

NESHOBA COUNTY

I am 22 years old and the wife of Michael H. Schwerner, one of the three civil rights workers who have been missing in or near Philadelphia, Miss., since June 21, 1964. Michael and I came to Mississippi on about January 16 this year as field staff workers for the Congress of Racial Equality, assigned to the Council of Federated Organizations. On about January 21 we went to Meridian, Mississippi, with the purpose of establishing a community center in that city which would provide such services which the state and local authorities would not provide for Negro citizens. From that time until June 21, 1964, we worked continually in and around the area of Meridian and other counties in the eastern half of the Fourth Congressional District. To my knowledge, the only times that Michael left the state in those six and a half months were for a four-day conference in New Orleans in February, a one-day trip the two of us took to New York in March, and the Oxford orientation session in Oxford, Ohio, immediately prior to his disappearance. The only additional time that I was out of the state was for a ten-day visit to New York City from May 24 to June 2.

Shortly after we arrived in Meridian in January, we met Mr. James E. Chaney, a 21-year-old Negro man who worked with us and eventually became part of the Congress of Racial Equality staff. From about the middle of February to the end of March, James was out of Meridian, working first in Canton and then, for a short time, in Greenwood. At the end of March, he returned to Meridian to work with us.

In the first few weeks that Michael and I were in Meridian, we had to change our place of residence some three or four times, because the Negro families who took us in received intimidating phone calls and became afraid to house us. In February we were able to rent a house from a Negro, Mr. Albert Jones, which he rented from a white woman, Mrs. Roy Cunningham. We lived in that house until the beginning of June, when Mrs. Cunningham insisted that we leave. Prior to our eviction, we had had our rent raised by her.

In the first few weeks that we were in Meridian, we received no threats, nor did we suffer harassment at the hands of the local authorities. However, as people came to know us better, to recognize us, and to know what we were attempting to do, the tension increased. On several occasions my husband was picked up by the local police and taken to the police station, where he was questioned as to our activities, asked to show proof of ownership of our car, etc. They never did pick me up for questioning.

As we achieved some success in establishing the community center, the threats and intimidation began to increase. By May we received so many phone calls at late hours of the night that in order to get some sleep we were forced to remove our

telephone receiver before going to bed. We finally resolved this problem by obtaining an unpublished telephone number when we moved to our new apartment after being evicted. The phone calls at the office during the day and evenings continued. They were of several forms. Some were extremely unpleasant in that when I picked up the phone the party at the other end of the line would use extremely offensive language towards me. Other calls we received were threats of violence, such as someone calling and telling me that he was planning to kill my husband, or that my husband was already dead. Michael received anonymous calls telling him that they intended to kill me or that I was already dead.

A man by the name of Mr. _____, who runs an _____ shop a few doors down the block from our office, used abusive language directed towards me and my husband continually. He constantly referred to my husband as "Jew-boy" and "nigger-lover." I have been told by workers in Meridian that on at least one occasion in the last month, several of them were threatened by Mr. _____ with an axe handle.

As the car which we drove became well known, we were followed by the police and by white citizens on many occasions. We became extremely cautious about driving at night, and would not do so unless it was a necessity. The white cab drivers took to following us, and did so even when I returned for the hearing on July 23.

At the end of April, my husband was arrested on two counts of blocking a crosswalk. He was held in the Meridian City Jail from Monday until after his trial on Wednesday. When he was released he told me that he had narrowly escaped a beating. The police officer who took him to his cell on Monday afternoon called one of the other prisoners out of the cell. My husband could not hear what the police officer said to the other prisoner, but when that man returned to the cell he took Michael aside and told him that he didn't know who he, my husband, was, or what he did, but that he better keep quiet about it while in the jail, because the police officer had said that if this prisoner got the others to beat Michael, no action would be taken by the police.

On Friday, April 18, my husband and I were visiting Reverend R. S. Porter, when he received word that a cross was burning in front of his church. We arrived at the First Union Baptist Church as the fire department was extinguishing the flames, but the cross was still smoldering.

In the beginning of June, a large group of people were arrested in Meridian when they attempted to form a picket line in front of three of the five-and-ten-cent stores. They were charged with obstructing traffic. My husband went down to the police station to find out the charges on the arrested persons. Officer A_____, who I believe was the desk sergeant that day, threatened my husband. From what Michael

told me, his words were something like this: "If you get any more of these damn kids arrested, Schwerner, I'm going to get you, and that's a promise."

Working so closely with my husband and James Chaney, I was able, over the course of the months, to observe their habits and attitudes as workers. I have had the opportunity to observe other civil rights workers at their job, but I do not believe that there are any other workers in the state any more cautious or meticulous in their work than were Michael and James. Michael's concern about the danger to other people and the importance of minimizing it came from his experience as a rights worker and his feeling of responsibility as the Project Director. James undoubtedly derived much of his feeling of caution from the experiences he underwent in the 21 years of his life as a Mississippi Negro, subject to all the whims and capricious acts of the white citizens of this state.

Michael started making trips into Neshoba County in February and, in all, made about 30 such expeditions. Every time he went into that county to work, I remained in the office in Meridian to receive his phone calls when he checked in, or in the event that anything went wrong and he needed to contact someone. The only times that I did not serve in that capacity were the few trips he made into Neshoba County when I was out of the state. Because the county was known to be so dangerous, I insisted on assuming that job myself, out of obvious concern for my husband's safety. When James Chaney returned to Meridian at the end of March, the two of them usually traveled to Neshoba together, although there were one or two occasions when one of them went alone or with another person. Neshoba County has had a reputation for being so volatile that it has been nicknamed "Bloody Neshoba," and many experienced civil rights workers, for very good reason, declined to work in that territory.

My husband believed very strongly in security precautions, such as phoning in one's whereabouts, and on several occasions I heard him reprimand others who did not call in to the office when they were supposed to. I remember only one incident prior to his disappearance when Michael was two hours late returning from Neshoba County and did not call to tell me why. I was frantic and at the point of calling the jails, but refrained because I knew that if he had not been picked up, this would inform the authorities of his whereabouts and make the situation far graver. When he and James returned that particular evening, they said that they had been detained in talking with a contact who had no telephone, and that they were fearful of stopping on the road to call in and advise me of their delay.

On one occasion, I believe at the beginning of May, the two men, James and Michael, were planning to drive to Philadelphia during the day to see some people. As I had met several of the Neshoba County contacts in Meridian, and I had information to

relate to them about community center programs which I believed would benefit them, I requested permission of the two men to accompany them. At first they both refused, but when I persisted, Michael finally agreed, and I believe that he agreed because he felt he might have been overprotective of me as his wife. James, however, did not have any of these personal involvements, so that he was able to rationally say that if I went, he would not, as he said that if he was seen in Neshoba County with a white woman we would all be killed. His sound advice was heeded and I did not enter Neshoba County on that day, or at any other time until after the disappearance of my husband, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman.

On one or more occasions, James told me that the car had been followed in Neshoba County by white persons in cars with the license plates either covered or removed. On one occasion he said he had been followed by an official car, either that of police or sheriff's department, but I don't know which.

On June 21, 1964, Michael and James made another trip to Philadelphia, this time accompanied by Andrew Goodman, one of the volunteer COFO summer workers. I was in Oxford, Ohio, at the time, but before my husband left Oxford at 3 A.M., Saturday, June 20, he told me of his intention to go on Sunday to Philadelphia to investigate the burning of the Mt. Zion Church in the Longdale community. The three men never returned to Meridian, nor did they call in their whereabouts. All knowledge I have of my husband's habits and training indicates that, given the opportunity, he certainly would have called in. It is foolish to assert that he would have turned down the opportunity to do so. The information from officials is vague and contradictory, and all knowledge of the situation in Neshoba County would lead me to believe that the three men have been murdered.

On June 25, at about 3 P.M., I went to the State Capitol building in Jackson with John Robert Zellner, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee field secretary, and Reverend Edwin King, the Tougaloo College chaplain. I attempted to see Governor Johnson to ask for his promise of help in the search for the three men. We were told by Senator Barbour that the governor was out for the afternoon and could not be contacted. He was extremely rude in his treatment of me. We then walked over to the Governor's Mansion, arriving just as Governor Johnson walked up the steps with Governor Wallace of Alabama. We followed them up the steps and Mr. Zellner introduced himself by name to Governor Johnson and they shook hands. Mr. Zellner then turned towards me and introduced me as the wife of Michael Schwerner, one of the three missing men. He said that I would like to speak for a moment with the Mississippi governor. The moment Johnson heard who I was, he turned and bolted for the door of the Mansion. The door was locked behind him and a group of Mississippi highway patrolmen surrounded the three of us. An officer

with the name plate "Harper" refused to allow us to request an appointment with the governor. Harper said that he would not convey our request to Johnson.

On June 26, 1964, when I went to Neshoba County to speak with Sheriff Rainey, the car which I was in was followed by a blue, late-model pick-up truck without license plates. There were two white men in the truck. At one point the truck blocked us off in front and a white, late-model car blocked us from behind. We turned our automobile around and were able to get by the white car; the pick-up truck followed us awhile farther. We reported this to the FBI agents who were working in Philadelphia on the investigation. After I spoke with Sheriff Rainey, who denied knowledge of the circumstances of the disappearance of the three men, we obtained permission from Rainey and the FBI to follow the sheriff's car to the garage where the station wagon (which the men had driven on June 21) was being kept, in order that I could see it. Several young white men, who I believe were workers at the garage, laughed and made screams which are usually referred to as rebel yells when they realized who I was. When we left the garage the sheriff's car was close behind ours, and the blue pick-up truck once more followed after us to the outskirts of town, with the sheriff making no attempt to stop it or question the occupants about the lack of license plates.

SIGNED: *Rita L. Schwerner*