

Illinois

A Report on Student Nonviolent Activities in Southern Illinois

One thing that students nearly everywhere have in common is a concern for human dignity and democratic rights. Such concern on the part of students of Southern Illinois University sparked integration activity by the people of Cairo, Illinois during the past summer. In July, 1962, the Student Nonviolent Freedom Committee was formed on campus. Since this time the student group has served as an advisor to the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee. Individual members of the SNFC have become involved in demonstrations and other activities in Cairo, although they represent only a personal commitment there, and not a commitment of the entire Committee. The SNFC, at the same time, helped organize the Murphysboro Nonviolent Freedom Organization, which has successfully dealt with several discrimination problems in that community. The larger Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has served as a more direct and immediate advisor in Cairo. Because of the personal contact between members of the SNFC and the SNCC Field Secretaries in Cairo, SNFC is now informally affiliated with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the entire Freedom Movement in the South.

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Student Nonviolent Freedom Committee

SNCC

Freedom Movement in the South

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee is at present a major leader of the student freedom movement in the South. While the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality are making vital advances, SNCC is taking the lead in direct action by skillfully coordinating and by validly and creatively giving direction to student involvement.

The constitution of SNCC provides for a Coordinating Committee consisting of a representative from each local protest group that wishes to affiliate with SNCC, together with advisers and observers from civil rights and civil liberties groups. This committee sets general policy and program, and names the Executive Committee which directs the staff and implements policy and program decisions. The main office is in Atlanta, which places the group in a better position to receive up-to-date information and provide direction for its field workers. This also makes possible greater contact with such groups as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Southern Regional Council, two groups with considerable experience in present and past integration activities.

But it seems that the real action and involvement comes through the SNCC field secretaries, most of whom are college graduates or college students who have interrupted their education to go into "the Movement." Prevalent in the personalities of these twenty-odd field secretaries is a sense of urgency. "Waiting for time or education to take care of the Negro problem" is not the answer for them.

SNCC workers are committed to non-violence as a philosophy of life, rather than as a tactic. They are concerned with the dignity and respect of even those who have beaten them or worked against them. They have sacrificed their personal lives and safety to participate in non-violent direct action and demonstration for the benefit of mankind. Their initial efforts involve negotiation with city officials or owners of establishments which discriminate racially. When negotiation fails, the work of the field secretary may involve teaching the people of the community the principles of non-violent action, or it may involve joining them on demonstrations. The worker may be required to endure insults, intimidations, and physical violence in carrying out his work. His commitment requires him to accept violence and to respect the aggressor, while he must maintain his principles.

SNCC's current project in the South is registration of qualified Negro voters. Field secretaries and their trainee assistants call personally on the unregistered potential voters to persuade them to exercise their franchise. Once these people decide to take steps in registering themselves, the field secretaries provide a school for the people to prepare them for examinations which have been set up to subtly deny the Negro his vote.

Even in these functions, the SNCC workers are in constant danger; buildings in which voter registration schools have been set up have been bombed, educators have been shot, beaten, and intimidated in other ways. Still the work goes on, and through registration, "selective buying campaigns," "prayer vigils," and "jail-ins," more and more Negroes become non-violent resisters in the fight for true freedom for all men.

Cairo Southern Roots

At the southern tip of Illinois lies Cairo, a small city which for years practiced unlawful racial discrimination.

That Jim Crow existed in the Land of Lincoln is a paradox, but in part it can be explained by the fact that Illinois dips further south than parts of Kentucky and Virginia. In a real sense it has its roots in the South.

Today, the pattern of discrimination has changed in Cairo. Illegal segregation has for the most part gone underground and segregationists seem to be willing to battle in court or in terms that at least appear legal. In the process of this transition, however, Cairo citizens and other involved individuals suffered threats, verbal abuse and violence. The battle is far from won, but the progress of recent months is a milestone in the history of Cairo.

The story begins during June of 1962 when reports of discrimination reached a number of concerned parties. One of these, the Rev. Blaine Ramsey Jr. of Ward Chapel A.M.E. Church, Cairo, invited a group of SIU students to attend an NAACP meeting on the problem. One of the SIU students was Mary McCollum SNCC field secretary.

The initial meeting with Cairo was fruitful, for it resulted in the formation of the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee, headed by a 16-year-old Charles Koen. Two former SIU students acted as advisors.

Following the meeting, the Cairo freedom committee tested a number of public facilities and were refused service at a restaurant, Mack's Barbecue. They informed the owner of the state public accommodations law and returned for service. This time they were charged exorbitant prices for food they described as inedible.

After conferring, the CNFC decided to demonstrate. Their advisors prepared them by conducting workshops on the tenets of nonviolence and personal conduct.

The demonstration in front of Mack's Barbecue attracted a group of on-lookers. One angry man moved toward the demonstrators with a knife and was blocked by advisor Mary McCollum, who received a knife slash on the thigh.

Resolved to continue their demonstrations, the CNFC returned and were sprayed by the restaurant owner who said he was "washing down the front of the building."

Pickets continued and in July, six demonstrators were arrested for trespassing on a private driveway when they sought entrance by a side door being used by white patrons. The picketing was finally discontinued when the restaurant owner served two Negroes.

Meanwhile, further testing by the CNFC found discrimination at two other public facilities, a roller skating rink and a swimming pool. The pool is operated by the Rotary Club, a national organization with a non-discriminatory policy.

Pickets were held at the two locations during July 14 and 15. Over 40 students, including three SIU students, were arrested with charges ranging from peace disturbances to mob action. Of the 40 arrested, only 20 were over 17 years old. Seventeen of the students elected to remain in jail until trials were held. During their week in jail, the group went on a hunger strike.

Meanwhile, a drive for moral support in the community and on the SIU campus began. Sympathizers wore white arm bands and it was estimated that nearly 500 arm bands were distributed.

When trials were held on July 20, about 250 Negroes sat in the courtroom and 50 more stood outside singing freedom songs. Twenty-one of the demonstrators were fined from \$50 to \$300 on charges of disorderly conduct, disobeying a policeman and mob action. All charges were appealed.

The day following the trials, Rev. Ramsey and Rev. John Lewis, SNCC, gave talks at a mass meeting. After the meeting, 300 demonstrators marched through the main part of town, at the courthouse, and at the jails, in silent protest. About 35 of the marchers were SIU students.

Demonstrations continued during the following weeks at the pool, skating rink, and at a supermarket where discriminatory employment practices were found. On August 17, high school students of the CNFC underwent a baptism of fire in the truest sense of the word.

Early in the day, trials were scheduled for nine Negroes charged with blocking the entrance to the Cairo public pool on July 14. Ironically, a Negro youth drowned in the Ohio River the morning that CNFC members were being tried for attempting to integrate a place where people can swim safely. The trials were delayed until the afternoon. The judge divorced the segregation issue from the charges and ruled the nine guilty. Again, the cases were appealed.

Later in the afternoon, the CNFC met and decided to continue demonstrations at the pool, the supermarket and at the roller rink.

Violence erupted at the rink the evening of August 17. Racists attacked demonstrators with rocks, chains, pipes and blackjacks, injuring several of the demonstrators. Most of the demonstrators grouped for protection, however others were chased down a road by attackers and reportedly fired upon.

When the Sheriff's forces arrived, the owner of the skating rink was questioned as an objective source of information. The Sheriff ignored Mary McCollum's pleas for action on his part several times, but finally reluctantly arrested several of the attackers.

Persons who had been injured seriously enough to be taken to the hospital were Charles Koen, 17; Linda Pearlstein, 22; Charlene Williams, 15; Ronnie Hale, 17; Debbie Flowers, 13; and Francis Williams, 15.

That night, following the outbreak, telegrams were sent to the governor by Dr. L. C. Holman, state president of NAACP, Rev. Ramsey, and others. The following day a meeting was set. It was to be attended by Charles Koen, Rev. Ramsey, Dr. Holman, and Roger Nathan, Illinois Human Relations Commission.

On August 20, about 100 individuals drove to Springfield prepared to demonstrate in the event the meeting was not satisfactory. However, Governor Otto Kerner and the attorney general gave support to the group and said, in effect, that the group should continue to demonstrate whenever it was deemed necessary.

The Attorney General added that his office would prosecute in any case of unlawful segregation. About 10 members of the CNFC gave statements to the attorney general's office.

Demonstration in Cairo continued and trials for integrationists were delayed.

In recent days the Cairo police hurled teargas bombs at demonstrators protesting an anti-parade law which would prohibit their pickets. Although discrimination has not been wiped out in Cairo, significant advances were made.

Among them are: State support of demonstrations, Negro admission to the skating rink, the opening of a Cairo hotel and cafe which previously discriminated, and important progress on an independent voter's league, in which Negroes are seeking both a voice in government and election of qualified officials.

Murphysboro
Citizens Take the Lead

The Southern Illinois University Student Nonviolent Freedom Committee was born out of student concern for conditions in Cairo. But this is a more general concern that implicates people everywhere. Certainly SNFC is concerned with problems nearer to home, as well as those elsewhere. A testing committee was formed to inquire into suspected discriminatory policies in the more immediate area. Since Murphysboro was to be a new living area for SIU students--with new private dormitories and regular bus service to campus--it was felt that policies there should be determined.

On Saturday, July 28, a testing team went to Murphysboro and found some discriminatory practice in public facilities. One cafe provided only take-out orders for Negroes and another overcharged a Negro couple. SNFC arranged a meeting with the Negro ministers and other interested parties to determine whether the community desired help in alleviating the conditions. John O'Neal, president of SNFC informed the people of general group policy, "We're here to help you, but we won't do things for you."

The attitude of those local people present was that there was a problem, and they wanted to take care of it. The student group was invited back for a mass meeting on Tuesday, August 7. In the meantime, due to concurrent involvement of many student members in Cairo and other group activities, a special sub-committee was appointed to handle Murphysboro. This sub-committee made many visits to various members of the community to determine their concern. One problem that was mentioned repeatedly was the fact that Negroes had never been able to swim in the local pool.

At the mass meeting, the Rev. C. H. Williams and the Rev. S. L. Hightower reiterated this concern. Those present decided that the pool should be tested. The following day, white members of SNFC were admitted to the pool with no membership cards. They watched from the pool as four local Negro girls and two boys were refused admission because of non-membership in the Riverside Pool Club.

At a meeting the next evening at the Murphysboro Bethel A.M.E. church, the results were announced. A committee was appointed to meet with the pool owners and negotiate.

At this same time a group of Negro youngsters were meeting in a separate room. They announced that they wanted to test some eating and recreation establishments. All agreed that if any violence should result, they would respond nonviolently. This preparation proved unnecessary. Apparently due to the publicity involved with the announcement of discrimination in the town, and the desire to avoid another Cairo situation, the owners of places that had previously discriminated had changed their policy. The young Negroes were served pleasantly and without incident. Four Negro boys were accepted at the local bowling alley and were assisted and coached by the manager.

The following week brought the report that the owners of the pool, Paul Slaybaugh and Lyle Turton, had signed membership applications for the members of the committee that had met with them. Pending approval of the membership board, the Rev. Williams, Mrs. Anns Bankhead, Mrs. Estella Johnson, and Mrs. Maxine Passamore would be members of the pool club and would be able to sign for others.

The Murphysboro Nonviolent Freedom Organization was formed Thursday, August 16, with Mrs. Passmore named president. A representative of SNFC told them, "You have a great deal to do. I have seen no Negroes working in Murphysboro stores, only in restaurant kitchens." A

A sub-committee was named to study employment problems and the feasibility of having Negroes apply for federal job re-training.

Mrs. Passmore announced a Human Relations sub-committee to seek a meeting with Mayor Joe Williams. She said the committee would seek to pinpoint goals and work toward understanding with city civic and business leaders. She also announced a goal of \$2,000 set by Murphysboro mothers to help remodel the Youth Center recently rented by the park board.

The following Tuesday, August 20, the largest group that had yet attended heard John O'Neal of SNFC and the Rev. Blaine Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Koen of the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee tell of the violence in Cairo on the previous Friday night. They told also of their subsequent meeting with Governor Kerner and what their summer-long efforts had gained for the people of Cairo. The people of Murphysboro were moved to continue to seek further solution to their problems through negotiation, or demonstration if necessary.

Barriers fell swiftly in late August with first four Negroes approved for Riverside Pool Club memberships and then 12 more admitted. As the month ended Mayor Williams met with Mrs. Passmore and other members of the Murphysboro Nonviolent Freedom Organization and agreed to investigate the forming of a joint Negro-White Human Relations Council. The goal of the committee would be to help deal with employment, housing, or other discrimination.

The SIU Student Nonviolent Freedom Committee is proud of its work with Murphysboro. It provided the ideas and help the Negro residents needed to handle their problems. Its goal in the future will be the same--to provide the help to residents of other communities so that they might remove barriers from within.

Nonviolence
Key to Dignity

Nearly everyone who becomes involved in nonviolent direct action becomes interested in its origins and "why it works." Many have sought further enlightenment and have been aided in their daily lives as well as in situations of violence by the understanding of the principles of nonviolence. Beyond a set of principles, for some, the philosophy of nonviolence has become a personal philosophy--it has been a key to creative interaction with others and with themselves.

The philosophy itself is a product of the creative resolution of a problem Gandhi faced in India. In evolving Thoreau's principle of Civil Disobedience, he came up with Satyagraha, meaning Truth force or soul force. Force of this kind lies not in physical power but in individual moral assertion of concern. It is not a philosophy for the weak of will, for the nonviolent will resist through his presence, through his assertion, and continue to resist when subjected to violence even unto death.

In order to maintain the dignity of his assertion, the advocate of nonviolence must first believe in the dignity of it--he must believe in himself. This is an important benefit of such a commitment in the Freedom Movement in the South. As the Negro makes assertions of increasing value, he forces the white to no longer ignore the problems of segregation; the Negro realizes the force of his commitment. By the same token, the white is forced to make creative assertions and to react to himself and to the Negro. It is thus possible to have a creative interchange through which the dignity of both white and Negro becomes reinforced. Self-respect and respect for the other person are necessary on the part of the nonviolent person. Mutual respect between white and Negro is the result, and nonviolent action that is carefully planned and disciplined allows both parties to retain and increase self-respect. Mutual respect and self-respect might be termed a strong aspect of Love.

The person who plans to use nonviolent direct action must follow a prescribed general plan or outline of rules while still keeping every situation open to creativity. Ground rules for consideration before nonviolent direct action include defining the objective, being honest with self and opponent, loving the opponent, and giving the opponent a way out. Five strategic steps toward action are investigation, negotiation, education, demonstration, and resistance. These are only general concepts that can be elaborated much more thoroughly. In all action of nonviolent principle the participants must remain friendly, firm, humble, forthright, calm, helpful, forgiving, and creative. These requirements are difficult (to fulfill) but the positive results are so rewarding that the alternative of violence seems inconsiderable.

Future Proposal
Intensified Student Involvement

The concern of the Student Nonviolent Freedom Committee is to validly involve a greater proportion of the people in the freedom movement now taking place here and in the South. In the actual operation of raising funds for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, our committee hopes to spark this involvement in both the white and Negro student population. As we present the movement to others in our drive to raise funds for the movement, we will be serving to make others aware of the true state of affairs as well as increasing our own awareness of the problem at hand. Steps are already being taken in dealing with pockets of discrimination.

Citizens of Illinois will become more aware of the freedom movement and will be given an opportunity to contribute through financial aid and personal expression of concern. The primary aim is to educate and validly involve the people, for the funds themselves are of a secondary nature. As the campus group appeals to communities for support, the communities will become more educated in dealing with their own problems. Through SNFC, speakers will be available to speak to these communities of the movement in the South and of the relevance between the Southern movement and the problems of Illinois. A feeling of solidarity between the movement in the South and the movement here will enable these communities to throw off the remaining bonds of segregation.

There is much to be done in the student community itself. In particular, housing for non-white students has been pressing. There is a great shortage of manpower within our committee, itself. In short, our immediate aim is that of expanding ourselves, in number and in depth of involvement, and our ultimate aim is an expansion of the total involvement.

At present, there is a twofold need for expansion. First, the Movement must not be allowed to restrict itself to a minority. The full strength truth must be maintained dynamically, else much may be lost. Secondly, unless a greater number of active supporters are involved, the total involvement will lose some of its validity. The Movement has as its goal the enlightenment and freedom of all men, all mankind. "Passive" sympathizers are in truth condoners of evil, for in refusing to actively assert themselves against evil, they are not being responsible to themselves as men. No one has the right to expect from another what he does not give, himself.