

Civil rights advance man Reggie Robinson recalls tales from front lines

USA TODAY NETWORK- [Deborah Barfield Berry](#), USA TODAY February 6, 2016

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Reggie Robinson, who worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, helped register blacks to vote and organize others across the South.

WASHINGTON--Within days of arriving in McComb, Miss., in 1961, Reggie Robinson set out to find housing, open accounts with black-owned restaurants and drum up support from locals willing to challenge segregation.

He didn't have much time. More civil rights workers were expected soon.

"It's no more than an occupying Army," Robinson, 76, recalled. "You come in. You find out what you need. You go get it and you go after the enemy. '

Robinson served as an advance man for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, spending months setting the stage for activists to join him

in Mississippi – a state at the heart of the tumultuous civil rights movement.

It was a dangerous job. Activists - many college students new to the South - depended on Robinson and others to help prepare them for what civil rights veteran Bob Moses described as "low-grade guerilla warfare."

"He was John the Baptist - going to clear the path," said Dorie Ladner, 73, a Hattiesburg native who helped register blacks to vote. "His job was very treacherous ... We may have had a local contact, (but) there was still danger."

Robinson, who also worked in other places in the South during his six years with SNCC, teamed with locals, who drove him around, introduced him and even housed him. In McComb, Robinson helped set up a SNCC office and a Freedom School where blacks were taught to read so they could register to vote. He credits Webb Owens, C.C. Bryant and other locals for fueling the movement.

"They had been doing this stuff for years, all around the state," Robinson said. "We were just maybe the catalyst that kind of triggered something."

Hollis Watkins, who lived near McComb, said Robinson was good at encouraging folks to get involved.

“His heart was in the right place,” said Watkins, 74, founder of Southern Echo Inc., which helps train and develop grassroots groups in Mississippi. “He was one of the ones that we knew we could depend on. He’s one of the ones that I’m truly thankful for having come to Mississippi.”

Moses, SNCC's Mississippi field secretary, had been in McComb raising money to bring in more activists. SNCC sent Robinson.

“He fit right in. We couldn’t tell he wasn’t from there,” said Moses, 81, founder of the Algebra Project. “He also fit in in terms of being comfortable

actually being the point person.”

Frank Smith met Robinson in McComb when he and the late civil rights activist Julian Bond were passing through on their way to Atlanta. Smith said he had “great respect and admiration” for Robinson and others working in Mississippi.

“Mississippi was a hellhole. It was a place where nobody really wanted to be,” said Smith, 73, director of the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum in Washington, D.C.

Robinson’s activism started early when he joined other college students protesting at segregated restaurants in his hometown of Baltimore. He later joined SNCC and volunteered to go to Mississippi.

Robinson and other SNCC workers were in McComb during the 1961 Burglund High School walkout, a protest that led to the arrests and expulsions of more than 100 black students.

For his efforts, Robinson was cited in reports of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a state agency tracking and intimidating activists.

“We weren’t hiding. The whole idea was not to hide,” said Robinson, a retired Washington, D.C. government worker. “You couldn’t hide and open up a (Freedom) school.”

Robinson would also check on arrested protestors and campaign to get media coverage. “Yes, you were afraid,” he said. “You’re a damn fool if you weren’t.”

Moses said Robinson’s role was critical to getting locals to support SNCC, “the new kid on the civil rights block.”

“It was really crucial that we would be able to deliver on what we said we would do,” he said.

Robinson’s assignments would also take him back to Baltimore to help coordinate protests against segregated businesses. He would also work in Selma, Ala., and Cambridge, Md.

At one point, he was assigned to SNCC headquarters in New York to help raise money, including tapping celebrities like Harry Belafonte. Robinson shared an apartment with his co-worker the late Marion Barry, who would become the mayor of Washington, D.C.

“We went after the big money,” Robinson recalled.

In 1964, Robinson headed to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City to handle logistics for SNCC workers, including Fannie Lou Hamer, who were there to challenge the makeup of the all-white Mississippi delegation. Robinson had also traveled the country with Smith asking Democratic delegates to support SNCC's effort.

Smith said he and Robinson sometimes wore dungarees and a straw hat on that mission.

“We were trying to look more like the people we represented - just because these people are hard workers and farmers, they should not be denied the right to vote,” he said.

Robinson said the "rich" SNCC experience left him with life-long friends. Despite the dangers, he would do it again.

"I knew the chances I was taking," he said. "Like I said to my brother as I was getting ready to catch my train (South), I said, 'If I make it through this one, I'm going to be okay for the rest of my life.'"

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