

A Report From Mississippi

Gail Falk wrote this as an open letter to friends here. She is teaching in one of the Freedom Schools set up by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Gail, 20, is the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Leslie A. Falk, 5665 Bartlett St., Squirrel Hill. She will be a senior at Radcliffe College this fall.



MERIDIAN, Miss. — It is Friday afternoon, and I have just finished my last class. Yes, even in Mississippi there are weekends, and you look forward to them.

The weekdays are classes and canvassing and lesson plans and office duty. They are staff meetings and mass meetings and filing canvassing reports and buying supplies. They are listening to ten 8- and 9-year-olds in a row each read you a book at the community center and arranging carpools and closing the windows and sweeping the floor and turning out the lights of the school before you go home.

For all of us, I think, the first and hardest lesson has been understanding better the meaning of the song we all sang so innocently at Oxford, Ohio, "They say that freedom is a constant struggle."

We heard so much before we came about the danger and extraordinary deprivation and the police state—all the sorts of things the magazine articles describe. We expected, without ever really thinking about it, that the summer would be one of heroics, that we'd be constantly dodging police or "serving our time in jail" or rolling up in the little balls we learned at Oxford to protect ourselves from police clubs and kicks.

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It isn't like that, except for those in the extreme danger areas—the southwest, parts of the Delta, Canton. And yet just because freedom is not a constant battle, that does not mean it is not a constant struggle.

It becomes quickly apparent to anyone who comes to Mississippi that the "problem of Mississippi" is too massive to be corrected by one summer project, no matter how dramatic and idealistic and admirable.

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Some of the newspaper and magazine stories that you may read seem to give the impression that Mississippi will be "cured" by the end of the summer. How far that is from the truth!

We are too few, too inexperienced, we have too little money and equipment to make any enormous change. In the beginning, many people, including me, thought of the project in terms of organizing and leaving behind native Mississippians to carry on the work when we left.

It is not that simple. Of course we are gradually working with Mississippians in the project. But as for organizing self-sustaining cadres of political protest, those of you who have worked in political organization in the North know how difficult it is even in a "free" society.

And here where the education level is so much lower and the threats which participation invites are so much greater, it is all the harder. And yet from the ministers, from many of the Negro businessmen, from the teenagers, from some of the poorest farmers, we have met an extraordinary degree of warmth and receptiveness. And we know that this is not a movement of Northern agitators.

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When I left to come down here, many people said, "You are so brave." For those of you who may come down some other time and for those of you who will make contributions in the North, know that it is not bravery that is needed in Mississippi.

It is something much harder, something that my friends and I here are groping for above staff squabbles and unresponsive classes and housewives who just can't understand what you mean by "convention change."

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For most Negroes in Meridian, the system under which they must live has driven them to crime or drink or the dull listlessness which comes when economic poverty brings a poverty of spirit.

And for others who have managed to get a decent job, there is enormous rejection of anything which might ruin the precarious comfort of their life. There is a deep fear of anything which challenges them to move outside the security of home and church, where the segregated world can be—or can seem to be—ignored.

A few people, however, the family I'm staying with, an old woman here, a teenager there, have risen above the "system." In these people there is a spirit which I first encountered in Oxford. It is a spirit of people who have freed themselves.

No one has given them their freedom. They can't buy a hamburger at a segregated stand any easier than another Negro. But these are the people who try.

Our Freedom School is an old Baptist seminary which was supposed to be condemned last year. We are thankful for it. We are one of the few schools with a building of our own and classrooms and desks and blackboards.

I teach two sections of a course called "Freedom and the Negro in America." I am teaching French to the younger children, mostly those 11 to 14. They love it. It is a symbol of what they

do not receive in school. And it turns out to be a good way to develop grammar and phonetic skills that would bore them in English, as well as a way to do some desperately needed broadening of cultural horizons.

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Sometimes I go to the community center after school to play with the younger children who have an all-day program here. Many of these children have no real home except the center. In fact, one of the things your contributions are used for is to buy lunch and sometimes supper for these children who might have no other decent meal.

In my classes alone, I have 35 or 40 bright children who would like to go to college. But the problem is deeper than just finding money for scholarships, although that, of course, is crucial.

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Even the brightest of the children would not be able to get through freshman year at a college that would be worth attending. Reading and writing skills in particular are just too low. What is needed are intensive summer-school courses or a scholarship that included a year at a Northern high school before college.

Some of the ninth and tenth graders have expressed interest in going to high school in the North. Do you have any ideas about this?

So far, we have seen very little of white Meridian. A few days ago, however, one of the other volunteers and I had a 45-minute conversation in a drug store with a member of the White Citizens Council and, we think, of the Ku Klux Klan.

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He was an old man, a small businessman who had worked his way up from nothing to respectability. In those 45 minutes, we heard about every segregationist argument I have ever heard. The talk in that drug store, combined with almost daily stares and harassment along the street, remind us what an enormous way there is still to go before integration can come to Mississippi.

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Soon it will be time for the convention challenge. I hope you are writing to members of your state delegation to the Democratic National Convention, asking them to support the challenge of the regular Democratic Party of Mississippi by the Freedom Democratic Party.

It is late now. I must plan my lessons for the week ahead.