

**REMARKS DELIVERED AT THE OPENING SESSION OF
MISSISSIPPI'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF FREEDOM SUMMER
CONFERENCE**

By Joyce Ladner

At Tougaloo College, June 25, 2014

Good Morning. I am Joyce Ladner. I am a native of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and I was a civil rights activist, a SNCC field secretary and a student here at Tougaloo College. In other words, I was a homegrown activist, a local person.

We are here to look back at what happened fifty years ago when the Mississippi Summer Project was launched. We are also here to assess the current status of Voting Rights, Worker's Rights, Education as a Constitutional Right, and Health Care Rights. We will share information, as well as try to find new strategies and approaches for solving some of these problems.

This is the first intergenerational conference on civil rights of this magnitude. There are four generations here---from the six year olds who will attend the Freedom School to the eighty year olds who fought in the struggle fifty years ago.

Over 700 young people are here with the Youth Congress and we have rolled the two agendas---theirs and ours-- into one. We are joining them in creating space for an honest dialogue; as we both listen to new ideas, broaden our perspectives, and share knowledge and skills across the generations.

Now, please allow me to take a step back to 1964. How many summer volunteers are in the audience? Please stand. How many who were COFO, SNCC, CORE, NAACP and SCLC staff is here? Please stand. How many local people—the backbone of the movement are here? Please stand.

Give them all a round of applause.

Half a century ago few, if any, of us thought about a reunion in 2014. We were not given to looking to the future, especially if you were here in the most dangerous place in America.

We were incredibly young. Bob Moses was our elder and he was probably twenty-seven years old. Most of us were in our late teens to early twenties. Yet, we were engaged in the most dangerous organizing imaginable— Perhaps it was because of our youth that we took on the roles of soldiers in a war. We discussed strategy and we devised plans endlessly. This was where we learned the true meaning of democracy because there was no discrimination against women, or the older local people. Our motto was, “Everyone has something to contribute to the cause.” We bonded through our work, and became lifelong close friends.

Our primary focus was how to register voters in the face of unprecedented dangerous opposition. Every single step was a hurdle that had to be jumped. Every act was potentially dangerous. Every person we were able to get to go to go to the Courthouse to try to register to vote faced potential reprisals. Every campaign was launched only after we weighed the risks and the odds. We were required to be pragmatic because of the level of the risks we were undertaking. Though our numbers

were small—thirty SNCC and CORE field secretaries and a host of local people scattered throughout the state, as Bob Moses recently said, “played guerilla warfare.”

In 1962 only 6.7 percent of blacks were registered to vote, and in the year and a half that followed, we were not able to add many new black voters to the rosters because of the obstructionist tactics used by our foes. Voting Registrars like Therron Lynd in Hattiesburg who administered the Literacy Test to all blacks who applied to register personified the visible foe. To pass this test, one had to interpret two sections of the Constitution and he just might have asked you to tell him how many bubbles are in a bar of soap or how many grains of sand are in a quart jar. One also had to pay a poll tax each year and keep the receipts as proof. Therron Lynd flunked me three times while I was a student here at Tougaloo College but I was not alone. Some people lost their jobs, others were beaten, murdered, and their homes and churches were burned to the ground because they tried to register to vote or advocated for black voter rights.

Our urgent appeals to the President and the Attorney General for federal protection for those who tried to register to vote fell on deaf ears. -FBI agents stood on the sidelines taking notes and fraternizing with the local Sheriffs while civil rights workers were beaten and chased by police dogs. Theirs, they said, was an “investigative” agency and their job was not to intervene.

Eventually, courage was not enough and the guerilla warfare we played had its limits what with the increased violence, the escalation of burned homes and churches, increased arrests and more bail bond money.

We reached our nadir---our lowest point--in 1963 when Medgar Evers was assassinated. Our ranks were being decimated and if there was a wake-up call, this was it. Yet, we knew we couldn't give up. We had to fight.

The idea for the Summer Project was born of necessity.

-By late 1963 we realized that 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? The staff was divided. Some felt it would weaken painstakingly cultivated local projects, and others wanted the sunshine to beam brightly on a state that had gotten away with it oppression far too long.

The 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."

The National Council of Churches and Allard Lowenstein said they would recruit hundreds of students and ministers to students. They were recruited, screened, and required to go to an orientation at a college in Ohio.

Even before the volunteers arrived, we were reminded of how perilous their journey would be. Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney and Andy Goodman left the orientation to drive to Neshoba County to investigate a church burning. Mickey and Rita Schwerner and James Chaney were our own because they were CORE staff in Meridian. Civil rights workers had investigated church burnings and bombings before

but this time it was different. This time the terrorists orchestrated a triple murder of Mickey, James and Andy.

Therefore, the summer volunteers arrived when the movement was under siege and they knew their lives would also be in danger.

Despite this ominous cloud, only one volunteer left.

The others -- 700 college students, and another 300 lawyers, doctors, nurses, clergy and graduate students taught in freedom schools, tried to register voters, helped to organize the Freedom Democratic Party, did legal representation for the volunteers, and delivered health care.

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. It achieved the goal of shining the spotlight on the racial disparities in the state. There was also less violence that summer because local police were under a microscope and were reluctant to attack civil rights activists when the cameras were rolling.

It was also bittersweet because the murder of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner was a very painful cross to bear.

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover opened a Jackson field office that summer. Today, the Special Agent in Charge is Daniel McMullen, an African American, and it is named for Chaney, Goodman, Schwerner and Moore.

And a big boost for us was the passage of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964.

Mississippi has undergone a transformation in these fifty years. Registering to vote is no longer as problematic as it was in 1964, but voter I.D. laws have been introduced in the state and will prove difficult for some voters.

We will hear an extensive proposal from Bob Moses on why education should be a constitutional right. Today, he says, our youth are receiving a sharecropper's education. How do we find ways for our schools to offer a 21st century education to young people in whom they acquire marketable skills in a vastly different international economy than the one we received?

This conference is sponsored by a coalition of ~~three~~ organizations: the Mississippi Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, Tougaloo College, and the statewide Mississippi NAACP, [the SNCC Legacy Project](#), and One Voice. Each has contributed a lot to the making of this conference—their ideas, resources, facilities, and each has helped to shape and promote the conference to their vast networks. That is why we have over 1, 000 people registered.

In the spirit of the summer volunteers fifty years ago, the Youth Congress is making a side trip today to Neshoba County, the site of the murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner. This is, still another way to honor these martyrs who paid the ultimate price for their beliefs.

Finally, the charge is that all of us come away with a new sense of urgency and commitment to address the longstanding problems that have been ignored by policymakers for far too long.

INTRODUCE BEVERLY HOGAN

Now, we will have a welcome by Dr. Beverly Hogan, the 13th president of Tougaloo College. Dr. Hogan is an alumnus of Tougaloo, and is the first woman to serve

in this capacity. She has a long and distinguished career as a public administrator, educator, community leader and humanitarian. Her work as a mental health professional, governmental official and college administrator, and civic leader address issues of economic and social justice, civil democracy and racial and gender equity. Under her leadership, new degree programs have been added and three centers have been established including a Center for Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility, and a Center for Excellence in National Transportation Security. Endowed professorships in civil rights and for Dr. Ernst Borinski are being established. Not only is Dr. Hogan our Sister President but she is also our most progressive, forward thinking one as well.

INTRODUCE MAYOR TONY YARBER

Mayor Tony Yarber is a native of Jackson and a product of its public schools. He received a B.S. degree in Elementary Education from USM and a M.S. from Jackson State. He has been a strong advocate for his community and for the development of all people. His relentless passion for the city of Jackson to be restored is evident in his commitment to this great city. Through his work in the public school system, city council and community engagement projects, Mayor Yarber has the skills and knowledge to move Jackson forward. He has a commitment to serve all the people irrespective of economic cultural or social boundaries.

INTRODUCE HOLLIS WATKINS

Our panel will discuss “The Freedom Struggle in Mississippi – 1944-2014.

Our first panelist is Hollis Watkins, whom I have known since 1961. He will talk

about the post-war years of the civil rights movement when veterans like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers returned home from the military and started on the path of civil rights activism.

Read from his Bio

Introduce Attorney Derrick Johnson, Co-chair of Freedom Summer 50th who will speak about the period between 1964 and 2014.

Again, I want to thank you for coming to this historic conference. There will now be housekeeping announcements, after which we will adjourn for lunch.

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