

CORE SOUTHERN REGIONAL OFFICE
Room 203 2211 Dryades Street
New Orleans, Louisiana, 70113
Edward S. Hollander, Field Secretary

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CORE COMMUNITY CENTER IN MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI

The community center which CORE has established in Meridian, Mississippi is a departure from CORE's traditional usage of nonviolent direct action. It is an attempt to dramatize needs by attempting to fulfill them. The community center program is a part of the over-all Mississippi civil rights strategy aimed at the basic problems in that unique state. To meet the challenge Mississippi presents, all civil rights organizations in the state have united to form a state-wide organization and program in the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) which includes CORE, SNCC, SCLC, NAACP and fifty-some local groups around the state. The Meridian community center is a CORE project within the COFO state program.

In just five months the Meridian center has become the only functioning community center in the state. In January of this year Rita and Mike Schwerner arrived in Meridian to set up the center. To start it they had a typewriter, a desk, a chair and five otherwise empty rooms. Mike, 24, is a June, 1961 graduate of Cornell; to work in Mississippi he left his job as a social worker at the Hamilton Madison Settlement House in New York City. His 22 year old wife Rita had been teaching English at South Jamaica Junior High School after her graduation from Queens College in June of last year. Working for CORE on the "Task Force" they earn \$10 a week each plus room and board.

Although there is a tremendous need in the Meridian area to relieve the hard physical facts of life, we do not have the resources to enable the center to make a significant assault on the problems of unemployment, sanitation, nutrition, health and pre-natal care. But CORE and COFO feel that a center can help break the tight system of Negro oppression, the stifling of ideas and discussion, and help arouse a spirit of striving within the Negro community.

Seeking to provide avenues of thought and expression, the Schwerners felt a library would have to be a basic part of the community center. From an initial 500 books provided by the SNCC book center in Greenwood they have increased the library to more than 10,000 volumes, all catalogued. They obtained that additional books by writing to the names of the contributors on the cartons of their original shipment and from a CORE "Books for Mississippi" drive conducted in the north. The library has a circulation of 75-100 weekly. No late fines are charged because the borrowers are too poor, and, as Rita put it, "if someone wants to own a book that badly it is felt that it would help them more that it would hurt the library". Mike built the bookshelves with the help of local teenagers; you can see in the photographs that they used sections of logs for the vertical shelf supports to save money on lumber. Rita reports that more often than not the library has the material high school students need when they come to do their school assignments.

Saturday afternoons Rita conducts a story hour for children. In addition to reading it includes listening to records and just last week the center received a contribution of children's games which Rita says were greatly enjoyed. With scrap material from the sewing program the children have

been making puppets and will soon stage a puppet show, much to their delight.

In March Rita discovered that there was considerable enthusiasm among the local women and teenage girls for a sewing program. Owning a new dress is a rare experience for the women so Rita obtained four sewing machines from the north and from an unsuccessful sewing cooperative in Ruleville. Northern benefactors sent material. She started a distribution of the material and sewing classes for those who needed instruction. Because of a lack of material she limits each woman to one dress or a skirt and blouse. Over 110 women have received material and at least 25 are waiting for it. Most of the women sew at home because they have to be near their children but there are about ten dresses perpetually being worked on at the community center. After the first two months of the program Rita gave the material only to those who attempted to register to vote (Meridian, the state's second largest city, is one of the least difficult areas in Mississippi for Negroes to register) in the belief that the community center can help only those who are willing to help themselves. There was an initial drop in the number of women coming in for material but the slack was soon made up as the idea became accepted in the community.

A program to train adults for civil service jobs proved too difficult but Rita is now working with a group of six high school dropouts, young men 19 and 20 years old. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ They plan their own program which is not strictly academic. I think it is interesting that the first thing they chose to work on was speech and self expression. At the beginning of the program Rita made an agreement with them that if they became bored they were to say so rather than just not come back.

The center also offers some recreation facilities including records, a ping pong table which was built by teenagers, and just plain lounge space. A program to show films has not started yet because the center's budget has not been able to cover rental costs. The Schwerners also hope to use the center for teenagers' parties in the future.

The following paragraph from one of the Schwerners' reports touches on some interesting points. "Psychologically the center is filling a need among the people for recognition, for a place to come and talk, for something that is for them. At first there was some suspicion of us as whites, but we believe that most of this has passed. Before we came there had been other workers in and out of Meridian, and the people are anxious to know that we intend to stay. They feel important at having workers assigned to their city."

The Schwerners have had an amazing lack of police interference for Mississippi. Mickey was "picked up" once and was arrested on May 4, but this was in connection with a selective buying campaign (which, by the way, is nearing success after just three weeks) rather than with the community center. A cross was burned on April 24 in front of a Negro church; the Schwerners happened to be at the minister's home at the time. It was the first cross burned in Meridian in over five years. By and large Meridian has maintained its reputation for being the most moderate of Mississippi cities. This situation may change as the program there includes more voter registration, rallies and boycotts. These programs are being worked on by Mike with help from several local teenagers while Rita spends full time at the community center.