

Come from OF

A PROPOSAL

FROM: The Rev. James Bevel & Mrs. Diane Bevel

RE: A School for Basic Education in the Mississippi Delta

This is a proposal for an educational center which we hope to set up in the Delta area of the state of Mississippi. We have developed this plan as a result of our experiences in working in this area on voter registration and nonviolence for more than a year. We are convinced that the plan outlined here holds the potential for changing the face of Mississippi and with it the nation. We are also convinced that if something along this line is not done, all other efforts in Mississippi ( voter registration, sit - ins, etc. ) will only scratch the surface and will bring no real change. Because we feel that this approach hits at the root of the problem, we have committed ourselves to give our time, our resources and our efforts to the setting up of this school. We are calling on you who read this memorandum to pledge your help in some form.

BACKGROUND

The Delta of Mississippi covers roughly 18 counties east of the Mississippi River between Memphis and Vicksburg. It is an alluvial plain formed by the river and contains some of the richest farming land in the world.

In this area live more than 300,000 Negroes---about two-thirds of the total population and in some counties over 70 per cent. These people, most of whom work on farms or at other menial labor, are the most deprived people in the United States. They are the worst victims of segregation. Segregation destroys a man or woman in several ways: it disfranchises him politically, it exploits him economically, it deprives him of educational opportunities, and it dehumanizes him ---takes from him all sense of dignity as a man and tends to separate him from God. All this and more has been done to the Negroes in the Mississippi Delta. They are the poorest people in the nation, and the most unlettered. They have been exploited the most and subjected to the worst brutality. Their family life has been destroyed because of segregation deprives the male of his manhood, prostitutes the female, and thus upsets the whole fabric of family life. And where family life is destroyed, the possibility of any real community life is removed. Everything good and important has been taken away from these people, and worst of all, when you take away these things you take away hope. Let people live under these conditions for generations, and they do not have the knowledge or the vision to stand

up and say 'no.' They know they are in a bad way, but they do not know why. They have no setting in which to learn; they have no places in which they can meet and discuss these things with each other, for most of the schools are controlled by segregationist state officials, and church leadership is untrained and fearful. As a result, many potential leaders among the Negroes have left the state or have been bought off and are being used by the segregationists. Many others, completely unprepared for life in our modern society elsewhere, migrate to Harlem and the Southside of Chicago and there are unable to adjust and find only new problems of deprivation awaiting them. And the rest of the Delta Negroes--- many of whom also have great leadership potential---stay in Mississippi, beaten into the earth, condemned to a life without beauty or hope.

But having said all this, let us hasten to add that we do not feel that this situation is hopeless. We have faith that even in the degradation of the Mississippi Delta the human spirit, with its infinite potential, can rise to heights of creativity. This faith is based not just on some vague hope of our own but upon our actual experiences in this state, where we have seen it happen. But we believe that if it is to happen on any widespread scale the civil rights movement must dig in deeper than it has before, must go to the root of the problem and come up with new solutions.

And we believe that those of us who claim to see nonviolence as a potent weapon cannot leave this matter to chance; we must pour money, time and effort into a conscious program that will put this weapon into the hands of oppressed people.

For more than a year, we have been working on campaigns for voters registration in the Delta. (Mr. Bevel is on the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Mrs. Bevel is a field secretary for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee.) We have worked in numerous communities, through mass meetings, workshops, individual contacts and canvassing. Our experience in this year have convinced us that this area is not ready for a voter registration campaign unless it is accompanied by an intensive program of citizenship education. Unless this is done, we feel that all money and effort poured into voter registration work will be wasted.

Illustrations of our experiences in two different communities will serve to show what we mean:

In Cleveland, Miss., we attempted to conduct a voter registration campaign along the usual lines. We got small groups together and canvassed door-to-door trying to get people to register. We did get a few people to go down and try to register. But these were people who had never been exposed to politics and the meaning of the ballot. They went because we asked them to, but they did not grasp for themselves the meaning of the ballot as a weapon for freedom. Indeed, they did not even sense within themselves what freedom means, for this is something they have never known. Therefore, when local segregationists put

pressure on church officials not to hold voter registration meetings in their churches, these people for the most part fell away. They had no resources within themselves on which they could fall back. Our registration campaign came to naught.

In contrast, in Ruleville, Miss., we worked differently. Before any voter registration campaign was conducted there, we held citizenship education classes; we discussed with the people the idea of freedom, the ideas of love and nonviolence; we discussed the application of our religious beliefs to the problems of life. To us, these religious beliefs are what make a man a man, what gives to him dignity and a sense of humanity. When he has that, he is no longer afraid. He can stand up to his oppressor. He can begin to sense his role as a citizen, his ability in unison with others to make over the society in which he lives. When he sees this vision, and it is his, a part of him, he becomes a new person. No one has to tell him what to do or the meaning of the vote; he knows; he finds for himself the things to do which are needed in his community. In Ruleville, the people went to register to vote. On a single day, 39 people boarded a bus and went down to the registration office; this is continuing. And here even more than in Cleveland the pressures have been applied: A minister was thrown in jail on a trumped-up check charge; peoples' houses were shot into; people were put off the land; the water was cut off in the church used for our meetings, its insurance was cancelled, and the city threatened to revoke its tax exemption. But the results were quite from those in Cleveland: the people stood up; when the church was closed to our meetings because of the pressure, the people opened their homes for us to meet in and eventually were successful in insisting that the church welcome us again. Despite persecution, many people have continued to work; for example, one woman has seen her husband shot at and put off the land, and she has lost her job; yet today she continues her efforts to encourage others to register. She is typical of many. This is what people can do when they have glimpsed a vision of freedom and dignity; they find resources within themselves by which they can survive. Nothing can stop them.

This is the spirit we need to develop in people all across the Delta. In the past, all of our civil rights organizations have spent too much time and effort and money sending a few trained people into an area to do things for the masses of the people. What we must do is spend our time and our money and our energy training people to do it for themselves. The key to this is to inspire in the people the vision of freedom and an inner sense of their worth as human beings. This is the most basic thing that segregation has deprived them of. Once we do that, they will find ways to act; they will know what needs to be done in their community; they will go to city hall to confront the mayor--- not us for them, but they for themselves; they will force open the church doors for the voter registration meetings; they will learn to make use of the programs that are theoretically available to them from the Federal Government for community improvement; they will find a way to use the vote to elect to office a new kind of man and woman who can bring a new day to Mississippi --- and ultimately to the nation.

We are convinced that the potential is here---in the Mississippi Delta. We believe the people can do this. But we also believe that if the education program we

suggest is not carried out, the vote by itself will be meaningless. Even if the poll tax, the literacy tests, the barriers to the ballot are removed, people will not take advantage of it. Or if they do take advantage of it, they can easily become tools in the hands of evil segregationists and vote the wishes of their oppressors because they will be afraid to be independent; under these circumstances, the winning of the ballot would not only be meaningless, it could actually be dangerous. The Federal Government spent a great deal of money getting James Meredith into the University of Mississippi, but in a sense this was a bombardment, without any occupation troops to follow up and make the victory real. In order for the victory to be real, there should have been Negroes all over Mississippi, trained and ready and possessed of the vision of freedom, to follow up with efforts to integrate the schools throughout Mississippi. Without this kind of local leadership, all our efforts at integration will lead to nothing but two or three Negroes in a few token-desegregated situations, and the lives of the great numbers will remain completely untouched by it all.

We can, a few of us, make stabs at developing this kind of leadership by holding citizenship classes ) like the one described above in Ruleville ) in various communities over the state. But in most places, it is impossible to do this because there is no place to meet; churches are not available because untrained ministers and deacons are afraid to let us use their buildings. Therefore, we have come to the conclusion that the best setting in which to provide this sort of training is in a residential school.

We base our conclusion in part on what was accomplished by Highlander Folk School at Monteagle, Tenn. The state of Tennessee closed this school, and they closed it because it was effective. Many of the people working throughout the South for integration today are products of this school; the godmother of the present nonviolent movement in the South, Mrs. Rosa Parks, was a student at Highlander. These people went there, lived in a new setting, came in contact with new ideas, caught a glimpse of the beloved community. And they went back home feeling like human beings, and they did things.

A residential setting like this provides an opportunity for the individual to break loose from his deprived background and see new visions. Today there is another such setting at the Dorchester Center in Georgia, where the Southern Christian Leadership Conference conducts its citizenship training program. Many of our best leaders in the Delta already are products of this center. But Dorchester is 600 miles from the Mississippi Delta. We need a setting like this close to home, no farther than a two-hour trip from any person in the Delta. We need a place close by, where people can go by the scores, where the poorest people can go. The potential for such a school or center would be great in the Delta, for there most of the Negroes are farm laborers and have no work for six months during the winter and would thus have the time to attend. Also, many people who would never go as far away as Georgia might at least, if

a center were close by, drop in for a few sessions and catch the spark.

Therefore we propose to establish a center for basic education in the Mississippi Delta.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this school will be to put the weapon of nonviolence into the hands of the oppressed people of the South, particularly in Mississippi; to restore in people a feeling of their own dignity and worth as human beings and to instill in them a sense of brotherhood with all men; to develop local leaders in every community in Mississippi and to build a real mass movement by giving to each individual a sense of his own role in the struggle; and through all this to build an integrated society that will ultimately lead to the "beloved community."

### PROGRAM

In line with this purpose, some of our specific objectives will be:

1. To prepare at least hundreds of people to engage in action to end the system of segregation and oppression.
2. To develop local leaders who can go back into their communities and spark movements for change.
3. To reveal to people the true meaning of nonviolence, which to us is not in any sense a passive thing but an inner philosophy which gives one the ability to refuse to cooperate with evil, no matter what the consequences, and provides the strength to mount a constant attack on the evils of society, although always by moral means. We will put special emphasis on the building of a "nonviolent army" of people who are totally committed to an all-out attack on segregation and will take stands for freedom, regardless of the cost, in their own communities and in other communities where needed.
4. To train people to train others in the specific skills needed for citizenship; for example teaching the unlettered to read and write.
5. To provide people with an analysis of the whole system of segregation, how it works, what sustains it, the reasons for it, and how its strangle-hold can be broken.

6. To teach people the meaning of voting and politics, the use of the ballot, the workings of government and the democratic processes, and to show them how they can use these tools to reshape their own destiny.

7. To suggest community service programs, whereby people themselves can raise their standards of living and lift their life aims.

8. To make available information on how economic development can be achieved, and to help people organize programs to bring new industry and business into the area.

9. To inspire potential leaders among Negro youth to go North to study and then return to Mississippi to provide leadership in their own state. Also to inspire them to prepare for leadership by enrolling in the accredited educational institutions of their own state. And to help them find opportunities to train themselves for a useful place in our increasingly automated society.

10. To provide for both Negroes and white people in Mississippi an opportunity to have relaxed and equal contacts and exchange with each other. (Today the attitude of the average Delta Negro toward whites is either fear or hatred, or both, because they have never had an opportunity to know white people except as masters and/or oppressors. On the other hand, most white people have the attitude that Negroes are less than people, and even those who are groping for a different concept have no place in Mississippi where they can meet Negroes as equals.)

In working toward these objectives, we will use these basic techniques:

1. Residential workshops, where groups will come for a few hours, a weekend, or in most cases for a week or more, and discuss one or more of these matters, drawing on the resources of experienced leaders and on communication with each other.

2. Follow-up, after workshop participants return to their homes, through (a) mailings, reading material, etc., (b) visits by circulating staff members from school to help those who have attended set up educational classes and movements for change in their home communities, and (c) refresher courses.

3. Extension Programs to Serve Surrounding Community: these could include such things as a summer camp for young people, a day nursery and kindergarten for children since so many mothers in this area must work, an orphans' home for children with no suitable home (and there are many of these in the Delta), a home for old people, and such community activities as sports events, teen clubs, Girl and Boy Scouting, club for young adults and adults. Such Services are almost totally

lacking among Negroes in the Delta area; here again this is a result of the degrading effects of segregation which have produced a total breakdown and disorganization of society. By providing these services, the school we propose could accomplish two things: (1) provide vital community organization in the area where it is located, and (2) serve as a model for those who attend its workshops to go back into their home communities and set up similar programs there.

Additional Services that this Educational Center Might Provide:

(1) If a farm location can be included in the school property, this institution can provide a place where people deprived of their livelihood for civil-rights activity can live and eat temporarily until they can find a permanent way to remain in the state and work for a new Mississippi.

(2) This institution could also provide a conference center where other organizations devoted to progress and human rights could hold residential meetings.

(NOTE; We do not expect to be able to put into effect immediately all of these plans we have outlined, but we do believe they can all be accomplished eventually. Our first and basic objective will be to set up the residential workshop program, with development of community service extension activities, etc., to come later.)

STAFF

The two of us are prepared to devote full time to directing this school. Both of us are on the staffs of civil rights organizations, which we believe would continue to pay for our maintenance while we do this work. Therefore, we would require no salary.

The Highlander Research and Education Center, which has the long experience of Highlander Folk School to draw on, has pledged to lend us staff personnel, and several of the civil rights organizations have promised to let us have the services of their staff members. We also believe much help will be forthcoming from various pacific action groups and church groups which are dedicated to nonviolence. People from the staffs of all these groups would continue to be supported by their own organizations, so no additional salaries would be required.

In addition, there is a great reservoir of talent available to us among young Negro and white students who are eager to work in the civil rights movement in the South and will do so if only they have a place to stay and something to eat. Many of these people have special skills such as journalism, the law, the social sciences, and they will be happy to make these available to us

for a summer, for a year --- or in some cases, even for longer.

Thus, we would expect to staff this school --- at least in the beginning --- mainly with people who would require no salary. The only jobs, in addition to a secretary, for which pay would have to be provided would be a cook and a maintenance person -- and these jobs could be used to give employment to people who have lost their jobs because of their civil-rights activity in the Delta.

#### LOCATION

We have a possible location in mind if money for it can be obtained. It is in Mound Bayou, Miss., an all-Negro town depicted on television recently by NBC. The site includes two acres of empty land and eight small houses located across the road. We could use the houses immediately for residential purposes, and we would like to build on the empty acreage a building that could be used for dining facilities, meetings, large gatherings, etc. More buildings for expanded program could be added as we go along, but the important thing is that we could start our program immediately on this location by the construction of just one large building.

In addition, we hope eventually to buy some farm acreage nearby and develop this for an extension of our work. This would enable us to provide a place to live to a number of people who are put off the land for civil-rights activity. These people could farm the land, and gardens could be developed to raise some of the basic necessities and help us to feed the people who come to the school and others who might live there temporarily. Larger-scale farming might eventually make the institution self-supporting in part.

#### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

We are in the process of setting up a board of directors which will administer the center and its program.



BUDGET

Estimated Initial Capital Outlay:

\$ 20,000	Purchase price of Mound Bayou property
25,000	Cost of building to house meeting, dining, cooking facilities, etc., and to serve as activity center. (This is estimated cost of initial and essential unit of such a building, enough to permit us to start our program. We are counting on much volunteer labor.)
<u>5,000</u>	Initial outlay for equipment and furnishings
\$ 50,000	TOTAL

Estimated Operating Expense for First Year:

\$ 2,600	Salary for full-time cook
3,250	Salary for full-time maintenance man
3,250	Salary for full-time secretary - bookkeeper
3,000	Fund for social security for paid employes and provision of hospital and medical insurance for paid and volunteer employees
3,000	Food, etc., for volunteer workers
24,000	Twelve residential workshops (approximately one a month), each to last five days and each to include about 50 people, at a cost of about \$2000 each. This figure should pay for maintenance of participants at the workshop, transportation for participants, transportation for consultants, literature and material, an extra cook to be hired at an hourly rate and cleaning personnel to clean the premises well both before and after workshop.
3,000	Initial literature and mailing costs
1,000	Travel expense for recruitment for workshops and follow-up work.
<u>\$ 43,100</u>	TOTAL

Thus, the total estimated need for funds for the first year of operation is about \$93,000. However, if we are not able to raise this entire amount but can get enough to acquire the property, we can at least make some sort of beginning toward the program we envision. The important thing is that a beginning be made and that it be made NOW.

If you desire further information about this plan, or wish to help with a contribution or names of others whom we may contact, please address us as follows:

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