Wednesdays in Mississippi: Uniting Women across Regional and Racial Lines, Summer 1964

By Debbie Z. Harwell

Coming together in the center of racial unrest at the peak of the civil rights movement, the women of Wednesdays in Mississippi (WIMS) were a study in diversity: black and white; from the North and the South; from the nation's largest cities and smallest towns; privileged and disadvantaged; Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic; those who had earned Ph.D.'s and those who had been denied a formal education. Despite such divergent backgrounds, they shared a common bond as women desiring to bridge the widening racial divide. In the summer of 1964, teams of northern women went to Jackson, Mississippi, under the leadership of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), conducting weekly visits to their southern counterparts, to act as a calming influence in this otherwise volatile time. Participants in this unique program worked woman to woman, encouraging black and white women to communicate their concerns to one another and thereby realize that they shared common goals for their families and their communities. The organizers of WIMS believed that this type of understanding would ultimately lead to an integrated society and that this overarching goal could not be accomplished without support from the white middle-class community. According to the program leaders, no other national group of men or women appeared to be working with the specific goal of opening lines of communication between black and white middle-class women, particularly in Mississippi, to facilitate acceptance of integration and black enfranchisement in the South.[1]

[1] Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York, 2003), 165; Pauline Cowan, interview by John Britton, March 8, 1968 (hereinafter Cowan interview, 1968), pp. 20, 27, Ralph J. Bunche Collections (formerly the Civil Rights Documentation Project) (Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.); Susan Goodwillie Stedman, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, October 20, 2002 (hereinafter Stedman interview, 2002), pp. 43–44, "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Oral History Interviews, 2002, #12241-c (hereinafter WIMS Oral History Interviews) (Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library,

Ms. Harwell is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Houston and managing editor of *Houston History*.

The Journal of Southern History
Volume LXXVI, No. 3, August 2010

A great deal has been written about high-profile civil rights organizations and their leaders; however, a number of other, often overlooked organizations and support systems—often composed of women—served as a backbone to the larger movement's success. Wednesdays in Mississippi was one such organization. Working outside the traditional power structures of both the broader civil rights movement and Mississippi society, black and white team members employed the intersecting identities of their gender, class, and age to open doors that otherwise would have remained closed to them. In this way, following southern protocol served as both their vehicle and their protection—an approach that was simultaneously unusual among civil rights organizations and quintessentially feminine.[2] Created by the NCNW, WIMS was the only civil rights program organized by women, for women, as part of a national women's organization.[3] Despite this distinction, WIMS is largely absent from the historiography on women in the civil

---

University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.; hereinafter Small Special Collections Library). Susan Goodwillie Stedman married after her involvement with WIMS and will be referred to in the article text as Susan Goodwillie; interviews will be referenced by her name as recorded at the time of the interview.

The author would like to thank the following for their encouragement and assistance: Margaret Caffrey, Kenneth Chandler, Margaret Coleman, Leigh Anne Duck, Joseph Hawes, Dorothy Height, Priscilla Hunt, Edith Savage Jennings, Marlene McCurtis, Cynthia Fabrizio Pelak, Janann Sherman, Holly Cowan Shulman, Susan Goodwillie Stedman, Landon Storrs, Nancy Beck Young, Geraldine Kohlenburg Zetzel, the National Archives for Black Women's History, and the Wednesdays in Mississippi Film Project.

[2] A few organizations made a cognizant effort to work within, or at least acknowledge, the boundaries of southern protocol, including the Southern Student Organizing Committee, the Delta Ministry Project, and Operation Compliance. WIMS, meticulously staying within those bounds, focused specifically on a combination of gender, class status, and age to reach an audience of middle- and upper-class women of both races in Mississippi, as well as underprivileged African American women taking part in the Freedom Summer projects. For further reading on the projects mentioned, see Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964–1969* (New York, 2004); Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens, Ga., 2004); and Kimberly E. Nichols, "'Service for All Citizens': Operation Compliance and the 'Opening of Public Accommodations to All,' 1964" (M.A. thesis, University of Memphis, 1997).

[3] The National Council of Negro Women served as the lead organization in creating a coalition of national women's organizations under which WIMS was conceived and implemented. The assemblage included the NCNW, the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Council of Catholic Women, Church Women United, the League of Women Voters, and the American Association of University Women. Other national women's organizations—including Alpha Kappa Alpha, Business and Professional Women, Delta Sigma Theta, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Girl Scouts, Hadassah, the National Association of Colored Women, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom—lobbied, funded, and offered statements of support for civil rights and worked cooperatively for the cause with non-gender-specific, male-led organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters of the AFL-CIO, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Congress of Federated Organizations, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. However, these other women's organizations did not independently initiate civil rights projects specifically reaching out to women during this time.

rights movement and on Freedom Summer. This growing body of literature identifies patterns of women's activism within the movement, highlights several individual women who worked primarily in male-led organizations, and chronicles the NCNW and analyzes its leadership, but it does not detail the WIMS project history. Of the works concerning women in the movement, only three contain a brief mention of WIMS: NCNW president Dorothy Irene Height's autobiography, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*; Kay Mills's biography, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*; and Deborah Gray White's study of black women's organizations, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994*.[4]

The NCNW maintains extensive records on the project. Housed at the National Archives for Black Women's History (NABWH) located at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House in Washington, D.C., the collection includes drafts of the original mission statement, reports of meetings, personal and official correspondence, individual and organizational reports, and team debriefing audiotapes and transcripts. The debriefings detail the events that transpired and outline the project's successes and failures as identified by the teams, while the reports by individual women add a more introspective assessment. The Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia serves as the repository for project director Polly Cowan's notebook, staffer Susan Goodwillie's diary, and several oral histories.[5]

[4] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 155–99; Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York, 1993), 192–202; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999), 194–97. Kay Mills gives a concise description of WIMS's conception and then details its expansion to need-based initiatives of the follow-up program Workshops in Mississippi, in which Fannie Lou Hamer directly participated. Mills calls Cowan "one of those overlooked figures of American history: those who bring people together to try to solve problems but who stay out of the limelight themselves." Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 193. Deborah Gray White briefly describes the program as an example of the NCNW's focus on community service, calling the grassroots focus "strategically smart, heartfelt, and sincere." She indicates that the people in Mississippi benefited from the efforts and that WIMS helped establish the NCNW as a "bona fide Civil Rights organization." White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 196. WIMS is mentioned regarding Polly Cowan's work for civil rights in Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2001), 111. Master's theses that explore singular elements of WIMS include Erica Poff, "A Ministry of Presence: Women/Wednesdays in Mississippi, 1964–1965" (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2002), which focuses on the relationship between this type of civil rights work and the women's movement; and Kate Wilkinson, "A Sociological Analysis of an Action Group: Wednesdays in Mississippi" (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1966), which uses WIMS to explore the interpersonal dynamics of a social action group. The author's thesis, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: Women as a Catalyst for Change, Summer 1964" (M.A. thesis, University of Memphis, 2007), from which parts of this article are derived, examines the program's history and use of gender and class to effect change.

[5] Susan Goodwillie's diary from the Mississippi experience is actually a scroll that she created on a roll of shelf paper run through her Olivetti portable typewriter. Susan Goodwillie, scroll

By compiling information found in the WIMS documents and analyzing the important role this group of women played, this article fills a gap in the historiography. These women acted like a "long-handled spoon" gently "stirring up" the community—introducing neighbors positioned along a wide continuum of thought on civil rights issues—to open lines of communication where the larger movement had failed. Flying under the radar, WIMS exploited the participants' gender, class status, and age differences to effect change. Put simply, scholars need to examine at length how women's groups—black, white, and interracial—operated during the civil rights era by employing these techniques.[6]

The mid-1960s was a frightening time in the South, and racial tensions reached a fevered pitch with the anticipated passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Lynchings, cross burnings, bombings, and beatings of blacks by law officers were common; individuals were threatened physically and economically for attempting to register to vote or participating in civil rights meetings. At the center of the unrest sat Mississippi. Rather than offer protection against violence, the new civil rights legislation seemed to add to it. The White Knights, a "commando-style" offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan, formed and attracted nearly ten thousand new members. The group burned nearly two hundred crosses in sixty-four counties on one night in summer 1964, and it terrorized individuals by shooting into homes and bombing churches and businesses. Even when the perpetrators were known, most of these acts went unpunished.[7]

---

diary, June 30, 1964 (hereinafter Goodwillie diary), "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Papers of Susan Goodwillie Stedman, 1964, #12241-d (Small Special Collections Library). Also see WIMS Oral History Interviews; and "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Papers of Polly Cowan, 1964, #12241-e (Small Special Collections Library). Between 2002 and the present, several participants have given interviews to document WIMS for the University of Virginia's Virginia Center for Digital History website Wednesdays in Mississippi: Civil Rights as Women's Work, edited by Holly Cowan Shulman (www.vcdh.virginia.edu/WIMS/) and for an upcoming WIMS documentary film created by the Wednesdays in Mississippi Film Project under the direction of Marlene McCurtis, Susan Carney, Cathee Weiss, and Joy Silverman (www.wimsfilmproject.com).

[6] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 165.

[7] Dorothy I. Height, interview by Polly Cowan, February 11, April 10, May 29, October 6, November 10, 1974; February 2, March 28, May 25, October 5, 1975; February 1, May 31, November 6, 1976, in Ruth Edmonds Hill, ed., *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College* (10 vols.; Westport, Conn., 1991), V, 172; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1994), 109, 173, 213, 215–18; Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York, 2001), 173, 200, 299; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–1965* (New York, 1998), 240 (quotation); Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938–1963* (Bloomington, 1991), 165; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, 2007), 111–12.

That year, Bob Moses and Allard Lowenstein of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) were planning the Freedom Summer project to bring northern college students to the South to register voters, establish Freedom Schools and community centers, and develop local leadership. Moses believed that only outside intervention, putting Mississippi in the national spotlight, would bring about a significant change in voter registration. As COFO and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) recruited and trained the students, Mississippi prepared for what the local press called an "invasion." The state legislature passed over twenty laws limiting rights to public assembly and free speech. In Jackson, Mayor Allen Thompson hired additional policemen, purchased 250 shotguns, and procured an armored vehicle—a retrofitted ice cream truck known as "Thompson's Tank"—that carried ten policemen and had shotguns protruding from gun ports. The New York *Times* quoted Thompson as saying unabashedly that he considered "any demonstration or assembly by Negroes, peaceful or not, 'unlawful demonstration.'" Despite these dangers or, more accurately, because of them, the NCNW and the WIMS women were asked to intercede.[8]

Events that led to the creation of WIMS began in the early 1960s. Stephen Currier, a philanthropist and president of the Taconic Foundation, brought together the heads of several organizations, hoping to interest other philanthropists in becoming more involved in civil rights issues. The attendees included Martin Luther King Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Whitney Young of the National Urban League, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Roy Wilkins and Jack Greenberg of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality, C. Eric Lincoln of the Black Muslim movement, and Dorothy Height, president of the NCNW and the only woman, representing the only women's organization. Spurred

[8] Height interview, in Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, V, 184; Vicki Crawford, "African American Women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," in V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement* (New York, 2001), 123–24; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 299, 306; Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, eds., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York, 1990), 187 (first quotation); Stedman interview, 2002, p. 30; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 299; "Police Fear Crisis in Jackson, Miss.: Force Strengthened to Bar Any Negro Demonstrations," New York *Times*, March 8, 1964, p. 52 (second and third quotations), clipping in File 9, Box 10, Series 19, National Council of Negro Women Papers (hereinafter NCNW Papers; unless otherwise noted all material cited is from Series 19) (National Archives for Black Women's History, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington, D.C.; hereinafter NABWH).

to further action by the assassination of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, Currier invited approximately one hundred individuals he felt would share his sense of urgency regarding civil rights to a meeting in New York City in June 1963. Approximately ninety people attended, and within an hour they raised nearly $1 million. One of the attendees was Polly Cowan, a white woman who was a member of the Citizens Committee for Children of New York and a longtime advocate for social justice. Inspired by the presentations, Cowan began writing position papers on the civil rights struggle and sent them to the Taconic Foundation. When Currier asked the organizational leaders if they could use volunteers, all the men declined. Height, however, said yes—provided she could have the woman who had been writing those papers. This forged a working relationship and friendship that lasted until Cowan's death in 1976.[9]

Height and Cowan came to the movement from divergent backgrounds. Born to a middle-class family in Virginia in 1912, Height moved at age four to Rankin, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh. She earned both her undergraduate and master's degrees at New York University on a scholarship that she had won in a national high school oratory contest. In 1937, while working for the Harlem Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Height escorted Eleanor Roosevelt to an NCNW meeting with the organization's founder, Mary McLeod Bethune. Height so impressed Bethune that Bethune recruited her to volunteer with the NCNW. That fortuitous meeting began an association with the group that continued for over seventy years.[10]

[9] Dorothy Height, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, October 16, 2002 (hereinafter Height interview, 2002), p. 13, WIMS Oral History Interviews; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 138–40; Holly C. Shulman, "Polly Spiegel Cowan: Civil Rights Activist, 1913–1976" (2004), Jewish Women's Archive, http://jwa.org/weremember/cowan; Holly Cowan Shulman, *Wednesdays in Mississippi: The National Council of Negro Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, 1964* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, forthcoming), 11–12. Currier and his wife, Audrey Mellon Bruce Currier, both from wealthy families, created the Taconic Foundation in 1958 to fund programs for social change. Berl Bernhard, staff director of the United States Commission on Civil Rights during the John F. Kennedy administration, said that through the foundation, Currier "probably contributed more money to advance the civil rights movement than anyone else." The Curriers died in 1967, when their private plane was lost between San Juan, Puerto Rico, and St. Thomas. Nichols, "'Service for All Citizens,'" 17; Philippa Strum, ed., *Civil Rights, Politics, and the Law: Three Civil Rights Lawyers Reminisce: Proceedings of a Program Sponsored by the Division of United States Studies, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars* (Washington, D.C., 2006), 14 (quotation in note); Lloyd Grove, "Child of Fortune, Take 2," Washington *Post*, July 8, 1998, p. D1.

[10] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 1, 2, 25, 40–41, 82–85. Height died in April 2010. For her obituary see Margalit Fox, "Dorothy Height, Largely Unsung Giant of the Civil Rights Era, Dies at 98," New York *Times*, April 21, 2010, p. A25. Mary McLeod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women in 1935. Bethune was the director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, founded and acted as president for the Daytona Educational

As Bethune took Height under her wing, she laid the foundation for Height's approach to her future work. Height recalled, "She helped me feel that the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of our work mattered as much as its material impact." This realization, along with Height's devout Christian faith, determined the direction she would take when she became NCNW president in 1958. Having observed the working relationship between Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt, Height saw the value in working interracially and followed suit. She believed that success in the civil rights battle lay not only in the hands of blacks but also in garnering the cooperation and support of whites.[11]

With this approach, Height found a ready ally in Pauline "Polly" Spiegel Cowan. She was born in 1913 in Kenilworth, Illinois, a North Shore suburb of Chicago. Her German Jewish family had immigrated to the Midwest in the mid-nineteenth century and opened a furniture store that her father and older brother converted to the mail-order catalog giant Spiegel's. She graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in New York, married Louis G. Cowan, and worked as a radio and television producer. Polly Cowan experienced the effects of quota systems and the exclusion of Jews from housing and social circles. Even though her family did not practice the faith, they were part of the Jewish community, and she was raised with the principles of "'Prophetic Judaism.' . . . the teachings of Isaiah: 'Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.'" Her daughter, historian Holly Cowan Shulman, has explained that in "working with Dorothy Height and the NCNW Cowan found her spiritual home." The two "worked together seamlessly, . . . plotting their course, sharing their dreams." Their relationship epitomized what they believed possible and

---

and Industrial Institute, which later became Bethune-Cookman University, and served as a leader in the National League of Republican Women and the International Council of Women of the Darker Races of the World. Historian Deborah Gray White has theorized that these activities "set the ideological foundation" on which the NCNW was based. Bethune believed that the government often overlooked black women because they failed to present a united front. The NCNW, acting as an umbrella organization for existing African American women's groups, would enable them to make progress in ways that had not been possible working independently. The organization sought "(1) To unite national organizations . . . ; (2) To educate, encourage and effect the participation of Negro women in civic, political, economic and educational activities and institutions; (3) To serve as a clearing house for . . . activities concerning women; [and] (4) To plan, initiate and carry out projects which develop, benefit and integrate the Negro and the nation." White concludes, "Of all the national black women's organizations to emerge during this period, the Council was the most influential and, as it turned out, the longest lived." White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 148–49 (first and third quotations on 148), 177; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), 202, 213 (second quotation).

[11] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 85 (quotation), 155–56; Shulman, *Wednesdays in Mississippi*, 7.

sought to achieve by opening lines of communication between black and white women in the South.[12]

Height and Cowan immediately organized a meeting of women to be held the day following the March on Washington. Frustrated by the failure of the male leadership to include women on the march program despite her repeated requests, Height felt a gathering of women was crucial. She hoped to broaden the discourse beyond discrimination to include other issues important to women such as housing, child care, education, and employment. At the meeting—titled "After the March—What?"—young southern women told about their experiences, and Height and Cowan expressed the willingness of the NCNW to help. Two months later, Prathia Hall, a SNCC worker who had attended the meeting, called Height to ask for the organization's assistance. Hall had been working to register voters in Selma, Alabama, when three hundred children, ages eight to sixteen, were jailed for encouraging participation. Their cells were so crowded they could neither sit nor lie down; the food was stretched with sawdust; the coffee contained salt instead of sugar, and only limited water was provided; they had no blankets, no privacy; and the girls were threatened with sexual assault.[13]

Height decided that a team representing the NCNW would travel to Selma to evaluate the conditions and determine what could be done. The team consisted of two African American women, Height and Dr. Dorothy Ferebee, former NCNW president and the director of health services at Howard University; and two white women, Cowan and Shirley Smith, the executive director of the National Women's Committee for Civil Rights. As traveling interracially in the South was culturally unacceptable and dangerous in 1963, they planned to travel in segregated cars, but the car for the two black women did not arrive. As a result, the four chose to risk riding together to the black First Baptist Church,

[12] Shulman, "Polly Spiegel Cowan" (first quotation); Polly Cowan, "Why Me?" autobiographical essay, File 10, Box 1, Series 1, Polly Cowan Papers (NABWH); Isaiah 1:17; Shulman, *Wednesdays in Mississippi*, 8–9 (second quotation on 8), 3–4 (third quotation on 4).

[13] Dorothy I. Height, "'We Wanted the Voice of a Woman to Be Heard': Black Women and the 1963 March on Washington," in Franklin and Collier-Thomas, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle*, 85–87; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 145–46 (quotation on 146), 157–58; Polly Cowan, autobiography fragments, n.d., pp. 41–44, File 7, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers; Dorothy Height, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, January 24, 2003 (hereinafter Height interview, 2003), WIMS Oral History Interviews. Prathia Hall is credited with inspiring Martin Luther King Jr. to use the phrase "I have a dream." In 1962 King heard Hall use the phrase regarding her vision for the future in a sermon in Terrell County, Georgia, at the site of Mount Olive Baptist Church, which had been burned to the ground by the Ku Klux Klan. Rebecca Clark, "Losing One of Our Own," *Boston University School of Theology Anna Howard Shaw Center Newsletter*, 19 (Fall–Winter 2002), 3 (quotation in note); Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York, 2004), 519*n*22.

where Smith and Cowan intended to drop off Height and Ferebee. When they arrived, the temptation to hear the stories of the children who had since been released was too great, and the white women decided to stay. The next day, all four women attended another rally at the church, where James Forman of SNCC invited the two black women to sit on the platform and speak. He asked the white women to speak as well, and Cowan, sensing from Forman's manner that he was daring her, accepted.[14]

Cowan and Smith met the next day with two local white women who were concerned about the accusations of abuse, but who also questioned whether the voter registration campaign was communist inspired and if the children had been paid to go to jail. As Cowan and Smith left, the two Selma women agreed to further discuss their misgivings with Dorothy Tilly of the Fellowship of the Concerned, an organization of southern white churchwomen intent on changing racist attitudes in the region. In the meantime, an account of Cowan's speaking at the rally appeared in the local newspaper, and this act caused the Selma women to refuse to meet Tilly. They told Tilly by phone as she waited at the airport, "We have been betrayed. These women, Mrs. Polly and Shirley, told us they came because they were interested in our community. But they have been with those people." The effort was not a complete failure, however. Not only had the four women witnessed the abuse and determined an area of need, but they had also learned from the experience. Height later discussed how the lesson framed their future actions: "Having generated heat where we had hoped to bring light, we learned that . . . we had to be sensitive to the perspectives of people on both sides of the issue. We would have to go into tension-filled communities quietly, anonymously, and—even when our most deeply cherished principles were violated in the process—with respect for local custom." Painful as the realization of their mistake had been, the lesson proved useful and served as a key to their future success with WIMS.[15]

[14] Polly Cowan, autobiography fragments, n.d., pp. 16–17, File 7, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers; Cowan interview, 1968, p. 7; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 157–60; National Council of Negro Women Education Foundation, "'Wednesdays in Mississippi' 1964," February 1965, p. 3, File 8, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Stedman interview, 2002, p. 15. Shirley Smith declined the offer to speak as she was in Selma in her capacity as executive director of the National Women's Committee for Civil Rights and, as such, would need permission from the organization's co-chairs to speak on their behalf. In addition, she had been arrested in Jackson as a Freedom Rider and did not wish to return to the Mississippi jail. Cowan interview, 1968, pp. 7–8.

[15] Stedman interview, 2002, p. 16; Cowan, autobiography fragments, n.d., pp. 17, 21, 23–24 (first quotation on 24; emphasis in original), File 7, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 162 (second quotation). Dorothy Tilly founded the Fellowship of the Concerned to push for justice for the disadvantaged, particularly African Americans and the poor. She believed that encouraging white southern women to teach their children and husbands

Both Height and Cowan emphasized finding a way for the NCNW to reach out to the South in an effort to bridge the racial divide. Still working full-time for the YWCA, Height reported the details of their experience to the national board of the YWCA and solicited input from the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), and Church Women United. Cowan, also pondering their future direction, realized in reflecting on the Selma trip that their "middle-class appearance was [their] main protection" and that to "organize a group of wealthy and powerful women" might provide the opening they needed to become actively involved. The national leaders of the organizations decided to hold an off-the-record meeting in Atlanta in March 1964, to bring together the leadership of the NCNW, NCCW, NCJW, YWCA, and Church Women United from the hottest trouble spots in the South: Albany and Atlanta, Georgia; Montgomery and Selma, Alabama; Charleston, South Carolina; Danville, Virginia; and Jackson, Mississippi. To encourage participation, they planned the meeting program around the topics of police brutality and substandard jails.[16]

Height presided over the luncheon meeting on their final day. She asked the women to sit together by city and consider what role the national organizations could play in helping their communities. Clarie Collins Harvey, a prominent African American woman from Jackson and founder of WomanPower Unlimited, stood up and gestured to the four white women seated at her table, stating, "Here we are . . . . We have never met before, we have never sat together before, and we have decided today that we will never be separated again. We have too much work to do! Yes, there is value to each of us in being part of a national organization, because you can help us. You can be like a long-handled spoon, reaching down and stirring us up, bringing us together in ways that we could never do by ourselves."[17] Harvey further expressed her

---

tolerance would go a long way toward ending racial prejudice. One activity of the Fellowship of the Concerned involved well-dressed southern white churchwomen attending the trials of those they suspected might not get a fair hearing. By their presence, the women hoped to "shame local authorities and juries" into delivering justice, rather than succumbing to outside pressure, and the women's efforts did make a difference. Edith Holbrook Riehm, "Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned," in Gail S. Murray, ed., *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville, 2004), 23–48 (quotation in note on 33).

[16] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 162–64; Polly Cowan, "Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Variations on a Theme," n.d., p. 1 (quotations), File 2, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers; "Inter Organization Women's Committee," File 2, Box 8, NCNW Papers; Stedman interview, 2002, p. 18. This meeting was historic in and of itself as the first integrated meeting attended by many of the participants and the first ever hosted at the American Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 164.

[17] "Inter Organizations Women's Committee," File 2, Box 8, NCNW Papers; Stedman interview, 2002, p. 20; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 164–65 (quotation on 165). Clarie

concerns about violence in reaction to the Freedom Summer project. Although Jackson was a "bastion of segregation," she nevertheless believed it would help if northern women would visit the community to act as a calming influence—a "ministry of presence."[18]

Dorothy Height and Polly Cowan felt strongly that to be effective in bringing southern women together across racial lines, they had to be invited to help. They could not say, "we're coming down whether you like it or not." The Atlanta meeting and Clarie Harvey afforded them that opportunity. Cowan conceived the idea to make Harvey's request a reality. She suggested bringing women of stature, black and white, of various faiths and interests, from the "Cadillac crowd." Their prominence would be a "quieting influence." Progressive women's activism, grounded in part in class privilege, education, and social reform work, provided a model for the activism of these women, many of whom were born in the 1910s and 1920s. The WIMS strategy, however, involved a smart and thoughtful twisting of class concerns as they functioned in the 1960s. Height and Cowan wanted to use class as a cover for bringing real social change rather than social housekeeping to the South. The

---

Collins Harvey was the only child of Malachi and Mary Collins, who, in the 1880s, established the first funeral home owned by African Americans serving African Americans in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. In 1924 they purchased what would become Collins Funeral Home in Jackson from G. F. Frazier. Harvey joined her mother in managing the business in 1950 and became CEO following her mother's death in 1970, expanding the business with numerous innovations in funeral services and the addition of an insurance company. Harvey received an undergraduate degree in economics from Spelman College and an M.A. in personnel administration from Columbia University and completed postgraduate work at New York University School of Business Administration and Union Theological Seminary, as well as earning numerous certifications in mortuary science. In 1943 she married Martin Luther Harvey, who became a dean at Southern University. The couple remained married until his death in 1976 and had no children. In 1961 Clarie Harvey founded WomanPower Unlimited to support the Freedom Riders on trial in Jackson. The organization grew to an interracial network of over three hundred women who supported voter registration, school desegregation, and other civil rights projects. Historian John Dittmer has theorized that the group's being "[i]ndependent of any male-dominated civil rights group" enabled them to act quickly, "free from bureaucratic inefficiency and territorial infighting." Harvey also served in leadership posts for numerous local, national, and international organizations and boards. She is continually referred to by women who knew her through WIMS and by residents of Jackson as an elegant, articulate woman who was well respected in both the black and white Jackson communities for her business acumen and humanitarian service. Harvey's papers are archived as the Clarie Collins Harvey Papers at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University. Collins Funeral Home, "Our Founders," http://www.servicebycollins.com/aboutus.htm; Mississippi Legislature, Senate Resolution 120, Regular Session 1999, SR No. 120, 99\SS03\R1582, pp. 1–4; Dittmer, *Local People*, 98–99 (first and second quotations in note on 99); Clarie Collins Harvey, interview with Gordon Henderson, August 5, 1965, "Oral History Memoir of Clarie Collins Harvey (Mrs. Martin L.)," Oral History Project—Contemporary Mississippi Life and Viewpoints 1965, John Quincy Adams Faculty Papers (Millsaps College Archives, Millsaps-Wilson Library, Millsaps College, Jackson, Miss.).

[18] "Consultation Program of Inter-Organization Women's Committee," p. 17, File 2, Box 8, NCNW Papers (first quotation); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 165 (second quotation); Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 20–22.

Selma team would be their prototype. The women coming to Jackson would use their skills as observers and then report to their communities on what they had seen; they would bring resources to the Freedom Schools and, thus, appear to be doing women's work; they would build bridges between the black and white women of Jackson. Expecting that these would be busy women—professionals, community leaders, and officers in local, state, and national organizations—who only had a limited amount of time available, Cowan suggested they fly into Jackson on Tuesday, fan out to surrounding areas on Wednesday, and return home on Thursday. They would call the project Wednesdays in Mississippi. Cowan wrote, "The Raison d'etre for these women being in troubled spots should be the same as the Fellowship of the Concerned: because they care, they want to know the truth, they want to help." Height recalled that Cowan insisted, "'We don't want them to go as sightseers. They have to be willing to do something that furthers the movement.'" The commitment of these women to the cause and their willingness to work for it while simultaneously projecting an image of propriety and moderation were paramount to the project's success.[19]

Cowan also had a concern for the safety of the students participating in Freedom Summer. Her own two sons were going to Mississippi as volunteers, as were the children of four of the other women she would eventually recruit. She knew that it frightened white Mississippians when they thought a thousand SNCC workers were coming; therefore, she wanted to refute any misconceptions about the students invading the state and to reassure the southern women that these were really dedicated young people, thereby calming reactionary fears and resistance to civil rights. The northern women who were mothers of COFO students could verify that the students were not advancing communism or endangering anyone but rather were offering an opportunity for education

[19]Holly Cowan Shulman, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: Civil Rights as Women's Work" (paper presented as part of a panel titled "Voices of Moderation: Jewish Women and the Civil Rights Movement," for the Thirty-first Annual Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference, Little Rock, Ark., November 10, 2006), digital recording, in author's possession (first quotation); Cowan, autobiography fragments, n.d., p. 24, File 7, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 168 (second and third quotations); Cowan, "Women in the Civil Rights Movement," 1964, p. 1, File 2, Box 2, NCNW Papers (fourth quotation); Height interview, 2002, p. 15 (fifth quotation); Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege*, 3; Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992), 3, 142. For further discussion of how class impacted the civil rights activism of women, see Dittmer, *Local People*; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995); Schultz, *Going South*; and Barbara Ellen Smith, ed., *Neither Separate nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the South* (Philadelphia, 1999).

and extending rights of citizenship to those lacking it. In this way, WIMS could both dispel the rumors being circulated about the COFO volunteers and contribute to the NCNW's original mission of opening lines of communication. Further, many children of the WIMS women, both nonparticipants and participants in COFO, attended the same universities as the children of the southern women, which gave the northern and southern women a piece of common ground on which to begin building a connection.[20]

In May 1964, before embarking on their plan, Polly Cowan and Shirley Smith went to Jackson to be sure the NCNW's help was still welcome. They met with eight white and four African American women who had doubts about the plan's success, given that anyone coming in from the outside was suspect. The responses ranged from "If Jesus Christ himself came in here nobody would listen" to "Please try it. Try anything"—but no one said, "Don't come." Having received the desired invitation from the local women, Height and Cowan outlined their statement of purpose: "It is important that many private citizens of stature and influence make it known that they support the aspirations of the citizens of Mississippi for full citizenship, that they deplore violence and that they will place themselves in tension-filled situations as a point of contact and communication to try to initiate both understanding and reconciliation." The specific goals were "to establish lines of communication among women of goodwill across regional and racial lines, to observe the COFO student projects and discuss them with local Mississippi women, and to lend a 'ministry of presence' as witnesses to encourage compassion and reconciliation."[21]

In addition to representatives from the organizations at the Atlanta meeting, members of the League of Women Voters (LWV) and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) would also participate. Height and Cowan wanted women who had something to offer the project through their education, their resources, or their

[20] Stedman interview, 2002, p. 25; Cowan interview, 1968, p. 18; Height interview, in Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, V, 185. Height hoped the program would bring family members together to facilitate understanding, but this goal was not achieved on a wide-ranging scale. The trips were too brief, and the outreach communities that the mothers visited did not correspond to their children's assignments.

[21] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Chicago Team," August 11–13, 1964, pp. 1–2, File 2, Box 15, NCNW Papers; Cowan interview, 1968, p. 12 (first quotation); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 168–69 (second and third quotations on 168; fifth quotation on 169); Height interview, in Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, V, 186; "Wednesdays in Mississippi," National Council of Negro Women Project Summary, 1964, pp. 1–2 (fourth quotation on 1), File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers.

positions—either in their own right or by nature of their husbands' connections. Height believed each woman's recognition of her personal contribution to WIMS was crucial to her ability to accurately assess the situation in the South. Staffer Susan Goodwillie further explained, "The last thing we wanted was a bunch of northern finger-wavers . . . who really had no understanding themselves, of what [WIMS] was all about or what the struggle in the South was all about." The women would fly together into Jackson and follow Cowan's three-day itinerary, visiting the Freedom Summer projects and meeting with local women in an effort to open lines of communication. This would not be a pleasure trip; every moment would be filled with discerning the reality of life, for both blacks and whites, and pinpointing where they might find common ground between the two factions to build bridges of understanding.[22]

Remembering their Selma experience, Height and Cowan were determined not to alienate anyone and planned accordingly to operate within the bounds of southern social norms for gender, race, and class. To administer the program locally, they needed a small biracial staff and base of operations. They chose Susan Goodwillie as the white staff member. She had come to work for the NCNW in October 1963 after becoming interested in civil rights while reading about the movement as she worked with Operation Crossroads Africa. A recent Stanford University graduate, Goodwillie was only twenty-two years old, a fact that raised some concerns for her safety as an outsider in a hostile environment. As a result, she recruited her college roommate, Diane Vivell, to work with her as a volunteer. Housing was arranged for the two women at the Magnolia Towers, an apartment building owned by members of the White Citizens' Council. Although the NCNW paid the bills, local "angels" laundered the checks so that the money would not be traced to the organization. Expecting that in a small city like Jackson questions would be asked about why the women were in town, they chose to go undercover, armed with a letter of introduction from Cowan's husband stating that his company had retained them to write a cookbook. For the black staffer, Height selected Pittsburgh native Doris Wilson. Wilson had a B.A. from Tuskegee Institute, an M.A. in Christian education from Union Theological Seminary, and an M.A. in social administration from Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University). She had worked with the national Student YWCA, where

[22] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 168–69; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 31–33 (quotation on 31); Height interview, 2003, p. 5; "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Proposal, May 22, 1964, File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers.

she met Dorothy Height, and also had experience working with women in interracial groups. While in Mississippi, Wilson stayed with a friend, a librarian at Jackson State College (now Jackson State University), who refused to leave a light on outside at night for fear she would be shot coming in from her garage, as had happened to Medgar Evers the year before. Nonetheless, she was willing to take a chance for progress.[23]

To learn their legal rights and the art of nonviolent civil disobedience, the three women attended the COFO training for Freedom Summer volunteers at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. In an attempt to anticipate various scenarios, they also met in Cowan's living room in New York to role-play how they should dress and how to answer questions they might encounter. To be beyond reproach, they wore white gloves and "went to church three times on Sunday." Goodwillie said, "If we were going to get through to white women we had to be totally acceptable to white Mississippi upper-class standards." They maintained their decorum at all times, even divorcing themselves from outward contact with friends participating in the Freedom Summer project in Jackson.[24]

Next on the agenda was finding a place for the women to meet. Gathering publicly, whether Wilson came to the Magnolia Towers or the two white women took a taxi or bus to Wilson's residence, was impossible. Finally, Lillie Belle Jones, head of the local black YWCA, agreed to let them meet in her back room, provided they exercised caution and kept the meetings brief. Goodwillie recalled the plan they devised to reach the facility after looking at a map: "we figured out that the Sun-n-Sand Motel, which is where we housed most of the white team members, was sort of on the edge of the black community. So we'd take a

[23] Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 5–6, 33–34; Susan Goodwillie, interview by William Chafe, January 22, 1989, "The Reminiscences of Susan Goodwillie," Allard K. Lowenstein Oral History Project (Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.), 3, 4, 18–19, 21–22; Susan Goodwillie Stedman, interview by Marlene McCurtis, August 6, 2008 (hereinafter Stedman interview, 2008), transcript, WIMS Film Project, Tape 1, 01:02:47–01:03:44, 01:28:57–01:29:55; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 170 (quotation); Height interview, 2002, p. 20; Doris Wilson, interview by Mary Ann Lawlor, March 9, 2003 (hereinafter Wilson interview, 2003), pp. 7–17, in the possession of Holly Cowan Shulman, University of Virginia; Kojo Nnamdi, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: An Interview with Guests Susan Goodwillie, Priscilla Hunt, Mildred Pitt Goodman, Doris V. Wilson, and Russlyn Ali," *Public Interest*, WAMU, American University Radio, Washington, D.C., April 20, 2001, cassette, in author's possession. Regarding the cover used by the white women, a minister from Boston who was trying to operate an integrated church in Jackson brought to their attention, much to the staff's amusement, that if you were writing a southern cookbook you would not be getting your recipes in the white community; you would be talking to the African American women. Stedman interview, 2002, p. 35.

[24] Height interview, 2003, p. 11; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 171; Height interview, 2002, pp. 19–20; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 34–35 (first quotation on 35); Lottie Joiner, "Down in the Delta," *New Crisis*, 109 (March–April 2002), 31–37 (second quotation on 35); Goodwillie diary, June 30, 1964; "Reminiscences of Susan Goodwillie," 16.

white taxi to the Sun-n-Sand Motel, walk through the lobby, past the swimming pool, . . . through the crepe myrtle hedge at the back of the motel property, . . . and [then] walk the six blocks to the Y. . . . [W]e were safe in the black community. . . . [T]hey knew we were pals, and it's the only time we felt safe." The elaborate nature of this route illustrates the level of paranoia in Jackson at that time, which prevented freedom of movement and created obstacles not only to interracial communication but also to discussion of civil rights advocacy.[25]

As the various elements of the plan were arranged, Height and Cowan began to select women for the visiting teams. Well connected, the two called on women they knew, women who served in organizations to which they belonged, women who had children going south for Freedom Summer, and women referred to them by others. Height and Cowan were also selective, however, and a woman's interest did not guarantee her acceptance. Cowan recalled one incident in which a woman said, "If I see something that I don't like going on I'm going to go to jail." Cowan told her to go with another group, as WIMS could not afford that kind of publicity—it would stop their activities. Height and Cowan wanted a diverse group who could relate to the equally diverse women they would find in Mississippi and who could be paired to create a common ground. Therefore, each team, composed of four to eight women, usually included a Jewish woman, a Catholic woman, a Protestant woman, a member of the LWV or AAUW, and one or two women from other organizations. Many had multiple affiliations through which to make a connection.[26]

Beginning July 7 and running through August 18, 1964, seven teams totaling forty-eight northern women made the trip to Jackson: thirty-two white, sixteen black; thirty-two Protestant, eight Jewish, six Catholic, and two undesignated; forty with college degrees, four of whom had earned Ph.D.'s. They came from Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. Sixty percent were working women; many served on community

[25] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 170; "Reminiscences of Susan Goodwillie," 20; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 35–36 (quotation on 36). The YWCA officially called this facility the branch YWCA; however, due to de facto segregation of the Jackson facilities, community members referred to it as the black YWCA. YWCAs in other cities followed this pattern. For further discussion of race and the YWCA, see Sara M. Evans, ed., *Journeys That Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955–1975* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2003); Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*; and Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

[26] Height interview, 2002, p. 16; Cowan interview, 1968, pp. 12, 24, 16–17 (quotation).

boards and government commissions. They belonged to at least twenty separate organizations, and a quarter of the women held positions of responsibility, with four serving as national presidents. Their husbands included a former governor of New Jersey, the dean of science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the president of United Artists, John F. Kennedy's former science adviser, the director of the Twentieth Century Fund, the head of the Associated Negro Press, and the executive vice president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.[27]

As with the staff, team accommodations were arranged by race. The African American women in Jackson welcomed northern African Americans into their homes. White team members, in contrast, stayed at one of the local hotels. This pattern continued until the arrival of the final team, whose northern white women received invitations to stay in southern white homes. To prepare team members before they left for Jackson, the NCNW conducted orientation sessions and provided briefing materials that included basic facts on Mississippi and the towns they would visit, such as Canton, Hattiesburg, Meridian, Ruleville, or Vicksburg; background information on local civil rights projects; a bibliography on southern attitudes; a pamphlet, "Behind the Cotton Curtain"; and the text of a speech by University of Mississippi professor James W. Silver that led to his book *Mississippi: The Closed Society*.[28]

In a July memo, Cowan cautioned the women that they would hear many rumors that should not be reported as fact without first being verified. "In the same way there may be rumors about us which we can dispel by our integrity," she said. To refute the misconception held by white southerners that subversive organizations paid northerners to come to the region, Cowan reminded the women that if someone asked, they should assure the person that they were not part of SNCC or COFO and that they had not been paid to come or sent by any group. To wary southerners, any of these situations would have raised red flags as to the visitors' intentions. In fact, the majority of the WIMS women could afford to and did pay their own way, with a few receiving travel grants

[27] National Council of Negro Women Education Foundation, "'Wednesdays in Mississippi' 1964," February 1965, p. 10, File 8, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Joiner, "Down in the Delta," 32; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 175; Cowan interview, 1968, p. 16; Polly Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi 1964–1965: Final Report," 1965, pp. 40–43, 50, File 14, Box 12, NCNW Papers.

[28] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 170; "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Proposal, May 22, 1964, File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Dick Schaap, "Secret Project in Mississippi—Interracial Meetings of Women," New York *Herald Tribune*, August 30, 1964, clipping in File 9, Box 10, NCNW Papers; James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York, 1964). A copy of Silver's speech is in File 9, Box 8, NCNW Papers.

from the NCNW or one of the sponsoring organizations to which they belonged. Financial independence served as one of the important class markers to set WIMS apart from seemingly radical organizations.[29]

A further precaution was a strict rule against publicity. While they wanted the women to go home and share their experiences to recruit others to the cause, the organizers feared that any reports during the summer would endanger the teams and staff. If questioned by the press, the women were to provide a statement about their goal to act as a "ministry of presence," to assist in meeting human needs and relieving suffering, and to act as "sensitive interpreters . . . through personal observation and conversation" with the thought that women could accomplish a great deal by demonstrating concern and dedication. Further, their instructions stated they should not participate in civil rights demonstrations or marches.[30]

While attending the COFO training in Ohio, the staffers received news of the disappearance of fellow trainees James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, who were later found murdered. Goodwillie remembered, "That really shook us. I mean, it was awful, awful testimony to the reality that we were about to enter." This news caused some team members to withdraw, but for others, it strengthened their resolve. Some husbands objected and forced their wives to drop out, others questioned Cowan at length about provisions for the women's safety, and still others were supportive or left the decision to their wives. In case trouble should arise, WIMS took the precaution of notifying federal and state officials of their impending visits, including President Lyndon B. Johnson, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Mississippi governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., and the head of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, John Doar, who remained in close contact throughout the summer. Before the first team's departure, the Department of Justice sent a message to the Mississippi state police advising them of the coming trip. The Mississippi state police, in turn, sent a notice to the highway patrol officers on July 6: "These women are coming here by invitation from the Department of Justice."[31]

[29] Polly Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Memo Number 6, July 2, 1964, File 6, Box 9, NCNW Papers (quotation); "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Proposal, May 22, 1964, pp. 2, 6, File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers.

[30] Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi" Memo Number 6, July 2, 1964, File 6, Box 9, NCNW Papers (quotations); Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 32, 50.

[31] Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 36–37 (first quotation on 37); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 170; Cowan interview, 1968, pp. 28, 30; Stedman interview, 2008, Tape 1, 01:49:54–01:55:16; "The Dept. of Justice Gave the Following" Memo, July 6, 1964, Folder 8, Box 144, Series II, Subseries 10: Highway Patrol, Johnson (Paul B.) Family Papers, Collection

One final stipulation for all teams was the insistence that they travel in segregated groups upon arrival in Jackson. They would fly together from their departure point, but when they deplaned in Jackson, the women were to separate by race, not speaking or acknowledging the others' existence. There, the black women would be met by Wilson, the white women by Goodwillie and Vivell, and they would depart in separate cars. Some women balked at this plan. Ruth Batson, a member of Team 2 and commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, almost canceled her trip because she believed that since this was exactly the kind of behavior they hoped to stop, they should lead by example. The WIMS organizers and staff, in contrast, insisted that segregated travel was essential if they expected to accomplish their goals. On arrival, Doris Wilson carefully outlined the visitors' role such that Batson no longer felt she was betraying her principles. Height explained, "We helped to get them to understand the importance of living within the pattern . . . . There was no way we could bring about change if we went down there and tried to upset it." At first glance, WIMS's actions may appear circumscribed and overly cautious. In reality, the women operated in this manner because the situation in Mississippi was dangerous, and they did not want to repeat the failure of their Selma experience. The fact that WIMS employed subtle tactics in no way mitigated their efforts to bring about change.[32]

The first WIMS team, which included both Height and Cowan, arrived on July 7, 1964, just five days after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 went into effect. Even though the legislation prohibited discrimination in public accommodations, that stipulation did not equate to changing attitudes of segregationist white southerners. Hence, the WIMS women followed their plan, separating by race at the airport. The teams would only come together interracially at the Freedom Summer projects and whenever an evening meeting could be quietly arranged, usually at the home of Clarie Harvey. The first team's itinerary typified those that

---

M191 (Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Miss.) (second quotation).

[32] Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 39–41; Unita Blackwell with JoAnne Prichard Morris, *Barefootin': Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom* (New York, 2006), 96; Russlyn Ali and Susan Goodwillie, *Wednesdays in Mississippi: The Story* (Washington, D.C., 2006), 14; "WIMS Team #2," Team Debriefing transcript, 1964, pp. 3–4, NABWH-001-S15-SS5-F18-S1-S2, Sides 1–2, Folder 18, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers; Joiner, "Down in the Delta," 33 (quotation). For a discussion of how white activist women's groups in the South maintained separation by race while attacking the problem of segregation, see Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege*. For a discussion of white activists working for civil rights prior to the 1960s, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1993); and Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*.

followed throughout the summer. The black women departed the airport for the home of their hosts and, after dinner, attended an NAACP rally. The white women checked into the hotel and went to a meeting with the white staff members. On Wednesday all the women visited a Freedom School in Hattiesburg and the local COFO offices and listened to a report on voter registration. On their return to Jackson, they met with local women in segregated groups, attended an Inter-faith Prayer Fellowship gathering, and went to a meeting of WomanPower Unlimited. On Thursday they returned home. Though the details varied, all the teams participated in similar activities, depending on their outreach community and the events scheduled in Jackson that week.[33]

The WIMS women witnessed the potential for violence on their first trip while visiting the Freedom School at Morning Star Church in Hattiesburg. As team member Marian Logan, the New York City special projects coordinator for the SCLC, stepped outside to call her husband, a car sped by, and someone threw an object out the window—a Molotov cocktail that "mercifully fizzled." One of the COFO volunteers, a music major, walked over to the piano and played the "Hallelujah Chorus." Height recalled, "We joined him with our voices, clasping hands in a circle as each one sent up a private prayer of thanks that no one had been hurt . . . . We were a group of strangers united in a common crusade for which, each of us knew, all were prepared to die." Goodwillie offered her perspective, "I remember being scared, but this was nothing relative to what women, Mississippi women had been through, and would continue to go through. . . . [I]magine having to live your life like that." In the evening, the WIMS team learned that their guide for the day, the Reverend Bob Beech, a white Presbyterian minister and head of the Hattiesburg Ministers Project, had been arrested and jailed after they left, charged with having an overdrawn bank account.[34]

[33] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 171; Susan Goodwillie, "Letter from Susan Goodwillie—Re: The First Wednesdays in Mississippi—July 7–9," July 1964, p. 1, File 3, Box 14, NCNW Papers; "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers.

[34] Height interview, in Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, V, 189; Cowan interview, 1968, pp. 19–20; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 55 (first quotation), 57 (fourth quotation); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 173–74 (second and third quotations); Jean Benjamin, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Answers to Report Questionnaire," July 27, 1964, p. 3, File 7, Box 12, NCNW Papers; "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, p. 7, File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Goodwillie, "Letter from Susan Goodwillie—Re: The First Wednesdays in Mississippi—July 7–9," July 1964, p. 6, File 3, Box 14, NCNW Papers. Although not in the same geographic area, the Hattiesburg Ministers Project headed by Rev. Beech was part of the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches (NCC), which included most of the country's mainstream Protestant and Orthodox denominations. The NCC attempted through resolutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s to encourage peaceful acceptance of change by whites in Mississippi

Cowan later said they "never emphasized the kind of thing that might have caused hysteria"; however, the threats of violence and retaliation certainly validated the need for the many precautions they had taken. Over the course of the summer, despite their having notified various government agencies, team members reported being chased by sheriffs, "followed by angry-looking white men with weapons prominently displayed in their gun racks," and "shot at a couple of times." All the teams expressed a fear of law enforcement, and they never knew with certainty if surveillance was hostile or protective. Even being aware of "booby traps," such as stop signs turned the wrong direction to enable law enforcement to identify anyone who stopped as an outsider, they occasionally stumbled. One evening while carrying a car full of women, Goodwillie was stopped by an officer as she turned the wrong way on a one-way street. As he reprimanded her, she recalled, "something just clicked in my head. I said (in a southern accent), 'Officer, I'm just so sorry. Well, I didn't see that sign. You really ought to put better lights on those signs, officer.' This dripping Magnolia stuff, and batted my eyelashes. I was merciless. . . . Had he known who I was and what I was doing, I would have been in jail. I should have been given a ticket, but instead, got nothing." Goodwillie had learned enough about Mississippi law enforcement to use her gender and their own prejudices against them.[35]

As the summer progressed and the teams were debriefed, Cowan noticed that the later teams made observations that earlier teams were unable to make, particularly Team 7, which returned to Team 1's destination of Hattiesburg. She believed that the variation stemmed, in part, from their not being burdened by the same fears as the earlier teams and that they thus experienced a slightly greater openness in the community.

---

and the South, but the group did not engage in direct participation in the civil rights struggle. That policy changed between 1963 and 1964, when the NCC created a Commission on Religion and Race, took part in the March on Washington, lobbied for civil rights legislation, and sent mediators to several cities. This activity led to formation of the Delta Ministry, which sought to offer direct relief, to ease suffering, and to act as a "ministry of reconciliation" to those in the Mississippi Delta region, Hattiesburg, and McComb. Similar to WIMS, the Delta Ministry's goals included opening lines of communication between the black and white communities. Like COFO, the Delta Ministry also sought to develop local leaders, to establish community centers, to assist in voter registration, and to educate and conduct job training. The project alienated many white Mississippians, and as a result, many Mississippi Christian churches withdrew their financial support from the NCC. Nevertheless, the Delta Ministry successfully moved ahead with many of its efforts. Newman, *Divine Agitators*, ix, 4, 7–8, 12 (quotation in note), 31.

[35] Cowan interview, 1968, pp. 19–20 (first quotation on 20); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 170 (second quotation); Height interview, in Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, V, 190; "Reminiscences of Susan Goodwillie," 20–21 (third quotation on 20; fifth quotation on 21); Stedman interview, 2002, p. 21 (fourth quotation).

She speculated on the reasons for this shift: the WIMS staff's greater experience, the presence of FBI agents and news media investigating the disappearance of the three students, and WIMS's improved relationship with representatives of the Department of Justice, which had developed through weekly reports Cowan provided to them on WIMS and the Freedom Summer projects. No doubt, all these factors combined to ease the tensions with each successive team's travel.[36]

Visits to the Freedom Schools, which were working to educate adults and children in basic academics and rights of citizenship, were an important part of each team's trip and served as another invitation for the group to come to Mississippi. Working with schools gave the appearance of engaging in nonadversarial women's work and, at the same time, afforded the NCNW an opportunity to facilitate progress in education. While some Freedom Schools held classes in churches, others met in abandoned buildings, converted barns, or open-air facilities with benches. Prior to each team's departure for Mississippi, Goodwillie determined what the particular school needed and provided a wish list of supplies the women could bring with them on their upcoming visit. Consistently, the team reports commented on the dedication of the COFO student volunteers and the importance of the work they were doing. Young and old alike attended the schools in large numbers. Children came eager to learn even in the sweltering heat. Adults, often in evening classes, learned their rights as citizens and discovered African American history, something that Freedom School teacher Arthur Reese said opened a "whole new world" to them and served as a source of pride. Some of the stories regarding the children are heartbreaking. Goodwillie recalled a child who exhibited pride in having learned from a previous teacher that the reason black people were inferior to white people was because the brains of blacks weighed thirty pounds less than those of whites. At that time in the South, it never occurred to the child to question that statement. Alice Ryerson, a school psychologist and Team 2 member, said that not surprisingly, the teacher in Canton begged for a science book that did not perpetuate this myth. The work of the WIMS team members continued after their return

[36] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—New Jersey Team to Hattiesburg," 1964, pp. 11–12, File 3, Box 15, NCNW Papers. In an example of how WIMS provided information to the Department of Justice, a representative from the department asked Cowan to have the teams visiting Canton verify the validity of rumors the department had received that the COFO students in Canton were "badly" dressed, which inflamed the residents, and frequented white clubs as interracial couples. The department feared this could be dangerous and felt the WIMS women would provide an objective assessment of the situation. "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Boston Team July 14–16," 1964, p. 8, File 2, Box 15, NCNW Papers.

home as they sought donations, supplies, and materials for the Freedom Schools.[37]

Even though every team debriefing commented on the emotional nature of the experiences at the Freedom Schools, the schools were not the sole focus of the trips. Once they had visited the schools, the WIMS teams planned to report what they had seen to the women of Jackson in hopes of allaying the Mississippians' fears about the college students and their work for civil rights. To accomplish this goal, the staff first had to find Jackson women willing to meet with them—no easy task as the southern white women expressed reluctance to meet with the northern women, even in all-white groups. As a result, Height believed each team should be made up of more white women than black women to break down those barriers. She explained, "White women had more needs. Black people were born into segregation . . . and a northern black person going into the South, immediately was a part of the community. If white women went in larger numbers, they could be paired, they could help each other." Because segregationist southern white women were, it was hoped, being persuaded to change their position on civil rights, and because moderate southern whites already agreeable to change often found themselves isolated, the white team members bore the greater burden in tearing down the barriers to interracial communication. Wilson concurred that she had the warmth of the community, but Goodwillie, as an outsider, struggled to get the white Mississippi women to have coffee with the white team members. Goodwillie attributed this situation to Mississippi's being "in a state of paralysis. . . . [where] anybody from outside was feared." This point was driven home

[37] Height interview, 2003, p. 4; Joiner, "Down in the Delta," 37; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 41–43; Goodwillie, "Letter from Susan Goodwillie—Re: The First Wednesdays in Mississippi—July 7–9," July 1964, pp. 2–3 (quotation on 3), File 3, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Dittmer, *Local People*, 259; Ali and Goodwillie, *Wednesdays in Mississippi*, 18; Alice Ryerson, "Report on Trip to Mississippi July 14–16, 1964," p. 6, File 8, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Goodwillie diary, July 8, 1964. Two examples of larger contributions made to the Freedom Schools as a result of WIMS included Cowan's husband's obtaining a donation from a friend in the grocery business of 750 pounds of food, or seventy meals per person, for the Vicksburg COFO students who were "literally starving"; and a fund-raiser with Harry Belafonte hosted by Team 1 member Jean Benjamin and her husband, who was president of United Artists. While not everyone could make offerings on this level, their efforts were nonetheless important as they rallied their communities for support. "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, p. 8 (quotation in note), File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Jean Benjamin, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Answers to Report Questionnaire," July 27, 1964, pp. 1–2, File 7, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Ali and Goodwillie, *Wednesdays in Mississippi*, 20; Polly Cowan, "Women in Mississippi (WIMS) Preliminary Report," 1964, pp. 6–7, File 2, Box 13, NCNW Papers. The immediately preceding document is also available with cover correspondence from Polly Cowan to Lee C. White, Associate Special Counsel to the President, November 24, 1964, File HU2/ST24, Box 39, White House Central Files (Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, Austin, Tex.).

when Team 1 failed to visit with any white women in Hattiesburg. A woman who worked on voter registration had initially agreed to meet but declined at the last minute because she feared being seen with the visitors in broad daylight.[38]

The fears were well founded, as Hodding Carter documented in *So the Heffners Left McComb*, which detailed how one family, despite their good intentions, lost everything—employment, home, and friends—after being seen associating with so-called subversives from COFO. Apart from the obvious threats of violence, other less obtrusive measures were employed to apply pressure on black and white families who openly supported desegregation and voting rights. As a result, many of the women in Mississippi who took part in WIMS did so anonymously.[39]

Loss of employment was a frequent nonviolent threat against people of both races in the South. Husbands of women who belonged to the LWV received letters saying their wives should withdraw from the "subversive organization" or the men's jobs would be in jeopardy. In one town, the school superintendent effectively halted a boycott of downtown businesses by predominantly black teachers when he began tracking their purchases, telling them that if they were making their money in town, they had better be spending it there. In the Jewish community, women prepared food for the COFO workers but delivered it through Freedom Houses rather than taking it directly to the black parts of town. Again, fear was a factor. New York team member Pearl Willen, president of the NCJW, explained that the Jewish women in Mississippi believed that "Jews have a moral obligation towards other minority groups," but

[38] Height interview, 2003, p. 6 (first quotation); Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 21 (second quotation), 25–26, 44; Wilson interview, 2003, pp. 23–24; "Reminiscences of Susan Goodwillie," 4–5; Nnamdi, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: An Interview with Guests Susan Goodwillie, Priscilla Hunt, Mildred Pitt Goodman, Doris V. Wilson, and Russlyn Ali"; "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, p. 14, File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers.

[39] Hodding Carter, *So the Heffners Left McComb* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965). WIMS made every effort at the time to keep identities confidential. The audiotapes of the debriefings recorded in 1964 mention southern participants by name, usually in terms of "Mrs." followed by a surname and almost always preceded by a clarification of whether using the names on the tape was acceptable. Very few references include first names of the women or their husbands. The debriefing transcripts done in 1964 did not record names; instead, they used "Mrs. A.," "Mrs. B.," and so on to designate the individual women. On numerous original written reports, names are crossed out and illegible, even names of women who operated openly such as Clarie Collins Harvey and Jane Schutt. The NABWH is in the process of creating new transcripts, and those follow the tapes verbatim. No complete listing exists of the women who met with the teams or served as hostesses. With only a few exceptions, the white women identified as having attended the coffees are not mentioned in documents of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Most likely, they were unworthy of note because either they did not openly support the civil rights cause, they did not associate with individuals who supported civil rights, or they opposed the civil rights activism.

she expressed concern that identifying with civil rights "would bring increased anti-Semitism, which [was] already fanned by the racists." Goodwillie recalled the story of one elderly white widow who realized after her husband's death that she was free to get involved: the woman quipped, "It pays to be a widow of independent means if you want to be involved in the civil rights movement."[40]

When white women did agree to meet, it was a clandestine affair. Goodwillie recalled one of their first get-togethers: "We finally organized a coffee at the home of a prominent white Jackson woman, . . . with two or three of the visiting team members, white, all white . . . [O]ne woman walked in and immediately went over to all the windows and drew the curtains, just drew them. It was ten o'clock in the morning on a pretty, sunny day. . . . [T]he hostess said, 'Mary, what are you doing?' She said, 'If anybody sees me here, if my husband sees me here, it'll be the end of our marriage.'" At the debriefing for Team 5, Cowan estimated that 150 women had expressed similar sentiments about their husbands throughout the summer. For some, this reflected their racist attitudes, but for others, it had more to do with fear of reprisal. Cowan's description of one Jackson woman could have easily fit any woman who, for whatever reason, let her fear overtake her sense of compassion: "She has a heart of gold and no courage."[41]

While this comment definitely rang true in one sense, it also reflects certain expectations or prejudices team members brought with them, despite their every effort at objectivity. These thoughts began with the state of Mississippi itself. Multiple team members commented on the difficulty they had reconciling their fear with the beauty of the place once they saw it. Josie Johnson, a member of Team 4 and secretary to the Minneapolis Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, recalled, "I remember the fear in driving from Jackson to Vicksburg. It was such a beautiful state. You have this image of all the evil and ugliness that was taking place there, the abuse of people. To see that it was a lush,

[40] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, pp. 13–14 (first quotation on 14), File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Cowan, "Women in Mississippi (WIMS) Preliminary Report," 1964, pp. 26–27, File 2, Box 13, NCNW Papers; Jean Benjamin, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Answers to Report Questionnaire," July 27, 1964, p. 2, File 7, Box 12, NCNW Papers; NCJW News for Publicity Chairman, "NCJW Head Takes Part in Wednesdays in Mississippi," September 4, 1964, pp. 2–3 (second and third quotations on 2), File 8, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Nnamdi, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: An Interview with Guests Susan Goodwillie, Priscilla Hunt, Mildred Pitt Goodman, Doris V. Wilson, and Russlyn Ali" (fourth quotation).

[41] Stedman interview, 2002, p. 44 (first quotation); "Wednesdays in Mississippi—New York Team No. 5 to Ruleville," 1964, p. 19, File 1, Box 15, NCNW Papers; "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, p. 13 (second quotation), File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers.

green, beautiful state was a surprise." The WIMS participants expected the worst; they had a mistrust, albeit justified, of anyone in law enforcement; and in some cases, they were judgmental of those who held a segregationist stance.[42]

Team 6 member Lucy Montgomery, who served on the Women's Board at the University of Chicago, had her patience pushed to the brink at a coffee where three prominent white women, Mrs. Hederman, Mrs. Crouch, and Mrs. Green, insisted that Medgar Evers's assassination had been arranged by his brother, Charles, that the blacks were happy with their lives and did not want to register to vote, and that no violence had occurred in the South before COFO arrived. Montgomery labeled the trio as delusional and "schitzoid," saying it was like dealing with "patients in a mental hospital and as if I were their nurse." They blamed everything on a communist plot rather than concede when Montgomery pointed out the lack of logic in their arguments. Labeling those who fought for racial justice as communists and blaming communism for being behind seemingly un-American activities were practices carried over from the "Cold War hysteria" of the 1950s. The state of Mississippi reinforced this association when it created the State Sovereignty Commission in 1956 to root out communism, which supposedly went hand in hand with civil rights as a threat to southerners' very way of life. Opposition to communism, therefore, bolstered other longtime justifications for Jim Crow laws, which had been created to institutionalize separation of the races. Many white Mississippians accepted this line of reasoning because it had been ingrained as a truth by those in power. Further, news media in Jackson controlled by the Hederman family portrayed this as the true sequence of events and often blocked national broadcasts with a different portrayal of civil rights. What appeared "delusional" to Montgomery, a woman with northern sensibilities and preconceptions, instead reflected not only dominant political attitudes but also the reported version of facts. This stark discrepancy illustrates the political and cultural divide between white women of the North and South that WIMS sought to address.[43]

[42] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Minneapolis–St. Paul," August 7, 1964, File 10, Box 14, NCNW Papers; Joiner, "Down in the Delta," 37 (quotation).

[43] "WIMS Team #6," Team Debriefing transcript, 1964, pp. 3–10 (first, second, and fourth quotations on 4), NABWH-001-S15-SS5-F21-S2, Side 2, Folder 21, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers; Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense*, 158 (third quotation); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (New York, 2006), 87–88; Smith, *Neither Separate nor Equal*, 17–18; Dittmer, *Local People*, 64–66; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 21–22. Lucy Montgomery said that later Mrs. Green, as a member of the state's library board, expressed her distress that Mississippi libraries had become increasingly isolated

In other instances, the WIMS women had their own eyes opened by the southern women. Ilza Williams, a member of Team 2 from Mt. Vernon, New York, and assistant principal at the Clara Barton School, found her attitude toward southern blacks needed reexamination when she observed the effects of the lack of communication across race. Saying the eyes of southern blacks were "simply dead," she could see that black people who came to the North found it difficult to make the transition because they had been treated as nothing. She stated, "I've always been very impatient with people who came into New York. And my favorite phrase to myself has always been, 'Well why can't they? I did it,' . . . 'Why don't they do better?' So I feel that it's made me a better person in my local community, in work with Negroes. . . . more aware and tolerant." Although objective observation was the goal, the emotional nature of the civil rights struggle and the fact that the WIMS women had definite opinions or they would not have volunteered in the first place made the expectation idealistic, at best. Therefore, they found it imperative to appropriately temper the expression of those feelings to prevent closing rather than opening lines of communication with the southern women.[44]

Despite participants' preconceived notions, all the debriefings reflect that both black and white team members acknowledged the inherent difficulty of the situation facing sympathetic white southerners. Nevertheless, some of the southern women believed the northern women expected too much of them. Jane Schutt, one of their local angels whose assistance was a linchpin to WIMS's success, belonged to Church Women United and chaired the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. She explained that the majority of people coming down from the North during the civil rights movement could not understand the strong feelings about integration because they had no real experience with it. The movement had challenged long-held attitudes, beliefs, and customs that "divorced [southerners] from the myths of old." Elaine Crystal, a white Jewish woman active in a number of civil rights efforts through her synagogue in Jackson and Mississippians for Public Education, felt that many northerners in general believed everyone in the South was "ignorant . . . and didn't wear shoes." As a result, some of the southern women either expected that

---

and cut off from assistance because of the state's stand on civil rights, and she intimated change was needed.

[44] "WIMS Team #2," Team Debriefing transcript, 1964, pp. 21–23 (first quotation on 22; second quotation on 22–23), NABWH-001-S15-SS5-F18-S1-S2, Sides 1–2, Folder 18, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers.

attitude or sensed it from a few of the WIMS women. Crystal got the impression that the team member she hosted in 1965 felt that the sympathetic southerners were not doing enough to change things. A native of Iowa who moved to Mississippi in 1949, Crystal understood the situation from the perspective of someone who had lived on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line: the women who came down did not understand why the southern women were not marching, for example, but the northern women failed to realize that many southern women were doing the best they could under the circumstances. By contrast, Dorothy Stewart, an African American woman who spent her career in the Jackson public schools, observed of her experience that the women who came from the North might have arrived with paternalistic attitudes, but by the time they left, everyone stood on an equal footing. The team reports and debriefings support both conclusions. The WIMS women did, at times, criticize the southern women for moving too slowly, but they also developed a greater appreciation for the difficulty of the southerners' circumstances by making the trip and listening to their stories.[45]

The initial responses by the southern white women who visited with the teams ranged widely. Not all of those who came to meet the WIMS women sympathized with civil rights; rather, some wanted to express their opposition to the movement and the influx of northerners. In one such incident related by Trude W. Lash, executive director of the Citizens Committee for Children of New York and a member of Team 5, an unnamed angry white woman claimed that no problems would have occurred had it not been for the people coming from the North. In responding to this criticism, their hostess was described as being "very tactful and very firm," never once backing down from her own beliefs as a civil rights advocate.[46]

[45] Jane M. Schutt, interview by Leesha Faulkner, October 3, 1994, Mississippi Oral History Program (Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Miss.), 24 (first quotation); Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 3–4; Elaine Crystal, interview by Marlene McCurtis, July 24, 2008 (hereinafter Crystal interview, 2008), transcript, WIMS Film Project, 00:18:28–00:20:26; Barbara Brinson and Elaine Crystal, interview by Marlene McCurtis, July 24, 2008, transcript, WIMS Film Project, 06:12:50–06:13:35 (second quotation); Dorothy Stewart, interview by Marlene McCurtis, July 23, 2008 (hereinafter Stewart interview, 2008), WIMS Film Project, Tape 1, 00:57:19:07–00:59:40:25. Jane Schutt withdrew from high-profile involvement on the committee after crosses were burned in her yard and her husband's job was repeatedly threatened. However, she continued working for civil rights behind the scenes on various committees and through other organizations. Jenny Irons, "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," *Gender and Society*, 12 (December 1998), 692–709, esp. 699.

[46] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—New York Team No. 5 to Ruleville," 1964, pp. 15–16 (quotation on 15), File 1, Box 15, NCNW Papers; "WIMS Team #5," Team Debriefing transcript, 1964, pp. 163–64, NABWH-001-S15-SS5-F19-S1, Side 1, Folder 19, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers.

Other confrontations could not so easily be brushed aside. Jean Davis, president of the Chicago Area Girl Scout Council and a member of Team 6, attended a coffee given by a widow, Miriam Ezell, who announced to the gathering that she had taken an interest in civil rights and had been entertaining COFO volunteers and their mothers, news that shocked her daughter and friends in attendance. One of the adversaries confronted Davis about why she had come to Mississippi. Davis explained that her daughter had volunteered with COFO and that even though Davis had qualms about her daughter's participation in Freedom Summer, "if she is involved, then I am involved." By coming to Mississippi, Davis pointed out, she could see for herself what was happening. She said, "It became abundantly clear that there's a good deal of difference in the way people in the North and the people in the South raise their children. . . . [T]hey really and truly couldn't understand how we as mothers could possibly let our children come down." The team tried several different tacks, including a biblical reference that had no effect, but they could not persuade the women to change their point of view. In trying to reach some sort of understanding, Davis asked, "Is there something we can do?" At that point Mrs. Ezell's daughter looked her in the eye and said, "Yes, you can go home, and take your daughter with you." This exchange reflects not only the intensity of the feelings involved but also the fact that individuals from the North and South came to the problem from completely different perspectives based on attitudes that went beyond the question of desegregation alone to include the most basic family values.[47]

Also a member of Team 6, Miriam Davis, wife of a Congregational minister and Jean Davis's sister-in-law, believed the different perspectives flowed over to religious tenets as well. Rather than returning home with the WIMS team on Thursday, Jean and Miriam went to visit Jean's daughter in Ruleville. Attending a "basket-dinner" at a church where Fannie Lou Hamer was speaking, Miriam reflected on the complexities of understanding the southern white women they had met, many of them members of the First Methodist Church in Jackson and the Women's Society of Christian Service: "As I participated I thought of those white ladies at the coffee the day before who likewise are convinced that their point of view can be defended Biblically. How interesting that these two conflicting beliefs should be resting in the same cloak

[47] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Chicago Team," August 11–13, 1964, pp. 12–13, File 2, Box 15, NCNW Papers; "WIMS Team #6," Team Debriefing transcript, 1964, pp. 83–85 (first and second quotations on 83; third and fourth quotations on 85), NABWH-001-S15-SS5-F21-S1, Side 1, Folder 21, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers.

of religion." Miriam Davis's frustration was shared by more liberal-minded southerners like Janet Purvis, a white woman active in Church Women United, the YWCA, and Save Our Schools and whose husband was the first doctor in Jackson to integrate his waiting room. Purvis pointed out that interpreting the Bible to support segregation, particularly in barring African Americans from worship, provided the needed impetus for some progressive-thinking individuals to seek out others who supported civil rights. Fortunately, not everyone in the South took the segregationist interpretation as gospel.[48]

Despite the occasional confrontation, the WIMS teams experienced a number of victories as well. As an example of the way in which this type of interaction opened the doors to understanding, Gerry Kohlenberg, a teacher at the Shady Hill School and member of the Boston team, summarized what transpired at another coffee:

> After listening for half an hour to her fellow Southerners telling us how fine everything was . . . [Jane Schutt] spoke up in her soft, broadly accented voice: "Girls, I just have to tell you, you are all so wrong! . . . You all know that I was on the State Advisory Committee of the Civil Rights Commission for two years . . . and I sat and listened to the people come in and tell of their abuses, and jobs lost, and beatings . . . [T]here were lots of injustices, terrible ones." . . . [F]or three quarters of an hour this sincere, gentle woman educated her neighbors to the real facts of life in Jackson, Mississippi, and other Mississippi cities, too. When she was through, it was as if the dam had broken. The others talked, exchanged stories and experiences. These women were speaking up, and to each other, about the one subject they have been too frightened to mention at all.[49]

Just as Clarie Collins Harvey had observed in Atlanta, prior to this type of arranged gathering by WIMS, acting like the "long-handled spoon," the local women had no opportunity to come together in a setting that enabled them to feel safe engaging in an open discussion on civil rights.[50]

These women had, at last, opened a dialogue on race, but others went even further. Helen Meyner had worked with the national Red Cross and was the wife of a former governor of New Jersey when she

[48] Miriam Davis, "The 'Rules' in Ruleville," August 1964, pp. 1–2 (first quotation on 1; second quotation on 1–2), File 2, Box 15, NCNW Papers; Jean Davis, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, June 27, 2002, pp. 18–19, WIMS Oral History Interviews; Janet Purvis, interview by Marlene McCurtis, January 22, 2008 (hereinafter Purvis interview, 2008), transcript, WIMS Film Project, Tape 1, 08:33:31–08:43:19. For a discussion of how the position of Mississippi Methodist ministers differed from the national church's views, see Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, esp. 155–71. For a review of the way that ministers in general felt conflicted over biblical direction on integration, see Newman, *Divine Agitators*.

[49] Cowan, "Women in Mississippi (WIMS) Preliminary Report," 1964, pp. 20–21, File 2, Box 13, NCNW Papers.

[50] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 165.

volunteered to be a member of Team 7. A Presbyterian, she was slated to stay at the home of a Jackson Presbyterian minister and his wife, a breakthrough for WIMS. At the last minute, however, the couple sent word to Goodwillie that they had to withdraw their invitation to Meyner for fear it would jeopardize the outcome of a close vote on a controversial church issue. The wife, Barbara Hendrix, called Goodwillie later to express her regrets and embarrassment over the incident. She added, "You know we're not free, are we?" Goodwillie replied, "you're not any freer than the blackest man in this town." Several months later, that same woman became a leader for change and organized WIMS's first integrated lunch at the Sun-n-Sand Motel.[51]

The teams consistently found that black and white women had no opportunity for communication across race; hence, the two groups feared one another and lacked any mutual understanding. Priscilla Hunt, vice president of the Cambridge, Massachusetts, LWV, and Dr. Hannah Levin, professor of psychology at Rutgers University, stayed at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Vockroth. Hunt described them as having their heart in the right place on civil rights but being on the "nervous side" due to community pressure. Levin explained that they knew of every desegregation case but had no one else to talk to except in the most guarded way. Their hostess informed Hunt and Levin that the lack of communication created serious problems: "The whites have tremendous fears about the Negroes. They never have any contact with them. So the fears get worse. . . . And then on the other side . . . the Negroes fear the whites. . . . Instead of the wall being broken down, it just gets higher and higher." Polly Cowan argued that the situation left the Mississippi women, on both sides of the racial divide, "uninformed and misinformed," a situation Height too saw as handicapping and isolating whites as much as it did blacks.[52]

Height and Cowan believed that opening lines of communication between southern black and white middle-class women was essential to breaking down the barriers to freedom for African Americans. When asked in an interview in 1968 if WIMS operated on the theory that women, not men, truly held the key to changing attitudes, Cowan

[51] "Reminiscences of Susan Goodwillie," 18–19 (quotations on 19); Stedman interview, 2008, Tape 2, 02:23:35–02:38:12; Goodwillie diary, August 17, 1964.

[52] Priscilla Hunt, phone interview by author, October 6, 2008 (first quotation); "Wednesdays in Mississippi—New Jersey Team to Hattiesburg," 1964, pp. 8–9, File 3, Box 15, NCNW Papers; "WIMS Team #7," Team Debriefing transcript, 1964, pp. 1–3 (second quotation on 3), NABWH-001-S15-SS5-F38-S2, Side 2, Folder 38, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers; Polly Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Report From Polly Cowan Project Coordinator," 1964, p. 4 (third quotation), File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 183.

replied, "Absolutely. We knew that the men would never move as fast as the women. And that's true, because the women do see the issues at a different level and they do think about their children in a different way and they do think about the school system." She added that the economics of the situation also did not hit women as hard as men. Both black and white southern women exercised caution against reprisals, particularly directed toward their families, but they managed to effect change in subtle ways, nevertheless, as several southern women observed. Wilma Clopton, daughter of Mississippi NCNW president and activist Dr. Jesse Mosley, explained that middle-class women worked for integration and enfranchisement through projects like WIMS because it enabled them to "set foot in areas where most people would not venture." They talked, offered their homes and their time, and supported the movement by providing a safe haven. Dorothy Stewart believed that, slowly but surely, these efforts changed Mississippi and enabled women to move to a new level—and when they moved, so did the men and their families. Lillian Burnstein, a leader in Jackson's Jewish community, and Janet Purvis, also white, made similar observations: by teaching and leading through example, and in doing what they thought was right, women significantly influenced the thinking of their families, their children, and their children's friends. By taking up the cause in ways that appeared to be women's work—through schools and church groups, for example—the women worked for change while staying within acceptable bounds. By teaching their children to think in new ways, they provided a legacy for future progress.[53]

The WIMS strategy for success went beyond employing a gendered approach alone, however. The very attributes that had kept women off the platform in rallies and out of the historical literature were the very attributes Height and Cowan sought to exploit as a source of power for WIMS. Cowan wrote, "High level women have unique abilities to offer people in troubled places. Initially, they have access to people—it is hard to turn away or ignore a 'tidy, smiling lady with white gloves and high heels.' When you combine experience, determination, knowledge, understanding and a desire to help—with femininity, you have a force to reckon with." Just as Tilly found with the Fellowship of the Concerned and as Height and Cowan discovered on the Selma trip, the

[53] Cowan interview, 1968, p. 21 (first quotation); Wilma Clopton and Jay Shands, interview by Marlene McCurtis, January 24, 2008, transcript, WIMS Film Project, 15:19:38:56–15:25:09:01 (second quotation); Stewart interview, 2008, Tape 1, 00:33:38:29–00:36:33; Purvis interview, 2008, Tape 2, 10:20:37:10–10:21:07:11; Lillian Burnstein, interview by Marlene McCurtis, January 22, 2008, transcript, WIMS Film Project, 06:57:16–06:58:12.

intersecting identities of gender, class, and age provided a level of protection and acceptability that eluded other civil rights activists. Wearing white gloves and dresses as was customary in the early 1960s, they—far from hiding their status—relied on the fact that they were mostly middle-aged, middle-class or upper-class women to make their presence and their message less threatening and offensive. While adopting the expected behavior patterns of gender, race, and class can serve to reinforce existing inequities and power structures, WIMS consciously chose these behavior patterns as a method to infiltrate and tear down those hierarchies with regard to race specifically.[54]

Even though many southern women opposed northerners' coming to Mississippi, the WIMS women's aura of respectability served as an entrée to many white women who might otherwise have altogether refused to meet with them, categorizing them as another group of northern troublemakers. Trude Lash observed, "For the white women the realization that we were obviously middle-aged women with some standing in the community whose children were at the same colleges as their own created an uncomfortable challenge to firmly held prejudices. In this respect we were probably more effective than the COFO workers." This common ground made it difficult for many of the southern women to completely dismiss the WIMS team members in the same way that was so often done with the COFO students and radicals accused of being "communist-beatnik-pervert-Jews." The WIMS women did not march, demonstrate, or dictate terms. They merely sought to open a dialogue between women and, in the process, affirm that respected people agreed with the same principles as the students and other civil rights proponents.[55]

Cowan concurred with Lash that their status as respected women and their quiet, dedicated approach enabled them to "modify many of the most antagonistic attitudes." In fact, their quiet approach, in contrast to other civil rights organizations operating in the state, served as another element used to foster success. Ed King, chaplain at Tougaloo College

[54] "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Fact Sheet," n.d., p. 2 (quotation), File 2, Box 2, NCNW Papers; Cowan, "Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Variations on a Theme," n.d., p. 1, File 2, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers. For a discussion of white privilege see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Smith, *Neither Separate nor Equal*; and Stephanie M. Wildman with Adrienne D. Davis, "Making Systems of Privilege Visible," in Paula S. Rothenberg, ed., *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (2nd ed.; New York, 2005), 95–102.

[55] Trude W. Lash, Memo to Polly Cowan, September 8, 1964, p. 2 (first quotation), File 1, Box 15, NCNW Papers; Stedman interview, 2008, Tape 2, 02:31:36–02:32:34 (second quotation); Geraldine Kohlenburg Zetzel, phone interview by author, January 24, 2008.

and one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, stressed the significance of the program and WIMS's approach to the movement: "The program was extremely important . . . . The whole thrust of what we were doing was not just the dramatic things, like going to jail or marching. We were trying to deal with every level of change that was needed, and Dorothy Height understood that." Height was well aware that, at times, some African Americans criticized her for being too soft in her approach, for working too well with white people, for not being "radical enough." The criticisms, however, did not change her course of working for "radical change" without being a radical.[56]

In an early planning session for the project, Height cautioned the group not to "expect to accomplish too much in a single trip," but to add women to the cause one, two, or three at a time. During their visits, the WIMS teams met with about three hundred women, almost half of them white, and Height observed of them, "[A]s the summer progressed, an amazing number of local white women came forward, quietly and often apprehensively, to join our project. They said they decided to do so because they didn't want to rear their children in such a climate of hate; or because they knew integration was inevitable and they wanted to help make the transition as smooth as possible; or because they simply could no longer stand by, simply watching, as innocent people were harassed or even killed because they dared to try to register to vote." Slowly but surely, the WIMS women chipped away at the barriers to interracial cooperation, and in so doing, they impressed on the southern white women that they had nothing to fear by moving forward in the cause for civil rights. This movement toward moderation contrasted with individuals rigidly opposed to changing and challenged the very definition of a moderate, which would come to mean one supporting desegregation and enfranchisement.[57]

The team visits encouraged white Mississippi women to begin questioning what they heard was happening with regard to African Americans in the state and to assess the validity of their sources for information about the northern students. The WIMS women did this by sharing their thoughts as parents of COFO volunteers, by reporting what they had seen while visiting the Freedom Schools, and by giving

[56] Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Report From Polly Cowan Project Coordinator," 1964, p. 4 (first quotation), File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Joiner, "Down in the Delta," 37 (second quotation); Height interview, 2003, pp. 1–2 (third quotation on 1; fourth quotation on 2).

[57] Shulman, *Wednesdays in Mississippi*, 5 (first quotation); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 177–78 (second quotation); David L. Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore, 1994), 214.

progressive-thinking white Mississippians the opportunity and courage to speak out in support of the changes taking place. Many of the white women had turned a "blind eye" to the effects of segregation and the denial of civil rights. Height theorized that they knew what was happening but felt no sense of "personal identification" with it. WIMS brought the oppression of African Americans to the forefront and made white people aware of and interested in what was occurring on the other side of town. Purvis agreed, saying, "[I]t did keep everyone aware that there had not yet been a solution, and it had to be searched out." Further, Crystal observed that "once we did start going to interracial places, and to meetings, we grew within ourselves, our understanding of all the problems and opportunities." By summer's end, a few local white women asked to accompany the WIMS teams on their trips to the projects outside Jackson.[58]

The change of attitude impacted southern African American women also, but in a different way. For them, WIMS served as a source of encouragement and support that gave them hope that change might truly be coming, particularly for women in the Delta communities who only knew white women as employers in domestic service. Hope came from knowing that black and white women in the North cared and worked in their behalf, as well as from discovering that women across town demonstrated a willingness to help. Unita Blackwell, a civil rights activist later elected Mississippi's first black woman mayor, said, "When Black and white women came together, it was, for us, strength. It was a feeling of we weren't alone. That group of Black and white women was something that we had not seen before." Stewart expanded on that idea when

[58] Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Report From Polly Cowan Project Coordinator," 1964, p. 4, File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Stedman interview, 2002, p. 48; Height interview, in Hill, ed., *Black Women Oral History Project*, V, 240 (first and second quotations); Purvis interview, 2008, Tape 2, 10:05:54:23–10:06:56:20 (third quotation); Crystal interview, 2008, 00:11:28–00:12:28 (fourth quotation). The invisibility of their privilege enabled whites to ignore the racial injustices across the country, and by opting out of support for the civil rights movement, they had in effect taken action. Their silence thus sustained their privilege. This was not unique to the South. Goodwillie's father recognized this consequence of his and others' inaction as he faced the prospect of his daughter's going to Mississippi. In a letter she found many years later, he responded to her grandfather, who had instructed her father to prevent Goodwillie from going to settle someone else's problem. Her father wrote, "For a hundred years it's been wonderfully convenient to shove the whole thing under the rug with the statement that the negro [*sic*] problem is the negro's [*sic*] problem. Well, it never has been, and it surely isn't today. . . . It is precisely because you and I have persisted in this approach, for all these years, that the thing has busted out . . . . I think we've sown the seeds of our crop today with our own blind, stupid indifference. And you, as Susie's grandfather, and I, as her father, now find ourselves in the dreadful position of having Susie, whether we like it or not, compelled to pick up the pieces." Of course, Goodwillie was by no means going to single-handedly change racial discord in the South, but the collective movement would. "Wednesdays in Mississippi: A Family Member's Reaction," Virginia Center for Digital History, www.vcdh.virginia.edu/WIMS/creation/SusieFatherLetter.html (quotation in note); Wildman and Davis, "Making Systems of Privilege Visible," 95, 99.

she spoke of the positive impact that interracial alliances had on women like Clarie Collins Harvey, Dr. Jesse Mosley, and Unita Blackwell. They "started to grasp a world that was outside of Mississippi, outside of Jackson and they didn't want to be limited to just . . . a little black neighborhood, a little black Mississippi." The NCNW, Stewart said, acted as the "catalyst" that helped women move beyond the "marginalized thinking" of what they could accomplish. Opening this door of opportunity carried immeasurable benefits for African American women.[59]

Wednesdays in Mississippi was intended to be a one-summer project. In November 1964 the organizers met with team members, government officials, and Mississippi women to assess the degree of success achieved by their efforts and to consider the program's future. The women from Mississippi "tipped the scales" in favor of going on with the work as they "literally begged the NCNW to continue the program." The Mississippians felt that they had "gained insight into the true state of affairs within their law enforcement and judicial systems" from the northern women and that WIMS had "started something invaluable." By the end of the second summer, which featured interracial, interfaith teams paired by profession, the success of WIMS's efforts to bridge the racial divide had become apparent. Leading Mississippian Patricia Derian, who later became President Jimmy Carter's assistant secretary for human rights and human affairs, wrote in 1965, "After two summers of vigorous activity these ladies have established a pattern and method of activity that should not be allowed to disappear. Rather it should be enlarged . . . A catalogue of Wednesday achievements probably cannot be compiled, simply because they did so much and the things that they did have yet to end. If you looked back over the last two years and marked every forward step in Jackson community relations, you'd find that a Wednesday lady has somehow been involved." Derian, who moved to Mississippi from Ohio in the 1950s, could speak firsthand to the impact of WIMS and the changes that occurred. She had worked with the American Civil Liberties Union, Mississippians for Public Education, the YWCA, and Head Start; established an interfaith prayer group; and independently conducted housing inspections after which she interceded with city government on behalf of residents. The job of

[59] Trude W. Lash, Memo to Polly Cowan, September 8, 1964, p. 3, File 1, Box 15, NCNW Papers; Height interview, 2003, p. 6; Stedman interview, 2002, p. 49; Joiner, "Down in the Delta," 37 (first quotation); Patricia Derian, interview by Marlene McCurtis, January 26, 2008 (hereinafter Derian interview, 2008), transcript, WIMS Film Project, Tape 4, 04:20:22–04:21:50; Stewart interview, 2008, Tape 1, 00:57:19:07–00:59:40:25 (second quotation), 00:35:03:29–00:36:33:00 (third and fourth quotations).

achieving an integrated society remained far from finished, but progress had begun. The second summer teams resided interracially and met and dined with local women in integrated groups without incident.[60]

In 1965 the teams remained interracial and interfaith and centered on professional exchanges between teachers, librarians, social workers, and other professionals isolated by segregation. The teams also made reports to national enforcement agencies of failures to comply with the Civil Rights Act. In 1966 the project became Workshops in Mississippi, a need-based initiative focusing on housing, education, food, clothing, and employment. These projects included Head Start, teachers' training, school desegregation, job training, remedial reading, medical care, school meals, and instruction for Mississippi women on how to write their own grant proposals for federal funding. The NCNW created, and continues to support, the Fannie Lou Hamer Daycare Center in Ruleville and initiated hunger programs that offered creative solutions, including community gardens, food co-ops, and pig banks, which provided pigs to poor families. Height assembled an interracial team that included housing specialist Dorothy Duke and Unita Blackwell to tackle the problem of inadequate housing. Under their direction, the organization initiated Turnkey III. Sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Ford Foundation, the project enabled low-income families to buy rather than rent housing. The NCNW continues to operate this project and helped with the rebuilding efforts after Hurricane Katrina.[61]

Height and Cowan realized that in the process of working with the southern women "to open their eyes, their hearts and their minds," the team members themselves would experience a "cultural shock" that would cause them to reexamine and reevaluate their own worlds. The WIMS leaders expected and even banked on this encounter to motivate action, which it did. Height wrote, "None of us who were part of WIMS that summer returned home unchanged. What all of us saw of life behind the 'cotton curtain' shocked and outraged us." Repeatedly during the debriefings, team members, even those who previously considered themselves well informed, expressed the sentiment that what they saw

[60] Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 178–79 (first quotation on 179), 184–85; "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Fact Sheet," n.d., p. 1 (second and third quotations), File 2, Box 2, NCNW Papers; Stedman interview, 2002, pp. 51, 52–53 (fourth quotation); Derian interview, 2008, Tape 3, 03:16:04; "Excerpts from Letters from Mississippi Friends," n.d., p. 4 (fifth quotation), File 13, Box 8, NCNW Papers.

[61] Height interview, 2003, pp. 8–10, 14–17; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 189–92, 196; Stedman interview, 2002, p. 52; Blackwell and Morris, *Barefootin'*, 178–82; National Council of Negro Women, "NCNW Awarded $750,000 from Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund," December 2006, http://www.ncnw.org/images/katrina_fund.pdf.

firsthand had a far greater impact than anything they had seen on television or read about in the newspapers. Team members returned home and garnered support for the Freedom Summer projects, actively campaigned for seating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation to the 1964 Democratic Party convention, encouraged others to get involved by speaking at community and organizational meetings, and, perhaps most important, set an example for their own children's future activism.[62]

Unfortunately, Wednesdays in Mississippi has received little attention in the historiography of women in the civil rights movement, perhaps because WIMS shunned publicity for fear it might compromise participants' safety or perhaps because in doing women's work, they seemed unremarkable. This study adds to the historical literature by highlighting the important role this group of women played in bringing about change in Jackson's middle-class community, utilizing their gender, class, and age as an entrée to the southern women. Cowan described the significance of what WIMS and other civil rights projects were fighting for when she wrote, "The 1960s gave many of us an opportunity to fight injustice and to work for freedom. Freedom for black people is a step toward freedom for all people. I believe this effort for a national liberation encouraged many white people to join the battle knowing that no one of us can be free until all of us are free." The WIMS women shared a belief that the cornerstone of equal rights was for people of extreme difference to accept and respect each other as equals. Knowing that a truly integrated society could not be achieved in an environment where hostility between people of different races prevented normal human interaction, Height and Cowan devised a plan to address that problem under the leadership of the NCNW in cooperation with six other national women's organizations. With the unique approach of quietly sending women of stature in interracial, interfaith teams, WIMS reached into the community like the "long-handled spoon" that Clarie Collins Harvey had envisioned, "stirring up" the southern women and bringing them together by opening lines of communication. In so doing, they served as catalysts for change, the ripple effects of which continue to be felt today through those whose lives were touched either directly or indirectly by this program.[63]

[62] Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi Report From Polly Cowan Project Coordinator," 1964, p. 2 (first and second quotations), File 15, Box 12, NCNW Papers; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 176 (third quotation); "Wednesdays in Mississippi—Team #1," July 13, 1964, p. 8, File 7, Box 14, NCNW Papers.

[63] Cowan, "Why Me?" autobiographical essay, n.d., p. 1 (first quotation), File 10, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 165 (second and third quotations).