

Rev. Willie Blue shares a half century of SNCC history with *Advocate* readers

By Rev. Willie Blue
Special to the Jackson Advocate

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) celebrated its 50th anniversary April 15-18, 2010, at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. Hundreds of brave souls sat together and remembered from whence we have come and how much we have accomplished with so few. Fellowship one with another is the true essence of SNCC character. From no vote to Obama, we all seem to be so old when we were so young in the sixties. Church McDew, Hollis Watkins and Julian Bond remember all too well Jimmy Travis who left

president of SNCC after John Lewis, who was the first, reminded us of why we were here. Not to revel too deeply into our accomplishments but to provide the missing parts of our unfulfilled agenda of the 60s and to remove "the last burden from the last oppressed person" in Mississippi and our country.

There are those who are still in Mississippi who believe their mission in life is to make life more miserable for those of African American descent. What kind of people who are in high places in our government would deny the poor, the destitute, those who sit in darkness with no hope, access to public health? The same sons and daughters



Cleve Sellers, Courtland Cox and Chuck McDew

us last year. Ella Baker said that, "Strong people do not need strong leaders." SNCC people were young and strong, and did strong things.

SNCC was born at Shaw University 50 years ago by Ella Baker to confront segregation head on. Direct action, called the Sit-in Movement, to desegregate public facilities that served "whites only".

I served as SNCC field secretary from 1963-66; became a member of the Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement in 2007; and chaplain in 2009. Presently, I am enrolled at Jackson State University with an expected graduation date of 2011.

My essay on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's 50th anniversary conference starts out with Hollis Watkins calling me on the 13th of April to wish me a happy 71st birthday, and to know if I wanted a ride to Raleigh. He informed me that the SNCC program committee had put him on the opening plenary program and the both of us on the panel discussion — "Moving on Mississippi" in the afternoon. Even



Cynthia Palmer, Hollis Watkins and Mrs. Owen Brooks

better, they provided us with room and board at the Marriott.

We had a rental car (thanks to Southern Echo). We left Jackson around the 6 p.m. hour on April 14th with Jesse Harris and Harriett Tanzman, both vets of the Mississippi struggle since the early '60s.

We arrived in Raleigh about the 7 a.m. hour of the 15th. Shaw University was not hard to find. It's downtown Raleigh, just a block east of Marriott hotel on the same street.

We knew we were there when we saw the monument before the entrance that said, "Welcome to Shaw University, the Birthplace of SNCC and the 1960s Sit-in Movement."

Our timing was perfect. By the time we registered (our I.D. tags and meal tickets already prepared), it was time for our opening session.

Chuck McDew — the second

of the devil who keep trying to justify slavery, Jim Crow law, segregation and the Confederate flag (which still flies over our Capitol as I write). You know, the one that tried to overthrow the U.S. government by armed force in 1860 over the issue of slavery.

My question is this. How many souls must be wounded? How many lives must be lost? How many families must be broken before America will ban this flag forever?

I believe when every black, white, brown child in Mississippi that is 10 or older knows what the Emancipation Proclamation is and how it got to be that way. When every 10 year old in America knows who they are, and how they got to be that way, America may still live up to her true creed and true freedom, and democracy will be able to come forth like spring time after long, cold and bitter winter.

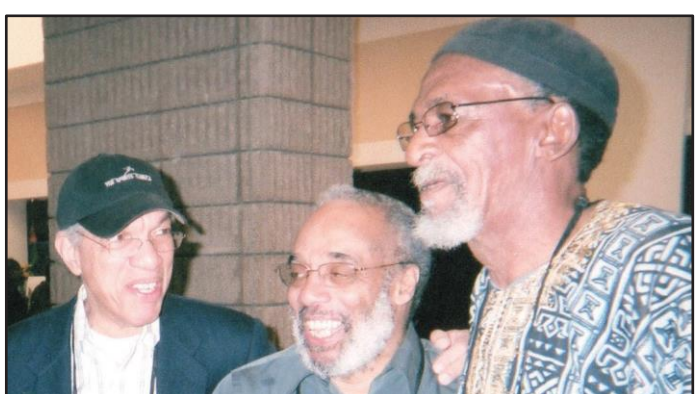
Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker felt that it was only right that SNCC would come to Raleigh for its 50th birthday and made everyone feel at ease and at home.

Julian Bond. He was humor-

ous. He explained what a leap of faith he took going from SNCC to NAACP. Going from the most radical group of civil rights activists to the most conservative base was justified in the end results. SNCC was sure to go to jail with direct action and "in your face" attitude and the NAACP was sure to get us out of jail and defend us in court, so whatever our fundamental differences may be, the end results justify the means. All is well between SNCC and the NAACP.

Thank you Julian Bond for all that you have done for the people of Mississippi. I told him that personally. He smiled.

On Thursday, April 15th, from 10 a.m. to noon, three panel discussions were going on at the same time. "Early Student Movement Philosophy and Activism" — Dave Dennis, the only one of three panelists who I know personally. His story is a



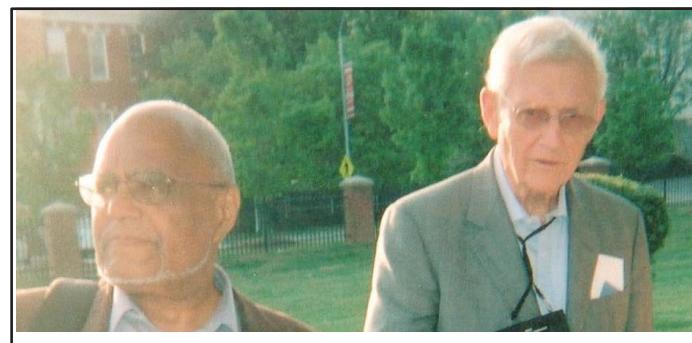
Ivanhoe Donaldson, Charlie Cobb and Jesse Harris

part of the Mississippi story. He was the director (president) of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) in 1964. The three civil rights workers killed in Philadelphia, Mississippi, that summer were CORE members. SNCC under Bob Moses, CORE under Dave Dennis shared the SNCC office at 1017 Lynch Street in Jackson, which is now COFO.

No one could distinguish SNCC from CORE during that time in Mississippi history. The heartbroken people of Mississippi just felt our pain without distinction. Dave's pain was so acute because he took responsibility for sending them into harms way. He has never been the same since the summer of '64.

The second panel — "From Student Activists to Field Organizers." I chose this one because I believe the people on the panel know what they are talking about, especially Chuck McDew, who summarized early SNCC in Mississippi. He said that SNCC executive director Jim Foreman had the audacity to give you ten dollars and a bus ticket to Mississippi, and tell you to start a workshop in the Mississippi delta.

Funny, but mostly true. One of the truly great leaders of our time. Thank you James Foreman



Bob Moses and John Doar

for all that you did for the people of Mississippi — Willie Blue 4/20/10.

Third — SNCC Builds an Organization — The Raleigh Civil Rights Movement.

Thursday, April 15th — the luncheon hosted by Chuck McDew — Go to internet, library for information on the Greensboro 4.

Afternoon sessions included: Social Response to SNCC. John Doar, the U.S. Attorney General at the time, may very well be the most influential person concerning Mississippi voting rights. Do some research. Decide for yourself.

And Moving on Mississippi. When it was my turn to speak, I told them my story in less than the ten minutes allowed. I joined the Navy when I was 17 to get away from the dead end jobs of the cotton fields and the saw mills that were killing people and leaving them destitute, and the insanity of Jim Crow law. The Navy was truly an adventure for me since there were no wars going on at the time. I felt I was blessed to be born at the right time to "join the Navy and see the world."

President Truman had integrated the military services in 1955. There were no visible signs of segregation but I knew it



Willie Ricks, Hollis Watkins and Fannie Rushing

was there, just below the surface. The Southern whites would remind me of their presence by occasionally declaring "the South will rise again!" Through it all, the experience was good for me. For the first time in my life I was getting paid to be there.

After I was discharged I went to St. Louis, Mo., where my father lived. Discontent and home sick, I came home to Mississippi where things looked worse than when I left.

Still trying to find myself, as the saying goes, I wanted to re-familiarize myself with my own roots. Charleston, Mississippi, was not the place to be on my own with no intention of maintaining the status quo.



Crowd includes Marion Barry, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Belafonte, and Mr. and Mrs. Julian Bond.

The whites controlled just about every aspect of black life. They were very diligent in knowing all of our business, especially mine. I was constantly hounded to get a job. I refused to even consider it because slave wages was no different than being a slave.

The pressure they put on my family made me want to leave. It also pissed me off considerably.

Cousin Birdia KeGlar, who was secretly a member of the Mississippi NAACP and manager of Fox Funeral Home in Charleston, saw my dilemma. (She has been warned to get me, the trouble maker, out of town, or else.) She told me that the

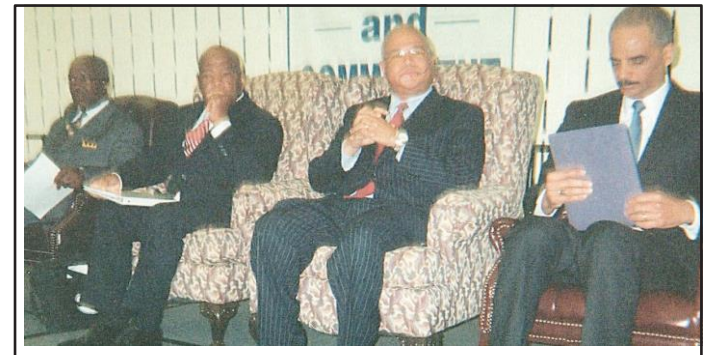
named Denmark Vesey (library). Thank you Frank Smith for all that you do for the people of Mississippi.

Between discussions he pulled me aside to tell me that a group of teens from Glendora, Mississippi in Tallahatchie County, very close to the Emmett Till murder scene, was looking for me. They knew me from my publication of my short story named "A Christmas Story" by Willie E. Blue. I found them in the courtyard near the Research building. We took pictures.

In my mind, SNCC in Mississippi had accomplished most of what it had set out to do by 1968. We had won our right to vote.

We had won our fight to desegregate public places. SNCC people were expected to start civil rights workshops and projects wherever they might be.

We still need to finish what we started during our fight for voting. We need to continue to educate our people. What is a vote?



Tim Jenkins, John Lewis, Rev. William Barber and Atty. General Eric Holder

Where did it come from? What do we do with it, collectively and individually? (It is so painful to see our brothers and sisters sell their vote for alcohol and drugs.) I believe that we must teach our people the very high price that has already been paid for our freedom (lost lives) and the persecution that continues today.

ran off with a highway patrolman and when I saw you in my rear view mirror coming upon me so fast, I thought you were trying to catch me to give her back." Hilarious.

Then the SNCC Freedom Singers captivated the audience and had us in tears with their original ballad of "They Laid Medgar Evers in His Grave."



Willie Blue with Harry Belafonte and wife

That rag that calls itself a Confederate flag must be abolished once and forever. I will continue the fight for its removal as long as I am able to speak and write.

We have at least four generations of our people who don't know who they are. Most of our young people do not know who they are. We have to go back to teaching and establishing our most effective and long lasting methods — freedom schools.

If freedom schools could transform my life, it will work for anyone. I commit to making freedom schools a part of the civil rights movement future, present and past. Join me!

We, who are old, should remember our youth. That is what my thinking is, as this great conference is coming to an end.

Dick Gregory is funny again

As the program ended and the crowd poured out of the theater into the courtyard, the "Hot Eight Brass Band" was there to lift our spirits with New Orleans style jazz. Everyone left the courtyard dancing in the streets.

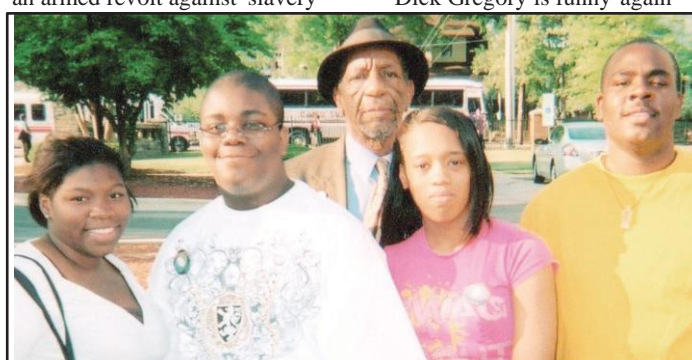
The conference was over for me. After the fellowship period on Saturday night, April 17, at the Marriott. It was a great time for all of us who had not seen each other in many years. Some happy, some sad.

The SNCC office had a reputation for breaking up many love relationships by assigning interracial couples to different states. We worked in the South, so it was obvious that we did not need to pour gas on a fire that was already out of control during that period of our youth — 1963-1966. Sad.

Lovers met again, but now too old to recommit. Others just glad to still be alive.

Bob Moses recommitted himself to the future. The future vision is to "ensure every child receives a quality education, free." He asked everybody to join him.

As for me and my personal commitments, I'm strictly with freedom school. I believe this is the way for our young people to "know who you are," especially in Mississippi.



Willie Blue with Glendora, Mississippi, youth Ambresha Bridges, Johnathan Hill, Conswello Scooter and Dexter Thomas