

Joanne Gavin's Answers to Jon Hale's Freedom School Questionnaire, 2008

1) When did you become aware of people working for equal rights in Mississippi and in the South? How did you become informed about the Civil Rights Movement?

I was probably already working with San Francisco CORE. We had hosted SNCC people on tour, and we had an excellent phone tree in operation, such that the day of the Freedom Riders' bus burning on Mothers Day 1963, one call was made to San Francisco and inside of a few hours we had 300 people marching around City Hall (on Mothers' Day!) We had also had a picket of a Dutch ship that was carrying some cargo from South Africa, and an all-night sit-in at the school board. Plus housing actions, etc. Then there was the long state capitol sit-in over a fair housing law and a side trip from that to help people in Oroville who were demanding fair employment practices etc. . In Oroville I really felt that I was in the South. "Mississippi with hills" ..I edited and wrote most of one issue of the *San Francisco CORElator* that concerned the Sacramento sit-in and Oroville I had attended the CORE national conference in Dayton probably early in '63, got stranded in Denver for a while on the way back and worked with C.O.R.E. people there and from them learned plenty about negotiating with corporate racists, and took the chartered bus from San Francisco to D.C. for the March on Washington and sold my return ticket to stay in D.C. to work with SNCC. I remember telling someone in S.F. CORE that I didn't want to be a weekend warrior any more.

2) What story, picture, image or protest do you remember most about the Civil Rights Movement before you went to Mississippi?

Probably no single thing, but the strongest may have been meeting Fannie Lou Hamer in D.C. when I was already working for SNCC at the DC office. Stokely took some of us over to Howard University "to meet some people from Mississippi". Before those were even introduced I experienced a tangible tingling in the room at the moment when those two great minds caught sight of one another. Whatever it was, I knew it was related to what they had shared in Mississippi, and, in spite of having planed to stay in D.C, where I thought I was needed, I "wanted me some of that". So, when the situation in D.C. changed and a call went out for more Freedom School teachers in the Jackson area, friends raised funds and I took a bus.

3) Why do you think you worked for civil rights in Mississippi and other members of your family and your friends did not?

I had long hated racism. When I was 12 years old and in the 8th grade at St. Anthony's in Long Beach, CA, I had chosen as a term paper theme, "Segregation: The Root of the Problem". That isn't true, of course, but I was at least on the right track: it does aggravate it. Another student and I worked as a team, and we needed an interview to complete the assignment. I don't remember how, but we were put in touch with a "Negro" professor and went to his place to interview him.

Then, in high school I triggered a boycott without ever having heard the term. A "Negro" classmate came up to me one evening as I sat across from the school at a bus stop that was in front of an ice cream parlor. She asked me to go in and buy an ice cream cone for her. I laughed and told her to go get her own ice cream cone, that if I missed my bus I would wait an hour downtown for my connecting bus out to Dominguez. She floored me by explaining, "They won't serve me in there." Amazed I said, "What?!" and she asked if I had ever noticed the sign over the cash register that read, "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." I said I guess so. She asked if I knew what that meant. I said, "drunks and rowdies?" She said, "Maybe. But it also means me." She said she'd watch for my bus if I went in and bought her cone. Fuming over the revelation, I replied that I would do so, but that it would be the last time I would ever set foot in the place, and that when word got around school no one else would go there either. Well, next day in the schoolyard at lunchtime I related the incident to those within sound of my voice on the benches under the arbor. Soon the

whole schoolyard was buzzing. My recollection may be faulty, but I remember that ice cream parlor going out of business. That was sixty years ago. We had never heard of “negotiations”, either.

On another occasion, a pair of white racist adult males bought tickets to and attended a game of the basketball tournament that St. Anthony’s sponsored for all the girls’ high schools in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. They sat down fairly near the playing floor and soon began to make hostile comments about the same Black classmate, who happened also to be one of our star all-around athletes. At first there were none of our girls near them, but, as their comments became louder, several of us moved closer to them and someone suggested that we refund their ticket price and invite them to leave. They heard only one girl ask something like did they come here to enjoy the game or to insult our players. As the students moved closer they began reaching into their pockets for change. But the two creeps saw only some very determined-looking young women moving in on them and reaching into their pockets for the guys knew not what. They split. (People messed with St. Anthony’s girls at their own risk!)

4) How did you come to be involved with COFO/SNCC during the 1964 Freedom Summer? Did you volunteer?

and

5) Have you or your family done this kind of work in the past?

(See answers to questions 2) & 3)

6) Could you describe the type of building and the area of town in which your Freedom School was located?

We had the use of the chapel and outdoor areas of the Tougaloo College campus.

7) Where did you live during the Freedom Summer?

At first for a few days, during orientation, on a cot in the former shower room of what had been a men’s dorm and was now a women’s dorm at Tougaloo College. My bunk neighbor was Janet Jermot, who went on to become SNCC project director in Natchez, and later married Bob Moses. She told me of her experiences teaching in Harlem schools. Then I was housed with various families and individuals in the Tougaloo “village”. Later on, after the Summer, I lived with a family in Jackson and worked at the COFO office. Then I went to Holly Springs and took care of the MFDP files and a house that was used by Movement travelers as an overnight rest stop. One of my guests was Rita Schwerner, after the assassination of her husband. Then I went back to Jackson to staff the MFDP office during the mass arrests of the Jackson demonstrations. “Headstart” was starting about then, and the people of the Tougaloo community asked me to join the staff “because it has to be integrated, and we don’t want any strangers” -- one of my proudest moments. Again at that time I lived with a family.

As had the Freedom Schools, the Headstart centers benefited from visiting enrichment folks. Free Southern Theater had been playing to people off the plantations. John O’Neal and his colleagues found that Mississippi sharecroppers related far more knowingly than any city theatergoers to Becket’s *Waiting for Godot*. But in Jackson they had come to play for the Headstart students. They were taking their first flight into children’s theater, and the production was a largely improvised *Beauty and the Beast*. The evening before the performance I joined some others in having dinner (excuse me! “supper”! see question 8’s answer) with the FST people. John said that they were encouraging local participation and needed people to dress up as animals – supplying their own costumes – and dance in the wedding scene. Well! I had wanted to play a crocodile ever since seeing the original production of Mary Martin’s *Peter Pan* at the old Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium! Next day

my Headstart class and I made a wonderful crocodile head out of construction paper, and I discovered that must have been one medium where “color inside the lines” elementary school “art” instruction had not intruded: I was *good* with paper, scissors and paste! I then ‘costumed’ myself in black dungaree pants and jacket and black gloves and ballet slippers, slithered on my belly, holding arms and hands close to torso and did a *grrreat* crocodile – much to the joy and pride of the kids.

As an intro to the play, John, as “Beauty’s Father” did a monologue outside the “Beast’s” castle wall. He told of how he had three beautiful daughters, one so beautiful “That we named her ‘Beauty’”. Then inspiration struck him: “Yes. ‘Beauty May Jackson’, that’s her name!” he exulted. And forever after in apocryphal tales we told of Mississippi, “Beauty May Jackson” was the heroine’s name.

When we got home, Val, the small daughter of my host family related everything to her mother, including a delighted, “and I was sooooo scared!” To which her mother said, “So. I guess you don’t want to see anything like *that* again!” But Val, who instinctively understood the purpose of theater, cried, “Oh yes! I want! I want!”

At some point I was offered the job of secretary to the Division of Natural Sciences at Tougaloo College and lived for a time in a faculty/staff “singles” rooming house, but eventually got my own house in the “village”. I had also lived for a time in a household in the “village” that included Hollis Watkins and MacArthur and Margaret (Burnham) Cotton. A poem of Charlie Cobb’s was written in large letters on butcher paper and hanging on the kitchen wall there; it was my first exposure to free verse and gave me the idea I could write that, too. When Nixon’s budget cuts eliminated the job of science division secretary I got jobs in Jackson as offset press operator at a small letter shop and proofreader with the local daily papers and rented a couple of houses in that town, before accepting a job with a company that was moving to Houston in 1971.

8) How did you fund/support yourself while living in Mississippi?

We were housed and fed by the community. Stokely, for instance, always returned his \$10 (minus a few cents to IRS) “weekly” (when funds were available) SNCC check, explaining that if the people of the community felt an organizer was performing a valuable service they would support him or her. In addition to that I for a time received \$40/month from some academics in “the north” who had become part of a SNCC/COFO support program called “The Circles of Forty” which I had conceived while working at the D.C. SNCC office in ‘63-’64.. Forty people met once a month to read letters from “their” civil rights worker and contribute \$1 each to his/her support and write a joint letter to him/her. (The “circles” may have been smaller, the donations larger and the meetings more frequent. I may have something in my files. But that was how it worked, and it came out to \$10/wk or \$40/month.) Once the lay Franciscans of the Third Order in San Francisco raffled off a bottle of “Southern Comfort” and sent me the proceeds. We were guerillas; we were “amidst the people like fish amidst the water.” (Ho Chi Minh) They took care of us. For instance, Miz Moman of the Village Grill always had food for us and never asked for payment. She taught me the southern distinction between “dinner” and “supper” and often also stashed some fine, moisture-retaining, milk-made cornbread for me to take home as a bedtime snack or quick breakfast.

9) Several people have noted that several of the Freedom School teachers weren’t certified teachers in traditional schools. What criteria would they look for when recruiting teachers?

I think the majority of us were not. They looked for people willing to carry out the program and with the ability to do so. And there were many “electives” that developed in one or more of the schools. The SNCC philosophy was that if you knew something and somebody else wanted to learn it: share. Foreign languages were very popular. I myself taught ballet, as related further on. The students in the Tougaloo Freedom School were also probably atypical, since they were from the Tougaloo “village” and had various associations with the college. Many of their parents worked there. Some of their elders had gone to school there when the Education Department had operated a 12-grade laboratory school and some had attended/graduated the college. All classes could be audited without charge (at least by employees, and possibly by others) and some of their elders may

have taken advantage of that. One problem was the old story of internalizing the white society's values, which was manifested in an obsession with, for instance, wanting to keep one's hair straight. So I sent for materials from Black nationalist groups, etc.

There was also the problem of automatically saying "Yes Ma'am/Sir" to anything that a white adult said. I had to break that down and get them to treat me as a fallible human being. One method I remember improvising was to casually hold up a picture and say, "Isn't this pretty?" with predictable response. Then, a few minutes later hold up the same picture and say "Isn't this the ugliest picture you ever saw?" with same response. Then I would shock them by asking what was with them: a few minutes ago you said it was pretty! We would go on from there and I finally got them to contradict me and to express their real thoughts and feelings. That was the biggest thing any of us could do: break down the fear, the learned response, and say what they really thought, have real discussions, not just learn by rote.

Cuba at that time was conducting its literacy campaign, sending anyone who could read and write and was willing and able out to remote locations to teach people of all ages. That made us feel very close to them. We listened to Radio Habana Cuba on shortwave and they read on the air my poem on the death of Che. They were aware of our situation, and identified me only as "our friend, Joanne, in Mississippi".

On a personal note, I had never seen such an assemblage of beautiful humans as the Freedom School students. I would sometimes become distracted in mid sentence - just struck by the beauty of one or another of them. Then I met their parents: at first I wondered how such ordinary-looking people could produce such gorgeous children. Finally I realized that, given twenty or thirty years of the kind of lives their parents had been forced to live, they would become ordinary-looking, too!

10) By what process did students learn of and attend the Freedom Schools?

It must have varied from place-to-place. In Tougaloo I was put into touch with Mrs. Annie Seaton Smith, who had attended the Tougaloo campus elementary and high school, graduated from the college and taught most of the children in "the village" in the small public school there that had for a time replaced the campus school. Her specialty was speech, and one always knew her students by their precise use of language. (example: during Headstart I knocked on doors looking for a plunger one day when we had a blocked toilet. I found 8-or-10-year-old Lee Edward Jones at home. To my inquiry he replied: "A plunger. Is that a device which is used to unstop a commode?") Miz Smith directed me to the Washington family where she said high-schooler Hymethia and her younger brother, Denver, would probably be of help. They were not only of help, they did the whole job, organizing other students to spread the word.

11) What was the relationship like between those who worked in voter registration and those who worked in the Freedom Schools?

There were no Voter Registration staffers or volunteers assigned to the Tougaloo community. The people of the community took care of that themselves, as they did so much else. They were a very, if informally, organized community. They got things done. They took care of one another.

12) What did you expect the Freedom Schools and Freedom Summer to achieve on a social level? A political level?

I don't know that any of us had any idea of what to expect to achieve. We knew something needed to be done and that nothing much had worked so far, so we wanted to try new approaches. One of the basic principles of SNCC was to go into a community and seek out the indigenous leadership that we knew was there and to assist that leadership in organizing the community to accomplish what they knew needed to be done. That was how the whole thing about voter registration began: Bob Moses learned from Messrs. Steptoe, Lee, etc. and Doc Henry and others that such was what the people felt would make a difference. So, that is what he and others

worked on. Later, other needs became apparent, or were thought to implement that goal, and thus were the Community Center and Freedom School programs born. Our job was to use whatever skills we had to assist the communities. What sometimes happened, however, was that some volunteers, in the pursuit of efficiency, took too much responsibility, causing local folks used to deferring to white superiority to step back either in deference or resentment. I experienced this later on, when I was asked to act as the “faculty advisor” to the SNCC affiliate group at Tougaloo College. I was neither faculty nor did I presume to advise them, which is why they put my name on paper: just to fulfill the college’s requirements. But one day I wrote, duplicated and posted something I considered just clerical trivia, in order to save them the trouble. But the students considered that a usurpation of their position. They knew they could reprimand me, and did so.

13) What was a typical day for you like in Mississippi during the summer of 1964?

There probably weren’t any typical days. The Freedom School met, of course, but beyond that we might have an organizing mini-march through the community, with the students promoting a meeting or getting more people to come to Freedom School or getting adults to talk about voting or whatever. One afternoon I was, for my own muscles’ sake, doing ballet class, using the top of the last pew in the chapel as my barre. Glancing at the windows I was greeted by a duplication of the two young neighbors that Raphael saw at his window while he was painting *The Sistine Madonna*. He put them into the base of the picture as cherubs. I said “Hi”. They asked, “Whacha doin’?” I explained, and they said, “Can we do that?” On the one hand, we had no studio, no music, no dance shoes, and, beyond taking over the supervision of younger classmates for a few minutes while my Kirov teacher stepped out of the room, I had never taught. On the other hand, we had the SNCC directive: If you know something that someone else wants to learn, share it.” So I said, O.K. Tomorrow bring, or wear or wear under your clothes, a bathing suit or sunsuit or shorts and a tee shirt and, if you have no soft slippers with no or little soft heels, bring heavy socks. And spread the word. Thus we had class. And even there the well of untapped talent stunned me. Charles (of whom more elsewhere) was the only boy in the class. When demonstrating *port de bras* (carriage of the arms), in order to show how the head follows the hand, I told the girls, “Imagine you have a pet butterfly that lands on you finger, and you watch it fly away, come back, fly away, come back. It worked. But what to tell Charles? I said, “You are a king in an ancient land, commanding a battle. When you open your right arm, the troops on your right move out. When you open your left arm, the troops on your left move out.” He did it, and I felt like curtsyng! He projected a powerful presence that would have come across on any stage.

14) In addition to teaching in the schools, what other kinds of work would you do in Mississippi?

During Freedom Summer I first worked a few days in the COFO office before being assigned to be the Freedom School Coordinator in Tougaloo. I requested visiting lecturers, musicians, etc. to come to our school. Later I was in Holly Springs and was recalled from there to the Jackson MFDP office as mentioned earlier. Then I became WATS line operator at the COFO office. And, of course, there was Headstart.

While I was secretary to the Division of Natural Sciences at Tougaloo College I encouraged interaction between the school and the community surrounding it. Upon discovering a telescope in a storeroom I arranged to have it go out in to the community some evenings. We saw four of Jupiter’s moons and many other exciting things. I also realized, thanks to interest shown by a man from the community, that the resources of the Science Division, including lab displays and student projects, could be shared with the people of “the village”. So, we had a community science day. It included a demonstration of brain surgery on a laboratory rat; weeks later people would still ask me, “How is White Rat Two?” Things like an entire real human skeleton and preserved specimens in the biology lab were fascinating to the people.

We also had a series of film showings in the Science Building lecture hall. I think an animated one on blood was part of our science day or a continuation of it. I’m not sure how much I was involved in other showings, but

I know they included the Mississippi premier (and probably only) showing of *Salt of the Earth*. We were so excited when we saw the role of the women in that strike that we were literally jumping up and cheering. Interestingly, there was in that audience a woman who said that her father worked at the time of the strike for the mining company against which it was directed, and she was sure that they never treated the workers all that badly and that the strike was surely instigated by outsiders, Communists, etc. The film was far a more powerful statement than were her objections.

Later, of course, and as noted previously, I sought gainful employment in the outside world and eventually moved to Houston with one of those companies. While in Jackson I worked a bit with the white youth of the Kudzu Project.

15) What types of activities were the students engaged in during the day? What were the most effective methods in reaching the schools goals?

I don't recall following any set curriculum. One particularly fine piece of study material provided was the "Negro History Coloring Book" by Bobbie and Frank Cieciorca. Its pen drawings were fine art. I can still see the picture of John Brown, his flowing beard metamorphosing into the flame of the torch in his hand. One of the things that happened throughout the program statewide was that the original curriculum was geared toward preparation of youth to participate as age allowed in the voter education/registration programs. I would guess that in some areas this included teaching adult literacy, which was another program that, I think, like "Topsy", "just grew". And the original Freedom School curriculum was geared toward high school age students. But the younger students wanted Freedom School, too. They just came and wanted to be part of it. Many wanted to learn subjects not in the original curriculum. Also, SNCC had no Jackson Project. It was NAACP territory. I was the only Freedom Summer volunteer in the Tougaloo Community. (The SNCC photography project was housed in the village, and some folks working in other programs lived there, but they did not interact with the community.) I really have very little recollection of anything structured that we did in class time. Maybe that was because of the atypical background of the Tougaloo youth.

16) What was it like to be a white worker in all-black communities in 1964? Or what was it like to be black and working with white workers in 1964?

17) Many of the Freedom School volunteers had middle class backgrounds and had a college education. How did this background compare with the Freedom School students?

18) What kind of cultural differences did you notice between the area of the country you came from and Mississippi?

19) What were your impressions of local Mississippians BEFORE you arrived in Mississippi?

These four questions seem to combine into one answer, with (18) having been answered previously.

I myself have no college credentials, and I was 10 years older than most of my colleagues. The few classes I had taken bored me because I was required to take beginning classes and had already read beyond their scope on my own. And I rarely read the assigned books because I would find one or several of greater interest on the library shelves beside them.

My impressions of local Mississippians before arriving were not entirely uninformed. I had heard, even in San Francisco, SNCC people telling us of the situation and of events there. Then, I had spent eleven months in D.C., much of it in the SNCC office. Early on I had been "adopted" on a picket line by a family in Anacostia and lived with them for a while. But when I went to work at the SNCC office I needed to be closer in and I and another SNCC worker were offered free rooms at a women's rooming house, the St. Paul and Augustine Parish Residence. At the SNCC office we received frequent reports via SNCC's Atlanta headquarters and from both

staff people and visiting “local people” of what was happening in Mississippi. So I was not entirely unprepared for what I would find there. I think that what was more of a shock to me, the Californian, was the differences in the natural setting. All those trees! All that hanging moss! That stifling heat! I felt suffocated my first days on the Tougaloo campus. Even later on I would accept every invitation to go down to the gulf coast just to be able to look out into an unobstructed horizon. But I did come to love the trees, especially the ancient Tougaloo Oak and mourn its death from exposure to pollutants.

But the people! Especially the women! The African women of Mississippi were a revelation to me! The women of my family and others who had influenced me, such as my teachers, were neither shrinking violets nor Victorian dolls. But these women were beyond anything I had experienced. Their strength. Their calm courage. Their organization. Their ability to size up a situation, devise strategy, delegate responsibility and get the job done. Nothing could stop them. They taught me to organize. I bonded with them and still keep in contact with some of them. When I visit there it shakes me when they ask, “When are you coming home?” They know: Mississippi will always be my true home. I miss a lot about Houston, too, but Mississippi made me take root. I don’t know if I shall ever be able even to visit there again, and certainly have no prospect of living there. But it will always be “home”.

There was real community. There were no homeless people there. No orphans. No cast-off people. Examples: my next-door neighbor in “the village”, a young boy, lived with his “big mama” (grandmother), and knew his “real mama” lived in Jackson but could not have him with her, though he visited with her from time-to-time. There was a middle-aged retarded man who lived with one family or another from time-to-time and did whatever odd jobs he could for them. If someone were hospitalized, he or she knew children would be cared for, fed properly, gotten to school, etc. (The village raising the child thing) (When I visited in ’94 one of the great griefs of the community was that drugs had infiltrated (“and we can trace it all the way to the governor’s mansion”) so that they said it was no longer safe to walk around the village late at night, as they knew I had enjoyed doing.)

I became part of the community. One night I heard a noise in my carport. Starting to go out I backed up in terror: there was a gigantic hog out there! That is one animal that scares the bejeebers out of me. But I knew whose hog it was and that it was destined to be food for that family. Gathering up all my courage and adding a flashlight and a broom, I made my way over to their house on the next street and asked them please to let me in first and then I would tell them why. I remained trembling inside the house until they assured me the monster had been found, captured and securely confined. Then they walked me home. I think that was the bravest thing I have ever done.

But all was not sweetness and light. Later on, when I was working for the college and living in the village, young man broke in to my home and tried to rape me. I talked him into a delay sufficient for house-mates to arrive home. I told Miz Smith about it and she said I had but to identify the intruder. One day when I was with her I saw him. Later I asked her what had followed and she said simply, “It has been taken care of”, giving me to know that I really shouldn’t ask further. The community functioned. I am sure only that no outside authorities were involved. I had “peeping tom” episodes both there and later in Holly Springs. I also had gentlemen friends who were welcome in my home, and that, no doubt confused some people, particularly young men. One even drew wrong conclusions from some paintings I was hanging in my house; by the art professor at the college, some featuring abstract, undetailed nudes in expressionist style. He thought only a brothel would display such pictures (which may have been why they were not hung on campus, now that I think of it!) Of course, personal contact with local men had to be discreet and strictly within that community.

20) The Freedom School teachers were mostly women. Was it expected that only women should teach?

I never got that impression, but, then, my situation was somewhat isolated, except for statewide or regional meetings. Many women may have preferred Freedom Schools or Community Centers work. Then, of course, there was, as asked before, the dangers to the community and fellow volunteers as well as to themselves from southern white fanatics of the “our sacred white womanhood” cult.

21) What were your experiences as a woman working with an organization run mostly by men?

Who sez? Ruby Doris Smith Robinson ran much of “SNCC Central” in Atlanta with an iron hand, and we all deferred to her. There were a fair number of women project directors: Muriel Tillinghast and Janet Jemot, come immediately to mind. Then there was Cynthia Washington, a daughter of the “D.C. B.B.” (“Black Bourgeoisie”) who listed her qualifications for Freedom Summer as “read, write and speak English and drive trucks.” She shocked her very proper mother by returning briefly to D.C. in engineer’s boots, blue jeans and a layer of delta dust. She took on notorious Tallahassee County for the gathering of Freedom Registrations, insisting upon working alone, and rejecting the use of a SNCC car with a two-way radio, whose long radio antennae she considered to be flashing neon signs of identification, saying instead, “give me a fast, reliable car and a gun.” (I think it was a rifle.) She raked in the registrations.

22) Did you have any encounters with the Mississippi police?

Nothing serious. In Tougaloo the community was always watching. Cops did not go into the Tougaloo community. It was armed and they knew it. They also knew that community brooked no nonsense from anyone. I heard a story of a Tougaloo man whom a Madison County Sheriff grabbed on the highway and beat up. The creep had grown up with the Tougaloo people and they had no illusions about him. So two of the man’s sisters went to the cop’s house at night, called him out, beat him up and went back home. He never mentioned it to anyone, nor did he pick on Tougaloo people again.. No one locked doors in Tougaloo; if one arrived at a house and found no one at home but thought they might return presently, the caller was expected to go inside and wait. Though I told them I wanted nothing to do with guns, several people showed me where theirs were kept, should I have need of that kind of protection and not find anyone home.

One evening while working my “Avon Lady” extra job on my moped in a community just north of Tougaloo (in Madison County) an unmarked pickup came up behind me and took to flashing a spotlight at me. I continued on to a gas station on the Hinds County side and pulled in. The pickup driver identified himself as a Madison County Sheriff and asked why I had not stopped before. I said I was not in the habit of responding to unmarked vehicles’ flashings. He asked some intimidating questions and I was non-committal until some Tougaloo people came in and indicated that they would see me home. He left.

In Hattiesburg during a statewide meeting I was riding out to the Palmers Crossing meeting site with a local Black man. We stopped at a gas station to make a phone call. When I emerged I found we were under arrest. I asked on what charge and the cop spluttered “burglary”. “Fine” I said, “what did I burglarize?” He looked back at the station and improvised, “Tires”. Tires I could not possibly have hefted even one of. “O.K.” I said and went along. A passerby called the Project Office and it was not long before the local Project Director, Hattiesburg native Doug Smith, if I recall correctly, was there to get us out without charges. Meanwhile the jail flunky had to harass me through the bars, but I blew him off.

Not a cop story, but in Jackson I was renting a house in a white neighborhood. A young Black woman, possibly a Tougaloo graduate or student, wanted to stay with me for a while. Fine with me but not with the neighbors. One of them came to our door one night and wanted to know why we wanted to destroy the South’s way of life. I asked him how two quiet young women sharing a house could do that. He was certain it would.

23) If you could apply one lesson from your Freedom School education to the current educational system, what would it be?

Put students into situations where they learn to think for themselves instead of spitting out memorized data like android walking computers and all learning exactly the same cold, dry “facts” (some of which may not even be facts). We’ve long had books for storing information, and we now have computers. Let’s free up people for creativity..

24) What other stories would you like to share? Is there anything else you would like to tell?

This is as good a place as any for my other “Charles” story and some related ones.

Charles, the boy with the huge stage presence in my ballet class, was a child who wanted to learn. But only if something really interested him (a position with which I will always empathize). If his interest were captured, he was all attention and participation; if not he might be found under a pew in the chapel or up in a tree if we were meeting outdoors.

One day after lunch break he and I returned to the campus before any of the others. We sat taking on a bench under a tree. I asked him what he liked to do. He said, “I like to play. And to read.” I was surprised at the latter. But I continued by asking him what he would like to do when he grew up. He said, “I’d like to work in a gas station.” I replied that such would be a good job while going to school, but that there were much more interesting jobs for people after they finish school. I suggested, “If you like to read, maybe you would like to teach others to read.” At the word “teach” he recoiled: “No’m. I wouldn’t want to have to whup nobody.”

Such was the experience of Mississippi Black students, and of people there generally. Children were beaten by their parents lest they become “uppity” and it perhaps cost them their lives or get them imprisoned. When Jackson high school students met to plan a school boycott, it never occurred to them to demand no beatings, only to limit how many and how hard the blows and from what instruments. They reconsidered after staffers and volunteers initiated a discussion about it.

There was a teacher at the Black high school who had a steel plate in his forehead, which he banged against students’ heads to discipline them. There was a woman teacher who, at the beginning of each term, passed out text books, said there would be exams and quizzes from time-to-time, declared, “I got mine, now you get yours” and sat down to her desk to do her nails or write personal letters.

Anyway, I said to Charles: “You ever catch me lying to you?” “No’m. Don’t think so”, he replied. Well then, I continued, I want to tell you something you may find hard to believe, but every word of it is true. In all the years I went to grammar school and high school, not only did no one ever whup me, but I never saw or even heard of anyone being whupped in school. There are places like that, and you could help to make Mississippi like that, too.” He allowed as “Well, if I didn’t have to whup nobody, I might like it pretty good.”

And it may just have been in private conversations like that where the Freedom Schools did the most good. Muriel Tillinghast once told me, “We can’t give mass freedom. We can talk to a few people and they can talk to a few people.”

25) Do you know of any Freedom School students that would want to share their stories, too?

I have already referred you to Hymethia Washington Lofton, and will be glad to phone her to remind her. Or has she responded to you already?