



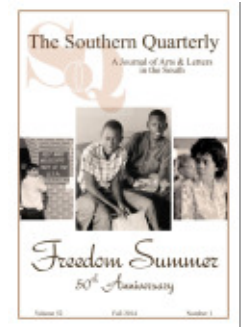
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Unsung Heroes of 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer

DAVID J. (“DAVE”) DENNIS, SR.

My first visit to Mississippi was on May 21, 1961, when, as a college student at Dillard University in New Orleans, I arrived on the first bus of freedom riders from Montgomery, Alabama, to Jackson, Mississippi. I did not get a chance to meet any black people on this first visit—only armed white men in National Guard and local police uniforms. I later met several prisoners from the local community and two local black lawyers, Carsie Hall and Jack Young. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had retained these lawyers to represent the Freedom Riders. After being released from the Mississippi jails in 1961, I became a field secretary for CORE for Louisiana. After being arrested with a large number of students from Southern University in December 1961, and subsequent release in January 1962, I met Bob Moses who came to Baton Rouge with several Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers from McComb to recruit some of the students from Southern University who had been expelled from Southern for their participation in the December demonstrations. We had two meetings and it was through these meetings that I became interested in going to Mississippi to work.

My next visit to Mississippi was in April 1962, when I went there to become the Mississippi Director of CORE activities. My first three to four months were consumed with meeting SNCC workers, such as Bob Moses, Hollis Watkins, Mattie Bivins, Paul Brooks, Dorie and Joyce Ladner, as well as many local people including Medgar Evers, R.L.T. Smith, Aaron Henry, Amzie Moore, Carsie Hall, Jack Young and Jess Brown, to name a few. Most of the SNCC workers were local young people. During these first months, I

traveled throughout the state meeting people while trying to figure out what my focus should be and how I could maximize my efforts since I was the only CORE staff person in the state. After many discussions with Bob, the SNCC workers, and local people, I soon decided that I should join forces with the SNCC workers with a focus on political issues, such as voting rights. Most of my time was spent in different parts of the Delta, Hattiesburg, and Jackson. In June 1962, I began to attempt to recruit more CORE workers to join me in the state. My first targets were my old colleagues from Louisiana, especially the New Orleans CORE group.

Prior to my arrival in Mississippi, Bob Moses, Tom Gaither (the then CORE field secretary in charge of CORE activity in Mississippi), and local leaders had begun discussions on how to focus on the issue of voting rights in the state by using the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a state-wide organization composed of national civil rights organizations—SNCC, NAACP, SCLC, and CORE—as well as local organizations. In 1961 local civil rights leaders formed COFO to support the freedom rides. A meeting of this organization was held in Clarksdale in late July or early August 1962; the members decided to reorganize the infrastructure, making Aaron Henry president; R.L.T. Smith, treasurer; Carsie Hall, secretary; and Bob and I, co-directors of the voter registration program. Additionally, James Bevel, Jim Foreman, and local SNCC workers were present. With the exception of Bob Moses, Foreman, Bevel, and me, this new phase of COFO was led and driven by local people. It was after this meeting that I decided that CORE would work closely with SNCC under the COFO umbrella; with Bob, we would begin a major effort in Mississippi. Resuming my recruitment of additional CORE staff, I brought on New Orleans CORE members Jean Thompson, Jerome Smith, Doris Castle, Matheo “Flukie” Suarez, and George Raymond. I had set up primary shop in Hattiesburg with SNCC worker Mattie Bivins; her father was D.K. Bivins, a local NAACP leader who worked with Mr. Vernon Dahmer.¹ Also in Hattiesburg were Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes; they worked with Mrs. Victoria Gray. We had a little office set up in a “boarding house” located in Hattiesburg and owned by Mrs. Lenon E. Woods, a knowledgeable businesswoman.²

Many of the national civil rights organizations were concerned that the COFO concept would not allow them to have an identity in the work in the state. CORE conditioned their support on a plan that would allow CORE to maintain its identity. Bob and I, under COFO, devised a plan for CORE to be identified with a geographic location—the fourth congressional district—since George Raymond and Flukie Suarez had begun to work with some local people in Canton and Meridian. This concept was to satisfy the national CORE, but local CORE workers had adopted the COFO concept and

continued to work throughout Mississippi. Along with Bob, I maintained my role as co-director of the statewide effort. In 1963, CORE increased its staff to include Dick Jewett, Mrs. Annie Devine from Canton, and James Chaney from Meridian. In the spring of 1963, the Jackson NAACP, under the leadership of Medgar Evers, who was also the director of the Mississippi NAACP, began a boycott of downtown stores, followed by sit-ins by students from Tougaloo College and the local Lanier High School. At the request of Medgar, several SNCC and CORE staff joined him to help to train the students in non-violent tactics. Out of that movement two students—Anne Moody from Tougaloo and Gene Young from Lanier—joined the CORE staff. In January 1964, Mickey and Rita Schwerner became part of CORE staff assigned to Meridian to work with Flukie and James Chaney. Sue Brown joined the Meridian staff also. The CORE staff, under the leadership of George Raymond, “Flukie” Suarez, Mickey and Rita Schwerner, and James Chaney, worked with local leaders in developing and organizing Freedom Schools, voter register activities, and boycotts in Canton, Meridian, and Philadelphia.

At the training of the Freedom Summer volunteers in Oxford, Ohio, CORE staff from Mississippi was joined by Rudy Lombard. Twelve CORE staff members, including Mickey and Rita Schwerner, James Chaney, George Raymond, Matheo “Flukie” Suarez, Mrs. Annie Devine, Rudy Lombard, Dick Jewett, Anne Moody and Ed Hollander participated in the Freedom Summer volunteer training at Oxford, Ohio. After the deaths of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, CORE increased its staff significantly in Mississippi, but concentrated most of them in the fourth congressional district.

During this period, the Mississippi CORE and SNCC staff identified more with the local people and the COFO concept than with national CORE. SNCC and CORE staff in Mississippi worked together as one. The first team to settle in Philadelphia after the deaths of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner included Rudy Lombard (CORE), Jean Wheeler and Ralph Featherston (SNCC), and Jimmie Collier. They lived and worked together in the heart of Philadelphia as one unit. What made Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964 a success was the ability of people from different organizations and different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds and beliefs to come together under the COFO roof with the singular target of making the Constitution of the United States real for all of the nation’s people. The issues were primary; personal differences were left at the door. As Bob Moses stated, “No one owns Freedom Summer. Freedom Summer belongs to the people.” I will add that it belongs to the people of Mississippi.

When I arrived in Mississippi in the early sixties, I discovered that there was a common thread between what was happening in Mississippi and what was happening in Louisiana. Black people in both states had been

preparing for a movement for a long time. Local people had established an underground movement that provided opportunity, at great personal risk, for people to get an education and to begin to open the doors for political participation. They came from all walks of life—black people who owned their own grocery stores, ministers and deacons who found ways for activists to use their churches to teach reading and writing and to challenge the political system by teaching people how to register to vote. They worked as postal workers (Amzie Moore), doctors (Drs. Anderson and Smith), teachers (Mrs. Victoria Gray), insurance agents (Mrs. Annie Devine), and sharecroppers (Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer). COFO was a movement “of the people and by the people.” It was and is still a model for grassroots organizing today. It takes a whole village, not just one part of a village, to make a movement. That is what COFO was about!

The COFO concept gave the space for everyone to participate, to feel equal. Thousands of local people participated in the movement in many different ways. They housed us when we had no place to stay, fed us when we did not have food, protected us when we did not even know we needed protection, put a floor beneath us to allow us to do what we did. Mississippi Freedom Summer would not have been in 1964 if it had not been for those local people—people whose names few remember. Who were all those people in McComb, Hattiesburg, Liberty, Laurel, Meridian, Natchez, Yazoo City, Canton, Meridian, Philadelphia, Greenwood, Greenville, Indianola, Ruleville, and so on who provided that safety, that shelter, that sustenance? Who were those volunteers that participated in the marches and, more often than not unsuccessful, the attempts to register to vote? There are many untold and many incomplete stories and perhaps more questions than answers:

- I remember C.O. Chinn standing guard in the front of churches in Canton with his guns and facing off with Sheriff Billie Noble.
- I remember people in the back woods late at night using different light signals to identify meeting places.
- I remember a “Freedom Vote Day” in Canton when an elderly man and his wife came to the courthouse in a wagon drawn by an old mule; he got out of the wagon and gently helped his wife out. He asked, “Where do I go to vote . . . ?” We told him where to go to “register” to vote. He went in and later came out with his wife and got back into their wagon. I watched them as they rode away through town to wherever. I have never stopped wondering what happened to them, as I also wonder what happened to all the local people who participated in Mississippi Freedom Summer and have, for the most part, been forgotten.
- I remember Hattiesburg native Mrs. Woods, late one night, refusing to

let several white men take me from her house (where I was staying). She pointed a shotgun at them and told them to leave, that this was her house and no one would tell her who could stay at her house. After they left, out of fear for Mrs. Woods, I attempted to leave, only to have her tell me to go back to my room and that I could not leave. Mrs. Woods spent the night by her front door with her shotgun, not letting anyone in—or out—of her house.

- I remember my last words with my friend Medgar, just one hour before he was gunned down in his yard.
- I remember my last words with Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, the day before they were killed in Neshoba County.
- I remember the words of Mrs. Devine admonishing me for leaving Mississippi when I did.
- I remember the times I had with my friends in Mississippi: Bob, Rudy, Charlie, Medgar, Amzie, McLaurin, Cotton, Hollis, Jimmie, Curtis, Euvester, Dorie, Joyce, “Flukie,” George, Jessie, Dewey, Mrs. Hamer, Mickey, James, Anne, and “Jughead,” to name a few.
- I remember the many evenings of walking the streets and back roads of Palmers Crossing with Mrs. Victoria Gray, Mattie Bivins and her father D.K. Bivins, Mrs. Peggy Jean Connor, Rev. J.C. Fairley, and members of the local voters league, led by Mrs. Gray. We knocked on doors to try to get people to register to vote, to maybe get two or three people registered during a week or sometimes two-week period. There were only about fifteen blacks registered in Forrest County at that time.
- I remember the many days that the SNCC and CORE workers had to depend on local people in the Hattiesburg area for food because there was no money for food. In fact, sometimes we would schedule our door-to-door campaigns to coincide with people having supper in hope that they would share food, and in many cases this worked!
- I remember my many encounters with the Hattiesburg police department, because CORE and SNCC workers were constantly harassed by the local police. One night in particular, I was picked up for an alleged traffic violation. Once the officers put me in the car, they began a conversation about integration and how wrong it was, proclaiming that God did not intend for the races to be together. I responded that *white men always integrated with black women, especially when the public was not watching*. I continued that I was the product of a white person and a black person “integrating” and producing a “grey-eyed, light skinned, kinky-haired me”. One officer responded that “maybe if someone had kept your nigger momma off the streets it would not have happened.” Not to be outdone, I retorted, “Oh no. You got it wrong. Sorry. My daddy is black;

my momma is white.” Big mistake on my part; I received probably the worse beating of my life. This experience caused me to be more careful in choosing my battles and my words.

- I remember one of our first and largest “Freedom Days” in Hattiesburg in January 1964. It was during this demonstration that Bob Moses decided to test the “the right of a citizen to make an arrest of someone breaking the law.” As black citizens tried to enter the courthouse to attempt to register, the sheriff and his deputies blocked the entrance. Bob tried to escort a lady to register and was stopped by the sheriff. Bob attempted to arrest him for blocking their entrance to the courthouse. After a moment of bewilderment, the sheriff punched Bob and proceeded to arrest him for “disturbing the peace.”
- I remember also that it was in Hattiesburg that SNCC and CORE staff met to decide whether to have Freedom Summer—in January 1964 at the time that Lewis Allen was murdered for his willingness to testify as a witness to the murder of Herbert Lee.
- I remember, too, that it was in Hattiesburg that I met my first wife, Mattie Bivins, then a field secretary for SNCC, who would become the mother of our beautiful daughter Erika.

There were many unrecognized heroes and *sheroes* from Hattiesburg and elsewhere who made tremendous sacrifices, who became leaders throughout Mississippi, and who were integral parts of the freedom movement. How many people, like Mrs. Hamer, tried to register only to be forced from their homes without any place to go? How many people lost their jobs, were beaten, jailed that we do not know about? When most of us from outside left Mississippi in late 1964-65, the local people stayed, without protection. We know of nineteen people murdered between 1961 and 1965 as a result of their direct or indirect affiliation with the movement. Most of these people were local members of the NAACP. There were also the “collateral damages of the movement.” We did not know anything about “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” It is believed by many psychiatrists and psychologists that human beings should not be in combat zones for more than six months before transferring out to a calmer place. Most of the civil rights workers from SNCC and CORE spent years without a break in what we considered “war” zones. Some never left, just as the local people who remained after the volunteers and press left. Many of the SNCC and CORE workers dropped out of school to never return and, today, many are in bad health without adequate health care benefits and are living from day-to-day. *These are our veterans of a war for justice in America.* America turned its back on these people in 1964, but let us not forget them now.

I am hoping that Freedom Summer 50th anniversary commemorations will be for and about these people, that we can reintroduce to the nation the COFO model for organizing, and that the spirit of these people will resonate, will catch fire, and will ignite the hearts and passions of those who will settle for no less than the dreams past and dreams present becoming dreams realized.

Southern Initiative Algebra Project

NOTES

¹ Former NAACP president of the Forrest County, Mississippi, chapter, Dahmer was later murdered by the KKK when his home was firebombed in 1966.

² Now a historic site on the Freedom Summer Trail in Hattiesburg, the Woods Guest House was located at 507 Mobile Street; the building was destroyed by fire on September 18, 1998. The Woods Guest House, built between 1895 and 1900, was one of the area's first hotels for African Americans. In 1964, the Hattiesburg headquarters of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was housed in one side of the building, with offices, sleeping quarters, and a Freedom Library during Freedom Summer. For more information about the Freedom Summer Trail, contact the Hattiesburg Visitor's Center: <http://www.hattiesburg.org/> for a brochure.