

Excerpt, "From Little Memphis Girl to Mississippi Amazon," Holsaert, et. al., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010)

Mississippi Project Director

By Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons

Initially, no residents in Laurel agreed to house us, so we had to sleep in Hattiesburg, thirty miles south, for the first two or three weeks, driving up to Laurel every day to scout out the prospects. We had the names of three people who had been active in the Laurel NAACP: Mrs. Suzie Ruffin, a Mr. Richardson, and a Mr. Simmons. We began meeting secretly with them and a few others. A number of black residents in Laurel wanted their city to be a part of the summer project. Two brave women, Mrs. Carrie Clayton and Mrs. Eberta Spinks, came forward and offered to house the three of us. We began looking for building space for our headquarters.

At first, many people were quite afraid. Everybody said that there was only one black landowner in town who owned a property large enough for what we needed. When we approached him about renting an old boarded-up nightclub, he flatly refused, so Mrs. Clayton said we could put the office in her house, too. We were reluctant to clutter up her lovely home, which we knew represented years of hard work, but she insisted. We compromised and used her back porch for more than half of the summer.

Jimmy, Lester, and I began walking the hot, dusty roads canvassing and soliciting people's participation in the summer project. A few days later, when Lester, the project director disappeared, everyone in our fledgling group feared the worst. After some of the black ministers intervened at our request, law officials admitted they were holding Lester on an old warrant. Lester had neglected to tell any of us he had violated a bond by missing a court appearance; the authorities had arrested him now and refused to let him out on a new bond. Jimmy and I were terribly upset for Lester and for the project. Lester was the seasoned SNCC worker; Jimmy was a California college student with no southern organizing experience. What little I knew I had learned in Atlanta attempting to desegregate lunch counters. Clearly, in my mind, neither of us could carry on the project without Lester or someone of his experience. A lawyer was sent in to get Lester out. The lawyer for the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) got Lester out on the condition that he leave the county permanently or face five years in prison.¹

I kept asking SNCC to send a replacement for Lester. I was told they had no one to send and I would have to be project director until they could find someone else. I couldn't believe what I

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was hearing! Jim Forman kept assuring that I could do it. And do it I did, but not without a lot of fear and trepidation in the beginning.

By the grace of God, the job was done. After Jimmy and I stabilized the project, we began recruiting housing for additional volunteers and urging COFO and SNCC to send us more people. And send them they did. All told, we had twenty-three volunteers, including two additional black college students. While handicapped in the beginning, the Laurel Project established a Freedom School, with a satellite freedom day-care center, held successful mock voter registration campaigns in which we registered hundreds of black residents, and has a good turnout for the mock elections. We built a strong Laurel chapter of the MFDP and selected the delegates for the state convention....

...Though I was just a girl, I had to grow up real fast and assume an air of authority, especially with the white male volunteers, who could not believe that a black girl younger than they were was the project director. Boy did I learn a lot about the northern liberal brand of racism and about the male sexism. I had been thrown into a fast-moving river, and I had to learn to swim the rapids. I nearly drowned many times. Allah alone sustained me.

There are so many examples of God's grace throughout my time in Mississippi. I basically taught myself to drive on one of our donated cars, an old 1953 Chevy sedan, with a stick shift, of course. So many times I ran into ditches and would have to crawl out, leave the car, and walk back to town or to a nearby farm to get some men to help me pull the car out. One of the volunteers, who came late in the summer, was a race car driver who taught me how to drive, and I do mean drive. I am sure this is why I survived several high-speed chases, driving close to a hundred miles an hour while being chased by rednecks with guns.

I remember facing off with the sheriff at a sit-in at a small diner downtown. He leveled a gun at my chest and told me to turn the demonstrators around or he would fire. I was so afraid, but the demonstrators were mostly kids, and I felt that I had to stand up to him, not show my fear. I kept walking toward him, whispering a prayer as I walked. For some unknown reason n, he let me and the scraggly line of demonstrators pass him and carry out our demonstration until we dispersed. He laughed and, holstering his gun said, "Gal, you sure is crazy; you gonna git your damn self kilt one of these days." I thought, *I'm working God overtime today!*

ⁱ COFO was the sponsoring organization for the Mississippi Summer Project. The organizations involved in COFO included CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC.