

"Sunshine"



Southern Christian Leadership Conference
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A Man Called "Sunshine"

Meet a man called "Sunshine."

Ben Owens, a staff member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), is known by his full name to few, but loved and respected by thousands who know him as "Sunshine."

Mr. Owens is one of those countless people from all walks of life who have participated in the freedom movement. But he has gone beyond that and dedicated his entire life to the struggle.

Ben "Sunshine" Owens was born March 14, 1914, in Perry County, Alabama, and educated in nearby Jefferson County.

The Movement Man

For years, he worked as a bulldozer operator, but when he heard about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Ralph David Abernathy, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, "Sunshine" went there and it changed his life. From then on, he was strictly a movement man.

As an SCLC field organizer, Mr. Owens has served in rural counties across the South and in major cities around the nation. He has been involved in virtually every major event in the modern civil rights movement.

He is at his best working at the grass-roots level—recruiting voters out of the croplands, organizing for community boycotts, helping people to start farm co-operatives, leading folk on marches and sit-ins—

always prepared to be the first to accept the consequences.

"Jailed All Over the Country"

One time when he was asked to describe his years of experience in the movement, he replied simply: "Jailed all over the country."

Another time, he revealed his great determination. He was warned that the lack of funds might force SCLC to make drastic cuts in its staff. "Sunshine's" response: "You may have to take me off the payroll, but I will never leave, because I am in this movement for life."

"Sunshine" is famous in the movement for the vegetables he grows and for his love of watermelon. For years he sent a steady supply of peanuts and pecans to Dr. King and Dr. Abernathy.

"Sunshine" and the Mules

Mr. Owens is one of SCLC's expert handlers of the mules which often serve as a rallying symbol in the movement. But the mules cost him part of one leg. At the 1968 funeral of Dr. King, one of the mules pulling the cart which bore the casket kicked "Sunshine" in the leg. He paid little attention to the injury at the time, but it did not heal and an amputation was eventually required.

But that did not stop a man called "Sunshine." Mr. Ben "Sunshine" Owens, the movement man, is still on the case.