

FREEDOM FIGHTERS: STORIES FROM FREEDOM SUMMER 1964

by
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ABSTRACT

ANNA ELIZABETH MCCOLLUM: Freedom Fighters: Stories from Freedom Summer
1964

(Under the direction of Kathleen Wickham)

Freedom Summer was a project conducted in Mississippi in 1964 as part of the civil rights movement. It involved hundreds of volunteers and members of the Council of Federated Organizations working to promote education and voter registration among the African American community across the state. The researcher found and interviewed veterans of Freedom Summer in order to write a series of profile stories centered around that subject. She visited them each in their hometowns (besides one phone interview with a woman from Iowa), photographed most of them and spoke to some of their peers for second and third sources.

Through this process, the researcher discovered that there was and still is a divide between the Mississippi natives who worked for the civil rights movement and the out-of-state workers, many of whom were from northern universities. She also found that Freedom Summer significantly impacted each of her subjects. Her conclusion was that the stories from Freedom Summer — many of which still have not been told — remain critical to the history of Mississippi, the state that was so greatly marked by the summer of 1964.

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INTRODUCTION

Freedom Summer was a crucial part of the civil rights movement and a key time period in Mississippi history. In the summer of 1964, college-aged students from all over the country travelled to Mississippi, whose percentage of registered voters was lower than any other state's at the time. Organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the student volunteers' main goal was to create equal voting opportunities for blacks in the state. Up until then, Jim Crow laws, the white Citizens' Council and the state's Sovereignty Commission had kept blacks out of the polls through physical and economic intimidation. Civil rights leaders, however, knew if the the black population could participate fully in civic affairs, steps could be taken to overtake the oppression and discrimination of Mississippi.

In order to reach that goal, hundreds of students came to Mississippi and asked for the assistance and cooperation of thousands more. Those helpers from within the Magnolia State included families willing to house the volunteers, to send their children to the freedom schools and to help spread the word about voting to their fellow Mississippians. There was a community of people from outside of the state who organized Freedom Summer, and there was a community of people within Mississippi who made it possible. Fortunately, many of those involved on either side are still alive today, 51 years later. Many of those people's stories have not been told.

The purpose of this research is to locate people who had a hand in Freedom Summer but whose narrative has gone untold and then to tell those stories before they are

lost. A number of figures will be sought out in order to gain perspectives on these aspects of Freedom Summer: the families who housed Freedom Summer volunteers, the children who attended freedom schools, the volunteers themselves, and those who lived through the killings of the three civil rights workers in Neshoba County. Once these perspectives are located, a series of interviews will be conducted, preferably in their homes or hometowns. Photographs will be taken for supplementary purposes. Then, four to six feature stories will be written with the information gathered from the interviews. The stories will strive to answer this research question:

Research Question 1: Who have we not heard from about Freedom Summer 51 years later, what stories do they have to tell, and why is it important that their memories be recorded?

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this thesis is to locate and tell the stories of people who were in some way involved in Mississippi's "Freedom Summer" of 1964. This anecdotal research is important because it may uncover the stories of some people that have never before been told, revealing details of Freedom Summer to the modern-day audience before they are lost. In order to do this, a number of steps will be taken.

First, the researcher must locate subjects. To do this, the researcher will consult both Bill Rose and Curtis Wilkie, faculty members at the Meek School of Journalism and New Media who were young journalists at the time of Freedom Summer and who have contact information of many people involved. In addition, civil rights organizations in the Delta and Jackson will be contacted as well as social service organizations and community groups. Using the names given or found, the researcher will then begin to make phone calls and send emails in search of appropriate and willing subjects to participate in the research. In a phone call or an email, the researcher will inform each possible candidate of the purpose of research and ask what his or her role was in Freedom Summer. If the researcher deems the potential candidate's story worthy of investigation and the subject agrees to be questioned, the researcher will set up an in-person interview date with him or her if at all possible.

The interviews will be scheduled to take place at the earliest convenience of both the researcher and the interviewee. In cases where appropriate, the researcher will plan to

travel to the interviewee's home or hometown in order to conduct the interview. If that is not feasible, the researcher will resort to an over-the-phone interview.

During interviews, the researcher will ask subjects about their experience with Freedom Summer and attempt to get an in-depth idea of the subjects involvement and feelings toward Freedom Summer and its affects on Mississippi, both long-term and short-term. The researcher will use an audio recording device and take notes during said interviews as well as make photographs of the subjects. Using results from the interviews, the researcher will write a series of four to six feature stories. On occasions where it seems logical, certain subjects will be grouped into a single story that has a theme shared by said subjects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to achieve this, a thorough background on Freedom Summer is necessary. For the purposes of this research, this analysis can be broken into three parts: the volunteers from out of state and both groups of Mississippians — those for Freedom Summer's cause and those vehemently against it.

Most of the volunteers who came to Mississippi during Freedom Summer were college students who were learning the tactic of nonviolent resistance and leadership. These techniques were somewhat revolutionary, especially in the fight for civil rights. They were crucial, though, for ultimately it was that school of thought that brought change about in the South (Marshall, 2013). From an examination of the students who volunteered in Mississippi comes a clear understanding of the original purpose of Freedom Summer. This gives insight into the unbiased story of Freedom Summer and therefore a clear backdrop to each character's story.

It is also important to know the timeline of Freedom Summer as it relates to the activists involved. For example, the Neshoba County murders marked a critical point of the civil rights movement, and an analysis of them can provide a point of comparison for each involved person's personal account. It is crucial to know the stories of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney as well as the tale of their murders at the hands of white men in Philadelphia (Cagin and Dray, 2006). To understand these murders is to know the climate of race relations in rural Mississippi at the time. The men who killed the three civil rights workers were all men of power in their small town of Philadelphia, whether local police or members of the Ku Klux Klan (Currie, 2006). By

examining the events that took place during Freedom Summer, especially the murders of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, a clearer understanding of the dynamics in Mississippi at that particular time can be gleaned.

A study of local Mississippians should come next, so the climate of racism and small-mindedness can explain why the fight for equal rights was such a struggle for everyone involved, but especially the student volunteers. During the 1960s, there were many black men and women in Mississippi willing to risk their lives for civil rights — Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer being just a couple of examples. Many of these people were locals, and they helped in a number of ways (Dittmer, 1995). Some housed the volunteers, breaking a longstanding taboo of blacks and whites living together. Others were on the front lines of the movement, registering blacks to vote or working in the freedom schools.

However, there were also lots of whites who made the job of the Freedom Summer volunteers, both in and out of state, extremely difficult. The Sovereignty Commission, a state-funded agency, as well as the Citizens' Council, a private organization dedicated to the preservation of segregation, were two white organizations that worked to keep separateness alive in Mississippi and worked to keep civil rights workers down. The two were informally linked, as some men belonged to both. With two sides as opposed as the blacks and whites were in Mississippi during the 1960s, any outsiders would have to be courageous to come between them. Although Freedom Summer did make progress in the movement for civil rights, it came at a large cost thanks to many of the powerful and prejudiced Mississippi locals.

Through a thorough examination of the students who volunteered during Freedom Summer and the events involving them (such as Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney's murders) as well as the local Mississippians at the time and their attitudes toward race relations — both for and against the cause of Freedom Summer comes an understanding of the conflicting thought processes and overall climate of tension. It is important to first have a basis of understanding for the time period and the social customs of Mississippi in 1964, especially regarding race, in order to be objective and mindful while comprehending and writing the stories of those who were present for the summer that changed the state and the nation.

ROSCOE JONES

Roscoe Jones would have been killed if it weren't for a knock on his grandmother's front door in 1964. He was supposed to accompany James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner to Philadelphia, Mississippi, on June 21, the day they were killed.

But over half a century later at 69 years old, Roscoe Jones is very much still living. He's even still fighting.

Jones got involved in the civil rights movement as a child growing up in Meridian, Mississippi. He helped organize the state's largest Freedom School during the summer project of 1964 known as Freedom Summer, and he's since dedicated his life to a purpose he believes he was spared for.

Segregation's walls were weak within the city of Meridian, Mississippi, in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Meridian was a checkerboard," Roscoe Jones said of his hometown. He was driving down Eighth Street in his red Suzuki Grand Vitara that he had bought for \$3,000 the day before. The car just barely accommodated Jones' large frame, and it protested with a shrill squeak that bugged the stew out of him. He had on Wrangler overalls much

like the ones he was photographed wearing at the Freedom School Convention 52 years before. He motioned out the window with his left hand, the same one on which he wore a Yankton College class ring.

“Here’s a black neighborhood,” he said. “And now we’re in the white neighborhood. See? Almost simultaneously, you’re right there together. Back door to back door.”

Jones’ grandmother, who raised him, kept white children from time to time.

“They would come and stay with us at night,” he said. “And we’d sleep in the same bed and everything. Slept on the floor together. It wasn’t until we became teenagers that we realized there was a difference. But there wasn’t a difference.”

Jones took an interest in race relations before even his teenage years, though. At 10 years old in 1957, he watched the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School on television and wondered why black children weren’t allowed to enter the school doors.

“What’s in that building they don’t want us to see?” he asked his grandmother.

"I don't know, ‘cause I haven't been in there," she said.

“Well I tell you what, when that comes to Mississippi, I want to be a part of it,” Jones replied. “‘Cause I want to see what's inside of those buildings.”

And one day just a few years later, it not only came to Mississippi, but face to face with Jones. NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers visited Jones’ church and announced that he was reorganizing the youth chapter of the NAACP that afternoon.

"I was just in awe when I saw him," Jones said. "He had been a military man, and he was very educated and very articulate, and he was working for his people to try to better his people. I said, 'This man's doing the right thing.' When I got home, me, my

brother and my uncle and my baby auntie — my grandmother gave us all \$2 a piece and told us all to go join the NAACP. That's it. That's how I got involved.”

And that’s how Roscoe Jones got arrested.

On May 30, 1963, he was one of the students who led a sit-in at Woolworth’s lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi.

“That was the first time we tried to integrate,” he said.

And 13 of them paid the price: a week in jail.

"It was fun,” Jones said, grinning. “It was fun because we were in there for a reason, and we were in there together — you know, girls and guys. And we were young, and Miss Fannie Lou Hamer came and talked to us.”

Hamer, a native Mississippian and civil rights activist, went on to help coordinate Freedom Summer and later represented the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Jones’ smile shrunk as the Suzuki shrieked over railroad tracks and then slowed at the corner of 25th Avenue and Fifth Street. His gaze lingered on the empty lot where the Council of Federated Organizations office once stood. In January of 1964, Michael Schwerner and his wife, Rita, made 2205 1/2 Fifth Street the COFO office and community center for Lauderdale County. The couple even lived there until members of the community helped them find better accommodations.

But Jones put in a lot of hours there as well. It’s where Schwerner trained him in nonviolence. It’s where Jones got to know James Chaney. And it was where Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were last seen.

Jones finally broke his stare, turned his head and pointed across the street.

“Troy Laundry had their facility there,” he said. “And one of the 23 that was indicted [for the murder of the three civil rights workers], [Jimmy] Snowden, worked for Troy Laundry. And me and Mr. Chaney used to sit there and look at him, and he’d make faces and all of that. It was a trip.”

The site of Meridian’s Baptist Seminary is also an empty lot now. But in Jones’ memory, it is Mississippi’s largest Freedom School. One of Michael and Rita Schwerner’s foot soldiers, as he refers to himself, Jones helped organize and run the school, which occupied the Baptist Seminary building on the corner of 16th Street and 31st Avenue. Although Jones was an upcoming high school senior that summer, he considers himself a pupil of the Freedom School as well, because several elective classes were offered such as foreign languages — French, Latin and Spanish. According to Jones, Harris High School, Meridian’s public, black high school, was good enough that the Freedom School had no need to teach core subjects.

“We wanted some advancements,” he said. “We had, bar none, and I’ll say this to anybody: we had the best black high school and probably one of the best high schools — black or white — in the state of Mississippi.”

As Jones remembers it, the Freedom School was just as successful. A record number of over 300 black students attended, and there were virtually no behavior problems:

“The students patrolled the students. We were the disciplinarians. We made sure that everything was together. We never had a fight, we never had an argument - to my knowledge. And I brag about that.”

He brags with good reason.

"We organized it," he said. "We organized where [the volunteers] were going to stay. We organized how they were going to eat. We organized it. *We* did. The *students* did."

The 10 or so teachers — all white volunteers from outside of Mississippi — played an important role as well, but Jones suggests that they had a more carefree attitude that wasn't shared among the student workers.

"Some of these college students were in there playing with these kids like they were all on the same level. That used to make me mad. We had some volunteers that were much older — in their thirties. And they'd be out there playing pied piper, got kids all over their neck. Get a life, man," he said. "We were harder on ourselves."

By the end of the summer, Jones had been chosen to co-chair a convention for the Mississippi Freedom Schools. It was held in early August at the Meridian Baptist Seminary the two days prior to James Chaney's memorial service. Students from 41 Freedom Schools gathered and formed the Mississippi Student Union, and they elected Jones as its president.

“The Mississippi Student Union grew out of the Freedom School Convention in that a group of young people from all over the state came together and said, 'We need to have our own organization, student led, student controlled. And we need to start taking over control. We need to take over integration,'" he said.

Jones continues to be recognized for his role in Freedom Summer even today, but he won't take all the credit.

“It ain't about me,” he said. “It's about all the students. Don't honor me without honoring all the students. I'm just an instrument. I'm just one of the leaders. I don't know how I became a leader. All I know is, 'Roscoe,' Mickey said, 'Come on, I've got to train you for nonviolence. You've got to be nonviolent. You cannot be violent and be in the movement.’”

This was one of the many things about Jones that caught the eye of his math teacher at Harris High, Jesse Palmer.

“He's not one of those that you see that's one way this minute and he's something else the next,” Palmer said. “He's a pretty steady guy. You know, sometimes a little hothead would go out and get someone else hurt, but [Roscoe] seemed to be pretty grounded. And I think that's what kind of pulled me toward him.”

Palmer couldn't get too involved, however, because Harris High teachers were prohibited from being involved with any kind of demonstrations.

“We weren't even bystanders. We were out of sight,” he said. “I don't think that I could have adhered to the nonviolence. I've not been in a fight my entire life, and I'm soon to be 88 years old. But one thing you have to understand: it was *dangerous*. I think we spent more time learning how to stay alive.”

This was something Jones was all too aware of the summer of 1964.

“I knew that at any moment, we could be killed. I knew that,” he said. “Fear will destroy you. I wouldn't let it destroy me. Now, am I crazy? I know how to get away from

things. So if you don't let them bother you, and you get away from them, then who's controlling who?"

It was a sultry, summer Saturday night. Music drifted from Magnolia Park, where Freedom School teams were having a dance on that June 20th. Inside, 17-year-old Roscoe Jones worked the front desk, and outside, a blue station wagon pulled into the parking lot.

A student opened the front door of the black recreation center and called to Jones, "Someone's here to see you. It's one of the COFO guys."

"Is he white or black?" Jones asked.

"Black."

"Oh, that's Chaney." Roscoe Jones turned to the woman at the desk with him.

"Take over for me. I'll be back. I need to go see what Chaney wants with me."

He walked out to the parking lot to find his friend, James, standing with a white guy that Jones didn't recognize. He had dark, slicked-back hair and didn't look like he belonged in the South. And he was smiling.

Chaney introduced him as Andy Goodman from New York. He had driven from a Freedom Summer orientation and training session in Oxford, Ohio, all the way to Meridian with Michael Schwerner earlier that day.

After a few friendly words, Chaney pulled Jones aside.

“Look, you've got to go to Philadelphia with me tomorrow,” Chaney said, a pleading look in his dark eyes.

“Why, James?” Roscoe asked. He was surprised at this request — Chaney normally asked girls to accompany him on day trips.

“Roscoe, you see that man over there?” Chaney asked, nodding his head in Goodman’s direction. “You see how he's smiling? He has no clue as to what he's getting himself into. You know, Roscoe, [Cecil] Price already told me he's going to kill me if he catches me up there.”

Over 50 years later, Jones remembers that night from his small, cluttered home. Papers and fliers and pamphlets and programs litter all surfaces of his living room: the sofa, the chairs, the television stand, the floor. He has plaques and accolades lined up on a bookshelf with pictures of his family: a son, a daughter and twin grandchildren.

With the hindsight of five decades, Jones recognizes that that night outside of the teen center, Chaney had a premonition about his death that would occur the next day.

“You know, they say that when a person's gonna die, they feel something,” Jones said. “When I look back on it and analyze what he said, he knew something was going to happen. And he felt safe with me being in the car because there would be another black, and it would be two on two. And you know, maybe they wouldn't mess with him.”

But at the time, no one really had a clue what was coming.

“I remember saying, 'Take it easy. Take it easy. Everything will work out.'”

The next morning, Jones woke up early. He remembers his grandmother's phone ringing. She answered; it was Mickey.

“And he said, 'Roscoe, this is Mickey. We're going to Philadelphia, and I understand that you want to go with us.' I said, 'Yeah,' and he said, 'Okay.'”

And that's when the knock came. Three raps on the front door, and Jones suddenly remembered a commitment he'd made to the Fifth Street Baptist Church.

“Mickey heard the knock [over the phone], and he said, 'Who is that?' I said, 'Oh, that's Mr. Johnny Ray Moore. He works for Mr. Bishop.' He said, 'Yeah, I know who he is.' He said, 'What does he want?' I said, 'I just remembered he wants me to speak at his church to the youth group.' And he said, 'Well, you can't go.' I said, 'But I can... I can set this up for another date.' And he said, 'No, you set it up now. You're not going.’”

Several hours later during that same day, Jones found himself staring at the telephone in the COFO office with co-worker Sue Brown. They were waiting to hear from Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, and as the minutes passed, panic soured their thoughts. The COFO workers had a without-exception rule of calling the office whenever they safely arrived in a new town.

“That was not like Mickey. It was out of character,” Jones said. “That was not like James. It was out of character.”

It was getting late, and Jones and Brown began calling whoever they could think of for help. Finally, a local member of the NAACP, Charles Young, answered. After hearing the situation, he picked the students up from the COFO office, and they tracked down a man from the Justice Department eating dinner at the Holiday Inn. He said it was too late to do anything that night, but that he'd call the next morning.

Young took Jones and Brown back to the office to get their belongings and then offered them a ride home. But Jones wanted to walk.

“When I got to the house, I told my grandmother, I said, 'Mama, Mickey and them are missing.' And I said, 'We'll never find them alive.'”

The next day, Jones had a lot to think about. Three men — three of the *good* guys — were missing, but that wasn't stopping the hundreds of volunteers from descending on Mississippi that Monday, June 22nd.

“It invigorated them,” Jones said of the volunteers. “There was excitement now. ‘These folks in Mississippi are something else.’ We’ve *got* to go there now because they're trying to keep us from coming there. They've taken Mickey and them just so we won't come.”

Forty-four days after Jones didn't go to Philadelphia, three bodies were found buried beneath fresh red dirt in Neshoba County. Everyone already knew their names.

Jones was at Mount Olive Baptist Church the night of Tuesday, August 4, 1964. Folk singer Pete Seeger was performing a concert for the students, workers and volunteers at a mass meeting when someone walked over to him and whispered a few words in his ear.

“So, while he was singing, he stopped,” Jones said. “And he announced that the bodies had been found, and that they were dead. It was a surprise to all of us. There was crying. There was relief. Because a lot of us in the movement had already surmised that they were dead. We knew that the longer . . . You know, if you don't find somebody the first 24 hours or the first 48, forget it.”

The crowd joined hands to sing “We Shall Overcome” and then the people dispersed, their eyes cast downward and many faces wet from tears.

“They were found in an earthen dam that was to be their burial site forever,” Jones said. “They were never to be found.”

But the bodies were discovered by FBI agents — hundreds had occupied Neshoba County since the blue Ford Station Wagon had been found three days after the men's disappearance. Then, Jones remembers the three bodies returning to Meridian for a short period of time.

“Andy and Mickey's families wanted them all three together, but the city of Meridian didn't want that,” Jones said. “Mickey and Andy are buried in New York, and James is buried here.”

But no one except very close family and Enterprise Funeral Home knew where James Chaney was buried for a couple of years after his death. According to Jones, this was a precautionary measure in order to protect Chaney's remains.

There was a public memorial service for James Chaney, though, the day before the Freedom School Convention. On Friday, August 7, Joyce Brown and Roscoe Jones, chair and co-chair of the Freedom School Convention, decided to join the march to Chaney's memorial service.

They started at the Freedom School. About 50 people gathered on 31st Avenue as the sun began to set. FBI agents stood out of the way.

“In [the movie] ‘Mississippi Burning,’ they show the FBI get into the march,” Jones said. “They did not get into the march. They stood on the outside and looked in and gathered all the information they could about us. But beyond that, they did not do anything. They were not our friends, contrary to what they say. We didn't trust J. Edgar [Hoover]. We trusted the president of the United States, but we did not trust J. Edgar.”

The crowd walked on past, ignoring the uniformed men watching them. By the time they reached First Union Baptist Church, there were people spilling out the doors. Ladies wore crisp skirts and men wore suits. James Chaney's mother was in all black.

Dave Dennis, 22 the summer of 1964, gave a eulogy at the service. He had worked closely with Bob Moses and Medgar Evers. His bright blue eyes seized every heart in the room with a few short sentences.

“Don't bow down anymore!” Dennis said. “Hold your heads up! We want our freedom now! I don't want to have to go to another memorial! I'm tired of funerals. I'm tired of it! We've got to stand up!”

A cacophony of voices gave Dennis their affirmation. Jones remembers the sickening mixture of feelings in that chapel. People were devastated. They were exhausted. They were outraged.

"There was anger," Jones said. "I was angry myself, but I knew not to be angry about it because Mickey had said anything could happen. And for us to strike back would defeat the purpose. So, we were all committed to nonviolence, regardless of what it was."

Jones had been in that church hundreds of times prior to that day, and he's visited even more times since.

"Most of the significant activities took place at this church," he said. "Reverend R.S. Porter was self-educated, very articulate. He had a way with words."

Jones visits Chaney's burial site frequently as well. It's on the outskirts of south Meridian, down a deceiving road named Fish Lodge at a cemetery named Okatibbee after the nearby lake which shares the same Native American name. There are several graves with Chaney's. One is fresh: his sister. According to Jones, Okatibbee Missionary Baptist Church gave the plot of land to the Chaney family so that James' relatives could be laid to rest next to him.

Chaney's tall, worn tombstone has two rusty, metal arms extending from behind that hold it upright.

"Some classmates of mine came out and fixed it so they couldn't turn it over no more," Jones said.

A plaque on the ground reads, "There are those who are alive but will never live. There are those who are dead yet will live forever. Great deeds inspire and encourage the living."

There was once a photograph of Chaney on the tombstone, Jones says. And an eternal flame. Both of those are gone now, broken and stolen. But there are more signs of love than hate: countless round pebbles circle Chaney's grave and sit atop his tombstone.

"That's a Jewish tradition," Jones said. "They put the rock up there, and it's a symbol that they have been there. So when you look at those rocks, you know that somebody's been here. So I tell people, 'When you come, put you a rock up there.'"

The next year was a big one for Roscoe Jones. In the spring of 1965, he went to Selma for the march over the Edmond Pettus bridge. In June, he graduated from Harris High School. Then, in the fall, he integrated Meridian Community College.

His experience in Selma has got him thinking about a lawsuit against the billy club.

"The police came into the church, in Brown Chapel. They were beating people in Brown Chapel. They had cattle prods. But I was not hit. People say, 'Man, that billy club went upside my head.' I say, 'Nu-uh. It didn't go upside mine.' Because I would have been crazier than what I am now! A stick upside the head? The brain is not equipped to do that. Outlaw the billy club. We probably got some concussions from them billy clubs. I think those billy clubs did a lot of damage."

But Selma was nothing compared to Jones' experience attending Meridian Community (then called "Junior") College.

"I didn't know my name," Jones said. "I thought my name was 'nigger.' 'Nigger this, nigger that. 'Nigger, nigger, nigger! Go home, nigger!'"

Dr. Bill Scaggs, who was president of MJC that year, remembers Jones taking the harassment in stride.

"Roscoe was well prepared by his experiences in the Meridian Freedom School and by our local NAACP and COFO team to lead MJC's desegregation challenges," he

said. “A good student, he knew when and how to confront the hecklers and kluckers, which fortunately were few among our students.”

Five African American women accompanied Jones that year, and he became a sort of protector for them.

“Where his ‘sisters’ were concerned, he was strong and forceful with their adversaries,” Scaggs said. “If any of the knuckle heads wanted confrontation, he was prepared. But he did not seek confrontation. Roscoe is gregarious, but was very disciplined and focused. His leadership style fit the situation beautifully.”

Jones went on to Yankton College in South Dakota, where he played football. He joined the Marine Corps and served in the Vietnam War. He married and had two children. He became the first black administrator for the Meridian school system.

Today, Jones is driving his Suzuki around Meridian, where he still lives. He talks to Jesse Palmer, who became his mentor, every single morning. He eats catfish for lunch. He answers phone call after phone call on his iPhone. He is working to preserve the facts and memories of Freedom Summer, many of which were destroyed along with the COFO and Baptist Seminary buildings. He is bitter. He wants to rebuild them.

“That was really his legacy,” Palmer said of the COFO building that was bulldozed in 2014.

“We don't need to keep destroying history,” Jones said, “because if you don't know where you came from, you don't know where you're going.”

His nonprofit organization, The Freedom '64 Project, makes that its mission: preservation. Enlightenment is another pillar of Jones' work.

“We need to get the facts out,” he said. “Because if you don't know, you're ignorant. You can become enlightened when you start learning. People need to be enlightened.”

For example, Jones believes that integration should be given a second thought.

“Integration hurt black schools, and it's still hurting black people because we never asked for integration,” he said. “The movement was about equality. That's where people missed the boat on this whole thing. 'Well, we've got integration, so the whole movement is over.' Oh, heck no! If you are equal, you don't need integration. Integration will come.”

The 69-year-old's face softens when he talks about why he is continuing the fight for civil rights to this day. He thinks back on how happenstance kept him from going to Philadelphia on June 21, 1964.

“I'm the fortunate one,” Jones said. “Sometimes I am, and sometimes, I don't feel I am.”

Jones grew quiet.

“I used to feel bad, but now, I look at it as there was a reason why,” he said. “And I need to find that reason, and I need to be more dedicated to do doing whatever that reason was.”

FLONZIE BROWN-WRIGHT

“Is this Flonzie Goodloe?”

She knew the voice on the telephone like her own father’s. Never, though, did she think it would utter her own name.

“Yes it is,” she replied.

“This is Martin King.”

His voice was slow and smooth and strong.

“Yes sir, Dr. King, how can I help you?”

“Well as you know, we’re on our way to Canton, and we’ll be in Canton for several days. I’m wondering if you can provide housing and food for 3,000 people?”

She didn’t think twice. When Martin Luther King Jr. asked something of you, you obliged.

“Well, yes sir.”

Close to 50 years later, she is Flonzie Goodloe Brown-Wright. Though her name has changed, her spirit and energy remain the 73-year-old’s defining characteristics.

“She just keeps going on and on,” Brown-Wright’s daughter, Cynthia Palmer, said. “She’s like the Energizer bunny.”

According to Brown-Wright, that tenacity comes from her family.

And she *loves* her family.

Inside of her Jackson home, the walls are a collage of framed family photographs. Her mother, her father, her brothers, her daughter, her sons, her grandchildren — they are all represented. They are an army of smiling faces. They are Brown-Wright's guardian angels.

She points to a photo of her mother, a woman who was part Caucasian, that is hung high on the "family wall." Despite the woman's advanced age at the time of the portrait, her skin is the color of a latte, and her dark hair so long and thick that it blankets her shoulders.

"She just taught us children to believe in ourselves," Brown-Wright said. "That there was nothing that we could not accomplish if we really applied ourselves."

And scattered among the family photos are certificates and plaques and awards, each a testament that Brown-Wright took her mother's words for truth.

From her father's side of the family, Brown-Wright gained other values.

"My dad's dad was the son of a slave," she said.

It was that grandfather, Papa Rob, deafened at the age of 16, who walked away from an oppressive sharecropping job without the ability to read or write.

"Papa Rob couldn't understand how at the end of the cropping season that he still owned the landowner money," Brown-Wright said. "He just couldn't understand that. He could count money faster than a banker, and so one day he just decided to take his kids and they walked off the plantation."

Instead of tolerating subjugation, Brown-Wright's grandfather made and sold cans of molasses for 35 cents each. He dressed hog heads for three dollars each. And he dug graves, seven dollars a hole.

"Every Monday morning, my grandfather left home with a shovel on his shoulders, and he walked all throughout the community to see who died so he could dig a grave," Brown-Wright said.

And as a result, Papa Rob's 13 children went on to own their own businesses. Brown-Wright's father became the first black electrician and plumber in Canton. But it didn't come easy.

"This was at a time when blacks were not given the opportunity to excel in certain areas, and so he was required to take the plumbing test on three occasions before they finally passed him," Brown-Wright said. "He wasn't trying to become the first black man to achieve anything. He just knew he had a talent. God had given him a skill."

And despite the discrimination against blacks in mid-twentieth century Mississippi, Brown-Wright's family was able to teach her grace.

"We were reared in a home where our family taught us just so much love. They taught us to love each other and to love people," she said. "Those are the kinds of seeds that my parents and [forefathers] planted within me. I'm just honored and proud to be a descendant. Slaves on one side, and then the other culture on the other side. So I have a mixture of culture to my being."

Much of that mixture comes from Brown-Wright's mother, who is of Irish, Indian and African American descent. According to Brown-Wright, they were affluent people. This is what allowed Brown-Wright shelter from much of the violence and racism in

Mississippi at that time. Her mother took her husband's small paycheck and sent their children to a private Catholic school because she felt it would be a better, safer education for them.

"I was educated by white nuns," Brown-Wright said. "I had been sheltered from the ugliness of racism because of my mother's culture."

And although it took her a while — and an altered perspective — to see it for what it was, the ugliness of racism was rampant in Brown-Wright's life.

"One day, the sheriff gave a black man \$20 to come and beat up my daddy," she said. "The young man had tears in his eyes because he was a friend of my daddy's. And so my daddy reached in his pocket and gave him \$20, and he said, 'This is what you do: You take this \$20 back to him, and you tell him that if he wants a piece of this black meat for him to come and get it himself. He may have not said 'black meat,' but anyway, you get the picture. And that was the end of that.'"

But there were other, more horrific acts of racism occurring all around Brown-Wright.

Emmett Till had been murdered when she was 13 years old. Then, two of her own teenage cousins were killed in a very similar fashion in Lee County. They were walking down the street to the store when "this truck pulls up with a lot of white guys in it drinking a lot of beer and offered them a ride," Brown-Wright said. "And they jumped in the truck, and they took them off in the woods and decapitated them and chained them to their truck and drug them."

Still, Brown-Wright could not comprehend the root of these evils.

“I knew about my cousins being killed, but I still did not know that that was associated with the kind of system in the world we lived in at that time,” she said. “And I knew about the two water fountains if you went uptown. I knew about that. And I knew that there was a culture that if you're on the sidewalk and you're meeting a white family, the black family had to step off and let the white family pass so that it was concluded that there was not any eye contact. I knew about that stuff from a historical perspective and learned even more about it, but then did not understand how that translated into whites not wanting to associate with us and that we were considered second class citizens.”

But then, a series of events challenged Brown-Wright’s way of thinking and forever altered the course of her life.

She became a teenage bride to a California man named Edward Goodloe and moved to Los Angeles where they had three children: a daughter, Cynthia, and two sons.

And because of her naiveté at the time, Brown-Wright assumed California was just like Mississippi. But then, she began to see the Freedom Rides on television and her marriage failed. She had no choice but to pack up her children and move back home.

It was one year later, in 1963, when NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson. And that is what woke up Brown-Wright, who was living in Biloxi at the time, to Mississippi’s racial problems.

“I simply could not understand one thing: how was it that a man — and I didn't even see him at that time as a black man — but how was it that a man who was fighting for civil rights or equal rights for people . . . How was it that he could be gunned down in the presence of his wife and children? How could that happen in America?” Brown-Wright said. “How was it that when he reached for the doorknob, a man would blow out

his heart? In the presence of his wife and children? I couldn't understand that. I just couldn't understand that. And so, I said, 'Well if the hatred is this strong, then somebody has got to be out there trying to help people understand that hatred is not the way.'"

And that was it.

"That's how my movement days began," Brown-Wright said. "I just kind of found myself caught up in this movement."

Brown-Wright returned to her home of Canton, Mississippi, where she with her three children moved in with her mother and father. She had no job, so she began putting her musical abilities to work for civil rights. She organized a choir to sing freedom songs at NAACP mass meetings, and one night, she caught the attention of the organization's branch president.

"After the meeting was over, he came up to me and said, 'Young lady, you know, we need you to work with us. We need you to really play a role with us.' And I said, 'Well I don't know what to do.' He said, 'Oh, what you're doing — teaching and singing and talking.' Because they said I had a gift of gab, but anyway, I understood issues and I could articulate them, and I'm proud to say that I had, at that time, great analytical skills."

It was because of that night Brown-Wright was paid a visit by Charles Evers, a man she claims is very different than his late brother. He came to her parents home to ask if she would work for the NAACP.

"Well, let me just talk with my parents," Brown-Wright replied. "Because my mother and daddy — they weren't afraid, because they were very, very outspoken in their own right, but they knew that I had those three children."

In the end, though, she accepted the responsibility.

"It's just about trying to do my bit — whatever that little bit is — to make things better," Brown-Wright said. "Because that's the right thing to do."

It was the right thing, yes, but Brown-Wright soon found that it was not the easy one.

"A lot of times, I'd come to work and there would be three or four guys in their trucks brandishing their guns and sit there all day while I worked," she said. "A lot of times, I'd come to work and they would have put under my door their calling card that 'The eyes of the Klan are upon you.'"

In fact, the Canton NAACP office had closed for a while prior to Brown-Wright's involvement because of the danger.

"If people found out you were an NAACP member, you'd get shot, shot at, beaten, drugged, assassinated and all of that," she said.

For example, a minister named L.S. Johnson had been involved with the NAACP at one time, and paid the price, according to Brown-Wright.

"When [the Klan] found out he was the president and solicited membership, they beat him so badly — disfigured his face, beat him up — and so he went to St. Louis and was there with family," she said.

But after that, after Charles Evers took over his brother's work and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, many organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) came to Canton. Things got better, according to Brown-Wright, but it remained very dangerous to be a part of the movement, and not just in Canton.

"There were times where I was fearful because the three civil rights workers had been killed. The four little girls in Birmingham had been killed. Medgar Evers had been killed. George Metcalf had been firebombed, and I went to his hospital bed in Natchez," she said.

Metcalf, who was the president of his local NAACP branch, left the tire company after a night's work to get in his truck, turn the ignition, and have it blow up.

"I went to his bedside, and there was so much glass in his system, in his flesh, they would have to pick it out with tweezers," Brown-Wright said. "I mean, I *witnessed* that."

And she knew that many could not be trusted.

"We knew that some of the same townspeople that we were doing business with in the day would put their sheets on at night and throw bombs in our yards," she said.

All that violence and fear wore on Brown-Wright, but it never defeated her.

"There were just a lot of things that I simply could not understand," she said. "I didn't want to be a martyr. I didn't want to be killed for my children. So yes, there were times when I was afraid, but I felt that I was doing what I had been chosen to do."

She protected herself for her children's sake, but they were her number one concern.

"When my kids got out of school everyday, I would follow them home on another route to be sure that they got home safely," Brown-Wright said. "And they never knew that I was doing that until about 10 years ago. And this has been 50 years ago, but I never told them that I followed them home everyday until they got home safely. Because I didn't want to put any fear in them. These were just things we had to do."

Things they had to do in order to continue the fight.

“I was caught up, but it was for the right reason,” Brown-Wright said. “And I felt that if I could just play a small role in awakening people to their rights, then I had an obligation to do that. And I didn't want to die, but if it meant my life, then I would have hoped that my life would have meant something.”

One night, it very nearly meant her life.

The stretch of Old Highway 80 between Mount Beulah College and Interstate 20 was about seven miles long and everyone in the movement knew the rule: don't get caught on it at night. The school was near Edwards, Mississippi, a small town about an hour southwest of Canton, and held training sessions for Head Start and various poverty programs. One afternoon, Brown-Wright drove there with an older woman from Canton to hear NAACP attorney Marion Wright speak. They got caught up in the program, and before they knew it, the sky was growing dark.

The women returned to Brown-Wright's truck and set out for Canton just as the sun was setting, and they knew they had made a mistake. The narrow road was even darker under the shadows of the surrounding forests. But Brown-Wright proceeded at a normal speed, knowing she just needed to get to I-20.

But then, in her rearview mirror, an unfamiliar truck grew closer and closer to her vehicle. Soon, she was able to see the men inside. They were all white, and the cabin was full of them.

The truck revved its engine, and before Brown-Wright could work up enough speed, the driver rammed her back bumper and pushed her vehicle off the road. Her truck plummeted down into the kudzu vines, but luckily, she was a good driver.

“My daddy taught me to drive when I was nine,” she said. “And he taught me to drive one of those stick shift trucks, and I was driving a stick shift truck.”

She steered it back onto pavement when shots rang out. The men had pulled guns on the two black women. Neither of them were hit, and a kick of adrenaline kept them alive.

“I was able to regain control, and I was able to double clutch that car,” Brown-Wright said. “And I was soon back on the highway, and they just drove on off.”

Fifty years later, when Brown-Wright tells that story, her voice gets high-pitched. It upsets her — more today than at the time, she says. Then, fear was just not an option.

“It's a strange dichotomy,” she said. “I describe it as sometimes I was so afraid that I was too afraid to be afraid. I was just too afraid to be afraid.”

When James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner went missing in June of 1964, Brown-Wright had a bad feeling. She knew their fate.

“We all knew they were dead,” she said.

But Canton and other towns across Mississippi were gearing up to host hundreds of volunteers for Freedom Summer, a project developed by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to increase voter registration and education among Mississippi's

black population. Most of the guest volunteers were college-age whites from northern cities just as two of the missing men were.

“We already knew they were dead, but the question was to these young people — 18, 19-year-olds — was, 'Do you still want to go to Mississippi?' We contacted their parents that, 'You have an option to not go.' Not one said no,” Brown-Wright said. “They all said, 'We're going to catch those buses, and we're going.' Not one young person said, 'I am not going.’”

And because no one backed out, Brown-Wright soon had six white college students coming to stay with her for the summer. She had agreed to house volunteers in addition to her duties with the NAACP.

"I picked [my volunteers] up and brought them to my home and just gave them a little overview of what to expect and the kinds of things we were trying to do,” Brown-Wright said. “The Freedom Schools were being organized, so we just tried to give them kind of a layout of what we were trying to accomplish and how they could fit into that. Because we kind of knew our communities, and we knew how they could best fit.”

In addition to Brown-Wright’s orientation, the students had been through a training session in Oxford, Ohio.

"They were trained on self-defense techniques. They were trained on cultural techniques,” Brown-Wright said. “They were trained not to come in trying to take over, because we knew the lay of the land better than they did.”

And, according to Brown-Wright, they listened and everyone got along well.

“We had fun,” she said. “We'd sit on my porch at night, and one had a guitar. And I would teach them — we would sing freedom songs on the porch, and I cooked those

traditional Southern dishes, and people came by and dropped food off to help feed them. So it was just really a community of people coming together.”

Cynthia Goodloe Palmer, Brown-Wright’s daughter, was just a small child that summer.

“I kind of vaguely remember music on the front porch,” she said.

Palmer, Brown-Wright’s first child, is now the executive director for the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Inc. That summer, though, she was just five years old and had to share her room with a volunteer.

“I think I was probably fine, you know, the more the merrier,” she said. “We were just happy; that was a fun time.”

Brown-Wright had just bought her own little house and moved out of her parents’ home. Ten people under one roof was difficult, but she made it work.

“They slept on sofas, my two boys slept together and they slept in their beds, then I had a couch back in the den,” Brown-Wright said. “Someone shared my daughter’s room, so we just slept them just all over.”

It was rare that they all spent much time at home together anyway.

“We were like ships passing in the dark,” Brown-Wright said. “Because they got up with an assignment every day, and they knew that on this particular day they were going to be taken to a particular precinct or to a particular location to knock on doors and to pass out fliers, to be in the meetings and things of this nature.”

Sometimes, things of that nature weren’t well-received.

“There was a lot of opposition from the townspeople, because here they were: white kids coming into Mississippi who lived in our homes, who went to town with us,

who rode in our cars to the gas stations, things like that,” Brown-Wright said. “So it was quite a . . . quite a day. Quite a day in time.”

The volunteers who stayed with Brown-Wright that summer, though, were not harassed or arrested like many of the others were. She made sure that they reported in to her each day, and in addition, they attended regular meetings at the Freedom House, where many stayed. These precautions acted as an added layer of protection, according to Brown-Wright.

"We maintained pretty close ties with them because we didn't have to call their mamas and daddies and say, 'Your 18-year-old baby Joe Beth has been killed!'" Brown-Wright said. “So we knew we had an extra layer of work to do to keep them safe.”

Brown-Wright continued this level of care even after Freedom Summer when, in 1967, eight students from Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, stayed with her in what was a continuation of the 1964 project. Charles Evers had organized it in order to continue the fight for voter registration.

With that particular group of students, Brown-Wright had a different tactic for protection.

“I took them to the sheriff's office,” she said. “And I identified each one of them to the sheriff, who was white — very mean sheriff, Billy Noble. I said, 'These are my children. They're going to be going door to door doing voter registration.' And I said, 'Don't arrest them. Don't beat them. Do not crack their heads.' And I had a little pistol, and I laid my gun on the counter and I told them, 'Y'all can threaten my life. I chose to be in the movement. But if you come to my home at 344 Boyd Street, I'm going to leave

your people in the window. Because I intend to shoot them. And here's the gun I intend to do it with.”

Looking back to the summer of 1964, Brown-Wright says that Freedom Summer “was a success for what it was intended to do.” She said, “It brought into the South an awareness that we all are equal. It brought awareness to the power structure that we all bleed red, and that the color of your skin may be different than mine.”

And a lot of that awareness occurred because of the volunteers, according to Brown-Wright.

“I believe that they were convinced that they would be a part of this movement maybe not knowing what to expect from day to day. They knew there would be danger. They knew there could be jailings and beatings and all those other things,” she said. “People were willing to put their bodies and lives on the line. Because these young people were not Mississippians. They were going to come and go, but they felt that in that particular time and space, there they were needed to help with the cause. And so, you can call it socialism — whatever you want to call it. The premise is: If you're not willing to help someone, then how is life really worth living to you?”

In the fall of 1968, Brown-Wright was elected as an election commissioner of Madison County. She became the first female African American to hold public office in the state of Mississippi since Reconstruction. The black community had put pressure on her to run, which Brown-Wright's daughter thinks is a compliment.

“That meant a lot during that time that people would put their trust and confidence in her,” Palmer said, “that she would represent them in a manner being a person of integrity and a strong person to endure the threat, and so I think that says a lot about her character.”

But Brown-Wright was hesitant to run until the day she went to register to vote.

She said that she went by herself that day and hoped the registrar was having a good day. She picked up the 21-item questionnaire, and when she got to number 17, she had to draw a random question from a cigar box. She drew “habeas corpus,” which she knew nothing about. She improvised.

After she turned it in, the registrar — a mean man, according to Brown-Wright — looked her in the eye and said, “You didn’t pass.”

“And I knew not to get too loud because the sheriff's office was right across the hall,” Brown-Wright said. “And I said, 'Well sir, what was my mistake?' And he said, 'Nigger, I told you you didn't pass. You get the hell out of my office.' And so, when I walked down the corridor of the same courthouse where ‘A Time to Kill’ was filmed, I said, 'I'm going to get your job.' That's when I decided that I was going to run for office. And so, when election time came, I didn't run for his position, I ran for the position of the Madison County board of election commissioners which supervises his office. And I won it. November the 5th, 1968.”

And if that wasn't victory enough, Brown-Wright had defeated a white man who'd held the position for years.

But it wasn't just the black vote that won her race.

"I got a telephone call from one of the white gentlemen who had been elected," Brown-Wright said. "And I didn't recognize the voice because I hadn't heard it before. And he said, 'Mrs. Goodloe—' And first of all, he surprised me by calling me 'Mrs. Goodloe,' because we had to file a lawsuit just to get a courtesy title. We had to file a *lawsuit* just to get a *courtesy* title! And so when he called me 'Mrs. Goodloe,' he said, 'I want to be the first one to congratulate you on your election.' And he said, 'I will be working with you, and I want you to know that you've got a lot of white votes because people believe that you will do the right thing.' And he said, 'You will learn who I am later, but for now I will not identify myself, but I want you to know that I've got your back.' When he told me that I had gotten a lot of white votes because people felt that I would do the right thing, I was just absolutely flabbergasted."

Brown-Wright's supporters were correct in their thinking; she did a lot of good in office. Three times she filed lawsuits. Three times she won. Each improved the equality and fairness of the political system in Madison County.

"So my track record of filing lawsuits and winning them against the board soon sent a message to the board that, 'Look. I'm not going to do something just to do it,'" Brown-Wright said. "Some of the things that I did back in the day have affected how Mississippi runs a lot of its systems today."

Daphne Chamberlain-Wilson, assistant professor of history at Tougaloo College, said the same thing.

“Her advocacy for the inclusion of African Americans in the political process has resulted in tremendous change in this state.”

It was in part those successes that inspired Brown-Wright to write her memoir, *Looking Back to Move Ahead*. But it wasn't a simple task.

"It took three tries for me to start because the first time I tried to write it and I began to revisit all those images, I found that I was very angry and I had to put it aside. I just had to really give myself an attitude adjustment so that I could present an objective piece of work. And it's a bestseller, so I guess it's touching somebody.”

The title, though, came easier.

"I never wanted white people to feel that I blamed them for anything,” Brown-Wright said. “I didn't want them to feel as though I thought the things that happened in Mississippi and in the South, that they personally did it. And so I had to put myself in a frame of mind that I could be objective. So looking back helped me to shape who I am, but then moving ahead is where I want to go and where I want to take people.”

Where she went after her time in office was Ohio. In 1989, Brown-Wright remarried — a very fine gentleman, she says — and started her own freelance consulting business.

"I don't like that eight to five everyday. I'm too old for that,” she said.

She has only been back in Mississippi for the past five years, but Mississippi never left her. She is regularly asked to lecture to people of all ages and distinctions about the movement.

"I'm just kind of on the radar, I guess,” she said.

And she is. In fact, the courtroom in the Canton courthouse is being named in her honor.

“I’m most proud of that is because that’s the same room that my daddy sat in to take his test 60 years ago,” she said. “That’s the same room that he was denied that opportunity to get his license. That same room.”

Palmer said it’s an honor.

"I'm very proud of her. I don't know of many courtrooms named after women, and to have that distinction is very special to me and to my family and to her loved ones and coworkers and church members," Palmer said.

Although Brown-Wright recognizes that the honor says a lot about Mississippi’s progress with race relations, she claims that the movement never ended and lives on today. It’s just changed faces, she said.

Over 50 years ago, the movement was organized “tight as a drum,” Brown-Wright said.

“We would come back together to assess what we had done to see, ‘Did it make a difference? Do we need to change strategy? What did we accomplish for the local people? What do we need to do to make things better?’ So, we were tight.”

Today, though, there is still a need for that effort, according to Brown-Wright, because the fight is not over.

According to Chamberlain-Wilson, this is something Brown-Wright teaches often.

“Like so many other sung and unsung civil rights heroes, Mrs. Wright made significant contributions to the cause of black freedom and empowerment,” said

Chamberlain-Wilson, who is also Tougaloo's coordinator of civil rights and social justice initiatives. "And she continues to remind the younger generation that, though people of African descent have gone from the cotton fields to the White House, the struggle continues."

Brown-Wright especially knows that racism is still thriving in the United States, though, because 25 years ago her family felt its sting.

"My grandson was shot 15 times and killed sitting in a wheelchair because he couldn't walk," Brown-Wright said.

He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, according to Brown-Wright. She said that he was implicated in a robbery even though he was in a wheelchair and couldn't walk. When policeman arrived, he was sitting on his hands in his wheelchair, and they demanded that he give up his gun. He told them repeatedly that he didn't have a gun, but, according to Brown-Wright, the officers persisted.

"He was sitting on his hands, and so finally when he pulled his hands out to throw his hands up, they thought he was coming out with a gun and killed him. Sitting in a wheelchair and in front of his mother in California," Brown-Wright said. "There's nothing like going to the morgue and seeing your grandson laying on a cooling board, shot 15 times. His body looked like a checkerboard."

Dr. Martin Luther King was on his way to Canton, and Flonzie Brown-Wright had to come up with food and housing for 3,000 people.

King was near the end of a 1966 march that covered more than 150 miles and penetrated the heart of Mississippi. He and other civil rights leaders had taken up the procession after its original lone marcher, James Meredith, was shot and wounded south of Memphis.

“I just started calling people all over Canton: 'You've got to start cooking.' And they start cooking pots and pans of stuff,” Brown-Wright said. “In Canton at that time, there was a strip called The Hollow that was filled with black businesses — primarily restaurants — and so I told all the restaurant owners, 'You've got to cook extra hamburgers, extra hotdogs, extra french fries, bowls of salad, potato salad, greens, peas, cornbread, muffins, potato chips.’”

By the time they arrived, she had orchestrated the whole thing.

"People were sleeping on porches, in yards, lawn chairs, swings, sleeping bags, floors of people's homes. Because we had that community togetherness,” she said.

According to Brown-Wright, churches were being opened for people to sleep in, and the gymnasium of her childhood Catholic school was even being put to use. King even gave a speech in that gym the night of his arrival.

But the next day, after the march to the courthouse, Brown-Wright had the honor of introducing Canton’s esteemed guest.

"I had the chance to introduce [Dr. King], and there were thousands and thousands of people in the South entrance of the courthouse,” Brown-Wright said.

She was, after all, the “mover and shaker” in Canton. That’s what someone had told King, anyway. That’s why he called on her.

"In Martin's quiet time, when he was not in front of the public, [he was] very funny — I mean, what I call a 'cut up,'" Brown-Wright said. "Very funny. You know, even the day he was killed, he and Andrew Young were having a pillow fight in their room. Very comical, very funny, very lighthearted, very *jovial*. But then when he was out in the public presence, it was a different persona."

He called on Brown-Wright for a personal favor during his stay in Canton as well.

"Dr. King called me and said, 'You know, I want some soul food.' And I called my mother and asked Mother to cook him some food. So she cooked peas and fried chicken and cornbread and, I think, candied yams. And maybe a sweet potato pie. So I took him and put him in my little car and took him to my mom's house for a real meal."

But Brown-Wright's most sacred memory of King is much more somber. She says that it has impacted her more on a continuous basis than anything else in her career.

She and King were in a room with a handful of others planning the Canton courthouse march.

"He told us that he was not going to be with us very long, that his days were numbered because he was always getting death threats — they had burned crosses in the yard of his family in Atlanta," Brown-Wright said. "And he said, 'There are things that you all must do once I am gone. It's not a matter of if; it's just a matter of when. But the 12 of you must continue this struggle as long as you see racism. As long as you see separatism and hatred, the 12 of you in this town must continue this fight.' And I'm one of three living. And that is why we are doing this interview today. I made a vow."

MACARTHUR COTTON

For three days in 1963, MacArthur Cotton hung by his wrists in a prison cell that smelled like urine and body odor.

He was given no food, no water, no relief.

He was in Parchman selflessly; he wanted his people to have the right to vote. It wasn't the first or last time he would be arrested, but it was definitely the worst.

MacArthur Cotton was born on April 23, 1942, the second to last of 16 children. His father's father had been a slave. His father, born in 1874, worked in education, a job through which he met MacArthur's mother. He was also an adamant voter and instilled the importance of civic duty in MacArthur from an early age. Even when harassment of blacks became heightened after the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court ruling and the formation of the Citizens' Council, Cotton's father took a stand for his right to vote in their hometown of Kosciusko, Mississippi.

"They had taken him off the books," Cotton said. "But he stayed there way into the night before he came home. Of course, they probably threw his [ballot] in the can or something, but they let him cast his vote."

That is one of the few stories of racial clashing Cotton has of Jim Crow Kosciusko. Besides an incident at the freshly integrated county fair in which a black girl was slapped, Cotton remembers integration coming easier to Kosciusko than other parts of Mississippi. But that's not saying much.

"We didn't have [problems] right there in my neighborhood," Cotton said. "Of course, you was really affected by it, and you hear about it, and when you left home or your community, you knew there were certain places you didn't go."

That didn't stop him from pushing the envelope. Cotton and his friends would drink out of the white water fountain in the courthouse just to get a rise out of locals.

"They'd say, 'Hey, hey! Wait! You're supposed to go to the other one!'" Cotton said.

Sometimes, they'd go to a restaurant they knew didn't serve blacks.

"It didn't make no difference anyway, so I remember occasionally I'd go buy a bar of candy or something, pop it out the machine, and then sit up on the counter," Cotton said.

And, anyway, Cotton remembers his family as being somewhat removed from their community.

"We were basically independent, in a sense of the word," he said. "We grew what we needed for the most part."

Still, Cotton had a sense of stirring in the South. The Montgomery bus boycotts were in full swing just before his 13th birthday.

"We were aware of that and other little things happening," he said.

And then, that summer, the nation glared upon Mississippi with the murder of a boy Cotton's age: Emmett Till.

"I think that impacted us to have a kid that could have been my playmate or on the team or something like that," he said. "There was fear in the sense of thinking somebody might come in and do us the same way. That agonizing kind of feeling of oppression — you just had to double down.

As Cotton grew older and Mississippi more volatile, a resistance grew within him.

"I can't say that we weren't afraid, but it was more like there was a state of fear," he said. "I don't know exactly how to put this, but you know that you can't stay here. You know that you can't accept the kind of lifestyle and oppression that we were under. It was kind of like two different kinds of fear. We were afraid to go, and we were afraid to stay too, in a way. I never saw it as an option to accept it. My parents didn't teach me that I was less than everybody. They didn't teach us that, so it wasn't that easy to just accept."

So after graduation, Cotton found himself interested in Tougaloo College because of its philosophies.

"I knew Tougaloo was progressive because I had a couple sisters to graduate from there," he said. "I wanted to go because it was a progressive place."

In Jackson, Cotton found a community of like-minded people on the campus in 1960.

"My attitude didn't change that much," he said. "My possibilities changed. Now I'm with some students who feel the same way I do."

He joined the youth chapter of the NAACP and worked along with other students at voter registration and planning demonstrations like the sit-in at Jackson's Carnegie

Library. Cotton got to know NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers during the years just prior to his 1963 assassination when he was working closely with Tougaloo students.

"He was quite an intellectual. Very kind and honest," Cotton said of Evers.

"Strong kind of person, you know. Kind of quiet at the same time. He spoke when it was necessary. Just a real gentleman, so to speak. A captain — because he was definitely our captain."

Another frequent Tougaloo visitor was Bob Moses, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC. School had just ended for the year when Moses paid Cotton a visit in the library. He told him about his plan to take some volunteers from the campus' SNCC chapter down to McComb, Mississippi, to work on voter registration.

"Well, you know, being brought up like I was, that sounded just great," Cotton said.

He wasn't sure sit-ins were entirely effective.

"I was afraid that wouldn't be tangible enough to make sure everything changed," he said. "It could so easily flip right back, you know. So, when [Moses] said, 'voter registration,' I was like, 'Yeah, that's cool!'"

Southwest Mississippi, though, was notorious for being nasty.

"I was sent over to Walthall County, which was — whew! — one of the worst places at the time," he said.

Cotton, Moses and around 11 other volunteers had their work cut out for them in the area. The circuit clerk, who had quit school after the eighth grade, wouldn't pass any black applicant, not even a history professor from Alcorn State University.

"We were kids," Cotton said. "I kind of thought, at first, 'with a little encouragement, or whatever — and there will be a little harassment — we'll get people registered.' I didn't think that they would put up such effort. I thought that we'd get people registered, and then when one of us try to run for something that that's when it was going to start. That's what I figured. *Shoot*. They didn't want not one person to register, which really changed the whole movement, actually. If there wasn't so much resistance, things would have been different."

If there hadn't been so much resistance, Cotton said he wouldn't have witnessed the circuit clerk beat his friend and fellow SNCC member.

"John Hardy was going to pick up some applications at the courthouse, and I was going over to the library," Cotton said, recalling that afternoon.

The two buildings were relatively close to one another.

"But I noticed that as I was walking to the library, you know how you can see people looking? At first, I thought they were looking at me. And I'm praying real hard," he said. "But then, after a while, I started to see. You know how you can see people looking past you, kinda? And so I turned around, and the circuit clerk had met him at the doorstep and beat him with his pistol upside the head."

There was no time to think about what he was watching take place. Cotton said he rushed to his friend, who was bleeding and hurt on the courthouse steps.

"You don't really think too much about how you're feeling," Cotton said. "You're thinking, 'How am I going to pull this off? Here I've got a man bleeding, and we've got to call for help. We've got to get some transportation and all.'"

He said he wiped Hardy's face and head and took him to the nearest pay phone in front of a funeral home. There was a protocol for that type of situation.

"The plan was that you had to have about 20 cents," Cotton said. "You wanted to call the central office, and you wanted to call the Justice Department."

And then, seek help.

"He wasn't hospitalized, but he was bleeding pretty bad, so we had to take him on over to McComb because we couldn't get no medical care over there," he said.

Hardy recovered, so Cotton didn't dwell on that day too much. There wasn't time. And remaining nonviolent sometimes meant moving right on and not looking back. But decades have given Cotton a rewind button.

"It's amazing. I probably think more about it now than I did then, in a way."

On that day, Cotton was doing what it took. He was bearing harassment and threats and cruel stares and his friend was being battered with a blunt revolver. But time has revealed the victories that made it worthwhile. Even just a decade later, Cotton's work was coming to fruition. It was around this time that a man named Frank Figgers was involved with the Jackson Human Rights Project at Tougaloo College. His work became a continuation of Cotton's, although SNCC was, for the most part, no longer active on campus.

"We always refer to him as 'Brother Mac,'" Figgers said. "He was sort of a big brother to me. A mentor, if you will."

Figgers, who served as an election commissioner in Madison County, said he sees Cotton's work a catalyst.

“Because the work that those students did, other things began to happen because of their sacrifices and the courage that they had,” Figgers said. “So anybody who stepped out there to make a change, you'd have to elevate them to hero and heroine status.”

That summer in McComb, though, was just the beginning of what Cotton would do — and sacrifice — for voter registration in Mississippi.

When he returned to Tougaloo in the fall, the freedom rides were beginning to take place all over the South, including Jackson. Cotton and fellow SNCC members began assisting the freedom riders who were routinely arrested when their buses entered the state capital. Some were local activists, but many were far from home and were helpless upon their release from jail. Cotton used his connections to provide them with accommodations within the black community. He even got himself arrested — for buying a bus ticket on the white side of the station — in order to give Jackson more exposure.

“We didn't call ourselves 'freedom riders,’” Cotton said. “But everybody else, if they saw a black and a white person together, or if they saw somebody trying to work on voter registration, they were 'freedom riders.' That was their word. I never used it.”

And even after the freedom rides had died down and Cotton left Jackson, he continued his efforts at voter registration. This time, though, he was in new territory: the Mississippi Delta. In 1963, Cotton was working with SNCC in Greenwood on a “freedom day,” an idea developed to put pressure on the circuit clerk. On these freedom days, hundreds of blacks would gather at the courthouse to register to vote, led by Cotton and his team. Local authorities were outraged, and on one particular freedom day, demanded the crowd disperse.

“So of course, we didn't leave,” Cotton said. “We were trying to establish ourselves as a part of the community. We were trying to say, 'Hey, this is too important for us to walk away from. So they arrested us and actually put us in the county farm.’”

Cotton had been arrested before — “not too many times,” yet he couldn't count them. This time was different, though. Over a dozen workers were taken deep into the Delta, to the outskirts of Leflore County, where they were forced to dig ditches. According to Cotton, the Grand Dragon of the local Ku Klux Klan was prone to watching them work while they were isolated way out in the woods. But the overseer in charge of their work gang couldn't get comfortable.

"The poor thing was just scared to death,” Cotton said. “You know, we weren't going to bother him because that wasn't a part of our philosophy, but every time we would move or fall or something, he would jump and grab his gun.”

After about two weeks, Cotton and the other detainees decided that situation was too dangerous. So they refused to work, and they refused to eat.

This is how MacArthur Cotton went to Parchman.

"It was kind of horrible,” he said. “We were in the same cell block where the [electric] chair was. And that's one thing you'll never forget you could smell: that burnt flesh.”

The men were stripped down to their underwear. They had no clothes, no blankets on their beds, not even a commode — it was simply a hole in the concrete floor .

But that wasn't even the worst part of those 39 days Cotton spent in prison. He remembers that one time, there was a man on death row who refused to eat his food.

“So I was silly enough to ask for it,” Cotton said. “He said, ‘Okay, yeah, you want that? Okay, we’re going to see that you get it.’ And they sent me a plate with a piece of cornbread about the size of a dice and I think with three butter beans and whatever else. I mean, small, small, *small*. And I threw it back.”

Cotton’s temper got him hung up by his wrists. He was just tall enough to stand on his toes, but the pressure was too much to stay like that for long.

“You go from resting your toes to resting your wrists until you give out,” Cotton said. “I guess I eventually passed out, but I wasn’t 100 percent unconscious.”

After that, Cotton’s memory gets foggy. Time elapsed like it does in a dream. He gauged the days by how often his cellmates were being fed — and how often he wasn’t — and concluded that he hung for three.

“But being a teenager, early 20s, I guess one of the most humiliating things that can happen to you is when you start releasing yourself on your clothes and you’re just there,” Cotton said. “You can’t do anything about it.”

Cotton found out a couple of years ago that hanging like that without food or water can kill a person. He walked away from it, though, with wrists that looked as though they had simply been cuffed for a few hours.

His motivating force wasn’t bruised, either.

“I never thought about wanting to give up,” Cotton said. “What would that look like?”

So he didn’t, and the next year, 1964, he found himself caught up in what was being called Freedom Summer — a familiar program with a new name.

“We had summer projects from '61 up until then,” Cotton said. “It was a continuation.”

But this time, there was lots of outside help coming into Mississippi, an idea that Cotton admits the Council of Federated Organizations, COFO, was worried about.

“The majority of the staff was against the summer project,” he said. “When I say, 'against it,' I felt like it was a little too soon. I felt like we needed a little more grassroots organizing and making sure we got some strong contacts.”

Nevertheless, Cotton wound up in Memphis, Tennessee, conducting orientations for student volunteers entering Mississippi. He was working for COFO, Mississippi’s umbrella organization that encompassed smaller ones such as SNCC as well as the powerful NAACP. Cotton spent nearly three weeks in Memphis, during which time the three civil rights workers went missing in Neshoba County. Incoming volunteers were fearful, but Cotton admits that the incident made his job easier.

“It was like a tailgating party at one time because, you know, students were out of school,” he said. “And that grounded people. Can you imagine trying to explain to somebody who grew up in Boston, 'This is no joke. This is real.' Well then now, they're beginning to understand.”

Cotton returned to Jackson after his short stint in Memphis to continue helping with the project. He said he worked behind the scenes doing logistical tasks that kept him busy. If someone donated textbooks, for example, Cotton would be the one to deliver them to their designated freedom school.

He said he met lots of volunteers from outside of Mississippi, but he became friends with the natives.

“You get closer to the people from Mississippi that are working because the volunteers weren't there very long,” he said.

The two types of volunteers were further separated by differing attitudes of the summer project, according to Cotton.

“They were looking at it as a movement, and we were looking at it as a struggle,” he said. “What can we put in place that's going to be substantial and is going to sustain us forever? And they were looking at it like, 'I've got a job to do kind of and I'm going to go on.’”

But overall, with the hindsight of 52 years, Cotton thinks that Freedom Summer was successful, at least in some ways.

“It succeeded in what it was designed for. It wasn't exactly designed for what I had in mind,” he admitted. “I just felt that if we had taken a little more time it wouldn't have cost as many lives. But understand that I'm not the kind of person to say, 'Well if it would have happened this way...’”

Today, MacArthur Cotton lives in Kosciusko and has three great-grandchildren. He drives a bright blue pickup truck and wears family reunion t-shirts. He is soft-spoken and quick to smile.

“Today, he is wise beyond his years,” said Frank Figgers, who has known Cotton since 1969. “But 50 years ago or 45 years ago, he was wise beyond his years.”

After 1964, Cotton went back to school and then started a construction business that would allow him the flexibility to continue working for the movement, a trajectory he didn't necessarily choose.

"I think I was maybe born into it," he said.

So naturally, he's not content with today's race relations.

"I am quite concerned. I see resegregation of schools," he said. "Just study and work and do the little that you can where you are."

He's doing plenty where he is, and he looks forward to the days when he reunites with people from his past. He admits that prison is a bonding experience, but the constant pressure of the movement in general was enough to fuse people into his life. He is a Mississippi Civil Rights Veteran, and he delights in attending the annual conferences.

"It's like we never really departed," he said. "When we get back together, we sit down and enjoy each other. It's just like old family."

PATTI MILLER AND ALICE ROBERTSON

Patti Miller was over 800 miles from home on a bus full of unknown souls she was sure would hate her if they knew.

It was the summer of 1964, and she was on her way to Meridian, Mississippi, the scariest place in her 20-year-old world. Miller stared out the Greyhound's window. She watched the trees blur by, and she thought of uniformed men searching similar forests in Neshoba County. They were looking for three bodies. She imagined them finding one that was her own.

Miller left her home state of Iowa to participate in Mississippi's Freedom Summer after her junior year at Drake University in Des Moines. She had grown up in a small, all-white town. When she was little, she had admired the image of children of all races holding hands around the globe.

Miller even believed in that harmony until she came to Mississippi.

During the 1961-1962 school year, Miller's church group decided to take a trip to the deep South over spring break. A Southern white woman was the director of Drake's Wesley Foundation, a Methodist organization for college students, and was aware of the civil rights movement. Miller, on the other hand, was ignorant.

So when they made a pit stop on their way to New Orleans in either rural Mississippi or Louisiana — Miller can't remember exactly — she was shocked by what she found. Two waiting rooms at the bus station: one clean and uncrowded for whites and the other grimy and congested for "Colored."

"And, literally, when I talk about this, I say, 'It was sort of like I became an activist overnight,'" Miller said. "I saw the colored waiting room. I saw the differences between the two. I saw that they were separating the blacks from the whites. And it just infuriated me. Something in me just said, 'This is so wrong.'"

Whatever spark was lit that day inside of Miller was a raging fire by the time she returned to Des Moines.

"When I got back to my campus after that experience, I was a changed person," Miller said. "I had just had my eyes open that I lived in a country that was completely different than I thought. I thought I lived in a country where everyone was equal. That's how naive I was."

Miller involved herself in as many human rights causes as her university offered, but those Southern waiting rooms plagued her memory until the day she spotted a brochure about Freedom Summer on a school bulletin board.

"I took it down, and I read it, and I just knew instantly that it was something I wanted to do," Miller said. "This was kind of in response to that experience my freshman year. It was like, 'Oh my gosh, there *is* something I can do! People *are* trying to change things in the South.'"

Miller was the only one of her peers interested in sacrificing a summer to help blacks register to vote in Mississippi. But nothing was going to stop her after she was

accepted to volunteer — not a lack of companionship, not even the late-June news of three civil rights workers' disappearance in Neshoba county.

"I was very fearful, but I never once had the thought, 'I'm not going,'" Miller said. "I think a part of it was my naiveté. You know, you can read about something, but you can't put yourself in the situation and imagine what it was like. And I was just so deeply committed to the cause of civil rights that I would never think of not going."

Her parents didn't even try to dissuade her.

"We were a very churchgoing family, and I put it in terms that I felt that as a young Christian person that I should be involved," Miller said. "And they said, 'If this is something you really believe in, then we will support you.'"

So after summer school was over, the upcoming senior in college boarded a bus in Des Moines, and her parents sent her South. She was alone, and they all knew she would be in danger.

"I look back on it and just can't even imagine what it was like for them the time that I was gone," Miller said of her parents. "But they never tried to stop me from going."

And although Miller admits naiveté, she knew that civil rights workers were hated in the South.

"So I made a real point to not let anyone know why I was going," Miller said. "There was this Southern woman that I was riding on the bus with, and she was quizzing me about why I was going to Mississippi, so I told her that I had family there. She was obviously a very prejudiced woman."

But after several agonizing hours, Miller made it to Jackson, where she attended Freedom Summer orientation at Tougaloo College with a other students like herself.

Because of the turnout, she assumed that several students would go to each station across the state. However, when the leaders announced “Meridian,” they called Miller’s name but no one else’s.

“And, of course, I knew that Meridian was where the three who had been killed were from,” Miller said. “Then they gave me a bus ticket, and they said, ‘Just go to Meridian, and somebody will pick you up at the station.’ And that’s all they told me.”

The bus ride from Jackson to Meridian became the most frightful time of Miller’s stay in Mississippi.

“I was completely alone,” she said. “I was going into the heart of what I understood to be the territory where they were killing people, and I knew no one. And then here I was on the bus with all white people who, had any of them known where I was going . . .”

But then, things got better.

“It was pretty scary,” Miller said, “but there was a moment that I remembered what I was doing and why I was doing it and how deeply I believed in it, and so I just settled in to that feeling that, ‘Well, you know, if I have to die, this is a cause that I’m willing to do that for.’ And this incredible peace came over me. And the rest of that bus ride was probably the most peaceful time the whole time I was there because I realized how deeply I believed in what I was doing.”

No one was at the bus stop to retrieve Miller when she arrived in Meridian, so she called a telephone number given to her at Tougaloo.

“If no one’s there, call this number,” they had said.

She did, and soon she was being taxied to the Council of Federated Organizations — COFO — office on Fifth Street. There, she met a few people who would be her coworkers, and then it was back in the car again. Miller was taken to a small, white house that would become her home for the next few months.

A petite and beautiful black woman with caramel colored skin greeted Miller. Her name was Alice Robertson, and she instantly put the 20-year-old at ease.

“It couldn’t have been more comfortable or easy,” Miller said. “She was so welcoming.”

Robertson was nearing her 29th birthday when the two women met. She was married to a plumber and at the time, they had three children — all brown-skinned boys whose heights stair-stepped that summer.

Robertson, who is now 81 years old, doesn’t remember exactly how she and Miller were paired up, but she thinks she must have signed up to house a volunteer at church.

But it wasn’t because she had a plethora of space to offer up: Robertson’s home had only two bedrooms — one where the three boys slept on two twin beds, and one where she and her husband slept that happened to be the only air conditioned room in the house. It’s the latter Robertson offered her white, northern guest.

“They *insisted* that I sleep there,” Miller said. “And I said, ‘No, no, no! You know, I’m a college student. I can sleep anywhere. Just let me sleep on the couch! It’s a

great couch. Just let me sleep on the couch, and you don't have to do anything.' Nope, they would not hear of it.”

According to Miller, Robertson shared a twin bed with one of her boys while her husband — a big man, as Miller remembers — slept in his living room recliner. This arrangement persisted the entire time Miller was in Meridian.

“The sacrifice they made . . . incredible family,” Miller said. “Just incredible family.

Alice Robertson was born on July 19, 1935 in Pineville, Mississippi, a small town in Smith County. She walked to her one-room school as a child, and every icy winter watched as white children rolled past on their warm bus. Later, her family moved about 12 miles southeast to Louin, population 269. But after Robertson started working in a nearby city, it wasn't long before she was ready for an upgrade.

She was working at a nursery in Meridian — a city of about 50,000 people then — when she befriended a white coworker. Soon, Robertson began staying with the woman.

“I met a lot of people, and I never did go back to the country,” she said. “Then I got married here. And had children, so I've been here ever since.”

She had six children, to be exact. One of which, a son, was killed as a young man. According to Miller, the murder was never investigated.

“That's what it was like for black people,” Miller said. “He had a young son, and apparently the mother wasn't fit to raise him, so Alice raised him.”

And sure enough, the 81-year-old had just dropped her grandson off at work. Her voice was raspy and hoarse from sinuses, but she still had a sparkle in her dark eyes. And her skin was still a smooth caramel. Her smile revealed a dimension about her that she didn't let just anyone see.

"She's such an amazing woman," Miller said of Robertson. "She's so non-assuming, but such a deep, deep thinker. There's such an intelligence to her. And such a big heart. I mean, her heart is just huge."

As if giving up her bedroom — or just air conditioning during a Mississippi summer — wasn't enough, Robertson would also cook for Miller whenever she wanted.

Miller remembers being offered “wonderful meals” when she rushed out the door in the mornings on the way to the community center as well as when she returned home in the evenings. And Robertson's young sons were just as hospitable.

"The minute I would come home, they'd [say], 'Oh, can we go get something for you at the store?' I'd give them a dollar and they'd go pick up some things, and I'd have them get candy for themselves or something," Miller said. "And they were just the sweetest things, and of course every minute we could be together, we were. It was very sweet."

But it was Robertson's friendship that Miller valued most.

"We'd sit and talk," Miller said. "I kept a journal that summer, and I have a few things that we talked about."

Robertson says that it's a friendship that continues to this day.

"I stay in touch with her all the time."

And it's in part for these reasons — a preserved journal and friendship — that Miller was able to make a documentary about that summer.

Miller is now the president and founder of Keeping History Alive Foundation which produced *Iowans Return to Freedom Summer*, a film that aired on Iowa Public Television in 2014. Miller narrates the film, which documents several Iowans' participation in Freedom Summer, including Miller's own.

Robertson only makes a cameo appearance, but her character played a much larger role. At one point in the film, Miller reminisces on a more frightening event that involved both her and Robertson that summer.

It was one of those hazy days in August. The grass and trees sang with insects. A group of civil rights workers, including a young man named David Gelfand, had been invited to Curry Farms, an African-American-owned property, for a summertime picnic. Miller had met and befriended Gelfand, a Bostonian who was assigned to Laurel, Mississippi. Despite the heat, Gelfand and the other civil rights workers were enjoying a nice lakeside lunch before their day took a nasty turn. The Ku Klux Klan arrived.

"My friend was playing guitar, and they went over to him and smashed his guitar and beat him with tire irons," Miller said. "And to get away from them, he jumped in this pond. And they were even shooting at him, but he dipped down into the water."

Miller claims that the Klan targeted Gelfand "probably because he had long hair and was playing a guitar and was white. A perfect — in their mind — 'hippie.'"

According to Miller, many Mississippi hospitals and doctors wouldn't treat civil rights workers, so they had to have a backup plan.

"They came to my house that night," Robertson remembers.

"He came to Meridian because Alice said that he could stay in her house and that we would try and help him," Miller said. "So, he slept on the couch."

Despite the violence occurring all around them, neither Miller nor Robertson remember being victimized that summer.

"As far as anybody trying to pick at us about Patti or anybody, they did not," Robertson said. "You know, I can't say that I got threatening calls or anything like that. I did not. I didn't receive any of that."

But Gelfand didn't have it so easy.

According to Miller, there was a lawsuit against the men responsible for the attack at Curry Farms.

"I do remember going to the courthouse with [Gelfand] for that trial, and we walked in the door, and there was this mob waiting for us," Miller said. "So that was terrifying. And it was one of those things, all I remember were all of these people kind of coming at us, and somehow we managed to get out the back door and into a car and were driven away, but that could have just been horrific. We could have been beaten severely."

Miller said that Gelfand's trial was never held.

"Those people were all there to make sure no one was held responsible for what happened to him," she said.

Patti Miller believes that Freedom Summer was a success. She claims that the greatest lesson she learned over those two months is that people can make a difference.

“I think it's pretty much agreed that had it not been for Freedom Summer and the Selma to Montgomery campaign that the Voting Rights Act would not have been passed,” Miller said. “That was because individual college students were willing to give up the summer and go work in the civil rights movement that that was able to be brought to the forefront of people's awareness and pressure put on the government to change things.”

And because she was one of those students, Miller believes her life's trajectory was permanently altered.

"I think it was the pivotal time for me, and almost everyone who was on Freedom Summer would say the same thing," she said. "It was such a powerful experience. It completely changed the direction of my life."

And from that powerful experience, there is one memory that stands out to Patti Miller above the rest: James Chaney's memorial service.

His body, along with Andrew Goodman's and Michael Schwerner's, had been found by FBI agents in Neshoba County the day Miller arrived in Meridian. Though she would normally be working at the community center interacting with local black children, the day of August 7th, she had a different duty. That day, Miller and a fellow volunteer were asked to hand out leaflets advertising the march that was to take place from the Meridian Freedom School to First Union Baptist Church, where Chaney's

service was to be held. After a long day in an unfamiliar town, Miller arrived at the church around sunset.

“It was the first time I had ever been to a black church service,” she said.

Miller remembers the church was packed and Dave Dennis’ eulogy stirred every soul in the room. But it was something else that made the biggest impression on her.

“The thing I wrote about in my journal that I remembered most was that whoever the minister was that was in charge, he kind of opened the service,” Miller said. “He said, ‘Let us pray,’ and I assumed that he would be praying for the black community and for what black people had been going through for their whole life. And instead he said, ‘And dear Lord, thank you for all these courageous young people who’ve come down from the North to help us.’ And I just started crying. It was just unbelievable. Hearing what these people had been through day in and day out, and here, one of their own had just been murdered by the Klan. And he’s praying for those of us who had just come down for a few weeks. I mean, what an experience. What an experience! So I never enjoyed white churches after that.”

Miller attended the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer two years ago and was shocked to learn how many of her fellow volunteers became lawyers later in life. She too continued to work for change, but in a different manner.

“After graduation, I went to Chicago, and I worked with Dr. King for two or three years,” Miller said. “And then I became a folk singer, because folk singers at that time were great agents of social change.”

But her summer in Mississippi not only changed Miller’s life, but Miller herself.

“It opened my eyes to the whole world and to the plight of my fellow Americans,” she said, “so that my whole life I've been very aware of what's going on in my country and this particular area where I've lived.”

And today, she strives to keep those lessons and the story of Freedom Summer alive with the work of her foundation. She believes in George Santayana’s quote that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” and made it the opening line of her documentary.

But she is most grateful for Freedom Summer because it taught her that she could indeed make a change.

"I learned on an individual basis that if there's something I really believe in and that I want to see changed, that I can do something about it," Miller said. “That everybody can make a difference.”

Even a little black woman from the country can make a difference. Even a nice bedroom with air conditioning and home cooked meals can make a difference.

Robertson admits that housing Patti was her way of aiding in the civil rights movement.

“When you do things like that, you don't only think of yourself, you think of other people,” she said. “And you think of your children — what their life gonna be like. You know, if you don't stand for nothing, you don't get nothing. And if you're going to stand

for something, you have to stand regardless the circumstances. Life throws you some curves, but you just have to pray. And you can't give up.”

THE PROCESS BEHIND THE PROJECT

The process of this thesis began with a trip to see Curtis Wilkie, assistant professor of journalism, given his experience covering the civil rights movement as a reporter for the *Clarksdale Press Register*. Wilkie gave the researcher several names: Roy DeBerry, who had been a student at the Holly Springs Freedom School, Dr. Hilliard Lackey at Jackson State University, Dr. Don Cole, assistant to the chancellor for multicultural affairs at the University of Mississippi, and Susan Glisson, the senior fellow and founding director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation.

DeBerry was difficult to get in touch with, but finally responded saying that he would be too busy to participate. He regretfully declined an interview. Cole and the researcher emailed back and forth for a couple of weeks trying to set up an interview, and because schedules wouldn't line up, the researcher moved on to Lackey. He responded to an initial email immediately offering his help, and he told the researcher to drive to Marks, Mississippi, to talk to a man named James Figgs. Lackey didn't give much supplementary information other than the fact that Figgs was aging but a great storyteller. In a very roundabout way that included calling the local high school and speaking to the librarian who knew Figgs, the researcher tracked him down to find that he was in the hospital. So, again, it was on to the next name. Glisson was happy to help, and she passed along the contact information of a woman named Cynthia Palmer.

Palmer supplied the researcher with a list of names and contact information that included Roscoe Jones, Flonzie Brown-Wright, and MacArthur Cotton. The researcher first looked Roscoe Jones up on Google. A video that PBS made about him titled “The Preservationist” was one of the top results. It’s only a few minutes long, but the cameraman is riding with Jones around downtown Meridian, and when they approach the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) office, it is being demolished to Jones’ great dismay. From a few other online articles — including the civil rights veterans’ website, which collects oral histories and proved very helpful during my research — the researcher summed up that Jones would make a good interview and decided to call him. He was eager to talk and very kind on the phone, but he warned that the researcher needed to “get it right.” Jones was concerned about preserving the facts. He agreed to help, and the researcher continued speaking on the phone with him until an interview with him and a woman he knew named Alice Robertson was set for Saturday, February 13, in Meridian.

Next, the researcher contacted Brown-Wright. From what was found online about her, she had been a huge asset to Canton, Mississippi, and Madison County. She agreed to an interview in her home in Jackson the next weekend, on Friday, February 19. The researcher decided to see if MacArthur Cotton, who — as read online — had been a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at Tougaloo College, would be able to meet that same weekend. He agreed on Saturday morning in Kosciusko at the public library.

And thus began back-to-back weekends of traveling the state of Mississippi to interview people who had been involved with Freedom Summer. Jones’ interview was

first, and the researcher brought her boyfriend, John Corbin Evans, for assistance (as she did for each interview). They met Jones in the Cracker Barrel parking lot and got in his little, squeaky car when he arrived. Evans helped the researcher with her camera equipment and the audio recorder while Jones drove around Meridian, teaching the two students its civil rights history. The researcher took notes while riding in the front seat, and had to squeeze her questions in whenever there was a rare moment when Jones wasn't talking. He drove downtown to show the students where the COFO building once stood and then down to the site of Chaney's memorial service, First Union Baptist Church. The three went inside for a while before he took us to Chaney's burial site. He also showed the researcher and Evans the lots where the Freedom School and the old black school, Harris High, once stood. After a long morning of riding, listening, photographing, recording and interviewing, the three traveled to Jones' home to meet Robertson. Jones had contacted her and arranged the interview for the researcher because he knew that she would want to speak with someone who housed a volunteer.

Robertson stayed only briefly and declined having her picture taken. She encouraged the researcher to return the next weekend and come to her home where she had lots of old photographs from Freedom Summer. The researcher got Robertson's contact information and Jones returned her and Evans to their vehicle at Cracker Barrel. Unfortunately, the next weekend, Robertson wouldn't answer phone calls from Jones or the researcher. She had left Meridian to visit family in Texas.

Brown-Wright's interview was much less exhausting, although it was long. The researcher had given Evans a copy of the questions she was going to ask Brown-Wright so that Evans could write down at what time during the audio recording she was

answering each question. After an hour and a half, the interview was finished and the researcher made photographs of Brown-Wright in her home. The next morning, Evans and the researcher met Cotton in Kosciusko and followed the same procedure.

After returning to Oxford with the bulk of the interviews completed, the researcher was dismayed at how little information Robertson had given her during their brief interview, so the researcher decided to contact Patti Miller, the volunteer who stayed with Robertson that summer. Miller, who was in Iowa, was eager to help, so she and the researcher set up a phone interview. Not only did Miller answer questions in great detail, but she sent old photographs of Robertson and her family as well. It was because of Miller that the researcher was able to fill in all the blanks she still had about Robertson and write a story at all.

The researcher began transcribing interviews as soon as possible because she knew that process would be very time consuming. For other second and third sources of stories, the researcher called and emailed people that subjects suggested. This process was rather smooth and quick, and soon, the writing process began. What proved most difficult was organizing the mountains of information from each subject. The researcher not only had to sift through it all and decide what to use, but she had to arrange it in a way that would flow in a narrative form. The process she used included highlighting information and quotes from the transcriptions that she wanted to use, jotting down a one or two word description of each on a piece of paper, and then numbering that list by how the researcher wanted to present them in each story.

Through this process of interviewing and writing, the researcher not only learned valuable lessons but made several observations as well. First of all, because she

interviewed people who were complete strangers, she had to trust that Palmer gave their names for a reason and that they were truthful people. The researcher was hesitant at first to write some of the things she heard about in her interviews because a lot of those memories are not only over 50 years old, but they are impossible to fact check. Perhaps the interviewees were telling the truth as they remembered it, but time and hindsight has a way of stretching the facts, and the researcher was wary of this. She had to learn the value in using her judgment as well as cross checking information with second and third sources.

For example, on the telephone, Miller told the researcher, “Don’t believe everything Roscoe Jones tells you.” She had known him when she was in Meridian the summer of 1964. However, Roscoe Jones claimed that Patti Miller didn’t have the whole story. This was an observation the researcher made with each of her subjects: the local Mississippians, for the most part, saw the summer volunteers differently than the summer volunteers saw themselves. MacArthur Cotton said it concisely when he told the researcher, “They saw it as a movement; we saw it as a struggle.” According to the locals, the volunteers saw themselves as heroes because they gave up one summer when in reality, the locals had been there all along and would continue the fight for years afterwards. This is how Jones felt about Miller.

And Miller, the researcher noticed, had some skewed views of Mississippi. However, something that is true of each subject — Jones, Cotton, Brown-Wright, Miller and Robertson — is that the movement became their lives. It is the most significant event they have ever involved themselves with, and because of that, their minds were changed

by it. They have continued to look at their surroundings through freedom fighter lenses. It is something they carry around with them to this day.

Something else that the researcher learned through this process was the level of organization and efficiency with which the civil rights movement worked. In reading old documents from that summer, learning about the various organizations — all included under COFO — and listening to my subjects' stories, the researcher gained a respect for the movement's regulation and coherence. She got to see and hear firsthand how the movement was run like a tight ship.

From a technical standpoint, the researcher learned better interviewing skills. She learned the importance of asking direct questions and then remaining silent until she had been given an answer. The researcher learned that it never hurts to get a second or third opinion, because it may change a viewpoint. And speaking of that, had the researcher started earlier (as she should have), she would have tried to interview more people for profiles to make sure she was representing as full of a picture of Freedom Summer as possible.

Overall, the greatest lesson the researcher learned through this process is that Freedom Summer was a very significant event in Mississippi's history that is still very relevant to this day. She learned that it is important not only to remember it, but to record those memories and try to make sense of it in a way that can be useful to future generations. The researcher hopes that these profiles do the history justice but also give due credit to those who gave their lives to the civil rights movement — and to Mississippi — and are still here today to tell their stories to anyone willing to listen.

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