

## A Mississippi Freedom Summer pilgrimage: An atrocity we must never forget

Written by Marian Wright Edelman and Julia Cass  
Monday, 04 August 2014 15:15

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Along a back road near Philadelphia, Mississippi, was the final stop on our step-by-step journey through the final tragic day of Freedom Summer volunteers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. Our guide was Leroy Clemons, a longtime local leader and activist whose family was involved in the civil rights movement in Neshoba County and who is prominently featured in the excellent documentary "Neshoba: The Price of Freedom."

We both took this journey on June 25 with a group of about 400 young people, including young women participating in the Children's Defense Fund (CDF)'s summer leadership institute for young Black women from rural Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, part of CDF's Southern Rural Black Women's Institute for Economic and Social Justice. Other young people who were in Jackson, Mississippi for the 50th anniversary commemoration of Freedom Summer joined our group too, as did Freedom Summer organizer and leader Dave Dennis; James Chaney's sister, Julia Chaney Moss, now a minister in Willingboro, New Jersey; and Walt MacDonald and Michael Nettles from ETS—the Educational Testing Service.

Our buses were escorted by state troopers. For a split second, that almost seemed like an honor until we quickly wondered why we needed a police escort. The site is just down the road from the families of two of the Ku Klux Klan members involved in the murders, and as the buses stopped to see the murder site, riders on some of them said that pickup trucks rode by, back and forth, in a presumed effort at intimidation.

In a flash it brought back the absolute reign of terror faced by Black people in Mississippi in those days. We're certain all of us gathered at the murder site—we went in small groups—couldn't even begin to imagine the terror the three young men felt that night as Leroy Clemons, from his study of histories, articles, court records, and his own interviews with still-living Klan members, told us what happened.

Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were stopped and arrested by Klan member and deputy sheriff Cecil Price as they drove away after speaking with members of a Black church that had been torched a few days earlier. The rebuilt church was our first stop in recreating their day.

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The deputy, Cecil Price, and the Klan knew that civil rights workers had been at the church several times to talk about having a Freedom School there—especially Michael Schwerner, who had been working in the area for some time, and they were looking for him. Chaney, the driver, was charged with "speeding" while Goodman and Schwerner were booked for investigation, and all three were taken to the former jail—a squat non-descript building which was our second stop. After the Klan had time to gather, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were released around 10 p.m. and told to drive back to Meridian where they were staying.

As they were driving Price stopped them, the Klan members drove up, and they took the three young men to the spot pictured above. They selected this place, Clemons said, because Edgar Ray "Preacher" Killen, the ordained Baptist minister and local Ku Klux Klan leader who was eventually accused of directing the murders, lived on this road and wanted to see the place they were killed whenever he came and went. About 20 Klansmen, drunk and full of "blood lust," chained James Chaney to a tree and beat him with chains. When they unchained him, he fell to the ground, and then they castrated him as Goodman and Schwerner watched. Then they shot him. Schwerner came up and cradled Chaney in his arms. A Klansman asked, "Are you that nigger lover?" and he said, "Sir, I understand your concern." And they shot him in the heart. Andrew Goodman ran and they shot him too.

They then took the bodies to a dam a little further down the road (private property so we couldn't go there) where a tractor had already been deployed to dig the graves. Evidence suggests Andrew Goodman was buried alive. The bullet hadn't quite killed him because an autopsy showed red clay dirt in his lungs and also grasped in his fists from trying to dig his way out. The next day, Edgar Ray Killen took all the weapons and bullet casings to the Meridian Police Department, which destroyed them. The department was made up of Klan members.

We listened in horrified silence. James Chaney's sister, who had never been to this place, stood completely still and stared at the makeshift memorial. Being there made the brutality vividly real and present. The night before, some of the veterans of Freedom Summer—Dave Dennis, Rita Schwerner Bender, Michael's widow, and a few others—talked to the young people in the audience at a church rally in Jackson about those surreal and horrendous days in the summer of 1964. The young people also watched "Neshoba: The Price of Freedom," which covers the events of 1964, the town's racial complexity in the present, and the trial in 2005 of Edgar Ray Killen who was charged with murder but convicted of manslaughter and is now in protective custody at Parchman Penitentiary because when he got there he said, "it's too many niggers in here," according to Clemons. In 1967, in a case brought by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, seven Klansmen were convicted by a jury of Mississippi citizens in federal court of conspiracy to violate Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner's federally protected civil rights. Eight others were acquitted and the jury was undecided on two more. None served more than six years in prison. A half-century later nobody has ever been convicted of murder in their deaths.

The Freedom Summer veterans on our pilgrimage used the courage of the three young men and the other young men and women and local Black citizens who participated in Freedom Summer to urge today's young people to pick up and carry on the movement in this era of racial profiling, stop and frisk, chokeholds, and mass incarceration—one in three Black boys born in

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2001 will grow up to spend time in prison; voter suppression; inferior education for millions of Black children, 80 percent of whom do not read or compute on grade level in the 4th and 8th grades; and epidemic gun violence which is the leading cause of death among Black youths. Although much progress has been made, great danger lurks for so many in our community and the prospects for poor children of color in Mississippi and across our nation are diminishing. It is time for another transforming movement to honor the sacrifices of those who went on before us. We must all finish the job Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Septima Clark and Medgar Evers and so many other civil rights warriors struggled and sacrificed for.

We must make sure that our children and all of us know our history and that the atrocities that wiped out the lives of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner and countless others who died for freedom and justice during the Civil Rights Movement—including eight other Black men whose bodies were only found as the FBI dredged Mississippi rivers and swamps searching for these three young men—do not ever happen again. We must all do our part to create a safe and hopeful nation for every child.

It is way past time for all adults to step up to the plate and make sure that the backwards slide for poor children is stopped and light a fire under ourselves to combat with all our might the continuing discrimination, dehumanization, and lack of public support and concern for children and youths of color and poor children in America.

The need for the Children's Defense Fund was first evident in Mississippi when the state turned down Head Start money in the new anti-poverty program after the summer of 1964 because they were trying to push poor Black people out of the state and make sure poor children would not get the skills they need to survive in the economy and to become informed citizens. But civil rights and church groups were able to apply and give children hope and skills and history not provided by the public schools. The Child Development Group of Mississippi—the largest Head Start program in the nation that year—created hundreds of new jobs for parents and other adults free of the plantation and state Jim Crow structure and seeded new effective leaders. We do not want to go back to those days again. We do not want to return to the old days when powerful segregationist members of Congress could eviscerate food programs for poor sharecroppers who attempted to vote, and when child hunger to the point of starvation was evident in Mississippi in 1965 and 1966 and 1967. This hunger became a national issue when Senator Robert F. Kennedy went up into the Mississippi Delta followed by Dr King who later called for a Poor People's Campaign.

We must move forwards and not backwards to the not so good old days during that extraordinary summer of sacrifice that transformed America in positive and fundamental ways. It is time for a new transforming movement to end child and family poverty, hunger, homelessness and illiteracy in America.

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*and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).*