

THE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Department of Citizenship Education

Mrs. Dorothy Cotton -- Director

**Mrs. Septima Clark -- Supervisor of Teacher
Training**

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More than two decades ago one man and one woman in South Carolina saw communities of black people suffering in untold ways. They saw people starving, fearful and brutally treated: they even saw, to their horror, these same folk failing to relate their own misery to those who were controlling local, state, and national governments. Mrs. Septima P. Clark and Mr. Esau Jenkins were determined to help the disinherited and powerless poor regain pride and satisfaction in knowing that **THEY THEMSELVES COULD AND INDEED MUST WORK TO RIGHT THESE WRONGS...**and thus, the Citizenship Education Program was born.

The main purpose of CEP is to make sure that every man exercises his rights as a full citizen of the United States of America.

Whereas the landowner and King were rulers in medieval times and the tyrant Hitler was dictator in Nazi Germany, the men who set forth this country's founding principles wanted the "citizen" to be powerful. In our most cherished documents, the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and many enacted laws, "we the people" are entitled to a voice in government through the vote and other means.

The citizenship schools which started on a small South Carolina island a long time ago have rapidly spread to all the Southern and border states. Since 1962, CEP has been a department of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It is co-sponsored by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries (United Church of Christ), and financed by the Field Foundation. Today, approximately once each month, 50 to 60 grass roots community adults, all potential leaders, are invited to spend five days of intensive training in CEP workshops. These future leaders and teachers don't have college degrees; indeed, many lack even a high school diploma. The only requirements are a minimum skill in reading and writing and a desire to help others in their home communities. Classes are taught by

trained CEP personnel on basic citizenship rights, new information about federal and private programs for economic opportunities, the organization of credit unions, consumer education, general community problem solving, Negro history and teaching methods. In short, the purpose of the CEP class is to give instruction necessary for meaningful existence and participation in a democratic society. Most important, however, is the way that the CEP staff somehow convinces their adult students that most people do not need an authority figure to "pour out" facts as much as an understanding person who can help them realize that **THEY THEMSELVES CAN THINK, MAKE DECISIONS, AND THEN ACT.** To date, more than 2,600 ordinary adults from the South have been trained for leadership and to be teachers themselves, and have then returned home to teach their own citizenship classes, attended by 23,000 others.

A few examples of CEP achievements will help clarify its goals. Members of the staff are presently writing a Negro History manual which will make clear the significant role in history played by Negro people here and in other countries. All men, while functioning in the present, must know and use lessons of their own pasts. The organization of a very successful credit union in South Carolina is leading to similar efforts in many more communities. In Wilcox and Lowndes Counties, Alabama, government funds have made possible broad training programs in which CEP teachers are participating. The Haywood County Charity Club, organized by CEP, has visibly improved conditions in some Tennessee communities through voter registration drives, desegregation of schools, Head Start programs, and demands of more employment opportunities and greater police protection. CEP schools have produced many outstanding local leaders of SCLC affiliate chapters.

Mrs. Dorothy Cotton, Mrs. S. Clark, and their able staff, feel that the many social, political and economic problems facing Negro Americans today can be effectively removed through active citizen participation. The aim is to organize at the local community level and unite these local groups in a powerful drive to transform America into a good society

serving all human needs. By demanding and exercising full citizenship, Negroes throughout the North and South can put an end to centuries of subjugation and exclusion.