

507 Mobile St.  
Hattiesburg  
Miss.  
Aug. 1, 1964

To the Editor of the Gazette:

Just outside of Hattiesburg, about two miles down the road, there is a rural community called Palmer's Crossing. Presumably there is a creek nearby; I have not seen it. The community itself consists of a cluster of stores, a school, two churches, and perhaps 100 ramshackle houses. In one direction there is a sawmill; in another, a few small farms. The stores are all owned by whites, but Palmer's Crossing is a predominately, though not exclusively, Negro community.

The school is called the Earl Travillion Attendance Center. It is for Negroes; in fact, it is the only Negro school in Forrest County, outside of those in the city of Hattiesburg itself. All grades, from first to twelfth, are housed here. In 1957, the county closed down the many one-room schoolhouses provided for Negroes, and ~~consolidated~~ consolidated all the schools in a single building. Any Negro child, any age, who wants to go to school from rural Forrest County must come here. A large fleet of busses brings the children from over 30 miles away.

This ~~is~~ is the logic of a segregated school system. First you repeal the compulsory education law (Mississippi is the only state that has done this). Then you close down the schools and make children travel hours by bus. On this basis you justify having only one school ~~for~~ ~~Negroes~~ because of the small number of Negroes who want an education. And then for dessert you point out that in Forrest County the Negroes have a brand new school house! (White kids in Palmer's Crossing are bussed somewhere else to school. But there are plenty of white schools in the county).

The Summer Project has two Freedom Schools in Palmer's Crossing, at each of the churches. We hold classes in the morning and evening. The two schools have nine teachers. Although Mississippi newspapers pretend that all the summer volunteers are "beatniks and wierdos" (this is an actual quote from the Governor on TV), the teachers at Palmer's Crossing are mostly professionals. We have only one person who has not yet completed college. One teacher has just graduated, one is now in graduate school. A fourth is a housewife, and the other five, including myself, are all teachers by profession. Two New Yorkers teach slum children in Harlem, and like it.

We are a highly qualified group, but it has been rough. Much of what we know about teaching must be unlearned or relearned here. The standard academic approach has not worked at all well, even when material has been simplified and vocabulary sterilized. The kids we are dealing with are not trained to listen to and absorb information presented in a point-by-point, organized, "logical," manner. One day, for example, we had a guest lecturer, a history professor from California, who is travelling around Mississippi with the Summer Project. He talked about the Civil War and Reconstruction. He took pains to make his points clear and straightforward, but opinions varied about his success in getting his information across. My opinion was the bleakest. It seemed to him that he must present his material "simply," but my impression was that he had mislocated the source of ~~ix~~ the problem. The students do not seem

to be able to follow a point-by-point presentation at all, whether simple or complex. They learn by talking, by conversation, by rambling around and beating the nearby bushes. And they learn by acting things out.

Let me give an example of this last method. One day we had a lesson on the US Congress. Most of the kids knew the basic facts (how long congressmen serve and so on), but no one had any understanding about the political process. None had even so much as heard of congressional committees. Instead of giving them a lot of data about this, I had them act out a committee meeting. I appointed one girl as a Senator with a bill to present, and divided the rest of the class into pros and antis on the committee. The girl introduced a bill to give poor Negroes in Mississippi money. The kids were quite good in arguing the merits of the proposal. The negative side brought out all the standard arguments: give them money and they won't work, they all have TV sets, life is cheaper down there. Gradually the bill shifted from federal aid to a minimum wage law: make the white employers pay better wages. (Fact: colored maids in white homes get about three dollars a day). At this point it occurred to someone that we were the wrong committee to deal with this bill (we had chosen to be the appropriations committee), and we were able to table the motion, a neat parliamentary trick.

The other day we employed a combination lecture and role playing that worked this way. First I read, or rather told about, an article in the New York Times about Negro voting in Fayette County, Tenn. Five years ago in this particular county virtually no Negroes voted; today, after an intensive civil rights drive, there are more Negroes registered than whites. The newspaper article stressed the fact that the candidates in the election for sheriff, though both white, were courting Negro votes in many unheard of and once inconceivable ways. After a brief discussion my class had the following role playing situation. The class played a group of voter canvassers; I played an aged Negro who was reluctant to go to the court house to register. The main argument that I used was that it wouldn't do any good, because things never get any better in the south. The class was able to point out to me that they had learned in Freedom School that voting does do good, because in a certain place in Tenn. gains have been made already.

We have undertaken to enroll rather small children (aged 8 and up), and these are our worst problems. It's difficult to find anything constructive for them to do. Once when it was my turn to babysit I tried to hold a lesson on politics. None of the little kids knew what politics or government were, so I asked them if they knew what the mayor is. Someone volunteered that the mayor is sort of like a horse. (This led to a spelling lesson on "mayor" and "mare"). In order to get down to real basics, I asked if anyone had ever seen a street or road. Yes, they had. How, I asked, did they think streets and roads got there? Who made them? Here the civics lesson came to an end. "God," a little girl replied. A lengthy theological discussion followed. "Does God make trees?" "Yes." "Do people make trees?" "No." "Does God make houses?" "Yes." "Do people make houses?" "No." "God makes everything." This position seemed unassailable by logic alone, so, thinking that something massive must be done at once, I asked a few of the more sober-minded boys if they had ever seen someone build a house. Indeed they had, and I launched them on a long description of how this is done, making sure that real people figured prominently in the description. It was not without interest, but it wasn't a civics lesson.

One day we listened to the recording of "In White America," the Broadway play about Negroes in the US. The kids were struck by the

incident in the Little Rock integration riots, in which a small Negro girl describes movingly how she was spit on and cursed as she tried to go to the previously all white school. Our discussion soon came to examine the purposes of school integration. All the kids were totally convinced that integration will mean that they would get schooling as good as the whites. It was, for them, a very simple point: Negro schools, in hundreds of little ways, are not as good as white schools.

I tried to make the question more theoretical. Suppose Mississippi should decide to spend as much money on Negro education as it does on white, so that the two schools would really be equal. Would they still favor integrated schools? For some of the kids this possibility was too incredible to accept seriously. They could not imagine Mississippi making Negro schools equal. But others saw that the point of the question was ~~xxx~~ whether integration has a value in itself, apart from equality it would bring. Few kids seemed ever to have thought of it just that way, but a little prompting gave them an idea. Did they think that Negroes and whites in Mississippi really understood each other? There was a chorus of deeply felt Noes. They quite frankly admitted not understanding white people any better than white people understood them. Did they think this would be true if whites and Negroes had been going to school together all their lives? Probably not. I was then able to get in a philosophic point about education. Education, I said, is supposed to give people an understanding of what the world is really like. A school system that closes ~~people off~~ students off to half the people in their world cannot do this. And so segregation deprives whites equally with Negroes.

The civil rights movement here is nothing if not ambitious. Its political goal this summer is to oust the Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention. We hope to be able to make the point that the regular Democratic party here does not represent the people of the state, and certainly not the people who support the national ticket. (At the state convention recently the main problem was how to support Goldwater without aiding state republicans). We have formed a dissident group, called the Freedom Democratic Party, and are holding precinct and county meetings around the state to elect a slate of delegates to go to Atlantic City and present our challenge. At the same time, we are trying to enroll in the Freedom Party at least 200,000 Negroes (and white, if any feel interested), in order to demonstrate that there are that many who want to participate in government, but cannot. (Only 20,000 Negroes, about 5% of the eligible population, has been able to register).

Voter registration is not hard work. Teams of two spend their days walking the streets and roads, knocking at every door, talking to everyone they meet. They have two messages: sign the books of the Freedom party; go down to the courthouse and try to register. It is not difficult to get people to join the Freedom party, once you convince them that the books will be kept secret. But getting people to register is another matter. There is a solid wall of resistance, composed partly of apathy, partly of hopelessness, partly of fear. Few people are willing to buck the organized hostility of the white community to Negro voting. Several hundred people have gone to the courthouse this summer, but in Forrest County there are still only about 250 registered Negroes, from a population of 15,000.

There are people who have tried five, ten, even seventeen times. The story is that the white southerner respects people with guts: if you try often enough you will convince him you are determined, and then you will make it.



One of our jobs in Freedom School has been to prepare young people to work in voter registration. This has been the easiest and most rewarding part of our work. Most of the kids are eager to participate, and they need no kind of intellectual support from us; it is we who are learning from them. On matters like this they are remarkably informed and cogent. We have an 11 year old girl named Rita Mae who is the equal of the best of us. At one role-playing session, when I took the part of a Negro unwilling to register, I found myself unable to hold up the argument in the face of Rita Mae's logic, common sense, and determination. I could find no good reason why I ~~xxx~~ should not register, and was ashamed to admit that I was scared, so I tried a dirty trick: I promised to go down, but said I need a ride to the courthouse. This Rita Mae said she would provide; but, as the role playing continued, when she came around with a friend in a car, I had skipped out and couldn't be found. Rita Mae ruefully admitted that the dramatization had a most realistic ending.

We have just had a flood here. When it rains in this part of the country it really rains, and today we had a prolonged cloudburst which the totally inadequate sewers were unable to handle. Water on the sidewalk is now about ankle deep. The temptation to go swimming was too strong to resist, and for about fifteen minutes the street in front of the office was loaded with soaking civil rights workers, busily splashing about and throwing each other into the only non-segregated swimming hole in Mississippi.