**Mississippi Musings: Freedom Summer Revisited, by Mike Miller. *Social Policy*, Fall 1994.**

On a sultry day this July, I rented a car in New Orleans and headed for "Mississippi Homecoming 1994 — Freedom Summer 1964 Revisited." In 1963, the year before the big "Summer Project," I was a SNCC field secretary in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood — population 20,000. Now, 31 years later, I was back, along with 600-700 others (mostly northern whites) who had come in the Summer of 1964, for a reunion in Jackson, the State Capitol.

Four days after the Homecoming was over, I added a private journey into the past. I drove by Rev. Aaron Johnson's First Christian Church, the first Greenwood church open to mass meetings.

I found Ed Cochran at his liquor store and hotel (now burned out) in the heart of the Greenwood ghetto. When SNCC workers were thrown in jail, Cochran could be depended on to bail them out. He used his property to "post bond," and when that wasn't enough he came up with cash. I chatted with him and his customers about how things are. Cochran told me his concerns about the youth. "They don't know what everybody did in the '60s," he lamented. "They think it's hard now; they don't know what it was like." Similar to others with whom I spoke, he was worried about the combination of drugs, random violence and crime that plague African-American youth in Greenwood.

"No work," was one customer's response to my question about how things are going. He'd come home after getting laid off by Honeywell in Minneapolis, when the company went through a "downsizing." He said it was impossible for someone like him, Black, middle-aged and without a college degree, to get work in Minneapolis. The major companies had all laid people off. "It's easier to be poor in Greenwood," another said. In the Delta, family, neighbors and small-town life are more supportive than northern urban Black neighborhoods. Still, African-American unemployment in Leflore County in 1990 was 18.3 percent — double what it was in 1960. At least on this score, things are worse now.

Underlying the conversations was deep pessimism. I asked people, "What can be done about the depressing conditions?" The response: a shake of the head accompanied by a quiet "don't really know."

Now, "What can be learned from the past?", and "What is to be done today?" are questions stalking veterans of The Movement. (We still say it as if it were a proper name.)

The Mississippi Community Foundation (MCF), host for the reunion, was founded in the aftermath of the Hollywood hit, "Mississippi Burning," which caused a storm of anger among veterans of the southern civil rights movement. Outrageously, the film portrayed an FBI agent as a hero of the civil rights struggle, while the FBI had either done nothing or provided information to southern police — who beat and jailed thousands of Movement activists. The police often were in the Ku Klux Klan. Several former SNCC people went to Hollywood, met with studio executives and obtained an agreement from one of the studios to make a movie (now in the works as a major Hollywood production) from The Movement's point of view. During the same period, a friendly producer proposed a film to SNCC's Bob Moses about the Mississippi Project. The two things came together. MCF was created to receive income from a movie on Mississippi that would he shaped by Movement veterans — income that would make possible a permanent vehicle for telling the Mississippi story. Before inviting our return, MCF had gathered local Movement veterans. Now the foundation was gathering the larger group of those who had been involved in 1964.

## Memories

At the reunion we learned new things about the past. A volunteer discovered that in Mileston, where he had worked, an elaborate system had been set up by local Blacks to guard the volunteers. In another small Delta town, Black guys who had hung around the freedom house, and who the volunteers thought of as derelicts, turned out also to have been guards. For most Mississippi Blacks, nonviolence applied to picket lines and demonstrations, but self-defense applied where one lived or worked.

Snapshots: One volunteer remembered a little Black girl's hand in her own, and the girl saying to her, "my hand's dirty, isn't it?" As the volunteer told the story 30 years later, it still brought tears to her eyes. All of us remembered being called "Mister" and "Miss" — even by people three times our age — and how hard it was to get local people to call us by our first names. The compromise, in my case, was "Mister Mike."

Sighting a State Highway Patrol car led me automatically to slow down — even though I was driving at the speed limit. I discovered others reacted to the cops with fear as well. Then we laughed at ourselves when an African-American state trooper passed by. When we were here before Mississippi police were our enemy.

A group of volunteers returned to Hattiesburg, where the white mayor proclaimed "Freedom Summer Day." Eleven Black women — all former freedom school students — met the volunteers in a small Black church — the school's former site. Each of the eleven told their stories, and how the freedom schools had changed their lives. In retrospect, we saw that sensitive whites, working in a Black-led movement, could contribute to teaching Black pride.

There were bad memories as well. In Tchula, three of us had been run off the road. The police kept my car, and worse — despite efforts by NAACP lawyers to regain them — my files. The local hospital refused to treat us. The town's African-American undertaker saved my life by putting us in his hearse and driving an hour to the University Hospital in Jackson where we were treated. Even that hospital had its scary side. I was used by one of the doctors to illustrate a point of medical ethics: "Even though we may disagree with why this patient is here in Mississippi," he said to observing students, "we must still treat him with medical objectivity."

Perhaps most important, we were reminded that The Movement in Mississippi emerged from a context of struggle. Too many stories of SNCC fail to acknowledge the crucial role of local Black community leaders who invited Bob Moses and SNCC to work in the state. I think I failed to realize at the time how important it was that a group of Mississippi Blacks, most of them linked to one another by their membership in local chapters of the NAACP, opened the doors for SNCC workers in the state. Many of them were veterans from World War II who had a taste of equal treatment from European whites when they were part of the army that liberated Europe. After discharge, rather than leaving the state, they stayed — determined to struggle for democracy in Mississippi as they had fought for it in Europe. Chuck McDew, an early chair of SNCC, said at the time, "We who have struggled to make the world safe for democracy must now struggle to make democracy safe for the world." These local Blacks directed Bob Moses, in his initial visits to the state, away from sit-ins or freedom rides and, instead, toward voter registration. It was they who were involved in early strategizing for what came to be the SNCC Mississippi Project. In contemporary organizing parlance, the local leaders were "sponsors." They played the role of legitimizing the organizing effort because they were trusted by the people the project sought to involve. You can't land in a community and expect to be welcomed. It is a mistake the northern student movement-initiated mid-'60s organizing projects made — and a lesson that any organizer needs to learn.

## The Reunion

In Mississippi today the workforce in motels, restaurants and other public places has been integrated. The Holiday Inn where some of us stayed had a "Welcome Mississippi Volunteers" sign, and we were checked in by Black and white clerks. The *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, which called us "communists" and "outside agitators" in 1964, now editorially commented, "…those who knew firsthand about the voting rights struggle 30 years ago pointed out that there is much to do in the 1990s to see those gains are not lost or forgotten….The older and wiser Freedom Summer participants issued a call to a new generation of Mississippians to…work to build upon those foundations." On matters of race, the state more or less looks like the rest of the country — though the desertion of whites from the public schools after integration was greater than elsewhere, and pockets of fear and violence remain.

Our coming together again was a bitter-sweet time. Jan Hillegas, who remained in Mississippi, wrote an open letter to the returning volunteers: "[I]n the sixties we dreamed of a beloved community, and then we went our separate ways and rarely looked back. I do know that we talked about participatory democracy and then spent much of our time counting registered voters and African-American officeholders.” As if to confirm her point, a major theme of the reunion was how to retain these officeholders in office. A panel was devoted to the subject. For good reason, some fear that the end of the Second Reconstruction is near and that metropolitan government, a smaller state legislature with larger districts, and other forms of consolidated government will eliminate many Black elected officials. Hillegas omits the fact that many who left Mississippi continued elsewhere in the struggle — and often were the key people to maintain whatever fragile relationships might have existed between Blacks, other people of color, and whites in their local communities.

Many who came had worked in voter registration, freedom schools and community centers. For most, it had been their first experience working with Blacks, let alone the poor Blacks of the Black-belt counties where they were sent. When they revisited the towns where they had worked, some met former freedom school students who are now city council members, mayors and chiefs of police. All spoke of how the freedom schools had opened their minds to the possibility of being first-class citizens.

Some went to Ruleville to pay gravesite homage to Fannie Lou Hamer, the eloquent spokeswoman of the Mississippi Movement, who had been fired from her job on a plantation because she sought to register to vote. Ruleville is also the site of my favorite organizing story. In August of 1963, I was at a "mass meeting" (even if there were ten people present, we called them mass meetings) in a small Black church there. A man in his seventies got up, raising his arm to shoulder height, while his lower arm dropped to a right angle. "They call you Freedom Riders 'outside agitators,'" he said in a trembling voice. Then he started rotating his lower arm back and forth. "I got an old-style washing machine in my house. It's got a thing in it goes back and forth like my arm. They calls that thing an 'agitator.' You know what it does?" he asked. He left a dramatic pause, then answered his question. "It gets the dirt out." He sat down. I've never been afraid to be called an agitator since.

The design of our gathering left much to be desired. It had too many forums with "leaders" talking to or at us; no local leaders who were still in the trenches. Why didn't the planners just create groups of 20 people each — some from the north, some from Mississippi — and let them tell their stories to one another?

What I concluded from the informal time I spent with people is that most are still "in the struggle," as we used to write at the end our letters to one another. Whether they are teachers, public health workers, lawyers, trade unionists, realtors, art dealers, community developers, elected officials, photographers, writers, they are still involved. A few even have remained organizers. Whatever most of them are doing, they are still playing their part on behalf of social and economic justice. No yuppies or buppies here. Not even any real sell-outs.

As always the case, singing was a highlight. The Freedom Singers sang and we sang with them. Music was one of the magical things of The Movement. When it looked like a SNCC staff meeting would blow up in internal conflict, it was lime to circle round and sing freedom songs. When spirits were running low in local communities, you could always count on Fannie Lou Hamer, Hollis Watkins, Sam Block, Willie (now Wazir) and James Peacock,

and dozens of others to lead us in a mass meeting with "We Shall Not Be Moved" or "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." And as we sang, we believed; as we believed, we acted.

## Whites in SNCC

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee went into Mississippi when almost no one else was willing to do so. For the more established national organizations, Mississippi was not a priority. It would fall last, said the leaders. Still, there were local Blacks who had bravely resisted segregation, a few publicly and many more in the small private ways that were available within (at least on the issue of race) this police state. In 1961, after visiting many of those who were leaders of local NAACP chapters or who were otherwise identified as Blacks willing to fight for equal rights, SNCC's Bob Moses started the first voter rights project in McComb.

SNCC field secretaries (joined in 1963 by CORE — the Congress of Racial Equality) worked for almost three years with the courageous few who would take the phony literacy test to register to vote. Their efforts were almost fruitless. A few thousand of the hundreds of thousands of eligible Blacks in Mississippi were registered. A high price was paid by those who sought to register: some were killed; more were beaten; many lost jobs or homes or both; churches that allowed civil rights meetings in them were bombed and burned. While a fragile movement infrastructure was slowly being built, led by local Blacks and aided by Black SNCC workers from Mississippi and elsewhere, there was little reason to think things would change. The Justice Department, FBI and the President, showed little inclination to break the massive resistance of the state's Democratic Party structure.

In 1962 and 1963, before anyone thought of the Summer Project, the presence of whites in the Delta was a subject of debate within SNCC. Bob Moses, the organization's Mississippi project director — who had seen the escalation of violence against local Blacks when white Movement supporters had traveled in the area — opposed whites being there. Greenwood project leaders Sam Block and Willie McGee had invited me the previous December when they were on a fund-raising tour to the San Francisco Bay Area, where I was the local SNCC rep. National director Jim Forman also supported the idea. Block, Forman and Moses huddled for awhile and agreed that Dick Frey and I could stay — but that we would have to be very inconspicuous. All of us were in Greenwood for the July 4 week-end "Delta Folk Jubilee," a concert with SNCC's Freedom Singers, Theo Bikel, Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger, held at the farm of Laura McGee who like other Blacks who owned a piece of land had a margin of independence from the local power structure. Two hundred people attended, with about half that many cops and highway patrol surrounding the place, recording license plate numbers and taking photos of us all.

By the next year, Bob Moses had changed his mind on the presence of whites. The killing of one local civil rights leader after another, with no action by the federal government to protect them, triggered his conclusion. As the SNCC Mississippi staff met in the second of two 1963 Greenville meetings to debate whether or not to have the Summer Project, Lewis Allen was killed in Liberty,

Mississippi. The story of his death began a year earlier with the killing of another local Black. Herbert Lee was an "uppity nigger"; he had dared to try to register to vote and was killed by his Representative in the state legislature for seeking to be a first-class citizen. Allen had witnessed the killing. Though he hadn't testified at the trial — his fear was too great — he had qualms of conscience and made it known that he would be willing to testify if he and his family could be protected. He never got the chance. As Moses later said, "That was it. It was my decision that we had to bring the country to Mississippi." Once he took a definite stand, he commanded so much respect that the organization followed — with some still in opposition. The invitation to come to Mississippi met a prompt and overwhelming response from almost 2,000 students — along with some lawyers, health professionals, teachers, building-trades people and others. After screening and normal dropping out, about 800 came.

Participation in Mississippi Summer permanently changed most of those who went. Sociologist Doug McAdam was able to study the impact by comparing applicants to the Project — those who went with those who did not. All were idealists when they applied, but when he visited them some 25 years later the Freedom Summer group was still deeply involved in some kind of social action. Those who had not gone were much more typical of their broader age cohort.

## Black and White Together

One of the verses of "We Shall Overcome," anthem of The Movement, said, "Black and white together, now!' But our togetherness was fragile. We had to turn the negatives of racism into positives. If the country would pay more attention to northern, middle-class, white students than to southern Blacks, then SNCC would bring those students to Mississippi and force the federal government's hand. This was the core concept of the Summer Project. But by 1963, many SNCC workers were justifiably angry. “To be Black and in America," as James Baldwin said at the time, "is to be in a continuous state of rage." Within the state, the infusion of the northern students was likely to overcome the developing Black staff leadership. Many SNCC staff felt that they would get pushed aside. In fact, some local SNCC staff had already experienced some of the phenomenon with northern Black students who had come from Howard, Fisk and other top colleges in the country. The problems of class and education would now be compounded by the added dimension of race.

Many white students were ill-prepared for the hostility they met in "freedom houses" — combined offices and living quarters for The Movement — from some Black SNCC staff. The confusion increased when they were welcomed by local Blacks who were not full-time civil rights workers. Some whites compounded the problem by their own subtle and not-so-subtle forms of elitism. Some who were "political" thought they would "educate" The Movement. Others, less political, came with an attitude of white paternalism. Most came to be part of The Movement — which by then had gained a reputation of heroic proportions on northern college campuses.

Whatever the weaknesses of some it took courage for all to come, and they didn't expect to be met with hostility by those whom they had hoped would be their sisters and brothers in the struggle. Things that were little to the northern whites would set off a reaction. When white volunteers laughed at a picture of the 300-pound Hattiesburg registrar of voters, Theron Lynd, Black staff who knew the fear he inspired in his county were shocked, angered and dismayed. The former were insensitive; many of the latter were too bitter to forgive the insensitivities. Even as the Mississippi Summer Project contributed to breaking the walls of legal segregation in the South's bastion of resistance, it often resulted in breaks between young Blacks and whites who were the shock troops of The Movement. I talked with a number of people who almost didn't come; the memories were too painful. The struggles between Blacks and whites inside The Movement had taken their toll.

But another truth transcended the conflicts. As the Summer of '64 went on, volunteers earned their stripes by their work, and gained the respect of Blacks who had been unwilling to work with any whites when they had first arrived. For a brief period in Mississippi, SNCC transcended the racial chasm in America. That we couldn't sustain it as an organization says more about America than about SNCC — though it is true of both. And despite the organizational failure, the relationships that are enjoyed to this day between Black and white Movement veterans stand against the grain of most of America.

The reunion was a time for healing. The very fact that the Black-led MCF extended the invitation to the summer volunteers was the beginning of the healing. And it continued as warm hugs and handshakes were shared by all. Here we were — most a little fatter and many now gray — all appearing to have prospered with the years. The old SNCC symbol of a Black and white handshake came alive again.

## SNCC's Mississippi Strategy in 1964 and Its Defeat

SNCC had been about "Black power" as early as 1961 when some of its field secretaries decided that integrating lunch counters and desegregating bus terminals weren't enough — that the back of the South's racism had to be broken, and a way to break it was through the vote. Nor was the vote, in and of itself, thought to be enough. SNCC's strategy was to build local Black organizations that would be able to act independently of the Democratic (or Republican) Party. In Mississippi, this independence was expressed in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Because of their connections in the north, the volunteers helped build a national base of support for the MFDP. The SNCC-inspired strategy was brilliant in conception and sophisticated in execution. But to no avail. The Atlantic City defeat was the result of the application of political pressure on delegates by President Johnson and his agent in the matter, vice-presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey. When the screws were turned, support evaporated.

When the MFDP's challenge to the seating of the racist Democrats at the 1964 Democratic Convention was defeated, anger that had been building among many Blacks in SNCC reached new heights and created the context for the "Black power" slogan. The slogan was both political and personal. For some, it meant various forms of Black nationalism. For others it meant repeating what history books said the Irish, Italians, Jews and other ethnic groups had done in America. For some Black power meant hostility toward all whites, including those in SNCC. The defeat was too fundamental to be dealt with easily. Some at the reunion considered MFDP's defeat an accomplishment in that it "exposed" the depth of the country's racism. But social movements demand hope for their sustenance, and exposure — however accurate — is not enough. Without hope, a vision and a believable strategy, exposure leads to despair and withdrawal or to individual and small group acts of destruction, as, for example, bombing banks — as some Movement veterans later did.

## Lessons Learned

The Mississippi experience vividly teaches the limits of electoral politics. At a literature table at our conference grounds I bought the Summer 1992 *Journal of Negro History*. The issue is an historical assessment of Black mayors, and separate articles examine Mayors Hatcher (Gary), Goode (Philadelphia) and Young (Atlanta). Though not the issue's thesis, one cannot help but conclude from its evidence that in the absence of a mass movement, there is little these mayors could do to improve the quality of life of the vast majority of the Black people of their cities — nor, for that matter, of the poor and working class of whatever ethnicity or race. The same can be said of the 800-plus elected Black officials in Mississippi. In fact, it is now generally recognized that white-owned industry will not locate in the predominantly Black-belt counties because Blacks are too likely to unionize and Black elected officials are too sympathetic to union efforts. With capital and other resources increasingly withdrawn from Black-run cities and rural communities, Black elected officials are left to preside over the division of an ever- shrinking pie. It is an important lesson, one that SNCC knew in theory but was unable to implement.

Electoral politics is but one tactic of a freedom movement. Others include negotiation, lobbying, disruption, boycotts, strikes, mutual aid (credit unions, co-ops, buying clubs, support groups), community economic development, member benefits (discount buying, health and retirement plans) and direct service. Each is a means toward solving specific problems facing people — hunger, housing, health care, child care, employment, toxic waste dumps, education and public services; each may train people to assume new positions of responsibility and offer jobs for the unemployed.

The broadly based organization is the necessary vehicle if these tactics and solutions to specific problems are to be part of building something bigger. The organization builds a sense of community and, through it, people act with power, purpose, spirit and dignity. Within such organizations education, celebration, evaluation, training and reflection take place. A freedom movement needs to become ever larger in its geographic scope, ever deeper in its levels of leadership and base of support, and ever broader in its constituency. Otherwise, the more remote centers of power (multinationals, the federal government, the International Monetary Fund and banks, to name a few examples), which must be made accountable to the interests of the poor, working and middle classes, remain untouched. Even worse, as the movement shrinks, as the face-to-face relationships that can counteract media-hype disappear, the very elected officials who emerge from the movement become increasingly dependent on wealthy individuals and big business sources of financing for their (media dominated) electoral campaigns.

We lacked the steel-strong discipline necessary to engage in the battle we had undertaken. The Summer Project, and the entrenched power it sought to challenge, demanded things of SNCC that went beyond its courage, dedication and brilliance. SNCC had gone into battle essentially unarmed. We were supposed to be an organization of organizers — not the grassroots organizations that, as organizers, we intended to build. SNCC lacked an effective mechanism for screening, recruiting, training, mentoring and disciplining new staff. SNCC grew too fast — from about 20 full-time workers to over 200 in three years. There was no way for the better organizers to mentor those with the potential to learn. We had no way to fire people, thus they stayed on. The organization was too open — and some took advantage. Some Blacks who were moved aside by northern whites should have been moved long before the whites arrived. Others cracked under the stress of the continuous threat of violence. Chuck McDew called them "the walking wounded." Post-traumatic stress syndrome had not yet been named — but we knew it in The Movement. Jim Forman paid special attention to bringing mental health professionals into the state to help. But for some SNCC workers it was too little, too late.

We rarely asked local people for money — neither dues nor a regular mass fundraising operation were established. Many thought it wasn't possible. But at almost the same time The Movement was growing in Mississippi, Cesar Chavez was organizing the National Farm Workers Association in California — and asking its farm worker members to pay $3.50 per month in dues. When northern liberals stopped supporting The Movement through "Friends of SNCC," it was too late to develop a "bottom-up" funding strategy.

We failed to accurately assess our adversaries, and to have an alternative plan. Most of us were unprepared for the outcome of the Freedom Democratic Party's Atlantic City challenge. We had neither predicted, nor developed a strategy based upon the possibility of, defeat at the hands of the Democrats. People went home bitter. A subsequent January challenge to the House seating of the newly elected Mississippi Congressmen met similar defeat. Movements are not built on such defeats. The idea of "contingency planning" — having a plan "A," and a plan "B," one for the possibility of victory, the other for the possibility of defeat — was not in our lexicon.

With these failures, we were unable to sustain hope. Hope is what enlivened the '60s movement: hope for everything from paved and lighted streets and roads to an end to the plantation system that kept its Black workforce in near slavery. Hope was kept alive by the shared community of common struggle. Whatever the objective outcome of a movement's effort, as long as it keeps itself together as a community, people will fight. As The Movement song said, "Before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." SNCC, the "band of brothers (and sisters too), circle of trust," began to unravel after the Democratic Party Convention. SNCC could not contain its bitterness; the hope began to disintegrate.

No matter how bad the objective conditions, Nazi death-camp survivor Victor Frankl says in Man's Search for Meaning, we can choose our attitude toward these conditions. This is our individual freedom. But the choice is conditioned, in part, by the community of which one is a part. In the death camps, people of courage inspired others-hoping, in this case, for the Allied invasion. Communists, socialists, Christian and Jewish militants organized within the camps. So, in Mississippi. SNCC organizers and student volunteers were the people of courage who inspired hope. That is why large numbers of poor Blacks in the state became involved. But hope was replaced by bitterness, the community disintegrated and little of that involvement by poor Blacks remains.

Underlying all these particular lessons was the general one. We failed to do what we said we sought to do. We didn't build lasting, democratic, autonomous grassroots organizations.

## Signs of Hope

I talked with former SNCC and MFDP workers Hollis Watkins and Mike Sayer who, along with Leroy Johnson, are the principals in Southern Echo, a recently created vehicle to help revive organizing in Mississippi. They still talk organizing. They told me the story of the primary election to replace Congressman Mike Espy when he was appointed by President Clinton as Secretary of Agriculture. Mississippi's Second Congressional District can elect a Black because of its Black majority of voters. But division appeared, and threatened the outcome. With assistance from Echo, a District caucus was held to endorse a candidate in the Democratic primary — winning that race is usually tantamount to victory in the general election. Candidates who participated had to pledge not to run if they weren't endorsed. Unita Blackwell, one of the early and courageous leaders of SNCC, a native of Issaquena County, and long-time mayor of the town of Mayersville, was among those seeking the endorsement. When endorsement went instead to Bennie Thompson. Blackwell decided to run anyway. She was badly defeated, and Thompson went on to win the race. It was a lesson in accountability to a broader community. Echo is committed to building (or rebuilding) that community. It is one of the signs of hope today.

In Jackson, I met with another Movement veteran, C.J. Jones, who now works for Voice of Calvary Ministries, a Christian agency "to demonstrate the gospel of Jesus Christ through wholistic ministry to the poor…" He told me of the community organizing efforts underway in the neighborhood surrounding his office, and took me on a tour to see the results: rehabilitated, owner-occupied housing, new neighborhood facilities and, most important, the sense of accomplishment felt by the neighborhood. He spoke with pride about the development of a neighborhood association, the flowering of local leadership and their successful work to begin to turn the neighborhood around.

In the Mississippi Delta, catfish farming is a growing industry. Workers there have organized and won some major victories. The catfish workers, mostly Black women, now part of the AFL- CIO-affiliated United Food & Commercial Workers, are also a sign of hope. A few other unions now have a presence in the state as well.

And the national Algebra Project now has a presence in the state. Initiated by Bob Moses, it promises to teach math literacy to those who will be cut out of the new high-tech economy without it—and to organize them in the process. Dave Dennis, director of CORE'S Mississippi work in the '60s, now works with Moses on the Project.

But these signs of hope seem few and far between. Another generation of powerful grassroots groups may emerge in Mississippi — but they are not there now.

## Success or Failure?

While rubble remains, The Movement broke the walls of legal segregation. In that, it was a great success. What we left was important; yet it was not all that we intended. The legacy of the struggle of the domestics, day laborers, tenant farmers, small independent farmers and businesspeople, sharecroppers and those few who were in the struggle before we got there includes: a thin layer of the new African-American middle class; a larger group of Black elected officials than anyplace else in the country; an end to most police and citizen violence against Blacks; and some local activists who run "programs" that are government or foundation funded; Blacks in many jobs previously unavailable to them. There are also Black superintendents of schools, police chiefs, hospital administrators, etc. All of this is for the good; that the reunion was able to celebrate successes was good as well.

To the extent The Movement wanted to solve Black (and white) poverty in Mississippi, and change the structures responsible for that poverty, it failed. But in this ambition, there was little that The Movement could have done in the South without a strong parallel movement, with depth in its respective communities, in the country as a whole. That movement didn't exist. The principal source of poverty was and remains the economic structures that deny economic opportunity for Mississippi's poor.

Serious other problems remain. A number of mysterious hangings of Black prisoners in state penitentiaries have taken place — suicides state officials say; the action of some combination of white prisoners and guards say others.

In Mississippi, where historically Black colleges have played an important role for the African-American community, the threat to break up, and in some cases close, these colleges in the name of integration is a major issue. Black students oppose this effort, and Black professors and administrators do as well. They, too, are one of the signs of hope. Over 15,000 of them marched on the State Capitol in April, 1994, to protest. Ironically, the break-up of historically Black colleges may be the way the state complies with the U.S. Supreme Court order to "eradicate [its] policies and practices…that continue to foster segregation." But without the power to define a concept, its application may undermine its original meaning. Integration now may mean submergence. Instead of equal rights, it may mean fewer rights. Leaders of the current student movement met with the veterans of 30 years ago to tell their story. In an intense, annoying to some, but good spirited, evening meeting during the reunion the students told us they had locked the doors of the room (in fact, they hadn't) and "demanded" that we "pass the leadership torch" to them. Everyone was willing, and some $2,000 was collected to accompany the flame.

The Movement sought also to address powerlessness. Here our errors deserve to be noted and studied. There was little critical analysis during our Homecoming of what those errors were and what needed to be done. Almost everything at the reunion about the contemporary scene focused on electoral politics and the Black college student movement; almost nothing spoke to building broad-based community organizations. The extraordinary story of the catfish workers' union was presented to an almost empty classroom.

To understand the poverty and powerlessness that, in some ways, are worse today than in the legally segregated South several things should be considered. First, reliance on a strategy that combined electoral politics, litigation and the creation of "community development" institutions. The electoral and litigation approaches led people to expect too much from elected officials and courts. The community development programs created high expectations and absorbed most of the talented leadership into non-profit, externally funded institutions that lack the authority and resources to solve any of the major problems; but they create a buffer between the real power holders and the people in the communities. This process involved massive co-optation of Black leadership. Often, those so co-opted were enraged by their powerlessness — and their rhetoric was often militant. No matter; those who controlled the purse strings knew the rhetoric was harmless. Second, and the flip side of the first, in part caused by it, was that mass participation disappeared. Unfortunately, there never really were mass organizations. In retrospect, SNCC didn't know how to build them — even though we wanted to at the time and clearly articulated the difference between "organizing" and "mobilizing." There wasn't the depth of organization necessary to keep elected officials or directors of government and foundation funded programs accountable to the majority of the people in the local communities.

## The Challenge Ahead

What will restore hope to Mississippi? The struggle ahead is a huge one. The challenge for the Algebra Project will be to do more than teach math literacy, serving as a mobility route for some that leaves most behind. Southern Echo offers training, workshops and consulting in community organizing to local groups. Will it move beyond ad hoc. single-issue campaigns and local "projects" to build a broad base of power that can hold politicians, public administrators and private institutions accountable to the interests of poor Blacks (and whites) in Mississippi? Only a very few community organizations in the country are now able to do so—and only some of the time, and thus fall within relatively narrow issue parameters. If The Movement erred on the side of demanding more than its power could win and of projecting an impossible dream, the current community organizing movement errs on the side of caution in its demands and a reluctance to project an alternative vision for a democratic America. Today's community organizers have much to learn from The Movement. Movement veterans, seeking to rebuild or build anew, have much to learn from the contemporary community organization movement. Each offers different lessons — and the possibility of new strength for both.

As C. J. Jones of Voice of Calvary was working in the earlier described neighborhood in Jackson, the vultures were watching. As local people improved their housing, speculators entered the neighborhood and bought up remaining abandoned housing — whose selling price they have now doubled. Will gentrification follow? Will Voice of Calvary and the neighborhood association it spawned be part of a larger effort — one that can begin to have an impact on larger institutions?

Will the unions in Mississippi be successful in their organizing? That would be important enough. Will they reach out horizontally to an emerging community organizing movement? If they don't, they will not fully be able to address the problems facing their members.

Mississippi, the poorest and most oppressive state in the nation, for a while led the way — pointing to new possibilities for an interracial participatory democracy. Careful analysis of how we failed to build the capacity of local communities for continuous struggle in the direction of a state and nation that acts on principles of social and economic justice is something that we owe to the new generation of organizers.

The Mississippi Movement of the early '60s captured as much as any place in the country the biblically-based vision of a beloved community: the dignity and worth of each human person; love and caring; a society based on principles of freedom, justice and equality; deep responsibility to act in solidarity with the poor — the last shall be first; and one that offers opportunity for the expression of the gifts and talents of all. That was one of the strands of inspiration for SNCC's work in the South, and for a while at least elements of it were there to be seen. Others, including me, coming from an enlightenment tradition, liberalism or radicalism, shared a similar vision. Those of us who came from the North were profoundly affected by the extraordinary strength and spiritual quality we met in the Black sharecroppers, domestics, day laborers. farmers and tenant farmers who were, for that too brief period, our sisters and brothers in the struggle.

The Movement experience remains one of the most important in my life — as it is for everyone else I know who took part in it. If its lessons, both positive and negative, are learned, The Movement's contribution will continue…and if new stirrings in the state continue, Mississippi may again lead the nation.

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