

Eugene Nelson

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Dear Parents and all:

Thanks for the letters. Frantic parents who want their kiddies back home are beginning to make frantic calls and frantic visits here, so it's nice to hear of a couple who are reacting with prayers and anger. What happened to those three men makes it impossible not to go. I don't want to live in the same country with that without doing something about it, and Bob Moses and SNCC are giving me the chance to do something constructive. The place I'm going to is considered fairly safe, so I expect little trouble. But should something happen, I expect you to yell just as loudly as possible to the powers that be and to everybody else as well. If those men had gone down with no noise, it would truly have been in vain. Now it has involved the whole country in Mississippi. Part of our job is to keep it involved all this summer and beyond that as long as men there are denied their rights.

But that's all a bit pathetic. I'm going to Mileston, in Holmes County. Mileston itself is just a small place: a cotton gin, co-op, and a few houses, so mail will go to Tchula, Miss., addressed to the Mileston Community Center, Mississippi Summer Project, until I give you other information. I will be living with a Negro family, but to protect them as much as possible, the mailing address will be the Center. Holmes County is not typical for Mississippi. Its population is 72% Negro (It's on the edge of the Delta), but that population owns some 74% of the land in the County. Most of them are independent farmers (60-200 acres) and so are more or less immune to economic pressure, if not to bombings and burnings. They've got an active rights movement going, but have not had much success in their attempts to register, so we can expect some demonstrations around the court house in Lexington, the County Seat. Since these will be confined to picketing the Court House, there is much less chance of them getting out of hand than demonstrations like those in Saint Augustine, but they will certainly lead to arrests, and perhaps to some beatings, which we have as far as possible learned to take. Probably I will not actually be involved in the demonstrations, but will stick to my job as librarian in the Community Center at Mileston, particularly since I'll have about 5,000 books to sort, shelve, and catalog. I've had some chance to talk to my two co-workers, and it looks good. Both are smart, adaptable, and I think able to put up with me. The chief activities at the Center will be the library, day care for children, recreation, literacy training, and health instruction. It looks now like I won't get a chance to put on a play, but I'll probably do some building.

I should say some things about SNCC here which I would like you to pass on to as many people as possible. More than anything else, it must be

emphasized that we're not dupes. This must be the most relentlessly honest political movement in the world. We've been told where we're going, what it'll be like, and what we're to do. I don't think anything has been left undiscussed, down to the personal difficulties involved in a multi-racial movement. The leaders here are simply tremendous men. They have names you've probably never heard: Bob Moses, Vincent Harding, and Bayard Rustin, but that, it seems to me, is because they're Negro, and that's what we're going to change. This country can't afford to have such men demonstrating against the system; they ought to be running it. What fascinates me about these men, particularly after two years at Yale, is that they think, but are not intellectuals. They've gone beyond critical non-involvement to critical involvement. They are men, not just thinking heads. Because they are men, the movement has a strange quality: I am being used, but I know why and how, and will that Bob Moses so use me. We are an army whose obedience is passionate because it is based on knowledge. After a summer of these men, I too may no longer be an intellectual, may even be a teacher.

The movement is astonishingly Christian. I had no idea that so many young people of the age and education of the people here had any serious commitment to religion in this country. It is disturbing, and reassuring. Disturbing, because I'm afraid the faith of some of these nice little girls may run into difficulties if things start happening. Reassuring, because if it survives or already has survived such things, it will be a mighty stay for those of us whose commitment is mostly intellectual. The involvement of the church is also deep, and may even make it relevant again for awhile in this country. If you can, I wish you would try to get the Evanston church involved, not so much for the good of Mississippi as for its own good.

Another thing that's good here is the talk, about everything under the sun, but mostly about Mississippi, politics, America. By the standard of many here, I'm a terrible conservative, since I believe in the system and believe that it is flexible enough to meet any situation, though perhaps slowly. This belief is, I think, shared by the leaders of SNCC: they don't want a revolution, they want the vote, which will lead to revolution in Mississippi, but revolution which remains within the American system and is indeed nothing more than the final imposition of the American system on the state. This same movement may go on to demand more, but as long as these men run it, it will be an American movement, using the ballot and the law to gain its ends.

With these men and these volunteers, I have no doubt that the Movement will win, and soon, though perhaps not this summer. I hope you sent the manila envelope to Mr. Porzak; there was a list in there. If you didn't, send the list and let me know. I also need about 20,000 3x5 cards for the library catalog.

Don't Worry!

*Gene*