

Letters from Freedom Summer

Instructions: The following are letters written by northern Freedom Summer volunteers to their friends and family back home. As you read, think about what motivated these students to become a part of the movement. How has their perspective changed since becoming involved? Do they feel that progress has been made? What challenges do they face? You will write your own letter describing your role in a social movement or political cause. How will your experiences be similar to or different from those described in these letters?

Letter 1

June 17, 1964

Dear People at home in the Safe, Safe North,

Mississippi is going to be hell this summer. Monday, Jim Forman, executive secretary of SNCC, stood up during one of the general sessions and calmly told the staff (who already knew) and the volunteers that they could all be expected to be arrested, jailed, and beaten this summer, and, in many cases, shot at.... I'd venture to say that every member of the Mississippi staff has been beaten up at least once and he who has not been shot at is rare. It is impossible for you to imagine what we are going in to, as it is for me now, but I'm beginning to see...

Please talk up Mississippi up North, pass around the materials I am sending, and begin petitioning the Federal government for intervention...

Love,

Xtoph

Letter 2

To my brother,

Last night I was a long time before sleeping, although I was extremely tired. Every shadow, every noise—the bark of a dog, the sound of a car—in my fear and exhaustion was turned into a terrorist's approach. And I believed that I heard the back door open and a Klansman walk in....

I tried consciously to overcome this fear.... Then I thought of why I was here, rethought what could be gained in view of what could be lost.... I remembered Bob Moses saying he had felt justified in asking hundreds of students to go to Mississippi because he was not asking anyone to do something that he would not do...I became aware of the uselessness of fear that immobilizes an individual. Then I began to relax....

Anyone who comes down here and is not afraid I think must be crazy as well as dangerous to this project where security is quite important. But the type of fear that they mean when they, when we, sing "we are not afraid" is the type that immobilizes.... The songs help to dissipate the fear. Some of the words in the songs do not hold real meaning on their own...but when they are sung in unison, or sung silently by oneself, they take on new meaning beyond words or rhythm.... There is almost a religious quality about some of the songs, having little to do with the usual concept of a god. It has to do with the miracle that youth has organized to fight hatred and ignorance....

Jon, please be considerate to Mom and Dad. The fear I just expressed, I am sure they feel much more intensely without the relief of being here to know exactly how things are. Please don't go defending me or attacking them if they are critical of the Project....

They said over the phone "Did you know how much it takes to make a child?" and I thought of how much it took to make a Herbert Lee [a black leader killed in Mississippi]....

With constant love,

Heather

Name: _____

Letter 3

Holly Springs

Dear Mom and Dad;

The atmosphere in class is unbelievable. It is what every teacher dreams about—real, honest enthusiasm and desire to learn anything and everything. The girls come to class of their own free will. They respond to everything that is said. They are excited about learning. They drain me of everything that I have to offer so that I go home at night completely exhausted but very happy....

I start out at 10:30 teaching what we call the Core Curriculum, which is Negro History and the History and Philosophy of the Movement, to about fifteen girls ranging from 15 to 25 years of age.... The majority go to a Roman Catholic High School in Holly Springs and have therefore received a fairly decent education by Mississippi standards. They can, for the most part, express themselves on paper but their skills in no way compare to juniors and seniors in northern suburban schools....

We have also talked about what it means to be a Southern white who wants to stand up but who is alone, rejected by other whites and not fully accepted by the Negroes. We have talked about their feelings about Southern whites. One day three little white girls came to our school and I asked them to understand how the three girls felt by remembering how it feels when they are around a lot of whites. We agreed that we would not stare at the girls but try to make them feel as normal as possible....

Every class is beautiful. The girls respond, respond, respond. They disagree among themselves. I have no doubt that soon they will be disagreeing with me. At least this is one thing that I am working towards. They are a sharp group. But they are under-educated and starved for knowledge. They know that they have been cheated and they want anything and everything that we have to give them.

I have a great deal of faith in these students. They are very mature and very concerned about other people. I really think that they will be able to carry on without us. At least this is my dream...

Love,

Pam

Letter 4

August 24

Dear John and Cleo,

Some of them are beginning to realize, now that we're talking about the end of school and our departures, that we're not saviours and we're not staying forever and we're not leaving any miracles behind. We've awakened great expectations and now will vanish leaving folks with only a deepened sense of their destitute state and a deepened longing.... When we talk now with our pupils about college and scholarships they respond as if we are telling fairy stories....

Nothing short of staying here...with \$10 per month which others are and have been living on—nothing short of this will satisfy me.... Maybe the immediacy of the sufferings and dangers here *is* overwhelming me and blurring out the essential “larger view,” but I can simply no longer justify the pursuit of a Ph.D.... When I feel the despair of the youngsters who can't even get through high school because cotton planting prevents them, I almost feel ashamed of my college diploma....

Love,

Jo

The letters come from the book *Letters from Mississippi* (Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, Zephyr Press, 2002).