

MFDP Chapter 65

WILLIE JOHNSON

Interview
Willie Johnson
Negro; male
SNCC staff, former project leader of
FDP in Vicksburg

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Vicksburg, Miss.

A: My name is Willie Johnson. I'm a resident of Vicksburg, Mississippi, County of Warren, State of Mississippi. I'm 24 years of age. I am a student. At the present time I'm engaged in civil rights work, working as a staff member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. I've been--at the present time, my status as a student--my classification, that is; I'm sorry; my classification is that of an advanced junior. Prior to becoming engaged full-time as a civil rights worker, I had been a full-time student at Mississippi Vocational College. At that time, I participated in civil rights work with the SNCC group and because the things in the state were such a terrible disadvantage for the Negro, I decided to participate more fully, and which I became staff member of the SNCC, and since then I have been active in every faze of civil rights work in which the organization has been involved. This occurred--my active involvement occurred in '63 in which a voter registration campaign, which I had started in Greensburg, Miss., which was approximately ten miles from the school in which I was attending. At that time, Negroes were attempting to register and were being turned away from the courthouse by the Sheriff and other hostile people of the area, including Mr. Beckwith, who was the killer of Medger Evers, or the accused killer of Medger Evers. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to register the Negroes in Leflore County, we decided--the organization as a whole decided that the problem that existed was not just in Leflore County, but throughout the state. I was later sent from Leflore County to Vicksburg, out of the Third District. I worked as a part-time worker and as a student at Vicksburg. That is, I would attend classes all week and on weekends I would come home and participate in voter registration until the end of the school year. At which time, I began to work full-time in voter registration and other activities which the community thought was best for their use or benefit or their livelihood. A number of the activities in which the community engaged itself were political education classes. Our job was to teach Negroes political education--how to use the vote once they got the vote. Also, part of our job was to teach illiterate Negroes how to read and write. A part of my job also consisted of helping the new volunteers to get acquainted with the white community. We, therefore, had a project called White Folks Project, which was proved to be unsuccessful after a period of four months. At this particular time, which has evolved from '63 to '64, at which time, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was born. It was formed on April 24, 1964. This organization grew out of the

desire on the part of disenfranchised Negroes to have a voice in the government. Also out of the fact that there was to be an election. And prior to this, Negroes hadn't been able to participate actively. Therefore, the party introduced itself to the fundamentals of political organization, also teaching the people what a political party consists of. Our reason for organizing was that in the past Negroes had never had any part in the political processes in this state. Also, that officials in the state had been elected illegally. This effort at organizing the Mississippi FDP was successful, quite successful for a period of 2½ months of hard, down to earth organizing, going into the community, talking to people, getting people interested in what this political party could do for them, what they could do for this party, how they could really have an active party, doing something about the state in this way. The law should be made to benefit them as well as other races. The elections were to come up in the same year, 1964, at which time the FDP made itself aware of its coming and decided to have mock elections run on a parallel basis to the elections of the state. This was carried out successfully. Incidentally, this happened after about a 2½ months period in which working to organize the party with about approximately 80,000 members in the party to term. From that point, we decided to run candidates in the mock election, using the same ballots, like the ones to be used in the regular election. Use the names of the candidates who were running for the various offices. Also, use the names of the candidates of ours in the mock election. It was found after the election that the candidates in the Mississippi FDP received a substantial majority of votes over their opponents. It was decided that we would have this election because Negroes had tried to participate in precinct meetings and county meetings held by the regular party, and had not been allowed to do so, that we would engage in an all-out effort by the Negroes in the State of Mississippi to protest against the election of officials that were to be elected that year--that had been elected that year. This motivated us to the Atlantic City scene--that is, during the Democratic National Convention during 1964, in which Negroes from the FDP organized themselves just as the regular party had. That is, with the same number of delegates. And they were sent to Atlantic City to protest the election of the officials. The results of this convention were later to be revealed to the members of the Mississippi FDP was, had one choice. That is, to compromise and accept that would leave them two candidates at-large, go back home with nothing. We, as members of the FDP, felt that this was tokenism. So, we returned home.

Q: Were you a member of the delegation?

A; No. I wasn't a member of the delegation. I am really a member of the party. Even though I was a delegate from my community to the County Convention, at which time I was eliminated. There were other people chosen to represent my particular County. After leaving the convention--not really heartbroken. Not feeling a lack of accomplishment. Actually we felt that we had accomplished a great deal. We came back to further organize the Freedom Democratic Party to a larger membership and to make it grow--to make it the type of party that it was intended to be from the very outset. We found from community organized action, that the party really did have potential to grow to a membership of over 100,000. In January, we decided to return to Washington. This occasion happened to be the opening of Congress, January 4, at which time we were to protest the scene of the Congressmen from Mississippi, whom we knew to be illegally elected--that is, no Negroes had been allowed to participate in the election which these officials were saying was to represent all the people of Mississippi. We asked Congress not to recognize their seating. At which time, a vote was taken by the Congressmen and they were later tentatively seated, pending an investigation of the State. The investigation were to follow a land--a legal land basis, which is our land in a Congressional challenge--for a Congressional challenge. There is a statute, in which our lands are given to filing and challenging any election in which you feel that you, or a people, have not had a part and there were illegality about the election. We were given, that is the Mississippi FDP were given, forty days in which to collect testimony. Also, the contested Congressmen were given forty days in which to collect testimony. Our testimony would be based primarily on evidence obtained from citizens of Mississippi and it was to be taken by attorneys who had volunteered their services in Mississippi. Depositions were taken which at the end of the time in which the depositions were taken, it was found that there were better than 15,000 pages of testimony from over 600 residents in the state and out of the state. We later, submitted this evidence to the Clerk of the House, which we later found a meeting had taken place just before the submission of the evidence, a meeting which had taken place between the Clerk of the House and the attorneys of the contested Congressman and also the attorneys for the Mississippi FDP. We were to later learn that the Clerk of the House, Mr. Roberts, even though he'd promised to print all of the material, he had, between the time that he told us and the time that he printed it, found out that it wasn't going to be printed at all. We protested this through various methods. It is my understanding now that the evidence is being printed, has been printed and

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that is it is to be submitted to the Administration of Elections. Or to the Election Committee--and that it is to be voted on sometime in August, or the first part of September.

Q: When--well, did you work here as a project directory last summer? When did you first begin working here?

A: I started work as a project director in my community in the summer of '64 and I worked up until February of '65--at which time I was asked by the organization that I worked with and by the FDP to go to Washington to work on the Southern Areas Coordination and to make sure--to take care of all the mailings for the South--to take care of the finances for the South. And also to work with the Agriculture Department in getting our people, our farmers, elected to the ASC Boards in the state. My work also included lobbying from time to time with the Congressmen and taking lobby groups that came to Washington from time to time to the Congressmen.

Q: So you've just gotten back from Washington recently?

A: I've been back from Washington approximately two and one-half to three weeks, during which time, I have had the occasion to be arrested, to be beaten, and jailed. I got arrested--that would be the same thing as being jailed--one would think. This happened during a demonstration in which I had just arrived back to Mississippi from Washington and was en route to Jackson. I was stopped by a Highway Patrolman who had arrested me...before--who had arrested a number of my co-workers before. I was beaten first, then charged with resisting arrest--in which there were no legal grounds for this. I was later to find out that my arrest was based on the fact--myself and my companion--was based on the fact that the patrolman had reason to believe that I was influential or that I encouraged one of my co-workers to subpoena him during the deposition period. This was what I was later to learn, while engaged in a conversation with the arresting officer. I was placed in the Hines County Jail. No one knew that I was there. I was there for a period of four days before anyone knew that I was there. I was not allowed to make a telephone call. My trial date is set for September 13, at which time I'm supposed to return to school. But, I guess that school will have to wait a little while.

Q: I--what was the charge?

A: Interfering with an officer and resisting arrest.

Q: Have you been asked since you've been down here this

summer to make a comparison with last years project with the summer's?

A: Yes. To me, the comparison of this year's project in Mississippi by volunteers and by local people, to be earnest, is quite different from last summer's. Last year it was just a newly-thought-out thing, the organization was new to a lot of people and a lot of people acted as if--and a lot of people are still acting as if it were. At that particular time, last summer, a lot of people weren't so interested in making decisions as they were seeing things done. This year I can see where last year's thing wasn't a loss or in vain because I can see a lot of this years people are involved in making decisions themselves and in directing the work that is to be done. And this is good. As far as violence in the state is concerned--it's quite different. The reasons for a lack of the violence is, I feel, due to the challenge that exists--that is, the Governor of the State has asked that people remain calm, not act in any way that would cause the challenge to succeed. I feel that this is the major reason there hasn't been as much violence this summer as last summer. Of course, whereas we're not having much violence in Vicksburg, this, still, does not speak for the whole of the state. As a whole, there is violence in the state and people are still being denied their basic right--that is, their right to register and vote.

Q: A lot of people have said--I mean, do you think that there's any difference in spirit among the people working on the project this year from last?

A: Actually, I can only speak for the project that I worked on since I've been back from Washington. And the spirit would have to be a little different because of the fact that they are--that local people are beginning to make decisions. And you have to wait until those persons make decisions before you can act now. Whereas last summer, there was always something to do because to a great degree, you were making decisions, too. And you knew that this was a newly organized organization and that you had to go out and get people and get them registered or get them interested in this party. So, you had something to do every day. And just as it was new and exciting to the local people, it was new and exciting to the people who did the work. This year it's a different routine--not entirely, but there is a difference and the type of work that we're doing and the way that we're going about it--we're concentrating mainly now on voter registration, at this particular time. Freedom schools are still existing. The major emphasis, though, is placed on voter registration, since there is a law now. And a lot of people had the opportunity to register. It's not, I suppose, as exciting a summer as last summer, to a lot of people, but, as far as

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work to be done and things to be accomplished, there is. There's great hope that this desire to work will be restored.

Q: Do you think that the attitude of the local people to the summer volunteers has changed any?

A: Oh, I don't think that it has changed. And talking to the local people, they are very much impressed with the work that they are doing here and in the state. And it was their asking that brought volunteers into the state.

Q: Do you think that there'll be volunteers again next summer?

A: I can't say. A great deal of this depends on how well we function this summer. That is to say, it depends a great deal on how many people we get to go and register this summer. And how well they come to the point of feeling that they can continue to make decisions themselves. Of course, I can see political education as being a factor. This may be a means of bringing volunteers back into the state next summer.

Q: Yes. I just wanted to ask you along the lines of political education, as well as voter registration, has there been much emphasis placed on that?

A: Yes, there has been emphasis placed here on voter education, political education as well as voter registration. Because we feel that voter registration is no good unless once a person gets the vote, then to know how to vote. To know what this is all about, he'd have to know political education. And I think that this is what the people in the communities are asking, you know. How can I learn more about the government. How can I make the government work for me? And there have been great emphasis placed on political education and we're in a process--we've been trying to get a movie projector. And we've reached several agencies that have political education films so that they can be shown them at precinct meetings throughout the state and this can motivate people and people can reach an understanding of what it's like to participate in a government, more so than in hearing it from other people. All of the time just sort of hearing it and never really seeing what it's like.

Q: What sort of leadership in the project have they had since you left?

A: Since I left to go work in Washington, there have been a couple of people in charge of the project and they're both SNCC people, both local people. Students who have gone to

school, just as I have and I think that they did a terrific job in that period while I was away. Which goes to show that everyone can do something if they really want to do it. When I returned, there was a--still a person in charge of the project--a worker--a worker who had been working with me while I was project director. They wereinaudible. Since then, things have changed considerable, with the fact that there is an Executive Committee and they make decisions about the project. And a local person used to be appointed, has been appointed, actually, to take over the position of actually running the project after the summer project ends. That is, when the volunteer leave and go back. And the people who are working go back to school. They will leave the project now and go back to school and there will have to be someone carrying on. They've already given that position to a person in the community.

Q: How long have you been a member of SNCC?

A: I've been a member of SNCC for approximately two years.

Q: How do you feel about working for SNCC and the MFDP at the same time? I know that so many people always lump them together.

A: I never did really think about it, actually. Because when I started working for SNCC, I didn't know nothing about the MFDP, or the making of the MFDP. But, it happened. And I was caught working for SNCC and I knew that I was a Mississippian, and that I understood the process of the party as it was being organized, and that I could help bring the people to the party and I could achieve a goal that really it didn't make too much difference which organization you work out of. To me it doesn't. The organization is not as important to me as the things that can be achieved through the resources that that organization may have.

Q: Well, do you think that SNCC has any other goals and plans in Mississippi, other than working with the MFDP?

A: I wouldn't know. Because they're working in a number of states right now. Their work is all over, at least five states, I think. And they, right now, the thing that the organization, as a whole, would more than likely be doing, though I can't say right now, because I am working primarily with the MFDP and not taking thoughts on what I could be taking and doing for SNCC. But, just as an MFDP worker, taking all this from local people, what to do, I think that SNCC is stressing voter registration everywhere they go.

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But I don't think that they are willing to engage in the work that is to be done in Mississippi as long as there are people in Mississippi who are doing it themselves.

Q: Well, what exactly does SNCC have in mind when it goes into communities? I mean I really have a ahrd time understanding what SNCC is...

A: SNCC is greatest organization to me. To me it really does something for people that no other organization does. I'm not criticising an organization because I feel that all organizations are working for the good of people and their tactics might be different, but the difference with SNCC is that it works with the caliber of people that never had anything, who've never made anything for themsleves, a grass-root people. When SNCC goes into a community, well I'll refrain from saying when SNCC goes into a community, but when an organizer goes into a community the first thing he's asked to do is find out what the people want to do in that community - what they want to do and try to show them ways to do it and try to encourage them first of all find out the ways they themselves can do it. But if they need assistance get them as much assistance as you can.

Q: So one way of saying it - I mean people say that the goal is for them to go in and to make themsleves unnecessary as soon as possible.

A: Right.

Q: Do you see a time when SNCC will be completely withdrawing from Mississippi and leave it completely up to the FDP?

A: No, SNCC is independent, I mean FDP is independent of SNCC so...

Q: Do you see SNCC as leaving?

A: No, let me put it this way. There's a lot of work still needs to be done in Mississippi and I have no idea of how long SNCC might stay in Mississippi and I just couldn't answer that at the present time.

Q: How did you yourself - how did you decide to join SNCC as a specific organization?

A: Well, to be honest about it, I was talked to by a pretty, I consider him a pretty courageous fellow myself. Mr. Robert Perish introduced me to the idea of working with SNCC and some of the things I could do to help the organization and at the same time help people in Mississippi. And that particular time I meant to return to school but I didn't have money

enough to return to school so I decided I would work with SNCC a year. At the same time SNCC saw to it that my school was taken care of the following year for as long as we're there - maybe to return to school this year.

Q: What happens to your draft status when you're working for SNCC?

A: Well, I've been called in by the local Selective Service Board. Yes, I have been notified and I've had to go in for an examination. Of course at which time there wasn't a real threat of war and I have been lucky so far cause during the time that I was in school ...had deferments and what have you and just recently my school filed for a deferment and I filled out a form stating that I would be enrolled in school because I would be lucky, I think. I was just reading the paper yesterday to get off since they are planning on taking a few people from colleges with deferments so I don't know what might happen. It depends, it might happen in the next few days for all I know.

Q: You said something a few minutes about the summer project here and do you think it operates more effectively under the executive council or more effectively with the project director?

A: Yes, I see a difference but I see a good difference. The goodness in the executive committee making the decisions is that more people, I believe, benefit from the decisions that are arrived at through people from the community making that decision even though it's only a few people from the board making that decision. A great number of people become more actively involved through these few people than would be possible if just a project director were making decisions about what's to be done in the community and going out and doing it. It makes those people less a - it makes them more dependent upon that particular person to do these things for them which the way it stands now, this those people gotta do it or gotta see that it's done.

Q: Without the day to day leadership do the people on the project tend to be more independent?

A: Yes, they are.

Q: Well, back to what I was wondering about - that is how you got involved in SNCC specifically. I was just wondering. Did you ever think of joining some other civil rights organization like the NNA or CORE or SCLC?

A: Well, to be honest, I think I was - yeah I had a membership with the NAACP at the time, but they wasn't doing any work in the South so I felt that I had to join some organization that was doing some work for the good of people where I was living. And is's just as simple as that.

Q: What role does the NAACP play in civil rights?

A: Well, right now the NAACP has a pretty big role because they have access to a lot of resources that we don't have since we is still s new organization, that is the FDP is a new organization and it has to seek out the financial status of the MFDP, that is see how the projects in the state are being maintained, how they are being run and operated. Cause this put the MFDP at a great advantage as far as resource is concerned compared with the NAACP. So the NAACP i understand is doing a good job as far as registering people to vote. But ayear or so ago, they couldn't have done the job they're doing now because the state wasn't as wide open. I mean there's not the worry of being shot or killed. I mean it's not as great as a year or so ago.

Q: You said that success breeds moderation. I think you could call the NAA a moderate group and you could also say that the MFDP is becoming successful. Do you think that your success is opening it up for the NAACP?

A: Yes, it has opened up the state as a whole so that the NAACP's work would be much easier. I don't know whether a plan is at work by any particular organization that at this particular time at this particular year that they would draw all their resources into the state and try to register the people. And I have no objections to that whatsoever. I think that there are number of other organizations that's as much responsible for the success in the state as the organization that's working, that has most of its resources in the state and is working. Remember last summer I was in a civil rights organization that was presnet in Mississippi and they had a hand in bringing about the few changes that I do see adn feel in the state.

Q: Is there very much friction between the FDP and the NAA here?

A: No, I haven't seen a great deal of friction and this is confined to the _____ area. I can't speak for any other area. The few members or workers that the NAACP have in Warren County as far as I know, they get along remarkable

well with the a other civil rights workers who are working here. It seems that the workers are working for the same goals. The end results are going to be the same.

Q: Do you think that that's ture? I mean that it's just as well to have a more moderate or conservative organization working at the same time and that the results will be the same even though they go about it in different ways?

A: Of course this is going to be a long range thing. The results are going to be the same but they might come at...the techniques, I have to apply techniques because techniques are going to be different. The results are going to be the same but the time limitation - there's a time limitation that's involved here. I think that the results of the techniques being used would mean that the results are either going to be force quick about one organization and none of the other organizations is going to get a chance to play a big part in the results that are to come. I don't know the real advantage of having a moderate group and then when it's not so moderate.

Q: Do you think that SNCC and the NAA are both seeking the same goals, the same type of society in the movement?

A: I wouldn't like to answer that.

Q: You said that - could you answer a more specific question? What kind of society do you think that SNCC is seeking?

A: See, the reason why I won't try adn answer that question is because and now I'm speaking from my personal point of view, and there are two organizations - two different organizations and they work with different staffs. One work with the grass root people and the other in the past years their persormances have showed that they are not so interested in creating new leadership as they are in trying to make that old leadership work. And personally I like to see new leadership being created because a person is not going to live forever, see. And like you gotta have something to fall back on and there shouldn't be one or two leaders in a community or anything like that. Other people should make decisions and that's the big difference in the two organizations.

Q: SNCC seems to emphasize youth at least I've noticed this.

A: Yes. Yes, SNCC encourages youth to participate more fully in helping to get the all the people actively in-

volved. I feel personally that this has been a great success, and it's not the fact that you're using youth because at the same time they're learning something that they wouldn't learn in school. They're learning a role of responsibility. They're assuming - they're taking on responsibilities that they never had and they really feel it. And SNCC also encourages a number of people who I have known personally to go back to school which without that encouragement I don't think that they would have gone back.

Q: Do you think that the younger people are really a different type people from their parents?

A: Sure, I definately think so - a different breed. The point of difference is although they live under a strain they don't have to live under the strains that their parents or grandparents had to live under. And therefore, they're not indoctrinated to the extent that their parents are. That is, that there might be a superior person other than God. So...

Q: What about the difference in religion? It seems to be such a - for the old people religion still plays a big part but the young people tend much more toward atheism, well anti-clericalism.

A: Well, I think that this is a common even dating way back in history you would have found this present in any movement or anything you do religion plays a big part in it. It's a big factor in anything that you do, because active participation by ministers and priests and nuns and what have you, in my mind is nothing but a religious type of participation which hope to get more people really thinking that religion which does get people - plays a part in what they're doing. Because of the fact that the strain is on the youngster or the younger people who are engaged in helping bring about these changes, they tend not to think so much as a religious part of it. This is what's playing a tremendous apart in this struggle. I mean religion has a lot to do with it. They tend not to think about it so much I think, but it's not that they've forgotten either because from day to day they're remembering it that religion plays a part in the movement. And I don't think that this would classify them as being atheist, but one would think so from maybe talking to some of them, you know.

Q:(inaudible) something to the effect that religion was holding the people back because they were depending to much on God and not upon themselves.

A: I think that was a very true statement, at one stage. Of course I've seen a great deal of more participation from a lot of people who had a very religious manner a year or so ago and I think a year or so ago religion was holding them back to an extent because what they didn't do for themselves they always felt that some superior being was going to do it - which was God. So I think now that they realize now that there are certain things that they have to do themselves.

Q: It depends upon how you look at it. We were talking to Mr. Graves up in Clay County and he was saying - he's very religious - and he was saying the people who said that God was going to do it for them weren't looking at it right. But the people who were really religious were the ones who tried to register and everything and said that God would take care of them then.

A: I think he has a point there, too.

Q: Do you think that the movement is having - well religion seems sort of a backbone of the movement. At the same time, the movement seems in a way - not killing religion - but hurting it a little bit. It brings these people to another focus in life and religion is sort of replaced by the movement.

A: Well, I think the only effect that the movement has on religion are people who's very religious - the movement creates thinking to me. It makes people who are very religious think so as to understand. This to me is important and it's been proven over and over again that no matter how religious you are or studying the bible, there are just some things you gotta do for yourself and people are slowly realizing this. And I think the movement is the major reason why they are realizing this now. There is quite a few examples. One example is Dr. King, for instance. He is religious. People follow him even some of them think that he might do say a year or tow years ago would have seemed very radical to them - a street demonstration or something like this - it would seem very radical, but he's making a lot of religious people aware of the things they have to do, that they personally have to do and also other organizations are doing so.

Q: You don't think that the movement is having a negative effect on religion.

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A: A negative effect on religion?

Q: You don't think it's hurting religion seriously.

A: No, it's not hurting religion that much, no. It's just bringing about clear thinking.

Q: When you talk about the movement, what exactly do you mean? Do you mean just like the civil rights movement in the South or a movement all over a broad phase of concern for all kinds of issues including Vietnam...

A: No, I was refering to - I was limiting it to South since our conversation is basically dealing with the people in the South.

Q: For yourself, how do you personally define the movement?

A: When I define the South, I think of the Southern states only. I'm refering to Southern states only and the changes that people are going through in the Southern states and the things that have been accomplished and the things that need to be accomplished just in that one particular area. I don't - if I was going to be broader with it and say the movement than I would say - there is a - I would have to say, I would include Northern states I would just say the movement in the country period. But I usually define it to one sector of the country. If I'm working in the North, then when I say movement usually I'm talking about the North. Where I'm working I'm familiar with the work the people in the movement are engaged in. And I'm quite familiar with the work in the South, but not so much the work in the North.

Q: Well, do you feel yourself concerned about these other issues like Vietnam or and various other political issues?

A: Gee, I feel myself concerned with it and I feel as time go on more civil rights organizations and more people in the movement are going to concern themselves with the war in Vietnam also, but at the present time there is other things that I see need to be done. I can't concern myself with it as one would who has nothing to do.

Q: You mean Vietnam.

A: Right.

Q: There are other more important things.

A: Yes, I see changes in the state. If I can't create a society in which I can live in then I don't feel I should - first I think I should create a society in which I can be a member for trying to deal with some other issue that I know absolutely nothing about. I don't know anything about the war in Vietnam. I don't know what it's all about.

Q: Do you feel that most members of the Negro community are concerned about such issues as Vietnam or are they concerned about the civil rights segment of the movement only?

A: Well, I can say most people - some people are concerned about the issues in Vietnam and because a great deal of them have sons and they can't help it being concerned.

Q: Many of the volunteers down here - I've talked to many of them who consider civil rights just to be one branch of the movement and Vietnam is equally important.....how do you feel about these people who consider civil rights to be just a part of the movement?

A: Well, to be honest it doesn't make any difference to me how a person feels as long as a person does the work that he is asked of he or she to do. And that person, as long as their feelings about Vietnam or what have you doesn't interfere with the work that has to be done in the community, it's quite okay that they possess this feeling about Vietnam or consider the movement civil rights as a the whole thing.

Q: What do you feel about the thing that Bill was talking about this morning that as a movement or the FDP or SNCC stress that they take stands on things that people who are supporting them in the North_ they realize that this is cutting down... stop their support. I mean do you think it's good that it should be going on to take these stands?

A: I wish that you would rephrase that question because I...

Q: Does it matter - do you feel that it is alright to the merit of principle to go ahead and take stands that you probably realize will alienate some of the "white Northern liberals" who are helping finance SNCC and other people?

A: Yeah. Yes, I feel that it's a good thing and I hope I can see more initiative taken by local people and I think the sooner that they realize that the support from the North is not going to last forever, the better they would be. And that this will automatically make them start doing things for themselves. If finances do not come out of the North, then finances will have to come out of the community somewhere and I think even though the salaries are low, I think that this can always be obtained from the community if they really want progress. And I've seen it down here and well I

guess the ones in the North couldn't help feel that this was stepping on their toes and that they are going to withdraw funds once they find out that this is not only hitting in the South, but it's far reaching - that this could effect them also. It's nothing new. I guess it was thought of about along with the organizing of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and the challenge that this was going to effect a great many people, and not just people in the South. And people in the North are going to start thinking that they were going to organize independent political parties and want to make decisions for the people in the ghetto in the North. And this effects liberals - those who say they are liberals and a lot of them find out who say they are liberals are not liberals so naturally this would effect them so they would start financing projects in the South.

Q: Do you care that much about the financial support?

A: Well, I think the time that it was critical that was the time that you were trying to get people interested in doing something for themselves but this... I can still see where it could be helpful, but actually it wouldn't be as much work put out by individuals working in a community to obtain finances if he knew it was coming from the North. Then he could go about his job organizing without having to worry about finances. But now you have a job of organizing and organizing to get finances also, but this poses a problem but it - I feel that it can be, the party as a whole any organization that is working for the good of the people can do without if it's made known to the people - I can't function, I can't help you people like I want to because I don't have the money therefore, it's going to be you who get the resources for the work that need to be done. And that information, I'll get all of that as I possibly can and everything else I possibly can I'll do. I think that they can become more independent than of the funds from the North and still operate.

Q: Have you been doing fund raising in the North....?

A: Yes, I have been. I did about a month and a half of fund raising, you know, incidently, in which I didn't like because I never liked asking anybody for anything when it comes to - so it was out of my line.

Q: What kind of audiences or people have you spoken before?

A: Basically I talk with the college groups, friends of SNCC groups and also with church groups and around Washington, it was mostly church groups and a lot of colleges in Washington - American U. and Howard.

Q: What kind of an approach do you use when you do this? DO you point out how radical the movement is coming or do you mention this?

A: Well, I never mention it if nobody else mentions the fact that the movement might be becoming radical. I don't think that this is important that this is mentioned. If nobody else cares, why should I?

Q: But do you think there are people who still will continue to give money and funds, you know, even in the future when the movement does become more radical - if it should become more radical?

A: I think there's always going to be people who think just like you think, who feel that changes need to be made just as you feel and they going to continue to contribute. But on a large scale, I have no idea. Only time will tell that.

Q: You've been doing lobbying too, haven't you?

A: Yes, I have.

Q: What do you think of that?

A: Well, it was quite interesting at first when I first started, but as time went on it became a bore. That is, you know, you thought that you wasn't really accomplishing something. You could talk with people and because the changes were so far off, they couldn't be conclusive. You know, give you any conclusive answers. The congressman - lots of times you talk with congressmen that has support the challenge before and you thought sure that they was going to support it and they say they are going to support it. Yet they couldn't tell you that they had talked with the other congressmen and tried to influence them to do so also. I mean that's the job you have to do yourself and it was pretty rough knowing that the challenge was, you know, a good ways off.

Q: Have you ever felt that you have influenced a congressman? That you have, you know, played a part in making him change his mind?

A: The politicians, they know how to talk, they know what to say. They know how to be evasive so I could assume on several occasions that the remarks that I was getting was in my favor but I never got a definite yes or no, and this is something politicians are aware of. They always conjure the fact

that you trying to get a yes or no out of them. And they can always find a way to evade the question that you asked. And I really don't think I convinced any congressman. Either their minds was already made up when I went to see them, you know, about whether or not they was going to vote for or against it. They just made me feel good - reassured me that I could be reasonably sure that they would vote, but sure, I'm not sure at all. I couldn't be sure.

Q: Can you tell me what sort of things change their mind when they vote?

A: I didn't understand you.

Q: Did they tell you any things that might make them vote against the challenge?

A: Yes, there were things. One major thing was the voter rights we have. I felt from the conversation with some of them that they felt that the voting rights was all we needed and from some I got the feeling that they really didn't understand what the challenge was all about. And that they could be convinced, even though they didn't understand at that particular time, they could become convinced if they had the opportunity to read the evidence that was submitted. But they can't be definite, I guess that's why I got bored.

Q: Do any of them say anything to the effect that demonstrations etc. up in Washington have led them to disfavor for the particular challenge?

A: At one time I believe that was stated by a congressman or so that they didn't favor demonstrations and I believe and these were congressmen who supported me so that always kind of puts you on the spot too.

Q: How about the general concept about the whites in the civil rights movement, coming down to the South.....how do you feel about this in general?

A: I feel that there's a lot that has been gained from people coming from the North to work in the South. There's a lot they've been able to teach kids and there's a lot that they've been able to tell local people, which they had absolutely no opportunity or coming into contact with if those people from the North wasn't here. Also, I respect the, and I think that most of the people do in the communities, and this is a big factor, it is the fact that they respect the education in most volunteers most people from the North come down with that this education in a sense will

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qualify them and help them to interpret certain information that might be essential for their livelihood or something - essential that they get some of the things in life that can be gotten with that information. I think they really served a tremendous purpose; they've really done quite a bit. And I don't think there's anybody in the state - at least I haven't heard who wasn't in the power structure to criticize the presence of the people in the state.

Interview
Willie Johnson, cont. frp, 0307

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Side 1

A: I feel tha the comment from the people from the North was good in this respect. As I said the average Negro family was not even accustomed to a white person coming by their homes or something to offer them assistance. And to see this that there are people who are interested in them and wan to to do something to help them. It gave them a special type feeling that they wasn't in this alone. That it wasn't just the Negro race itself that were concerned but the people themselves. And it wasn't just the people in Mississippi. That they would have to fight this thing, and that it was far reaching. That it reached much farther than that. That there were people that felt that in other places also.

Q: What disadvantages, if any, do you see in having whites working in this state?

A: A out a year ago I could have re ally have given you some, but at that time our security would have been a big factor. Because that was a real headache. One thing if you were project director, it would cut off all social life that you might have, you know. After a day's work then there's social life in a Negro community for you if you were a Negro. Now, that was when SNCC was first organizing and wasn't anything but Negroes. There could be social life, but once you became project director and was in charge of an area or something then the volunteers came, and then you just didn't feel that you should go no where and they not go. And the refore you all just and to sit up and talk or something, see. So that was a problem to some individuals. It was a problem to me because I wasn't accustomed to not going and out and socializing and what have you. But I had to refrain from doin it so other than that I haven't really had any other big hang ups.

Q: You sa id your attitudes have changed on this since last year.

Q2: It's just more dangerous.

Q: Is it just because?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, well, this year there is a difference. Security is not a thing that you really go apples with. It's not a thing that you stress over and over again. At least --

I really shouldn't speak like that because I haven't been -- I'm not project director here no more, but from all indications it appears to me that security wouldn't be the thing that you would stress the most here now because of the fact that things are a lot more open than they were last year. Because of the challenge and what have you people aren't going to commit the acts that normally would commit. Even though this place has been under surveillance for better than a two weeks period once this summer -- because of the fact that they were bombed.

Q2: Was there much violence here last summer?

A: Quite a bit. As you know last summer there were a number of bombings -- there were two bombings anyway. One occurred while about thirteen people were sleeping. That was at our freedom house which was also the freedom school. And the only place that kids could come and read and you know and be entertained and learn music and what have you. Also a restaurant -- which is a Negro restaurant which was the only restaurant in the city which served civil rights workers. You know, food and what have you -- they were bombed too. And, or course, the proprietor had threats and all during the time that I was here. After I left this happened to him. Andbeatings were pretty regular, and intimidations and, you know, telephone calls which would tell people if they didn't like a thing going on, they didn't like volunteers being here. They didn't like anything that you were trying to do so ----So if you were sleeping at the freedom house you usually help out at night answering the telephone.

Q: Did you have to guard the freedom house at all?

A:; Yes. Last year it was a regular thing. I was there every night.

Q2: How did you get anything done?

A: Well, see we had a large crew last summer. We had something like twenty people here. And we were divided up into shifts and just the fellows would keep watch. Of course, the girls were staying with families in the community. And usually each individual would get about three hours of sleep though. I tell you it was exiting last summer next to some --- so we were able to get out -- you had a lot of energy the next day to get out because we knew that we had something to do, see.

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Q: DO you know Pat Thomas?

A: Yeah, I know Pat very well. He's quite a guy.

Q: Yeah, so do I. He goes to Stanford.

A: Yeah, I meant to ask you about Pat because after he left we communicated.

Q: Oh, did you?

A: Yeah, we used to go camping together all the time. That was my buddy everywhere we went. I used to call him lazy, you know. Not that he was lazy but he walked lazy and he reacted like a lazy person would, you know.

Q: You're right.

A: You can't

Q: There's one last area that I'd like to talk to you about. I got the impression that you or a lot of the people that I've talked to that the people who are leaders in Mississippi or who are in positions of responsibility within the movement come from homes that by Negro standards are middle class. Do you find that true around here or for yourself or would you say that's right?

A: Definitely, it's not true for myself, no. And I haven't really taken this into consideration before now either. And therefore I couldn't answer that question about other people in the movement because I haven't had the occasion to visit a lot of people -- to know about their standards -- whether they are middle class or what have you. But I do know here that this is not true at all. We are way below par. If this has anything to do with income

Q: Okay, I guess that's about it for now. Thank you very much.