

Clarksdale, June 26, 1964

Dear Folks and Sara:

Just a note to say that we are starting to get a good community response and that my work is beginning to show results. There has been absolutely no violence, and police harassment has stopped. I think there will be no violence at all here, but harassment may pick up as the project picks up. There isn't really any way I can convey what I feel about Andy.

Love,

Mat

P.S. I got all your letters and that kind of encouragement really raised my spirits. There are daily frustrations which will be much easier to overcome if you all keep writing.

Love,

Mat

ON DAY ONE, TRAGEDY:
Zwerling writes home (above)
as an FBI poster announcing
the disappearance of Goodman,
Chaney, and Schwerner receives
national media attention.

MISSING

CALL
FBI

THE FBI IS SEEKING INFORMATION CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE AT
PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI, OF THESE THREE INDIVIDUALS ON JUNE 21, 1964. EXTENSIVE
INVESTIGATION IS BEING CONDUCTED TO LOCATE GOODMAN, CHANEY, AND SCHWERNER,
WHO ARE DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

ANDREW GOODMAN

JAMES EARL CHANEY

MICHAEL HENRY SCHWERNER



‘We Were NOT Afraid’

Fifty years ago, Matthew Zwerling '64 risked his life during Mississippi Freedom Summer. His friend, Andrew Goodman, gave his. But the biggest heroes of the civil rights movement, Zwerling says, are only starting to be recognized.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

THINKING BACK TO HIS SUMMER 50 YEARS AGO IN CLARKSDALE, Miss., Matthew Zwerling '64 recalls the warmth of the Friday night gatherings in the backyard of the man called “Doc Henry.”

Aaron Henry was a World War II veteran, the president of the Mississippi state chapter of the NAACP, and a pharmacist with a small drugstore in downtown Clarksdale. When Zwerling arrived as part of a group of northern white volunteers to participate in Mississippi Freedom Summer, Henry was there to greet them.

“He just kind of rallied the troops,” says Zwerling. “He had a great sense of humor, which I admired in particular because he was under so much stress.”

Henry had known danger. Both his home and his pharmacy had been firebombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan. His friend Medgar Evers, an NAACP leader in Jackson, had been shot to death in his own driveway.

“With 50 years of perspective, I’m astounded at the courage of the local people who had been doing civil rights work for years,” Zwerling says.

Freedom Summer was among the most ambitious initiatives of



ICONIC IMAGE: One of the last images of Goodman (above) was taken during a training session in Ohio that he and Zwerling attended together.



the civil rights movement. Organized by a coalition of civil rights groups including the NAACP, the bulk of the effort came from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, an organization of black college students that had grown out of the Greensboro sit-ins. Led by Robert Moses, a Harlem-born, Harvard-educated SNCC activist, Freedom Summer organizers recruited several hundred northern white college students who would be trained by experienced civil rights workers, grouped with experienced leaders, live in the homes of black Mississippians, and fan across the state to be ground troops in a concerted effort to register black voters in a state in which less than 6 percent of voting-age African Americans were registered, according to data compiled by the United States Commission on Civil Rights during a 1964 investigation.

In late June, to mark the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer, many veterans of that summer will gather at a four-day conference in the state capitol of Jackson. The planners of the conference have a single clear message: Freedom Summer “was more than theory and faith. It was more than uplifting rhetoric and freedom songs—It was pragmatic and tedious, dangerous and deadly.”

Zwerling will not be able to attend the event. But his experience of the summer was just as the planners describe. In a series of letters he wrote to his family during that summer, and which he’s donated to the University of Southern Mississippi Archives, Zwerling told of canvassing residents in tiny towns and rural areas in the heat of the Delta summer. Of spending hours in a small office helping to organize meetings that drew many locals in some cases—or in others, none at all. It was a summer filled with heat and boredom, frustration and fear. And exuberance at any progress, large or small.

Like virtually every northern college student who took part in Freedom Summer, Zwerling had participated in civil rights activity, albeit in smaller ways, before. He got his start in high school, traveling to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Youth March for Integrated Schools, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, in the fall of 1958. Zwerling’s parents, Israel and Florence, lent their support to the movement by participating in sympathy pickets, offering financial support to civil rights organizations, and placing pressure on their elected officials through meetings and letters.

At Rochester, Zwerling had been one of a small but committed group of students and faculty members who sought to bring attention and support to the southern civil rights movement. During spring break in 1964, Zwerling had been all set to travel with a group of students to Greensboro, N.C., to help register voters. But he came down with mononucleosis just before the trip. “If somebody were to punch you in the stomach,” Zwerling recalls the doctor telling him, “they could rupture your spleen.”

It was a major disappointment. But within weeks, SNCC’s

charismatic leader, John Lewis, came to the River Campus where he’d address a crowd of nearly 250 people, according to the *Campus Times*. Lewis, now a member of Congress from Georgia, had addressed the March on Washington the previous summer, and came to the University as part of a concerted effort among Freedom Summer organizers to recruit volunteers.

As Bob Calhoun ’64 reported in the *Campus Times*, Lewis “pointed specifically to the summer project that [SNCC activists] are now organizing in an all-out attempt to break the voting barrier in Mississippi.” Zwerling, having missed his chance to go to Greensboro, had his heart and mind set on Freedom Summer.

Mississippi was far more dangerous than North Carolina. As NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins famously said in a press conference following Evers’s murder, “There is no state with a record that approaches that of Mississippi in inhumanity, murder, brutality, and racial hatred. It is absolutely at the bottom of the list.”

Freedom Summer organizers were frank about the dangers faced by civil rights workers in the state. The potential for physical harm and how to respond to threats were major themes of a weeklong training session for volunteers held on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. It

wouldn’t be long before Zwerling would be confronted with the depth of the risk he’d taken on.

Zwerling would be driving to Oxford with Andy Goodman, another volunteer whose family lived in the same New York City apartment building as the Zwerlings.

“We were more acquaintances than friends,” Zwerling says, describing the relationship over the years in which they shared a building and their parents, all committed civil rights supporters, shared a circle of friends. Goodman had attended the Walden School on the Upper West Side, while Zwerling had gone

to the Bronx High School of Science. Zwerling had left the city, seeking a small liberal arts college, while Goodman was a student at Queens College, part of the City University of New York.

They would spend the entire 10-hour, 600-plus-mile drive to Oxford, Ohio, and much of the next week of training, together. “We were not afraid,” Zwerling says today, thinking back to the ride and to their training. It wasn’t that they weren’t aware of the dangers. “I think we were just kind of blocking that out. There’s a reason governments recruit soldiers at 19 years old. At that age, we think we’re going to live forever.”

After a week of training, Zwerling and Goodman parted ways, Zwerling having been assigned to work in Clarksdale, and Goodman in Meridian. “That was the last I saw of him,” Zwerling says.

Zwerling would drive his car to Mississippi with two other white volunteers and an African-American Mississippian named James Jones.

As they traveled south, Zwerling was struck by the landscape. Entering Mississippi around dawn on June 20, he saw his first



NOW & THEN: Zwerling, a retired public defender, at home in San Francisco (opposite) and with fellow volunteer Margaret Hazelton at a backyard picnic hosted by Clarksdale NAACP leader Aaron Henry in June 1964 (above).

cotton fields. As he slowed down to take in the view, Jones grew anxious. Zwerling recalls Jones telling him to speed up. As Jones knew, a car like theirs was sure to attract attention among a police force that, in many counties, had close ties to the Ku Klux Klan. It had New York tags, and blacks and whites traveling together, highly unusual in Mississippi. As Zwerling would learn years later, when he'd exchanged his New York license plates for Mississippi ones, his name, local address, and new Mississippi plate number had been passed promptly on to the Klan.

On June 23, when he wrote his first letter home, all seemed well. "Safe and sound in Clarksdale," he wrote. "So far community is extremely friendly and no harassment so far." The letter was unlikely to have reassured his parents. They'd been wary about his going. "Apparently, without telling me, they had very deep questions about whether they'd be willing to let me go to Mississippi, given the level of danger," Zwerling says. "They spared me that agonizing by just coming to me and saying, 'If you feel like you want to go, we're behind you all the way.'"

BY THE TIME THEY RECEIVED THE LETTER, GOODMAN, ALONG WITH two other civil rights workers—James Chaney and Michael Schwerner—had been reported missing. The news was a source of deep worry for northern volunteers, and it cast a pall over Zwerling's first week in Mississippi. "There isn't really any way I can convey what I feel about Andy," he wrote to his parents on June 26.

Few veteran activists doubted the fate of the three workers, whose bodies would be discovered, buried in a ditch outside Philadelphia, Miss., in August.

Zwerling was slower to acknowledge their likely fate. "It didn't register until Andy had been missing for about a week," he recalls. "Once a week had gone by, it was clear that they had been killed somewhere."

But like soldiers in battle, they weren't to dwell. "I did the thing

that people from SNCC were trained to do. Just to say, 'I'm not moving. They can't scare me out of here. I'm staying and registering voters.'"

The disappearance of the three workers quickly became national news. That Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner would become three of the most recognizable faces of the movement is evidence of what African-American veteran civil rights workers knew from long experience. It was far from the first time that ordinary citizens had been murdered in Mississippi for advancing civil rights. Had Chaney, who was black, been the only victim, it's unlikely anyone outside the activist organizations would ever have known. Among those making that charge was Schwerner's widow, Rita Schwerner, herself a SNCC activist in Mississippi. In numerous memoirs, veterans including Henry note that the recruitment of white students to Freedom Summer was a deliberate means to place national focus on the violence and lawlessness in Mississippi. When volunteers like Zwerling signed up to go to Mississippi, they were lending more than manpower. They brought power in the form of white skin and connections to elite institutions. In his memoir, *The Fire Ever Burning*, Henry wrote that Mississippi civil rights workers needed "national publicity and coverage that would reflect the significance of our efforts." In 1963, when a group of white students from Yale and Stanford came to help with a voting rights project, Henry noticed a curious thing: "They were able to get the news media to almost every mass meeting that we held in the state."

Moses had worked for three straight years trying to register black voters in Mississippi. But as scholars such as Clayborne Carson, professor of history at Stanford and author of *In Struggle*, a history of SNCC, explain, Moses found that neither his nor anyone's efforts had borne much fruit. The dearth of African-American voters demonstrated the effectiveness of the threats against blacks who attempted to vote—from firings, foreclosures, and evictions, to sniper fire, fire bombings, and murders. Indeed, a 1963 U.S.

Q&A

Civil Rights and Civic Lessons

Maya Sen, assistant professor of political science, explores the legal significance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Freedom Summer is considered pivotal in President Lyndon Johnson's decision to introduce the Voting Rights Act in the spring of 1965. But during that same summer, Congress passed a legal landmark that was arguably even more significant: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations.

It wasn't the first such effort, says Maya Sen, assistant professor of political science at Rochester. The legal twists and technicalities on the road to ending legal segregation began nearly a century earlier. Sen, who joined the faculty in 2012, holds a law degree in addition to a doctorate in political science and teaches courses on law, judicial politics, and the politics of race and ethnicity in the United States.

From a legal standpoint, why was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 so significant?

It was significant in two major ways. First, we think of the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 as being that definitive moment when we knew that separate was inherently

unequal and that segregation was no longer the law of the land. It galvanized the civil rights movement, starting with the Montgomery bus boycott. Segregation was still the informal law of the land, even if it had been declared unconstitutional. As several political scientists have shown, the percentage of African-American children attending desegregated schools in the South was close to zero for many years after the *Brown* rulings. It wasn't until passage of the Civil Rights Act that things changed. The new law called for desegregation of schools and empowered the federal government to sue for enforcement. One could say that the Civil Rights Act really implemented the spirit of the *Brown* rulings.

Second, it outlawed discrimination in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants.

President Ulysses Grant signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1875, also outlawing discrimination in public accommodations. Why did the 1964 law succeed while this one has been all but forgotten?

The 1875 act was enacted under Congress's authority under the Enforcement Clause of the 14th Amendment, and the Supreme Court ruled very soon after that Congress had exceeded its author-

Commission on Civil Rights investigation found “open and flagrant violation of constitutional rights in Mississippi,” carried out by intimidation and violence.

Despite pleas from civil rights leaders, the federal government under President Kennedy had not intervened to protect voters, leaving the job to local police. Moses calculated that federal intervention was the only way to secure voting rights in Mississippi. And the only way to get federal intervention, he reasoned, was to invite the sons and daughters of elite white Americans to join the struggle in Mississippi.

The Mississippi state legislature responded to Freedom Summer with multiple new laws targeting political activity and a near doubling of the state’s highway patrol. Gov. Paul Johnson told a television news reporter that the police would respond to Freedom Summer with “Mississippi-style” justice. But the influx of northern whites also made the internal politics of the civil rights movement complicated. Many African Americans in the civil rights movement were opposed to recruiting white participants, fearing the implications of dependence on whites.

As a volunteer in Clarksdale, Zwierling would feel that tension more acutely than volunteers in almost any other area of the state. “Freedom Summer was different in Clarksdale because of the very

strong NAACP presence in the town and an already vibrant movement taking place,” says Françoise Hamlin, an assistant professor of history and Africana studies at Brown University.

In her 2012 book, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II*, Hamlin explores the leadership of Henry, and of another Clarksdale NAACP leader, Vera Mae Pige, who died in 2007, virtually unknown to the history books.

“There were strong movement leaders in Clarksdale, Pige among them, who did not necessarily support Freedom Summer as enthusiastically as Aaron Henry, which made for some interesting interactions between the older grassroots leadership and the young volunteers,” Hamlin says.

As it turned out, Zwierling would be among Pige’s first volunteer houseguests. Through her, he would become acquainted with the complicated internal politics of the civil rights movement.

Pige owned a hair salon in downtown Clarksdale. As a hairdresser, she knew more than just about anybody about the daily lives, circumstances, and opinions of the black residents of the town. For years, she helped build the NAACP’s membership in the region, helping Clarksdale to become the stronghold of the NAACP in the state. From the back of her salon, she ran Freedom Schools to educate locals on citizenship rights



AT WORK: Aaron (Doc) Henry, an NAACP leader and a pharmacist, “rallied the troops” in Clarksdale, Zwierling says.

ity under that clause. But the 1964 act was not passed under the 14th Amendment. It was actually passed under Congress’s authority to regulate interstate commercial activities, what we would call the Commerce Clause. This is an important distinction, and it led the court to uphold the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. It’s hard to know where we would be today were it not for the 1964 law.

Do you think the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act is secure?

There have been challenges as to whether the law usurps Congress’s authority under the Commerce Clause—i.e., whether this really constitutes interstate commerce as the founders intended it. It appears to be settled that the constitutionality of the law isn’t in question.

Whether there continues to be popular will in support for the Civil Rights Act is a different question. And I think there continues to be. We’ve agreed as a society that it’s wrong for hotels, movie theaters, and restaurants to discriminate against customers solely because of their race or ethnicity.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. Last year, the Supreme Court struck down a portion of that law. What was the significance of that ruling?

In *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court struck down the formula used to determine which jurisdictions were “covered” for purposes of the Voting Rights Act, a designation that triggers additional scrutiny from the Department of Justice. The coverage formula struck down by the Supreme Court is based on historical data. Chief Justice John Roberts, who wrote the opinion, said we can’t rely on a formula that uses 40-year-old data. He argued, quite reasonably to a lot of people, that a lot has changed in the last few decades.

It’s not that the entire act is invalid after *Shelby County*, or that it can’t be worked through. But it does raise the question of whether Congress will try to rewrite the coverage formula that *Shelby County* struck down. The Voting Rights Act has in the past enjoyed broad, bipartisan support. For example, the last time it was reauthorized was in 2006, and that was under a Republican president and a Republican Congress. So there is good support for it. In addition, the Voting Rights Act has been by most markers quite successful. In some states, the percentage of eligible black registered voters went from approximately 10 percent to 60 or 70 percent.

Time will tell whether Congress will take up the challenges posed by the *Shelby County* decision.

—Interview by Karen McCally ’02 (PhD)



SAYING NO TO JIM CROW: Zwierling (right, standing) and fellow Clarksdale Freedom Summer volunteers at work in the Freedom Office.

and strategy. “At times,” writes Hamlin, “Pigee could literally hold clients hostage to a continuous barrage of information and persuasion while working on their hair.” Hamlin argues that Pigee saw the northern white volunteers as a potential distraction from work already under way, as well as a competing force on turf she’d staked out for her own efforts.

While Henry saw the potential of SNCC and welcomed the volunteers, Pigee went along only reluctantly, resenting the presence of SNCC.

Writing home, Zwierling noted that Pigee’s circumstances were far better than those of most black Mississippians. She had air-conditioning in her home, for example. But he felt some tension in the air, and got wind that it was in part due to a disagreement between her and Henry.

“There is some conflict here between the NAACP and SNCC which sort of stays a little beneath the surface,” he wrote.

While Zwierling felt Pigee to be less welcoming than Henry, today he sees her as an unsung hero of Freedom Summer, whose bravery, like Henry’s, is astonishing. A bullet had passed through her living room window the same night that Henry’s house had been struck. Yet, like Henry, she continued her work and agreed to host—at least for the first week—the northern volunteers, an act that would place her in even more danger. “Talk about courage,” says Zwierling. “She still agreed to put us up, and she continued to work after we were gone.”

Over the years, Zwierling has become more impressed with a

point driven home to the volunteers during Freedom Summer. During training, they were told their presence might strike great fear among many black locals. Many residents were fearful of all whites, especially if they were approached by more than one. Those who trusted the approaching volunteers would know that fraternizing with Freedom Summer volunteers could place them in danger. While the volunteers would return back home at the end of the summer, the local residents would remain in Mississippi where they would be potential targets for retribution. As Zwierling got to work, he wrote that the residents he canvassed were “very receptive and friendly.” He added, “I found four people willing to go to the courthouse tomorrow and attempt to register. The real test will come tomorrow to see if they’ll actually go; if we workers will be arrested and if they will be registered.”

AS THE WEEKS PASSED, ZWIERLING GREW MORE EXCITED ABOUT THE prospects of the new political party growing out of Freedom Summer. He was helping to set up meetings to inform potential voters about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. By registering as a member of the new party, they’d help launch a direct challenge to the Democratic party, which planned to seat an all-white Mississippi delegation, elected by only a small minority of the state’s eligible voters, at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, N.J.

“I’ve called a meeting at the biggest church in town,” Zwierling wrote home, referring to a Baptist church in the black community of Riverton. “If the meeting works out I’ll feel that I’ve done something direct and important. If not, it means more slow plodding on.”

As it turned out, Zwierling was pleased with the results of the



STYLIST & ACTIVIST: NAACP activist and beautician Vera Mae Pigee (center) instructs citizens on voting rights and movement strategy in a back room of her Clarksdale salon.

meeting. About 50 people attended. And with the deacon late in arriving, he even led the attendants in a prayer. “I prayed for courage for us all to fight for ourselves—sort of a secular prayer,” he wrote to his family.

“I’ve been working like crazy on the Freedom Dem Party,” he wrote on July 20. He’d since moved from Pigee’s home to more rugged—and typical—accommodations, a home with no refrigerator or stove, and little electric lighting. “Tomorrow is the precinct meeting and I’ll be like a chicken-minus-head.”

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party would hold its convention in Jackson in early August. Zwerling would not be present, however. “The SNCC people who were involved in the Democratic convention politics were mostly just the real top leadership—Bob Moses, Jim Forman, Fannie Lou Hamer. Most of the white students left before the convention, as planned.”

It underscored the role of the northern white volunteers as foot soldiers in a black movement. As Zwerling was leaving Mississippi to head back home to New York, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegates, including Henry, were in Atlantic City to challenge the Democratic party to seat them as Mississippi’s only democratically elected delegation. The national party offered the Freedom party a compromise, which the Freedom delegates rejected. But Zwerling says he had no opinion on the events in Atlantic City by that time. “I was exhausted,” he recalls. “I felt I had done my job. It didn’t matter to me what disputes there might still

be.” They’d challenged the national party, and forced it to respond. “We had achieved so much.”

Like many Freedom Summer volunteers, Zwerling says the summer changed the course of his life. He passed up an offer from Stanford Medical School and began preparing for a career in law instead. He worked for his home district congressman, Rep. William Fitts Ryan, who gave him a pass to be in the chamber as President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law in August 1965.

He went to Yale Law School, overlapping one year with Calhoun, who in addition to covering Lewis’s visit to the University for the *Campus Times*, participated in the spring 1964 trip to register voters in Greensboro. Zwerling worked as a public defender, and later as executive director of the First District Appellate Project, founded by Calhoun to offer legal services for appellate cases involving indigent clients. Zwerling would serve as the project’s executive director for 26 years before retiring in 2008.

Zwerling maintained contact with the Goodmans over the years, especially Andy’s mother, Carolyn Goodman, who died in 2007. “My parents and [Andy’s] parents worked together as soon as he was missing. They kind of formed their own support group as they went through the horror of finding out what had happened,” he says.

Looking back to Freedom Summer 50 years later, Zwerling echoes the view of most historians today. There was nothing inevitable about the progress made that summer. “In a nutshell, Freedom Summer was absolutely one of the reasons we got the Voting Rights Act,” he says. “It’s too bad it had to be through the mechanism of white kids getting involved. But I don’t see how anybody could look back and not see the impetus that that summer gave.” ^R