

CAN THE LAUREL COMMUNITY CENTER BE REBUILT?

HATTIESBURG MINISTERS' PROJECT  
522 Mobile Street  
HATTIESBURG, MISS. 39401

On February 16, 1965, the Laurel Community Center, a three room board house on a dead end street in Laurel, Mississippi, was badly burned and all its books, equipment, and supplies damaged or destroyed. A month later, Susan Clippinger, a Sudbury girl, who had been working for COFO in Laurel, asked a group of Lincoln and Sudbury high school students to help her raise money to support herself and other civil rights workers in Laurel. Subsequently adults in both Lincoln and Sudbury decided to support this student effort. An ad hoc committee was formed by Mr. and Mrs. Stuart B. Avery, Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin C. Badger, Mr. and Mrs. Richard B. Bailey, Mr. and Mrs. John M. Barnaby, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas N. Casner, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Clippinger, Mr. and Mrs. James DeNormandie, Mrs. B. Crockett Dexter, Mr. and Mrs. William G. Elliott, Mr. and Mrs. A. Bradlee Emmons, Dr. and Mrs. Albert C. England Jr., Mr. and Mrs. John B. Garrison, Dr. and Mrs. Herbert Haessler, Mr. and Mrs. Eliot Hubbard 3rd, Mr. and Mrs. G. Sargent Janes, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Jenney Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Charles P. Kindleberger, Mr. and Mrs. David W. Kirkpatrick, Mr. and Mrs. William G. Langton, Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Levin, Jr. and Mrs. Henry M. Morgan, Mr. and Mrs. David H. Navon, Mr. and Mrs. J. Warren Olmsted, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore S. Polumbaum, Mr. and Mrs. William M. Preston, Mr. and Mrs. Edward B. Rawson, Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Rhodes, Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Stevens, Dr. and Mrs. Howard W. Stoudt, Mr. and Mrs. R. Langdon Wales, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas W. Ward, Mr. and Mrs. John R. White, Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Weiss, and Mr. and Mrs. Guilbert Winchell.

In the initial fund drive, over \$1500 was raised and forwarded to Laurel. Additionally, over 2000 books and a quantity of nursery school equipment were donated by residents of both towns and sent to Laurel. Through the efforts of a Waltham businessman, Mr. Philip Gordon, the Ethical Society has also contributed generously.

The money raised has been spent in supporting work for voter education and registration, political organization, work toward school integration, welfare work, fair employment work, getting out a newspaper, and providing a youth center. It was the Laurel Center which organized four Project Head Starts for 400 preschool children in the community, while other city organizations chose not to employ needed and available Federal funds. Unfortunately, the library books are still stored in boxes, because no building is available where they can be safely used.

This earlier infusion of funds from this area enabled the Laurel workers to establish a temporary headquarters and carry on some of their work, in spite of intimidation and violence. However, in late June, their make-do, half-building they were using for their second headquarters was fire bombed while two workers slept inside. This time, fortunately, there was little damage to the valuable equipment, but the building was damaged and made unsafe for use.

It seems plain that our best way to continue our support of the work in Laurel is to raise enough money to help build a new, less vulnerable, and insured building. They have a carpenter and plans which have been approved by the building inspector. But they have no money.

The cost of a building - \$5000 - is not small. But \$5000 not raised in Lincoln, Sudbury, and neighboring towns soon probably will not be raised elsewhere. And if we choose not to act, we will be allowing violence and intimidation to win over integrity and courage.



## LETTERS FROM LAUREL

Marion Davidson, on the preschool project: "The beauty in the children you see playing in the drainage ditches is overwhelming. The toys they put together out of the junk they find around are incredibly imaginative. A nursery...would help equip these children for the struggle for 'self identification' that occurs each day in the life of a Negro child...Your concern and support is invigorating. Please keep in touch."

Susan Clippinger, to her parents: "Sometimes I lie in bed thinking...for hours... about plain human suffering. Really in general I feel very happy because we are doing something worth while...We don't participate in any sit-ins unless the local people ask us to. Then we must back them. We are working on the nursery school and equal employment, political education classes, and the rebuilding of our office and library."

Susan, to the Laurel Committee here: "Every time we go anywhere, we worry about how much will get stolen, as the doors are easily broken down. Things are going so slowly, and more and more we realize how difficult it is to work in a Christian community without the support of the church...The record player is always going, and we use the tape recorder often, and the typewriters...The books are not set up because we have no place yet to put them, as the city inspector has not let us use one of our houses, and the other is too small. We have about 200 books set up in our small building. But we are excited about our plans for a new building, for which we haven't even the funds. I will send you plans...We truly...and I mean that---appreciate what you are all doing. It's something that really lifts us when we walk in these sweaty streets and hate what this country has done to people--black and white. You remind us that there are people who care."

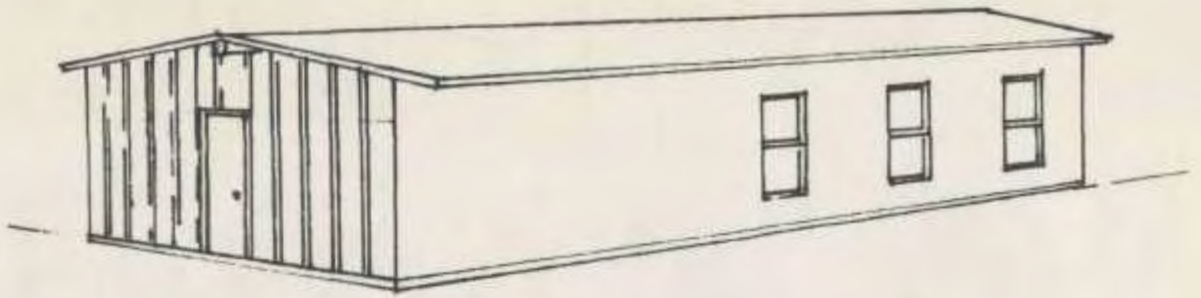
Later, Susan: "I must tell you that there is a lot of funny business down at the house where our books are stored. White men have been riding around there at night and following us around (along with the cops, who have been picking us up and trying to find things to charge us with.) We have heard rumors that the Klan is going to pay a Negro man to burn the house down. Those books are precious, and it would kill us to have them burned. We have no other place to store that many books. No one here will insure them. What can we do in a hurry?"

Susan, July 8, writing about the building: "A blind minister in Laurel is waiting to use the building for braille classes which he has started himself. Mrs. (Pearlie) Yarborough is waiting for a nook where she can set up a small welfare office, to parallel the Jones County office. Ben Hartfield needs a desk at which he can gather and distribute information on the employment possibilities. Finally, the new building will contain a large meeting room which will facilitate the whole movement in Laurel by providing a permanent meeting place."

"Spirits are pretty low down here. The man who rents us the office is completely sympathetic, and says he will repair the house and will give us the chance to move back in, even though he has a low income. But at the same time, people are really getting scared. They don't want to house us any more, they know they're next on the list. We are scared at night, and lay awake wondering when that bomb is going to come through the wall...What do we do when people are scared, they won't organize around voting; it's not concrete enough. So what we are trying to do is organize people around things that they are really interested in: food and money. We are working on welfare and unemployment. When we get the new building we won't have to worry about anyone's house being bombed but our own; the Boykins have to move out of this place, they can't go without gas and lights, and can't afford another bombing, with their seven children.

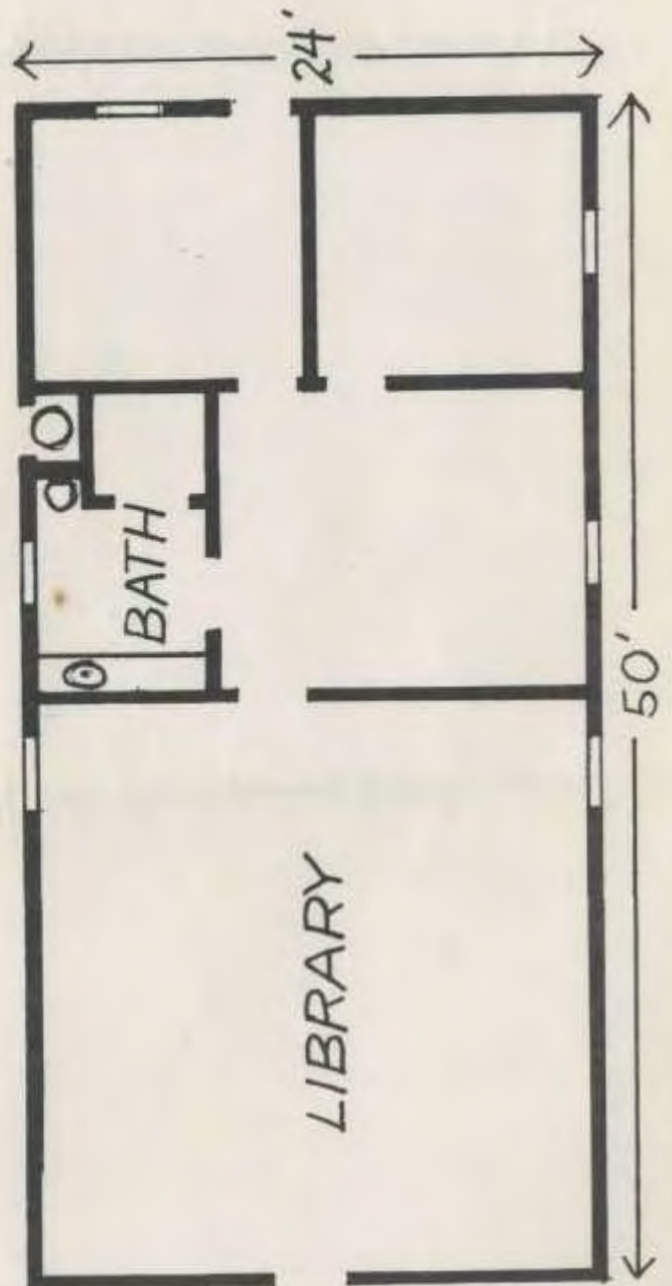
"I am really inspired to know that you people are still working, and I mean that with all my heart. Suzy."





"they say that the reaction in the white community was happiness at the burning of the COFO office...I am enclosing some of the drawings that Ted asked for. We had planned to make it of wood, however, if bombings and burnings continue, we would like to make it of brick or line it with asbestos (which is the only thing that saved our office). This will raise the estimated cost of \$3000 to \$5000...As you see the front room will be used for the library and community room. There is no place for young people to meet in Laurel. There is no integrated movie theater...there is no public library for Negroes. We have books, thanks to our friends, and a movie projector which we hope to set up. People from the North have offered us art and civil rights films.

"The back room will be used for office work and supplies. In this office it has been impossible to maintain an equilibrium in which we can work. It is very small, and either we kick everyone out or open up, whereupon the whole office swings with noise. And it hurts to kick people out because they have been told over and over, this is yours, you haven't get much but this is yours. But the boys live here at night (to guard the place from bombings, you know). They have no privacy whatsoever...Kids come down here...They come because we have offered them a hope, and yet we don't have time to sit and talk with them because we are trying to keep up with the newspapers, letters, and movement work...With the new office we hope to have a place to do our work in peace. Thank you. Suzy Clippinger."



September 22, 1965

Dear

Thank you very much for your gift to make possible the rebuilding of a community center in Laurel, Mississippi. A total of \$5468.81 was raised in Lincoln, Sudbury and Concord, and in the Boston Ethical Society. Lincoln's share was \$4119.95, a very heart-warming response.

A group of local people has been formed in Laurel to plan and direct the building of the new center. This committee is called the Community Action Group and its chairman is Mr. Sam Simmons. Mr. Simmons has actively participated with COFO and the Freedom Democratic Party, as well as with the neighborhood group responsible for Project Head Start.

One of the major goals of the COFO workers in Laurel has been the development of local leadership to direct activities in the community. Much of the energy of Gwen Robinson and the other workers was spent in steering the community toward taking this responsibility in an orderly way. In late August, COFO decided to abolish itself in Mississippi, and turn the leadership over to local Mississippi people, who, they feel, can provide stability and continuity to the work for social change which is still very much needed in Mississippi.

Some of the COFO workers have stayed in Mississippi to help the new leadership; others are leaving the state. For example, Bea Hartfield and Ulysses Everett, both Mississippi school dropouts, are here in the Boston area to complete their education. Gwen Robinson is working in the SNCC office in New York and taking college courses. Suzy Clippinger is back at Brandeis as planned. Pat McCauley is remaining in Laurel. Negro Mask, a Laurel high school boy, is living here in Lincoln. Marlene Davidson is in Washington.

The Freedom Democratic Party, which has indigenous leadership, will direct political and protest activities in Mississippi. Other groups, like the Head Start Committee and Mr. Simmons' new Community Action Group, will direct activities which are not political.

We have been in touch with Mr. Simmons by telephone. When his plans are completed, a representative will go to Laurel to establish an orderly system for disbursing the funds, and to make sure that the building is adequately insured. A committee here will be needed to handle the money. If you would be willing to serve on this committee, will you please let us know?

Thank you again for your help.

Sincerely yours,

for the ad hoc Committee on Laurel