

[1964, April 20]

Weekly Report Meridian Community Center Week of April 20th Rita Schwerner

This week has brought about several innovations in the community center. It has also seen some reaction from the white community concerning our presence and activity in Meridian.

We have started a class for high school dropouts. There are five young men in the class, with more expected, and we meet two evenings a week. The class is conducted as a seminar, with the students planning their own course of study. We have started with work on speech. The boys seem enthusiastic and have become involved in other aspects of our program.

For a few weeks now we have required all persons receiving cloth from the sewing project to sign the Freedom Registration under the theory that if they are not willing to help themselves, there is little we can do for them. We have become somewhat discouraged by the apathy and fear which is rampant in much of the Negro community, and after several discussions, decided that we would initiate a still more positive approach to our giving of material. Starting today, all persons over 21 who wish to receive material must first make an attempt to register at the court house. We include in this all persons living in both Lauderdale and Clark counties. Persons living in Kemper are exempted because of the harsh reprisals for registration attempts. We are not ready to cope with the problems which would exist from sending many people down in Kemper. The women who came up today for cloth listened to our reasoning, and with one exception, agreed to go register this Tuesday. We believe that certain people will probably refuse to come up here now that we have started this policy, but we also feel that it is far more constructive to offer people a chance to change their situation than to simply continue to give them cloth. We realize that eventually we will have trouble getting more material donated, and in the meantime we want to have brought about some changes.

Although mass meetings fall mostly in the realm of political action, and are therefore not included in my report, the atmosphere in the community is vital to the functioning of the center, and for that reason I mention that during a mass meeting on Thursday nite someone turned in a false alarm, and the audience came near panic when the fire trucks arrived. We were able to calm them, but we saw an indication of the fear. Also it must be mentioned that most of the ministers refuse us their churches, and won't even speak about the center.

Last nite a cross was burned in front of First Union Baptist Church, where we have had meetings and the minister has been outspokenly in favor of our work. This is the first cross burning in Meridian.

We have contacted a white Mennonite minister who has expressed a sincere desire to help. We have had him here at the center a few times and I have worked out a plan with him for attempting to find a scholarship to a Northern college for one of the local girls. He met her the other day and was very favorably impressed. He promised to leave not a stone unturned in finding aid for her. We will be in close contact with him about it.