

1964 Revisited: Mt. Zion and the Ongoing Struggle against Injustice

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In my senior year at Ohio Wesleyan University, along with a dozen students and some professors, I took a study trip to Nashville and Atlanta. There, I met Julian Bond and John Lewis, as well as Miss Ella J. Baker (an esteemed theorist of U.S. social history) and historian Howard Zinn. Having returned to campus and packed for home, a telephone call was diverted to me at the bus station, asking if I would fly to North Carolina that night to be interviewed by Miss Baker and Professor Zinn. I did so and met with these two senior advisors to the civil rights movement. The next thing I knew, I was working with both of them to bring Black

and white students together for human relations workshops in autumn 1962. These workshops may have been the first *intentional* effort to assemble interracial Southern university students in safe settings and without fear, where they could freely discuss how both Blacks and whites suffered limits on academic freedom, were separated from each other, and the price paid by Southern states to maintain two educational systems, impoverishing them both. In these workshops, we worked to break down the heartlessness of policies that made human beings into strangers rather than celebrating our rich human diversity and commonalities.

I would soon be invited onto the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced *snick*). It was founded by Miss Baker at her alma mater, Shaw University, in Raleigh, North Carolina, when, along with the Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr., and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 1, 1960, she convened leaders of the Southern student sit-in campaigns that spread along the coastal South from 1959 into the 1960s. Later, she told me that the meeting had been attended by 200 student delegates from 58 Southern communities in 12 states plus white advocates from 19 Northern campuses and 13 observer associations. Miss Baker's speech called for the social structure of the United States to be altered.

SNCC quickly became the most comprehensive, far-reaching, and daring group of the nonviolent direct action wing of the Southern freedom movement. Indeed, it created "movement," rather than trying to institutionalize itself. I was aware then, but more so now, that in contrast to other groups that sought to bring Black citizens into the pre-existing political order, SNCC wanted structural change in U.S. society, including the dismantling of injustices, which is ongoing in the twenty-first century.

In going to work for SNCC, I had first to confront whether I was willing to die for my beliefs. Without doubt, everyone on staff had engaged in the same deep conversation with themselves. In 1964, SNCC retained the largest staff of all U.S. civil rights groups. Our bonds were strong, as

we intentionally confronted the fear associated with shared danger, and our loyalty was intense. We had relatively few titles. Julian Bond was the “press secretary,” because reporters needed to know who could authentically speak for the group, though we also had state and county directors. Women did what men did. Strongly influenced by Miss Baker’s philosophy that leadership potential could be found anywhere, we staff intentionally remained in the background, conspicuously promoted local people for major leadership roles, and stimulated the emergence of local non-hierarchical movements. SNCC was usually deep-seated in local communities and had the first *paid* staff of any civil rights group to base themselves in isolated neighborhoods, among the local people. Despite SNCC’s and our youth, we were able to produce an agenda of major social and political change.

Initially, I worked on communications with Julian Bond in Atlanta. He asked me to move to Jackson, Mississippi, to coordinate the communications office there for Freedom Summer, overseeing the information that would be gathered and offered to the national news corps on the project. In my early twenties, I earned \$10 a week, \$9.64 after tax deductions.

The vague term *communications* covered a host of vital tasks. We earned credibility as a trustworthy source in the eyes of national and sometimes international media, in part by resisting any temptation to exaggerate. Reporters, many of whom we came to know personally, could be free of suspicions that they were being fed propaganda while rushing against deadlines. Julian’s distinctive natural predisposition toward understatement set the tone in both Atlanta and Mississippi. Our team worked to place unreported stories in major news media circuits, prepared the way for journalists to observe unfolding chronicles, and eased predicaments of reporters trying to gain access for the interviews needed to report on the wide-ranging mobilization.

Another purpose of communications was to provide protection for civil rights workers. A reporter appearing at a jail with pen and pad in hand might save the life of an arrested local person, volunteer, or staff member. This was because sheriffs or other law officers could grasp that if a news report appeared about an individual behind bars, they could no longer operate with impunity. The information from our communications team — sharing background and facts on various projects — was often published in the regional and national press. It became as significant to our larger objectives as the organizing of voter registration drives, using nonviolent methods, devising mock ballots, and building an alternative political party.

In Mississippi, I moved into a small white weatherboarded house across from the rococo entrance gates of Tougaloo College, north of Jackson. By then, Tougaloo Southern Christian College was simply called Tougaloo College. *Tougaloo* in the language of the Choctaw Okino-Ftuk Lo Indians meant “where the waters divide” and pertained to the fork of two streams on the campus. The American Missionary Association, a group of northern abolitionists later affiliated with the United Church of Christ, had facilitated the purchase of 500 acres of John Boddy’s cotton plantation in 1867 to establish a college that year to educate freed slaves. The Boddy family’s antebellum mansion, built by slaves, became the administration building. Other buildings were erected by students trained there in industrial arts, who produced red bricks in the brickyard. The college looms large in my memory, because it appreciated the connection between personal beliefs and taking action. Living at the entrance of the college, I and another white SNCC staff member were surrounded by a black enclave. Years later as I pondered my

experiences, remembering the magnanimity of the local people who surrounded us, I realized that we had been protected by them.

In 1962, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was formed in Mississippi to facilitate what we envisioned as the statewide Freedom Summer in 1964. It would serve as an umbrella for all the groups working there in the southern freedom movement, among them the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), SNCC, and others. In autumn 1963, despite their personal fears, perhaps as many as 80,000 Black Mississippians cast ballots in a Freedom Vote — a mock gubernatorial election that coincided with the state's whites-only regular election. It was both a form of protest and a means of preparation for the hoped-for real balloting to come. Some 100 Northern students helped, preparing the way for Freedom Summer, for which we would recruit more than 1,500 volunteer teachers, clergy, lawyers, nurses, doctors, and others to join us from across the country.

With the energetic involvement of local people, we organized an alternative political party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, credit unions, cooperatives, and a Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. In addition, more than 30 alternative institutions called Freedom Schools originated by SNCC worker and author Charles E. Cobb, Jr. — would be taught by hundreds of volunteer teachers from across the county. Such parallel, institutions characterized the people withdrawing their cooperation from the existing racist and prejudiced organizations controlled by Southern oligarchies and to instead work to create a new reality in the midst of the old. The Freedom Schools, Charlie Cobb said, were “to provide an education which will make it possible for [the students] to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives . . . and new directions for action.” To me, they also revealed the remarkable resilience of Black communities in surviving enslavement and put into proper perspective their exceptional contributions to the development of the United States.

The opening day of Freedom Summer arrived on June 21, 1964. It was also the day when three of my fellow civil rights workers — James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner — disappeared in Neshoba County.

Our meticulous preparations for Freedom Summer required that if staff, volunteers, or anyone working with us went missing, efforts would be undertaken systematically to telephone every jail or detention center in the surrounding counties. Early in the evening on Sunday, June 21, I received a disturbing call in Jackson from Louise Hervey, one of the first volunteers at the COFO office in Meridian, which was staffed by CORE. Louise said that James, Andrew, and Michael had left Meridian at 9:00 A.M. to drive to Philadelphia, in Neshoba County, to look into the recent burning of the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church. The place of worship had become a pivotal point for local people interested in registering to vote, and the three young men, all of them in their twenties, planned to also examine the earlier beating of three local Black individuals there.

Jim Chaney, a local Black youth, was working on voter registration with CORE, and Andy and Mickey, both whites from New York, were working with a community center affiliated with CORE in Meridian. Andy had arrived the preceding day from Ohio, where preparatory sessions had been arranged for the volunteers accepted to join us in the

Freedom Summer. The National Council of Churches had played a major role in supporting the intensive preparatory sessions, held at the Western College for Women, in Oxford, Ohio. On June 21 immediately after Andy's arrival, he and the other two young men would drive to sparsely populated rural Neshoba County, some 70 miles northeast of Jackson, to visit Mt. Zion Church in Philadelphia, the county seat. Later it would emerge that the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) had set fire to the house of worship such that nothing would remain but its bell — a conflagration planned to lure the voting rights workers to the church so that they could be captured and killed.

Following Louise's disturbing news that Jim, Andy, and Mickey had been out of contact with local movement offices, contrary to the safety precautions called for during their planned trip to Neshoba County, I moved into action from my desk in Jackson. My preparations for communications called for me to methodically telephone every lockup in surrounding counties if anyone went missing, in this case including Lauderdale, Kemper, Leake, Winston, and Newton counties. Under customary law, law officers were expected to acknowledge whomever they held in custody and to disclose the charges under which they were detained. I also phoned local police headquarters and town mayors. Using as a fictitious name Margaret Fuller — one of the New England Transcendentalists associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson, both of whose writings I had studied — I claimed to be calling from the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper.

I had hoped that I might generate some degree of protection for the three young men. Similarly, but using my proper name, I rang the three phone numbers that I had for the FBI in Mississippi, the only state then without a central FBI office. Two days would pass until any activity became visible from their agents.

When I telephoned the Neshoba County jail to ask whether the three men were being held there, I had spoken with Deputy Sheriff Cecil Ray Price. He denied what would later be proved in court: they were indeed in his custody. We spoke shortly before he would release them at roughly 10:30 P.M. into the hands of a number of Ku Klux Klansmen, who had been mobilized to carry out their murders.

It fell to me to contact the families to let them know that we suspected foul play. I phoned Andy's parents at 12:40 P.M., to advise them of my dread. They were appreciative although naturally worried. It was a mark of respect that I rang them first, because Andy had special status as a volunteer. I rang Rita Schwerner, a professional educator married to Mickey, who was still at work in Oxford, Ohio, preparing the second contingent of volunteers. At 1:00 A.M. on June 22, I telephoned John Doar, deputy director of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice in Washington, DC, at his home, to tell him that three of our voter registration workers were missing and that we suspected foul play. My last call was to the *New York Times* journalist Claude Sitton, originally from North Carolina and for whom I had developed immense respect. I recounted my telephone calls and my apprehension given the seeming impossibility of no law officer in the area being

able to inform me of the men's whereabouts. Claude, already in Jackson, expressed appreciation for knowing the ground I had covered.

President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the U.S. Navy and FBI to lead the search for the killers and anyone involved in their disappearance. Meanwhile, national media turned the spotlight on Mississippi. The bodies of Jim, Andy, and Mickey were discovered on August 4. While the three were portrayed in the press as martyrs, especially Goodman and Schwerner as white northerners, media outlets were mostly silent about the bodies of African Americans discovered during the searches. I recall as if it happened yesterday how discouraged I felt when I couldn't persuade any journalists to report how the dredging of rivers had turned up the corpses of Black men with their hands bound together behind their backs — the victims of recent lynchings.

Although I was in the midst of an existential confrontation with evil, in this most disheartening moment, the people with whom I was working in COFO and living close to at Tougaloo came together in a firm commitment to continue working for voter registration and other forms of engagement for justice and democracy. I am not the only SNCC staff member who went on to make a lifetime commitment to work toward dismantling injustices, inequities, and untruths, which still beckon for reckoning and rearrangement. The United States as a nation remains far behind in what should have been a long course of action in multi-generational processes of conducting historical studies and making rearrangements.

In the 1967 U.S. district court trial, prosecutors were able to convince a jury to convict Deputy Sheriff Price and six klansmen of conspiracy to deprive Jim, Andy, and Mickey of their civil rights; the other eighteen defendants walked free, including Sheriff Lawrence A. Rainey. They were prosecuted for denying the three their civil rights under federal statutes rather than being charged with murder — a crime normally adjudicated at the state level but unlikely to return justice in a system permeated by racism. Even with justice delayed, one outcome of the Freedom Summer would be that those of us involved by whatever means broke the back of Mississippi's state-sanctioned vigilante violence, as the FBI reluctantly became involved and international attention focused on the state.

The deaths of Jim, Andy, and Mickey in some ways rewrote U.S. history. The passage of both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were immeasurably aided by the national awakening in the wake of their assassinations. In 2016, the case was closed after fifty-two years, although no one was ever charged with murder. In 2020, two books were published relevant to the valuable project of reordering and restructuring the injustice done. Claire Whitlinger's *Between Remembrance and Repair: Commemorating Racial Violence in Philadelphia, Mississippi* documents the decades-long process of Neshoba County's civil society to come face to face with what had happened. This included white communities in the South, on an interracial basis, working through programs that awakened ingenuity and a sense of reciprocal betterment. The theme of reciprocity is essential, as White Southern culture and

education have also been diminished as the price paid for the South's dedication to segregation policies drenched in blood.

Investigative journalist Mitchell of the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* won a MacArthur Genius Grant for his documentation of how justice, although delayed and wanting, was finally served. What he revealed in *Race Against Time: A Reporter Reopens the Unsolved Murder Cases of the Civil Rights Era* required a half-century because each of the state's 82 counties had a KKK klavern (group chapter), totaling 91,000 members of the White Knights throughout the state, not counting "secret members"—the politicians, lawyers, and business executives known only to the undisclosed Imperial Wizard. Mitchell exposed the complete corruption of Mississippi's state criminal justice procedures.

Today, much has changed and some developments deserve emulation. When Mississippi governor Haley Barbour in 2006 signed Senate Bill 2718, Mississippi took the lead and became the first state in the Union to mandate civil rights and human rights education at every scholastic level from kindergarten to grade 12. Although thus far unimplemented, the United States now possesses a model for legislation that can be implemented state by state to undertake the critical, indispensable, and important teaching of civil rights and human rights history.

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John Lewis and Mary King at Mt. Zion in 1994.