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CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE "HEART OF THE ICEBERG"

The Mississippi Delta, the alluvial plain which stretches between Jackson and Memphis and covers the northwestern part of the state, with its pre-civil war outlook and practices in race relations, has been called by Robert P. Moses, head of the Council of Federated Organizations, the statewide voter registration organization, and many others who have followed him into this area, "The Heart Of The Iceberg." My experiences here since March 4th of this year certainly bear out this description.

I went to Greenwood, located in the heart of the Delta, four days after James Travis, a 20 year old voter registration worker with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was shot as he drove other workers home at the end of a busy day on February 28. This incident, following as it did a series of other acts of violence, harrassment, intimidation, and reprisal perpetrated against local citizens and voter registration workers in and around the Greenwood-Leflore County area, motivated the administrator of the Southern Regional Council's Voter Education Project to declare this area a "testing ground for democracy" and to seek the support of the civil rights organizations participating in the Project in a massive crash program to register every qualified Negro. I went as a representative of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference where I joined our voter registration worker in the Delta, James L. Beval. Beval introduced me to other workers and community

people, who later were to provide meeting spaces and help set up the first citizenship classes in the area.

On the second night I spent in the Delta an attempt was made to kill four other voter registration workers as they drove up in front of the voter registration office. Miraculously no one was injured seriously, and the work went on. Although the shootings had the desired effect of intimidating the local citizens so that a far smaller number than the 125 who had gone down in two days the week before now responded to the appeals and challenges of the voter workers (now doubling many times over the handful headed by Samuel Elock who had come to Greenwood alone back in August of 1962 since CORE & NAACP had responded to the call for a massive program and SNCC had also sent in additional field workers).

The fear which gripped most of the Negro community almost totally immobilizing the so-called middle class who would have nothing to do with the movement, and threatened severely the poorer people who depended on the recently discontinued surplus commodity food program for subsistence during the winter months when there was no work to be done on surrounding plantations (county supervisors had discontinued the program as an economic reprisal in face of the momentum which voter registration among Negroes was gaining) was recognized as a concrete obstacle with which the workers had to deal as they approached

people of the community, but I would suggest that it was very rarely if ever consciously experienced by the workers themselves. I was and continue to be constantly amazed at the bravery, persistence, performance and perseverance of these workers (most of them native Mississippians) as they have endured and overcome one disaster after another. (The two shooting incidents in late February and early March, the burning of the office on McLaurin Street, the shooting into the home of one of the local workers (George Green of Greenwood), the subsequent jailing of 11 workers and one local man following an attempt to protest the lack of police protection which saw two persons become the victims of police dog attacks. The outrage which these actions stirred in the hearts and minds of the nation and the local community, where people flocked to the courthouse in large numbers daily ('marching' in the face of police surveillance and harrassment, police dog intimidation, to show the world that they were not afraid, that they wanted to be free) was a slackening of conviction apparent in the community after what many felt was a deal between the city and county officials and the federal department of justice which saw the workers released with the understanding that there would be no more 'marches'; continuous harrassment by the police who gave and continued to give traffic tickets of jail (sometimes beating those jailed) the persons known to them as voter registration workers without any reasonable justification, and most recently the jailing of workers and local citizens who in one case went to protest the lack of police protection following a second bombing incident at the church where they held voter

registration meetings and were attacked by other Negroes instructed to do so by the white authorities. In another case they were arrested at the county courthouse as they sought to be registered to vote. At this writing sixty-three (63) of these persons are still in custody at the penal farm and the state penitentiary after having been there for more than one month already, and after an unsuccessful attempt by the federal justice department to get forty-five of them released by federal court order. Yet in spite of these problems, the workers and the people of the Delta continue steadfast and hopeful. And I write about them, because it is from them, working day after day, early and late, that I have received the inspiration, the will, and the hope which have helped to make possible the realization of a citizenship education program in the area, and because it has been affected sometimes indirectly and many times directly by the obstacles placed in the way of the overall voter registration program.

The purposes of the citizenship education program include, the teaching of reading and writing, the helping of students to pass literacy tests for voting, and the giving of an all-around education in community development which included housing governmental processes, recreation, health, and improved home life. I like to add the general phrase, "and learning ways of gaining first class citizenship" to this for while the program is academic, its offerings serve only to give guidance direction and intensity to the motivations toward freedom and human dignity which the adult citizens bring with them to the classes.

At first, it was very difficult to secure meeting places for the schools because the people were so afraid to take an active part in the struggle. However, with the help of Rev. James Bevel who has long been one of the most dynamic leaders in the freedom movement and who is widely known throughout the Delta, having been born at Itta Bena just ten miles east of Greenwood, on the first night of my stay in Greenwood, we were able to secure the use of the Turner Chapel AME Church for a meeting place. Later, during the time of the massive push its minister, Reverend Tucker, led a march from the courthouse and was also bitten by a police dog. Miss Ida Holland, the first teacher of the class at Turner Chapel, accompanied Reverend Tucker and was knocked down by one of the police officers.

In the meantime, Mrs. Atlean Smith, in responding to our plea for meeting space, volunteered the use of her home, and I had started a class there while recruiting local people who would eventually set up their own classes.

Using the resources of the community leaders, the voter registration canvassers and other staff, and using the techniques of personal contact and publicity through mass meeting announcements, newspapers, handbills, and so forth, we were able to recruit twelve persons to be trained as teachers during the first training session held between March 13 and 22.

Because the people were so afraid, it was impossible to find a place where we could hold training sessions in the evenings, we were limited to daytime hours for our work. This prevented our recruiting more people - those who could have come after school or after working hours - for this first training session.

Eight of the twelve persons overcame their own apprehension over possible reprisals, braved the jeers and criticisms of their neighbors who would take no part in the 'mess' which we were stirring up, worked hard to master the course, and received their certificates at a mass meeting held on March 25.

All eight were women, ranging in age from 19 to well over 60. One was a retired school teacher, four were housewives, one was on social security but worked as a maid when she was able to get work, and two were young women in their late teens or early twenties all of whom at the end of the session saw the program as a means of helping to better the situation of our people and were ready to move out in the spirit of non-violence to help achieve our freedom. (Some of them had never attempted to register to vote before.)

Since the end of this first session one other training session has been held at Greenwood. Delta citizens have attended the April and June workshops at Dorchester, and a group of nine persons have attended a voter registration-community development workshop in South Carolina. Three of the

persons going to South Carolina were citizenship school teachers, and two others have since been to Dorchester for the training.

In all, a total of forty-five persons (11 men, 34 women) from Leflore, Bolivar, Sunflower, and Holmes counties have been trained since the beginning of March. Of this number twenty four (24) have set up and taught classes in citizenship education.

Many of them have experienced reprisals and intimidation either personally or through their families, friends, or students. But there have also been moments of joy and times of accomplishment. Here are some of our negative experiences:

Initially, churches in Greenwood were reluctant to open doors to classes, so teachers used their homes and/or neighbors' homes.

Students lost jobs because of participating in classes.

One teacher had two sons arrested and put on penal farm because of participation in a protest march. They remain there at this writing.

One teacher was knocked down by a policeman, and later jailed for participation in voter registration marches to the courthouse in Greenwood.

One teacher has lived in a very delapidated, run-down house for over a year. Owner will not repair it nor could she rent others - because she works with the movement.

One teacher has lived under continuous harrassment since last September when she was shot at 16 times after attempting to register. Policemen park in front of her house, let the police dog bark all night, stand on steps or in yard of church where her classes are in session and follow her as she goes about canvassing the neighborhoods. Her husband loses every job he gets as soon as it is known that she is his wife.

Another was told by her landlord that the neighbors complained that her having classes meet at her home was disturbing them, and he felt that she should stop holding class or he would have to ask her to move. This lady, about sixty five, told her landlord that her class, which at that time had met only one time and had only five members, had not been noisy and had not disturbed the neighbors at all. She was going to continue her meetings, she said she hoped to have ten people at the next meeting and he could put her out if he wanted to. (In the face of this courage and determination, the landlord backed down and has not bothered this teacher anymore.)

All except two of the teachers who have gone down to register have been disqualified by the county registrars.

Nine of the teachers sat through the recent federal court hearing which saw Judge Clayton deny the government's plea that forty five persons, arrested in Itta Bena protest march, be released from the county penal farm and their bonds be waived pending further court hearings. This, despite the fact that testimony proved beyond any possible doubt that the people were innocent of the charges of disturbing the peace and inciting to riot.

And the teachers have all lived through the cold-blooded slaying of Medgar Evers, NAACP state secretary, whom they all knew and loved. They have to deal daily with the repercussions of this murder and the resultant fears which have been engendered and/or reinforced in some of the people.

My own personal experience with Mississippi law enforcement and Mississippi justice came on Sunday June 9 (and three days following) as the group of nine workers and I were en route from the Charleston to the Greenwood workshop.

When we reached Winona, about 25 miles east of Greenwood, six of us got off the Trailways bus on which we were riding to use the services of the terminal -

some to use rest room facilities, others to use the lunchcounter. We were denied use of these facilities by the local chief of police and state highway patrolman. When I asked if they didn't know that it was against the law to put us out (thinking of the ICC ruling which resulted from the Freedom Rides), the police chief told me, "There ain't no damned law. You get out."

We went out but were later arrested as we attempted to take down the patrolman's license plate number in order to make a report of the incident. We were taken down to the county jail, and four of us brutally beaten by the police chief, the highway patrolman, a local policeman, another white man out of uniform, and two Negro prisoners who were forced to do so by the white officers who threatened to "get them" if they did not.

When one of the workers from Greenwood came over to Winona to check on our arrest and to seek our release, he too was arrested (on a trumped up murder charge) and very badly beaten, also.

Two days later, when we were well enough, we were forced to walk to the city hall where we were "tried" for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, found guilty and fined \$100.00 each. We pleaded not guilty and were released on appeal the next afternoon.

I had been in jail four days (by which time, according to the jailer, "the whole world" knew what had happened) before the local FBI got around to visiting with me and investigating the incident. And the officials kept insisting that I keep my voice down so that the local officials could not hear what I told them. They were very explicit in telling me, too, that they were merely the "guests of the police chief," that they had to follow his regulations, and if he said that they could not take any pictures in the jail then they would have to abide by his decision.

The fact that a federal official could entertain such an idea and the fact that the officers who had beaten us and held us illegally (who are more typical than atypical in the Delta of Mississippi and in many other "deltas" throughout the South) were left totally free and unhampered to operate as they choose after we were released, add a new dimension to the chilly depths and widths of the effect of the iceberg, and it points up the need for more citizenship education. People like those officers need training and rehabilitation before they can function adequately as law enforcement officials in a democracy. Whether this should be done at the hands of the federal government is debatable, but my opinion is that it should. And because of an emotionally based prejudice should be declared incapable and incompetent and removed from office until such time as they become more rational and unbiased in the carrying out of the duties entrusted to them by the people of the community - many of whom and in many cases the majority of whom are colored people. (It is significant that the most decent appearing official we met in Winona, the one who did not participate in the beatings and the one who seemed at times truly sorry about what happened, was the jailer, and he insisted to the end that we had just gone into "the wrong place.")

Now for the positive experiences:

In spite of all the harrassments, reprisals and intimidations, over 1300 Negroes in Leflore County have attempted to register to vote since the beginning of March. The citizenship schools have played a significant role in this accomplishment. Teachers have conducted classes, given instructions at the voter registration headquarters, and assisted with interpreting the application form at the court house. They have held block parties to recruit students and encourage voter registration; they have canvassed their communities periodically since the beginning of the drive, and recently after the jailing of more than half of the paid workers at the Greenwood Courthouse, the Greenwood teachers have stepped in to

help with this work on a regular basis; three of the teachers have served time in jail as they struggle to bring justice to Mississippi and many others are ready to go if necessary; others have signed property bonds in order to bail out workers and citizens. One teacher had the satisfaction of walking with some of her students and other local citizens for ten miles of a proposed 26-mile march to their county courthouse (included in the number was an 83-yearold woman). These people are from a small town whose law enforcement officer is the brother to the man who killed Emmett Till. Others have marched in Greenwood, giving support and encouragement to others as they went; many more have helped to distribute the food and clothing which was sent in by concerned citizens throughout the country when the surplus commodity program was discontinued as a measure of reprisal. Many continue this work as we survey the community to locate other natural leaders in each block who can help to decentralize this work in the coming winter (which we expect will be another hard one for many people in the Delta).

Increasingly the community responsibilities of the citizenship teachers in the Delta become greater daily, and for the most part, the response to the task has been of matching intensity. The latest project undertaken by the teachers is the sponsorship of a Sunday night mass meeting each week with meetings to be held wherever they can be most helpful in the area. Sometimes the whole group is responsible and again three or four classes will be in charge. All the teachers meet together as a body once every week. We propose to expand the program throughout the state. Teachers and supervisors are going as teams into new areas in the city and in outlying county areas canvassing and recruiting for students and potential teachers.

The people of the Delta have started from the inside to melt the iceberg, and I'm happy to share on the t.jawing process with them.

by: Miss Annell Ponder
Field Supervisor