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A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE FROM THE MISSISSIPPI WAY OF LIFE

Freedom Schools open a door to the world

Freedom School theme by a 10-year-old in Hattiesburg, Mississippi:

"Well, it was this bus driver, I was on the first straight seat on the bus, and he told me to move back. I said, 'I will not. I paid a dime and two pennies for a transfer and I'm not moving.' He said, 'You know white people must get on this bus.' I said, 'You know colored people must get on this bus, too.'"

By Joanne Grant
Guardian staff correspondent

JACKSON, MISS.

ACROSS THE STATE youngsters expressed similar attitudes in the Mississippi Summer Project's Freedom School classes, in poetry, in school newspapers. The impact of the program on the state's educationally-deprived Negro youngsters was readily apparent at a convention held at the end of the second session Aug. 8 in Meridian, Miss. At the convention, organized and run by the students, were about 75 delegates from 41 Freedom Schools with a registered attendance of 2,135. They adopted a platform—with a program for "our state, our nation and our world" with resolutions on subjects ranging from medical care to foreign affairs. They also resolved that "copies of this platform be sent to the President, every Congressman, the Library of Congress, the Governor and every member of the Mississippi legislature."

Resolutions had been drawn up by the students in each school before the convention, then were consolidated into a platform by delegates at workshops on voter registration, medical care, housing, education, jobs, federal aid and foreign affairs. There was vigorous discussion, both in workshops and in plenary sessions, which expressed the essence of the Freedom school aim of freeing the children from the strictures of the Mississippi system of education. The system is described in a Freedom School report: "The Mississippi educational system is geared to teach the Mississippi Educational Way of Life: Dissent is heresy. Ignorance is safer than inquiry. Fear pervades the academic atmosphere."

BUT THE DISCUSSION at the workshop on education illustrated particularly the students' revolt against almost all aspects of the state's education system. Points covered: lack of vocational courses, foreign language instruction and kindergarten; inadequate laboratories, libraries and classrooms. When some students proposed a resolution on academic freedom for teachers, lively debate developed over whether this meant a teacher might be free to force his ideas on the students. Others argued freedom for teachers to teach Negro history and voter registration. Still others argued for unqualified academic freedom so teachers could teach "different forms of government." One said: "I hear all this about communism. I want to learn about it in school." Focus of the discussion on education was the age and timidity of teachers: "How can we listen to a teacher talk about citizenship and democracy and voter registration when he is afraid to go down and register?"

The foreign affairs workshop resolution began: "We support strict enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine." It called for non-intervention by European countries in the Western Hemisphere and for U.S. "nonmilitary" pressure to force Latin American governments to refrain from accepting "military aid from the Communist bloc." At the plenary the resolution was deleted from the platform after a participant said of the Monroe Doc-

trine: "As a permanent member of the Negro race I'm sick and tired of anything that smacks of paternalism."

Other resolutions sought solutions for every discriminatory practice in the life of the Mississippi Negro. One on housing, for example, called for a building code with these minimum requirements: "A complete bathroom unit, a kitchen sink, a central heating system, insulated walls and ceilings, laundry room, pantry space, an adequate wiring system providing for at least three electrical outlets in the living room and kitchen and



Photo by Mark Levy

I'LL DO MY WORK IF I HAVE TO DO IT ON THE GROUND

Joyce Brown's poem was heard in the school in Meridian too

at least two such outlets in the bedroom and bath, at least a quarter of an acre of land per building lot and a basement and attic."

SUCH RESOLUTIONS CAME from children like the Hattiesburg Freedom School student, Robert MacAfee, who wrote in a paper entitled Segregated Schools (Separate but Equal?): "Most of the white kids live in these big large fine houses you know. If they need anything, their parents simply go and buy it for them. But me, you see, I live in this little three-room shack and my mother only makes \$15 a week and with four children how can a person live with rent being \$24 a month and still be able to feed us . . . And if I walk to school and want to take a few shortcuts, I have to go by the white elementary school where there is a white cop standing on the corner where he tells me, 'Hey Nigger, you not suppose to come this way, if I catch you here again I'll put you in jail.' So I have to walk two blocks out of my way to go to school."

At orientation sessions before the Freedom Schools opened, volunteer teachers—many in the state for the first time—had to learn how to leave something of value with children who were products of the Mississippi system. Staughton Lynd, Freedom School director, expressed it thus to teachers for the Jackson schools: "You must stress to the students: it is their school; they can study what they

want, think what they want, say anything they choose."

In schools across the state teachers fought rigidity. Day after day they would remind students, "I am not Miss Jones. I am Kathy." . . . "Not 'Yes sir,' The name is Bob." The young northern college students or professional teachers who staffed the schools found they were dealing with students who were wise beyond their years. "There's a wisdom born of daily fear, brutality, deprivation.

THEY WERE WISE, but unlearned. They were 10-year-olds, fifth graders, who could not read; 14-year-olds who could not spell. But they were children who could define freedom thus: "Freedom is to be able to go in" (a Meridian 12-year-old) and "Freedom is like when you

had been burned in nearby Natchez just before the McComb school was to open, so the church which was to house it backed down at the last moment. Then the Freedom House—civil rights workers' headquarters—was bombed. Since no church could be found for the school, its first session was held on the lawn of the

bombed out Freedom House. When Joyce's poem was read to a secret meeting of a dozen Negro businessmen, they were moved to tears and a home was found for the school and its 100 students.

PROBLEMS WERE SIMILAR elsewhere. When the Freedom School staff arrived in Carthage, the entire Negro community was assembled at the church to greet them. Two days later the staff was evicted from the school; the community again appeared with pick-up trucks to help move the library to a new school. Then the Carthage community began building its own community center to house a library, a winter Freedom School and adult classes.

Among the results of the summer's Freedom School program has been the unifying of Negro communities in many areas. In addition, the program has provided a glimpse of a far broader world for its 2,000 Negro students. It has been a small bridge with white Mississippians (white children attended Freedom Schools for short periods in Vicksburg and Holly Springs). It has helped develop local young Negro leadership. It has taught young Americans from other parts of the country that, as the Freedom School convention theme put it: Freedom is a struggle.

AS THE SECOND of the summer's sessions ended, plans were being developed for the schools to continue through the winter in each of the state's 25 summer project areas. Half of the budget of \$100,000 will provide scholarships for volunteers who give up a year of college to teach in Mississippi and for local students. (Contributions to the budget may be made out to Freedom Schools and mailed to the Council of Federated Organizations, 1017 Lynch St., Jackson, Miss. Information on tax exemption is available from the Freedom School Coordinator at that address.)

The Mississippi legislature had adopted a package of anti-Summer Project bills. One was designed to outlaw the Freedom Schools, but it is doubtful if the state's power structure has recognized the long-lasting significance of the schools. The law has not been enforced, the schools have flourished and the students, from 6 to over 70, will not easily be re-molded into the Mississippi educational system. Palmer's Crossing Freedom School students adopted a Declaration of Independence listing their grievances and ending:

"We, therefore, the Negroes of Mississippi assembled, appeal to the government of the state, that no man is free until all men are free. We do hereby declare independence from the unjust laws of Mississippi which conflict with the United States Constitution."

make \$40 a week and a white man with the same job makes \$100, you should make \$100" (a 10-year-old in Jackson).

They were students who, like those in the rural community of Carthage, where there is no Negro public school, were exposed in Freedom School to E. E. Cummings and James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. When this reporter visited the Meridian school, the French class was discussing existentialism and reading aloud Jean Paul Sartre's The Respectful Prostitute. They were students who, like Joyce Brown, wrote poetry. Joyce, who began voter registration canvassing at 12, is now a 16-year-old Freedom School student in McComb and chairman of the Freedom School convention. She wrote in "House of Liberty": "I asked for your churches, and you turned me down, / But I'll do my work if I have to do it on the ground; / You will not speak for fear of being heard, / So you crawl in your shell and say, 'Do not disturb.' / You think because you've turned me away, / You've protected yourself for another day."

Joyce was writing of one of the most urgent problems which faced many of the Freedom Schools—finding a building to house the classes. Two churches

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