

Fighting for Freedom In the Mississippi Sun

In 1964 I was a 'freedom teacher' for one brief summer. I came home; others were not so lucky.

BY KAROL NELSON MCMAHAN

WHEN I LOOKED AT THE elderly face of Edgar Ray Killen on the news a few weeks ago, the events of 1964 flooded my memory.

After 41 years, Killen was convicted in the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. These young men were volunteers during Mississippi Freedom Summer, as I was. I came home safely; their lives were stolen by a hate-filled mob.

"Baby Face Nelson," I heard the black woman working the registration table at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, say under her breath as I signed up to be a "freedom school teacher" and voting-rights worker. The idea was that if white youth worked alongside the black civil-rights workers who were already risking their lives, Congress, the FBI and the president would pay attention. It was during our training session that we learned the three young men were missing. In spite of our apprehensions, we boarded the bus for the long ride to Mississippi.

The people of Pilgrim's Rest Church in Madison County had requested volunteers to teach civics and black history. When Kay, Natalie and I got off in Canton, we were met by a sea of humidity and the local law. The white officers who fingerprinted us said it would help if anything happened to us. An elderly black man was waiting to take us to neighboring farms, where we'd live with African-American families who owned their land and couldn't be evicted for associating with us.

Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins and their two small grandsons lived on an acreage with a

house, barn, chicken coop, pasture, pond and garden. The bungalow had electricity but no running water or phone. Kay and I slept in a double bed in the front bedroom, where we were alert to every night noise.

Our summer days developed a reassuring rhythm. In the mornings we ate Mrs.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW MAHON FOR NEWSWEEK

GO HOME: We were cursed by people in passing pickups, and once a burly man got out of his car and followed us

Wiggins's fluffy biscuits. Then we did some work in the house and garden, followed by the noonday meal, which included okra that had been simmering in the steamy kitchen all morning. We were a temporary but real family who laughed and talked around the table and went to church together. Sometimes we went fishing with the little boys, who trapped crickets for bait.

Every afternoon, we'd all rest a while in front of the fan. Then Natalie would walk over from the Harris farm and we would plan our lessons, wash our clothes on a washboard and walk the country

roads, canvassing our black neighbors.

We invited people to attend freedom school or sign up for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, an alternative to the regular voting process which had shut out black citizens. We approached men in the fields, many still farming with mules, and women resting on sagging porches. They'd listen politely, but look nervously over their shoulders to see if their white bosses were watching. At times we were cursed by white people in passing pickups, and once a burly man got out of his car, followed us down the dusty road and called us "whores." I was scared that day.

In the evenings we met at the church, where classes were divided by age: little kids, teens and adults, each group meeting in a corner of the room. I wonder now at our audacity—thinking we had something to teach grown-ups who had worked in the heat all day and were risking their lives to be there.

The windows were open, squares of yellow light that exposed us to the dangers of the night. We'd stand in a circle, arms linked, singing "We Shall Overcome." Anyone could have shot at us, but those with cruel intentions bided their time, waiting until fall to burn down a nearby (empty) church.

Kay and I were already gone, having left on separate buses at the end of summer, each carrying a mason jar of soup stock that Mrs. Wiggins was sending home to our mothers. I waited in the "white" section of the Jackson bus station, feeling that I had learned much more than I had taught. Living with people of another race convinced me that we were not different, even if society treated us that way.

During my 35-year teaching career, I spoke often about that summer.

Once, when we read a novel set in Mississippi, I sang for my seventh graders, "If you miss me at the back of

the bus and you can't find me nowhere; come on up to the front of the bus; I'll be riding up there." The kids seemed surprised that their middle-aged teacher had done a brave thing, but 1964 must have seemed as remote as the Civil War.

I have often thought about my motives for volunteering. I hate injustice, but the adventure, even the risk, had an appeal. Or was it that a remedy was called for, and I became—for one brief, hot summer—just one atom of that remedy?

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Readers interested in submitting a back-to-school essay should send entries to myturn@newsweek.com. One entry will appear in the magazine in early September; selected others will be offered online.