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REPORT

By

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On

White Southern student project (School year of 1961-62)

This is a report to the Southern Conference Educational Fund and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee concerning the project set up by SCEF and SNCC to contact white southern students and to interest them in the movement. At first I would like to quote an outline that I drew up at the beginning of the project outlining the aims that I hoped to achieve and the work this year. The following were the 10 aims I projected:

1. Contact white students on southern campuses.
2. Interpret student movement to them.
3. Inspire and interest them.
4. Interest them in some sort of constructive action.
5. Aid the students in contacting Negro students in the area.
6. Aid them in meeting the leaders in the area.
7. Acquaint them with the organizations that are active in the movement and their publications, for instance - SNCC, CORE, NAACP, SCEF, SCLC, etc.
8. Acquaint them with some of the leaders in the movement.
9. Aid them in relating themselves to the activity in their area, if any.
10. Indicate some areas or techniques of action.

As to the matter of achievement in carrying out the program of the project that started in September of 1961, I would like to report that I have visited some 28 colleges in the South. This does not include several colleges visited outside the South. Fifteen of this number were white colleges or predominately white. Among the white colleges visited were Millsaps College, Jackson, Miss.; Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn.; Peabody College, Nashville, Tenn.; University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tenn.; Georgia State College, Atlanta, Ga.; Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.; Birmingham Southern, Birmingham, Ala.; University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Ala.; Auburn University, Auburn, Ala.; Duke University, Durham, N.C.; University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.; Tulane University, New Orleans, La.; University of Louisville, Louisville, Ky.

The Negro Colleges visited - some of them - were Jackson State Teacher's College, Jackson, Miss.; Campbell College, Jackson, Miss.; Tougaloo College, Jackson, Miss.; Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.; A & I University, Nashville, Tenn.; American Baptist Theological Seminary, Nashville, Tenn.; Alabama State, Montgomery, Ala.; Alabama A & M, Huntsville, Ala.; Miles College, Birmingham, Ala.; Talladega College, Talladega, Ala.; Stillman College, Tuscaloosa, Ala.; Benedict College, Columbia, S. C.; Xavier University, New Orleans, La.

I have contacted many students in various conferences across the

South and some in the north. I have attended the National Convention of the NACP. That's not the NAACP. It's the National Associated Collegiate Press. The convention was in Miami and there were many southern students there. I talked to students from the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, Louisiana State University, the University of South Carolina, Auburn University-many students from all over the South. I also attended the annual meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Nashville, Tenn. at the beginning of the project to become acquainted with the program that SCLC is conducting and some of the activities that they have going on in the South.

I attended various workshops: for instance, a human relations seminar sponsored by the National Student Association in New Orleans, La. I attended a SDS (Students for Democratic Society) conference. One of the things they were discussing was a southern political education project that they were interested in launching in the South to contact students on Southern campuses and try to get them interested in the vital political questions of our nation. I also attended a conference in Chapel Hill sponsored by the Southern Conference Educational Fund on Civil Liberties.

I attended a fund-raising reception in New York sponsored by SCEF. I spoke there and later in Philadelphia to groups trying to interpret what is happening in the South in the student movement. Incidentally, I missed a few too. Recently I missed my own SNCC conference in Atlanta because I happened to be temporarily detained in the county jail in Talladega. At the same time I missed a SDS conference in Chapel Hill that I planned to attend as well as a fund-raising dinner sponsored by Harry Belafonte in New York but these are some of the things you get into if you become the guest of some Southern politicians.

A few of the things I felt have really been an accomplishment I would like to report now. In several places I have been instrumental in forming several groups of students in college towns where there was a Negro college and a white college and yet there was no contact between the student bodies. In Montgomery, Ala. I helped form a group; it has had a lot of trouble but a group of students at Alabama State and a group of students at Huntingdon College have been meeting irregularly and secretly trying to get to know each other, trying to find out the things that they can do in the situation in which they find themselves. In Birmingham, Ala. I contacted students at Birmingham-Southern and students at Miles College and interested them in forming a group. They have been meeting quite regularly since that time; there has been very little action on the part of the students at Birmingham-Southern, but at least they have been able to keep up with what has been happening in Birmingham, and they formed some real friendships with students at Miles College.

Also I was instrumental in helping a group at Tuscaloosa, Ala., students at Stillman College and students at the University of Alabama. That's a very tense situation there, but they've been able to have some meetings and maintain a certain degree of contact. This seems to me to be a very important thing as far as Southern white students are concerned in the South. On most white college campuses there are students who would sincerely like to have some real personal contacts with Negro

students in their area but many times they do not know how to go about setting up this thing, so it is necessary to have someone who can move in both communities and arrange some sort of meeting and some sort of method by which they can get together.

Another project in which I helped was in the formation of the Talladega Improvement Association in Talladega, Ala.; it is made up of citizens of Talladega. They were of course inspired by the students at Talladega College but we were able to bring them together and to form some sort of stable organization. I think we'll continue and be able to do some improvement in Talladega. I hope that has been something of an accomplishment. I will come back later and explain more about the Talladega situation.

Now I want to discuss some of the problems that have been presented by this project.

Being a white Southern student I have had some problems in bridging the gap between the white Southern liberal and the militant Negro student and the militant Negro citizen. At first in the project I thought my work would mainly be a quiet sort of work—simply meeting and talking with students about what was going on. But I soon realized the impossibility of explaining what was going on unless I myself became an integral part of it, and of course my personality make up and psychology also tended to draw me into the area of action. So I did get into action—first in McComb rather suddenly when I joined a march there and was arrested for breach of the peace and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Next it was Albany, Ga. where I was arrested for a so-called Freedom Ride when I went down with several members of the staff. We were arrested for going through the white waiting room of the train station there. I spent 12 days in jail there. Next, it was Baton Rouge, La. This did not involve any sort of overtaction but it happened when I visited Dion Diamond, another SNCC staff member who was in the Baton Rouge jail. Chuck McDew, SNCC chairman, and I went to see Dion to try to get him some literature and some fruit because we couldn't get him out on bond. We were arrested for criminal anarchy. Then, later, there was the Talladega situation.

Now, the dilemma that I was faced with was that I had become a somewhat active person in the movement and had been arrested several times and had some publicity and by this time I felt quite estranged from the Southern students that I was supposed to be talking to. It was difficult to talk with them and bridge the gap between us that had arisen by this time, since I had become quite active and there was so little chance of them really becoming active. I felt insecure and uncomfortable on the Southern white campus by then, because I had been so caught up in the action of it.

The dilemma that is presented here is perhaps the dilemma that faces every Southern white person who becomes deeply committed to the integration movement. How do you relate to the white southern moderate or liberal and at the same time relate to a group of people who are as militant and as activist as students in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee? I don't know how to resolve this dilemma,

but I have found myself in it, and I have had some thoughts that maybe this did hurt the project that we originally set out to work on. Yet as far as I'm concerned I could not have done anything differently. It was inevitable that I did become involved and I think actually maybe in the long run it will accomplish more since then I did have something to talk about. I did know intimately what was going on, the thoughts that go through student's mind when they are involved in action.

In order to document some of the occurrences that caused me to feel very insecure on Southern white campuses and made me feel in a somewhat difficult position to talk to white Southern students I'd like to report two instances that happened.

One happened in Montgomery, Ala., at Huntingdon College, the very college from which I graduated in 1961. I had gone to the college to visit some students. I was in the dormitory talking to them, and then we left to go get a bite to eat, after which I planned to come back to get my brief case and things and then leave. On the way out two deans, the dean of students and the dean of men, met me as I was coming out of the dorm and ordered me to leave the campus. I asked the reason why. They said that my presence posed a potentially dangerous situation -that there were some students at Huntingdon college who violently disagreed with what I had been doing and that it was possible that I would be hurt physically if I remained on campus. I was very surprised to hear this tactic, which certainly it was, being used by administrators of a Christian college. Huntingdon is the college related to the Methodist Church. I quietly explained to them that if they were asking me to leave because I might get hurt if I didn't I would choose certainly not to leave. I told them this was the same sort of tactic that was being used all over the South by police officers in stifling legitimate protest and legitimate meetings because of the threat of violence. I said that I would not leave, that I did intend to go get something to eat and that I would return. They ordered me not to. I went and got something to eat with the students with whom I was talking and came back to the college.

While I was gone the deans called a meeting of all the boys in the dormitory and in effect produced a mob with which to throw me off campus when I came back. Now these were former classmates of mine and former fellow students. The deans, of course, were very sly about what they did. They simply explained that I was on campus (many of the people did not even know I was on campus) and certainly I had a right to be there and yet the dean said, "We know that you boys don't agree with Bob and we don't either. We think he's doing things wrong but he does have a right to be here. But please don't beat him up. Don't do any physical violence to him when he comes back." Of course there was a small group of boys who had been opposed to me and had been while I was there in school, and so by the time I got back there were 45 or 50 boys in a large crowd and the deans asked me, "Are you going to leave now? There's a mob and they're going to beat you up if you don't leave." And of course, I refused to leave in the face of the mob and I simply stayed on campus until they dispersed and, then I left. This was one of the things that I encountered.

Another thing occurred at Birmingham-Southern College where I was visiting some people. I was staying in the dorm and I had been to a mass meeting of the organization directed by Rev. Shuttlesworth and had spoken there. When I returned to campus, police were on the campus talking to the house father of the dorm. He immediately asked me to leave and refused to let me stay in the dorm.

These are some of the things that I did encounter that caused me to be very uncomfortable on the white campuses. I think by this time I have a thick enough skin that that sort of thing doesn't bother me anymore. But at the time it was quite traumatic and it made me very reluctant to put myself in the situation again where I would feel that everyone thought I was a real subversive or criminal of some sort.

However, after thinking long and hard about the project-about the future of it-I think that it will be extremely necessary to continue the project. There have been some indications that there is increased willingness to participate on the part of white students. At the SNCC Conference in April for instance, it is estimated that 30 percent of the participants were white southern students. This is the highest percentage ever since 1960. There has been each year an increase in southern white student participation and this year the largest increase. Now I don't, even by the wildest stretch of imagination, think that this project had all that much to do with it, but it does indicate that there is an increased willingness to become more intimately involved in the struggle for civil rights on the part of southern white students.

I think that if someone can take this project and can successfully integrate himself with the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee participating to some extent in its actions, while also talking with as many white students as possible, it will have great value. Whoever takes the project must recognize the basic dilemma: it is very difficult to relate intimately with the SNCC staff without getting involved in action and in getting involved in action you tend to put some distance between yourself and the white southern moderate. But some way this dilemma must be solved. Someone must reach the white students and interpret to them what is going on; to do this, he must know and feel what is going on. There've been many instances where white students who have found out what is going on have been inspired to take moves on their own, to try to figure out what they can do in their situation. But there has to be some organized effort to reach them with information and interpretation. Many Southern students are so provincial that they don't realize that this real fight, this stimulating struggle is going on for civil liberties. Someone must tell them, acquaint them with publications and reading material, communicate the spirit of the movement. Someone must try to relate and bridge the gap between them, the white Southern students and the militant people who are fighting on the front lines. This is the function this project should serve.

Whoever carries on the project next year will have at the outset the list of contacts I have built up on predominantly white

campuses this year. This will be a starter from which work can be expanded. I would like to recommend the following procedure of work for the project next year:

Immediately at the beginning of the school year, the person in charge of the project should arrange as many concrete appointments as possible on various white campuses. He should then visit as many of these as possible during the fall months, talking with the students. In the course of these visits, he should assess which campuses seem to have the greatest potential for establishing an on-going group committed to civil rights. He should then select two or three of these for more intensive work in the latter half of the year.

When he has selected the two or three campuses with which he would like to do more intensive work, he should begin to plan for student workshops on or near these campuses to be scheduled for the spring. These should be regional, if possible---for example, perhaps one in the Eastern Seaboard states, one in the Deep South, and perhaps one in Texas or in that area. Perhaps such a wide range should not be covered, but in any event the workshop sites should not all be in the same state. Then he should attempt to pull to each of these workshops centers interested students from other nearby campuses. I think it should be possible to have at least two and probably three such workshops in the spring.

These projected workshops would give him a concrete goal to which he would be working during the year. The workshops would be for the purpose of furthering the education of the students who attend and making it more possible for them to engage in action. In addition, as the person in charge of the project contacts students on various campuses about the workshops, he would be engaged in bringing information and interpretation of the civil rights and civil liberties movement to workshop prospects---so that these students will receive some benefit and stimulation even if they do not get to the spring workshops. Simultaneously too the person in charge of the project can be visiting more isolated campuses, talking with students, as his schedule permits.

I believe that anyone conducting this project must also visit the Negro college campuses on occasion---else he loses touch with what he is trying to communicate to the white students. In the course of these visits, when he encounters a local situation where Negro students desire SNCC staff help to develop their own action projects, he should assess the potential and report to the SNCC staff, with the idea that SNCC may then be able to send in another staff member to work with such campuses on a continuing basis, conducting workshops and planning action.

If the above plan is adopted for the project next year, it will have to be remembered that the "best laid plans of mice and men... etc." may go astray---especially in the South where the police and the jail-keepers may interfere. But at least this is a framework from which to work.

To retrogress a moment, I would like to report on another sort of isolated project that I've been carrying through. I think of it as certainly compatible with my work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Conference Educational Fund. It's an interesting sidelight to my case in Mississippi.

I was very much concerned about the lawyer situation in Mississippi. I knew from accounts of people who had been involved in the civil rights struggle in Mississippi that it was very difficult to get legal counsel. There are very few Negro lawyers in Mississippi and the ones who are in Mississippi are literally swamped with cases involving civil rights. So I wanted to conduct a project to put the white lawyers in Mississippi on a spot in which they would have to choose between their personal prejudices and their code of ethics as lawyers. Therefore, I wrote to about 40 or 45 lawyers and called about 5 or 6 more asking them to take my case in McComb in which I was involved in an anti-segregation demonstration and was arrested. I'd like to report some of the results of this.

I contacted Attorney John Satterfield the president of the American Bar Association and he lived luckily in Yazoo City, Miss. I asked him to take my case. He refused to take it on the grounds that he was too busy. After the trial in Municipal Court I contacted him again and asked if he would have time to take my case in the County Court. He again refused and has consistently refused and has refused even to answer letters after the first two.

I also asked Ross Barnett, Jr., the son of the governor of Mississippi and a lawyer, to take my case. He asked me some of the details about the case. I told him it involved a demonstration. He asked what kind of demonstration. I said a demonstration against segregation with Negro students. He said, "I'm sorry, I can't handle that case." I said, "You can't consider taking it at all?" He said "No, I can't."

To the lawyers I contacted by mail, I wrote the following letter:

"Dear Sir:

On October the 4th in the city of McComb I became engaged as a matter of conscience in an activity against racial discrimination in Pike County. Being a white man and involved with Negroes in a protest march, I am encountering difficulty securing white legal representation on my trial on charges of disturbing the peace.

I am due for arraignment on appeal May 14 in Magnolia, Miss. Could I engage you to represent me? If you can take my case I would appreciate your sending me an estimate of your fee and suggestion of a time when I could discuss the case with you."

So this was the kind of pattern I encountered all along.

I received numerous letters back from lawyers and I will give you just a few excerpts from these to indicate the way that segregation has undermined the very ethics of the legal profession and how prejudice tends to destroy a man in many other areas.

I have here a letter from _____, an attorney in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, dated March 30, 1962. He writes:

"John Robert Zellner
Century, Fla.

Dear Sir:

Receipt is acknowledged of your letter, March 22nd, 1962. There was no excuse or justification for outside agitators coming into Mississippi seeking notoriety. No matter of conscience was involved. I have lived all my life in Mississippi and grew up in a community where there were more Negroes than there were white people. The two races got along fine. I'm on the school board in the city of Hazelhurst and the Negroes here have a half million dollar school plant, their facilities being much better than that of the whites. As far as I'm concerned you're not interested in protecting the rights of the Negro race but you are seeking notoriety for pay. Therefore, I suggest that you get a lawyer from the group that you are a part of. If you prefer to promote the Negro race against the white race and prefer to be black instead of white then you employ a Negro lawyer.

Yours very truly,

_____ "

This is an example. Now I'd also like to give you an example of one of the good replies, although it was still a refusal. This is from _____, dated April 16, 1962:

"Your letter dated April 7, 1962, has been received. I admire your courage and you are certainly entitled to legal representation. I have engaged in limited amount of practice outside of _____ County but I have confined such practice to matters in connection with labor relations and I have not engaged in any practice in connection with criminal law.

It seems to me that in matters of this kind where constitutional rights of individuals are involved there should be some organization that could and would provide legal counsel and representation. I practice alone and at times have a rather rough way of it, partially because I have been identified for a long time with attempts to improve the economic status of

laboring people.

I find now that some of this segment of population whose economic status has been appreciably improved appear to have forgotten the source of their economic betterment and are now engaged in states rights, fighting sin and keeping the quote 'nigger' in his place.

There are some very fine law firms here in _____, some of them claim to be interested in the rights of humanity but I couldn't say as to whether these firms claims bear the degree of sincerity to the extent of defending someone facing charges in a situation such as yours.

May I again say I appreciate your letter but I feel that under the circumstances it would be best that I decline an attempt to represent you.

Sincerely,

_____ "

Just a few statements from other letters:

"Under no circumstances would I be interested in representing you as I feel very strongly that you and your kind are doing a disservice to all of the people in this state both black and white.

Sincerely yours,

_____ "

"In view of my own personal belief, it will be impossible for me to represent you on this charge. I respect your right to form your own opinion with regard to the question of racial discrimination in the state of Mississippi but I feel that you are definitely wrong in becoming involved in such a demonstration as was carried on at McComb for the obvious purpose of creating a civil disturbance.

The colored and white people of Mississippi have had mutual respect for one another for many years and demonstrations of this character can do nothing but destroy the harmony that has existed in the past between the two races."

This is from a lawyer,--according to his professional ethic, a lawyer is not supposed to refuse his services to a defendant because of his personal beliefs. And yet this is what they write in Mississippi. I feel it is necessary to expose; so this is one of the things that I have attempted on the side.

As yet I do not have legal counsel for this trial. I'm to be tried this coming Monday. That will be Monday, the 21st of May. I suppose that I will conduct my own defense in this trial as a sort of a protest against the inability of anyone involved in an unpopular cause to get legal representation. I hope that this will accomplish something in the long range struggle.

This has been a hurried report and I've been so involved since Talladega and involved in other arraignments and courts that I'm sorry that I've not had time to prepare a more thorough report. But I hope that this will give some indication of what has occurred in the project and maybe some ideas toward improving it, and I hope I have made a good case for continuing the project for next year.

Before the project ends in June I'm sure that I will prepare a more thorough statment and a more thorough prospectus toward the project next year. So may I end with an expression of appreciation to the Southern Conference Educational Fund for making it possible for me to engage in this work this year and also for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee for putting up with me and helping me to learn a little bit about what life is all about and some ways that I can perhaps do something to improve the situation. Thank you.