

Letter #3

Letter #3, five pages  
July 2, 1964

P.O. Box 275  
Ridgelyville, Miss.  
→ July 2, 1964

Dear Friends:

How you all feeling? Things have been quite serene here for the past few days. One sage friend warned me before coming that the most dangerous experience of the summer would be the boredom. I am about ready to concede the fact. We really got itchy last Saturday evening when we had to be in our homes at 8 P.M. There was talk of a beer party which would have run the risk of a police raid. Some of you are quite familiar with the way I can get to itching for a party. I suppose after 6 weeks of this 8 P.M. curfew I'll really be having fits. Since last Sunday when about 15 more kids - mostly girls - arrived we have been laying low. Wednesday the Mississippi staff had a meeting in Jackson to decide where to go from here. The decision was made that we will not try to test public accommodations or have demonstrations this summer but concentrate solely on education and voter registration. Apparently the white folks round about are really upset about all the white girls living in the Negro Community so we have orders to keep out of town and off the highways as much as possible. From my point of view this is a sad development. I want to make as many contacts as possible with the white community. I feel myself being sucked up into the polarization which seems to be a strong moment in any conflict. I would like to try to bridge the poles. The trouble is that this is a dangerous exercise not only for me but for the others as well. Particularly for the Negroes. If I inadvertently stir up something the wrath will quite likely be taken out on them, because they are more vulnerable.

Last Sunday the Methodist minister who is down here with our project wanted to go to the white Methodist Church in town. The mayor, a member of that church, called him up and discouraged him, saying, "You came to live in the Negro community, then go to their churches. I thought about going anyway since I had not been asked not to go. Mrs. Hamer, the head of the movement here, discouraged me. She felt I might just stir up something.

Three of the white male workers were walking downtown recently. A pickup stopped beside us and the guy started to talk. I was for walking on and not getting into trouble. One of the boys was new and wanted to take a crack at it. Soon another truck drove up. The boy avoided making inflammatory statements even to the point of selling out the Negroes a couple of times. Yet it's hard to see what was accomplished. One of the farmers finished the conversation by reviewing the hunting situation in the area. He said he could still find some pretty good deer around but wouldn't mind taking a crack at us. I guess I'll still try to get as many chances as possible to talk to the man and hope to get down to some real communication rather than the kind of verbal sparring that I have participated in up to this point. However, I'll be far from aggressive, I reckon.

I have got a number of wonderful letters from all of you. They are very dear to me. One thing a number have mentioned in some way or another is the challenge they feel by the act of my risking my life down here. First let me assure you that things have been very quiet in the past week. The police ride through the Negro community almost every ten minutes day and night and

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have kept down the numbers of white roughs riding through the community. Our leader thinks we may even get through the summer without any arrests in Sunflower Co. Secondly, I hope none of you mistake bravado for the unceasing committed type of courage which is needed in order to be of lasting positive help to others. The struggle to have an equal portion of concern for another as one has for himself goes on any where. At least in my relations with the Negroes here, this job has been much easier and more rewarding than elsewhere. It is very exciting to watch the first barriers of distrust start to wear down, to see warm smiles and greetings wherever you go. It is much more trying to work with a "difficult" person over the years and maintain an active concern for him. I guess the people here welcome whites who try even if not entirely successfully to meet them man-to-man. But it is an entirely different task to demonstrate that our concern goes as deep and as far as it does for other whites. This task won't be accomplished this summer, it won't be accomplished without years of commitment and a willingness to stick my neck in the noose made for them. This is the sort of love I struggle to attain. Well to round up this maudlin little section-Babies, please keep the letters coming! Let me know what you all are up to.

I want to tell you a little gem that Mrs. Anderson spoke this morning. Did I tell her in the last letter. She is sort of a village sage. Lives in a little box across the street under a huge pecan tree. She is quite fair skinned. Her grandfathers were both white plantation owners. She is well read and articulate. Went to a girls prep school that was associated with Morehead College in Atlanta. She feels very bitterly the lack of justice for Negroes. Today she said, "I have never celebrated the 4th of July before but I believe I will this year. I'll do it calmly though".

I just spoke to one of the eight Justice Dept. lawyers in Miss. the other evening. I asked him what they were doing about the intimidation of voters. He said they very rarely won a case where some one got fired for trying to register. It is too easy to say that the firing was for other reasons. He said that the Dept. could be a lot more effective if they had a larger staff. This might be a good target for public pressure.

This evening we went back up to DREW, the tough town up the road which we canvassed three days last week. There were still a lot of folks who didn't want to have anything to do with it all because it meant trouble. I met children, a very tall freshman at the local high school who said he wasn't afraid of the "man". As I walked down the road with him his mother came to warn him not to get mixed up with us. She said we could walk out of here at the end of the summer. Besides they probably wouldn't hurt us but would beat him as soon as we had left. She told me she was afraid for her boys. She wants to raise them safely and get them out of here. In contrast, there was an old couple-been married 62 years-who said they couldn't pull much any more but still could push. This seems to be the sentiment of many of the people in this town. They would be willing to take a step but they don't want to be first. We are gradually getting a list of about half a dozen people who say they are now willing to go down to the courthouse. One man I talked too was about 70. He had been in the First World War and said he hadn't seen more freedom as a result. He



He said now he was about to go anyway and would much rather go fighting for freedom than any other way. Shortly after talking to him I met an even older chap who also was a WWI veteran. He talked tough about if he had a gun he would really fight for freedom this time and all that but when I asked him to sign a Freedom Registration Form he wasn't quite ready. In sharp contrast to this old fellow was a little old lady down the street who calmly filled out the form on her door step in full view of some white youths across the street. This same sort of thing was happening in Chester and Ruleville. The women make up the lions share of the movement. This may be partially because they aren't as vulnerable economically but I don't think that factor is very important. Too many women work and oftentimes a man will get fired for the sins of his wife. Perhaps the major reason is that the women seem to have the calm courage necessary for a nonviolent campaign. Men who fought valiantly under terrifying battle conditions may not have the courage to walk through a mob to the courthouse or wait for the night riders. Masculine bravado runs deep.

Tonight we had an exciting mass meeting. John Lewis, National Chairman of SNCC and four Congressmen were there. The congressmen were taking a day tour of Mississippi. The people were excited and happy that somebody big cared but didn't seem to be awed. We sang as best as we could and the congressmen outdid themselves in speaking. They said they were with us and that the people of Mississippi had helped to get the Civil Rights Law and now had to help get people to obey it. One of the Congressmen was the father of one of the volunteers here. He will stay a couple of days to get the feel of the place. He told about how on the last day of the debate in the House, the Congressman from Atlanta got up and said he believed his people wanted to stay in the union and move with it and so he would vote for the bill. This had quite an impact. The singing had a happy victorious sound to it.

Have to tell you briefly about a noble couple in town here. They are Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald. He has been a leader for years. Was probably the first NAACP member in the county. They are both now reaching 70. He is tall and stands erect with large purposeful nose and chin. He showed me the holes in the door above his bed from the bullets of '62. He said at that time he decided that he would go ahead in the movement with everything he had. He now attends every meeting and is constantly driving people to the courthouse. His wife is a round jolly grandmother type who exudes cheerfulness and sparkle through everything.

Mrs. Shield just left today to take her grandchildren back up to Chicago. They sort of suggested that we might stay with another lady because then we could get meals. We said we wouldn't mind staying and cooking ourselves. The thing was sort of dropped and we didn't quite know how it stood. Tonight Mr. Shield said he thought we could probably arrange to have the lady next door come over to cook lunch. It sounded as though he wouldn't mind our company for the next couple of weeks while his wife is away. He also said that the lady next door would like to do it, which I don't think she would have been when we first got here. It made me very happy. I hope it will give us a chance to know both these people better.

It is now Monday morning July 6, and I will try to hurry up and get this letter finished so I can mail it when we go to canvas in Indianola this afternoon. I was just up last night on guard duty so am dragging today. You can't believe how many mosquitos! I cuddled down in the bottom of my sleeping bag and swatted and sweated until the dark sky rusted on its eastern rim.

I can't remember when I had such a good time on the 4th of July. It was an oppressively hot bright day. At 2 p.m. we gathered by droves at the little run-down church for a grand potluck dinner. There were only enough seats at tables for a fraction of the people. They let the volunteers have first go. I lasted through a couple of stiffes. It was hot and sticky and close, but the fried chicken and beans and cakes and stuff were so good and the people in such good humor that we had a ball. People milled around serving themselves, getting in each other's way, laughing and eating. Then there were speeches and singing and socializing. After that we all lined up for ice cream donated by a local colored businessman. In the evening Charlie and I were sitting on the front steps of our house with a couple of high school chicks when a white boy stopped in front and said he wanted to talk. He had been drinking a bit but wanted sincerely, almost desparately to get through to us. He talked about the high illegitimacy rate among negroes. Said he didn't mind us working on voter registration, but we should live in a white hotel in town so we wouldn't go in the face of Southern customs. We told him that we couldn't afford it and what's more we didn't share his things about Negroes. We went at it for about half an hour to the increasing distress of his friend who needed to go to the bathroom. He said Barnett and Gov. Johnson were two of the worst men he knew. One of the things he was proud of is the system down here of letting convicts out to work on peoples plantations. They came back from going to the bathroom to talk some more. They really smarted at distortions in the Northern Press. After they left we went around to the community center for a staff beer party. Around 11 p.m. a white boy parked his car out in front and came in. He was another local boy who wanted to talk. We greeted him with a bousing rendition of "We Shall Overcome". He discussed with about a dozen of us for over an hour including a Negro student from Howard and kept a wonderful sense of humor through the whole thing. It was a beautiful encounter. But around 12 or so the cops came around and arrested him for disorderly conduct. We called up the FBI and the police and swatted mosquitos while we discussed what our reaction should be. Some thought that he was still a segregationist and wouldn't treat Negroes the way he treated us so we shouldn't worry about him. Others felt that he was a courageous kid and that police inhibition of this kind of creative encounter should be protested. The next day we talked to his father who was relieved that he hadn't caused a disturbance. We offered the services of a lawyer if they didn't think it would be embarrassing for them. The father left the possibility open.

Sunday morning I tried to go to a white church. However, true to form, I arrived a trifle late. A man was standing on the steps in front. I asked him if I could go in. He asked if I was a trouble maker. Why, if I was staying with them, didn't I go to their churches. There followed a half an hour discussion. He is something like commissioner for public works.

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I told him about my concern for the boy who had been arrested last night. He said he thought it was fine for anybody to come around and talk during the day but that that boy did and said things he didn't mean when he was drunk. I think he was sort of afraid the kid might have a weak moment and see our side. He said that he had wanted to stop and talk to us many times when he was driving around but was afraid about how people would react. He made a big point that people in Mississippi treat Negroes better than they do up North. He hoped we wouldn't go back up there and give people the wrong impression. He himself had been raised by a black nurse, had played and swam with nigger kids. I expressed sorrow that they couldn't just continue such practices into adulthood. He said that if any Negro in town was sick and needed medicine he would pay for it. Whereupon he asked would that happen in the North. I asked him about people getting fired for going to register. He said he only knew of a few cases and they were really just using registration as an excuse. I said I had heard of a number of cases and asked him if he didn't think that patterns of firings shortly after people tried to register didn't show something wrong. He said that they did and if that was the case he was against it. He brought up the old theory that it was really the "agitators" who fired into the homes in 1962. I said wasn't it strange that the major had ordered the streets in the Negro community cleared of parked cars for the first and only time in the history of the town just the day before the shootings. He allowed as how that was hard to understand. He said finally that people take a while to change and that he reckoned the restaurants in town would be integrated in four years. (Now they have taken the seats off the stools at the counter in the drug store.) I concluded that it is very hard for an oppressor to realize that he is oppressing. I am sure this man knows more about the crimes committed against Negroes than he admitted but the fact that he wanted me to think and seemed to believe himself that Negroes are treated well is very encouraging. I plan to go down and talk to him more to see what develops.

Must run, More soon,

love, Mike

Orders for quilts: send material plus \$ 25.00 for double bed quilt to Mrs. J. Shield  
712 N. Division St.  
Ruleville, Miss.

To all readers: warmest thanks to all who have sent me letters or money for postage--

nicola geiger  
*nicola geiger*