. The Mississippi Summer Project founded other learning and cultural programs as well, including the Free Southern Theater and the Tougaloo Literacy Project.

In response to the plans for the Mississippi Summer Project, white Mississippians increased Ku Klux Klan membership. That summer, individuals, the Klan, and smaller Mississippi groups dedicated to using terror to oppose any advancement in black rights were responsible for the murders of actual and supposed civil rights activists mentioned above, at least thirty-five shootings, eighty beatings, and sixty-five bombings; thirty-five of the buildings bombed were black churches.

Standing Up for Our Beliefs

Joyce Ladner

A young woman learns dignity and courage from her mother, community, and early civil rights martyrs while growing up in Mississippi.

[Editors’ Note: This piece is based on a keynote speech given by Joyce Ladner on April 14, 2000, in Raleigh, North Carolina, during the SNCC 40th Anniversary Conference, which was dedicated to Ms. Ella Baker.]

My Community: Palmers Crossing, Mississippi

Race was always the central most important thing in the lives of my older sister, Doric, and myself. We’ve always carried both the burden and the blessing of this strong racial consciousness. Perhaps it came from our mother, who taught us that you look white people dead in the eye and don’t blink. All the white salesmen, like the insurance collector who came around our house, deferred to her. She always told us that there was a certain way you carry yourself in order to keep your dignity so that white people don’t walk all over you.

One day Doric and I were at the grocery store, a block from our house. Doric had just bought some doughnuts, and we were looking through the magazine rack. We were just entering puberty, and she had just gotten her first bra. The white cashier at the store walked up behind her and tried to touch her breasts. She turned around, took the bag of doughnuts, and began to beat him over the head. Then we ran all the way home, frightened and worried about what our mother would do, because assaulting a white person was strictly forbidden by the unwritten laws of segregation. My sister’s act of defiance might have put us and our family in immediate danger from night riders or the Klan. When we told her what had happened, our mother insisted that we should never tolerate any form of sexual abuse and
replied, in all seriousness, “You should have killed him. Don’t ever let any white man touch you wrong.”

Mother also taught us “Beliefs aren’t worth very much if you can’t stand up for them.” We learned this as well within our all-black community of Palmers Crossing, four miles from downtown Hattiesburg. Here we were taught how to survive with dignity, which was like walking a tightrope. The people around us told Dorie and me that we could indeed stand tall, have the courage of our convictions, and carry ourselves in a certain manner. If, for example, we were faced with the frequent situation of a white man making a pass at one of us, we were instructed to stand proudly, not respond, and walk away like ladies—and it worked. We knew we couldn’t beat too many people over the head with a bag of doughnuts, for fear that we might be killed, but we could demand respect.

Even though we lived in a very closed society, it was possible to get certain information. I read the newspaper from the time I was very little, spending a dime a day to buy the paper. I remember the Brown decision very clearly and how the local newspaper covered it. After that decision there was no attempt at all to desegregate the Hattiesburg schools, or schools anywhere in Mississippi. What the black community got were new public schools in some places, which was the white Mississippian’s way of staving off any attempt to say that we had unequal facilities. WDAM, the major television station in Hattiesburg, was very, very racist in the late fifties, but as an NBC affiliate they would break for Chet Huntley and David Brinkley. This was the one window of national news that we saw.

More importantly, a family friend, an older man by the name of Mr. McLeod, came to our house all the time when I was about twelve or thirteen years old. We called him “Cuz,” though he really wasn’t our cousin. Other people gave him the honorary title of doctor. He was a “race man” who sold herbal medicine and was a member of the local NAACP. Every week he brought us the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier, and every month Ebony and the JET. (Black people in the South always called JET magazine “the” JET.) He also brought books, introduced us to literature on black people, and told us, “You girls are going to have to change things. It’ll be your generation that’s going to change things when you get older.”

Black war veterans also criticized race relations in the United States. I remember when I was a little girl that my uncle Archie, a World War I vet, would sit on the back porch and tell us that going to France had given him a different perspective and that it was disappointing to come back home and see how terrible conditions were. The veterans of World War II, especially, were very important to the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. Many of them were the founders of the then-underground statewide NAACP. I can’t emphasize enough the importance of the role these men played. They were the ones who always felt that ours was the generation that would make things different. For them, the environment was pregnant with possibilities of all kinds of change.

Ours was the Emmett Till generation. No other single incident had a more profound impact on so many people who came into SNCC. We had seen the JET magazine cover of Emmett Till’s disfigured and bloated face with one eye missing. It was just an awful picture. When his body was prepared for burial, no cosmetic surgery was done. In the 1980s I asked Mrs. Mobley, his mother, “Why did you have him buried like that, with an open casket?” She told me, “I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby.” We were his age and could identify with him. I felt that if they had killed a fourteen-year-old, they could also kill me or my brothers. We knew that men were lynched, but we’d never known of a child being lynched before. On a profound, personal level, this reality had a strong, galvanizing effect on all of us. The image is with me still. It became etched in my generation’s consciousness.

Prying Mississippi Open

Dorie and I were very fortunate to be closely mentored by several black Mississippi heroes. Three men who had a profound influence on my life all died for their beliefs—Vernon Dahmer, Medgar Evers, and Clyde Kennard. In the mid-fifties when we were first- and second-year high school students, Mr. Dahmer and Mrs. Dahmer (Brother Beard and Sister Beard, as we called them in our church) and Clyde Kennard used to take Dorie and me to Jackson for state NAACP meetings. I think you seek mentors out as much as they seek you out. It’s possible that the reason they took us is because they knew we had an interest in race, because we talked about it so much. All the meetings were held at the Masonic Temple, up the street from Jackson State College. At these meetings we saw outside people coming into the state, people like Ruby Hurley, who was the first black woman lawyer I ever met. I don’t believe I knew that one existed before then. As Southeast regional director of the NAACP, she would come and speak at these meetings. Gloster Current, the association’s national director of branches, also spoke. Our local mentors, especially Clyde Kennard and Mr. Dahmer, helped us to organize our Hattiesburg NAACP Youth Chapter in the late fifties.

When Clyde came back home in the mid-fifties, he had served seven years in the military as a paratrooper and left the University of Chicago in his senior year, after his father died, to help his mother run the farm. Clyde was just in his early thirties. He was a very quiet person and moved easily
without your noticing his presence, except there was a profundity there. Determined to complete his college education, Clyde applied to the nearby all-white Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississippi) two or three times and was arrested and imprisoned as a result.

Not directly for that, of course. Instead he was set up by local authorities who enticed a young black worker to plant twenty-five dollars’ worth of chicken feed at Kennard’s farm and say that Kennard had planned a robbery. Kennard was found guilty and given the maximum sentence possible; seven years; the young man received a suspended sentence and was immediately hired back by the man who owned the chicken feed factory. In prison Kennard was required to do hard labor, even after he was diagnosed with cancer and denied necessary medical treatments. I began a campaign to secure his freedom, which was picked up by SNCC and JET magazine. Kennard was eventually released, but not pardoned by Governor Ross Barnett, in the spring of 1963. Kennard went straight to Billings Hospital at the University of Chicago but died shortly afterward from the cancer. It was awful. I have never cried, yet I still feel the tears deep down over how terribly they treated him.

When Dorie and I were in high school, there was a network of similarly minded students in the surrounding schools. What facilitated the younger people, my age, joining the Movement was that we were also active in certain high school organizations, which meant we traveled around, mostly within the state. When Dorie and I went to Jackson State College in the fall of 1960, I began to see some of those same students among my classmates. Some of the upperclassmen were people I’d seen at the NAACP office in the Masonic Temple or at the statewide NAACP meetings. We all recognized one another. James Meredith was one of these students; he was older, married, and had been in the military. We knew absolutely nothing about the fact that he had applied to go to Ole Miss.

For first-year college students, every Wednesday afternoon was free time. Most students used this time to go downtown to shop, but Dorie and I would go up to see Medgar Evers, whose office was on the second floor of the Masonic Temple. He would always tell us what was going on in NAACP chapters around the state. One time he told us that there was going to be a sit-in. Without knowing why they were going to sit in, where or when or what, we said, “Really? Can we join?” And he responded, “Well, yeah. You can.” We exclaimed, “Oh, that’s great. Tell us when.” Hesitating, he said, “I’ll let you know later.”

Each time we went by his office, he would say something vague. We knew not to ask too many questions, because having information could be dangerous if you were ever pressured enough to give it up. Once he told us, “You really can’t participate, because I would never be able to explain to your parents why you were arrested, and that’s important to me.” When I was away at school, he had met my mother one time in the grocery store in Palmers Crossing. She’d given him some money to give to me. By then my mother was used to Dorie’s and my activism. She would yell at us, “You know you’re going to get us all killed. They’re going to throw a bomb in this house, shoot it up because of what you two are doing!” But she never told us to stop.

Finally Evers mentioned that the sit-in was going to be soon and told us, “What you can do is try to organize some students on Jackson State’s campus.” We began to prepare for the sit-in. Talk about being ingenuous; for example, when we had a regularly scheduled meeting one night in the dormitory. Dorie, who was president of the dorm council, asked me to say the closing prayer. Without ever saying the word “sit-in,” I talked about, “Oh, dear Lord, there are perilous times ahead. Please protect us as we go into this danger,” and so on.

Next morning, we were called before the dean of students, who asked what I meant by the prayer and “perilous times ahead.” I said, “What do you mean, asking me about what I said to my God? You have no right to question me about my relationship with Jesus.” Dorie, who knew the dean was also an ordained minister, jumped in and said, “As a man of the cloth, how could you?” The dean agreed, “Well, you’re right, you’re right, you’re right.” My sister and I walked out of there laughing.

We also carefully spread rumors so that they could not be traced back to us that something was going to happen and that we had to be ready as students to support it when it went down. Then eight or nine Tougaloo students, members of the NAACP chapter on their campus, held a sit-in at the Jackson Public Library. The sit-in was organized and supported by Medgar Evers. They didn’t go to Woolworth’s or any other five-and-ten-cent store, because they wanted to attack a tax-supported facility. Next we started spreading the rumor that there was going to be a prayer vigil, a meeting, in front of the library at seven o’clock at night.

When we got out there, Rev. Emmett Burns was in the middle of his prayer. Then we heard someone shouting, “Stop it! Stop it! Shut up!” Everybody was looking around, wondering where these orders were coming from. It was the president of Jackson State running through the crowd, arms flailing, absolutely out of control. He was in a frenzy. “What is this? What’s going on? Stop it!” He took Eunice, one of my two roommates, by the shoulder and pushed her on the ground. Then he turned on Reverend Burns. The college administration brought a lot of police on campus that night. The next day, as we tried to march down to the courthouse, where
the Tougaloo students were being arraigned, I heard someone screaming, “Oh, Lord, they’re killing us.” Tear gas canisters were being shot into our group, and they sounded like guns. I ran and hid by going into different people’s homes.

I knocked on one front door, heard a radio, and reached a hand through a hole in the screen, unlatched it, and ran into the house. I told the older black lady who was there what happened. She responded, “Come on in. Nobody’s coming in my house.” She kept ironing and listening to reports of the event on the radio. Talking to herself, she kept muttering, “It’s a lowdown dirty shame, these white folks treating these children like dogs.” Some of the other marchers hid in the embalming room at a funeral home. It was bedlam. Eventually we got back to campus. They closed school early the next day and sent us home for spring break. And when we came back, the college administrators expelled the president of the student government.

This is what Mississippi was like before Miss Ella Baker came. There were a lot of people who carried on their civil rights work underground, lest they be killed. It meant, though, that Miss Baker came into a state that was no longer totally closed. The state was being pried open, because there were the Vernon Dahmers, the Moores, Mr. E. W. Steptoe, Clyde Kennard, the local men and women like Mrs. Hamer, and my dear cousin, Victoria Gray. These are people who consistently took stands. By the time the SNCC people came in, even though direct action couldn’t be carried out in Mississippi, we’d also matured to a point where we realized that eating at a lunch counter was not as important as having the right to vote. Then we thought, naively, that if you get some political power, then you can change things. We hadn’t really progressed yet to the point where we understood that economic power was very, very important.

Franz Fanon said that each generation must define its mission, then fulfill it or betray it. We had our time to stand up for our beliefs. Now my son and his generation have a tougher set of problems to solve than we did, but it is their choice as well.

An activist and pioneering sociologist, Joyce Ladner has taught at Hunter College in New York City and Howard University in Washington, D.C. At Howard she also served as vice president for academic affairs and as interim president. She was appointed to the D.C. financial control board by President Bill Clinton and was a senior fellow in the governmental studies program at the Brookings Institute. Concerned about the importance of improving education for public school students, she has researched successful programs and discussed this topic on nationally syndicated radio and television programs and with interested audiences nationwide. Her publications focus on issues relevant to the black community and include Tomorrow’s Tomorrow, a study of black inner-city adolescent girls; Mixed Families: Adopting across Racial Boundaries; The Ties That Bind: Timeless Values for African American Families; The New Urban Leaders; and Launching Our Black Children for Success.

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Inside and Outside of Two Worlds

Jeannette King

A married southern white woman steps out of her expected roles and becomes an activist in her own community.

The White Community

In January 1962 my husband Ed and I moved into a small wood frame house on the campus of Tougaloo Southern Christian College outside Jackson, Mississippi. Ed assumed the job of chaplain on the predominantly black campus, and I set about finding a job as a social worker in Jackson. My effort failed although there were few professionally trained social workers in the state. I was ostracized from the profession because we lived on a black campus and because Ed and I were two of a very small handful of native-born Mississippi white people who openly supported civil rights.

Ed and I were no strangers to Tougaloo College, having gone there on many occasions as students at nearby all-white Millsaps College. We later learned that the State Sovereignty Commission monitored these meetings between Tougaloo and Millsaps students and called our parents to let them know we were attending. These meetings had a profound effect on my life. It was the first chance I had as a white Mississippian to meet in the same room with black people and discuss personal and intellectual issues. In a short space of time, these meetings accomplished what all the religious (do unto others) and social (be kind to everyone) ideas had just talked about.

By the time we arrived at Tougaloo, Ed had made his commitment to civil rights quite public. In May 1961 he had participated in the second wave of the Freedom Rides. When the bus arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, Ed was attacked and beaten by a mob, arrested with the other riders, and had his picture splashed over the front page of the Jackson Daily News. The morning of the arrest I received a call from a reporter at the newspaper. He
wanted to know if I had decided to break my engagement as well as drop my wedding plans, scheduled for the following summer. The reporter seemed surprised when I said no.

In June 1961 Ed had made an impassioned plea for the Methodist Church in Mississippi to desegregate the churches and the placement of clergy. He made this plea from the floor of the annual meeting of the Methodist Church in Jackson. The conference subsequently sanctioned him and denied him ordination in the conference.

Although Ed had been offered placement in other Methodist conferences in the West, we both wanted to return to the South to participate in the changes that had already begun to sweep across the region. An old friend, Ernst Borinski, who was a Holocaust survivor and head of the sociology department at Tougaloo College, suggested that Ed consider applying for the chaplaincy of the college. This offered us a good opportunity to return to Mississippi without having to immerse ourselves in and be engulfed by the white community in Jackson, which, as capital of the state, was tightly segregated. It was impossible at that point in time to consider functioning simultaneously in both the black and white parts of the community.

Since members of my family lived in and around Jackson, relating to them in the midst of political chaos was often hard. Because of the demonstrations, Tougaloo was frequently mentioned in the newspapers. When Ed and I were arrested, our names were also in the papers. My maternal grandmother, my role model for courage, was a widow who by working as a seamstress had supported three young children during the Depression. She told my mother she was very disappointed in me and gave me the silent treatment. We never regained our relationship, though we saw each until her death at ninety-four.

My two uncles and their wives considered us to be “Commie pinkos,” corrupted by too much education and exposure to the North. Mother stood up for Ed and me within the family and continued to see us while we were in Jackson. Even though she disagreed with our tactics, she agreed with the principle of desegregation. The only thing she would say to me was, “I don’t know why you have to take the burdens of the whole world on your shoulders,” and she would then comment about how tired I looked.

Just how much my mother dealt with because of our high-profile activity was brought home to me one Sunday afternoon visit. As I started back to the campus, I was followed. This was not that unusual, but someone had obviously followed me from near Mother’s house. I took the regular precautions, locked the car doors, and headed for the center of town to make sure the man could not isolate me. When I felt safe, I glimpsed the driver’s face and realized he was our next-door neighbor. When I got to the campus, he went on his way. My mother was living alone in this house, where I had lived until graduating from high school. She told me that this man was a Ku Klux Klan member and had once confronted her about our activities, making veiled threats about “nigger lovers” and what should happen to them. Although he did not specifically name us, there was a cross burned in our yard twice when we lived on the Tougaloo campus.

My mother was also visited by the FBI, who wanted to pump her for information about us and our activities. Since we rarely talked to Mother about what we were doing, she could deny any knowledge. Ironically, at a later time she also had a visit from the FBI about her neighbor and his KKK activity.

We were threatened directly one evening in the fall of 1963. Six of us had gone to a small voter registration meeting at a rural church. There were two black students, one white student, and a Pakistani professor in our Pinto station wagon, including Anne Moody, who later wrote the moving story of her life in Coming of Age in Mississippi. Without warning, three men in a pickup truck with shotguns visible in the truck rack ran us off the interstate. They got out and surrounded our car. They told us they knew we were “nigger lovers” and said we had no right to come into Madison County to stir up trouble. Ed, who was driving, quickly made up a story and told them there was a visiting professor from Pakistan in our car. If we were attacked, he pointed out, it could create a nasty international incident. After a few more threats, the men left.

I felt a wide gulf between the gunman and myself, even though I was white and southern and they were white and southern. We might have been “kissing cousins,” as we say in the South. How incredible that these white southerners could not see either my black friends or the white passengers in the car as individuals, but instead demonized all of us in such a way that they felt we didn’t have the right to live.

The Movement

When we arrived at Tougaloo in the winter of 1962, we immediately joined the Jackson NAACP Youth Group, led by another white faculty member, John Salter. John had reluctantly been made the coordinator of the group over the suspicions of the local adult NAACP leadership, who distrusted his militancy. John and his wife, Eldri, planned to mobilize high school and college students to boycott white-owned businesses in the Jackson area and desegregate public facilities. From 1961 until the June 1963 death of
Medgar Evers, the head of the Mississippi state NAACP, this campaign led to numerous demonstrations and jailings. John and Eldri, Ed and I were to become close friends and movement allies.

Throughout the spring of 1963 the recruited students conducted small demonstrations to desegrate the churches, theaters, and libraries. First demonstrations began with small picket lines prior to an actual sit-in. Eldri Salter, Memphis Norman, Bette Poole, and I had been involved in one of these picketing incidents and jailed. Usually I provided backup as a driver, assisted students in getting out of jail, or brought supplies to them in jail. At the same time movement momentum was building in Jackson, SNCC was undertaking voter registration projects in several Mississippi communities.

The attempt to desegrate the Woolworth’s lunch counter was the most violent. Anne Moody, John Salter, and Joan Trumpauer were threatened and beaten for two hours as they sat in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter. Our efforts to get the police to intervene during the attack on those three proved fruitless. Ed and Tougaloo president Dan Beittel joined subsequent sit-ins. The unresponsiveness of the authorities ignited the students as well as Medgar Evers, who initially had hesitated to support the Jackson boycott. The NAACP national leadership became more reluctant to support the Jackson Movement as the number of arrests rose into the hundreds and the leadership of the national office was asked to provide bail and legal support.

It took tremendous courage by the student activists to be a part of the demonstrations. Many were afraid, with good reason, about retaliation against their families, most of whom lived in small towns and rural areas of Mississippi. If the identities of the students were known, parents could be physically threatened and/or lose jobs. Even students who weren’t demonstrating were afraid for their families if Tougaloo became known throughout the state as an activist center.

Opinion on the campus about the political activity of Tougaloo’s students and faculty was divided. Many faculty members believed radical action was the wrong approach. President Beittel created an open atmosphere where the activists inside and outside the campus were accepted. As a result, although Beittel had a written contract guaranteeing his position as president until age sixty-five, he was fired. His ouster put a damper on the student movement. However, many of the most active students, like Joyce and Dorie Ladner, Anne Moody, and Bette Poole, joined SNCC projects. Other Tougaloo students participated in a voter registration campaign in Madison County, bordering the college campus. This county had a majority black population and a particularly violent history in its treatment of black residents. One reason for this level of mistreatment was the especially high level of black land ownership, which created some measure of independence for black farmers and fear on the part of white people.

Following the large-scale demonstrations in Jackson, negotiations took place between the city fathers and the national leadership of the NAACP. The national organization put conservative black leadership in charge of the local NAACP, a move vehemently opposed by John and Ed. During this time, Medgar Evers was shot and killed. The gathering at the church the day after Medgar’s death was a mixture of sadness, rage, and solidarity. Three days later, Medgar’s funeral was held and a protest demonstration planned to follow. The NAACP and CORE leadership had organized the protest in compliance with nonviolent principles, but when the five thousand people marching began to sing freedom songs and when the singing was met with police violence, the demonstration broke into a riot. In the days that followed, the more conservative NAACP Jackson leadership sought to control the students.

Three days after the funeral, Ed and John were involved in a serious car wreck. The local papers speculated about whether the accident was intentional. However, there was no evidence to back up the claim. Ed, who went through the windshield of the car, suffered the most damage. While hospitalized, he underwent the first of nine plastic surgeries to repair his face. Initially we were unable to find a doctor willing to treat him or to perform the surgery required. Throughout his hospital stay, I feared hospital staff would mistreat him. I had to be there constantly or have friends from the campus present to ensure that no harm came to him. This accident left Ed in a very weakened condition, but it did not stop his activities.

By the end of summer 1963, we knew massive pressure must be put on the federal government to intervene in Mississippi. All efforts by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) had yielded little real change in voter registration. In most Mississippi counties, black people were still not getting registered. Either they were simply turned away, or they were being told that they failed voter registration requirements. In October 1963 COFO held a statewide meeting to plan for the 1964 elections. The plan involved developing an alternative structure to the all-white state Democratic Party. This was the beginning of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which led to the challenge of the 1964 Democratic National Convention. This meeting was extremely exhilarating—black representatives from county after county participated in the planning of this effort. I was elected as one of the delegates to this statewide convention. The delegates chose Aaron Henry from Clarksdale to run for governor in the freedom ballot campaign. A week later, though weakened by recent hospitalization and facing more
surgery, Ed acceded to Bob Moses’s request to run for lieutenant governor as Henry’s running mate. The statewide campaign had to be conducted in little over a month.

COFO decided to bring in more outside help, including large numbers of white students, to conduct a massive voter registration drive leading up to the 1964 national elections. This decision was a very difficult one because of the very strong feelings of black SNCC project leaders who had worked in the state since 1961. Very few white people had been allowed to work on Mississippi SNCC projects, because their presence would increase the danger to white and black SNCC workers, as well as to movement supporters in the various communities. Black male Mississippi civil rights workers also expressed a personal resentment and fear that this would create a potential for white dominance on projects throughout the state, competing with the existing black leadership. I felt very conflicted about the debate, mainly because it forced me to look at my own role. I had always felt very sensitive about my “whiteness” in a black community and participating in bringing about changes “for black people.” This position had always made me feel like an outsider taking on someone else’s burden. As a result, I could identify with black staffers who did not want to be submerged by white volunteers swarming into the state to “save the situation,” even though I often felt insulted by the condescension directed at me by certain male movement heavies.

When I began to understand my own female rage at any form of male dominance, I better understood the strong stance taken by SNCC men in relationship to the possibility of white dominance and the move to “black power” as they tried to change white-dominated political systems.

Early in 1964 I joined the group preparing to establish Freedom Schools across the state. Our curriculum emphasized a real version of history that included information about the contribution of black people to every aspect of American experience. In addition, we prepared materials for working on verbal and math skills. We had contributions from some stellar national educators, like Staughton Lynd of Yale and Robert Coles and Alvin Poussaint of Harvard Medical School.

During the summer, I worked in the Canton Freedom Schools, one of my most rewarding movement experiences. Later, when local people took charge of their own Head Start programs, the schools became the foundation for the federally funded Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM). I also helped develop college course work for SNCC workers. These programs demonstrated the Movement’s desire to expand the life experience for black Mississippians. The movement leadership understood that beyond getting the vote, the people needed the means for economic power and education and that taking control of their own economic lives was the key.

In late summer 1964 I was elected as an alternate MFDP delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. When the delegation was offered two token seats by the credentials committee, the disappointment and anger the members felt over this cynical treatment cast a dark shadow on the long-term work in Mississippi interrupted by the MFDP campaign. Tokenism was unacceptable. We returned to Mississippi exhausted, feeling defeated and betrayed. For me, this was the beginning of the end of the idealistic phase of the Movement as we had lived it for the previous two years.

In the next year the loose alliance of COFO broke apart as each member organization attempted to redefine its goals. CORE, SCLC, and the NAACP distanced themselves from SNCC, fearful that SNCC’s tactics were too radical to be “managed.” To me, the Movement in Mississippi was SNCC, but there was no place for a white southerner to fit into the organization as it began to change. I had identified with SNCC’s principles of grassroots development and creating mechanisms for change in the economic structure that affected people’s lives. Once again, I was on the outside. Over the coming years I worked with CDGM, a Head Start program that covered sixty counties in Mississippi, making it the largest such program in the country. First I directed the social services program. Later I served on the board of CDGM, along with Annie Devine and many other early movement activists.

My most vivid memories of spring 1963 to summer 1964 are those intense conversations held around my dining room table over food and drink. It was the most intellectually stimulating time of my life. We talked about strategy for demonstrations or spun out theories of possible change in the educational system. Tougaloo’s campus and our house were safe havens for many of the people coming into the state for part-time volunteer work.

Because I believed in our goals, I pushed myself far beyond my personal comfort level when it was required, though I felt more comfortable being the person who cooked the meals and housed people. Internally, I often labeled myself as a coward, because I could not be enthusiastic about demonstrations and being in the middle of sometimes dangerous situations. Whatever role I played, the Movement was life-changing and life-defining for me. I hope it will cast a long shadow over the generations to come—my children, grandchildren, and all our children.

JEANNETTE KING, her husband, Ed King, and their two daughters left Jackson for New Orleans in 1967, where they spent two years, and then lived in India for a year. Returning to Jackson in 1970, she worked as a psychiatric social worker in hospital settings and managed her own therapy practice. She served as president of the Mississippi Association of Social Workers from 1985 to 1987 and won its Social Worker of the Year award in 1987 for her work dealing with
domestic violence and setting up the first rape crisis center in Jackson. She and Ed King were divorced in 1986. In the past several years she has lived in various parts of the United States. She and her partner Jim Russell, an anti-war activist, were together from 1999 until his sudden death in 2006. The grandmother of four, she now resides in the state of Washington.

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They Didn’t Know the Power of Women

Victoria Gray Adams

A Mississippi businesswoman supports student organizers and becomes a full-time movement activist herself.

These Young People Are Our Friends

I’ve always been in the Movement. I’ve always had my own movement, from the time that I was conscious of the situation, both racially and economically speaking. For example, I was very unhappy with the kinds of employment that were available for black women in Mississippi, so I decided to start my own business. When the Movement that you know about came to town, I was a businesswoman selling cosmetics and household miscellany. My mission, as I understood it, was to help people have a better life by providing employment for black people in general but women in particular.

When SNCC people came to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, they represented just one more kind of movement, a way for folks to get a better life. Initially, I got involved from a support stance. At the time the SNCC youngsters arrived, the black powers that be had received their instructions from the white powers that be not to let SNCC in, even though SNCC had been invited to Hattiesburg by a local group, which included Mr. Vernon Dahmer. When the word came down not to let them in, nobody would open their churches or do anything else that might be helpful to these civil rights workers.

I heard that one of the black powers that be was trying to block Mr. Dahmer from inviting the Movement to come to my church. I said, “No, he doesn’t control the church that I go to; SNCC people are welcome there. I’m quite sure that if we meet with my pastor, everything will be okay.” With the cooperation of my pastor, Rev. Leonard P. Ponder, I arranged for my church to be open so that SNCC workers could have meetings there. That’s how the Movement found a place to become a movement in Hattiesburg, in my church, St. John Methodist Episcopal Church, which today is St. John United Methodist Church. For a long time, Reverend Ponder was the only minister who was participating in and supporting the Movement in Hattiesburg.

Arranging a meeting place was the beginning of my involvement. Then the youngsters began to invite me to do other things, including going to Dorchester, Georgia, for the Citizenship Education Program training, an SCIC program run by Septima Clark to train teachers in voter education. I was very excited when I left Dorchester, and back in Hattiesburg I had a voter education class up and going within a couple of weeks.

First I recruited a class of people from my church and neighborhood. Then I went to other churches and invited them to come also. We could not call it “citizenship education”; we called it “adult education” or a literacy program, in order to camouflage what we were doing. Next the SNCC workers invited me to go to a meeting. I took a bunch of kids in my car, and we met with kids from all over the state. That’s where I first met Ella Baker. When I met her and that community of youthful civil rights activists, I realized that this was exactly what I’d been looking for all of my conscious existence. Before, I had not found a community of people who understood where I was coming from. It was like coming home.

When I met Miss Ella Baker it was like we had always known each other. She was never a stranger, somebody I had to get to know. She was a very little figure, with a very strong and imposing voice. Our understanding of things was just so similar. Miss Baker and I, only two of the four adults at the meeting, reacted in the same way and were affirming, embracing, and supporting the youth. We also talked about finding ways to involve adults in the process. As a result, I became a mediator in Hattiesburg between the young civil rights workers and the local community.

For instance, when SNCC workers Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins were walking the dusty roads, encouraging people to register, people in the black community were afraid of them. Their fear was based on articles in the white papers circulated in the city, the Hattiesburg American and the Jackson Clarion Ledge. These papers said the SNCC kids were dangerous, talking about Communism, and that their actions would jeopardize the entire black community. Black people were afraid, among other things, of losing their jobs as well as the few hard-won rights we did have.

I would explain, “These young people are here as our friends, as our supporters. But the local white people can’t see civil rights workers in a positive light, because for white folks civil rights workers are the enemy.” I went to the black churches describing the projects Hollis and Curtis and the others were planning and encouraged people to support these activities.
As I went from place to place for my business, I talked about those young people and why it was important for us to support them. Sometimes the kids had pretty lean days out there. Even though Mr. Dahmer took care of some of their living and shelter needs, he could not do it all. The local white people spread propaganda that the kids had plenty of money. I emphasized that this was just not true. I told the people I came in contact with, “Oftentimes when these youngsters come to your door, they’re hungry. Sometimes the shoes on these kids’ feet aren’t too solid on the bottom. If you can’t do anything else, certainly you could contribute some food.”

I recruited women to come to the freedom house in Hattiesburg and cook. Other people brought food. We organized a telephone tree to be certain that someone would come every day to ensure that the SNCC workers would have at least one hot, well-prepared meal. Some of the working men in the community would come to my house at night and give me money, saying, “Take this. We appreciate what you’re doing, but we can’t help you directly.”

We adults provided a little money sometimes and places to stay and work. Mrs. L. E. Woods, a lifelong businesswoman, provided the freedom house. She had the only hotel facility for black people, like the big band folks, coming into the area. She was a very independent and courageous woman, who understood what was going on as soon as the SNCC kids came to work in Hattiesburg. She had always been interested in voter registration and was one of the first to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

The initial SNCC office was in my brother’s place. He and Mr. J. C. Fairlie had a TV repair shop in the downstairs area of the Masonic Temple. SNCC was there, and then the Delta Ministry came. Everybody in the Movement was in that TV shop. Eventually, the Movement outgrew the space. When Miss Woods became aware that the Movement needed a larger space, she opened up the first floor of her hotel across the street from my brother’s TV shop for the office.

We Need Something New and Different

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party grew out of the frustrations of people attempting to participate in the regular political structure. First of all, we were not getting registered. Our primary effort in Hattiesburg and Forrest County was just trying to get registered. During this time we launched the Freedom Vote campaign. We’d run our own candidates for the purpose of showing the larger national community that people would register and vote if they were granted fair access.

Some of the most significant voting rights suits came out of Hattiesburg. The circuit clerk, named Theron Lynd, was also the voting registrar. He was as obstinate as he was big and tall. He thought all the records, everything, belonged to him. He just did not pay court rulings any attention. Eventually the Justice Department filed a suit against Lynd and his tactics. It was only after that suit was won sometime in late 1963, early 1964, that we began to get registered. When we started to get registered, white officials played all kinds of games. They would say that the precinct meeting was going to be one place at a certain time. We’d get there and there would be nobody there. Or we’d get there and the meeting would be over. Or we’d get there and they just wouldn’t let us in.

This is why in 1964 the MFDP emerged. The party came alive for me when we started having our state meetings in Jackson, Mississippi. It was wonderful. It was just the most exciting thing to think that we were going to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegation. We were doing our politicking; we were making our speeches. At these statewide meetings I spoke, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer spoke, Miss Annie Devine spoke, Miss Ella Baker spoke, as did many others.

Miss Devine, Mrs. Hamer, and I, we talked to each other about everything under the sun. There’s not anything we didn’t talk about. None of us could remember when we first met; we just clicked. We were just perfect companions for each other. After we had been running up and down the road and meeting in hotel foyers for the MFDP, I said one day, “You know, this doesn’t make any sense. We’re giving these folks all of our money. Why don’t we just rent an apartment for the three of us in Washington, D.C.?” And they agreed.

Each of us had her own key to the little apartment we rented in southwest D.C., on Capitol Hill. Whenever one of us was in town, she went over to the apartment and let herself in. Once in a while, two of us would be there; every blue moon three of us would be there. It was exciting for us, slipping into this apartment one by one.

I don’t know where the idea came from to occupy the seats on the floor of the convention during the 1964 challenge. We were outside, picketing and singing. Then we decided to take those seats on the convention floor that had been vacated by the white delegation. They had left those seats because they had received premature and incorrect information that the MFDP had accepted the “two-seat compromise.” Incensed by the idea of giving up even two seats to civil rights activists, they walked out.

Some of our friends on the floor, friends in the delegations from places like Michigan and California, sent back their passes to the MFDP members. We entered one by one and sent those passes back to somebody else from the MFDP who would come in and repeat the process. We just kept passing those passes around until finally all of us were inside. Then we unfurled our
Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party banner and sat in the seats vacated by the white Democratic delegation from Mississippi.

I was always opposed to the compromise. We spent hours and hours discussing this, because not all the other MFDP delegates were as clear. There was a lot of pressure being brought from the big guns, such as Roy Wilkins from the NAACP and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. of SCLC, trying to get us to accept. The big guns thought we should accept the compromise; it would be a victory. They said, “The people have worked so hard, and they need a victory.” They were political animals in the sense of how politics worked at that time. But we were not. We were a different kind of political animal, desperate political animals, with our lives and everything staked on this. To add insult to the injury of offering us only two seats, the white government officials and others were so audacious and arrogant as to tell us who they would have sit in those seats—Dr. Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed King. So what kind of compromise was that? It wasn’t one. I said, “What kind of a victory? A victory of what? Two seats at-large! Who does that represent? Nobody. We came here with nothing and we leave here with nothing.” Oh, it was heavy. It was very, very heavy.

I wasn’t at all sure which way the vote was going to go. When local people are listening to the big guys, the national figures, the people tend to say, “Well, they’re smart. They know.” Here I was in the position of saying, “They may be smart, but right now they are wrong.”

Rev. Andrew Young, an aide to Dr. King, came to my hotel room and said, “Vicky, why won’t you accept it?” I responded, “Andy, because it really is nothing. That’s why.” I continued, “You need to understand something, Andy. We’re not asking you to make this decision for us. We’re asking you to support us. You live in Georgia. We live in Mississippi. What goes on in Mississippi is not always the same thing that goes on in Georgia. We’re going to make our own decisions, because the decisions that are made here affect our lives. All we’re asking you to do is support, not that you necessarily agree with us. Just support us the same way you support us when you call us to come to Alabama or wherever. That’s all we want from you.” And he said, “Okay.”

During the meeting to decide on the compromise, the big guns talked on and on. Mrs. Hamer and Miss Devine and I didn’t say anything for hours. It’s amazing how we clicked that day. We were not sitting anywhere near each other in that church in Atlantic City. I think Mrs. Hamer was down near the front, Miss Devine was somewhere at the middle, and I was near the back. We three just sat and listened and listened. Finally, when I got convinced that something was about to happen, I decided I’d better get on the floor. And I did. I said, “We are here representing people in Miss-issippi who have everything on the line. And they’re looking to us to bring back something that’s going to make a difference. Two seats at-large aren’t going to make any difference. So I’m not going back to the people and lie. We came here with nothing, so let’s go on back with nothing. Quite frankly, if what I’ve seen since we’ve been here is what it’s like, I’m not sure I even want to be a part of it.” That’s exactly what I said.

Next, Miss Devine hit the floor. Miss Devine is always very quiet and very deep. Then Mrs. Hamer hit the floor. Of course, once Mrs. Hamer took hold of an issue and went with it, everybody listened. The other point we made that day was that we can go back and fight another day. We’ll go back and continue the struggle until we get what it is that we need and what we want. That was the final word on that. I think that’s what swayed the MFDP—the three of us up there like that.

I remember clearly that both Dr. Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed King were disappointed. They would have been the persons seated by the Democratic Party, but I don’t think that was the source of their disappointment. They were thinking that the MFDP lawyers were the experts on these matters and that they had recommended accepting the compromise. Our lawyers might have been experts, but they were the experts at things as they were. The last thing we needed was things as they were. We needed something new and different.

Ed and his wife, Jeannette, Mrs. Hamer, and I left Atlantic City and went on to New York to keep a speaking engagement. Ed remained enthusiastic about the Movement, but Dr. Henry only kind of lip-serviced from then on. Later, at the 1968 convention, with a truly integrated delegation, both Henry and King were seated.

The Congressional Challenge

The MFDP delegation was seated in 1968. I don’t think a lot of people tie together the events that made this happen. I never saw the 1964 exploration as a lost cause, although many other people did. I believe if we had accepted those two seats in 1964, then 1968 would have been the lost cause. Because if we had accepted less than we went for, that’s what we would have gotten and it wouldn’t have gotten any better. Also, in between the two conventions there was the Congressional Challenge. The Congressional Challenge really frightened the powers that be.

After we were not able to convince the 1964 Democratic National Convention that we deserved to sit in the Mississippi delegation’s seats, we had to fight another way—that was the point of the congressional challenge. We came back to Mississippi saying, “We’ll fight another day.” During the Recon-
struction period of the 1860s and 1870s there were federal laws enacted that the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890 ignored. One law stated that people can challenge the seating of congressional delegations if they can prove that the congressional representatives have been illegally elected.

We changed lawyers for this second challenge. We wanted lawyers who gave us the information and let us decide instead of making decisions for us. We took depositions in the process and tried to have them printed in the Congressional Record. In fact, I went to jail in D.C. because I went down to the House of Representatives to challenge the clerk, asking why they weren’t printing our depositions in time for us to complete our process.

We challenged the seats of all the congressmen from all over Mississippi. When our challenge was voted on in Congress, the close outcome surprised the Mississippi congressmen. It shook them. It really shook them. They couldn’t believe that as many of their colleagues stood up and voted on our behalf as did.* That vote just really turned things upside down. John Bell Williams, for example, the white congressman from Madison, the congressional district where Miss Devine was from, went back to the other white Mississippi congressmen and said, “You’re going to have to do something, because if they come back again, they’re going to win.”

When he came back to Mississippi, Williams put the same word out. I believe it was this Congressional Challenge that made the white Mississippians know that this business as usual was not going to continue. After that, some of the moderates in the regular Democratic Party began to take courage and reach out to us through whatever channels they thought they had. Their message was “We can talk. We need to talk. Let’s see if we can’t develop something acceptable.” As a result, in 1968 we won the Democratic National Party Convention challenge. Our MFDP delegation was seated that time.

**Dangerous Times in Mississippi: Vernon Dahmer’s Death**

One of my big allies was Mr. Vernon Dahmer, whom I had known most of my life. He drove my school bus when I was a little girl. It was his own school bus, since the county did not furnish black children any buses in the early days. I really got to know him as an adult through my business. When I would be in his community and stop at his house, I would just give up the day, because we would talk forever. We had a very good rapport.

Mr. Dahmer was a significant figure in the community. He was a very successful businessman, farmer, and political activist and had been one of the movers in the NAACP for years. After the Voting Rights Act, he had opened a store to make it convenient for the people in the community to come by and register to vote.

One day in 1966, after we had a meeting in Hattiesburg, Mr. Dahmer said, “Mrs. Gray, I got something I want to discuss with you. It’s very important.” “Okay,” I said, “Can we discuss it when I get back? I’m on my way to South Carolina.” He said, “It can wait. Give me a call when you get back. Okay?”

On the way back that Sunday night, Helen Anderson was driving and I dizzed off to sleep in the car. I dreamt I had left my baby, Tony, on the riverbank while I went up the hill to get something, and there was a huge explosion. And I said, “Oh, my God! My baby! My baby!” Then I woke up and looked at the clock. It was about two o’clock. I wanted to tell Helen about the dream, but thought better about talking about something that terrible.

We reached Hattiesburg between six and seven o’clock in the morning. I had dropped Helen off and was taking Rev. Osmond H. Brown home when the news came over the car radio that Mr. Dahmer’s place had been bombed and that he was in the hospital. When they mentioned the time of the bombing, I almost jumped out of the car, because it was the same time as when I woke up from my dream.

As soon as I got home, I called the hospital. Ann Taylor answered the phone and said Mr. Dahmer was doing pretty well. I asked if he wanted me to go to the hospital immediately, but he said I should get some sleep first. The phone rang after I’d fallen asleep. He was gone. Dead. Just like that.

Voter registration at his store was a threat to the white people. They may have wanted to harm him anyway for all his other civil rights activities, but registering voters seems to be what precipitated this bombing.

**Dangerous Times and the Role of Women**

When I was moving around the country, speaking on behalf of our challenge to the Democratic Party and other civil rights matters, the issue of women’s leadership came up frequently. Many leaders of the MFDP were women. People wanted to know: Why is it that women are out front in the MFDP? Women were out front as a survival tactic. Men could not function in high-visibility, high-profile roles where we come from, because they would be plucked off. There would have been a lot more deaths like those of Vernon Dahmer and George Lee. Think about the black men of the early days of the Movement. Think about how many of them were killed simply because they went down and tried to register to vote or simply because they gave shelter to somebody. The women had to do it.
Dying isn’t so bad, but dying and nothing is ever going to be done about it, that’s foolish. That’s very foolish. You don’t sacrifice your life just for the heck of it. You have to sacrifice your life when you know something is going to come of it. Nobody’s going to pay the price of having taken your life. Nothing is going to happen to discourage it from happening again and again. So that’s what it was all about. That’s why the women were out front. The white folks didn’t see the women as that much of a threat. White thinking has always been, if you controlled the men, you got the rest of them covered. They didn’t know the power of women, especially black women.

Yet the men were involved in less public ways. I knew some of the men in my community who appeared totally uninterested and uninvolved, but when night fell they set up guards at every entry route that could be taken to my house. I remember seeing them sitting there—they sat up on the nearby icehouse, watching. Besides, the men had to be willing for us to be active. Otherwise, you know, as wives and mothers and sisters and sweethearts, we couldn’t have done it.

Some of the killings of black people were known and called what they were. Others were called accidents. But your life was in danger; you could be walking down the highway and somebody could come by and purposely bump you off and go on about their business. It would be called hit-and-run, not murder. Sometimes the targets were women. I escaped an attempt like that myself one night.

After I put my kids to bed, I had a habit of going up to see my aunt. I’d just sit and chat with my aunt and her family, relaxing from the day. I lived in a community surrounded by family, so I felt safe. One night I was on my way up there, and I saw a car coming down the road. Initially, I didn’t think a thing about that car. Then something said to me, just as that car reached me, “Jump the ditch.”

That car swerved out of its way to hit me. But I had jumped the ditch far enough out of the way so he couldn’t hit me. He had all kinds of trouble trying to get his car straightened again. When the car passed, I didn’t know what to do. I just stood there and thought, God, if I hadn’t jumped that ditch, they would have found me here in the morning. And nobody would ever have known what happened. I thought about the high number of hit-and-run deaths around the state, and I said, “That’s what’s been happening to these people.” And I came within a hair’s width of being one of them.

I went on up to my aunt’s house. I was so shook. I told everyone what had happened. They said, “We done told you about not walking these streets at night!” They knew that I never locked my doors. They criticized me for that as well.

Reflections for Today

On James Meredith’s March against Fear in 1966, when we came into Canton, Mississippi, we were gassed. We held a meeting that night. All of the big wheels were there, including Rev. Abernathy and Dr. King. I wondered, “Well, what are we going to ask for?” We were in a good bargaining position. The local authorities had blown it by using the gas. The first thing out of somebody’s mouth was, “We want some black policemen.”

I was mad as a whip that that’s all they asked for, black policemen. I fumed, “I am so sick of people asking for black policemen, I don’t know what to do.” Everybody turned around and asked, “What’s wrong with black policemen?” I said, “There is nothing wrong with black policemen. They just don’t have any kind of power. That’s all. Policemen are nothing but tools in the hands of more powerful people. The people who are really in charge can use black policemen to do the same thing to you as the white policemen have been doing to you. This time they can feel good about it, because it’s your own folks that’s doing it. If you’re going to ask for something, ask for something that can make a difference.”

The strength of the Civil Rights Movement was in the fact that there were so many local people involved. We had marvelous high-profile national spokespersons, but the day-to-day work, the hanging in there was done by the local people. Once they were able to rise above their fear, they had the courage to stand up for what was rightfully theirs as citizens of this country. Local people made the difference.

To young people today, I would say, “Get to know everyday people. Make sure you acquire, to the degree possible, the wisdom and knowledge of these people. Everybody has something to say and something to offer. There should be an opportunity for that to happen. Make the information available and all of the sources accessible. Then hear what the people have to say. If you do, you will find.”

Strong people don’t need strong leaders.”

VICTORIA GRAY ADAMS became head of the Hattiesburg Project and a full-time SNCC worker in 1962, remaining a member of the NAACP and later joining SCLC’s board of directors. She was one of the first three women to run for U.S. Congress in Mississippi and the first woman to run for the U.S. Senate. Twice a military wife, Mrs. Gray Adams still remains a staunch anti-war activist. Besides Mississippi, she lived in several European countries; Thailand; Arlington and Petersburg, Virginia; as well as Baltimore, Maryland. She created social justice institutions and programs in all of these places and directed many of her efforts toward young people, including helping her middle
son launch a charter school in Baltimore. A compelling public speaker, she traveled widely to share her Freedom Movement experiences. Several books and films document her work, most notably *Freedom on My Mind* and *Standing on Our Sisters' Shoulders*. The mother of a daughter and three sons, she nurtured her oldest son through his journey with AIDS. She made her final transition in August 2006.

“They Didn’t Know The Power of Women” © 2010 by Rev. Cecil Gray

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**Do Whatever You Are Big Enough to Do**

Jean Smith Young

A black Howard University student participates in Mississippi Freedom Summer.

**The Freedom Vote**

In the spring of 1964 I went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, as part of a SNCC effort to organize a statewide Freedom Vote, one of the building blocks to the MFDP’s August challenge of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party. The Hattiesburg Freedom Vote was held on the same day as the regular precinct elections. This very hot day started under the watchful eye of Miss Woods, a black lady somewhere between forty-five and seventy-five years old, who allowed us to use her rooming house on Mobile Street—the colored business street of Hattiesburg—as a meeting place. Sometimes we held special meetings upstairs, in the parlor decorated with thick red curtains and velvet settees, but mostly we used her large kitchen as a regular meeting place. She lived upstairs in quarters that I imagined to be very elegant and to which we were never invited. Miss Woods was a business lady.

Miss Woods was also a very proper lady. She was a thin, handsome, coffee-colored woman who always wore a delicate, white, starched blouse adorned with an old ivory brooch with intricate metalwork or a lace collar. She always had on stockings, no matter what time of the day or night you met her.

She had been political since the 1940s, when she and her husband had joined the “Black and Tan,” the black Republican Party in this southeastern part of the state. They joined because of the blatant exclusion of blacks from the Democratic Party at that time. After the Black and Tan, Miss Woods had continued to work for black voting rights. She was willing to support any organization that was for voting, whether it was the NAACP or our younger, brasher organization, as long as we followed her house rules. She didn’t want any foolishness. She wasn’t the least bit interested in youthful exuberance, and she didn’t allow any sexual liaisons in her boardinghouse. Miss Woods wanted you to know that she meant business. But after she thought you had gotten that message, she was a kind and nurturing woman.

On the morning of the precinct elections, Miss Woods came downstairs into the kitchen to wish us good luck. That morning she found just two people in her kitchen, project director Sandy Leigh and myself, eating grits and bacon. Her eyes swept the kitchen to make sure we had kept it clean. She disapproved of my Afro hairdo, but I could tell by the way the lines in her face softened when she talked to me that she actually liked me. Lately, when I had caught her unaware, I’d notice that she was looking at me with a special concern. I think she felt sorry for me because I was going with a man from the Movement who, as far as she was concerned, didn’t mean me a bit of good. And I didn’t have sense enough to figure this out. I’ll call him Paul.

That morning Miss Woods looked at me with sadness as I explained that I was waiting for Paul, who was one of the early and legendary Mississippi field organizers and whose reputation stood ten feet tall. The two of us were supposed to lead the precinct meeting. I’d gotten it into my head that I couldn’t start the precinct meeting without Paul.

But I didn’t know where he was. I’d spent half the night looking for him in the blazing honky-tonk places that sprang to life after hours in the woods surrounding Hattiesburg. The following morning I sat drinking Sandy’s really strong coffee and watching the clock above the stove. Eight o’clock and he still wasn’t here; where could he be? Finally, at nine o’clock, Miss Woods got disgusted and said, “It’s time for you to go, Jean. You got work to do. Don’t wait on no man.”

Miss Woods walked with me down the dark center hall that led from the kitchen to the front of her boardinghouse. I glanced briefly at the freshly made beds in the rooms on either side of the hall and hesitated a little. I wanted to stay with her and wait, but she wouldn’t let me. With a pat on the back, Miss Woods basically pushed me out of her dark and supportive world and into the bright sunlight of Mobile Street. No more food and coffee. No more discussions. She pointed me toward the Masonic Hall—across the street and to the right, upstairs, above Mr. Fairlie’s TV repair shop. It was time for me to go. I had a precinct meeting to run.

At 9:30 A.M. I walked up the stairs to the Masonic Hall and pushed open the door to the second story, which had been the meeting hall for the
Then I felt the presence of Miss Woods in the room. I can't remember whether Miss Woods actually followed me from her boarding house and down the street to the Masonic Hall, or whether she spied on me, was with me in spirit, or whether her spirit had accompanied me some part of the way. But I do remember that after I arrived at the Masonic Hall I met her there. Miss Woods and I were members of the same lodge, and we had known each other ever since we were children. Miss Woods was a very kind and gentle woman, and she always took care of me when I was in need.

I remember that night vividly. The Masonic Hall was packed to the rafters with members of the lodge. The air was thick with the smell of cigar smoke and the sound of voices raised in conversation. Miss Woods was standing in the back of the room, watching me closely. I could feel her presence behind me, and I knew that she was there to protect me.

The meeting was a success, and I was invited to return the next week. Miss Woods was very pleased with how I had performed, and she told me that I had a future in public speaking. She was right, of course, and I went on to become a well-known orator and public speaker.

The experience taught me a great deal about myself and the world. It was a turning point in my life, and it helped me to become the person I am today.
along with CORE, NAACP, and SCLC staff, and seven hundred student volunteers—had been enrolling black people in the movement-created Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The MFDP was to serve as an alternative to the existing state Democratic Party, which excluded all black people, a parallel party. More than eighty thousand black Mississippians had registered to participate in the MFDP’s Freedom Vote, thereby showing that large numbers of blacks would be a part of the political process, if allowed. Now we were following the rules for political parties in the state by having a precinct meeting and voting for delegates to the upcoming MFDP state convention to be held in Jackson, again shadowing the actions of the all-white Democratic Party’s membership and demonstrating our legitimate right to represent black voters.

I was so excited with these grand ideas that I had to stop and make sure people were listening. Not only were they listening; but they were also rocking and nodding their heads and shouting, “Amen, sister,” the sweetest sound I’d ever heard—Amen to me, with me! I felt wonderful. Thirty minutes before, I had been tongue-tied and helpless. Now here I was connected to all these people; I was them and they were me. We were sharing a great vision.

One by one, those who felt prepared to take the next risk for freedom rose from their chairs and carefully approached the long table to pick up a ballot and vote. Those who didn’t feel ready to go that far sat quietly and waited. At the table I explained the ballots and gave help if a person couldn’t read and write. I felt a thrill of excitement each time a man or woman who had never voted in their lives stuffed a carefully folded freedom ballot into the homemade ballot box.

I was so excited that I didn’t even think about Paul anymore. By one o’clock I had certified about fifty ballots, and by three o’clock I was on my way to carry them to the state capitol in Jackson, Mississippi, for the statewide MFDP vote count.

That night in Jackson some of the lawyers who were down for the Freedom Vote took me to the black restaurant on Farrish Street. They took notes about the specifics of how I had conducted my portion of the vote. These notes would show that we had carried out the election in an orderly way, consistent with the standards of the national Democratic Party.

Then the lawyers treated me to a wonderful steak dinner. I can still see that steak on its long, white, oblong platter as the waiter brought it from the window in the back of the restaurant. I can still taste that meal. It was the taste of success. I had independently taken responsibility for my organizing assignment, and I didn’t need some man to do it for me or with me. I had helped the Mississippi challenge to become an important part of history. Nothing could have spoiled that meal. It was the day I became an organizer in my bones.

Philadelphia, Mississippi

Soon after the precinct elections, in May 1964 I hitched a ride north to Oxford, Ohio, where a thousand volunteers were to be oriented for the massive Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. About the third day of the orientation, I was sitting next to Judy Richardson in the back of the Western College for Women auditorium. The hall was just large enough to hold the two hundred or so volunteers who had come for this training session. It was handsomely decorated in old, dark wood paneling. I scanned the room, trying to assimilate the new, mostly white volunteers into my thinking and feelings, but there were just too many of them. So I tuned in to Judy.

Judy and I know each other in a deep, abiding way. We can’t remember ever being introduced or our first meeting. We’ve just always known and admired each other. My sort of Jungian theory is that we have a special radar system that connects us because of similar events in our pasts. We both had the misfortune of losing daring and creative fathers early in life and the good fortune of having powerful, intelligent, and driven mothers to carry on.

Both Judy and I got these messages: (1) Life is tough, and you can’t depend on any man to take care of you; and (2) You are very much loved, but there’ll be no pampering around here. Everyone must pull her own weight. From the beginning, Judy and I recognized and related to each other, across crowded rooms and in the middle of the most complicated and frightening situations. This radar that we have lets each of us know that the other can be depended on. There we were in the back of the auditorium in Oxford, just being related to each other and feeling right about it, when Bob Moses, the project director and architect of the Mississippi Summer Project, came out to speak.

Bob explained the project to the volunteers and informed them honestly about the dangers that were ahead. I didn’t listen too closely when he talked about what might happen. After a year in SNCC I had gotten used to the atmosphere of danger and didn’t think very often about dying. Instead of concentrating on Bob’s facts about danger, I was more interested in watching his style and trying to learn how to model his delivery. Bob was good. No matter how determined he was about his own point of view, his presentation was the soul of humility. He rarely placed himself center stage, and this day was no different. He stood on the side of the stage, to the left of the audience. He talked in a conversational tone, so we had to strain to hear him. He paused often to let others speak. He answered all questions at length. He created the real feeling that we would remain in the auditorium for as long as it took to reach a common understanding.
Sitting next to Judy that afternoon, I had just relaxed into Bob’s mood of mutuality and consensus when suddenly the atmosphere became electric with tension. Bob was called offstage for a few minutes. When he came back, his body was stiff and it seemed he was being propelled forward by about four staff members, including his wife, Dona. Then these staff members lined up next to Bob as he announced, in an unusually hesitant way, that three of our people—Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—were missing in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and feared to be dead.

Dead! I had been moving around Mississippi in a cloak of denial, thinking that somehow I would be taken care of and wouldn’t get hurt. Now the reality gripped me, and I was scared. I felt Judy next to me. She was scared, too. I felt the atmosphere in the auditorium. In the stunned silence the room felt cold and empty. It was awful. Fear had separated us and broken down the significant relationships by which I, at least, was defined. Judy was the only person in the world whom I still felt connected to.

So I said, “Judy, let’s sing a song!” I knew she’d agree, because she and I were so much alike. Judy said, “Not me, girl. You do it.” It really didn’t matter which one of us did it. We were interchangeable. The silence and the emptiness continued. I searched the air for a song that would unite us, and the song came to me. I started walking from the back of the auditorium and toward the stage, singing.

I don’t know why
I have to cry sometimes.
I don’t know why
I have to cry sometimes.

It would be a perfect day,
But there’s trouble all in my way.
I don’t why
But I’ll know bye and bye.

Everyone in the room learned that song in about a minute and joined in. By the time I got to the front of the auditorium, the frightened atmosphere had changed into one of resolve and we were together again.

Judy and I went to separate projects after the Oxford meeting. Later in the summer, as it became certain that the three workers were dead, I volunteered to be part of the team that would set up a new organizing project in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town from which the SNCC workers had disappeared. After the Oxford orientation, Bob Moses had pointed out that SNCC had made a mistake by withdrawing from our position in McComb when Herbert Lee had been killed after he attempted to register to vote. Bob emphasized that we should not do this again.

We civil rights workers in Philadelphia stayed close together and focused on maintaining a presence in the face of organized violence. At first we met secretly in an abandoned schoolhouse in the woods that looked as if it had been built to teach freed slaves just after the Civil War.

Four of us were from CORE, because Philadelphia was in the congressional district where CORE had been doing the most organizing, and two of us were from SNCC. We set up headquarters in Philadelphia’s black neighborhood, referred to by its residents as the “colored quarters.” The office was on the second floor of a two-story building owned by Charles Evers, the brother of slain NAACP leader Medgar Evers. SNCC field secretary Ralph Featherstone decided that even though we were nonviolent we should do something to protect ourselves. So we strung barbed wire across the narrow stairs to at least make it hard for the Klan to surprise us. During the days, we canvassed the town and countryside, boldly making our presence known. Sometimes in the evenings we sat around in the freedom house and laughed at ourselves for being nonviolent in a place where all the white people wanted to kill us, and we made jokes about how much worse it would be once they got scratched up by the barbed wire.

Every night, Ralph walked me down the street to stay in the community. Because I was the only woman on the project and we were careful to respect the community standards, I didn’t sleep at the freedom house with the men. Instead I spent my nights terrified in the front room of a two-room wooden house down the dusty road that was the main street for the “colored quarters.” In the evenings my hostess would practically have to break into her own house after she came home from her “day work,” because I used to wedge a chair against the door under the doorknob whenever I was alone. There were no such things as locks. The whole place was so fragile that a hard wind would have blown it down. I went to sleep terrified and each morning woke up grateful that I was alive. Each day, I fought my fear and did my work as a SNCC organizer.

After the three workers had been found dead, in addition to maintaining an obvious presence in Philadelphia, our main goal was to get people to try and register to vote and to openly attend a memorial service in nearby Meridian for the three dead workers. In addition, we tried to get the Native American people who lived around the county involved in the struggle. Neshoba County, where Philadelphia is located, had actually been named for the Indian people. Most of their ancestors had been driven out of Mississippi on the Trail of Tears when whites had decided that they wanted to
farm the land themselves. The furthest we got with the Indian people was to talk to them at the baseball games that they and the black townspeople played on Sundays. At these times we were able to sit next to the Native Americans and explain why we were in Neshoba County. But they never seemed to get beyond their amazement that people who’d been treated as badly as black Mississippians would ever want to come back to Neshoba.

Fortunately, the white people in the county did not try to kill us. I think that in addition to the presence of the Justice Department and the FBI investigating the deaths of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, the local whites really were so surprised that we’d show our faces after what they’d done to our comrades that they had to stop and think about what to do next. Early on in the project, I was caught alone in town by accident and was paced by silent white men in two sedans. All I had was a walkie-talkie that had no one on the other end to hear me. I put the thing up to my ear and pretended that I was talking to someone, and the cars moved away. To this day I don’t know quite why they let me keep on walking.

In about a month we were able to find a church that would allow us to hold mass meetings even though the first church used for this purpose had been burned down. I formed friendships with black people on every block of the colored area. It felt good to know that at least I wouldn’t be abducted and killed in silence.

At the end of the month we held the memorial service for our three brothers. The church was filled with local people and with civil rights dignitaries. Dave Dennis, from CORE, gave a heartrending sermon while Ben Chaney, James Chaney’s little brother, sat crying into his mother’s chest. Leontyne Price, the famous black opera singer, who was from the area, sang a beautiful spiritual. During the service I again felt this powerful relatedness to all my people, even to the Neshoba Indians, who never figured out why we would come there in the first place.

What Organizers Do

My experiences in SNCC strengthened me as a person and taught me some essentials of what organizers do. Although I can’t give a road map to organizing, I can share these conclusions about the process. I believe that once they have chosen a righteous goal, organizers must face fear and must model bravery for others. Organizers have to maintain trusting and dependable relationships with the local people and with one another, no matter what else is going on in their lives. Finally, whenever possible, organizers should use music and art to communicate.

I also learned that my relationships with other SNCC workers strengthened me. There is a theory that a woman is functional, effective, and happy in the world to the extent that she is able to call on her strength as one in relation to others, and to actualize this experience. This posture of being in relation to others was the central fact in my organizing work in SNCC, and it has carried on into my adult working life, first as a teacher and then as a psychiatrist.

I would say that to the extent I was successful as an organizer it was because I maintained close and open relations of mutual dependence with the people I was trying to organize and with my co-workers in SNCC. Even though the language may come from women’s psychology, I’m sure this was not just a female thing. I believe the men in SNCC valued this relatedness as much as the women.

I also believe it is amazing that SNCC existed as long as it did in light of the powerful historical and political forces arrayed against us. Our survival is testimony to the strength of human bonds and relationships. And when the light went out in SNCC, the signal for the coming darkness was that we began to lose the enduring bonds between us.

I cannot end without saying something about the controversy over the role of women in SNCC. I never felt discriminated against as a woman in this organization. In fact, I felt and experienced just the opposite. SNCC was a liberating experience for me as a woman. The staff, including Stokely Carmichael, always treated me as an esteemed member of the team and always encouraged me to stretch my wings and fly. In the SNCC that I knew the message was, “Do whatever you are big enough to do.”

JEAN SMITH YOUNG remained a SNCC field secretary until 1967, taking only a short break to finish undergraduate school. In SNCC she served as a field secretary, community organizer, and campus traveler. She returned to Washington, D.C., where she obtained a master’s degree and taught at the University of the District of Columbia. She then went to medical school and became a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist. She has worked with a number of community-oriented mental health programs serving special populations, such as foster children and mentally ill juvenile offenders. She has instructed medical residents at Georgetown and Howard universities. In addition to her medical work, she is actively and joyfully engaged in the education of her seven grandchildren. Her articles and stories have appeared in Black-Eyed Susans and Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women, edited by Mary Helen Washington; Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal; and in Negro Digest, Redbook, and The New Republic.

"Do Whatever You Are Big Enough to Do" © 2010 by Jean Smith Young
Depending on Ourselves

Muriel Tillinghast

Less than a month after graduating from college, a young woman finds herself in charge of a SNCC project in Mississippi.

Project Director

Three days after I graduated from Howard University in June 1964, I decided I was going to Mississippi. I didn’t know what was going to happen after that, but I was definitely going to “the Sip.” For years I had let my hair grow in its natural state and was associated with the Movement. That alone limited my circle of friends and immediately cut down all talk in my house to an absolute minimum. By the time I had made up my mind to go south, no one in my family was talking to me.

I was basically a northerner. People from Washington, D.C., like to think they are from the North, whether it is reality or not. By the time of my departure, I had gained significant organizing experience in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Delaware. I had demonstrated on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and along U.S. Route 40 (formerly the main artery servicing the diplomatic corps who drove between their embassies in Washington, D.C., and their consulates at the United Nations in New York City). The Eastern Shore was a cauldron of racial hostility, but it did not prepare me for the state of Mississippi.

We spent a week at the orientation center in Oxford, Ohio, getting ready for something no one could really prepare for. We were taught to take Mississippi seriously, to respect our hosts and the community, to understand the risks they were taking and that they might be the ones to save our lives. Then we headed south in Greyhound buses. People sang and spoke quietly among themselves. Everyone was pensive. This would be the last relaxed thoughts and movements we would have for weeks to come. Once we hit the Mississippi state line there was silence. It was past midnight and we had not been told exactly where we would be assigned. Most of us were dropped off in small groups. The local people whose silhouetted forms met the summer volunteers hurriedly escorted their charges from the pickup point, disappearing silently into the starlit Mississippi night. I was dropped off in Greenville, not Greenwood—both are in the Mississippi Delta, but Greenwood was known for its hard-edged racism and active Klan activities.

Greenville was a river town that enjoyed local distinction as being “liberal”—that is, liberal for Mississippi. In Greenville I still had hope.

I spent my first two weeks in the upstairs office of the Greenville Project. I was petrified. How was I going to survive Mississippi? It dawned on me that I would never get anybody to register to vote staying in the office, so s-l-o-w-l-y I started coming downstairs and cautiously going out into the town. I walked like a shadow on the wall, edgy, just getting used to walking in the streets.

The Greenville Project answered to Stokely Carmichael (who later became Kwame Turé), the district head who worked out of Greenwood. My direct project head was Charles Cobb, “Charlie” to everybody. About two weeks after I got my “legs,” Charlie informed me that he wanted to do something else. It was time for him to move on. So he said, “I’m going to leave you in charge. You look like you can handle it.” I thought, Right, sure!

The volunteers, both local and northern-bred, and I developed a routine of sorts and defined our work and roles. Our day started around 4:30 in the morning; we wanted to get to the cotton and day workers before daybreak so that we could talk to them without immediate fear of economic harm. I didn’t realize it at first, but we were under constant surveillance. Once, a young white volunteer from our project was leaving the city library, which was located in the same building as the police station. The police chief stopped her, took her to a room, and showed her a file drawer with pictures of everyone in our project. They had pictures of every kind of activity, taken by day and even at night, because they were using infrared. When this became known, one of the young gay men from our project left, saying tearfully, “Muriel, I can’t have those pictures shown.” It was sad for both of us; he was a good organizer.

The Greenville Project area included Washington, Issaquena, and Sharkey counties. Part of our Oxford training required that organizers learn the political and physical structure of each Mississippi county—its roads and every possible means out of town, places to avoid, how the county operated, people and resources that might be reachable. This you needed to know like the back of your hand. Your life depended on it.

A rural state, Mississippi’s politics were county-based and local. Greenville, the center of our operations, was the Washington County seat. It was the only town in a county of hamlets. Just down the road from us, about forty-five minutes away, stood Issaquena County on the river and Sharkey County on an inland border. Issaquena was a predominantly black county, and Sharkey County was the home of the Klan in this part of the state. Learning about Mississippi taught us up close and personal about politics
the first ones to offer SNCC workers a safe haven there. We worked, family and power. We learned that power could be monopolistic, an inbred, jealous group that operated with control, where new ideas and new people were not always welcomed. We were taught to be afraid of the unknown, to stay in our place, and we were there to encourage opposition to it. Life in a rural setting was quite different. As soon as we had enough, we moved around, worked. In those little country towns, we usually knew everyone, and everyone knew us. Even if the sound of a car horn sounded, we knew who was coming. At the juke joint, church on Sundays, and more work. Work was the way we lived, and we were there to encourage opposition to it.

The police would patrol the streets looking for us. Sheriff Davis and his deputy never showed up for work. The police were not there to help us. They were there to keep us under control. The police would not let us participate. That was our way, and we were there to encourage opposition to it. Life in a rural setting was quite different. As soon as we had enough, we moved around, worked. In those little country towns, we usually knew everyone, and everyone knew us. Even if the sound of a car horn sounded, we knew who was coming. At the juke joint, church on Sundays, and more work. Work was the way we lived, and we were there to encourage opposition to it.

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Why were these black students in black schools expelled? In Mississippi one didn’t get to be a principal in a black school unless one was politically acceptable, a known quantity, someone who would not “rock the boat.” A principal quickly became unacceptable when he or she started having alien thoughts such as, Why can’t we register to vote? and What is this grandfather clause anyway? These thoughts were, by Mississippi standards, alien and subversive. The political cabal with which black principals cooperated wanted to pluck out these “diseased” ones before the cancer of freedom and hunger for democracy took over the rest of the student population.

**You Will Not Move Up**

Even though Issaquena was a majority black county, all the people who had any power were white, including Sheriff Davis. When our paths crossed, we would greet each other—“How ya doin’?”—because Mississippi is country and people knew each other anyway. The first time I saw Sheriff Davis he had a pickup truck. By the next week the pickup truck had a grated metal cage on the truck’s bed. He stopped me and Louis Grant, a black volunteer from New York, hollered out the window, and pointed to the cage, saying, “You like that, you like what I got? Well, that’s fo’ y’all.”

Sheriff Davis’s construction continued. He built a one-room jail out of cinder blocks smack-dab in the middle of a field without a branch for shade. “Do you like that?” The “jail” was just big enough to stand up in or sit down; there was no pacing space and, of course, no sanitary amenities like a toilet—just cinder block in the scorching Delta sun. When we told him he was wasting his time, Davis said, “Well, I know you’re gonna do something, I know you are, and I’m going to keep up with you.” Sometimes when we would walk the county (rides were hard to come by, and cars were even harder!), Davis would ride up behind us and keep pace with us while we walked along. He wanted to see where we were going. Louis and I would stop and admire the scenery, stalling until Davis moved on. Sometimes he would sit in the car and wait. He always tried to guess where we were going. Sometimes we would go past the intended person’s house and go to somebody else’s house in the back, because we didn’t want to lead him directly to our next possible registrant. If we couldn’t shake him, we would leave our visit for another day.

It may be difficult to understand today what local people risked when they took those steps toward freedom and equality. The history of black people in Mississippi is written in blood. As soon as a potential black voter went to the courthouse to register, their employers or “bosses” would often be right there. If the “bosses” were not at the courthouse, they were still informed immediately that “their” worker had taken this step—a step too far. If the people worked in the cotton fields, often they were dismissed immediately, losing both their means of employment and their homes. If they were receiving food through the Commodity Surplus Food Program, suddenly they would be cut off. Occasionally prospective black voters were beaten, arrested on false pretenses, or killed. The power system was consolidated, monolithic, entrenched, and resistant to any notion of change. No, no, no, not you. You will not move up. You and your kind will not change this system; you will not challenge us in any way!

By the fall of 1964 we began to look at other things aside from general voting—for example, how the local power structure obtained its cash flow. There were white gentlemen farmers who planted nothing but made an awful lot of money. Then there were black people who were planting cotton, and if they owned it they were barely able to get it ginned. Early on, we began to deal with the cotton allotment system set up under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Cotton Allotment Board determined federal subsidies to farmers. When we ran candidates for local cotton allotment boards, that hit the economic bell, which, in turn, brought out the Klan. In Mississippi the Klan had rivals and almost looked benign compared to some of the more rabid, racist organizations in the state, like the Association for the Preservation of the White Race, who made no bones about pledging to kill a civil rights worker if one were spotted. Nice people!

One time I called a meeting to organize black tractor workers. I walked right dead into a group of white men who had learned of the meeting somehow and were expecting a meeting of white tractor workers. They knew something was wrong because the meeting was at a black church, and they didn’t look happy. I kind of looked at them, and I knew immediately that they were the type willing to do harm to civil rights workers; they kind of looked at me, trying to figure out who I was. I said, “You here for the meeting?” And they said, “Yeah, You called the meeting?” I said, “No, I’m just looking for the person who called the meeting.” A white volunteer named Russ was with me. He and I, though terrified, walked slowly back to our car showing great confidence, got in the car, backed it up out of there, and deliberately drove off at moderate speed.

All of us learned how to be patient, how to read the situation, because your life could turn on a dime. Later you might laugh, but at the time it wouldn’t seem so funny. Once I backed into a police car. Again, Russ was with me. The car was a stick shift and we were on an incline. Being a very new driver, I was not adept at managing the clutch and the brake, so the car rolled back, damaging the police car behind us. I knew I had to play this one or it might turn into a dangerous situation. I jumped out of my car, acting
incensed, acting like a crazy lady, carrying on about this and that. Poor Russ just cringed—he knew we were dead meat. The policeman got out of his car, surveyed the damage (and there was plenty); but rather than deal with a crazy black woman, he gave me a look of disgust and just told me to get a move on.

**Life Lessons**

One of the things I have learned about doing the work of the Movement is that everything is political and each step is serious. You may not know how serious the step you’re taking is, but when the opposition believes you are trying to shift the “balance of power,” they will always attack, and their attack is always serious. We had so many near misses, so many close calls, and we had nobody to depend on but ourselves.

As a result of movement activism, Mississippians died by the score. I learned that black people in Mississippi are a very special group. I witnessed incredible wisdom and extreme courage. Sometimes I rode with a local resident who was a placid, nondescript kind of guy. I did not like riding with him, because I felt if we were ever in a dangerous situation, I was going to be on my own. One day we were riding down the road, and I said to him, “Do you have anything in this car in case we get stopped?” With a perfect poker face, he said, “Open up the glove compartment.” Then, “Check down underneath the seat on my side, and on your side. Listen, we may not survive, but we sure could blaze a few holes.” I said, “That’s the way I want to go.”

In SNCC we always encouraged people to read and understand things for themselves. We always encouraged people to discuss. Nothing we did was cloaked in any kind of secrecy, which is the way I have continued to operate. On the whole, I think we were very successful. We paid some very, very high prices for our gains—lives lost, mental and physical damage, economic and social destabilization, governmental enmity and invasion—but I think without a doubt most of us would do it again without hesitation.

“And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom”—Anais Nin.

**A Grand Romantic Notion**

**Denise Nicholas**

A college student from Michigan finds her calling and her voice during the Mississippi Summer Project.

**Getting There**

There’s a feistiness about people from Detroit that my friends in California recognize. “Oh,” they exclaim, “those Detroit women are bad!” The life my brother and I experienced growing up in Detroit was enriching and strengthening. As youngsters we saw black people in positions of responsibility and authority: teachers, lawyers, doctors, and police officers. Then there was the music, not just Motown, but extraordinary jazz, also reinforcing a black culture and aesthetic.

My father used to tell us stories about his youth in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He often talked about the Detroit race riot of 1943. He told these stories with humor, saying the white boys tried to do x, y, and z to us and we did x, y, and z to them. What he was teaching, without saying it directly and without preaching, was a way of being in the world that you don’t allow people to do certain things to you with impunity.

At the University of Michigan I heard other stories, stories of southern student activism. Even though Michigan was a white campus with just a few black students, there was enough information coming in to keep us up to date about what was going on in the South. Michigan was (and still is) a very sophisticated campus, idyllic in appearance, but hardly isolated. Tom Hayden was there; people like Stokely Carmichael came to speak on campus. There was an active NAACP branch in Ann Arbor. My very political friend
Martha Prescod and I helped set up a tutoring project for local elementary and high school students designed to get them on a college prep track. Coming from a place like Detroit and going to college in Ann Arbor, when I read and heard stories about what was happening in the South, that other black people were being denied certain things and being pushed down, it just got me going.

Another highly provocative incident that I never forgot was seeing as a very young girl the *JET* magazine photo spread of Emmett Till. Those images were branded on my brain and remain there as if I’d seen them only yesterday. When I was doing research for my novel, *Freshwater Road*, I went to the library and looked at that issue of *JET* to see if my memory was true. It was.

Everything coalesced for me when I took a semester off to go to New York in 1963. Going to New York—without parents—was a necessary rite of passage for some students. New York was the mecca. We had to go to New York, just as other students had to go to Florida. While in New York, I went to a party where I met Gil Moses and other students who had already spent time in Mississippi and were talking about basing a touring theater there. Gil wrote music and played the guitar, spoke French fluently, and talked about movies I had never even heard of. He had studied at the Sorbonne and had also worked with Jean Vilar in his French touring theater.

Gil believed that this kind of theater would work in Mississippi: take the theater to the people. Infuse that theater with a historical and political point of view and, at the same time, keep the artistic conventions of traditional theater. That’s basically the foundation of the Free Southern Theater.

I had no interest in acting when I went to New York. Running into Gil and the other theater people at a party was just happenstance. At that time I had two career plans: plan A was to go to law school, and plan B was to teach. That’s what we were told as women in those days, “If all else fails—teach.” Then I was at that party and Gil Moses was talking about the movie *Black Orpheus*. Here was this brilliant black man who was an artist. And I thought, *What is this*? It was so extraordinary to me that he was an artist and he was political, a new kind of person to be in the world. I didn’t know what that was. I hadn’t been exposed to that kind of person in real life or in my reading. Although I was always a reader, very much interested in writing and literature, I thought of these kinds of things as hobbies, not careers. I did have fantasies about being a person of the whole world. I could see myself in the foreign service, in the Peace Corps. I didn’t know at that point that I wanted to be an artist, or a person who lives through the arts, but it was pulling me. At school I found myself taking more art history than political science and going to cultural events on campus.

That there was a way to be politically involved and also be an artist was very important to me. I don’t really know how much I understood at the time. These were feelings, impressions. There was something grand about the idea of the Free Southern Theater, something idealistic and so romantic. Someone will play the guitar, we’ll sing, we’ll play, and we’ll bring the people in. This was like something out of a dream and was the final pull for me. I was absorbing all of these things, trying to find myself, too, when I went back to Ann Arbor right after Kennedy was killed. I did another semester of school, and in June 1964 I took the train to Mississippi from Ann Arbor by myself, with a little green book bag. I went to Chicago on the train, changed trains, and went south to Jackson, which is the opening geography of my novel *Freshwater Road*.

When I first arrived, alone and scared—my first time in the Deep South—it felt as if I had landed on another planet or stepped back in time. Then I began meeting all these other young people from all over the country, which quickly helped build up my strength and courage. Then I met local people. Pretty soon I was in it. I was home.

**Mississippi Spirit**

The Free Southern Theater (FST) was in the beginning stages when I arrived in Jackson. We were operating out of Tougaloo College and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) office in Jackson. SNCC folk had mixed feelings about a theater. Some people felt the theater and the arts, basically, were frivolous in the face of what needed to be done in terms of voter registration. They couldn’t see how it would help or how it could be anything but a nuisance to have us running around all over the place with our sets, props, and costumes. It was an interesting challenge even from the inside. Gil and John O’Neal (co-founder of the FST) and Doris Derby had put out the word that they were looking for people among the summer volunteers who were theater majors or who had an interest in the theater. That’s how we got the first group. I wasn’t there as an actress; I was reading scripts and writing critiques. After much heated provocation from actress-activist Madeleine Sherwood, John and Gil decided to do Martin Duberman’s play *In White America* that summer. They needed a black actress for the play and asked me to read for it. I read, though I didn’t know what I was doing. They said, “Well, that’s good enough.” What a start!

By the time I arrived in Jackson, James Chaney, Andy Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner were missing. We were afraid, but I think because everybody believed very much in what we were doing, we tightened up and we just kept going. We went all over Mississippi that first summer, perform-
ing in seventeen cities. They found those boys on August 4. I remember, from pictures or television, seeing these white sheriffs with body bags, like Vietnam body bags, bringing in the remains. I have that in my head, right with the Emmett Till photo. Those visuals never, ever go away. There were other unforgettable moments when Rita Schwerner, Mickey Schwerner’s wife, who was also working in Mississippi that summer, came to a number of our performances and spoke at the churches where we were. Her fragile appearance contrasted with her strength as she stood there assuring us that she would not leave Mississippi that summer but would stay and do the work we all had come to do.

That first summer there was violence everywhere. We could feel it in the air all the time. Even when we were dancing and letting off steam in some Dew Drop Inn with a jukebox that was leaning over three feet to the side, danger was always part of the equation. It was always there. In McComb someone threw a bomb at the stage. In another location—Holmes County, I think—men with shotguns sat on the porch all night guarding us while we slept.

Once we performed in a half-finished community center building. Some young builders from California had come out to reconstruct it after the original one had been bombed. When we performed, half the roof was there, the posts were there, but the walls were not up yet. It was incredible and beautiful. We did _In White America_ in that space, and local people guarded us while we performed. Our performances were held in the early evening. We had to follow all the regulations and rules coming out of Jackson, just as the COFO and SNCC workers did, as far as being on the road—for example, making sure the cars were serviced, because you didn’t want to have a breakdown on the road in a rural area; driving a little bit under the speed limit; and being very, very polite with people all the time. We walked around with our necks stiff from tension. We were having this extraordinary experience, but at the same time we were also always riding on top of terror, constantly trying to leap up on top of our own fear and do the things we were there to do.

The Free Southern Theater toured towns where there was a COFO project, places like Canton, Greenville, Meridian, and Hattiesburg. People on our staff worked with the COFO people in the towns we went to. Our housing, how things would be set up, what church we would perform in, publicity, all of these kinds of necessities were worked out between our staff, the local police, and the COFO volunteers in that particular town. COFO workers and local people helped us with advertising by handing out flyers. Young people from the town helped us unload the equipment, do the setup, then helped us take it down and load it onto the truck. Older people in these communities housed and fed us; they really took care of us.

In most of the communities we toured to, the local people had no conception of the conventions of the theater. Often people spoke to us from the audience during performances. During one tour we were doing a one-act that Gil Moses had written, and in that play my character, Dottie, is on stage trying to open a jar but can’t get it open. The husband character takes it, but he can’t open it either and gives it back to her. Dottie tries again. At that point, an older, slightly built man came right up on the stage from the audience and said, “I’ll help you,” took the jar, and opened it. It was so sweet and kind. Things like that happened all the time.

People reacted with joy to our performances. They were happy to have us there and said so. I think it was all a part of the world opening to them, letting them know that we cared enough to come see about them. It was beautiful. It was beautiful to be in the place, to be there. We had discussions after all the performances, so people had an opportunity to voice what they got from the experience of the play and how it and we connected to their lives and how we connected to the political changes that were going on in the South. The theater, like literature, can be a tool of community, of illumination of the human condition.

There was so much energy that first summer in Mississippi; even backwater, teeny-weeny little places picked up the zeal of what was going on in the whole state. In a sense it was like the entire state was in performance. It was uplifting, very uplifting. That whole summer was an incredible moment. We went to places like Mound Bayou, an all-black town with no paved streets. As a young woman from Detroit and Ann Arbor, I saw how poor, rural, and forgotten some places were, but at the same time I saw how wonderful these people and these places were. The spirit was so strong. It was us picking up their spirit and giving back what we had. It was an exchange, a pure exchange.

I was always very shy. It is hard to believe now, because theater made me into a talker. Theater is a group experience, which gave me courage and helped me to develop a personality. I don’t think I projected a whole lot; I wasn’t pushed through to myself until I’d worked for a while in the theater. I’ve heard other actors say this also, that the theater experience, the act of doing it, this group experience, developed them as personalities.

**New Orleans**

Gil Moses and John O’Neal decided that Mississippi was so hard, so harsh and unrelenting that we would probably do better basing the theater in New Orleans and touring into Mississippi. However, the worst incident I experienced personally took place in New Orleans. We had two apart-
ments in a building on Burgundy Street (Bur-GUN-dy, as black people say). SNCC people would come in and use the apartments for rest and relaxation days. On this weekend there were a bunch of SNCC folk in town, and two SNCC photographers went across the street to a little store to get cigarettes. There was a shoeshine stand directly opposite that the police used. Watching from one of the apartment balconies overlooking the street, I saw the two photographers go over to the corner store and come back out, but they never came up the stairs to the apartment. I thought, “Oh, my God, something has happened!” so I walked downstairs. As I walked out the door, a cop pulled his gun out and put it to my head, saying, “If you take one more step, I will blow your effing brains out.” You pay attention to something like that.

I thought, Oh, God, this is it. I could see the photographers in the back of the police car that was pulled up on the curb under the balcony. I just stood there. I couldn’t move. I’ve never been so frightened in my life. I remember thinking, I hope I don’t see on myself out here. I prayed, I hope I don’t die right here on this street. After a few terrifying minutes, other people from the Free Southern Theater came downstairs and the cop let me go. Although the photographers had identification and money, the police arrested them for vagrancy. Correctly assuming the photographers were bringing film out of Mississippi to send it north for newspapers and other media outlets, the police broke their cameras and took their film. Of course, the police weren’t just getting their shoes shined, they were watching the apartment. They were there to keep track of us and to harass us.

There were funny moments, too. Quite a few times when we, an integrated group from the theater, went to restaurants in New Orleans, the waiters would serve the black members but not the white. They set out the place settings and gave menus to the black people, but not to the white people. When we asked, “What are you doing?” they replied, “The law says we have to serve black people, but there’s no law says we have to serve white people.” Of course, we’d leave without eating.

During the first year when we were operating out of New Orleans, we performed in Bogalusa, Louisiana. Bogalusa’s up near Pопlarville, very close to the Mississippi border. There was a chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice there. The police arrested two Free Southern Theater members, one black and one white, and impounded the theater’s car and released them in the middle of the night, very much like what had happened to Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. So we had to go looking for them at night, which was absolutely terrifying. We didn’t know if this was a ploy to get us out and in harm’s way as well. When the arrested ones were released, they ran and hid in the woods, figuring the police would call the Klan or some other similar group and tell them where the Free Southern Theater people were. So with the help of one of the Deacons for Defense, we scouted around, trying to find them, whistling, flashing lights. Eventually they came barreling out of the bushes, scared to death, and climbed into the car, shivering and shaking in fear.

We had heard from local people there that the sheriff was very rough on black people. I went with a white lawyer from the National Lawyers Guild in New York to get the car out of the impound so that we could leave town. We wanted to get the hell out of there. We went into city hall and walked into the sheriff’s office. The sheriff picked the lawyer up by the lapels, lifted him right up in the air, and threw him down the hall. He chose the lawyer, whom he’d identified as a “nigger lover,” rather than me, just a regular old “nigger.” The lawyer’s briefcase went flying, papers scattered. I just stood there shaking. Finally we gathered the papers and briefcase and proceeded to get the Free Southern Theater car out of impound.

When we moved to New Orleans, I enrolled in Tulane because I wanted to finish school, but the theater was starting up again, and I thought, Ooh, I’d rather do that than go to school, so I dropped out of Tulane and went on tour again. On that second tour I believe we did Purlie Victorious. That was great fun. In one town we performed the play right next to a cotton field. There’s a scene where a character comes running through the rows of cotton pitching cotton bolls into the air. It was real cotton. It was mild. The theater, Purlie in particular, allowed for another way of venting—through comedy—and people loved it. They laughed and laughed.

The next fall we did Waiting for Godot. Samuel Beckett’s play. When we toured to Ruleville, I stayed with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. Well, we had to sleep on the floor, because her house was being shot into all the time. We slept this way a lot, but it was particularly important in Ruleville and particularly important staying at her home, because she was definitely a target. I remember sleeping on the floor, just out from under the bed. No wonder my mother didn’t talk to me for ten years!

Godot is a very difficult play, with sparse language, and there are such stark images in the piece, not the least of which is one of a slave with a rope around his neck being pulled by another man who is as enslaved as the other. During the discussion Mrs. Hamer took over the theater and spoke. She keyed in on the word waiting and wound it around in a way to stimulate and motivate people. She began, “Well, we know something about waiting, don’t we?” I have never forgotten her opening comment!

Everybody did every job in the theater, carrying sets and props, acting, and audience development. Generally speaking, our duties rotated. Sometimes I drove a station wagon or a small truck; other times I unloaded and set
up equipment. Actresses received no special treatment, and there certainly was no star system. The thirty-five dollars a week we received for expenses didn’t allow for that.

At the same time, the four people who ran the theater were men—John O’Neal, Gil Moses, and eventually Richard Schechner and Tom Dent. It was male-dominated, male-dominant in terms of the leadership. Still, I did not hesitate to express my opinion as did the other women. I was very vocal in meetings, and, believe me, we had meetings all the time! Everybody had meetings in the ’60s: meetings, meetings, meetings on top of meetings, and talk, talk, talk. Everyone was free to speak at the Free Southern Theater’s company meetings; we all voiced our opinions, and the meetings were long!

Pretty much all of my life my way has been to experience the world and be in the world as fully as possible. Learn as much as you can. Do as much as you can. I don’t know if it crept in and became a codified kind of a thing before or after the Movement. I guess I was already thinking that way, or I wouldn’t have been there in the first place.

When the black power movement took hold in the late sixties, we went through an extraordinary, raging change. The Free Southern Theater had always been a mixed group, and there were a couple of white people who had been integral to making this project happen. People you’d come to know and love were suddenly being excluded. It was a very, very difficult time. The Movement was changing, and we had to change with it. It wasn’t long after that, September 1966, that I moved to New York.

Riding the Freedom Train

As a professional actress, I did not take roles that I thought diminishing to me as a black woman or diminishing to the status of black people in the world. My father, Otto Nicholas, taught me this idea. He loved my career in show business probably more than anyone else in my family, but that was one of the rules I had to follow. Another was nudity. My experience in the Movement supported this kind of thinking. Also the fact that I was a reader, that I had some knowledge and understanding of American history and our history in America, meant I had to discern whether or not a role would cause discomfort for my father, his peers, and really for myself. These films and TV shows don’t go away. So there are a lot of roles I didn’t or couldn’t do. For me that was okay. I reasoned I could always work somewhere. That’s the Detroit in me. My dad was fond of saying, “You can always get a job at the post office.” That was his way of casting his counsel in a humorous light, but he never stepped back from it. I accepted his view and believed I could always get a job doing something and not have to fool with acting if it wasn’t right.

I wouldn’t exchange my movement experience for anything. I’ve had some other wonderful times in my life and some lovely successes. There’s the thought that it would have been nice if the Movement hadn’t been necessary, and, well, this is true, but since it was, I’m blessed. I don’t think anything else is as important as our struggle.

This struggle molded and shaped us. It pulled us in and made us do things that we would not have done otherwise. It’s the good part of the bad part of our experience. My time in Mississippi taught me much about surviving, about the essential things in life and in people that can’t be taken away. I was part of an extraordinary time in our history. I believe that experience made me who I am.

I think what we had was lacking for young people today. There is no great romantic political theme bringing young people together to change or protect or move the human race forward or move the country forward. It isn’t that people aren’t individually doing things, but in order for it to be a great, grand thing and a big romantic notion, it has to be massive. It has to be something that is going to change the course of history.

We were a part of such a struggle in the 1960s. We were very lucky to have lived through that time. It’s a badge of courage and a badge of honor to have been allowed, in a sense, to have been at that point in history at that age when we weren’t really too afraid of too much. We were filled with idealism, and the Movement was right there waiting for us. It is extremely important to me that I was able to find a place in the middle of that struggle. I got on that freedom train and participated in giving it some steam and moving it down the track.

After leaving the South, DENISE NICHOLAS joined the acclaimed Negro Ensemble Company in New York City. Within a year Twentieth Century Fox screen tested her for the role of guidance counselor Liz McIntyre on the new television series Room 222. She won the role and moved to Los Angeles. She went on to star in many popular television shows and costarred with Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier in three films. She costarred on the hit series In the Heat of the Night opposite the late Carroll O’Connor and wrote several episodes for that show.

Nicholas completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Southern California in 1987 and pursued a second career in creative writing. She worked with author and writing teacher Janet Fitch for five years and attended the Squaw Valley Writers Workshop and the Natalie Goldberg Writing Workshop in Taos, New Mexico.

Her first novel, Freshwater Road, a fictional account of the experiences of a Mississippi summer volunteer, received a starred review in Publishers Weekly
One time, Annie Pearl was arrested in the group. Initially a bystander, she placed herself in the procession being led into the paddy wagon and so was hauled off with the rest of us. At the jail the sheriff insisted that Annie Pearl sit down on one of the benches. When she refused a third time, the sheriff started yelling, threatening to shove his foot up her ass if she didn’t sit down. Annie Pearl pursed her brow and, in a steady voice, asked what he thought she would be doing while he was shoving his foot up her ass! I don’t know if Annie Pearl had ever read Claude McKay’s “If we must die, let it not be like hogs, hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.”

Whatever inroads we sowed in the community were being rapidly reaped by Charles Evers, who was in and out of Natchez, building a base from which he would later launch his political campaign for mayor in Fayette—a three-block slip of a town in a forty-five-minute jaunt down the road from Natchez. Pressure was coming from SNCC staff/volunteers to integrate the Natchez Project, which had maintained an all-African American staff and which, because of its location in southwest Mississippi, was considered one of the more dangerous projects in the state. By the spring of ’65, we had established a beachhead in Fayette and worked to have a voter registration rally.

Two male SNCC workers and I moved into Fayette slowly, tapping into a small network of men whose fearless spirits were not bowed by the aroma of Mississippi’s “strange fruit,” which lingered in the psyche of all who were born there, of all who worked, and of most of those who passed through. These men—overalled, in dusty boots—were winter trees, deep-rooted, enduring, and unadorned. Their hearts resided in the spirit of spring and sang of renewal and hope. Their tongues spoke widely and often metaphorically in parables of what was important.

After weeks of visiting, a woman I knew as “Ms. Crew” and her husband offered us a place to live. They were raising two grandchildren. One of my jobs was to braid their granddaughter’s soft, cottony hair—a very uneven exchange in return for biscuits and syrup in the morning and a safe, warm place to lay my head at night.

At some point we were passed onto others, including Mr. Brown and Mr. Peavine. I recall one evening needing a ride back to Natchez. Mr. Peavine offered to drive me back. We left his house after dark and rattled in his pickup truck through piney woods over unpaved back roads into Natchez.

I had lived on my own since I was twenty-one, renting a small apartment just off Central Park West in New York City. My mother had slowly adjusted to the idea of my living on my own instead of returning to the South Bronx, where I had been born and raised. As I moved deeper into the darkness and

If We Must Die
Janet Jemmott Moses

A young New York teacher leaves her job and joins the Movement.

A Place in the Sun

I decided at twenty-two that I would risk my life to stay alive, to walk in the sun without shame or guilt for not doing what in my heart I knew I should do. A chain of events had brought me to this crossroads in my decision tree. Two years of picketing of Woolworth’s stores in support of the campaign against segregated lunch counters didn’t seem to be enough when others were putting their lives on the line. So I finished out the school year—I was teaching social studies at Wadleigh Junior High School in Harlem—and made arrangements to go to Mississippi in the summer of 1964.

I spent my first year in Natchez, which had been pried open by Chuck McDew, George Greene, and Dorie Ladner. We were provided lodging in a rooming house owned by George Metcalf, a local NAACP leader. He worked at the Armstrong Tire Company and was badly injured in a car bombing.

The Maziques would feed us at their restaurant, sometimes for free and sometimes on their eat-now-pay-later plan. Annie Pearl Avery from Birmingham joined us sometime during the year. By that time, we had established ourselves in the freedom house that Annie Pearl guarded at night with her .22.

I spent a lot of time working with the young people who were becoming increasingly conscious of their right to a place in the sun. We would go to pool halls, juke joints—wherever the folk were. The community bailed us out when we got arrested for walking down the street with leaflets and for peacefully demonstrating in front of the local segregated movie theater.
silence of the night, not knowing where I was, with a man about whom I really knew very little, I wondered what she would say.

I wondered why she never suggested that I not go south. She had spent her formative years in Greenville, South Carolina. I recalled the story she told of her mother having to rush her father (my grandfather) home in fear that he would be lynched after he had bumbled into a white woman. He was blind in one eye and had not seen her approach on his blind side. My mother never forgot the terror of the thought that her father might be killed. But whatever misgivings she had for me she kept to herself. Instead she worked with a small group of women in the Bronx to raise funds for SNCC.

That night, driving with Mr. Peavine, I asked not for an answer, but for deliverance—to Natchez of all places—and for deliverance from my fears. Mr. Peavine explained that we would come onto the highway a few miles from Natchez, and we did, much to my relief. Then he returned home the way we had come.

One day I met Mr. Brown and his wife. He listened unemotionally as I told him who I was and why I was there. I knew this was not the first news he had had about voting. I invited myself back—another day, another week—to chat some more. He didn’t tell me not to return, so I would go back and he would ask if I had talked to so-and-so, and I would dutifully go and talk to so-and-so. After several months they all agreed, singly, that registering to vote was a good idea and that they would support a voter registration day in Fayette. We set the date.

I don’t remember how the FBI got involved; a rumor had been launched that there would be trouble, that a group of Klansmen was planning to stop the demonstration. On the morning of the demonstration, local people began to gather around the courthouse in clusters. Some stood across the street, and others sat at the side of the courthouse lawn. I moved from group to group, greeting onlookers and those who had indicated that they might try to register. We escorted those ready to take the long walk up the courthouse steps into the registrar’s office.

I recall that at some point several white men in a pickup truck drove up in front of the courthouse. I watched them from the courthouse steps as they got out of the truck. Trouble was materializing in front of our eyes. There was no place to go, or to run. (Mother had always instilled in my brother and me that we could only be chased if we ran.) The bottom line at that moment was that I not show fear. As they approached the stairs, several other white men—FBI—intercepted their approach and escorted them to their truck.

Mr. Brown indicated that he wanted to see me. He sat on the stone embankment that bordered the side of the courthouse, one among several men with whom we had worked rather closely over the past few months.