

# Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)

## SNCC 60<sup>th</sup> Conference

### October 2021

---

**Speakers include:**

**Freddie Biddle** - SNCC Veteran and SNCC Legacy Project Board Member

**Hollis Watkins** - SNCC Veteran and Founder of the Mississippi Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement

**Charles McLaurin** - Community Organizer and Civil Rights Activist

**Leslie McLemore** - Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Jackson State University

---

**This discussion centers around the creation and political activity of the independent political party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). SNCC veterans who worked directly within the political party will share their experiences.**

---

**Moderator:** Welcome to the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party \[MFDP\]](#)<sup>1</sup> session. We are glad to have you with us while we talk about 1961 to 1964, asserting our political place and power in Mississippi. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party stood up defiantly to big party politics to declare that their votes meant more than compromise and created a lesson for the future. So today, we have Mr. [Charles McLaurin](#) joining us for this conversation.

**Charles McLaurin:** Hello everybody. It's great to be here.

**Moderator:** We're so glad to have you with us today.

**Charles McLaurin:** Thank you.

**Moderator:** Next, we have [Hollis Watkins](#), a veteran of the SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] and founder of the Mississippi Veterans for Civil Rights movement. We're glad you're with us today.

**Hollis Watkins:** I'm glad you're glad to have me today because I'm glad to be here.

**Moderator:** Fantastic. The other person joining this conversation is [Freddie Biddle](#), also an SNCC veteran and SNCC legacy project board member.

**Freddie Biddle:** Hello, and it's great to be here with my two brothers from the movement, Charles [McLaurin] and Hollis [Watkins]

---

<sup>1</sup>The MFDP was a political party designed to encourage black political participation while challenging the validity of the Mississippi all-white democratic party

**Moderator:** Our moderator for this session, Dr. McLemore, is experiencing technical issues. If he's able to join us later, we'll hear from him. For now, we'll start with Hollis Watkins. Hollis, please share your experience with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

**Hollis Watkins:** It's good to be here, and I hope what I share will be helpful. Working in the civil rights movement is a real test for all of us. It's a hard test, one that many struggle to pass. The places we worked in and the efforts we made haven't always received the credit they deserve. Not everyone understands the importance of that work, but those of us who do have to keep going until we reach our full potential. That's my goal, to reach the max. I want to make sure I do everything I possibly can.

Growing up in a big family, one of 12 children, taught me a lot about perseverance. That foundation drives me to keep pushing, to give everything I have to the movement, and to help others do the same. So, I'm still working, doing what's necessary, helping those who have large families, especially those who tend to be having family problems. I try to provide some counseling to them, not so much about what they become everyday street beggars, but by which they learn how to, in many instances, the skills environment that they have.

I'm asking all of us to continue to work if possible. [Bob Moses](#), who came to Mississippi, did a wonderful job in assisting, in aiding us in the process of helping to improve voter registration, which leads to many other important issues and events that go on and are taking place here in Mississippi. Like the song said, "Keep on or pushing. I can't stop now", that's the spirit and the attitude you must have, the spirit and attitude that says to you, you have got to keep on pushing, keep on pushing. Based on what I saw in the early phases of the civil rights movement, we, the older ones, will step over and to the side and become one that donates and helps the young people who get it done. The reason I know is because I used to be a young person.

When you compare my work today with what I did in the early sixties, it is not hard with a little help for young people to do what needs to be done. I think the problem is that young people work so fast and hard and well until it frightens older people and says, somebody else needs to do this job. Because I don't understand.

That's the setback. We need to make sure that when we are doing jobs and working on different issues, we have it where the young people can explore and explore their possibilities. That's why I'm always doing what I can to help young people move beyond the stage of stagnation by giving a lot of them opportunities to do different things at different points.

At times, they'll say to me, "I didn't know I could do that." The reason they don't think they can do it is that they were never allowed to try. That's why I'm asking all of you to help create those opportunities. I did as much as I possibly could, even spending a summer in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. But that didn't break me it didn't turn me around.

In fact, that's where we found inspiration for our song. We started singing, and the words took on real meaning: "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. I'm gonna keep on walking, keep on..." Talking and walking up the highway. We have to keep on

pushing. Don't let anybody turn us around. We were not made with a lot of fear; we were made with determination and willpower to move ahead.

We talked about McComb [Mississippi] being our starting place. Other places started in the same area at the same time. And they kept on moving, marching up the King Highway. I want to ask all those young people today to keep their spirits up, keep their heads high, and don't let anybody turn you around. When you see how the movement in McComb kicked off, it started, went from McComb over to Hattiesburg [Mississippi], went from Hattiesburg back to Jackson [Mississippi], then left Jackson and went in several different ways into the Delta<sup>2</sup> and the Delta area were my favorite.

I got a chance to meet people like [Hartman Turnbow](#) and people like [Amzie Moore](#). I ain't go any further in that because McLaurin [Charles] is here, and he's well prepared to tell you what needs to be done. And you are going to cut it off right there and say. I guess the deepest of problems that I had with the folks in the Delta was that the local county officials sent me to the Mississippi State Penitentiary, where I spent 55 days in the maximum-security unit on this road.

But did that stop me? No. I Did, like the song says, say “You better keep on or pushing, don't just stop now”. That's what I did, and I spoke. All the young people expressing keep pushing, keep up to good words and you will ultimately overcome. So, I'm gonna stop and say thanks to those who made this happen, thank you.

**Moderator:** That is the introduction for Mr. Charles McLaurin to join and share his experiences. It looks like we're not able to hear you just yet. Hold on for one quick second so that we can fix that for you. All right. Let's hear from you, Mr. Charles McLaurin.

**Charles McLaurin:** Thank you, Hollis, and keep on pushing, I've been reading in the Advocate and Jackson papers about your leadership seminars and teaching young people. You've always been good at that. So, I hope to see you in person real soon. I'd like to start talking briefly about the Mississippi Delta because that's where my involvement in the movement started. In 1962 Bob Moses brought [Charlie Cobb](#) and others to the Mississippi Delta and brought us to Amzie Moore's house who was the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] leader who wanted to initiate voter registration in the Delta.

Bob Moses brought us to a little town called Ruleville, Mississippi, in the mid-Delta, and left us with some leader's black leaders in the rural community who wanted to organize and get registered to vote so that they could vote in [Sunflower County](#), which is the county seat. So, organizing at that point was not something that I'd ever done before, and was a little bit lost at first until I took my first two people to the courthouse in Indianola [Mississippi]; we had to go from Indianola, meaning from Ruleville [Mississippi] to Indianola about 26 miles to the county seat to register to vote

All people who were trying to register to vote in those days had to be 21 years of age or older. They had to go to the county seat to register, which was really voter suppression. You make a

---

<sup>2</sup> The Delta is a distinctive northwest section of the U.S. state of Mississippi and portions of Arkansas

person travel 26 miles to take a literacy test. There was no intention from the beginning of that person becoming a registered voter. So, Sunflower County [Mississippi] was where I finally landed and started to work.

Sunflower County was about 70% black, and there was one registered voter. Of course, we never found him, but the record showed that there was one at that time. In 1961-1962, there was not a single black elected official in the whole state. Mississippi only had about 5% of the African American or black population registered to vote.

So, I received some training early. I had been to Mount Beulah, and [Medgar Evers](#) had talked with me and some of my friends there in Jackson where I had grown up. One day I went to Medgar and asked him how we were gonna stop Mr. Charlie <sup>3</sup> or the white man from lynching us. Medgar said you get the guys and come by the office this afternoon, about three o'clock. So, we did and went up there, and Medgar took out this big map of the state of Mississippi, and he drew a circle around the Mississippi Delta.

He said, here's where we start. He talked about then how the legislature was a portion, how many members in the house, how many in the Senate, and pointed out the fact that if we got a significant number of African Americans in the Delta registered, we could send many African Americans or good white folks to the legislature.

That's the way we were going to change things. So, I saw that right away and was anxious. When Bob left us up there in Ruleville, I was anxious to get started. I thought we could register a significant number of African Americans in about six months. I'd go back to Jackson and go back to college. It was up there in the Delta taking people to the courthouse, and the number of people to the courthouse.

They got to pass this literacy test. The plantation owners on which plantation they were living were harassing them, some were getting kicked off of the plantation, and a very good example was the future leader who was one of the plantations near Ruleville, Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer. Fannie Lou Hamer was told that if she wouldn't go back to the courthouse and withdraw her application to register the vote she would have to leave.

That even if she went back and withdrew the application, there was a possibility she still might have to leave. So, Fannie Lou Hamer left the plantation and came to Ruleville, and she became one of the most important leaders in the effort to register to vote. I had the opportunity to bring her to SNCC after she left the plantation, Bob Moses requested that I bring her to Tougaloo College, and from Tougaloo College, Hollis [Watkins] remembers, Joyce [Ladner] MacArthur [Cotton] and a whole bunch of us along with James Jones traveled to Nashville, Tennessee to the SNCC conference there. We brought Fannie Lou Hamer with us. Over the years, we saw that taking people to the courthouse and hundreds of people going to the courthouse, we weren't getting any results. So, we needed to have some other strategy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Charlie or the white man referring to racist white men who often harassed or killed African Americans due to their racist beliefs

We need somehow to bring pressure on the local level, at the state level, and at the national level. So, we got all the NAACP, [CORE](#) [Congress of Racial Equality], SNCC, [SCLC](#) [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], and other organizations, and put them under an umbrella called [COFO](#) [Council of Federated Organizations]. COFO is now an organization that was easier for us to go out and encourage people to work under because the NAACP had been underground because, over the years, they had white people in the power structure, and that stigmatized the NAACP to the point that a lot of blacks were afraid to identify with it.

Under COFO, we now had a banner under which all of these organizations were pulling their resources, and these resources were mostly aimed at developing leadership in the various communities. One of the things that I think I know, Hollis and I and others did was that we had to communicate and find a way of communicating with people.

We did this to do canvassing, and we had to educate, so we had mass meetings, we had Citizenship classes<sup>4</sup> and these kinds of things that we had to do because black people, at least in Mississippi had not voted since the 1890s. You can see the period between 1890 and 1960-1961, there were black folks who just didn't see the importance of voting, especially in the Delta.

They couldn't see that a guy is working on a plantation, and he's been told that if he gets involved with the NAACP, he gets involved in any kind of organization. If he gets an education, he's going to have to move, he's got to leave. We had to find ways to get national focus on Mississippi so that we could break open this closed society that had been created there.

We were in a condition, and I always described it as we were hostage, that there was a level as to how high we could go, and we couldn't go any higher than that. We could not participate in the democratic process. So, we were just people who were being used, misused, and abused. We have got to now find ways to keep moving the people, and we had gotten ready to take them into the courthouse and get them up, build their interest. We had to somehow keep from losing them.

So, we decided to have a mock election where we're going to run our candidates for governor and lieutenant governor. Then, we would run in three of the five congressional districts where we had the largest population. That was the fifth, which included Hattiesburg. Our candidate was Ms. [Victoria Gray](#), in the fourth [District]. We were going to get to have this Annie Divine, and in the second congressional district, which we failed, was our district.

We wanted to get back to our district. The second congressional district included the Delta and John A. Lynch, historically, the black Congressman had lost his seat and our political district there with the Mississippi legislature and 1890 constitution. So, our aim now is to keep moving until we can get to somebody, somewhere who would listen to us.

So, we had the mock election, we went out and set up our registration forms and registered with people who were 21 years of age or older, anywhere. We found them in cotton fields, junk joints, church houses, junk joints, wherever we found people willing to let us make an application for them as a registered voter with what is coming and what is coming is freedom summer.

---

<sup>4</sup>Citizenship Classes- The schools taught reading, writing, civics, history, and arithmetic, and helped students prepare to pass literacy tests for voting

[Freedom Summer](#) is going to help us continue our voter registration effort and is going to help us set up freedom centers and freedom schools across the state. It will help us begin to develop the Mississippi freedom democratic party. The purpose of this is that we were going to challenge the deceiving of the regular Mississippi Democrats in the Credentials committee.<sup>5</sup> If we were not successful there, we hoped to get a full fight where we failed. We had some support, and what happened? We went to Atlantic City, and I had a good time, but we also went there, to conduct some business. Our business was to unseat the regular delegates. [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) spoke to the credentials committee, and Henry [Aaron Henry] spoke to the credentials committee.

So did [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#) But the testimony that brought the attention of Mississippi broke open closed the door, and took the hoods off of Klan [Ku Klux Klan] was Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony. That testimony brought us in contact, meaning the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in contact with the president of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, who was in office because of the death of Kennedy [President Robert F Kennedy] and wanted a full term.

So, we, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, are now in a position where I never thought we would be, you think the president of the United States is now involved in what is happening in Mississippi and Mississippi is the spotlight here. Of course, we didn't unseat the regulars, but they did offer us what they thought was a compromise.

President Johnson sent his two henchmen, Walter Mondale and Senator Humphrey, and offered us what they thought we would take as a compromise of two seats at large. Then they were going to tell us who would occupy those two seats. So, when we met with Fannie Lou Hamer and all of the delegates Fannie Lou Hamer said, this is nothing.

It was nothing you think about that after the convention would've been over; if we had accepted that and gone home, we were coming right back to Mississippi where the same Mississippi Democrats or Dixiecrats<sup>6</sup>, as they were called were still in charge. They didn't even try to offer us some seats in the democratic party, but they're going to leave us up there in limbo talking about two seats at large Fannie Lou Hamer said No.

All the delegates voted that we would not accept that compromise. Of course, the regular Mississippi Democrats were asked to pledge loyalty to the Democratic nominee, and they refused and came home and left. So that then left us in Atlantic City. And you may have seen some of these pictures of how jubilant our people were down there under the Mississippi delegate banner.

Of course, in the next phase of our effort, there would've been a floor fight, but of course, President Johnson worried about losing what he thought was his Southern base. The national democratic party accepted Johnson's nominee for the democratic party by acclamation, and really, that ended the convention. We came home, Fannie Lou and I came home really because we had

<sup>5</sup> Credentials Committee-a committee of 108 democratic jury members at the 1964 Democratic convention

<sup>6</sup> Dixiecrats members of a right-wing Democratic splinter group in the 1948 U.S. presidential election organized by Southerners who objected to the civil rights program of the Democratic Party



to continue our fight. After all, we knew that the problems that we would face were in the Mississippi legislature and these counties back home.

We came back home and filed lawsuits, and one lawsuit that Fannie Lou Hamer filed, Hamer versus Campbell, that lawsuit led to some changes in the politics in Indianola and then in the two little communities within Sunflower County. Our whole effort was to build a movement. We built that movement, and that movement brought us to the national scene.

As a result of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party going in the challenge, the national democratic party changed its rules and, for 1968, all delegations that came to the convention should be more representative of the population back in the home place. So, we had success in terms of our organization, our movement, and the results that we got in 1968; the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and a group called the Loyalists [Democratic Party Loyalists] went to Atlanta, Chicago.

The loyalist group was seated in place of the Mississippi delegation, and all the so-called Dixiecrats and democratic people came back to Mississippi. The Republican Party became the strongest party in the South. So, today, we are up against basically the same people, the same system with this voter suppression and them putting books [Law Books], laws, and things in the book that we'll have to fight for the next 20, 30 years. Hollis is right to get young people ready to meet those challenges. Freddie, you all had better cut me off, Hollis said earlier, it's hard to talk about it to end when you've done so much and know so much about certain things that have happened, and when you get an opportunity to express it, they must cut you off its notable you got it.

**Freddie Biddle:** Oh, okay. I met Charles McLaurin, who also came, into the Delta, into Greenwood [Mississippi]. [Sam Block](#) was probably the first organizer who walked into Greenwood. And Sam had grown up in the Delta in Cleveland [Mississippi], with Amzie Moore. All of these are connections. People, all who know each other, encourage each other to do other things.

Amzie Moore meets Sam [Block] as he comes home as a veteran from the Air Force, and he tells Sam, you need to get involved. He encourages Sam, and Sam is very eager to be involved and get things moving. So, he sent Sam over to Greenwood and Sam who had been taking courses at Mississippi Valley State, which was then Mississippi Vocational College. Because all of this is all the things that the state was doing to make sure that people of color had no opportunities to do anything.

Sam was there at Mississippi Vocational College and met my brother Derek who was also a return Navy veteran there at Mississippi Vocational College. They began to talk, and he, Sam, came into Greenwood. The whole process was to meet, encourage, and try to get as many people as you could to register to vote. Now, given the conditions in the Delta for people of color was very hard.

People were living on plantations. People who weren't living on plantations were being picked up by trucks, to work the field, and this is what people did; there were no real jobs for most of

the people. So often, the opportunity to be able to do something else and that's one of the biggest things, going around doing door-to-door canvassing and encouraging people to register to vote.

That's basically what all the organizing was all about. You were going on knocking on doors, talking to people, going into churches, talking to people, going to man to pool halls, wherever the people where you were going to try to talk to people about registering and voting. As Charles McLaurin has told you, one of the testing processes to try to make sure that people were interested is that we had this mock election in the mock election, 80,000 people, and 80,000 black people went out to vote.

All these people were going to vote because, apathy was not the issue, the intimidation and being afraid of, what could happen, losing your job, losing your house, losing, being killed, all these were kinds of things that were happening to people so that the, the fear, the fear was real.

So, the testing process of doing the mock election proved that the people wanted to be involved. They wanted to change the conditions that they were living in. They knew that the only way these conditions could be changed was to vote out some of the people who were in the office. One of the other things that we were doing was setting up citizenship classes and trying to help people, as you had to be 21 to register to vote.

So that people like me were in high school, at that time. I was too young. I worked helping in the citizenship classes and all, and all of this was to help the people vote. Now, Mississippi was harsh as always. Mississippi came after us with vengeance with people trying to register to vote.

All these people who had been receiving food subsidies from the state as a matter of just being able to eat, Mississippi cut off the food subsidies. So then, the little help that people had was no longer available to them. But one good thing is within the movement, Bob Moses and all the movement people decided to talk to their friends of SNCC, which was organized around the country to help the Mississippians.

They organized food drives, clothing, drives to do all of these things, to help the people in Mississippi. Now, that was a big motivating factor for the black folks who lived there because they saw for the first time that the only people that were coming out to help them were movement-type people. So, this became as Mississippi cut off the food, and they had nothing to do, had no food to eat and stuff.

Now there's the food drives and the [Northern friends of SNCC](#) bringing down [Dick Gregory](#) flying in a plane into Greenwood [Mississippi], and we are now distributing food to assist the people. Now that has become a big motivator for a lot of people. Now, another big thing that happened is that with the organization of the Mississippi Summer Project<sup>7</sup>, in bringing in additional people so that we could organize, we would have more people because, at the present, during the year 1963, there were very few organizers.

---

<sup>7</sup> Mississippi Summer Project- Otherwise known as The Freedom Summer Project resulted in various meetings, protests, freedom schools, freedom housing, freedom libraries, and a collective rise in awareness of voting rights and disenfranchisement experienced by African Americans in Mississippi.



Mainly most of them were really Mississippi people. There were a couple of people who were not from Mississippi, but we were trying to get a larger group of people to come into the state. So, the organization of the Mississippi summer project brought in all of these people; we were able to put in staff people, and volunteers at basically all the different counters and all the different projects.

We then could have a larger thing. That allowed us to be able to organize the Mississippi freedom democratic party and to get more people involved in it because we had more hands on deck, as they say, today. So, as we are now having all of these different projects, I worked in Greenwood [Mississippi], which is my hometown. In the summer of 64[1964], I worked in the McComb area. One of these things that was constantly happening was all of the violence that was going on. A lot of black churches were just blown and burned down.

So, all of this was the whole intimidation to try to prevent people from attempting to register to vote. Fortunately, it had just begun to encourage more people to register and vote. We were then able to have our little conventions to get ready for the national democratic convention, which was held in August of 1964. It doesn't look like we have any questions in the chat. I share any additional information with the people who are viewing the next steps or things that they may be able to do to get involved.

As I mentioned, I think you have to have an interest in a particular thing, like now it's the whole question of voter suppression and the real big impact that it has on people. To understand that it's local elections, that's very, very important. It's just to try to encourage people to participate in the system.

**Charles McLaurin:** Another thing is that, of course, the legislatures in these various communities, and various states, are really where the problems are in democracy. Look at what happened on January 6th, it is a lesson to the extent to which some people will go to get their way. We need to bring together nationally and locally.

Those people who see the need, we need a COFO or something like that. All the organizations concerned about saving democracy in America need to get busy and mobilize, organize, and educate people because this thing has not ended.

**Moderator:** Absolutely. So, you all have shared so much information, and we greatly appreciate it. We are getting ready to come to an end. I would like to know if we can get some closing remarks from each of you. So, if we can start with you, Mr. Charles McLaurin, if you want to give us your closing remarks, then we'll move to Hollis and then Freddy for how you would like to end our session. So, Mr. McLaurin, if you can provide us with your closing remarks?

**Charles McLaurin:** Let's get ready, let's get young people involved, and let's save democracy. So, those were shorter than I anticipated. So, do you have a closing remark for us? The marching orders?

**Hollis Watkins:** I just want to say that the proof is in the pudding. I know we have a lot, a lot of young people, so we are gonna not have to be afraid to reach out to those young people and allow them to enjoy some of the wonderful pieces of life and help to see their country, their city improves.

**Moderator:** I agree. As a young person who has learned so much from the wisdom of those who have come before us, I appreciate your intention of making sure that you all share what you've learned so that we can continue to make strides. Miss Freddie Biddle, I would appreciate some closing remarks from you.

**Freddie Biddle:** Yes. One of the things that happened was black Mississippians had been mistreated all their lives. They have seen opportunities that were not available to them. They now see the chance of these same opportunities not being available to their children and possibly to their grandchildren. So, you look at this, and you say, how can I make a difference? The way you can make a difference is to get involved.

So, you talk to someone, to somebody else, talk to another younger person, and you try to find out what are the kinds of things that bother you the most. Is it going into schools where the books are all very badly used because they've been passed on from one school to another school? So, you say, well, where is the chance for you to see that your children can do something else, not only your children but also the children in the community?

We all talk about how there's a lot of crime and stuff that's going on, but then we don't talk about what we can do to get involved, to create opportunities. So, people can acquire skills and knowledge to figure out how to move from one step to another. It does start very, very small. Even though we always talk about having big mass meetings, a lot of times the mass meetings are like two or three different people, maybe 10, but they're not huge through groups.

So, you're starting very, very small. I think that's why some of the young people get discouraged because they don't feel that they see enough people involved, but you have to start small to build up so that you can create an environment so that other people will want to be involved and want to do something to change this whole world because we can't let it go back. We had a little bit of success, but we can't go back. And that's what it looks like in terms of our democracy right now because we see what all of these state legislations are trying to do, you know?

**Moderator:** You are right. We cannot go back. So, I thought that we were wrapping up, but we've got a couple of questions coming in from the chat and a couple of notes that I wanted to share with you all. We had Robin in the chat who just wrote saying that if someone only listened to this workshop, they got a bargain that they're honored and blown away by the information you have shared. And then we had a question from Marilyn, who asked sister Freddie, Brother Hollis, and Brother McLaurin if you could share some of what the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party[MFDP] did after the Atlantic City convention so that I know who may want to take that, and give us a little information about what you all did after the Atlantic City convention?

**Hollis Watkins:** I just want to say that Dick Gregory and [Harry Belafonte](#) are two people that supplied food and clothes to people in Mississippi, and that should not never be forgotten because it was there, and they used it, but thank them for providing them.

**Charles McLaurin:** To the question about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party after Atlantic City. One thing you have to realize is that most of the organizers of the Mississippi freedom democratic party were the SNCC people, SNCC organized and promoted the Mississippi freedom democratic party. So really, the SNCC people after Atlantic City, most of them, the ones from out of state, either moved to other areas or went home.

Those of us who lived in Mississippi came back to Mississippi and continued to work and file lawsuits to create single-member districts, legislative districts in the legislature, and filing lawsuits to, recoup our second congressional district, a district with a significant number of African Americans in it. So that those who were voting age, could get our congressmen back, who we had lost.

We were successful in these lawsuits and the continuous works of the Mississippi freedom democratic party types, see the leadership of the Mississippi freedom democratic party was under the leadership of [Lawrence Guyot](#), the late Lawrence Guyot, who was an SNCC field secretary.

The office that was left in Jackson was relocated to the small town of Sunflower, Mississippi, where finally Fannie Lou Hamer had won a lawsuit that, throughout the elections because of discrimination and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party got involved in; was the last effort of the Mississippi freedom democratic party at that point before it merged into what became the Loyalists.

**Moderator:** We do have one other question that came through. Mike is wondering if sister Freddie or Brother Charles could talk more about what Fannie Lou Hamer and others faced when they came back from Atlantic City and why accepting two seats was not an option for them. Well, Fannie Lou Hamer came home and, as I mentioned, she continued to be harassed, but she never really stopped. She spent a lot of time after Atlantic City on the road traveling across the country, speaking and accepting two seats at large. What state were these seats in?

What we have is 52 states now, which one of these states were those two seats in, they were not in Mississippi, they didn't tell us that we had two seats in Mississippi or Illinois or New York, it was a farce. It was just something they threw up there, expecting us to go for it, which meant nothing. There was Lyndon Johnson and the democratic party who had already selected the two people that they felt were acceptable to deal with. And that was Dr. Aaron Henry and the chaplain at Tougaloo, Ed King these were the leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that they felt acceptable to, the national democratic party. So it was; it was nothing in that for the masses.

**Freddie Biddle:** I think one other thing about that Charles, is that people did go back to districts and began to work on local elections. As a result in Mississippi, there are a lot of black people who have won seats in local elections, and they are in low positions, but this is the basis of what democracy is about. This is a result of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which set the

foundation. Right. It brought these people out right now, Mississippi has more black elected officials than any state in the nation. It's all a result.

It's all a result of the work that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party did. These are the people who were in colleges or high schools. When they grew up, they were now in the office. There's not a single county in the Mississippi Delta that does not have a black mayor, members of the board of supervisors, or the increased number in the legislature.

In this last election, we got a transportation commissioner. It is a broad political geographical area, and these are people who were friends of Fannie Lou Hamer, friends of the Mississippi freedom democratic party. They are Democrats, all of them, I don't think there's a single member of the Mississippi legislature on the African American side that's not a Democrat. That's the result of 1964. It's the result of 1968. And it's the result of hard work at the community levels of, a step towards Hollis mentioned and, and, Herbert Lee, Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, Fannie Lou Hamer.

**Moderator:** We do have another question that has come through. John is asking, this goes for the whole state of Mississippi, but how much backlash was there absent the media attention to the volunteers from out of state? How much media attention? I guess he's asking how much backlash there was due to the absence of media attention to the volunteers from out of state.

**Charles McLaurin:** Many of them were jailed, of those who were left, I think at that point, the fear, a lot of the fear that African Americans had, of being involved had gone. The state started to become more Republican, and as a result, we ended up within the state of Mississippi at the state level with more Republicans. I don't think there's a Democrat in office other than in the legislature and the Senate. So, the backlash to the community, in my estimation, was minimal.

As Freddie had mentioned earlier, we had overcome the loss of the federal surplus food in Lalo County and the county's surroundings, people had the Head Start program came along and offered more opportunities for jobs that African Americans had never had a livable wage at that time. A lot of training and conferences and education people were just a little too busy to be worried at that time about as long as they stayed away from the bad white folks.

**Freddie Biddle:** Yeah. I think that the violence in Mississippi and the types of backlashes probably was early on; you're talking about 63[1963], 64[1964], and 65[1965], but 63 was probably one of the worst years. It was also the same year that they killed Medgar Evers, so it was a series of violence. That didn't do what they expected; the death of Medgar Evers didn't do what people [White], the clan [Ku Klux Klan], and others hoped would dampen or decrease the movement of black people in continuing to press forward for their rights.

And that's basically what was happening with the violence throughout, the killing of Medgar Evers, and the shooting of all these people, brought in more and more people who were willing to get involved in the movement.

**Moderator:** We have one last question I see here in the chat. Two, every time you all talk, another question comes through, but the next question that came up is what was Miss Hamer's

role in the creation of the Mississippi freedom democratic party. I know we're getting close to the end, so, I don't know who wants to take that question off just the role of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

**Charles McLaurin:** Since I was her campaign manager during her run for Congress, Freddie if you recall, and maybe you don't, Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the organizers. She was the vice chair of the Mississippi freedom democratic party. We ran her for Congress along with the other women, the other two ladies who ran, but we legally qualified her so that the lawsuit could be filed.

That led to a challenge in 1965 on the floor of Congress, Fannie Lou Hamer and the other two women, who ran for Congress filed a lawsuit. That lawsuit was heard in 1965, and Fannie Lou Hamer and the two other candidates were the first blacks to be seated on the floor of the US Congress, because of that Fannie Lou Hamer continued work with Northern groups and she was very involved in the election Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman to be seated in. She didn't stop.

**Moderator:** All right. The last question that we have, and this can be, a quick yes or no, but were any of your parents involved in politics? That is Rick's question.

**Freddie Biddle:** My father was one of the delegates to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and was very involved in both registrations around the Greenwood area.

**Moderator:** How about you, Mr. Hollis Watkins?

**Hollis Watkins:** Well, Mr. John Watkins said he had to go slow about his time, because if he didn't and wasn't sure he would find himself having killed a few people who along the way found themselves in the wrong place. So, my father wanted to support and for the most part support activities that were done, but not bringing them out at the opening, going in all kinds of ways. Based on his coming up, you know, he didn't want the white folks to create a situation that would cause him to kill some that maybe should have a little bit longer. So, he said, go right ahead and support you. And he did support a few others, but that's, that was my father's point.

**Moderator:** Got it. And Mr. Charles McLaurin, did you indicate if your parents were involved in politics? They were not.

**Moderator:** All right. And so, this is the last question that we'll be able to accept from the chat because we've only got two minutes left. We are wrapping up this incredible session, but the last question is whether one person can speak to Bob Moses and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

**Charles McLaurin:** Hollis, I think you knew him a lot better than I did. I was only with him for a very short time.

**Hollis Watkins:** Well, Bob, created improvement with the different groups who had young people involved in the work they were doing. He worked and helped inspire two or three in several of the counties that had organized some people to do various things in the community.

**Moderator:** Wonderful. So, he helped a lot with organizing the young folks. We thank you all for participating in this session with us, Mr. Hollis Watkins, Mr. Charles McLaurin, and Ms. Freddie Biddle; thank you for your wisdom for your work and for allowing us to hear a little bit more from you all about what was done and what we can do moving forward. We thank everyone for joining us. We ask that you check the session agenda that is on the lobby page of the site for the next set of sessions. And we look forward to seeing you this evening at the mixer that's taking place. Thank you everyone.