

**In the Mississippi River: Heroes and Sheroes: A Tribute to
those Murdered and Martyred in Mississippi**

FreedomSummer50

Friday Morning June 27, 2014 - Opening remarks

Judy Richardson

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Before I begin to talk about the main reason we're here this morning - which is to honor the amazing local Mississippi organizers who are no longer with us - I want to say one thing:

I'm so glad to see us all here! Now, I love seeing all these young activists. The next generation! You all are the kind of young people Danny Glover was talking about.

But, I'll be honest: at this point in my life, I'm also so glad to see all my long-time comrades and friends and some folks I didn't know well, but just heard about. To paraphrase my friend Dottie Zellner's favorite poem, by Langston Hughes: "We're still here." We are fortunate to be here - and we should celebrate that.

In fact, we're not only still here - so many of us are still doing important work, at so many levels... and we're still strong.

Now, maybe not always physically (and I just got a new knee!), but here [head] and here [heart] where it counts most.

And much of the work we're doing is based on the way we were shaped by older, local Movement organizers, and for many of you here, by local organizers and leaders here in Mississippi.

It was the strong, heroic men and women who provided the grounding, the foundation for us, long before we entered the state. And after we got here, they nurtured and schooled us. They prepared the way - and then, they continued with us... they didn't leave us out there by ourselves.

In so many ways, we are continuing to do the work they *prepared* us to do.

And let's remember what they were up against.

It wasn't just about the violent racism of people like Jackson Mayor Thompson and his Thompson tanks, or U.S. Senators Stennis and Eastland, or about the racist sheriffs who often got bumped up to become

FBI agents... or the plantation owners... or the managers of the banks and the local businesses.

No, it was about a system of white supremacy that was sustained by state-sponsored terrorism - from top to bottom. It was raw, unbridled power. And it was power that even the federal government recognized... and didn't really want to mess with. That's what these local organizers were up against - and long before we came on the scene.

The state of Mississippi knew that the vote was **one** of the ways Black folks could begin to really gain some justice and power - and they did everything they could to stop it. As our SNCC comrade, Courtland Cox often says, the vote is one of those things that is necessary, but not sufficient... but *it is necessary*.

This morning, we will first honor those warriors who have passed on. In the second session this morning, we call the role of those who were murdered and martyred: those who were assassinated because they dared to challenge - and sometimes won - against that powerful *state terrorism*.

Most of the emphasis on this list is on local Mississippians, but it also includes other COFO workers and staff who have passed on. Please, let us know of any we've missed.

The video presentation you're about to see was prepared by the Freedom Summer 50 Planning Team and the Tougaloo College TV station, WLOO

And now... our long-time brother in the struggle, and an early field secretary here in Mississippi - Dr. Tim Jenkins.

Session #2 - Intro to Martyrs

Let's give another round of applause to that moving presentation produced by the Freedom Summer 50 Planning Team and the Tougaloo TV Station.

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folks registered to vote without getting them killed. Now, I knew the hell that civil rights organizers went through in the 1960's, so I just figured Amzie was, you know, getting older... and had gotten a little confused.

What did I know?

Then we had production school for the *Eyes* series in 1984 -

6 years later - and I asked the wonderful local movement historian, John Dittmer, about what Amzie had said. And, to my amazement he confirmed it. Said, yeah, they had about 7 -10,000 Black folks meeting as part of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership.

Let me repeat: 7 - 10,000 Black folks organizing around the right to vote and against police brutality... in Mississippi... in 1951-52.

The preeminent, populist poet, Sterling Brown, wrote about the "strong men" and, I'm sure he would now add women, so I'll just do that. He wrote:

The strong men [and women] keep a-comin' on
The strong men [and women] git stronger...
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The reason we're all still here, is because those whose names we'll call, gave their lives to the struggle. They laid siege to the seemingly impenetrable structure of racist state power that was Mississippi, and it's their work we continue to build on. They knew they might never see the fruits of their labor. But they also knew that if they did nothing - nothing would change. They were fighting for future generations.

We are here because they never, ever gave up.

We're establishing a process to collect photos and biographical information about these martyrs. Their names and information will be placed on the Freedom Summer 50th website and will be periodically updated.

We ask you for any additional names and information - we want this to be as complete a list as possible. We want to make sure we - and future generations - know who they were and what they did. And as we hear their names, let's remember that the best way to honor them -- and their sacrifice -- is to do the work they trained us to do.

To borrow a phrase from the author Mary Helen Washington, they were "the strong Black bridges we crossed over on."

So, we're gonna call the roll.

But before we do that, we'll hear again from the wonderful Freedom Singers.

Now here to call the roll are Albert Sykes and **In the Mississippi River: Heroes and Sheroes: A Tribute to those Murdered and Martyred in Mississippi**

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