

(Training Before heading south)

#1 Letter #1
(5 pages)

The following letter was received June 22, 1964.

June 18, 1964

Dear Family and Friends:

The last four days of this orientation program for the Mississippi Summer Project of the 4 major Civil Rights groups have probably been the most concentrated, dynamic, emotionally exhausting educational experience of my life. You receive this letter and hopefully others during my six weeks doing voter registration work in Mississippi due to the kind offer of Nicola Geiger who has agreed to duplicate my letters and send them out. I must confess that I first thought of this as sort of a good opportunity to catch up on some of my correspondence which I have so neglected. The past four days have made it clear that this experience will be so important to me emotionally that I run the risk of becoming alienated from you. I hope that rather full communication with you will tend to counteract this. During the last day or so as the dangers were more clearly described I have been debating as to whether I should tell you about them. I have opted for openness with some missgivings because I hope that if you understand what is happening your reactions to anything which may happen to me will be more appropriate.

Sun. evening, the first program was a solemn memorial service for Medger Evers conducted by Ed King, a native Miss who is Methodist chaplain and dean at Tougaloo- the Negro college outside of Jackson.

Monday morning King led off the first session with a run down of some of the factors which contribute to making Miss. a Police State. King is a soft spoken man with large scars from an auto accident disfiguring one side of his face. He ran for Lieutenant Gov. on the Freedom Election run last year by SNCC. He told about the techniques the White Citizens Council, which receives state funds has kept control of the state for the past ten years since its inception in 1955. No politician can afford to be a moderate. Three were voted out recently for voting against an extreme piece of anti Negro legislation. In the past six years over 60 Methodist ministers have been forced out of the Southern half of the state alone. Merchants who meet the terms of the Civil Rights groups are economically coerced to change or leave. Moderates are now unable to have any voice in decisions about how to handle the Movement. What's more they aren't even in a position to know what is happening. All widely read newspapers simply deny the white guilt for violence and usually ignore incidents entirely. National news on T.V. is interrupted by local commercials or preface a report by saying, "The following is an example of a biased untrue yankee reporting."

King says that he sees how there can be some truth to the contention that many Germans didn't know about the treatment of the Jew.

Next Bob Moses talked to us in his quiet, reasoned manner about the project and the situation in various parts of the state. He immediately won the position of undisputed father figure for the volunteers. He seems to radiate good judgment and a sincere concern for all involved.

Quite roughly you can find quite distinct situations in the four corners of the State. The North East has come under the liberalizing influence of TVA. Added to that is the fact that the percent of Negroes in the area is only 15-30 and one gets one of the "moderate" areas where a recent conference of economic leaders thought that the Negroes ought to be helped to integrate into the economy.

The Northwest on the other hand is a hard core area. Known as the delta, it supports a plantation economy where the Negro population is well over 60%. It is the home of the White Citizens

Councils which were founded in 1955 in Indianola, 5 miles south of Eastlands large holdings. Up until recently the whole state has been completely controlled by the WCC. On the state level they receive funds from the government. Their methods of enforcing white supremacy tend to be legal and economic. They have established a fullfledged police state with an admirable intelligence network. When laws fail they are quick to effect economic reprisals on those of either race who step out of line. If this fails they may engage in symbolic acts of terror which are aimed at demoralizing the movement by picking off the leadership, e.g. Hedger Evers and the shooting into three houses in Ruleville where SNCC workers stayed.

The Southwest is the most dangerous area. It is hill country with small owner operated farms and 40-50% Negroes. The March on Washington has seemed to trigger a resurgence of the Klan and other terrorist groups in this area. Five to eight Negroes have been killed in this area since January. This is an area of wanton violence but we must go in or they could say that their method works. In Yazoo City the competition between the Klan and the WCC is in full swing and may prove very dangerous.

Greenville on the Mississippi is a spot of moderation in the south delta. Harding Carter, the local editor has endorsed the project and a committee of white citizens has been set up to help register Negroes and Whites.

The Southeast, The Gulf Coast receives the moderating influence of the coast tourism and looks to New Orleans. Hattiesburg, north of the Gulf Coast has been the target of an intensified registration drive. It is one of the few places where the Negroes right to picket has been protected by the police from white mobs. Presbyterian ministers have been helping to man the picket line there for months. However, the number of Negroes registered in Hattiesburg is very small. The registrar is been tried for contempt of court for continued resistance to register Negroes.

Bob then warned us that we are all victims of the plague of prejudice but must not make the mistake that the authorities in Camus' Oran made by resisting the recognition of the disease because recognition would have made action necessary. He said that the staff had had long deep discussions about the white Northerners coming down. Many of them have very deep antipathies to all whites. I must say that they have done an excellent job in overcoming these prejudices in their dealings with the whites.

Bob then sketched some of the goals of the summer. He said that the mere fact of our spending the summer in Negro homes would be a very important victory. It is also hoped that we, through our connections back home will give the project more projection, and bring the Justice Dept. into Miss. in a bigger way. Rev. King speculated that if the wrath of both the WCC and KKK is spent on us this summer and the movement is still intact in the fall the way may be opened for moderates to say, change is inevitable and will be more to our advantage if we plan it.

In the next session the body was broken down into small groups in which project directors from the local projects described in some detail the conditions in their counties. I happened to be assigned to a group where Charles McLurin was talking about Sunflower and Bolivar counties. He is a dynamic clear speaker whose determination, good humor and calmness about angers are massively impressive. These SNCC staff people must really stand out against the background of a lazy dead-end society. It becomes almost understandable how they can persuade people to risk house, job and life to go down and attempt to register.

picket

(Moses)

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Ruleville is the most organized town in this area. Almost all eligible Negroes have attempted to register despite the shooting and loss of jobs. The Mayor has said he will talk personally with anybody who hires a Negro who tried to register. The whites in the delta have been trying to force the Negroes out. Mechanization in cotton production threatens many jobs. Maybe as high as 50% of high school graduates go North. The Planters still have their workers under almost feudal control. SNCC workers cannot go onto plantations. Planters carry two rifles in their truck and often have radios to coordinate operations. There are rumors that Eastland uses prisoners from Parchman on with fife, brews of illegal liquor and has some Negroes who they won't let off his place, Ten miles west of Ruleville as Cleveland the county seat for Bolivar County and the home of Delta State College. A group of white students from Delta state will try to persuade us to go back north.

That evening we went back into the same groups and discussed race relations. This was a painful rather intimate discussion in which many of the white kids bared their fears about being accepted by the Negroes. One boy from West Virginia confessed that he is quite embarrassed when confronted by a group of Negroes and asked how he should act. A little blond Smith girl said she knew what he meant though she didn't have the problem herself, in fact she didn't know whether it was environment or heredity but she found Southern Negroes quite attractive. The discussion was very valuable in posing the problem of how does one adapt without sell out of his own identity. Unfortunately the press was not discreet. I saw an almost verbatim account in a Cincinnati newspaper under a photo of a bare-footed boy.

Tuesday we had more regional briefings. Then there was an informal general session to discuss various problems. The most interesting discussion was about how we should confront the white kids who want to persuade us to go back home. Should we insist that a Negro come along. What about radio debates. If their minds are closed what is the use of talking to them. It became clear that our relations with the Negro community might be endangered if we want off to talk to them. I certainly wouldn't want to be put in the position of trying to defend the Negroes case when he should legitimately present it. On the other hand it is so important I feel to get into the white community and let somebody know what we are like. I imagine the rumors about the invasion of communists are getting pretty wild at present. It is so important for them to get as human a picture of us as possible, otherwise they are capable of anything.

Tuesday evening we saw a CBS documentary, Mississippi and the 15th Amendment. One of the interviews was with a racist lawyer in Hattiesburg who explained why a local negro teacher with a Masters Degree wasn't eligible to vote. The volunteers laughed at the absurdity of his argument. After the show one of the staff said very solemnly that he had not 6 of the field secretaries who had walked out because of our reaction to the film. For then this lawyer was too dangerous and too insulting to be laughed at. Next on the program was a talk by Charles Morgan, the courageous Birmingham attorney who stood up at the time of the bombings and made a strong public statement in favor of sanity. He has since been forced out of Birmingham by economic coercion. He warned us gravely about the dangers of Mississippi. Said he thought that atrocities don't soften but harden the local people. He described the white Miss. as a pretty regular guy who is concerned about getting along. He said one

thing that might help was that Miss. is very concerned about its image. He layed the slow movement of the Civil Rights cause in the South not to the strength of Southern opposition but to the weakness of the North on the issue. Kennedy was the first President to initiate suits in order to try to reinstate the right to vote in the South. He ended by solemnly stating that he admired our courage. From a guy like that who has seen a lot of fire this was really frightening. I think as the week has progressed we have all lived under the increasing weight of fear. The struggle to come to terms with the possibility of death consumes much of our emotional energy. It is interesting that one seems to succeed for a while. Some times for a stretch of a couple of hours one becomes quite fatalistic but then a wave of fear rolls in and my intestine thickens and it is hard to see how I'll keep from getting paralyzed by it when I get down there.

Just the precautions are scary: beware of cars without tags they are always danger, never go out alone, never go out after dark, never be the last out of a mass meeting, watch for cops without their badge, listen for an accelerating car outside, if you wake up at night thinking there is danger wake everybody up. There seems to be a very good type instinct for preservation. Some of the Negro field secretaries who I was talking to informally told how they played like real Uncle Toms to the cops when in real danger. They advised us white kids to play like we were Northern kids just come down to see how things are. We should say we had read all that stuff in the Northern press about how bad they treated their Negroes and couldn't believe it. They were advising us to sell then out to get out of danger (that is only when it was an all white group of course). They stressed the importance of sticking together. Going to jail together, taking the blows for someone else, etc.

Wednesday Rev. James Lawson presented and skillfully defended Christian revolutionary nonviolence as a way of life. Most of the staff and volunteers were agnostic nonviolent technicians. The discussion was hot but very real. It became clear that not all nonviolent techniques could be practised by certain personality types. Only perhaps 10% can talk successfully with someone who is going to beat you. For the rest withdrawal seems the best reaction. Bob Moses said he withdraws. Some of those who are more aggressive in confronting the antagonist "burns out" after a few months in Miss.

Thursday we got some practical legal council from one of three Negro lawyers in Miss. who takes CR cases. He is a wily old fox with a wonderful sense of humor and a great gift for diplomacy (no not Uncle Toning). Mighty glad to have him in our corner. Also heard from head of legal defence fund and others. There will be 150 lawyers in the state this summer! Friday Morning we heard John Dore, Burk Marshall's assistant in the Justice Dept. talk about what they would be doing there. He said they would keep very close watch on us and try to watch for trouble brewing. However, he said unless there is a Federal court order to bring Federal troops into an area, responsibility for maintaining law and order is left up to the local law enforcement agencies. The kids questions and statements were quite burning. There is a law which gives the FBI power to arrest and protect people from intimidation of their right to vote. They are filing a suit which is before the Supreme Court which would outlaw all the procedures used now to discourage Negro registrants.

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CBS following their car

It is now very late Friday night. Tomorrow morning we leave in a car for Memphis and then on to Ruleville. I am riding in a car which CBS is following down. We will have a mike in the car and they'll tape what we say. They are doing an hour long documentary on Ruleville. Look and Life will also be there. This may be a protection but also may make it harder for us to work effectively.

My address at present will be c/o Charles McLaurin, Post Office Box 275, Ruleville, Miss. I will write soon from Ruleville.

Love, Mike

P.S.

A word about the group. A surprising number of young married couples. One school teacher who left wife and kids at home. Maybe a majority of Young Democrat types with a good representation of people from the left. It is hard to tell how we will turn out till we have seen action.

Note added below
by typist/person
who forwarded
Mike's letters

*(Nicola Geiger, a family friend of Mike's typed out Mike's letters for circulation to his friends & family.)

May Nicola Geiger add something to this letter which speaks for itself. It is long past midnight, almost 2 AM. I am not tired at all, but wide awake and I who sits here in this old farm house, built in 1703 for the grandson of William Penn, salutes Michael (as I call him) for his courage and forbearance. Well do I understand Michael's fears. I was born in Germany in 1920 and how well I remember the years in which I too confronted death. And well do I remember that I could have done more, that I could have given my life, but that I did want to live...

Worcester, Pa.

Readers: Michael and his group need your contributions, as their work involves many unexpected kinds of expenses, as for detailed record-keeping, expensive telephone calls, and many others. Send contributions, Postal Money Orders, to Michael's above address.

* Notes added, in 2014, after finding the collection of these letters from Mike that Nicola shared for Mike.