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In Memory of Civil Rights Veteran Jesse Harris

Jackson, Mississippi – The Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, Inc. (VMCRM) sends its deepest condolences to the family of Jesse Harris. Mr. Harris passed away on January 28 of natural causes at his home at the age of 75.

Mr. Harris was an active board member and Civil Rights veteran. In fact, Mr. Harris attended the January 24th board meeting in high spirits. He was planning a monthly "Civil Rights Film Festival" for senior citizens who lived at his housing complex with the first event scheduled for February 5th at the City's Fannie Lou Hamer Library.

This foot soldier of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement will forever be remembered as a steadfast community organizer who worked tirelessly for justice and equality.

"It is our esteemed honor to have been a part of his life, he a part of ours, and his legacy engrained in the civil and human rights we enjoy and continue to fight for today," said Hollis Watkins, Chairman of the Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, Inc.

"We will dearly miss our brother, Jesse Harris," said Cynthia Goodloe Palmer, VMCRM Executive Director. "We recently honored Mr. Harris with a 'Board Member Highlight' just this month. His efforts as a young man during Freedom Summer up until his death have brought about a positive change, and we will continue to carry the torch."

Homegoing services are incomplete at this time, but details will be posted on the VMCRM Facebook page at Mississippi Civil Rights Veterans once received.

About Jesse Harris

Mr. Jesse Harris got involved in the Civil Rights Movement early in his career. After he heard about the murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi and Mack Charles Parker in Poplarville, Mississippi, Harris was catapulted into the movement of social justice. As he recalls, Harris had to write a school paper regarding current events taking place, and decided to write about Charles

Parker. His teacher denied the paper because she said it was too controversial to discuss during this tumultuous time in history.

In the early 1960s, Harris worked on voter registration campaigns around Mississippi. In 1961, he received information regarding Freedom Riders and their plan to ride through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, ending in New Orleans, Louisiana, where a civil rights rally was planned. Freedom Riders came to the South to work for desegregation of public facilities serving interstate transportation, as segregation of such facilities and buses had been declared unconstitutional. The federal government had done nothing to enforce the Supreme Court decisions and southern states ignored the rulings.

Mr. Harris explains that his Civil Rights education began when he was imprisoned in Parchman along with people like, James Forman, James Bevel, Stokely Carmichael, Diane Nash, and Leon Diamond. There, he learned about “the movement of the past.” After spending nearly 23 days in the Mississippi Penitentiary Prison, James Forman invited Harris to become a field secretary as part of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In this new position, Harris was assigned to work in Laurel, Mississippi with the Jones County Improvement Association to organize a voter registration project and a non-violent workshop with high school students in the area. After seeing the work that Harris was accomplishing, Robert P. Moses, serving as the Mississippi state director of SNCC, asked Mr. Harris to go to Greenwood to support and reinforce the work they were doing in the Mississippi Delta. After the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and other civil rights organizations left the area, Harris along with other Tougaloo students continued the fight for justice through protests and demonstrations wherever there was a need for civil and human rights.

In 1964, Harris was instrumental in helping train Freedom Summer volunteers before they came to Mississippi, and managed the volunteers in and around McComb. Harris also served as an organizer for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In the mid-1960s, he worked for the Child Development Group of Mississippi, a predecessor to Head Start. Later, Harris worked with the Poor People’s Corporation and the Federation of Southern Co-Ops, which were trying to improve the economic opportunities for black craftspeople and farmers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jesse Harris was a member of the Nation of Islam. He briefly lived in Chicago and New York before moving to Florida, where he worked in various capacities, including a longshoreman, a truck driver, an airplane engine mechanic, and an instructor for a community college golf team.

After retiring from the corporate world, Mr. Harris settled in Jackson, Mississippi, where he continued his fight for civil and human rights as a board member of the Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement.

In April 2014, Mr. Harris was a recipient of the Fannie Lou Hamer Humanitarian Award presented by the COFO Educational Center at Jackson State University, Jackson, MS.

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