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Miss
SNCC -
Miss. (Greenwood)

Report from Mississippi

'We're Changing Our Lives'

By Martha Prescod, SNCC Field Representative

I spent last summer working for SNCC in Greenwood, Mississippi, on the voter-registration drive.

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is an organization that grew out of the 1960 Southern student sit-ins. In the rural South you offend somebody just as much when you walk up to the courthouse to register to vote as if you walk into his store to sit down. When the first registration project was set up in McComb, Mississippi, in the summer of 1961, SNCC found that people going to the courthouse to register would be beaten up right on the courthouse steps.

To this day when a person goes down to register, his name is published in the paper and everybody knows it. Many times he loses his job. He loses his credit. He is cut off Welfare.

And of course, he is also subject to physical violence. It is not rare. For every instance that is brought to public knowledge, there are at least 10 or more that nobody hears about. Medgar Evers is not the only person who has been shot in Mississippi. Neither is William Moore the only person who has been killed in Alabama. There are countless shootings, countless houses that have bullet holes in the screen door and on the walls. It is common, very common.

The people we are working with are poor. The average wage for the Negro in the Mississippi Delta is between \$200 and \$300 a year. Most people either pick cotton or work as domestics.

EASTLAND'S WORKERS

The people who pick cotton on Senator Eastland's plantation earn \$2.90 a day. They work maybe three or four days a week,

during the cotton season, which extends for about ten weeks each year.

Many others work as domestics, which is a \$10 to \$15 a week job. Depression is not an invention—it is there in real terms. People live in houses where they paste up advertisements to keep the cold out. Many of the houses burn down in the winter because the heating system is so bad.

We have to depend on face-to-face contact. There is no other means of communication. We canvass door-to-door, telling people how registering to vote will change their lives, how it will mean a better education for their children; and maybe a minimum wage so they won't have to have their little children picking cotton 12 hours a day instead of going to school.

WORST IN COUNTRY

We then have to train people to take the literacy test. This state has the worst school system and the largest percentage of illiteracy in the entire coun-

try — among both Negro and white.

We have urged illiterates to go down and have adopted the slogan: "One man, one vote." We feel that because someone has been denied the right to an education—which the Negro in this country has — you cannot then deny him the right to vote to change this situation for his children.

To pass a literacy test to register, you have to be able to write your name and address, how long you've lived in the state, and so on. Then the Mississippi clerk opens the Mississippi constitution, which contains 500-odd sections, and asks you to copy one of these sections and interpret it. In Greenwood, maybe 5 out of 2,000 people who have gone down to register have actually been put on the books. We have had college graduates fail to pass. The test, of course, is not administered to whites.

NO FEDERAL AID

We have asked many times for Federal marshals but we don't get them. People went down in Ruleville on Aug. 6 to vote. Eight people were registered there. They were met by 12 white men, armed with rifles, drawn and cocked. They had to go through these men to vote. They were followed back by a truckload of white men with rifles. The only kind of protection we have is publicity.

People register knowing this is what they risk. They know they may lose their jobs, their homes may be shot into, they may be arrested and beaten. But they know also that they are changing their way of life. Time and again people say:

I don't want to see my children come up the way I did. This is what drives them to keep coming.

BRUTALITY—AND COURAGE

SNCC workers are predominately Southern workers, and most of our people are from the states they work in. These are just a few of the people I worked with:

Jo Ann Christian—Jo Ann was 15, and had been to jail 12 times. She was with a group of kids who went to kneel at City Hall. The police knew who she was and when the police were arresting her, she was picked up, dragged into the station — and deliberately dropped four times. When she went into the station to be booked, Chief Prichett of Albany picked her up by the hair and threw her around the station. One of the police officers slammed her behind the steel doors several times. She was stomped on. And finally they put her into solitary confinement.

There are two special things I remember about Jo Ann. I remember her mother standing up at the end of a mass meeting in Albany and asking our attorney very quietly: "I wonder if you could tell me if my daughter is alright?" The other thing I remember is that when they finally got to visit Jo Ann and asked her if she wanted any more light, she said, "I always carry my light with me."

ONE OF THREE ALIVE

Then there is Bob Moses. He is known state-wide by the police, and all whites in the county. There was a trio: Herbert Lee; Medgar Evers, and Bob Moses. They had all been shot at innumerable times. Both Lee and Evers are dead. Moses

is still in Mississippi and he's staying, and working on in his usual quiet, patient way.