

COMMUNITY CENTER REPORT

About 300 children, teenagers and adults are now participating in the Community Center program in Mississippi. These Negro Mississippians -- who have been deprived of all cultural benefits and have been subject to one of the most inferior school systems in the country -- are now flocking to thirteen fledgling community centers in makeshift buildings.

The Community Center program is an integral part of the three-point Mississippi Summer Project, sponsored by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a statewide organization assisted by field secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the NAACP, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Its main function is to provide recreational activities, special skills and knowledge -- such as sewing, public health information, arts and crafts classes and guitar lessons -- to the Negro population, wherever community centers can be established.

In the original planning of the summer project, it was thought that the centers would mainly service adults. As it has turned out, many more children and teenagers are going to the community centers than adults. This did catch some community center planners by surprise, but the reasons lie deep in the terror-filled status quo in the state: such adults, who publicly go to any office officially associated with the movement, are in danger of losing their jobs or being subject to various types of intimidation by local whites. This fear, therefore, is a real one, and cannot possibly be termed "apathy." Some community center workers say that the presence of so many children may discourage further participation by adults, and so efforts are being made to establish separate facilities for adults. Along with this, special attempts are being made to encourage adults to take the risks involved. No one can properly describe how hard a task this is.

A community run-down will properly illustrate the current status of each community center, what programs are flourishing, and what their needs are. First, however, are some highlights of the summer's work:

In Greenville, a journalism course and a drama workshop are flourishing. The journalism course is led by Vicki Halper, an 18-year old Oberlin student from Brooklyn (who incidently is an art history major). She helped students found the Freedom Gazette, a weekly publication of the Greenville Center. Grace Brooks, a Negro speech and drama graduate of Columbia University, taught drama for five years in South Carolina State College, and is now helping produce two themes from IN White America in the Greenville center drama club.

In Canton, Arlene Beck, a volunteer from New York, is teaching a photography course where students will attempt to build a simple camera. All they need now are the supplies.

Kathy Dahl, a registered nurse, is working with the Holly Springs community center in starting a future nurses club for teenage girls attending the center. She has also gone into the field to talk to local doctors and midwives.

Also in Holly Springs, students have written an original play, Sons of Freedom, which is based on the life of Medgar Evers. About 20 aspiring actors are taking part in the play, which is scheduled to make several appearances in various towns of the Delta.

Other classes in projects include a home nursing class; an English class offering a \$10 savings bond for the winner of an essay contest (second prize, Freedom Singers' Song Book; and third, a Negro history book); and, in the Clarksville community center, probably the only leather craft class in the state. This latter phenomenon occurred when a volunteer doctor, passing through the state, learned of this interest from a young student and raised funds to buy leather-craft kits when he returned home.

One of the main problems this summer in the community center project is the lack of adequate facilities. In at least three projects, community workers are erecting a building in order to cope with the problem of inadequate space. A six-man board, elected from the local community, will manage the center which is being built by two Californian volunteers, Abe Osheroff and Jim Bebel. Local people will contribute the labor for the building, which will include a kitchen, a hall seating 150 people, and a library. Depending on how much time local citizens can take from their farm duties, the actual building of the center will take between ten and twelve weeks. Hartman Turnbow, a member of the permanent center board, has raised the possibility of organizing a local farm co-operative out of the center.

Work is already in progress for the community center building in Harmony, which is a small rural Negro community outside Garthage, (Leake County) Miss. Living up to their name, Harmony farmers and homesteaders have been hammering and sawing, while their wives have been cooking dinners for the workers. Teenagers will help with the interior painting after the shell is up. When finished, the center will house a library, snack bar, office and recreation area.

In Greenville, even sympathetic whites are helping build the community center by contributing to an effort to raise \$3000 to get the project underway. The local community is being asked for \$3000 to show a concrete commitment to the goals of the center. A local women's group has been organized to hold bazaars to help raise funds, led by a 24-year old woman who was committed enough to quit her job and begin working for the project full time.

Charles T. Askew, a Negro architect from Philadelphia, Pa., has submitted blueprints for a hexangular building which has six "A" frame structures radiating out from one center recreation room. The building will house a large auditorium, classrooms and an office, and will cost approximately \$15,000.