

## Mississippi movement set example for female leaders

# The Clarion-L

A GANNETT COMPANY



(Photo: Library of Congress)

This week I have been at Tougaloo College to commemorate Mississippi Freedom Summer that brought more than 600 Northern, mostly white college students to the state. Another 300 professionals from medical, legal and religious organizations and graduate students made a potentially perilous journey to Mississippi to register black voters, teach in Freedom Schools, work in health clinics, and provide critical legal services. And indeed, people hostile to their "righteous crusade" murdered some of them. Many of these volunteers came to this reunion

conference to assess the impact of Freedom Summer and consider projects that should be undertaken in the future.

The Mississippi movement set an example of equality by the full participation of women in organizing the Summer Project, the name we gave this effort. I was part of the planning process for the six months preceding the arrival of the volunteers but spent part of the summer fulfilling a graduate school obligation and the other part of the summer in Jackson. The idea for the Summer Project was born of necessity. In 1962, only 6.7 percent of blacks were registered to vote, the smallest number in the nation. Although the movement was expanding all of its efforts to register voters, we were largely unsuccessful because of the obstructionism of voting registrars who administered tests that even they couldn't pass, like interpreting sections of the Constitution or stating how many grains of sand are in a quart jar. I failed all three attempts to pass the voter literacy test in Hattiesburg even though I was a top student at Tougaloo College. Registering to vote was the most dangerous, high stakes work possible. Violence was everywhere we turned with civil rights workers falling victim to beatings, bombings, jailings, shootings and assassinations.

Our numbers were few. There were only 30 field secretaries working for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Our numbers swelled with the addition of the many local people who joined the movement. If ever there was a small guerilla group taking on Goliath, we were it.

"Mississippi was deadly, and it was getting worse each day," SNCC Chairman John Lewis said, "Our people were essentially being slaughtered down there. If white America would not respond to the deaths of our people, the thinking went, maybe it would react to the deaths of its own children."

There was no local police protection, and urgent appeals to the president and attorney general were ignored. I remember seeing FBI agents in Greenwood, Mississippi, standing on the sidelines taking notes while civil rights workers were beaten and chased by police dogs. Excessive arrests and bail bond fees, not to mention the extreme violence, were decimating our ranks.



Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer sings outside the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. (Photo: "Freedom Summer" documentary)

No question about it, the summer volunteers arrived when the movement was under siege. The white Citizens Council, the state Legislature, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission that operated as a secret police, the Ku Klux Klan and other homegrown racist terrorists attempted to destroy every vestige of the movement. My Tougaloo College friend, Jimmy Travis, was shot in the neck when he was riding in a car near Greenwood. It was a bullet intended for COFO director Bob Moses. Civil rights activist Louis Allen was murdered in Amite County, and Fannie Lou Hamer and June Johnson were jailed and brutally beaten after they tried to eat at a Winona restaurant. These were almost the garden-variety offenses taken against civil rights activists.

The lowest point for us was when Byron De La Beckwith shot NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers in the carport of his home in 1963. Although he was a marked man, he had been the most courageous and visible civil rights activist in the state since being named field secretary in 1954. A native of Newton, Mississippi, he joined other World War II veterans like Amzie Moore of Cleveland, who were determined to bring the same democracy to Mississippi they had fought for overseas. For all blacks, his murder brought indescribable grief and anger. Yet, our resolve to continue the fight was stronger than ever.

Ultimately, the issue was how we could protect ourselves from harm. By late 1963, we realized bold, assertive, unprecedented action had to be taken. When white Yale and Stanford University students participated in Freedom Days in several cities and were not beaten or arrested it was a good sign. We asked ourselves whether the violence against black civil rights workers would

continue if the sons and daughters of the nation's powerful and wealthy were recruited to volunteer in Mississippi. Local people gave a resounding yes to the Summer Project because, as Fannie Lou Hamer said, "If we're trying to break down segregation, we can't segregate ourselves."

What the summer volunteers found upon their arrival was a grass-roots civil rights movement that was reeling from the disappearance of the three civil rights workers in Neshoba County. I knew James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner through our movement work, but Andy Goodman was making his first trip to the state. They were brutally murdered a few days later, with Chaney, a local black activist, singled out for the worst beating before he was killed. In other situations, white activists who were seen as betraying the white race were beaten badly. During Freedom Summer, 20 black churches were burned or bombed.

Not enough is known about the roles women played because the traditional emphasis was placed on the men who led the movement. It was left largely to the women to find housing for the summer volunteers with other black families. This was the first time any of these families had had a white person live in their homes.



Civil rights leader Dorie Ladner(Photo: USA Today)

In Charles Payne's book, "I've Got the Light Of Freedom," he makes the point that, while men were the visible leaders, women did the day-to-day building of locally based grass-roots organizations. Women were involved with the Mississippi movement from its start. In 1961, four of the "Tougaloo Nine" who staged the state's first civil rights demonstration with a sit-in at the

Hinds County Public Library, were female. Ethel Sawyer, Janet Jackson, Geraldine Edwards and Evelyn Pierce were arrested and spent the night in jail. A month later, my sister Dorie and I were expelled from Jackson State College for organizing a sympathy protest demonstration to support the jailed Tougaloo students. In the summer of 1961, women like my white Tougaloo roommate Joan Trumpauer were sentenced to Parchman penitentiary for being Freedom Riders. Jackson businesswoman Claire Collins Harvey organized Womanpower Unlimited to help provide for the physical needs of Freedom Riders during their incarceration. Many Tougaloo students were arrested for trying to desegregate the Jackson Municipal Auditorium and to integrate the city's white churches. In the fall of 1963, I spent almost a week in jail for trying to worship at Galloway United Methodist Church.

In the summer of 1962, Dorie Ladner, Mattie Bivins and Colie Liddell, all Tougaloo College students, were among the half dozen civil rights workers led by Bob Moses, who went into Sunflower County in the Delta to try to register black voters. Civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the first people they recruited. When the plantation owner where she lived demanded that she withdraw her name, she refused. The next day she was evicted, and these students helped her relocate. A short time later a Jackson State student, Mary Lee Burke, and her cousin were shot through a window in the home where Hamer was staying. It was believed the bullet was aimed for Mrs. Hamer.

The three most visible women in the Mississippi movement pre-Freedom Summer were Hamer of Ruleville, Victoria Gray of Hattiesburg, and Annie Devine from Canton. The strong resolve of the inspiring Fannie Lou Hamer was legendary. A very charismatic woman, she was the youngest of 21 children. She suffered polio as a child and was sterilized as an adult without her knowledge or consent. She echoed the voices of disfranchised black Mississippians when she uttered these memorable words: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." The summer volunteers found roadblocks at every turn in their attempts to register black voters. At least 17,000 blacks attempted to register, however only 1, 600 were successful.



Victoria Gray marches at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. (Photo: George Ballis/Take Stock)

In 1964, Hamer, Devine and Gray were members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. This historic undertaking was the first time a delegation sought to unseat another because it was racially segregated. The nation watched Fannie Lou Hamer testify before the convention on the beating she suffered and the reprisals blacks experienced when they tried to register to vote. My role was to accompany the FDP delegate Hartman Turnbow and his wife of Tchula, Mississippi, to meet with DNC Credentials Committee member Oregon Congresswoman Edith Green. When Turnbow spoke to her so movingly about being jailed for allegedly bombing his own home and other atrocities he and others faced, Green pledged her support to seat the FDP right then and there. However, political expediency took over quickly because President Lyndon Johnson was fearful that seating the FDP would cause him to lose the support of white Southern Democrats in the fall election. When the DNC offered a compromise of two seats instead of unseating the all-white Mississippi delegation, Hamer was so obviously disappointed that she quipped, "We didn't come here for no two seats since all of us is tired."

Despite the disappointment we all felt, the DNC changed their rules and barred all enforced racially segregated delegations in the future.

In 1965, Hamer, Devine and Gray ran for the U.S. Congress on the Freedom Democratic Party ticket to demonstrate how the state refused to allow blacks to register to vote.

There were countless other women in the movement. I will always remember the critical role

played by Hattiesburg businesswoman Lenon Woods who turned her hotel into the Freedom Summer headquarters and dared the local police to harass the civil rights workers.

Despite the initial concern and prohibition of allowing teenagers on the front lines, there were many female high school and college students in the movement. When 15-year-old Brenda Travis led a demonstration in McComb, Mississippi, in 1962, she was sentenced to over six months in reform school. Gov. Ross Barnett agreed to release her into the custody of a Jewish professor from Talladega (Alabama) College if she agreed to leave the state. A legion of other young women also braved jail, police dogs, beatings, and school expulsions.

By any measure, Freedom Summer was a success in breaking down the barriers of the "closed society" that separated Mississippi from the rest of the nation. The murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner and the presence of hundreds of volunteers and media did bring the federal protection we wanted. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover opened a Jackson field office that summer. Today, the Special Agent in Charge is Daniel McMullen, an African American. There was less violence that summer because local police were under a microscope and were reluctant to attack civil rights activists when the cameras were rolling. A big boost for us was the passage of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964.

Mississippi has undergone a major transformation in these 50 years. Mississippi has the largest number of black elected officials. Registering to vote is no longer a problem but inspiring people to go to the polls to vote is. The conference agenda reflects the fact that today's civil rights issues are related to the persistence of poverty, joblessness, inferior education and Voter I.D. laws.

Bob Moses, who has spent decades teaching math skills to young people through his Algebra Project, shared his ambitious project on quality education as a constitutional right. In the spirit of the summer volunteers 50 years ago, a parallel Youth Congress is tackling what they view as the critical issues. They also made a side trip to Neshoba County — the site of the murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner — as still another way of reminding us and younger generations of the promise they sought to have America keep.

*Civil rights leader and Mississippi native Joyce Ladner is the author of "Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman." She and her sister, Dorie, took part in civil rights protests alongside Medgar Evers, whom they worked with. They suffered arrests and jailings as a result of their activism.*