

July 3 [1964]

Dear Mom and Dad,

Our typewriter is in the COFO office and we are back home for a rest, so I must use my hands. We are both well, happy, safe, and very busy. The response to us has been unbelievable: we had 600 (six hundred) applications for Freedom Schools, from ages 8, up (oldest: 82). The thing got all out of hand and became a mass movement. Naturally we couldn't turn anybody away. We've been reinforced by 5 new people, and 8 teachers from NY are expected today, so we'll have 24 people teaching. We plan a morning session and an evening session (for different people), so on the average we'll have classes of 12. Lots of older people have signed up for typing and literacy; fortunately we've got 2 professionals with rapid-result methods to handle this. The rest of us have many good ideas, and also many worries. We've already prepared a "Freedom Booklet" containing US and Miss Constitution, Dec of Independence (read this again; it's a beautiful statement of the Negro's condition), Supreme Court cases, etc. as our basic document on citizenship. We're now working on a similarly-sized magazine on Negro history. I've written to every magazine you can think of soliciting free subscriptions; also to Macy's, Gimbel's, and FAO Schwartz for chemistry sets, Scrabble, and educational games of all kinds. Some place chipped in about a dozen microscopes with prepared slides. The publishers of Ebony also put out books on Negro history; they have promised the project 1,000 free copies. So we've been terribly busy, and things are swinging.

The place we live is quite nice, by community standards; rather a middle-income slum, if you get the picture. There are plenty of kids and plenty of chickens, and life is loose and easy. Some local women make us free lunch at the office every day, and we can have dinner (62¢) down the street. The food is largely chicken, but it's very good, and ample. We move all over town hopelessly integrated, and, though people try to stare the hell out of us, no one has reported any overt hostility. A car load of people were given a verbal going-over by the county sheriff just outside of town one evening. The FBI is virtually omnipresent. The Dept of Justice has a man on us, and we have our own lawyer. There is also a permanent camp of visiting ministers, whose leader has been here for 6 months, knows everyone, and is very helpful. Unfortunately, the rabbi, who's said to be very progressive, is out of town. Services aren't being held, as far as we can find out. We all feel so secure that I'm a little afraid of that - it doesn't seem real, especially after what we went through at Oxford. I have to keep saying that after all it's not Michigan. Of course we do take obvious precautions: I have locks on the gas cap and the hood, we never go out alone, the car is locked at all times, we sign in and out, and call in when we get home at night. We are short on cars, so I've been doing chauffeuring, which is a little annoying, but I'm getting to learn the town.

There seem to be 3 or 4 Negro neighborhoods. As far as I can tell, the Negroes get no community services; no paved streets; no traffic or street lights, no sewers. Most of the people have electricity and running water and phones, but there's one neighborhood without even these rudiments. There's a bus line on Mobile St. (that's the main drag of the Negro section), and every once in a while a police car drives by (to look at us, most likely), but otherwise you never see a cop. My guess is that crime among Negroes is very low - anyway, no one ever looks anything and no one seems hesitant about going anywhere. When Negroes steal, I imagine, they steal from whites - it's more pleasant and, I suspect, safer.

So you see that voting is no meaningless abstraction around here. Neither is

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the Civil Rights Bill. Rev. Cameron said at the mass meeting Monday that if the President signs the bill at noon, he's going to be having a steak at the Holiday Inn at 1:00 Pm. (He didn't mean it - Gov. Johnson has already told everyone not to comply voluntarily, and no one is planning any tests of the bill in Miss. for some time. While we had breakfast in Montgomery, I suddenly realized how totally insane it is that a Negro couldn't have stopped in there for a cup of coffee. I was tempted to tap the nearest native male on the shoulder and ask him if he didn't think it was insane, too, but I didn't. Alabama is a very pretty state. We saw an "Impeach Earl Warren" billboard. The State Police have confederate flags where other people put front license plates.

We continue to be deeply impressed by our group of kids (not that they are kids). They really are the best people from the best schools, and they're all living through a kind of experiment in community life and purposeful action that's going to make a profound difference in all of our lives. We are also impressed by the native Negroes, but I don't feel I have met them well enough to tell you anything now.

We'll write again (soon I hope). We got your letter today. The weather has been quite tolerable - hot and muggy but tolerably. School - and the really hard work - begins Monday. Please continue to write.

Much love,
Nancy and Joe

Letter from Joseph Ellin in Hattiesburg, Miss.