***[Mike Miller on Freedom Summer and Beyond, Part 1](http://stansburyforum.com/mike-miller-on-freedom-summer-and-beyond-part-1/)***

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*Long time organizer Mike Miller recently journeyed to Mississippi for the 50th anniversary gathering of Freedom Summer. Peter Olney interviewed Mike for The Stansbury Forum on his return. Here, running in three parts, are his thoughts on the reunion, his trip and the relevancy of the Freedom Summer experience to today.*

**Peter Olney (P):** Mike, you recently returned from the 50th anniversary gathering of the Freedom Riders in the South. Please tell us where you went on your trip and what were some of the activities you participated in?

**Mike Miller (M):** On the way to Mississippi, I stopped at the [National Civil Rights Museum](http://civilrightsmuseum.org/), a fantastic place. You can stand on the balcony where Martin Luther King was assassinated, and look across the way at the window through which his assassin fired the fatal shot; then you can cross the street and visit the assassin’s spot as well. I didn’t stand on the balcony; too painful.  I wondered how history might have been different had King, Malcolm X and Robert Kennedy not fallen to assassin’s bullets. Might a different political configuration have led to something other than the country’s turn to the right?

Making a left turn in one of the halls, I saw a well-known [SNCC](http://www.sncc50thanniversary.org/sncc.html) brochure photo of Martha Prescod, Bob Moses and me (along with some unidentified local people) on the wall and said to a friend, “There I am!” Martha was in Greenwood, MS when I was there in 1963. She became a Movement historian, and is a co-editor of one of the SNCC women’s books. Bob, of course, is the legendary organizer who was SNCC’s Mississippi Project Director.

Hearing my “There I am,” a guy next to me wanted to know the story.  One thing led to another. He wanted a picture with me. Then about 20 black kids making a museum visit together did as well–so I did it one-by-one. Their faces and comments showed a feeling of standing next to a piece of history. It was a touching moment.

The rest of the museum is a terrific collection of visual and narrative material about “THE MOVEMENT”—which we always wrote in capital letters.  It, along with the one in Birmingham and, hopefully, a soon-to-be opened Mississippi civil rights museum, should not be missed.

The Delta counties had black a population 70% to 80% with five percent registered to vote at the maximum; in some it was closer to zero. Fear was deep. People were fired, evicted, denied credit, refused cotton ginning, beaten, their houses fire-bombed, and at the brutal worst, murdered. Internalized oppression led many to consider politics “white folks business.” By and large, none of that exists now. Blacks now work where they never could before; there are local towns and counties with black elected officials, cops and sheriffs. Ebony, a 31 year-old black woman, picked me up at Tougaloo for my car rental. We chatted. While she insisted on the southern “sir,” there was none of the deference that characterized black-white interactions 50 years ago.

But conditions now are in many ways what they were then, and in some ways worse. The schools are still largely segregated, and awful; poverty for the majority is still a fact of life; un- and under-employment are widespread; drugs have penetrated the area, and form an underground economy. Together, these elements create the school-to-prison pipeline, which is alive and well in the state. Mississippi is the poorest state in the country, and no place is poorer than the Delta.

In Indianola, two black students told us about their schools: old books, a strict dress code, suspension for slight infractions of the rules, inadequate staffing. “It’s like a prison,” one of them said. They are part of a school reform organizing effort, whose organizer Betty Petty was our host. [Southern Echo](http://southernecho.org/s/?page_id=5) is the organization that carries on the MOVEMENT’s organizing tradition in the state. Its full-time President is Hollis Watkins, who was one of SNCC’s first Mississippi recruits. It describes its “underlying goal [as] to empower local communities through effective community organizing work…to create a process through which community people can build broad-based organizations necessary to hold…systems accountable to the needs and interests of the African-American community.”

The Blues were born in the 1920s in the shacks and “juke joints” of the Delta. In Clarksdale, [Delta Blues Museum](http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org/) celebrates that history.

I stopped to talk with the museum custodian, a man in his 60s who remembered the bad old days, and whose father was part of THE MOVEMENT. I gave him a poster (I brought about a dozen of them with me for this purpose) that includes the photo of Bob Moses, Martha Prescod and me. He shook my hand for what seemed like minutes, excitedly thanking me for coming down to his state some 50 years ago. “You all did good things back then,” he exclaimed.

“[Mrs. Hamer](http://www.howard.edu/library/reference/guides/hamer/),” as we all called her even when we knew her pretty well, is a legendary leader of the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/cd/mfdp.htm). She electrified the country with her speech to the Democratic Convention’s Credentials Committee in 1964 ([here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TchoKJrvFQ) and [here](http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html)). Here’s her conclusion: “Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?” At the time, the TV networks were angered by a last minute, no-content, news conference called by President Johnson with the obvious purpose of pulling the cameras from Mrs. Hamer’s speech. So they re-played it several times. Delegates on the convention floor cried when they heard her.

Mrs. Hamer was one of the early people to go down to the courthouse to register to vote. She was told by her plantation owner to remove her application or she would be fired. She didn’t, and was. Her house was fired into a few nights later; luckily, no one was killed. She refused to budge, and went on to become a nationally known leader. She is a heroine of THE MOVEMENT.

She later established a pig farm coop, and provided food to both black and white people in and around her country who were living on the edge of starvation. The pig farm was run in an interesting way. Hungry families were given two piglets, a male and a female. When these pigs had a litter, the family had the responsibility to give a male and female pair to another hungry family. Both whites and blacks were beneficiaries of this program, and I’m told the relationships among them were often good—indicating that the wall of racism can be broken relatively quickly if the circumstances are right.

[The Fannie Lou Hamer Museum](http://www.thefannielouhamercivilrightsmuseum.com/) is small, but its collection includes graphic documentation of those earlier times. Photos of Mrs. Hamer, a reconstruction of the shack she lived in, flyers and other documents from the period are all there. We were fortunate to show up when the curator was there on other business. (The museum was officially closed.) She took us on a personal tour. A few hundred yards away there is a Fannie Lou Hamer shrine and burial place. It brought back vivid memories of the times I was with her. In 1963, I went through Ruleville and visited her after purchasing the 1963 memorial issue of Ebony Magazine that celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation. She loved going through it with me as we sat in her house. I bought it for myself—and on my $10 a week income it was pretty pricey. I left it with her as a present. Seeing her joy at reading that history was a far greater satisfaction than having the magazine.

I also remember Mrs. Hamer at the infamous [Peg Leg Bates SNCC staff meeting](http://books.google.com/books?id=hX2uPnGjp1AC&pg=PA214&lpg=PA214&dq=peg+leg+bates+AND+sncc&source=bl&ots=_ulzyaj8RB&sig=BK5UxdqXKgWynN5ilRdHJXmo3HI&hl=en&sa=X&ei=aXnmU4i6CYO0iwKaiID4Dg&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=peg%20leg%20bates%20AND%20sncc&f=false) of December, 1966. (Bates was an African-American one-legged tap dancer who supported good causes.) I arrived to bid adieu to my friends; I was on the way to Kansas City, MO to direct [Saul Alinsky](http://billmoyers.com/content/who-is-saul-alinsky/)’s black community organizing project. When the vote to exclude whites from the SNCC staff passed, Mrs. Hamer was in tears. “Mike,” she said to me, “I just don’t understand what they’re doing.” Her deep Christian faith told Mrs. Hamer we are all children of God. It was the last time I saw her. She died of cancer about 10 years later.

I rented a car in Jackson, and drove to Diamondhead, which is on the Gulf, and visited a friend there. There are still foundations with nothing standing on them–testimony to the power of Hurricane Katrina. My friend lives back from the water, and about 40 feet above sea level, so her house wasn’t touched.

We talked a bit about the recent election. A Tea Party candidate was defeated in the Republican run-off because blacks “crossed over” from the Democrats and voted for his opponent in sufficient number to affect the outcome of the election. An unusual provision in Mississippi law let registered Democrats (which is what most blacks are) vote in the run-off election between two Republicans.

The nominated Thad Cochran is better than the candidate he defeated. But the Mississippi potential is for someone and something much better. I hope the potential will be realized. The pieces and the legacy for something strikingly different are there.

***“Of course you need programs and issues to build power. But these are two distinct things, and need to be understood in their own terms.”***

**(P):** Mississippi summer was such a seminal time in our movement history for issues of race and class. What is the legacy of Freedom Summer for these issues, positives and negative?

**(M):** As your question suggests, there were positives and negatives. On the positive side, the Mississippi Summer Project (MSP) ([here](http://helpingchangehappen.wordpress.com/2014/07/09/the-freedom-summer-of-1964-remembering-mississippis-struggle-for-justice-50-years-later/) and [here](http://civilrightsmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/14-Is-This-America-Learning-Links.pdf)) broke the back of legal discrimination in Mississippi. Barriers to voting, equal access in public accommodations, state and private-violence against blacks who in any way spoke up, hiring in many areas and other features of what had been an apartheid state ended soon after MSP. Of course nationally there was a climate of support for civil rights. In 1965, Martin Luther King and the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) (SCLC) led the [Selma-Montgomery march](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=2) which was another major pressure to get the national government to enact voting rights, and implement those rights by sending federal marshals to the south to implement them. MSP brought about 1,000 people to the state. Three hundred of them were volunteer legal, health and other professionals; the rest were predominantly middle-to-upper middle class northern white students from major colleges and universities. Within days, a couple of them, along with a local black activist, were murdered by Klansmen operating in conjunction with law enforcement personnel ([here](http://www.propublica.org/article/when-freedom-summer-landed-in-white-americas-living-rooms);[here](http://www.propublica.org/article/a-brutal-loss-but-an-enduring-conviction)). The national pressure that resulted forced federal action. It is possible that without the MSP Mississippi terror might have broken THE MOVEMENT—as it did in the 1955-60 period.

There were negatives as well, and they are more difficult to measure. In some projects, newly emerging local black organizers were unintentionally pushed aside by self-confident northern whites. Local organizing and organizers got lost in the “big picture.” Voter registration and other “programs”\* became ends in themselves as distinct from interim objectives that contributed to building power to address more recalcitrant problems, particularly economic and educational opportunity.

\*(freedom schools, community centers, the Democratic Party’s convention challenge to seating the Dixiecrat racists by the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s (MFDP)](http://civilrightsteaching.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/MFDPLesson.pdf), and the challenge to seating the elected Mississippi racist congressmen at the January, 1965 opening of Congress)

**(P):** There was focus on the MFDP challenge at the Democratic Convention in 1964. Was such a focus to the detriment to or complimentary to more grass roots power building?

**(M):** The slow, patient, work of building local units of people power was absorbed in the highly visible Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to the seating of the racist Dixiecrats at the 1964 Democratic Party convention. ([here](http://www.crmvet.org/info/mfdp_atlantic.pdf) and [here](http://www.commondreams.org/views/2007/08/15/church-fannie-lou-hamer-august-24-27-1964-atlantic-city)): The discussion is generally cast as a moral one. As Fannie Lou Hamer put it, “We didn’t come here for no two seats.”

More broadly, “programs” (voter registration, community centers, freedom schools) trumped organizing for power. This subtle distinction is lost on most people. Of course you need programs and issues to build power. But these are two distinct things, and need to be understood in their own terms. When you look at things from a power-building perspective, you are interested in questions of capacity—can we do this and grow stronger as a result? You can, for example, win a major campaign on an issue and leave nothing on the ground afterward. Or, you can run a wonderful Headstart program (as the Child Development Program of Mississippi was) but find all your energies absorbed in it with none left to continue on the road to greater democracy, freedom, equality and justice. You get a big win, or build a great program, but there’s no organization and movement left.

And you have to be wary of the downsides of good, big programs. Here’s a comment from a local black Mississippian:

***“[W]hen Head Start got into the county, that split up everything. When they got the pre-schools…our leaders all jumped out of our organizations, our Freedom Democratic Party, and went for those jobs. That left the peoples that were following. Y’know how that is when something happen to a leader and nobody else can really just go on. They had peoples to take over, but didn’t have nobody strong enough to know the issues and follow them up…Then those poor peoples who had all interest in these leaders, they started saying, “They using us to get everything for themselves!” Which it was true. It was sure enough true.”***

The answer to your question is not an unequivocal one. Things might have been done differently. What disappointed me about the reunion was the absence of a critical look at what we did then that might have informed what is being done now by a whole new generation of organizers, activists and leaders.

What if MFDP had asked for half the seats instead of all of them—i.e. a split delegation? Granted, that would have been an implicit acceptance of the racism of the “regulars.” But wouldn’t that have made an interesting proposal? Had it been granted, and had the regulars remained at the convention, they would have found themselves in an “integrated” Mississippi delegation—more accurately one characterized by equal voting rights. Of course they wouldn’t have stood for that, and would have walked out—as they did anyway even after MFDP rejected the two seats at large offer. Would the split delegation proposal have won additional credential committee votes? Might it have blunted the fear of white voter backlash expressed in now-released private tape recordings of Lyndon Johnson rounding up votes to deny MFDP’s challenge? Would it have made a difference with labor, liberal and other allies? We have no way of knowing. But on the face of it, I think it might have been a better proposal.

Indeed, it is arguable that even the two seats at large might have presented MFDP with a wedge into 1968 recognition as the official party from the state. Instead, the labor-liberal-national civil rights leadership alliance bypassed MFDP, and created a new “moderate” Democratic Party in the state.

I don’t have a firm view regarding these options. I am convinced of the importance of learning by evaluating the past.

*Mike Miller graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. His worked as a tenant organizer in NYC, was on staff to SNCC and spent time in 1963 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. In 1966 he took a job in Kansas City with the Industrial Area Foundation with Saul Alinsky. In 1968 he returned to San Francisco where in in 1972 he started the ORGANIZE TRAINING CENTER. He has also served as editor and contributor to the publication Social Policy.*