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BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING: THE ACTIVISM OF WEDNESDAYS

IN MISSISSIPPI

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Building Bridges of Understanding: The Activism of Wednesdays in Mississippi

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Wednesdays in Mississippi (WIMS) was an interracial, interfaith civil rights organization formed in 1964 to aid in the Freedom Summer voter registration project. The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) sponsored this organization, with participants hailing from major national liberal women's organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of Catholic Women, Church Women United, and the NCNW. These women sought to counteract southern whites' negative stereotypes of civil rights workers by promoting themselves as an older generation of activists sympathetic to their cause. By wearing white gloves, pearls, and dresses, they employed gendered performances of respectability, membership in national women's organizations, and ties to major business and political leaders to change the hearts and minds of white southern moderates resistant to integration. In that first summer, 48 WIMS members in teams of five to seven women flew to Jackson, Mississippi on Tuesday, visited a smaller Mississippi town on Wednesday, and flew back on Thursday. Teams returned in the summer of 1965 to work with Head Start initiatives. In 1966 the organization became Workshops in Mississippi and shifted its focus to

supporting anti-poverty initiatives, such as a pig farm, day care centers, and low-income home ownership projects, in Mississippi.

This dissertation explores the ways that middle-aged, middle class black and white women engaged in activism during the 1960s. Unlike more radical feminist and black power activists, these women sought to be unobtrusive and inoffensive in their efforts, working behind the scenes to foster social and economic justice. Their activism depended on individual transformation and on building connections between local activists and national officials and organizations. Their quiet strategy has been largely responsible for the lack of attention given them by historians. Yet they offer an important and largely overlooked form of middle class liberal activism through which women influenced local civil rights campaigns; forged ties between black and white women, North and South; and used their connections to bring federal resources to poor southern communities. Ultimately, WIMS efforts also served as a model for NCNW projects in Africa.

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Building Bridges of Understanding: The Activism of Wednesdays in Mississippi

Introduction

For three days in March of 1964, forty black and white middle class women convened at the Americana Motor hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. In order not to draw attention, the delegates chose an inconspicuous name: Women in Community Service (WICS).¹ Fear of repercussions saturated the event. No one could take any photographs inside of or speak about the meeting outside of the conference walls. But the women who attended—from the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Church Women United (CWU), the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW)—reached across racial lines to discuss a critical issue: namely how to investigate police brutality against young women who had been imprisoned during voter registration campaigns.

Dorothy Height, the NCNW president, and Polly Cowan, a white Jewish staff member from the Council, were especially enthusiastic delegates. They recently had spoken to young women in Selma, Alabama, who had been jailed during the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) Freedom to Vote Campaign a few months earlier. Height and Cowan had already discussed plans to implement a direct-action civil rights program for the NCNW, and the Atlanta gathering could further this effort.

¹ This organization later became the main organization devoted to screening young women for the Job Corps. The YWCA was no longer involved directly in WICS after this meeting, but the other four organizations, including the NCNW, remained. See Polly Cowan, interview by John Britton, New York City, March 8, 1968, transcript, p. 11, The

Cowan, a wealthy descendent of the Spiegel mail catalogue family and the wife of the president of CBS television, initially envisioned a project that would send interracial teams of female “trained observers” to travel around the South and report their findings back to the northern public. Journalists were especially welcome, but anyone willing to report on racial inequalities could apply. Cowan thought that such a group of “women with prestige” would be effective because “nobody could accuse them of being communists; nobody could accuse them of being just do-gooders.”²

At the Atlanta meeting, Clarie Collins Harvey, a black businesswoman representing Church Women United in Jackson, Mississippi, offered Cowan an opportunity to debut her project in slightly altered form.³ That spring, SNCC and the umbrella civil rights organization the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) were preparing to bring 1,000 northern students, mainly young white women and men from private colleges, to Mississippi to help register blacks in the state to vote. Harvey feared that this proposed “Freedom Summer” would anger white Southerners and lead them to act more violently against local African Americans. In addition, Harvey feared that local news sources would provide little objective information to white Mississippians. Harvey thus asked national organizations represented at the WICS conference “to come in and stir us up and to tell us what’s happening in the world and send us papers and keep in touch with us, and so on and so forth.”⁴

Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

² Ibid.

³ In 1964 United Church Women changed its name to Church Women United. I will refer to the organization from this point forward as Church Women United.

⁴ Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), 165.

Cowan took this invitation and formed Wednesdays in Mississippi (WIMS), an all-female, interracial, interfaith nation-wide civil rights organization. Height and the NCNW agreed to sponsor the group. In summer 1964 the first seven WIMS teams flew from New York, Chicago, and Boston to Jackson on Tuesday, visited a smaller Mississippi town on Wednesday, and then flew back on Thursday. The black and white members of WIMS traveled to Mississippi for a variety of reasons—some because their children had joined the movement, others to meet with southern women interested in creating change, and others because they simply wanted to see the situation in Mississippi firsthand. But all hoped to act as a “ministry of presence” through which they could “build bridges of understanding.”⁵ To build such bridges, the northern teams visited voter registration

⁵ Many different sources related to Wednesdays in Mississippi—organizational reports, interviews, memoirs, etc.—use the phrases “ministry of presence” and “bridges of understanding” to describe the modus operandi of WIMS. For some of these sources see “Wednesdays in Mississippi,” Winter 1966, p.1, Folder 16, Box 12, Series 19, National Council of Negro Women Papers (hereafter cited as NCNW Papers), National Archives for Black Women’s History, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington D.C., (hereafter cited as NABWH); Height, *Open Wide the Freedom*, 165; Susan Goodwillie, “Wednesdays in Mississippi: A Synopsis,” unpublished preliminary report for Children’s Defense Fund, Washington D.C.: Children’s Defense Fund, 2001, in the personal collection of Holly Shulman. By 1968, Cowan said that although it was an apt description of what WIMS was trying to accomplish, she was tired of the phrase “building a bridge.” See Cowan, interview by John Britton, 20. There has been some excellent work thusfar on WIMS, but it has focused mainly on the first year of the WIMS project. For masters theses and articles that explore efforts of WIMS see, Erica Poff, “A Ministry of Presence: Women/Wednesdays in Mississippi, 1964–1965” (master’s thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2002); Kate Wilkinson, “A Sociological Analysis of an Action Group: Wednesdays in Mississippi” (master’s thesis, University of Mississippi, 1966); Debbie Z. Harwell, “Wednesdays in Mississippi: Women as a Catalyst for Change, Summer 1964” (master’s thesis, University of Memphis, 2007); and Debbie Z. Harwell, “Wednesdays in Mississippi: Uniting Women across Regional and Racial Lines, Summer 1964,” *Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 3 (August 2010): 617–654. A few historians have made some mention of WIMS in their studies of black and white women’s activism. See Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999); Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The*

projects, freedom schools, and events to promote social justice for black Mississippians. They also met with local black and white clubwomen and listened to their perspectives on the changes occurring in their neighborhoods. The northern teams also sought to dispel any rumors the southern women might have heard about the movement.

Committed to interracialism, WIMS was two-third white and one third-black. While members came from major black and white women's organizations—the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), Church Women United (CWU) and YWCA as well as the Girl Scouts, League of Women Voters, and the American Association of University Women-- the National Council of Negro Women was the only official sponsor of this group.⁶ As a liberal organization, WIMS was committed to a strategy of behind-the-scenes personal change, but it did not publicly challenge segregation within some of the national organizations from which its members hailed.

Cowan, Height, and Susie Goodwillie, a white NCNW staff person, all agreed that Clarie Collins Harvey, the black Jacksonian businesswoman, invited northern white and black women to Mississippi. Yet in a March 1968 interview, Cowan also acknowledged

Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (New York: Dutton, 1993). Finally, Dorothy Height writes about WIMS in her autobiography *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*.

⁶ Cowan writes: "No organization (woman's) was willing to sponsor WIMS except The National Council of Negro Women. That was due to the leadership of its National President, Dorothy I. Height, who saw the value and importance of working in this way in the south, particularly during the up-coming Freedom Summer...The other women's organizations were participating members: Young Women's Christian Ass. [sic], National Council of Catholic Wm., Nat. Council of Jewish Wm. United Church Women--and adding to the original list from the meeting in Atlanta in March were The American Association of University Women and the League of Women Voters." Polly Cowan, "Outline," p. 6-7, Box 1, Series 1, The Papers of Polly Cowan (hereafter cited as Cowan Papers), NABWH.

that the “dialogue” that WIMS sought to build was primarily aimed at convincing white southern women to join the movement by highlighting the common concerns about family and community shared by white and black women.⁷ She claimed: “We wanted them to know each other; to know they could work together; that their goals were very much the same—that they wanted a state and a good town and a good school and a good environment for their children and that if they did meet, they weren’t so very different.”⁸ Cowan assumed, as did other white liberal northern women concerned about southern race relations, that the problem could simply be fixed by women getting to know each other on a friendly basis across the color line. After all, she and Dorothy Height had become friends and colleagues through the NCNW.⁹

The model WIMS developed was inherited from a previous generation of female activists. After World War II, a variety of women’s liberal organizations utilized what they viewed as “a female ethic specifically to build bridges *across* racial lines.”¹⁰ Rooted in this tradition, the women of WIMS believed that they possessed a special type of ethical commitment different from that of men. This commitment meant that they were better equipped to create friendships that could change the hearts and minds of other

⁷ Cowan, interview by John Britton, 18.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Cowan and Height first met during meetings of the Taconic Foundation, an organization sponsored by Stephen Currier. After Medgar Evers’ death, civil right leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young met to discuss how the separate organizations might work together. Cowan attended these meetings and began writing reports on the civil rights struggle. Cowan offered her services to Height as a volunteer. They became colleagues and friends. Height spoke at Cowan’s funeral in November 1976.

¹⁰ Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, 1997), 4. See also Helen Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of American Women's Organisations* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002).

women, who could then influence family members and neighbors.

Unlike most male-led organizations, WIMS sought to be as unobtrusive as possible. Their approach was feminine in that the group avoided publicity as being inappropriate and even offensive. Their personal ethical obligation to the civil rights movement led them to act, and for some, this involved a deeply individual process of transformation. By traveling to Mississippi to “witness” racial strife, these women sought an authentic experience that became characteristic of many liberal groups involved in the movement.¹¹ WIMS members initiated this personal change by “breaking bread” together or having tea in one another’s homes in order to forge friendships. These deeply personal rituals, which mimicked the religious rituals followed by many WIMS women, rooted transformation in the process of communication.

Their experience in the South changed many northern WIMS participants, black and white. Several wrote about how the visits challenged their views of the South, other races, or the Mississippi poor. According to the handwritten notes of an NCNW staff person in 1964, “Ilza [Williams, a black member of the 1964 team] said she never understood Southern Negroes before [going to Mississippi], [she] had been intolerant of them. Never will be again.”¹² Many others claimed that their experience in the South awakened them to problems that existed in the North as well. Influenced by their experience, some WIMS participants later created projects across racial and class boundaries in their own backyards.

At the same time, WIMS was created in an ecumenical moment when Americans

¹¹ For more information on authenticity as a motivating factor in civil rights activism, see Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

became more religious, but also embraced a liberal tolerance of religions other than their own.¹³ Liberal religious organizations, from progressive churches and synagogues to the YWCA, served as the main way for black and white middle class women, North and South, to become involved in civil rights efforts. These organizations were deemed respectable, and middle and upper class women thus viewed them as safe spaces for their activities.¹⁴ WIMS members utilized their identities as churchgoers to fight against common stereotypes held by white Mississippians about civil rights activists. Many white southerners in the 1950s and 1960s believed that activists, especially student activists, were godless “Communists” and “beatniks.” They felt threatened not only politically, but also morally by students who seemed to flaunt their defiance of local norms. WIMS members wanted to show southern whites (and blacks) that civil rights activists could also be moral people devoted to God and country.

WIMS’ makeup as a single-sex, middle- and upper-class organization of middle-age participants created an aura of social (especially sexual) propriety, but the women also deliberately performed respectability by wearing white gloves, pearls and dresses.¹⁵ In a memo sent to participants in 1965, Polly Cowan decreed that WIMS participants should always appear feminine and respectable. Even though the weather was going to

¹² NCNW staff note, [ca. 1964], Folder 7, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹³ For more information, see Wendy Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ For more on respectability in the civil rights movement see Marissa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson and Brian Ward, ““Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, eds. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

be hot and uncomfortable in Jackson, the women still had to look their best. They were to bring dresses, a sweater, “wash and dry cloths (you may have to ‘freshen up’ on the fly)”, and most notably—white gloves.¹⁶ Participant Justine Randers-Pherson recalled her first meeting with WIMS staff as she stepped off of the airplane in Jackson: “Diane and Susie, our ‘staff’ came forward to greet us like long-lost aunts—they [were] demure and whitely gloved.”¹⁷ Members also emphasized their role as mothers, stressing that they were going south as women concerned for the well-being of all children—white and black. Drawing upon Cold War era ideals of motherhood helped these women establish credibility not only with middle class white and black Southerners, but also with local governmental officials.¹⁸

The strategy of appearing feminine and respectable served multiple purposes. First, WIMS did not want to alienate those southern white “ladies” who were tentative in their support of civil rights. Cowan wrote that the goal of WIMS was not to disrupt or challenge regional norms, but to “quietly...develop communication links between middle-class Negro and white women in Mississippi, and between Northern and Southern women of both races.”¹⁹ They could best open such lines of communication by presenting themselves as ladies who deserved respect and a civil reception. The point, they

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siecle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).

¹⁶ “Suggestions for Supplies and Wardrobe to Take to Mississippi,” [ca. May 15, 1965] Folder 10, Box 8, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁷ Justine Randers Pherson, “Report of a Team Member: ‘Wednesdays in Mississippi,’ 20 July 1964,” Folder 9, Box 14, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1994).

believed, was not to alienate southerners, but to convince them of the positive aspects of integration. They were women who benefited from and relished the affluence of the American economic system. They were not attempting to destabilize capitalism and democracy, but rather to expand it to include women of all faiths, races, and regions.²⁰

The focus on respectability had additional meanings for black women. Since Reconstruction they had sought to contradict stereotypes that they were less feminine and proper than white women.²¹ By displaying middle class dress and behavior in the WIMS project, black participants engaged in a “politics of respectability” that was familiar from preceding generations.²² While most did not seek a visible disruption of the system of segregation, they called for quiet examples of virtuous femininity to slowly chip away at discrimination. Though it may seem counterproductive to have lived by the rules of conduct established by a white-dominated society, blacks still found agency in these methods. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes of African American

¹⁹ Polly Cowan, “Wednesdays in Mississippi – Fact Sheet,” [ca. January, 1966], Folder 2, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁰ For more on how ideas of consumption influenced notions of American character in postwar America see Lisabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

²¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

²² Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham examines how African American women involved in the development of the National Baptist Convention at the end of the nineteenth century used the idea of respectability to make political gains for their race. Having been excluded from authoritative roles within the National Baptist Convention, female members developed the Women's Convention (WC). Instead of specifically challenging dominant gender roles that called for the submission of women to men, the WC sought to help fight racism through their roles as women who possessed virtue, cleanliness, and respectability. In 1915 the executive board of the WC wrote, “Fight segregation through the courts as an unlawful act? Yes. But fight it with soap and water,

churchwomen at the turn of the twentieth century, “By insisting upon conformity to society’s norms and established rules, black Baptist women subverted the cultural logic of white superiority and condemned white America for failing to live up to its own rhetoric of equality and justice as found in the Constitution.”²³

Finally, WIMS utilized this strategy out of a need for protection.²⁴ In addition to behaving in a manner that would not offend southerners (especially white ones), members remained in segregated groups for the bulk of their time in Mississippi. They did so in part because they wanted to create an environment where sympathetic whites would be more likely to listen to their opinions. But they also utilized this strategy to ensure their own safety. White southerners had repeatedly attacked and killed black and white civil rights workers. In 1963 Mississippi NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was assassinated in his driveway, and his wife and small children heard the shot. The following year, Freedom Summer COFO activists James Chaney of Mississippi and Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner of New York City were murdered in Neshoba County. As contemporary historian James Silver pointed out, Mississippi was a “closed society,” unwilling to open itself to change while frustrated outsiders were asking the state to do so²⁵ Cowan was aware of Silver’s scholarship and took into account that these trips, as short as they were, could be dangerous for northern participants and the

hoes, spades, shovels and paint, to remove any reasonable excuse for it, is the fight that we will win.” Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 193.

²³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 222.

²⁴ For more on how women have used motherhood as a protective tool while fighting for political change, see Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

southerners who interacted with them. Thus, the members of WIMS tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. And in case anything did happen, Cowan alerted Assistant Attorney General John Doar, the FBI, and the Mississippi governor to the group's activities and itinerary.

Suggesting the impressive connections that WIMS women had with leaders in politics and the media, Cowan remarked that she was able to convince journalists to hide WIMS' activity. "The news medium has given complete co-operation by its understanding that, if the project were given publicity, the Mississippi staff would be discovered and their ability to broaden southern contacts would be curtailed."²⁶ She claimed that knowledge of WIMS would

compound the risks taken by the many southern women of both races who have talked to us frankly but off-the-record. We believe that many of the doors which have been opened with such effort would slam shut immediately if the southern press drew attention to the concept and organization of the project.²⁷

While WIMS participants tried to stay out of the newspapers, they also tried to bring information to southern women who might not have access to outside resources. Cowan wrote, "[W]e found that many women were uninformed or misinformed due to the handicap of a steady stream of local, non-objective news reports. Through our questions and comments, the Mississippi women began to doubt the validity of their

²⁵ See James Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (February 1964) and *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York City: Harcourt, 1964).

²⁶ Polly Cowan, "'Wednesdays in Mississippi': Report from Polly Cowan, Project Coordinator," Report for US Commission on Civil Rights Hearings (hereafter cited as Commission on Civil Rights Report), [August 1964], p. 3 Folder 18, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁷ Ibid.

sources.”²⁸ The women who WIMS worked with came to realize that they were not alone in questioning segregation. Thus these northern activists believed that their presence opened conversations as more southern women felt supported in discussing the region’s challenges. And in turn the northerners came to realize that the issues so crucial in the South related to them as well. Through their visits to Mississippi, northern women recognized problems in their own backyards. Cowan wrote:

We, in turn, were able to make it clear that we came into Mississippi in interracial teams to learn more about the problems of the South, but at the same time we consider de-segregation and integration a national learning process in which we too are deeply involved.²⁹

Over the course of its existence, Wednesdays in Mississippi changed from an organization that highlighted the affluent status and professional connections of its charter members in the North to one that promoted the leadership of poor southern black women. And yet it always maintained its commitment to interracial and interfaith activism, even as other organizations split along these same lines. Still while the group did change the hearts and minds of some individuals, it was not ultimately capable of creating profound changes in race relations. Because WIMS relied on a personal, “quiet” approach that would not alienate southern (and later northern) whites, it left individual women, who possessed little political power at the time, to take on the burdens of implementing integration and resisting police brutality. The group helped many southerners and northerners re-evaluate their feelings toward members of another race but did little more than that. Instead of fighting for systemic change through redistributive governmental programs, WIMS emphasized civil and educational reform to

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

advance its goals of creating a change of attitude in American hearts and minds. WIMS women worked to assist and uplift working-class and poor women, but they emphasized personal change and individual education as the path to societal advancement.³⁰

Moreover, southern white women changed very little after the WIMS visits. Only a handful of women embraced WIMS, and many of these were already committed to change. They created coffee klatches with each other and their new northern acquaintances, but rarely were able to spread WIMS' message to other southern white women.

Still, in the context of the times, WIMS' activity could be seen as progressive. In an era of de facto and de jure segregation, the creation of even tenuous interracial relationships was threatening to the existing power structure in Mississippi. And as WIMS transformed its goals and visions from 1965 onwards, its transgressions increased. Amidst urban rebellion and Johnson's War on Poverty, WIMS members created opportunities for black women to speak to white women, without their concerns being written off by the white community. Moreover, the activism of WIMS opened up opportunities for the NCNW, its sponsoring organization, to become more of a presence in the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty. Through brief trips south, Dorothy Height and the other northern black WIMS participants were able to personally witness civil rights projects such as freedom schools, community centers, and freedom rallies that they had previously only read about in newspapers or heard about from southern friends and relatives. Now they had the opportunity to view these historic activities for themselves. They were also able to understand better the plight of the black middle class

³⁰ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 216-18.

in places like Jackson, Mississippi. There they had the opportunity to ask the schoolteachers, principals, social workers, and shopkeepers why they had yet to publicly embrace the civil rights cause that so many working class blacks had joined. While northern WIMS women were critical of the southern black middle class, they now appreciated the deep fears among this group that prevented most from joining a movement that might cost them their jobs or even their lives.

By 1966, WIMS participants transformed their personal experiences into antipoverty activism by developing new civil rights initiatives. That year Wednesdays in Mississippi became Workshops in Mississippi (using the same acronym of WIMS). While WIMS offered staff and funding to these workshops, the NCNW took a more public role in supporting these events. In the late 1960s, when the black community moved toward self-determination and away from interracialism, WIMS found it expedient to subsume its public identity under that of the NCNW, although it continued to be interracial and maintained a separate budget until 1970. The Workshops the two groups sponsored together helped grassroots women articulate and design the types of projects that they considered critical to their communities, including the creation of a pig bank to provide meat to area residents. The project ultimately yielded over 2000 pigs from the original donation of 50 sows and 5 boars.³¹ The NCNW (with the help of Workshops) also purchased seeds, as well as canning, freezing, and farming equipment for three cooperative farms in Alabama and Mississippi. At workshops, grassroots Mississippi women created plans for a school breakfast program and two daycare centers. One of these daycares began as a project to house unwed teenage mothers, but was

³¹ Ibid., 237.

changed after resistance from a local congressman. Unable to fight against his racist and sexist assumptions, the NCNW instead created a daycare center on the property.

Through this change, the Council responded to white concerns but still helped local women in some way by employing them in and also admitting their children to the daycare center.

One of the most successful NCNW projects initiated in a WIMS-sponsored workshop was the Turnkey III home-ownership project. This initiative brought together local builders, the housing authority, and black homebuyers to create a low-cost, high quality home ownership program from the late 1960s through 1975. Under this program the NCNW worked with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to help families that “qualified” for public housing move into their homes without a down payment but with an agreement to do maintenance on their properties for subsidized payments. Local black community leaders were the ones who determined who “qualified,” not the housing authority. The NCNW then set up a Homebuyers Association and trained members to work with Turnkey III to manage and maintain their homes. After 25 years of occupation, residents received deeds of ownership. By the time the project was completed in 1975, bridges of understanding had been created between the local poor and local and federal officials who had access to government funding. Although these later bridges proved more useful for alleviating poverty, they would not have occurred without the connections made first through Wednesdays in Mississippi.³²

³² The NCNW literature in the 1970s repeatedly refers to the importance of Wednesdays in Mississippi in setting a foundation for poverty work in Mississippi. For more information see for instance "The Power in 4,000,000 Women," NCNW promotional filmstrip, [ca. 1973], phonograph recording, Side 1, Folder 20, Subseries 3, Series 15, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

In the 1970s the NCNW took the WIMS' bridge building model abroad. Amidst an increasingly conservative political climate at home, the organization began to look for new international projects. In 1975, the NCNW received a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to sponsor a month-long program to initiate self-help projects by women of African descent. USAID was interested in expanding on the "person to person" approach of the NCNW projects and granted the Council money for a month-long seminar during International Women's Year (IWY). The first part of the month-long seminar brought thirty women (many whose high level of education and membership in international liberal women's organizations such as the YWCA marked them as upper class) to the IWY conference where the NCNW held a separate, but corresponding conference. After participating in these events; thirty women from around the globe traveled to Mississippi to view the poverty projects that the NCNW had established there. The women observed not only the deep poverty that existed within a "first-world" nation, but they also learned about small businesses and community projects that poor Mississippi women had established with NCNW help. Thus the Council actively participated in the creation of development projects for women of African descent by exposing these international women to self-help models that had been established via the US War on Poverty. In addition, the Council established a pig farm in Swaziland and additional anti-poverty projects in Botswana and Lesotho in the late 1970s. The connection between the NCNW's actions in Mississippi and abroad shows how domestic civil rights efforts provided the model for international nation building efforts during the Cold War.

While scholars have examined the history of male-dominated and student movements, few studies exist of all-female organizations in the civil rights movement.³³ Most current studies of women in the movement analyze women in male-dominated organizations, including student movements; working class and rural women; or notable individuals.³⁴ Examining the role and effectiveness of one all-women's organization is important because it shows women as both participants and leaders.³⁵ WIMS demonstrates that middle and upper class women participated in social justice activism while maintaining their adherence to gender, sexual, and class norms that emphasized respectable dress and behavior. This story is also important in that these moderate women were married to and were themselves politicians, intellectuals, entertainers, and activists in the post-war era. Their activism in the 1960s illuminates how an older generation of middle class, ecumenical, white and black women influenced both domestic and international developmental policies that are still relevant today.

³³ Two notable exceptions are Abigail Lewis, "'The Barrier Breaking Love of God': The Multiracial Activism of the Young Women's Christian Association, 1940s to 1970s" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008) and Janine Marie Denomme, "'To End this Day of Strife': Churchwomen and the Campaign for Integration, 1920-1970" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001).

³⁴ Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York City: Oxford, 2000); Deborah Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil rights Movement*, (New York City: New York University Press, 2001) Charles Payne, "Ella Baker and Models of Social Change," *Signs* 14:4 (1989): 885-99; Barbara Ransby *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1998); and Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*.

³⁵ This emphasis on leadership and participation challenges Charles Payne's assessment in "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and*

WIMS and the NCNW *did* open up lines of communication in areas where they were badly needed. Their members acted as powerful political and financial figures providing crucial support to the civil rights movement and anti-poverty initiatives. For both groups, bridge building was necessary to increase dialogue about race among blacks and whites across differences of class, religion, region, and ideology. By doing so, they worked toward alleviating discrimination in the United States. At the same time, both WIMS and the NCNW changed their views as they came into contact with the stubborn resistance of southern whites. Local black leaders in Mississippi then persuaded them to redirect their efforts to more radical political and economic ends. The ability to reach across divides of class, race and ideology was rooted in part in the all-female character of WIMS and the NCNW and their willingness to listen to grassroots female leaders whose own bridge-building skills had been honed in family, church and community networks. WIMS reveals another type of women's "movement" in the 1960s, which—while not feminist—did engage an older generation of female activists and encourage them to develop networks of power. These women's deliberate strategy of remaining behind the scenes contributed, however, to their historical obscurity and has impeded scholars' ability to access their stories.³⁶ It is time for their contributions to the black freedom struggle to be recognized and analyzed.

Torchbearers, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1990).

³⁶ Both Darlene Clark Hine and Sarah Wilkerson Freeman explore the history of women deliberately hiding their histories, in the case of Hine—black women hiding the traumatic stories of their sexual abuse—and Freeman—white southern women hiding their activism. While these examples are very different, they do point to women's tendency to hide their stories out of gendered notions of respectability, fear of reprisals, or "preserving the peace." I believe that the women of WIMS also deliberately hid their activism. However, these women left numerous letters and accounts of their trips to

Mississippi, suggesting that they found great value in their trips to the South. The absence of WIMS in the history of the civil rights movement is yet another example of how historians can miss women's histories by looking for moments of public and outspoken activism instead of more private efforts towards social justice. See "Rape and the Inner Lives of Southern Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" in *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, edited by Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Theda Perdue (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992) and Wilkerson-Freeman, "Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women."

Chapter 1

Maneuvering for the Movement:

The NCNW and the interracial activity of WIMS, 1935-1963

The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) was Wednesdays in Mississippi's sponsoring organization. While the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Churchwomen United (CWU), the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW) all expressed interest in participating in the program, the NCNW adopted it under its organizational umbrella. With two-thirds white women and one-third black, Wednesdays in Mississippi was the only majority-white group that the Council sponsored. But this was not the first time that the Council worked with whites, and by exploring the history of interracialism in the first three decades of the NCNW, its decision to sponsor WIMS becomes clearer. From the beginning of its organization in 1935, the Council interacted with whites who were involved in social justice—church women, government workers, and Communists. The NCNW, a volunteer organization of black women who typically had few financial resources, had to move carefully in the white world to survive. The history of the Council and its two major leaders in the decades leading up to the creation of WIMS illustrates the careful maneuvering by moderate black leaders, such as Dorothy Height, in order to advance the economic, political, and social status of black women.

Mary McLeod Bethune founded the NCNW in 1935 as an umbrella organization to unite the proliferation of black women's clubs founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Black women participated in male and white dominated organizations

such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the YWCA. But they also had a long tradition of activism in black sororities—such as Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta—as well as religious, professional, and political organizations. Still, the activism of these black women’s clubs was isolated and often local. Bethune envisioned an umbrella organization that united these groups and spoke as *the* national voice of black women.¹

Bethune had the experience in educational, political, and club groups necessary to create such an organization. Born in Mayersville, South Carolina on July 10, 1875, she was the fifteenth of seventeen children. She was the first child in her family to be born free, and her formerly enslaved parents highlighted the special symbolism of her birth and instilled in her a self-confidence to pursue her education. As a child she learned from both black and white teachers, in white-funded missionary schools. Here Bethune not only learned how to read and write, but also how to maneuver in the worlds of white benevolence and paternalism. Her educational experiences included working with white as well as black teachers. First she met black teacher and mentor Emma J. Wilson at Trinity Mission School. Then she attended Scotia Seminary, a school to train black teachers and social workers, with a scholarship funded by a white Quaker missionary Mary Crissman. At the Moody Bible Institute, she was the only black person among dozens of white students and teachers.² She utilized these experiences of dealing with white paternalism to appeal to patrons in her future enterprises. While interracial, her education had also prepared her to be a “race woman,” epitomizing the late nineteenth

¹ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 148-9.

² Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 44.

century ideology promoted by the black community that educated black women had a responsibility to “lift as we climb.”³ In 1904 Bethune opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls with only \$1.50 and five students.⁴ She remained the active president of the college until 1942, only to take the presidency back briefly in 1946.

Meanwhile Bethune’s race work also manifested itself in her efforts with black women’s clubs. She was the president of the Florida State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs from 1917 to 1924 and president of the National Association of Colored Women from 1924 to 1928. These leadership positions led her eventually to serve in the government as head of the Office of Minority Affairs in the National Youth Administration from 1935 to 1942. From these leadership positions, she became acquaintances and close friends with white women such as Eleanor Roosevelt. These friendships and her appointment in the National Youth Administration again gave her an insider’s perspective on the workings of government, especially the importance of

³ This was the motto of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, who saw the role of educated black women to be that of race leader who would educate those black men and women who were less fortunate than herself. For more on this concept, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women in the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and White, *Too Heavy a Load*. For more on the concept of racial uplift in general, see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the race: Black leadership, politics, and culture in the twentieth century* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁴ In 1923, the school merged with the Cookman Institute of Jacksonville, Florida and became a co-ed high school. In 1924, the United Methodist Church took over the site and it became a junior college in 1931. In 1941, the school became a 4 year baccalaureate program. In 2007, the school received university status. “History,” Bethune-Cookman University, http://www.cookman.edu/about_BCU/history/index.html (accessed on July 7, 2011).

interracial alliances, which she then shared with African Americans who had traditionally been excluded from the political scene.⁵

In this as in other political matters, Bethune (and the NCNW) emphasized the practical in a “world of broker politics.”⁶ To maneuver through this world, she employed a chameleon like demeanor that helped her deal with men and women of all races and classes—“she was the consummate politician, always tailoring her remarks to please her audience.”⁷ Her tactics were varied and could not be encompassed in a single ideology.

As Audrey Thomas Cluskey argues, Bethune and her generation of leaders

required a multiple consciousness that envisioned the empowerment of their disinherited sex and race. Bethune’s leadership demonstrated specific qualities and adaptations which allowed her to embrace the conventions of white middle class femininity while simultaneously working to subvert the *effects* of sexism and white racism.⁸

Bethune’s Daytona Institute emphasized professional skills, but also insisted on training women to be more feminine in order to combat white racism that assumed the black woman’s inherent immorality. At the same time, her emphasis on teaching domestic arts indicates her acceptance, at least for the moment, of the existing economic structure, and her insistence that African American women “must be recognized and accepted first *as women* in order to promote social change.”⁹

In emphasizing the black woman’s femininity, Bethune continued to utilize an activist tactic of late 19th century women’s clubs, promoting the idea that the black woman must be beyond moral reproach by being more feminine than white women.

⁵ Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism*, 120-1.

⁶ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 152-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸ Audrey Thomas McCluskey, “Multiple Consciousness in the Leadership of Mary McLeod Bethune,” *NWSA Journal* 6, issue 1 (Spring 1994): 71.

They hoped that these efforts would combat the stereotypes of black women as lascivious and impure, and thereby ultimately make segregation unsustainable.

For example, the black women involved in the development of the National Baptist Convention at the end of the nineteenth century used the idea of respectability to make political gains for their race. Having been excluded from positions of authority within the traditional church governance, black Baptist women developed the Women's Convention (WC). Instead of challenging dominant gender roles that called for the submission of women to men, the WC helped to fight racism through feminine espousal of virtue, cleanliness, and respectability. In 1915 the executive board of the Convention wrote, "Fight segregation through the courts as an unlawful act? Yes. But fight it with soap and water, hoes, spades, shovels and paint, to remove any reasonable excuse for it, is the fight that we will win."¹⁰ They did not seek to publicly advocate upheaval of the system of segregation, but instead called for quiet examples of virtuous feminine ability to slowly chip away at it. Though today it may seem counterproductive to live by rules of conduct established by a white society intent on denying any rights to blacks, African American women found agency in their methods.¹¹

Yet while emphasizing its respectability, the NCNW also utilized a more modern concept of "networking" to place black women in as many government positions and volunteer organizations as possible. "The idea was that the more visible and persistent Council women were, the less likely it was that government and private enterprise would ignore black women." Council women hoped that this strategy would result not only in

⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 193.

¹¹ Ibid., 222.

legislation promoting black women's economic interests, but in the hiring of black women in those state, local, and national agencies created by the New Deal.¹² Unlike the earlier activism of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and other black women's organizations, the NCNW focused on obtaining jobs and other practical gains for black women rather than speaking out on behalf of their femininity. While the Council's publication *Aframerican Woman's Journal* lacked the "passionate testimonials defending black women" of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the Council fought for equality for black women by linking their interests to women around the world.¹³

Still, the NCNW had difficulty appealing to all types of black women. While Bethune was the daughter of farm workers and helped establish a school for rural black women in Daytona, the Council—which served as a clearing house for black sororities, clubs, and teacher's and other professional women's organizations—was still solidly middle class. Even though the sororities were service organizations, they could not break from their elitist images.¹⁴ Bethune helped build the Council during the Great Depression, but after the end of World War II, the organization had difficulty placing black women in government jobs. When Bethune stepped down in 1949 at the age of 74, Dorothy B. Ferebee took over the presidency for four years followed by Vivian C. Mason. Both women continued to promote women's issues through opening jobs and demanding equality for blacks. During her presidency, Mason worked with Martin Luther

¹² White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 150-1.

¹³ Ibid., 152.

¹⁴ Delta Sigma Theta protested lynching, segregation, and established libraries and jobs projects throughout the south, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) immunized over two thousand

King, Jr. to support the Montgomery bus boycott. His wife Coretta Scott King was an NCNW member, and Rev. King addressed the group at its 1957 annual convention. But while the Council became effective at fighting for black women in the professional and governmental spheres, it could not shake its reputation for being out of touch with the needs of the black working class.

Much like Bethune, the next longstanding president (serving from 1957 to 1998), Dorothy Irene Height possessed the ability to maneuver through the white-dominated world of government and private foundations as well as black activist communities. As a black employee of the YWCA, Height was in the precarious position of having one foot in the world of white clubwomen, many of whom were resistant to integration, and another in the black clubwomen's movement. Moreover she became president of the NCNW in 1957, a crucial year for the expanding civil rights movement. The NCNW relied largely on white funding, while also pursuing social justice for black women, a position that often forced Height to take a more moderate approach. Frequently Height was the only black voice in white women's groups that claimed to be "integrated."

Dorothy Height was born in Richmond, Virginia, on March 24, 1912 but moved with her family at age four to Rankin, Pennsylvania, a small mining town on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. Her parents were both committed members of the local Baptist church. With a father who was a building contractor and a mother who was a nurse, Height grew up as a member of the black middle class, a designation that one received not through income, but by employment in a "respectable" profession such as teaching, nursing, or social work. Despite her training as a nurse, Height's mother, could not get a job in the

and offered health care to 2,600 other black Mississippians between 1935 and 1942.

hospital, and instead worked for a private family. Thus, Height grew up with a keen sense of the differences between professional opportunities and personal constraints for white and black women in America. Reflecting on her mother's work for the Johnson family, and her feelings toward daughter Mary in particular, the race leader recalled, "I learned both to like and to hate [her] because it almost seemed to me that at every important event in my life, my mother had to be at her house, and so on. I liked her because she had a long narrow foot and I thought, beautiful new shoes, nice clothes."¹⁵ Even as a child Height came to hate the racial system that forced her mother into private nursing and took her away for extended periods. Yet she also envied and even admired the affluence of the white girl that her mom looked after. This situation was not unusual for African American families, but Height sought to transcend her situation as best she could by excelling in school.¹⁶

Height was a very bright student, and was often honored for her intelligence, hard work, and commitment to school and religious work. She received her baccalaureate degree from New York University (NYU) in three years. She used the fourth year of her

though a traveling immunization program. Ibid., 158-9.

¹⁵ Dorothy I. Height, interview by Polly Cowan, February 11, 1974 in *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College*, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, vol. 5 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1991), 42.

¹⁶ For more on the difficult emotional toll of black women's domestic work see Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1860-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994); Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and Susan Tucker, *Telling*

college scholarship, funded by the Elks club, to get a master's degree in Educational Psychology in 1933.¹⁷ While in school, Height took on a job as assistant to the director at the Brownsville Community Center, where a few years later she helped establish the Universal Baptist Church. In 1934 she became a member of the United Christian Youth Movement and became vice-chairman for North America one year later. After NYU, she went to work for the Department of Welfare in New York City. The department placed her at Brownsville, and as she recalled in 1974, "...there was a supervisor who oversaw my work, who placed me in charge because I could handle all of the, what do you call them, the...protest groups. So I used to have a regular schedule of meeting with all the groups who came protesting, the Unemployment Councils [sic]."¹⁸ Height found herself on the side of the governmental social worker during the protests. But she also lived in the community where she was working. She helped the Department of Welfare conduct a special study in Brownsville and was promoted to a special investigator of welfare fraud.

The department highly valued Height's insider status as someone who had connections in Brownsville, and who was also black. After the 1935 Harlem riots, when residents demanded better representation in local government, the department chose Height to be the first black personnel supervisor in charge of all central office services—medical, health, and nutritional needs.¹⁹ From her work experience, Height--much like Bethune—gained insights into the functioning of government, even as the predominantly white officials with whom she worked deemed her the best person to

Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

¹⁷ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, February 11, 1974, 43.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48-50.

“handle” protest movements. She was viewed as especially effective in pacifying the poor black men and women who demanded better wages and services. And she felt very conflicted about this type of work. She had worked in unions and with activists outside of her professional career, and felt troubled when representing management against the unions in her job at the Department of Welfare. “I had to speak on behalf of management against people that I often thought were being mistreated.” And so when she was offered a job at the YWCA in 1937, Height felt that this would be more in line with her desire to help the downtrodden.²⁰ Still, Height’s willingness to work within the Department of Welfare, even briefly from 1933 to 1937, is important and revealing. While she learned a great deal from the “inside” that she would later use in the NCNW, she still believed that those in management possessed a right to challenge the poor and downtrodden. And as a government worker, she believed that the established political and economic system could meet the demands of the poor, thus indicating her moderate approach and attitudes.

Still, she also worked with those who sought alternative methods of creating change. While living in Harlem as a student at NYU and then as a municipal worker in the 1930s, she became active in a variety of groups and initiatives affiliated with the Popular Front, a leftist coalition in the 1930s that brought together leaders from the Communist party and more liberal organizations, many of whom were civil rights workers.²¹ Through her activities in Harlem, she met activists and intellectuals such as Adam Clayton Powell, James Farmer, Kenneth Clark, Clinton Hoggard (a bishop in the A.M.E. church) and James Robinson (who created Crossroads Africa), Henry Winston,

²⁰ Ibid., 53.

²¹ Ibid., 54 and 56-7.

and Juanita Mitchell of the NAACP.²² In 1937 Height began working for the YWCA as assistant director, and in 1938 director of the Emma Ransom House YWCA in Harlem. In 1937 she met Mary McLeod Bethune and developed a friendship with her that would lead twenty years later to her appointment as president of the National Council of Negro Women. Height also worked internationally, teaching at the Delhi School of Social work in 1952 and then going to South America in 1959 and Africa in 1960. She helped organize the Negro Leadership Conference on Africa and later worked with the State Department. She served as president of Delta Sigma Theta from 1947-1958.

But Height's work, and moderate approach, was mostly grounded in ecumenical, interracial, Christian activism. She had always been active in the Baptist church. As a girl in Pennsylvania she helped integrate the Sunday school classes of the local church by teaching Bible classes to white children. She had briefly considered majoring in religious education, but decided against it after being dissuaded by NYU professor Samuel Hamilton, who stressed that the black church "was not ready for a woman."²³ She joined the National Christian Youth movement in 1934 and a year later became the vice-chairman for North America in the United Christian Youth Movement, while working for the Department of Welfare. As she recalls, "it was not a Sunday school type of thing. For instance, my chief interest was in economic order, so I was going to the Labor Temple and learning about economics, and the relation between the economy and life and work, that sort of thing." She was interested in the "relation between faith and action."²⁴ At the Harlem Christian Youth Council, where she was very active, she worked with

²² Ibid., 53-4.

²³ Ibid., 51.

²⁴ Ibid., 50.

Christian Communist groups.²⁵ In 1937, she attended a World Conference of Churches in England which left a deep impression on her.

For me, it was a truly ecumenical experience, and in it I came to the understanding that there—there were the different kinds, the orthodox, there were all the different kinds of Christians—but that the nature, as I understand it—and that’s why the YWCA meant so much to me—is that the YWCA is Christian, but open, that to be ecumenical means to be what you are, but open. In other words, I don’t have to be what you are, and you don’t have to be what I am, for us to work together. And I think that has been my understanding.²⁶

Afterwards Height returned to work with Eleanor Roosevelt on planning the World Youth Congress meeting in 1938 at Vassar College.

Height’s job as assistant director of the YWCA’s Emma Ransom House in Harlem incorporated her spirituality and her interest in social justice.²⁷ In 1939 she moved to Washington, D.C. to become the executive of the Phillis Wheatley YWCA. In 1944, Height moved back to New York to become the secretary for interracial education, a position that planted her on the national staff. Two years later, with help from Height, the YWCA established its Interracial Charter, dictating that the national organization move from segregated to integrated clubs. In 1949, Height became director for training and in 1963 head of the Department of Racial Justice.²⁸ While gaining paid employment at the YWCA, Height volunteered her service as president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority from 1947 to 1958 and to the NCNW as president from 1957 to 1998.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., 51.

²⁶ Dorothy Irene Height, interview by Holly Shulman, January 24, 2003, transcript, p.30, in the personal collection of Holly Shulman.

²⁷ Ibid., 38.

²⁸ Ruth Edmonds Hill, introduction to “Interview with Dorothy I. Height,” *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College*, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, vol. 5 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1991), 37-8.

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

The YWCA was unique in its early commitment to nation-wide integration within its ranks.³⁰ According to historian Abigail Lewis “The Y was distinctive in that it fostered both an interracial and ecumenical community.”³¹ Lewis points out that contrary to scholarly claims that when forced to choose between activism related to their gender or race, black women always chose the latter, African American women were very active in the YWCA. Indeed, the YWCA shared more members with the NCNW than any other organization, black-led or otherwise.³² The Christian purpose of the YWCA women took precedence over all distinctions.³³ The Y was also unique for its *de facto* commitment to integration. While many women’s volunteer organizations of the 1940s and 1950s claimed to be in favor of integration on a national level, they did not have the commitment or machinery to enforce racial change that the Y possessed.³⁴

While Height worked in mostly moderate interracial Christian groups, she also learned about and came to respect militant strategies while working with individuals and organizations in the Popular Front. She was impressed with the fact that despite their personal beliefs, radicals (including Communists) would hold fast to the party line. On the other hand, in Christian activist groups, she said, members were less likely to fight for

³⁰ For more on the YWCA’s integration programs see Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*; Helen Laville, “‘If the Time Is Not Ripe, Then It Is Your Job to Ripen the Time!’ The Transformation of the YWCA from Segregated Association to Interracial Organization 1930–1965,” *Women’s History Review*, 15, 3 (July 2006), 359–83; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways : Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Lewis, “The Barrier Breaking Love of God.”

³¹ Lewis, “The Barrier Breaking Love of God,” 116.

³² Of course the YWCA was also much larger than many other organizations so it may have simply had more members to share.

³³ Lewis, “The Barrier Breaking Love of God,” 117.

racial change across the board and instead offered excuses about how difficult it would be for whites to understand if change was made.³⁵ Height maintained a reverence for militant tactics and for those who held firm to creating change, which helped her later work with more militant members of the civil rights and black power movements such as Frances Beal of the Third World Women's Alliance and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC. "I have to see militancy as my way of using my approach to making a direct head-on attack on problems, rather than just vaguely discussing them," she claimed in 1974.³⁶

Height's involvement with the National Council of Negro Women began in November 1937 while she was chaperoning Eleanor Roosevelt to a meeting of the organization as a staff person at the Harlem YWCA. Bethune noticed Height at this meeting and asked her to become involved in the NCNW. Height was immediately appointed to the Council's resolutions committee and a year later was the registrar for the annual convention. By 1974 she had only missed three conventions—one while in India, one under special assignment, and one due to a tonsillectomy.³⁷ Height volunteered her time with the NCNW while working full time for the Y, but Bethune encouraged her to see if the Y would pay for her to work fulltime for the Council. This possibility was forestalled, however, when Height joined the national board of the YWCA in 1944 as secretary for interracial education. They were busy preparing for the Interracial Charter, which was announced in 1946 mandating the integration of the YWCA. While she could not work full time with Bethune during this hectic period, the YWCA did let her work as

³⁴ Helen Laville, "'Women of Conscience' or 'Women of Conviction'? The National Women's Committee on Civil Rights," *Journal of American Studies* 43, no. 2 (August 2009), 280.

³⁵ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, February 11, 1974, 59-60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

a representative to the Council and she was free to go to meetings in this capacity.³⁸

While working for the Y, Height spent most of her free time, including holidays, working as a volunteer for the Council.³⁹ Thus Height had extensive experience working with both white-dominated and black-led women's groups, which informed her approach within the NCNW.

The anticommunist environment of the 1940s and 1950s led to the decline of the Popular Front and hurt the YWCA and the NCNW. Donors were too frightened to donate to an organization deemed subversive simply by its commitment to interracial activism.⁴⁰ But the Council also suffered because members began leaving for nascent civil rights organizations. It was especially difficult for the Council to attract young women. In 1954 there were twenty-one junior Councils but only eight were active. While then president Vivian Mason attempted to raise funds by beginning a Life Membership campaign and guild in 1954, this still did not alleviate the financial crisis. And so when Height became president of the Council in 1957, she inherited an economic mess. Height recalls that on her first day in office she received a certified letter calling for immediate payment of a \$7,500 loan from the Industrial Bank of Washington. Utilizing her personal social connections, the new president called her cousin Campbell C. Johnson, who was

³⁷ Ibid., 67.

³⁸ Dorothy I. Height, interview by Polly Cowan, October 6, 1974 in *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College*, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, vol. 5 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1991), 100-101. The YWCA which employed Height on the National Board from 1944 to 1977 when Height retired after 33 years. See Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 155.

³⁹ Dorothy I. Height, interview by Polly Cowan, May 25, 1975 in *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College*, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, vol. 5 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1991), 226.

on the bank board, and the bank allowed the NCNW to pay off the loan in installments.⁴¹ In 1958, the NCNW instituted a “Fair Share” program to ensure that local council groups paid membership dues in one lump sum, a system that guaranteed that the Council would receive local council funds.

Some members who left the NCNW in the 1950s joined the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), formed in the aftermath of the Montgomery bus boycott. Others joined the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), which was formed in 1941, but gained new members when it supported the student sit in movement that began in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1, 1960. The sit in movements quickly spread across the South with over 70,000 participants and 3,000 arrests by August 1961.⁴² In 1960, Ella Baker of the SCLC helped harness the power of the sit-in movement and create the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As historian Clayborne Carson states, “What emerged was a coordinating committee that operated independently of other established civil rights organizations and relied on strong local leadership.” It was especially attractive to young black activists, including young women.⁴³

Other civil rights initiatives also attracted activists and media attention. In May 1961, the Freedom Rides, sponsored by CORE, challenged racial segregation in interstate facilities. James Farmer, the executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality, developed a plan to test the federal government’s support for integration of interstate

⁴⁰ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, October 6, 1974, 103-8.

⁴¹ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 156.

⁴² Clayborne Carson, “Ain’t Scared of Your Jails,” in *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years*, eds. Carson, David Garrow, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine (New York City: Penguin Books, 1987), 78.

buses and terminals by sponsoring interracial groups to ride busses into the South. On May 4, thirteen participants from Nashville, many who had already participated in the sit-in movement, boarded a bus in Washington D.C. headed for New Orleans. On May 14 a mob firebombed one of the two buses outside of Anniston Alabama. The same day another mob attacked the second bus near Birmingham. The riders were severely beaten by local whites. After this day of extreme violence, the Kennedy administration stepped in to fly the remaining interracial group to New Orleans where they ended their trip. SNCC member Dianne Nash of Nashville then organized a group of riders to continue the rides from Birmingham to Jackson, Mississippi, where the riders were arrested and sent to Parchman Penitentiary. Dozens of volunteers stepped in as riders consented to be arrested, and the movement gained national news coverage that highlighted the appeal of militant tactics. One important volunteer group that formed in response to the imprisonment of the Freedom Riders was Womanpower Unlimited, a group of black women headed by Clarie Collins Harvey and other notable black middle class Jacksonian women. They provided blankets, sheets, clothing, and food for the protesters who were unprepared for the long, dismal stay at the penitentiary.

Unlike Womanpower Unlimited, the NCNW, though supportive of these movements, maintained its distance from them as well. Instead, in the early 1960s, it continued to push for legislation to aid black women and their families and to encourage job creation and promotions within those positions. They also maintained their commitment to international issues. Of course the Council was formed to unite organizations that were working at the local level and some of these engaged in

⁴³ Ibid., 78.

community action campaigns. Still, the NCNW continued to focus on national legislative reform while seeking ways to become economically independent.⁴⁴ At this time, the Council did not focus on changing individual attitudes and behaviors. Instead, it sought to transform economic, political, and social institutions on a national scale. But at national conventions in the early 1960s, the NCNW heard from a wide variety of civil rights leaders, including those who were working with direct action campaigns. For the 1960 “Silver Anniversary” Convention, the NCNW invited speakers such as Reverend L. Francis Griffin, President of the Prince Edward County Christian Association and Jean Fairfax of the American Friends Service Committee to talk about integrating schools; Thurgood Marshall legal counsel of the NAACP; Alexander J. Allen, Associate Director of the National Urban League; and Andrew Young of the National Council of Churches; and Sara-Alyce Wright of the YWCA.⁴⁵

And yet the Council seemed out of touch with the dangerous, direct-action projects of groups like CORE and SNCC. For instance, at the 1960 National Convention, the NCNW hosted a “High Tea For Youth” which was sponsored by Personal Products, Inc., the makers of Modess pantliners.⁴⁶ They also hosted a gala which featured a “Fall-Winter Fashions” show, sponsored by Miss Louise Gardner, the Program Director of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and Miss Melba Linda Page, a fashion consultant.⁴⁷ The reflections of Dorothy C. Quinn, the 1960 convention coordinator, reveal the tensions present within the organization at this critical moment. Quinn

⁴⁴ Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism*, 172.

⁴⁵ National Council of Negro Women, Silver Anniversary Convention Workbook, November 1960, Folder 152, Box 15, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁶ National Council of Negro Women, Silver Anniversary Convention Workbook, November 1960.

lamented that the New York convention “revealed a picture of New York at its worst. Knowing New York at its best, one wishes more of that spirit might have pervaded. Our experience could have been less if the spirit of service which has usually been a part of Washington Conventions had been more in evidence.” Low attendance and high costs made delegates “[appear] like ‘irresponsible vultures’ upon prey.”⁴⁸ The convention, scheduled for November 9-14, was interrupted by the planning for the NCNW International Debutante Ball in February 1960 as well as the New York City Ball on September 23 and the Washington Debutante Cotillion 11 days after the convention ended. The very fact that these elite events disrupted NCNW’s 1960 gathering suggests its distance from the innovative civil rights demonstrations unfolding across the South.

While younger African Americans were pursuing militant action, NCNW continued to highlight respectable and “ladylike” behavior in order to combat long-held stereotypes of domineering matriarchs or lascivious temptresses. These stereotypes were reinforced by black male scholars at the time. In 1957, E. Franklin Frazier, a black sociologist who had earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1931, offered a scathing critique of the black middle class, especially black clubwomen. In *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier wrote

In the South the middle-class Negro male is not only prevented from playing a masculine role, but generally he must let Negro women assume leadership in any show of militancy...In fact, in middle-class families, especially if the husband has risen in social status through his own efforts and married a member of an ‘old’ family or a ‘society’ woman, the husband is likely to play a pitiful role.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Dorothy C. Quinn, “Silver Anniversary National Convention, November 9-14, 1960,” 7, Folder 153, Box 15, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York City: Free Press, 1957), 221.

Frustrated at his lack of power, the black male was likely to pursue extra-marital affairs, Frazier claimed.⁵⁰ He had written another pivotal work, *The Negro Family in the United States*, in the late 1930s that pinned the problems of poverty on the structure of the black family, which he argued was headed by an overpowering black “matriarch,”⁵¹ In both books, Frazier implied that through their domineering roles, black women, whether middle or lower class harmed their families more than they helped them, and thus posed barriers to racial progress.

Many NCNW women read these attacks on their middle-class “dominance” and were careful not to project such an image. Long before the Moynihan report of 1965, which contained similar assumptions, the NCNW provided a forum for such gendered attacks on their womanhood. At the 1960 annual meeting, Dr. Hylan Garnet Lewis gave the keynote speech on “Recent Changes and the Negro Family.” From 1959 to 1964, Lewis was the director of the Child Rearing Study for the Health and Welfare Council of Washington D.C. In November 1965, he would be appointed as co-chair for the proposed family section of the White House Conference “To Secure these Rights,” an effort to update Truman’s 1947 Civil Rights Commission report. During his 1960 NCNW speech, Lewis quoted Frazier and foreshadowed Moynihan when he focused on the needs of black men, arguing that they should take a larger role in the family as more African Americans moved into the middle class.

Both literally and figuratively—in the past and now –the presence and the role of the Negro male in the Negro family are, too frequently, shadow[s] and without substance sufficient to assure the kind of family life children certainly – and probably in most instances, women – deserve, and a healthy community

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White*, 2.

demands...for the Negro family in American life today there is increasing light that permits the shadows to play.⁵²

As groups such as the NCNW fought for increasing civil rights, black women put their own needs and concerns behind those of black men who sought increased status in their families and communities.

In her “Report of Consultation on Problems of Negro Women,” a product of the President John Kennedy’s 1961 Commission on the Status of Women, Dorothy Height concluded that “If the Negro woman has a major underlying concern, it is the status of the Negro man and his position in the community and his need for feeling himself an important person, free and able to make his contribution in the whole society in order that he may strengthen his home.”⁵³ A few years later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan used this quote for his infamous report “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,” issued by the Department of Labor in March 1965. Having argued that “The testimony to the effects of these patterns in Negro family structure is wide spread, and hardly to be doubted,” Moynihan inserted Height’s comment.⁵⁴ Height did not repudiate Moynihan’s use of this quote. Indeed, she had no public response to Moynihan’s report other than to

⁵² Hylan Lewis, “Recent Changes and the Negro Family – Lights and Shadows’: (Excerpts from a paper presented to the National Council of Negro Women),” in National Council of Negro Women, Silver Anniversary Convention Workbook, November 1960, Folder 152, Box 15, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵³ President’s Commission on the Status of Women, *Four Consultations: Private Employment Opportunities, New Patterns in Volunteer Work, Portrayal of Women by the Mass Media, Problems of Negro Women* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 35.

⁵⁴ Daniel P. Moynihan and the Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965).

reinforce his ideas by expressing the importance of her own nuclear-family experience to her development.⁵⁵

Responding to claims about the black family, members of the NCNW acted in a supportive role to male and student-led movements, but hesitated to become too involved in direct-action protest themselves. The November 1961 convention was entitled “Strengthening Community Services Through the Negro Woman Volunteers.” Task groups at the convention met and discussed how the NCNW could support groups like the NAACP, SCLC and CORE.

Moreover, the NCNW women continued to work for change mainly through local government. The recommendations from the 1961 convention encouraged NCNW women to “seek representation on all strategic Boards of the Community engaged in Civil Action,” work in cooperation with the NAACP and CORE, “study government, local, state, federal; be alert to impending legislation and articulate in urging action on bills relevant to N.C.N.W. objectives and concerns.” They also encouraged more women to be trained as teachers and nurses.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Moynihan’s report was highly controversial in that instead of blaming structural problems for black poverty, Moynihan cited behavioral problems within the black community, thus placing the blame on the poor themselves. For more information on the controversy surrounding the Moynihan report, see Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey *The Moynihan report and the politics of controversy; a Trans-action social science and public policy report* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1967); James T. Patterson, *Freedom is not enough: the Moynihan report and America's struggle over black family life : from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); and White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 201. Ironically Height herself never got married and never had children of her own. Thus, she never attained the full realization of the middle class domestic ideal that both she and Moynihan recommend.

⁵⁶ “Recommendations Evolving from Task Group Discussions at 26th Annual Convention N-C-N-W,” November 16-17, 1961, Folder 159, Box 15, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

While groups such as SNCC and CORE sought to challenge federal officials with direct-action movements, the NCNW took a less confrontational path. In addition, although it was concerned with international movements around the world, the group was generally supportive of the U.S. government's strategies. At the 1961 convention, the "resolutions" section of the "Findings of the convention" stated that

The National Council of Negro Women deplores the efforts of those on the extreme right and extreme left to convince the American people that the choice is between extreme conservatism and adherence to the Communist program and that any other choice must plunge us into a war which would in all probability destroy civilization; therefore BE IT RESOLVED:

That we call upon all Americans to join in a common effort to promote the interests of peace by seeking a sane resolution of our domestic and foreign problems which will preserve our nation and the world.⁵⁷

The NCNW consistently chose to work within established political structures to create political, economic, and social change. On December 14, 1961, President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10980 to create the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Height, who represented both the NCNW and the YWCA, was one of the 26 members of the Commission, joining leaders from the National Council of Catholic Women, National Council of Catholic Women, the National Council of Churches, and the Girl Scouts. Although the NCNW was often the only black women's organization represented at such meetings, the women did not articulate a dramatically different or more militant stance than white-dominated organizations.

At the same time, Height joined forces with prominent male civil rights leaders. She worked with King to organize the 1962 American Negro Leadership Conference on

⁵⁷ National Council of Negro Women, "Findings of the 26th Annual Convention in Cooperation with the Adult Education Section, United States Office of Education, The

Africa and then met with other leaders of the movement—James Farmer, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young. On May 12, Mother’s Day in 1963, Height delivered a speech in which she lauded the efforts of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and the SCLC direct action campaign in Birmingham, which began with sit-ins at “whites only” lunch counters on April 3. These groups organized protest marches on City Hall that included children and were violently put down by police using hoses and police dogs. Television cameramen filmed these marches, and people around the country were horrified by local Birmingham police chief Eugene “Bull” Connor’s use of violent tactics on the peaceful demonstrators. In the wake of this police brutality on television, President Kennedy sent Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to quell the violence. While protesting in the campaign, the Reverend Martin Luther King was arrested on April 13 and wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in condemnation of not only racist whites, but also those black and white liberals who claimed to want to help the movement, but refused to take action.

Height’s Mother’s Day speech showed her burgeoning effort to become more directly involved in the movement. In turn, in his speech on that day, King praised Height and the countless numbers of women who participated in the movement. She also tried to support the direct action of the students by having the Educational Foundation of the NCNW sponsor a series of scholarships for students who lost their school funding or jobs because of their full-time participation in the civil rights movement. By November 1964, the NCNW had distributed over \$40,000.00 in scholarship money to students from

Massachusetts to California.⁵⁸ In May 1963, the Council women helped to financially support the movement, but were not its foot-soldiers.

But Height began formulating plans for direct-action projects for the Council. In June she joined forces with the leaders of the major civil rights organizations to create the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership (CUCRL), brought together by the Taconic Foundation, a group first established in 1958 under the leadership of philanthropists Audrey and Stephen Currier. These philanthropists often sought to limit the turn toward militancy and to unite black civil rights leaders under a banner of moderation. It was CUCRL that organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In the wake of Medgar Evers' assassination on June 12, 1963, A. Philip Randolph—who had threatened such a demonstration twenty-two years earlier joined with other civil rights leaders, including Height, for a proposed a march on Washington.⁵⁹ In 1963, the Kennedy Administration initially voiced concern that Randolph's second proposed march, which promised to be much larger, might increase violence against blacks in the South. But after hearing from Randolph and others who argued that an organized march could actually reduce the militancy of black protests, the President reluctantly agreed to support the event. As Randolph argued, "If [black protesters in the South] are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by organizations dedicated to civil

⁵⁸ National Council of Negro Women, "Convention Handbook, November 11-15th, 1964, 29th Annual Convention," Series 2 Folder 174, Box 16, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵⁹ For more on moderation in the March on Washington see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 91.

rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about non-violence?”⁶⁰

As the only female representative of this organization, Height had different concerns from those of the male delegates. She later recalled, “Although sometimes the men had trouble seeing why I was always linking desegregation with hunger and children and other social welfare issues, we had as strong a male-female peer relationship as people could at that time in history. There were times when the men disagreed with each other and I could bridge the gap.”⁶¹

Height also tried to unite people across the generation gap. She believed that as the leader of a national organization devoted to women’s concerns, she had a responsibility to support the youthful activists in SNCC.⁶² She claimed,

I smile when I recall the meeting at which I suggested including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the civil rights leadership. The youthful members of SNCC, full of revolutionary zeal, were using tactics some saw as counterproductive. But I was concerned that the young people were not at the table.⁶³

As Height recalled decades later, she attempted to bring SNCC into the more moderate world of CUCRL, believing that even radical voices should have a place; or perhaps she thought that SNCC’s militancy could be muted most effectively in this way.

But the male leaders of moderate organizations were not interested in letting the women speak any more than the student activists. The March on Washington leadership

⁶⁰ Ibid., 92.

⁶¹ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 141.

⁶² Dorothy I. Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975 in *The Black Women Oral History Project: From the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College*, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill, vol. 5 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1991), 169.

⁶³ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 142.

indicated very publicly that the civil rights movement was led by men. No woman was invited to make one of the major speeches or be part of the delegation of leaders to go to the White House.⁶⁴ Daisy Bates, the NAACP leader of school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, gave a very short address on behalf of women in the civil rights movement. In response, Randolph offered a few comments that only made the patronizing attitude of male organizers more striking. Pauli Murray, feminist, civil rights activist, lawyer, and member of President Kennedy's Committee on the Status of Women, pointed out a few months later at a NCNW Leadership convention that this gesture reflected a "tendency to assign women to a secondary, ornamental or 'honoree' role" in the movement.⁶⁵ Thus rather than a token gesture of solidarity, Randolph's comments highlighted the male leadership's sexist attitudes.⁶⁶

As head of a moderate organization, Height was caught in a difficult position. She recognized the patronizing attitudes of her male counterparts, but with the voices of Hylan Garnet Lewis and E. Franklin Frazier resonating in her mind, she also insisted that black women had to support the interests of their husbands and black men in general. In hindsight, in her 2003 autobiography *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, Height reflected on what she had come to see as the sexism in the movement. Here she argues that the March

⁶⁴ Pauli Murray, "November 14, 1963, National Council of Negro Women, Leadership Conference, Washington D.C.," in *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, eds. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, 233. See also Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 145. Although Dorothy Height states that "Mahalia Jackson, who sang the national anthem, was the only female voice" heard that day, the spirit of her comment is correct. Houck and Dixon tracked down the audio recording of the event provided by Alan Ribback, who later became Moses Moon. Daisy Bates actually gave an address on behalf of women. See Introduction in *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*, eds. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, x.

⁶⁵ Murray, "November 14, 1963, National Council of Negro Women, Leadership Conference, Washington D.C.," 233.

on Washington was “vital to awakening the women’s movement.” She pointed out that the male leaders “were happy to include women in the human family, but there was no question as to who headed the household!”⁶⁷ But in truth the programs that she advocated for the NCNW in the early 1960s were hardly feminist.⁶⁸

Still, Height believed that it was critical to bring women together immediately after the march, and she violated a request by its organizers not to hold auxiliary meetings. She met with a group of women at the Shoreham Hotel on August 29 at a gathering entitled “After the March—What?”⁶⁹ She encouraged women’s groups to think about how they could become more involved in the civil rights movement, especially in activities oriented toward women, arguing that they had a special task to look after the concerns of education, childcare, and housing.⁷⁰ For her, the August 29th meeting “gave a kind of validity to the things that the National Council of Negro Women was organized to deal with, but which somehow got subdued as you were thinking purely of getting a Voting Rights Act.”⁷¹ Height insisted that civil rights leaders remember “women’s” issues, including those traditionally related to women and children, such as food, shelter, and education. Yet it was not Height, but Pauli Murray, who delivered a speech critical of sexism in the movement at the November 1963 Annual NCNW

⁶⁶ Introduction, *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*, x.

⁶⁷ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 145-6.

⁶⁸ Christina Greene points out that while interviewing black female civil rights leaders she also encountered “shifting attitudes toward sexism within the movement,” but that this “seem[s] to indicate an evolving consciousness about gender divisions” as well as the fact that women’s contributions “were overlooked and undervalued” Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 97-8.

⁶⁹ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 173; Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 146.

⁷⁰ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 146.

⁷¹ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 173.

Convention. While Height was no doubt influenced by Murray's frustration at the male-dominated leadership, she did not offer public support for her position. Instead, she encouraged other members of the NCNW to support the larger civil rights movement, which at times meant that concerns for their own equality as *women* took a back seat to their concerns for the race.⁷²

Young women from SNCC did focus mainly on the concerns of the race when they spoke at the post-March on Washington Meeting in August. They described their experiences while working for voter registration and the horrid conditions they faced in southern jails. Still, it was partly in response to their tales that the NCNW decided they would become more involved in direct-action campaigns in the South. Wednesdays in Mississippi ultimately arose from this initiative. One of the young women who had been present at the meeting was Prathia Hall, who called Height a month later from Selma where she was a SNCC field secretary.⁷³ Hall asked for help from the NCNW in investigating the imprisonment of 300 youths arrested for supporting voter registration. According to Height, she and her friends "were really trying to build more of a climate of support around these young people, and also to bring to public attention to the way they were being treated."⁷⁴

Local activists Frederick Reese and Amelia P. Boynton, who both helped found the Dallas County Voters League in Alabama, had organized this 1963 voter registration

⁷² For more information on this phenomenon during the civil rights movement, see White *Too Heavy a Load*, 175-81.

⁷³ Dorothy Height spells her name as "Pratheia" Hall, see Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 174.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

drive.⁷⁵ Boynton was the widow of the county's black agricultural extension agent and an independent businesswoman who owned an employment and insurance agency.⁷⁶ Southern black women who owned their own businesses were often able to become more involved in the civil rights movement, especially if their business catered solely to the black community. But Boynton also knew that no matter what class or educational level a black woman had attained, the white community would never treat her with the same respect offered to a white woman. Boynton was troubled by the story of an illiterate white voter registration worker who flunked a black schoolteacher when she corrected his pronunciation of the words "constitutionality" and "interrogatory."⁷⁷ Moreover, the brutal tactics of Selma Sheriff Jim Clark discouraged most local blacks from even making the attempt. Boynton fought against injustice as best she could, but welcomed outside help.

That help would not come from Washington. The federal government did little in reaction to official violence in Alabama, claiming that its hands were tied by the constitutional limits on federal intervention in state police matters. As John Doar recalled years later, "We weren't going to put policemen down there to guard every SNCC worker wherever he might go.... We were going to enforce the law through the standard method of law enforcement, which was to bring actions against persons who interfered with citizens' right to register and to vote."⁷⁸ And yet, even when black citizens attempted to

⁷⁵ Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 104-5.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁸ As quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 88. Also confirmed in John Doar, interview by Rebecca Tuuri, October 23, 2007, New York City, notes of interview in author's personal collection.

register, the FBI and other federal officials did little to punish those who hindered the process. On October 7--“Freedom Day”--the FBI would “merely [observe] and took notes as peaceful protesters were pushed around and arrested by Sheriff Clark and his men on the steps of the U.S. courthouse.”⁷⁹

Despite the overwhelming conviction within the African American community that black women were less likely to face severe repercussions than black men, they were also beaten, tortured and raped for defying white supremacy and aiding the civil rights movement.⁸⁰ They lived in fear of imprisonment, abuse, and even death from the prison guards or other inmates. The same year as the Selma incarcerations, Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi activist who worked with WIMS in later years, was jailed in Winona, Mississippi, with a group of women returning home from South Carolina. In a moving speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, the 45-year old Hamer told a national audience how she was beaten and sexually assaulted in jail by police and prison guards. She remembered the screams of other activists such as June Johnson begging for help. Even when Hamer was on the ground shielding herself from the policeman’s blows,

⁷⁹ Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 106.

⁸⁰ For more information about this assumption within the black community, see Introduction, *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*, xv-xvii. Charles Payne argues that while there was a certain plausibility to the notion that black women would face less severe repercussions, that most black women were in fact subject to violent reprisals and that their participation in larger numbers than men was in large part due to religious conviction and pre-existing social networks between women that made such participation possible. See Charles Payne *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 274-8. Jenny Irons also found in her study of black and white women’s participation in the civil rights movement that black women participated in high risk” activist activities and were exposed to beatings from police, police following, and having personal memorabilia destroyed. See Jenny Irons, “The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation: A Study of Women in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement,” *Gender and Society* 12 (1998), 696.

she tried to preserve her honor by holding down her dress. After her release, the courageous activist attempted to preserve her dignity and respectability by dissembling about the exact nature of the abuse she suffered. It was nine years later before Hamer admitted that state patrolmen had sexually assaulted her during her imprisonment.⁸¹

Since the times of slavery black women in America had been exposed to sexual violence at the hands of slave masters; and once “free,” they still were vulnerable to assault while serving as domestic workers. Darlene Clark Hine argues that black women often employed tactics of dissemblance to shield themselves from the cruel, yet all-too-common realities of rape and sexual abuse. Instead of speaking out about this experience, many refused to acknowledge it for fear of reinforcing white stereotypes of black women as sexually promiscuous. Silence thus became a form of respectability and an answer to the cruelty inflicted upon them. Dissemblance allowed black women to control one aspect of their lives, but it also kept many from protesting their abuse. In the civil rights era, however, black women began to regain their voices and refused to dissemble. Just as Hamer eventually spoke publicly about the abuse that she had suffered, other women also gained the courage to testify during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. And these struggles against the rape of black women helped motivate and inspire other civil rights efforts.⁸²

⁸¹ Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 52. Lee quotes Hamer as saying that the state patrolmen “pulled my dress over my head and tried to feel under my clothes in the room with all those men.” For more information on dissemblance, see Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub., 1994).

⁸² For more on the culture of testimony surrounding the sexual exploitation of black women, see Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York City: Knopf, 2010).

The NCNW, however, was still focused mainly on securing economic security for black women. Because many middle class black women taught black secondary and elementary schools within the state public school system, they risked losing their jobs if they publicly pushed for the right to vote. But working class women were also vulnerable. Sharecroppers such as Hamer and Unita Blackwell lost their jobs on farms after attempting to register to vote.⁸³ Whites in the South controlled the political action of blacks by threatening their jobs or refusing them credit. The NCNW tried to secure the teaching and principle positions of middle class black educators during the early days of desegregation. They tried to salvage their jobs while also trying to ensure that there was an equitable distribution between white and black teachers and principles, rather than relying on the basic assumption that only blacks would be integrated into white schools.⁸⁴ But they had yet to engage in direct-action projects as a national organization. However, their local affiliates became more active in the movement as it spread across the South.

The young activists' imprisonment in Selma provided a perfect opportunity for Height and the national NCNW to become directly involved in the movement while still focusing on women and children. But Height was the ultimate strategist. Having worked in the worlds of Christian and white philanthropic organizations, she decided to go down to Selma with two black women—herself and Dr. Dorothy Ferebee, former NCNW president and head of medical services at Howard University and two white women—Shirley Smith, president of the National Women's Committee for Civil Rights and a freedom rider, and Polly Cowan. They flew down to Selma in early October, 1963

⁸³ See Jenny Irons, "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation," 697 and Unita Blackwell, *Barefootin': Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 76.

to investigate the violence.⁸⁵ Members of the Dallas County Voters League were organizing a “Freedom Day” voter registration drive for October 7, and the police had reacted with characteristic violence.⁸⁶ Instead of protecting black demonstrators, Selma sheriff James Clark and his police force took pride in encouraging violence against them. Earlier that week over 300 ten to twelve year olds had been placed in local jails while trying to help their parents register to vote. The youngsters had been stuffed into jail cells, fed food mixed with sawdust, and prison guards had sexually threatened the female prisoners.⁸⁷ This violence at the hands of authorities, coupled with the fact that it had been less than a month since four children had been killed in a Birmingham Sunday school provided the perfect opportunity for the group to investigate what had happened to these children and report back to their respective national organizations. While Height and Ferebee focused on meeting with and supporting the young black activists of Selma, Cowan and Smith planned to make contacts with any white women who might be friendly to the movement.

By traveling in an integrated group to investigate the abuse of children and meet with sympathetic whites and blacks in the Selma movement, Height sowed the seeds for what would become Wednesdays in Mississippi. First as a salaried worker at the YWCA and then as the head of the NCNW, Height understood the reality of utilizing white allies in her organization’s efforts and in deferring to male civil rights leadership. But this

⁸⁴ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 165-6.

⁸⁵ For more on Shirley Smith and Polly Cowan’s role in the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights, see Laville “‘Women of Conscience’ or ‘Women of Conviction?’”

⁸⁶ Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 103-4.

⁸⁷ Polly Cowan, “Aint Nothin Goin to Change Around Heah: Selma Alabama, October 1963,” [ca. 1975], p.8, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

meant that the NCNW would play a cautious role in the black freedom movement, and engage behind-the-scenes in a manner that did not alienate potential white allies. This also meant that the NCNW would encourage its members to maintain respectable behavior and demeanor, as it had traditionally done, so as to present black women in the best possible light.

Chapter 2

Resurrecting a “Ministry of Presence”:

Establishing an Interracial, Women-led Project, 1963-4

By the summer of 1963, Dorothy Height, NCNW president, had taken steps to become more involved in direct action projects of the civil rights movement. She spoke at the end of the Birmingham Campaign in May, attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August, and went to Selma in October to investigate arrests during the SNCC Freedom to Vote campaign. On October 4, along with Dorothy Ferebee, Polly Cowan, and Shirley Smith, Height went to Atlanta and then Alabama to speak with the 300 youngsters who had been jailed for helping their parents register to vote. The fact that they were traveling as a united interracial activist group to the Deep South in 1963 was significant. This interracial trip to Selma provided the experiential basis for the development of Wednesdays in Mississippi, which the NCNW would come to sponsor in 1964.

The team’s first stop was the Atlanta YWCA where they spent three and a half hours making calls to activists in Alabama to confirm their plans, but were unable to get through to any of their contacts in Selma’s black community. They were told that the numbers they were trying to reach were not working numbers. Only if the group made a call through an operator would it go through. As Polly Cowan recalls, “We came to the conclusion that in this way all calls could be monitored as all were to people connected

with voter registration either directly or in sympathy with the effort.”¹ Even before it had arrived, the group was experiencing the surveillance of Alabama’s police state.

While at the Y, Dorothy Height set up a meeting with Dorothy Tilly of the Southern Regional Council. Tilly was a southern white woman who had worked for interracial causes in the region, and Height wanted to gain insight into the challenges that they would face in Selma. Much like Height, Tilly’s Christian faith (in her case Methodist) inspired her and provided her with tangible opportunities to work interracially.² Tilly had worked first with the Women’s Missionary Society of the Methodist Church. Since the early twentieth century, this organization had encouraged its white female members to help remedy the inferior housing, education, and recreational facilities available to blacks. She next worked with the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), a biracial group that sought to improve race relations through education, research and persuasion, but like many moderate southern organizations, did not challenge segregation. Through the CIC Tilly formed a friendship with Mary McLeod Bethune.³ In the 1930s she joined Jessie Daniel Ames’ Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) and a decade later served as the Southern Regional Council’s director of women’s work.⁴ She also served as a member of

¹ Polly Cowan, “The Freedom To Vote,” October 4-5, 1963, p.1, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

² See Edith Holbrook Riehm, “Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned,” in *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege* ed. Gail S. Murray, 29 and Jenny Irons, “The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation,” 703, 705.

³ Riehm, “Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned,” 28.

⁴ In 1931 Jessie Daniel Ames created the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching as an organization of white women who fought against lynching. For more information see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1993). For more on the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and

President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights in 1948. And in 1949 she created a new women's organization called the Fellowship of the Concerned, using her faith to support the fight for justice for black and white southerners. Only one year later, 4,000 members had joined.⁵

The Fellowship of the Concerned continued the legacy of Jesse Daniel Ames who fought against lynching by forming a “ministry of presence”— an organization of white women observing and judging the unfair trials of black men who were charged with the rape of white women in the South.⁶ Fellowship members appeared in southern courtrooms to remind judges and juries that someone was indeed watching. They did not approve of the racial system that prevented black men from receiving fair trials and hoped their presence would stop the most egregious displays of racism. Southern women in the Fellowship of the Concerned thus used their femininity to their advantage. Their behavior was not disruptive or offensive, but they reminded white men of their responsibility as “gentlemen” to ensure that justice and not lawlessness ruled the courtroom. Thus, the visible display of femininity was essential to the effectiveness of their activism. In the 1950s Height had been influenced by Tilly, recalling that

She organized groups of women who would go into the courts, and they would sit in the courts to see how justice was meted out. I remember her telling how at one time her husband picked her up to take her to the courts, and he looked at her and said, “Well, we’re going by Rich’s [a department store] and buy you some earrings,” because she had left her earrings at home. He said, “Just because you’re going into battle doesn’t mean you need to look like a battle axe.”⁷

the Southern Regional Council, see Julia Anne McDonough “Men and Women of Good Will: A History of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Southern Regional Council, 1919-1954” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1993).

⁵ Riehm, “Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned,” 24.

⁶ For more information see Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*.

⁷ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, February 2, 1975, 164.

Initially the Fellowship formed to ensure justice for African Americans in southern courtrooms, but in 1953 it began preparing white southerners for the end of segregation by encouraging its mainly female members to teach tolerance to their children, which would ultimately reduce racial prejudice and build a more egalitarian society.⁸ This activism remained behind the scenes, “effecting social reform under the protective and comfortable guise of domesticity.”⁹ This was a relatively safe form of activism for white women in the South who wanted to do “something” to work towards integration, but did not want their families economically, socially, or politically jeopardized. Even so, in a few cases white women were threatened with violence, but far less often than black women. Tilly took into account the reality that few white women would risk alienation from their communities to take a strong public stance against segregation. Although Anne Braden, Lillian Smith, and Virginia Durr had done so, they were dramatic exceptions to the generally united front of white opposition to integration.¹⁰

Especially in the 1940s and 1950s, when any progressive action was deemed Communist, white women of conscience learned to hide their “subversive” activities. As historian Sarah Wilkerson Freeman argues, their actions often remain “clouded in obscurity in part because women deliberately hid and disguised their most subversive political activity in order to fool, disarm, and outmaneuver their opponents.” The “stealth tactics” of southern white women had their counterparts in black communities, where

⁸ Riehm, “Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned,” 24.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For more information, see Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press

women also sought to hide their challenges to white supremacy in order to protect their jobs, homes and families. But the very different circumstances of white and black southern women meant that rarely did their efforts, or the means by which they disguised them, coincide.¹¹

Cowan and Height would incorporate Tilly's model of wielding femininity and respectability as an activist strategy in WIMS. These women were not trying to overhaul gendered social norms, but they were trying to fight for justice when it clearly was being ignored. Height, Cowan, and Smith had all worked with Tilly in July 1961 when President Kennedy called together three hundred white and black women from national volunteer organizations to Washington to discuss the role that women's clubs could play in the passage of the Civil Rights Bill. Enthused by the excitement generated, this group of clubwomen formed the National Women's Committee for Civil Rights (NWCCR) to act as a clearinghouse for information about the bill. The group was composed mainly of white women from national voluntary organizations—some were integrated, but most allowed their southern branches to remain segregated. And the women's goals were largely symbolic. An August 15 pamphlet of the Committee encouraged its members to assist with desegregation of schools and to

Talk with members of Negro organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the National Council of Negro Women, the Urban League and the NAACP about the kind of citizen support which they think might

of Kentucky, 2006) and Patricia Sullivan *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

¹¹ Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, "Stealth in the Political Arsenal of Southern Women: A Retrospective for the Millennium" in Walker, Dunn, and Dunn, *Southern Women at the Millennium: A Historical Perspective* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2003), 45 and Helen Laville, "'Women of Conscience' or 'Women of Conviction'? The National Women's Committee on Civil Rights," *Journal of American Studies* 43, no. 2 (August 2009), 286.

be helpful. Consult with police officials and religious leaders. Talk to newspaper editors, radio and television editors.¹²

Much like Tilly's Fellowship of the Concerned, this NWCCR strategy involved behind the scenes efforts, which would not disrupt the status quo on a large scale. And it was never quite clear what the next step would be or how communication would lead to school integration, the right to vote, or social acceptance by whites.

While the initial meeting of the NWCCR was convened by Kennedy, the group received no federal funding and was "explicitly nongovernmental."¹³ Much like the Voter Education Project, sponsored by the Taconic Foundation and supported by the Kennedy administration, the NWCCR was established to direct the movement away from public confrontational protests to community-based projects. In addition, the administration sought to promote more non-governmental action through liberal voluntary organizations, such as the organizations represented in the NWCCR— e.g. the American Association of University Women, the League of Women Voters, the NCNW, and the YWCA.¹⁴

Shirley Smith was the chair of the NWCCR and Polly Cowan took a major role as a special consultant, due in part to her generous financial donations to the group.¹⁵

¹² Pamphlet produced by the National Women's Committee for Civil Rights, 15 Aug. 1963, American Association of University Women Archives, 1881-1976, reel 146. As quoted in Laville, "'Women of Conscience' or 'Women of Conviction'?" 285

¹³ Laville, "'Women of Conscience' or 'Women of Conviction'?" 279.

¹⁴ Ibid., 284.

¹⁵ Laville points out in footnote 42 on page 289 that Cowan donated a large amount of money to the NWCCR, especially making Smith's trip to Selma possible. "In her letter recommending that Cowan be made a consultant to the group, Smith noted that Mrs. Cowan was "our second most important non-organizational donor. Mrs. Cowan's gift of \$250 made it possible for me to go to Selma." Memo to Mrs. Peterson,

Cowan and Smith stood out, however, for their desire to urge the NWCCR act directly in the South, believing that Southerners were capable of changing their minds in favor of integration.¹⁶ Historian Helen Laville writes: “Both Cowan and many within the NWCCR assumed that southern white middle-class women were silent supporters of integration, whose previous lack of action on behalf of racial justice reflected a want of effort rather than a want of will.”¹⁷ But the affiliate organizations could not agree on integration as a goal and did not want to risk alienating those constituent organizations that allowed segregation of local branches—such as the AAUW. As a result, the group was not able to accomplish much and became nearly defunct after Senate passage of the Civil Rights Bill on March 30, 1964. Most participants in the NWCCR prioritized the integrity of their national organizations over confronting segregation directly. Many believed, and perhaps accurately, that Smith and Cowan’s vision of southern white women secretly supporting integration was unrealistic, and simple conversation was unlikely to convert them to activists.¹⁸

Cowan and Smith were still inspired by the NWCCR meetings, as were Ferebee and Height by the NCNW “After the March, What?” meeting.¹⁹ They sought to aid the youth of Selma—Height and Ferebee by speaking with the black community directly, Cowan and Smith by mobilizing white women who had been “paralyzed” into inaction

Mrs. Horton and Mrs. Harris from Shirley Smith, 3 Dec. 1963, file 19, NWCCR Papers. See Laville, “‘Women of Conscience’ or ‘Women of Conviction’?”

¹⁶ Ibid., 289-290.

¹⁷ Ibid., 293.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Dorothy Height, “We Wanted the Voice of a Woman to Be Heard,” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York City: New York University Press, 2001), 88.

by fear and misinformation. When the group flew to Atlanta in October 1963, they had breakfast with Tilly. Originally, she was to join the Selma trip; but only a few hours later, she informed them that she could not due to her work with the Southern Regional Council. She insisted that Cowan and Smith would do fine in their efforts to establish contact with “anguished liberal” white churchwomen in Selma. On the plane to Alabama, the women met SNCC’s Jim Forman and comedian Dick Gregory, who were also traveling to Selma for the “Freedom Day” rally. When the group landed in Montgomery (the nearest airport to Selma), they planned to split up with Cowan and Smith buying their own rental car, while local activist Amelia Boynton picked up Ferebee and Height. Unfortunately Boynton’s car was overcrowded, so the northern group faced a dilemma. While Cowan and Smith certainly had room in their rental car for Ferebee and Height, any car carrying black and white women would be immediately marked and might be attacked. Height and Ferebee, aware of the racial codes that prevented them from safely traveling as equals in their white colleagues’ car, suggested that they pretend to be cooks for their white colleagues.²⁰ Even then, Forman told Cowan and Smith to take Height and Ferebee only to nearby Craig Air Force Base because it was too dangerous to go all the way into Selma in an integrated vehicle.

Years later Cowan described her discomfort with the ruse:

It is difficult to describe how frustrated I felt at the realization that such a pretense was necessary. These two Negro women were individuals holding leadership positions; they had dignity, scholarship, and wisdom. By comparison Shirley and I were unexceptional. I felt degraded as a White person: why should minorit[y]

²⁰ Cowan, “Aint Nothin Goin to Change,” 6. Only one year later in Selma, white Detroit housewife Viola Liuzzo was shot while driving a young black activist Leroy Moton from Selma to Montgomery in order to pick up a group of demonstrators. For more on Liuzzo, see Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

group persons have to represent themselves as other than they are? This is one of the memories of that trip which remains clear. I wish it would leave me.²¹

Height, on the other hand, recalled years later that she and Ferebee laughed about the fact that they would claim to be hired help if the police stopped them.²² Perhaps as black women, Height and Ferebee relied on humor to deflect the pain of experiences such as these, whereas Cowan, as a white woman, had not yet experienced such situations and felt guilt over their participation.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Boynton drove Dick Gregory and Jim Forman to the First Baptist church for that night's meeting. Ultimately, she asked Cowan and Smith to drive Ferebee and Height to the church as well, where youngsters were waiting to speak with Height. Although concerned about whether they would be welcome, the two white women were wrapped up in the excitement of the moment and decided to go into the church. Cowan recalled that she tried to record the stories as young people who had been jailed related their experiences to Height and Ferebee. Initially, she tried to tape the conversations, but to her dismay the recorder did not work. She lamented this failure, believing that their words could help "build a climate of support for these young people, and to bring to public attention [to] the way they were being treated."²³ As a white liberal northerner, Cowan understood the way in which first-hand accounts could inspire greater efforts among sympathetic white northerners to support the southern black freedom struggle financially and politically.

Height, Cowan, Smith, and Ferebee ultimately interviewed 64 of the boys, girls, and mothers who had been arrested, confirming reports of police brutality. The young

²¹ Cowan, "Aint Nothin Goin to Change," 6.

²² Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 158.

girls had been crowded into cells without room to sit on the floor, with no blankets, little water, and food mixed with sawdust and salt.²⁴ Height recalled similar “horror stories”:

One of the teenagers told us about the way in which some of the guards had tried to come into the area during the night where the teenage girls were, and how they all huddled themselves up so that if an effort was made to attack any, they could all fight back as a group...²⁵

The northern women were horrified that the guards had starved and threatened these young girls with physical and sexual abuse, but the incident in Selma was far from extraordinary.

They also learned that parents were often unable to learn the whereabouts of children who had been jailed. If parents asked about their location, they themselves were jailed. From these stories, the four visitors came face to face with the ugly reality of police tactics in Selma. Sometimes, in order to shield their parents from repercussions of violence, these young people gave the false names. Height recalls that during her stay in Selma, she met children who possessed a strength that often their parents did (or could) not have.

I remember one girl who was about fifteen, and she said she was having trouble at home because her mother couldn’t understand what in the world she was doing...And she said, in a very proper way, “What do you do when you’re really trying to say to your mother that you are working so that she won’t need to be so fearful?”²⁶

²³ Cowan, “Aint Nothin Goin to Change,” 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 8. Dorothy Height mentions a similar story in *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 158-9. She also recalls a similar incident in Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 174-9.

²⁵ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 176. There are also similar accounts in Cowan, “Outline,” 6, as well as in Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 158-9.

²⁶ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 178.

These children's sacrifice was even more extraordinary given the fear created by the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15. White supremacists were not beyond injuring and killing black children in order to maintain the power structure of the state.

After speaking with children at the church on October 4, the group went back to their lodging and had dinner. They returned that evening for the Freedom Rally, at which Height was slated to speak alongside Foster. According to Cowan, when she and Smith arrived, Forman encouraged them to sit on the stage. Smith could not. She had not received permission from the NWCCR. But Cowan had no similar excuse. She thought Forman was daring her to get up on the stage to show her support as a white northerner. Cowan admitted later that she was hesitant, but was also excited by the energy of the black freedom efforts in Selma.²⁷ Cowan not only sat on the stage, but after Height spoke, she got up and offered support from the New York City community. The freedom rally ended around 10:30 p.m. and the NCNW women stayed to speak further with children who had been jailed. After an hour though, SNCC photographer Danny Lyon strongly suggested that it was time to leave.

On the way out of First Baptist Church, Lyon urged the women to keep their eyes down and follow him. Cowan noticed that there was still a large gathering of teenage boys standing on the church porch. She later realized they would have to stay on the porch until someone picked them up in a car. If they attempted to walk home, they faced reprisals. But most adults were hesitant to drive them home because they could be

²⁷ Cowan, "Aint Nothin Goin to Change," 15-16.

charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor or suffer violent reprisals.²⁸

Indeed, even though they did not drive any young people home that night, Height and Ferebee were sent a summons for contributing to the delinquency of minors simply by speaking with them at the church.²⁹ Such intimidation was common. Cowan recalled her astonishment at the Selma police state:

How can you keep your eyes down when you're beset by curiosity? I didn't know we [were] going to confront an army. But we were. About fifty of Al Lingo's Helmeted [sic] Alabama State troopers were waiting in the yard of the church. They stood in clumps. It was dark—only one dim street light—so I couldn't see them all at first. I noted the size of the clubs they wore at their sides – larger, I thought than any I had ever seen on a policeman. These men had been issued pistols, carbines, riot guns, submachine guns, tear gas and cattle prods. I don't know how much of this arsenal they were wearing that night. But the effect was formidable. The bright orange helmets and arm bands added to the impression that this was an invasion. And invasion against what? Teenagers and women.³⁰

This image of the white South as heavily armed in response to peaceful blacks demanding the right to vote stuck with Cowan and influenced her to fight for civil rights in the years to come.

The next day, the group split, and Smith and Cowan met with two self-described “anguished liberal” white women in Selma with whom Tilly had put them in contact with Mrs. John Joyce, the daughter of former Alabama Congressman Sam Hobbs, and Mrs. Frank Cothran, Jr., who was Director of Christian Education at Selma First Presbyterian Church.³¹ Cowan and Smith were eager to speak with interested white women who they

²⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

²⁹ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, March 28, 1975, 179 and Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 160.

³⁰ Cowan, “Aint Nothin Goin to Change,” 20.

³¹ Cowan “The Freedom To Vote,” 3. These women had been contacted beforehand by Dorothy Tilly and Shirley Smith. See also Polly Cowan, “My Southern Journey” October 10, 1963, p. 4, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

hoped might support civil rights with sufficient encouragement. But as they discovered over coffee, Joyce and Cothran were frustrated by earlier efforts to work with local white and black communities and they were also frightened about what might happen to them and their families. Although their racial ideas were relatively conservative, these women had pushed for integration of the First Presbyterian Church. They believed that their church had made great “progress” by allowing four black girls to sit in the balcony (which once held enslaved worshippers). However, when the local paper reported that the church had integrated, it caused an uproar that led the Presbyterian elders to abandon their (partially) open door policy. Joyce and Cothran feared that their beloved pastor would resign over the elders’ decision and be replaced by an avid segregationist.

In addition to this discouraging episode, the two women were concerned about other efforts related to school integration and voter registration. Like many white Southerners, Joyce and Cothran suspected that voting efforts were communist-inspired, and they had little sympathy for African American voters if that was indeed the case.³² They also claimed that they had tried to work with the white establishment, but when one of them asked the mayor what she could do to help with integration, he told her: “go home and lock your door until it’s over. Nothing is going to make us change around

³² Cowan, “The Freedom To Vote,” 4. For more on the conflation of civil rights activism and Communism in the minds of Southerners see Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 2004); Catherine Fosl, “Anne Braden and the ‘Protective Custody’ of White Southern Womanhood” in *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era*, ed. Gail S. Murray (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004); Steven Lawson, “Race, Rock and Roll, and the Rigged Society: The Payola Scandal and the Political Culture of the 1950s.” in *The Achievement of American Liberalism*, ed. William H. Chafe (New York City: Columbia, 2003); and George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists*,

here.”³³ They also had little luck working with local black activists. Joyce had tried to talk to members of First Baptist Church, but the preacher told her that he had nothing to do with the movement. This was largely true even though he let activists use the church. He made it clear he did not want to be involved personally out of concern for his safety and livelihood. As Cowan noted, Joyce “felt the door shut in her face on both sides.”³⁴

Smith and Cowan helped Joyce and Cothran develop a plan of action—to meet in a black woman’s home (for as the two white Selma women said, no white woman wanted to risk her safety by inviting blacks to her home) to discuss racial issues. Joyce and Cothran, in turn, assured their northern visitors that “no one wanted any outside help” and if information about their meeting with Cowan and Smith got out, it would ruin any chance for communication and progress.³⁵ White southern women were more likely to be involved behind the scenes, where there was less direct effect on their quality of life.³⁶ In this case, Cothran and Joyce pointed out that no white woman wanted to risk having herself publicly associated with the movement.

Things seemed like they were progressing nicely until the *Selma Times Reporter* issued its Sunday edition on October 6 and reported that Smith and Cowan had attended the freedom rally at First Baptist Church and wanted to help in any way they could. Joyce and Cothran felt betrayed by their northern guests, who seemed so concerned for their wellbeing, but had been so public in their support of the black community. As a result, the two Selma matrons refused to proceed with their plans. Indeed, they even cancelled a

Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965 (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004).

³³ Cowan, “The Freedom To Vote,” 4.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

meeting with fellow white southerner Dorothy Tilly, and left the 80-year-old activist stranded at the airport. When Tilly called to see what had happened, Cothran replied, ““We have been betrayed. These women, Mrs. Polly and Shirley, told us they came because they were interested in this community. But they have been with those people.”” [emphasis original]³⁷

Immediately following the trip, Cowan wrote: “I think we must conclude from this experience that it is best if women go into these communities quietly and anonymously.” This had been Cowan and Smith’s initial inclination, no doubt after speaking with Tilly, but they had gone to the freedom rally instead and alienated the very women they hoped to convince to join their efforts. “Our curiosity and interest betrayed us....It may be best to follow the inclinations of your head and not of your heart under these circumstances.”³⁸ Cowan genuinely believed that white southern women wanted to help in the civil rights movement but felt paralyzed by fear. Instead of concluding after her initial visit that these women were hopeless, Cowan altered her strategy so as to not offend them. She and Smith decided that any future activities targeting white southern women needed to be done in a quiet, unobtrusive way, otherwise they might refuse to help.³⁹ In making this decision, Cowan and Smith believed that they were taking the only course of action that would win over white southern ladies, but they did so at the expense of taking a public stand against segregation and in favor of the civil rights activists. Cowan and Smith believed that most white southern women were only willing to work in “low risk” integration activities, because they felt that they had little to gain

³⁶ Irons, “The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation,” 698-9, 705.

³⁷ Cowan, “The Freedom To Vote,” 6.

³⁸ Ibid., 8.

from the movement, other than the satisfaction that they were doing what was morally and religiously right.⁴⁰

At the same time, black women faced much higher risks for their activism. The four young girls had been killed in Birmingham only two weeks prior to Cowan and Height's visit. Other black girls had been jailed and sexually threatened by prison guards, while adult women faced equally frightening and dangerous repercussions. When a group of black women who worked at Dunn's rest home tried to register to vote two days after Smith and Cowan's visit, Dr. Dunn fired one and beat another on her back and across her face with an electric cattle prod.⁴¹ The four NCNW-sponsored visitors did not directly witness this incident, but they heard stories about these types of brutal attacks on black southern women after they happened. While this reinforced the NCNW activists' belief that something had to be done, it also made clear the cost of public, high-risk activism. Cowan and Smith noted in particular the impact that fear of reprisals had on southern white women who might have considered aiding the black freedom movement. Their attendance at the Freedom Rally had alienated "anguished liberals" whom they hoped to persuade to support civil rights efforts. Cowan later agreed with white Mississippi sociologist Kate Wilkinson, who concluded that Cowan and Smith had "generated heat where the original purpose had been to generate light."⁴²

While their activism was not usually considered "high-risk," some southern white women involved in interracial efforts also became victims of dangerous emotional,

³⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁰ Irons "The Shaping of Activist Recruitment and Participation," 698-9.

⁴¹ "Additional Report on Selma, Alabama," October 13 [1963], p.1, Folder 2, Box 2, Series 19 NCNW Papers, NABWH.

physical, and sexual threats as well as finding themselves socially and economically ostracized. Jane Schutt, who was head of the progressive organization United Church Women and member of the Mississippi state advisory committee of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, received numerous threatening phone calls, a cross was burned on her lawn, and dynamite was thrown in her front lawn.⁴³ Another white woman from Maryland, Anne Karro, was arrested in Danville, Virginia for carrying a placard that read, “No more segregation” and passing out voter registration flyers. This white, upper-middle class, mother of three was thrown into the Danville jail. Five days later she was taken from her cell and led to a room where she was to be “examined.” Without consulting her, the jailer drew blood from her arm. Next, an unidentified white man asked her if he could do a “pelvic exam.” She objected, which caused quite a stir since she was the first person to ever resist the examination. Karro wrote,

The matron said in a low voice to the jailer that nobody had objected before in the time she had been there, and if this objection was allowed there would be trouble with others. The jailer then threatened: “If you don’t let him do it, the doctor will have to.” “I want to speak to my lawyer,” I repeated. We were then returned to our cells.⁴⁴

As the wife of a prominent attorney, Karro knew her rights.

Unfortunately most women who were jailed (mainly poor, black, and young) did not know their rights and were not likely to be listened to even if they did. While black women had endured physical and sexual abuse, Karro demanded a public response. She sent written testimony of her experience to the U.S. Senate, the American Medical

⁴² Wilkinson, “A Sociological Analysis of an Action Group,” 38. See also Cowan, “Aint Nothin Goin to Change,” 21.

⁴³ Jane Schutt, interview by John Dittmer, February 22, 1981, transcript, p. 36-39, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.

Association, and newspapers in New York and Philadelphia. She thus used her power as a respectable white woman to enrage Americans like her.⁴⁵ Karro recognized the part racism and classism played in setting a higher priority for wealthy white women's suffering over that of poor black women and used this awareness to gain support for campaigns to stop the sexual abuse of black women in jails.

After the trip to Selma, Cowan and Smith began to brainstorm how women like themselves could be useful to black freedom efforts. In a letter written from London on November 14, 1963, entitled "Women in the Civil Rights Movement, Variations on a Theme," Cowan began to formulate a plan for a "Cadillac Crowd" of upper middle class women whose class status would offer them protection from harassment and violence.⁴⁶ She believed that the upper and middle class status of all four participants in Selma—black and white—had shielded them from violence from the police and local white community.⁴⁷ Cowan asked, "Could we organize a group of wealthy and powerful women (women of influence, connections, stature in their communities) who would go to

⁴⁴ Anne Karro, "What Can We Do?" Testimony of Jail Abuse, November 6, 1963, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁵ In a letter dated January 10, 1964, Paul H. Douglas told Mrs. Anne Karro that he had submitted Karro's *Washington Post* article about her abuse in Danville, Virginia to the Congressional Record. Douglas goes on to say that letters written to the *Saturday Review* inspired by reprints of Karro's account caused members of the American Medical Association in Massachusetts and Philadelphia to write the Medical Association in Danville. See Senator Paul H. Douglas to Mrs. Jacob I. Karro, January 10, 1964, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁶ For a reference to this sequence events for the November 14 letter that mentions the "'Cadillac Caravan' (after Mrs. Peabody's venture)" see Polly Cowan, "Report for Wednesdays in Mississippi," Folder 18, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁷ "Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Variations on a Theme," November 1963, Folder 2, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH. Though there are some various accounts about when this letter was written, Cowan states in an interview in 1968 that she wrote the letter about "Conversation Caravans" while in England in November 1963. See Cowan, interview by John Britton, 11.

several troubled areas simultaneously[?]" Perhaps southerners would re-evaluate their beliefs about "beatnik" civil rights workers if they saw a new model of civil rights worker. She continued: "I would recommend chauffeur driven cars to be sent South ahead of an airplane arrival by the women. Or, in the case of women who live within driving distance and have status symbol cars of their own, they might drive themselves." She thought that the "distinguished look of the car's occupants will almost certainly put some fear into the power structure at the local level."⁴⁸

In many ways Cowan's plan of having cars filled with interracial teams of wealthy women drive around the South seems vastly out of touch with the reality of violence and poverty that she had just witnessed in Selma. But in other ways the plan makes sense given Cowan's background and experience. As the wife of the president of CBS television, she had personal connections to an affluent media world in New York City. She thus had access to centers of power and wanted to use her influence to support the civil rights cause. She envisioned groups of three to five women traveling south in "Truth squad cars" filled with influential female reporters, including Inez Robb, Marya Mannes, Mary McGrory and Doris Fleeson, who she believed could report on what was happening. They would not only be a visible and respectable presence, but also circulate information about the movement between the South and the North. She continued:

[T]he car's owner [would be] (for example Mrs. Marshall Field) a friend who is trained observer (like Mrs. Field's friend Lillian Helman) plus a Negro woman of importance (of whom Mrs. Field has many as friends)...Groups like this would be duplicated – sometimes two or three cars to one town, sometimes to adjacent towns, sometimes one car full to one town – all to be carefully assessed in terms of the situation in the area.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See "Women in the Civil Rights Movement." Confirmation of this letter as her first development of the project can be found in Cowan, "Outline," 3.

⁴⁹ Cowan, "Women in the Civil Rights Movement."

Cowan envisioned women bridging gaps by stressing their similarities. The people she hoped to recruit for this mission included leaders of black and white, mainly middle-class, women's organizations. "Use clubs, sororities, YWCA's, college friends, any and every lead. Get the Negro members of the team to talk to the Negro women and the white women to talk to white women before bringing them together." A common class-based respectability would aid Cowan's project by portraying an integrated team of women as a story of success, instead of degradation, as many whites viewed it. Using established women's clubs offered some protection to participants.

Cowan recognized that even for those who didn't work for wages it was hard "for women of this caliber to take two or three days out of their schedules." Yet she wanted them to "meet in Washington to be briefed, to get to know one another. This might take one full day before flying to their destinations." She was hoping that if they were "assured that this plan will have a real effect, I believe they will clear time on their calendars." She also hoped that the groups could "include a few wealthy Negro women, many of whom have not yet become involved to the extent that they will take this exposure independently." Indeed she believed, patronizingly, that "If they see white women of stature making this effort, they may be similarly aroused."⁵⁰

Contrary to Cowan's assumption, black middle class women had already become involved in the movement in large numbers. Women like Ferebee and Height had long been working to lobby for change. Black women like Daisy Bates and Ella Baker had taken central roles in the southern fight for desegregation. Much like white northerners, black women wanted to become involved in the movement, but unlike them, they not

only worked within the home, but outside of it as well. Thus, black women would be less available than white women to take part in Cowan's plan. From this initial idea, Cowan went on to develop the project that would become Wednesdays in Mississippi. She wrote that her Selma trip should serve as a model for other interracial groups to open dialogue in communities "where the communication has never existed or where it has broken down."⁵¹ The job of the participants would be to witness what was happening in the movement and to open lines of communication for southern women who wanted to help but did not know with whom to talk or what to say. She wrote, "The *raison d'être* for these women being in troubled spots should be the same as Mrs. Tilly's Fellowship of the Concerned: because they care, they want to know the truth, they want to help."⁵² They would become, in Cowan's mind, a "ministry of presence" to bring light to southerners, white and black, struggling to support integration.⁵³

Although she acknowledged misconceptions on both sides, Cowan recognized that there were far more on the white side. Still she assumed this was mainly true of *southern* white women. She wrote to her NCNW supporters:

You are going into a police state if you go into Alabama or Georgia in a place where trouble has erupted. It's a shock, but they are living with and sometimes they don't even know it. The Negroes know how many troops there are and what weapons they have and that the phones are tapped. The white people are for the most part not aware of this.⁵⁴

Still, she believed that black northern team members might have something to offer to their southern counterparts in the movement as well. As Cowan recalled, Mrs. Boynton

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Polly Cowan "The Freedom To Vote," 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 10.

had not made any real contact with the white community before Dorothy Height's visit, so perhaps black northerners, who already worked in interracial women's organizations, could offer black southerners a new perspective on the value of such efforts. That she assumed Boynton's failure to work in interracial groups was a consequence of lack of knowledge or experience suggests Cowan's own misconceptions.

At the same time that Cowan was working on her plan, Height presented a report on Selma to the National Board of the YWCA, which resulted in the creation of the Women's Inter-Organization, formed out of the National Council of Catholic Women, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of Catholic Women, and United Church Women.⁵⁵ These groups then decided to organize an "off-the-record" meeting in Atlanta.⁵⁶ This conference took place March 14-16, 1964 at the Americana Motor Hotel in Atlanta, and its original purpose, as noted in this dissertation's introduction, was to bring together black and white women from around the South to discuss police brutality against women and children, especially young girls.⁵⁷

But the meeting also offered black and white women an opportunity to discuss their fears about the civil rights struggle, the implementation of judicial decisions and legislation, and reprisals against those who attempted to fight for justice. Still, Cowan notes that the white (and some of the black) southern delegates did not actually address *civil rights*, as that topic seemed too controversial. As she wrote at the time,

⁵⁵ For a reference to this sequence events for Height's presentation of the Selma report to the YWCA, see Polly Cowan, "Report for Wednesdays in Mississippi," [sic] "Background," Folder 18, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Barnes and Frances Tennenbaum, "Women In Mississippi (WIMS) Preliminary Report," 1964, p.3, Folder 2, Box 13, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵⁷ Polly Cowan and Susan Goodwillie "He who would free himself must strike the blow..." October 15-16, Folder 3, Box 8, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Such a meeting, interracial in population, could never have been held around the issue of civil rights [emphasis original]. Never mind that they (the girls) went to jail for their civil rights. The women come together because it was too difficult to say no to a problem of humanity. But this group never faced civil rights as either a moral problem or a problem of injustice, only as a problem of mental and physical health and safety.⁵⁸

Women could discuss the health and wellbeing of children who had been jailed, but “civil rights” was too highly charged a topic for the white attendees to be placed at the top of the meeting’s agenda.

Many of the women attending the meeting had misgivings about the impending Freedom Summer voter registration project throughout Mississippi set for the following summer. As Cowan and Height learned more about this project, they believed that this was the opportunity that they had been seeking to implement their teams of upper-middle class volunteers. Some of the women present, Cowan included, knew about the project because their own children were planning on attending the Freedom Summer. But this was not the first time that students descended upon Mississippi in hopes of helping with voter registration. In July 1963, Allard Lowenstein, a Democratic activist and college administrator had traveled to Mississippi to learn more about the SNCC and the racial situation for those promoting voter registration there. Lowenstein proposed to the Jackson SNCC office that it hold a protest “Freedom Vote” campaign to run in parallel to the gubernatorial election scheduled for November 1963. The mock election candidates were Aaron Henry, president of the Mississippi NAACP and Ed King, white chaplain at Tougaloo College. Lowenstein vowed to bring in college students from the North and indeed brought in 100 students to help with the initiative. The campaign was a great success with 80,000 blacks casting votes in the mock election, showing both SNCC’s

⁵⁸ Cowan, “Outline,” 5.

organizational prowess and the willingness of blacks to vote in Mississippi when not threatened with violence—the white majority did not view black political power as threatening in this mock election.⁵⁹

Based on the success of this initial Freedom Vote, but also on the publicity that white northern students brought to the gubernatorial campaign, Bob Moses and other leaders of SNCC determined that Freedom Vote should be extended and expanded upon and white northern students should once again be brought down to Mississippi to help. And by January other members of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)—the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Mississippi state office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—joined SNCC to prepare for Freedom Summer. Still, SNCC took the brunt of the responsibility for the project, arranging funding for four-fifths of the project. The fundamental goal, according to McAdam was to “focus national attention on Mississippi as a means of forcing federal intervention in the state.”⁶⁰ The groups agreed to bring white volunteers from elite colleges such as Yale, Stanford, and Harvard to Mississippi to teach in “freedom schools” and to help register local blacks to vote.⁶¹ COFO leaders believed that white northern students’ presence would ensure national interest in and coverage of the activities. Yet white and black moderate southern

⁵⁹ Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 36-7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 38-9. For more info on Freedom Summer of 1964 see Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*; Mary Aickin Rothschild *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); Schultz, *Going South*; and Herbert Randall and Bobs M. Tusa *Faces of Freedom Summer* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2001).

women who were generally sympathetic to the civil rights struggle thought that the influx of white northern students might lead to trouble.

The southern women at the conference expressed concerns about the negative publicity the students would bring to Mississippi, and a few were worried about the violent backlash that might ensue. Fear drove the decisions of these middle class black and white women. In an informal report that Cowan wrote in response to the official “stuffy” report of the March meeting, she speaks about this fear among participants. When the women were asked at the last session if they wanted to exchange names and contact information, there was a resounding no. And when a woman at the meeting tried to take a picture of a presiding officer and a panel of women, some of the participants jumped as though they had been caught doing something illicit and begged the photographer to destroy the picture.⁶²

And yet, despite its caution and secrecy, the meeting was personally transformative for the participants, especially the white southerners. Black and white women did everything together in the safety of this private meeting. They ate together, spoke together, and sat together. In the process, the white women were exposed to the true brutality against black women. This included stories about participant Mrs. A.G. Gaston of Birmingham who had had a bomb detonated at her house, the employees of Dr. Dunn’s rest home in Selma, and cases of forced sterilization in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Cowan believed that southern white women could not help but be influenced by even this brief exposure to middle class black women’s experiences. She concluded, “They listened to the telling manner in which one Negro woman after another

put the case for her community. It will be impossible for these white women ever again to discuss the relative mentality of white and Negro.”⁶³

Clarie Collins Harvey, the black businesswoman from Jackson, founder of WU, and member of Church Women United and Jane Schutt, the white former president of the Mississippi branch of CWU who sat on the United Civil Rights Commission in the late 1950s, told Cowan and Height that the Atlanta meeting was the first time that white and black Jacksonians had sat together as equals. And they asked for a group to come in from the North and stir up Mississippi as if with a long handled spoon. Dorothy Height recalls that Harvey said to the northern clubwomen in attendance:

We are going to need your help. If northern women could visit us regularly during the summer, to act as a quieting influence by going into areas that are racially tense, to try to build bridges of communication between us, between our black and white communities, to be a ministry of presence among us, it would be of tremendous help to us.⁶⁴

While Height and several white members of WIMS recall that Harvey requested outsiders to come “stir things up,” perhaps she was looking for northerners to add energy to the southern movement, rather than take charge.⁶⁵ For the previous three years Collins

⁶² Polly Cowan, “Editorial Comment: Consultation Program: Inter-Organization Women’s Committee,” Folder 3, Box 8, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁶³ Cowan, “Editorial Comment,” 5.

⁶⁴ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 165; Cowan and Goodwillie “He who would free himself;” and “Recording Date: Unknown, Mississippi,” Sony DC-9, Side 2, Folder 3, Subseries 6, Series 15, NABWH, p.13, internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

⁶⁵ I did not run across anything that mentions Harvey’s invitation in her own papers at Amistad Center at Tulane University. I did find some reference to an interracial meeting about police brutality to women and children in jails and prisons. In a photocopy of what looks like a microfilm of newsletter, in margin, in pencil archivist has written the following: “Writings” “Peace Concern” “May-June 1964”. Harvey wrote, “Had a marvelous experience two weekends ago of sharing experiences on ‘Police Brutality to Women and Children in Our Jails and Prisons’ in a conference in Atlanta participated in by women – white, Negro, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and what have you –from key

had been leading WU as well as a host of other churchwomen activities, so clearly there was plenty of activity already stirring change in Jackson. WU initially organized to feed and clothe the Freedom Riders who had been jailed in Parchman prison.

Many members of WU ran businesses in their own community and were thus not subject to white economic reprisals. But as they became more involved in civil rights activities, they highlighted their roles as mothers, hoping perhaps that cloaking their efforts in the respectability of motherhood would serve as protection. Harvey, who became president of the organization, claimed that her first response was “that of a mother’s instinct—to help these activists in a practical way that would sustain them in their ensuing struggle.”⁶⁶ While WU initially provided basic needs for the jailed Freedom Riders, they soon expanded their activism as more civil rights activists, including students who entered Mississippi during voter registration campaigns. Establishing a flexible movement and fluid leadership, the organization fostered the creation of wider activist networks as they continued to provide practical aid.⁶⁷ Members also became involved in voter registration efforts, especially in encouraging women to vote, since they believed that mothers were most likely to influence the next generation.⁶⁸ First they met with influential women in their homes, and then they moved into the wider community, with the backing of these influential community members. Thus, Jackson’s

troubled areas in the South. Troubling but creative! Nine of us from Jackson, three Negro.” Womanpower Unlimited Newsletter, undated excerpt, Folder 15, Series 1, Box 19, Papers of Clarie Collins Harvey, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.

⁶⁶ Tiyi Makeda Morris, “Black women's civil rights activism in Mississippi: the story of Womanpower Unlimited,” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2002), 63.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 111.

black middle-class community engaged in civil rights efforts well before WIMS and the other Freedom Summer volunteers arrived.

WU engaged in interracial activism as well. The Interracial Prayer Fellowship Committee sought to foster and encourage cooperation between Womanpower members and sympathetic white women in Jackson.⁶⁹ In addition, the organization set up a “Chain of Friendship” of over 300 white women around the country who supported their efforts. These “Friends” were asked to exert their “influence” in a variety of ways. First they asked for the women’s prayers and then for their financial support. They also hoped these “friends” could help by lobbying state and federal legislators and patronizing businesses that were active in supporting the movement.⁷⁰ WU also sent representatives to established women’s clubs in the Jackson area. This way, they would give a respectable face to the local movement.

After receiving the invitation from Harvey, Cowan was thrilled that there might be an opportunity to implement her plan for “Teams of Observers.” The NCNW agreed to sponsor the project, while other groups allowed WIMS to use the phrase “in association with members of.” CWU, however, refused to allow WIMS even to use this phrase, although some members went on their own.⁷¹ Although it is unclear why CWU had this particular attitude towards WIMS, most likely they viewed this project as outside of the interest of the national organization. Thus while representatives from a range of organizations participated in WIMS, official sponsorship fell solely to the NCNW, the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁰ Womanpower Unlimited, *Womanpower and the Jackson Movement* (Jackson, Miss., 1963), 20-1, as cited in Morris 81,

⁷¹ Cowan, “Report for Wednesdays in Mississippi.”

only black-led, black-majority organization in attendance at the Atlanta meeting.⁷² Much like the difficulties faced by the NWCCR, most national women's organizations still believed that sponsoring interracial projects focused on integration and voter registration was too controversial and might alienate southern chapters.⁷³ Instead, black women again bore the burden of fostering interracialism.

Cowan and Smith went to Jackson two months after the Atlanta meeting to make sure that there was still interest in sending teams of observers and to establish contacts for the project.⁷⁴ While some women had concerns about WIMS coming to Jackson, "[t]heir anxieties were expressed in direct relationship to the amount of knowledge they had about the coming summer months of civil rights activity in Mississippi." A few, however, were extremely enthusiastic, and most believed it was at least worth a try, saying: "try it—try anything." Cowan felt that WIMS' job was not only to be a witness, but to transgress the "cotton curtain" by bringing outside news and information to the Jackson women, especially the more progressive members of the white community. "It is hoped that outsiders can also dispel rumors by tracking down the facts because they will be in a position to do so, while the women of Jackson will not."⁷⁵

Cowan's report on her May 7 conversation with Barbara Barnes, the recently appointed director of the Jackson Central YWCA (whites only), confirmed the need for outside help. Like most white southerners, Barnes questioned the tactics of student civil

⁷² Cowan, "Outline," 6-7.

⁷³ For more on this issue, see Helen Laville "'Women of Conscience' or 'Women of Conviction?'"

⁷⁴ For a reference to this sequence events for Cowan and Smith's May trip to Jackson, see Cowan, "Report for Wednesdays in Mississippi."

⁷⁵ Polly Cowan, "Preface," May 28, 1964, Folder 15, Box 12, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

rights workers and the movement in general, even though she worked for a nationally progressive, but locally segregated organization. Like many white southern moderates, she wanted to support the movement, but had limited information and questioned the methods of its black leaders. After the Atlanta meeting, the YWCA encouraged local leaders like Barnes to investigate abuses in jails. She had met with the Chief of Police Raefert and found that the jail did not have a matron for women prisoners. When Cowan and Smith asked Barnes about forced gynecological examinations on women prisoners, she said that she had never heard of this happening in Jackson, but she would check. She also offered the Central YWCA to house pardoned white girls who needed a place to go after being released from jail and the Branch YWCA to house black girls.

Clearly Barnes made some effort to investigate abuses against civil rights workers, but only to a limited degree. Though she felt that a “ministry of presence” might be useful, she also expressed concern about an “outsider” presence in Mississippi. Her concerns were diminished at least when she realized that the “outsiders” would be prestigious clubwomen. Still Barnes exhibited racist, sexual, misgivings when discussing the influx of white female volunteers. Cowan wrote:

She thinks many of the students, never having seen so many Negroes in one city before, are going to have a shock. She is afraid of white girls staying with Negroes partly because the girls will try so hard to be nice to everyone and partly because she feels that the temptation to the Negro male will be so great.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ “May 7, 1964, YWCA,” p. 2, Folder 15, Box 12, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH. While Barnes’ statement here certainly evokes the racial stereotype of the black male sexual predator, Barnes remained committed to working within the local YWCA to help alter its policies on integration. Barnes also helped provide contacts for WIMS in the summers of 1964 and 1965, and though clearly less progressive than other whites such as Ann Hewitt and Jane Schutt, Barnes did aid the women of WIMS in their search to promote integration in Mississippi.

Cowan reported that Lillie Bell Jones, the black director of the Branch YWCA, was likewise concerned about students planning on staying in black homes, but unlike Barnes, she was concerned for the safety of the homeowners, not the female students.

Both black and white directors of the Jackson Y had some misgivings about the WIMS project. In a private phone conversation, Ruth Lois Hill, a YWCA member told Florence Harris of the Southern Regional Y that contrary to Cowan's assessment in her own report, Mrs. Barnes "wondered a little about the lack of organization [within WIMS], but thought perhaps it was better to proceed as they were, on a sort of individual basis," and Cowan ultimately chose to proceed in this manner.⁷⁷ Other Mississippi progressive women were likewise nervous about the impending project, and they wanted to be sure that WIMS was not related to COFO in any way. They also did not want the project to be officially affiliated with the Jackson YWCA, since some members of the board were segregationists and the institution was concerned about losing funding and members. Instead interested women agreed to meet with WIMS representatives as individuals. "They were very clear about the fact that if it became officially an action of the Jackson YWCA, that it could not move forward. They were equally clear that if publicity was given to this, they themselves would not be as free to meet and talk with representatives of the YWCA of the U.S.A." Florence Harris then assured the women of Jackson's white Y that every effort would be made to keep these trips below the radar so as to not endanger participants or foil the efforts of the "Visiting Wednesdays" project.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Notes from Phone Calls Re Mississippi," Folder 18, Box 869, YWCA Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

⁷⁸ Florence Harris, "Visitation Report" June 29, 1964, Folder 18. Box 869, YWCA Papers.

WIMS tried to accommodate the concerns of the white community and agreed to remain secretive in their efforts, hoping to make them more effective.

Harris also reported on the opinion of Lillie Bell Jones, the black middle class Executive of the “Branch.” Harris had traveled with Barnes and Mrs. Jenkins, who were white, to the black Y-Teens Camp at Mount Beulah Christian Center, but recognized that Jones might only speak candidly with her if they were alone. And when Harris and Jones were alone, the black Y leader did say that the plans for WIMS seemed risky to her. As a member of the black middle class that cultivated a small but significant amount of power in Jackson, it was dangerous to become overly involved in civil rights, because this could jeopardize the many community-funded programs that she had put in place and put her own life at risk. As Harris reported, “Mrs. Jones lives alone and for security reasons feels that she must participate only in activities which are structured into the life of the permanent community.”⁷⁹

Still, despite these various concerns, Cowan began recruiting staff and participants for the summer trips. As she had envisioned in November 1963, interracial and interfaith teams of between five and seven women would travel from northern cities to smaller towns in Mississippi for a total of three days. She hoped that women of prominence would both “inspire” and financially and socially support Mississippi activists, black and white. But as requested by Barnes, and perhaps suggested also by Jones, they would move behind the scenes to establish contacts on a personal basis. Thus, from the beginning, the project was structured not around offering public support of the larger civil rights movement, but by quietly supporting them on a personal basis. With Height and

⁷⁹ Harris, “Visitation Report.”

the NCNW sponsoring the movement, Cowan began to search for white participants while Height found black women willing to bring this vision of an integrated “behind the scenes” project to life.

CHAPTER 3

Building a “Multiplier Effect into every trip”:

The Women of WIMS 1964

When Bob Moses and the other leaders of COFO decided to proceed with recruiting for the Mississippi Summer Project in January 1964, they sought to recruit elite white college students. First, these were the young men and women who had access to financial resources necessary to make the trip. (The average Freedom Summer Volunteer’s family income was nearly 50 percent higher than the national median and was nearly 480 percent higher than average nonwhite family income in Mississippi at the time.)¹ At the time of the Freedom Summer project, SNCC had very little money and could not afford to help pay the way of the student activists, so they sought out a crowd that would pay for the volunteer opportunity itself. Second, these were the types of students who would most likely attract media attention that would aid in the SNCC Voter Registration project. And finally, these were also the people with the connections to political, social, and economic leaders of America. Black civil rights leaders knew that these were the very people whose idealism drove them to apply in droves for the Voter Registration and Freedom School projects in Mississippi and that the news media would finally pay attention to the Voter Registration projects in Mississippi.

The white women that Polly Cowan recruited for Wednesdays in Mississippi resembled the student activists in political and social beliefs as well as economic means. This was not surprising as five of them had children who were Freedom Summer

¹ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 41.

volunteers, but most of the other white women fit the same family demographic as the student activists.² One major difference between the Freedom Summer volunteers and WIMS, however, was that one-third of the WIMS volunteers were black, while the Freedom Summer volunteers were only one-tenth black. But overall, both black and white WIMS women were at least middle, many upper-middle class.

Unlike the Freedom Summer recruitment process that was organized by SNCC and used the resources of volunteer programs in elite northern, Midwestern, and Western universities, the WIMS recruitment process was much more personal. Polly Cowan and Shirley Smith recruited participants by Cowan asking friends and acquaintances. Smith was in charge of the Washington/Baltimore and Minneapolis/St. Paul teams, and Cowan the New York, Boston, Chicago, and later New Jersey teams.³ Meanwhile Jane Schutt of Jackson developed background materials for WIMS kits as well as registration, screening, and travel schedule materials. While Dorothy Height selected the black staffperson and black participants. Unlike the more radical initiatives of the 1960s, WIMS advocated a moderate strategy that fit within a distinctly postwar white liberal way of reform in the United States that stressed that change would best occur by making changes within established structures of democracy and capitalism, instead of advocating economic reform. In a letter to David Hunter, the manager for the Stern Family Fund, Smith described aspects of this tradition while writing about the recruitment of participants for WIMS:

There has been a conscious effort to build a multiplier effect into every trip. This has been done by having women on each team who are in key positions in

² For numbers of women who had children participating in Freedom Summer, see Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," 628.

³ Cowan, interview by Britton, March 8, 1968, 16-7.

national women's organizations and who can do effective follow-up, both this summer and in the months ahead. Such women as Miss Dorothy I. Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women; Mrs. Pearl Willen, President of the National Council of Jewish Women; Mrs. Glady Brooks, [sic] head of United Church Women in Minnesota; Dr. Flossie Dedmond, Public Relations Director, Alpha Kappa Alpha; Dr. Geraldine Woods, President, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority; Miss Margaret Roach, Executive Assistant, National Council Catholic Women will be vital communicators to thousands of women across the United States vis a vis their Wednesday in Mississippi [sic].⁴

The emphasis on women with ties to respected national organizations was complemented by links to corporate power. She then noted that "On every team we have also tried to have the wife of a significant American businessman." Smith then noted that the wife of the President of United Artists, the daughter-in-law of the Chairman of the Board of Inland Steel, the wife of the past President of CBS/TV, the wife of the President of Baltimore Life Insurance, and the wife of the Vice-president of Minnesota Mining had all agreed to participate.⁵ Unlike the COFO student activists who often tried to hide their links to corporate America, Smith and Cowan promoted these ties, hoping that the class and social status of these participants would make white Southerners more receptive to building bridges of communication and supporting integration efforts.

This was a strategy that Cowan knew well as she had grown up observing the ways that affluence, social position, and "respectability" could aid in social justice efforts. She believed that highlighting individual black and white liberal women's accomplishments would make white southerners comfortable supporting voter registration and integration efforts by offering them an alternative to common stereotypes of movement activists as troublemakers and Communists. But such personal methods for

⁴ Shirley Smith to David Hunter, July 27, 1964, Folder 44, Box 6, Series19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵ Ibid.

creating change did not alter the systemic forces that kept most black people enmeshed in poverty. The participants who went with WIMS to Mississippi in 1964 were remarkable in their educational, professional, and social achievements. They were not only middle class; most were arguably upper class. The black as well as the white women held prestigious positions as the heads of major service sororities, attorneys, and professors. There was even a Broadway star, Etta Moten Barnett. Their careers and lifestyles meant that even African American participants were far removed personally from the problems of race relations in Mississippi. Only one black WIMS participant (who went in 1965) was a domestic servant, even though domestic service and sharecropping were the primary occupations of black women in Mississippi.⁶ Still this was a project that offered a low risk strategy for white women in the South as well as for those northerners who visited Mississippi for three days a week. It may also have been less risky for middle class black women like Jones who had less to fear from activists bent on personal influence than systemic change.

The success of WIMS depended on funding from white northern philanthropists. Cowan first met Height at a meeting of the Taconic Foundation, led by Audrey and Stephen Currier. Their foundation brought together civil rights leaders to work for a common goal, but also these white philanthropists hoped to soften the militancy of some civil rights leaders. Early in its existence, the Taconic Foundation conducted conversations with the Kennedy Administration as to how to push activists towards the

⁶ Virginia Bushrod, a black 1965 WIMS participant from Middleburg VA listed “maid” under the space for profession on her application, see Registration form for Virginia Bushrod, [May 1965], Folder 10, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Voter Education Project rather than other direct action projects.⁷ In general, they funded projects that worked within the existing political and legal system or increased understanding between black and white groups.

The WIMS project was supported largely by white benefactors. Although the National Council of Negro Women publicly sponsored WIMS, it could not contribute a large amount of funds to the effort as the volunteer organization was having financial difficulties at this time. Initially, WIMS members either paid for their own trips or were sponsored by the organizations they represented.⁸ The group also solicited donations from individuals and philanthropic organizations. For the 1964 trip the Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race contributed \$500 while individuals including Mrs. Jeanette Boddie, Miss Jewell Hines, and Mrs. Mary Cushing Niles (a 1964 WIMS team member from Baltimore, whose husband was the president of Baltimore Life Insurance Company) contributed a total of \$687. But the largest donors were the Louis and Pauline Cowan Foundation and the Stern Family Fund.⁹ The Cowan Foundation donated a total of \$2,417, or over 36 percent of the total funding for the 1964 trips. The Stern Family Foundation donated \$3,000, or 45 percent of the total contributions. WIMS Boston team member Laya Wiesner's husband, Jerome Weisner, Dean of Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the science advisor to John F.

⁷ Michael Barker, "Elite Philanthropy, SNCC, And The Civil Rights Movement," *Swans Commentary* (November 15, 2010), <http://www.swans.com/library/art16/barker69.html> (accessed on July 28, 2011).

⁸ Shirley Smith to David Hunter, July 27, 1964.

⁹ "Wednesdays in Mississippi Appendix #1," July 27, 1964, Folder 44, Box 6, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH. For more on the Stern Fund, see Institute for Media Analysis, Inc. *The Stern Fund: The Story of a Progressive Family Foundation* (New York: Institute for Media Analysis, Inc., 1992).

Kennedy, was a director of this foundation.¹⁰ The money to fund the project thus mainly came from affluent, northern liberal whites and the progressive foundations they established. Because of Cowan's financial investment in the project, Height likely gave her free reign to define the project in the way she wanted. WIMS members initially worked behind the scenes to build "bridges of communication" instead of pushing for more radical reform for black Mississippians, but with the public sponsorship of Height and the NCNW.

Although Cowan was not deeply religious, like Height, she was inspired by an ethical commitment to advocate for social justice. Like Height, she grew up around white, upper and middle class Protestant people and, like Height had learned how to negotiate different social worlds. Cowan's Jewish great grandparents had emigrated from Germany to New York in the mid-nineteenth century and sought to assimilate into American culture. Her grandfather and his brother moved to Chicago and then volunteered with the Union Army in the Civil War, part of a small number of enlisted Jewish servicemen. Her great uncle was killed at the battle of Vicksburg and posthumously received the honor of brigadier general. Her grandfather Joseph came back to Chicago after the war and opened a furniture store. While Joseph rarely went to synagogue and did not pass on the religious tradition to his family, he maintained some of his Jewish cultural identity, using Yiddish expressions in his shop.¹¹ When Joseph did attend synagogue, it was as a Reformed Jew. While Reformed Judaism accommodated to

¹⁰ Institute for Media Analysis, Inc. *The Stern Fund*, 31, 33, 156.

¹¹ Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy* (New York City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 57.

American life, it “drained the religion of its distinctively Jewish qualities,” and helped the business-minded Jewish community in Chicago reconcile its American business practices with some semblance of Jewish culture.¹²

In their efforts to become even more assimilated to American culture, Polly Cowan’s parents—Modie and Lena Spiegel—dissociated themselves even further from their parents’ religious traditions. They moved to the mostly Protestant suburb of Kenilworth and converted to Christian Science, a move for some Jews in the early 20th century, as they only had to embrace the teachings of Jesus but not accept the resurrection of Jesus.¹³ Still, despite distancing themselves from Judaism, the Spiegels were not fully accepted into their suburban WASP community. They then helped found the German-Jewish country club Lake Shore, which Polly disliked for the superficial interactions she had with other children there.¹⁴ But outside of Lake Shore, things weren’t much better. Polly became painfully aware of the discrimination that she faced, as a restrictive covenant was adopted in Kenilworth after the Spiegel family moved in.¹⁵ Her non-Jewish peers played with her, but refused to invite her to dances and other social events geared towards matchmaking. This experience influenced her to become active in efforts to eradicate discrimination.¹⁶

The situation became worse for the German Jewish community in the 1920s after two wealthy German-Jewish honor students at the University of Chicago—Nathan

¹² Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71-2.

¹⁵ Holly Shulman, “Polly Spiegel Cowan Civil Rights Activist 1913 – 1976,” Jewish Women’s Archive <http://jwa.org/weremember/cowan>, (accessed on 8/15/09) and Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, 63.

¹⁶ Polly Cowan, “Why Me,” Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

Leopold Jr. and Richard Loeb—bludgeoned to death a German Jewish child, Bobby Franks, from Hyde Park. Paul Cowan explained that “Especially after the Leopold-Loeb murder, they had to impress the gentiles with their sobriety, their propriety. At the same time, they had to remain so dignified, so much like New England WASPs that they could always be distinguished from the Eastern Europeans who, they thought, were giving all Jews a bad name.” Instead, German Jews like the Spiegels congregated in the safe space of the Lake Shore country club, where they could escape the anti-semitism of gentile “friends” but also find Jews of the proper class and national—that is German--background.

Like Height, Cowan was a bright student, involved in many student activities and athletics and she abhorred small talk. She moved to New York City to attend Sarah Lawrence as an undergraduate, but returned to Chicago to pursue a Masters degree in social work at the University of Chicago. Here she encountered the sociological thinking that would influence her approach to Wednesdays in Mississippi and met Louis Cowan, a man who also rejected his family’s orthodox Jewish faith in order to become more assimilated into American culture. Louis’ intelligence and interest in social justice impressed Polly and the two fell in love, marrying in 1939. Three years later, Lou became Director of Domestic Affairs for the Office of War Information (OWI) and the family moved to New York, where they stayed permanently.

Polly had already shown her sensitivity to the persecution of Jews by the Nazis. While a graduate student at the University of Chicago, she helped pay for the trip of a Jewish refugee attempting to leave Nazi Germany. While she was able to help this one person escape Germany, she felt great pain that she had not been successful at rescuing

any additional people.¹⁷ Cowan was always haunted by the Holocaust and this served as an impetus to become more involved in all types of social justice issues. As her son Paul recalled,

But her feelings about the Holocaust also imbued her—and [her children]—with a secular messianism: a deep commitment to the belief that we had a lifelong debt to the six million dead. [Her children] could repay some of it, she always insisted, by fighting anti-Semitism wherever we encountered it. Furthermore, she believed that our history of oppression obliged us to combat all forms of injustice.¹⁸

Thus she was driven to become involved in the black freedom movement in the early 1960s.

Like Mary McLeod Bethune, Polly's young husband Louis became integrated into the world of government appointments, working with the dollar-a-year executives in the Roosevelt administration during the war. Afterward, he moved up in the private sphere. Cowan first worked with CBS television, producing the \$64,000 Question and then moved on to be president of CBS-TV. Polly thus enjoyed a privileged lifestyle with access to a wide range of cultural events, but also felt frustrated by the corporate company she and Louis kept. Many of the other company wives had an interest in the social aspects of wealth, but little interest in using their status for anything other than social climbing. Polly was different: she had an equal passion for fashion and social justice.¹⁹ Still, she did not see her participation in high society and social justice as competing, but rather as enabling great change.

With Lou by her side, Polly explored the world of radio and television producing. In the 1950s Polly produced a television show named "Down You Go" and a radio

¹⁷ Polly Cowan, "Why Me."

¹⁸ Paul Cowan *An Orphan in History*, 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5 and Shulman, "Polly Spiegel Cowan."

program called “Conversation” which featured intellectuals, entertainment artists, and writers discussing topics of the day. When Lou moved higher into leadership at CBS, Polly had to scale back her producing; she quit her previous engagements and now co-produced a radio show named “Call for Action” on WMCA where callers reported complaints about defective housing or bad landlords. But this could not satisfy her need for independence. As her son recalls, “During these years, she told me, she felt terribly tense and lonely. She was cooped up in the mercantile world she hated, very much as she had been as a child.”²⁰ But in 1958, the NBC show, “Twenty-One,” patterned after the \$64,000 Question on CBS, was found to be rigged. Upon investigation, another CBS show, the \$64,000 Challenge, based on the original Question, which was produced by Entertainment Productions Inc., Cowan’s former company, was also proven to be rigging the results. Louis had sold his stock from EPI long before this scandal began and no longer had any connection with the \$64,000 Question, but because he was the creator of this quiz show, CBS asked him to resign in November 1959.

While this was a blow for Louis, it also freed him from the corporate world that Polly disliked so much.²¹ While at CBS, Louis had also worked as an advisor to Adlai Stevenson’s 1952 presidential campaign and as a board member of National Library Week and National Book Week. After leaving CBS, he became a professor at Brandeis until the mid 1960s and then became a professor at the Columbia University School of Journalism. He also began a small publishing company called Chilmark Press, which later provided a crucial ruse for white staff members working in Jackson during

²⁰ Paul Cowan, *An Orphan in History*, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

Wednesdays in Mississippi—they claimed that they were working on a cookbook for the press.²²

In 1963 Polly Cowan became involved in the National Council of Negro Women out of a desire to help those less fortunate than herself. She was the only white member of the National Board of the NCNW for many years, because Height also supported interracial activism, Cowan stayed active in the Council..²³ She was devoted to its cause and refused to worry her family with the dangers she faced. Paul Cowan recalled an incident when he and his girlfriend went to visit a motel that his mother and Height were trying to integrate. Height later told Paul that that night she and Dorothy had a cross burned in front of their window, but Cowan never said a word about this to Paul. As Paul wrote, “In her mind, where good manners and good taste were inextricably interwoven with progressive politics, it seemed unseemly to dwell on the few minutes of fear she had faced.”²⁴ Indeed, Cowan worked tirelessly as a volunteer. She and her husband also contributed a significant amount of money to the black freedom struggle, including donations to the NWCCR, WIMS, and the NCNW. While she gave a great deal of time and money to the Council and its related endeavors, she also gained psychological rewards from working with the movement, and she received some acceptance—through board membership in the NCNW and honorary induction into the all-black sorority Delta Sigma Theta—into black women’s spaces.

For their teams Cowan and Smith chose women belonging to a postwar generation of affluent and respectable clubwomen who worked within volunteer

²² Ibid., 90-1.

²³ Ibid., 94.

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

organizations to promote social justice. The black staff member Doris Wilson, a former employee of the YWCA, held a Masters of Social Work from Case Western Reserve. Height believed that Wilson's YWCA connection would enable her to work with both white and black directors of the organization in Jackson.²⁵ The first white staff member of the NCNW while Height was president was Susan Goodwillie, a program assistant for the NCNW and the NWCCR, which Smith directed. The second white staff person was Diane Vivell, a Stanford University law student and a Woodrow Wilson Stanford Law Fellow who volunteered for WIMS during the summer.

The northern participants as well as the staff fit the same highly educated, respectable model. The second black team member, Marian Bruce Logan, developed a defiant spirit at a young age and continuously pushed the boundaries of racial justice in her lifetime. This was clear from the very beginning of her WIMS journey. Under the blank space for race on her WIMS application, Logan wrote "HUMAN! (Negro if you insist)."²⁶ At the same time, she had no problem, however, putting "housewife" under profession on that same application. As a black woman who had been denied the status of "lady" accorded to white women of similar means, Logan felt that not having to work made a powerful statement. And yet, Logan was not actually only a housewife. She had been a cabaret singer in her youth, and as an adult, she served on multiple commissions devoted to progressive causes. She was the only northern board member for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, acting as the New York Special Coordinator for the

²⁵ Height, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, January 24, 2003, 40.

²⁶ Marian Logan Registration Form, [May 1964], Folder 12, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

SCLC.²⁷ She was president of the women's auxiliary to the Manhattan Central Medical Society, a member of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and a member of the Harlem Youth (HAR-YOU) Project. She was married to Dr. Arthur Logan, a board member of the Urban League and prominent member of the SCLC. According to Height, Logan was not particularly religious, indeed the space in her WIMS application for religion was left blank, which distinguished her from the others selected, whom Height viewed as having "deep religious conviction".²⁸

Like Cowan and Logan, Jean Kortright Benjamin had also left organized religion behind. She was born in China and then moved with her parents to England, their home country.²⁹ Although Kortright grew up as a member of the Church of England, her active participation ended after she moved to the United States. She attended the University of Lausanne in Switzerland for her bachelors degree. She moved to the United States, became an American citizen, met and married Robert S. Benjamin, who was Chairman of the United Artists Corporation.³⁰ As the wife of a prominent businessman, Mrs. Benjamin was involved in liberal organizations such as the League of Women Voters, the Girl Scouts, the Red Cross, and the National Council of Women. Yet she also had an independent career, working for *Life* magazine as a reporter and then the Department of

²⁷ Richard D. Lyons, "Marian Logan, 73, A Civil Rights Aide and Cabaret Singer," *New York Times*, November 28, 1993 and "Profiles of Members of First Wednesday in Mississippi Team" Folder 7, Box 14, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁸ Height, interview by Holly Shulman, January 24, 2003, 34.

²⁹ Brandeis University Office of Planned Giving, "A Lifetime of Commitment," [ca. 2006] accessed 8/26/09

<http://www.brandeis.edu/givingto/leadership/Brandeis%20NL%209.pdf>.

³⁰ Jean Benjamin Registration Form, [May 1964], Folder 12, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH and "Jean K. Benjamin," obituary notice, *New York Times*, October 6, 2007, accessed on April 8, 2012,

State for several years. Like Height and many of the WIMS women, she was very much a world traveler and world activist by the time of the WIMS trips.

Anne McGlinchy is the most unusual of the first team members. She was active in the Brooklyn branch of the National Council of Catholic Women and the Social Action Committee of the Catholic Inter Racial Council and thus shared a religious commitment to social justice.³¹ Yet in many ways she broke the mold for a typical WIMS participant. First, she was not married. Despite the single status of Dorothy Height, most WIMS members were married, and they often defined their status through their husbands, even if they had careers of their own. Second, Anne McGlinchy was a retired high school history teacher from Brooklyn who lacked the wealth and status of her WIMS coworkers. Third, she was Catholic. The Catholic church was much less open to working with interfaith projects, and its parishioners were less likely to embrace progressive social change than other religious groups. Indeed, throughout WIMS' history, Cowan had a much harder time recruiting and working with Catholic women, in the North and the South, than with Protestant or Jewish women.

Height, Cowan, Logan, Benjamin, and McGlinchy were among the forty-eight individuals who worked with WIMS in 1964, and they suggest the range of those who joined the project. In certain ways, they fit the image of the postwar housewife drawn by Betty Friedan in her 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*. Yet in other ways, this group challenged her claims that highly educated housewives felt stifled in their familial

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B07E6DF163AF935A35753C1A9619C8B63>

³¹ "Profiles of Members of First Wednesday in Mississippi Team."

and social positions.³² They had found an answer to the “problem that has no name” through social justice activism.

The myth of the happy homemaker content to do laundry and dishes while her husband earned the family income held great currency in U.S. society in the 1940s and 1950s because many Americans found stability in the ideal of the nuclear family. Historian Elaine Tyler May argues that amidst the anxiety of the Cold War, women sought to create a space of order and security by moving to the suburbs and following prescribed gender roles.³³ The U.S. government promoted this ideal claiming that domestic security in the home was important to the larger security of the nation at a time when threats of nuclear annihilation were all too real. Yet, while the ideal of the homemaker loomed large in the 1950s, the reality was far different for most American women.³⁴ A growing number worked outside of the home, and even those who did not were often active in volunteer organizations. WIMS women engaged in both of these paths to public life. Many members were housewives, but they were educated far above the national average at the time. Of the forty-eight who traveled with the 1964 WIMS team, thirty-eight held B.A. degrees and one a bachelor of laws, nine held Masters, four gained Ph.D.s. and one an Ed.D. Only four did not attend college, and four more

³² For more on Betty Friedan’s history of labor activism in the 1940s and 1950s, see Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism (Culture, Politics, and the Cold War)* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000). For more about women’s activism in the cold war period, see Sylvie Murray, *The Progressive Housewife: Community Action in Suburban Queens, 1945-1965* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Andrea Estepa, “Taking the White Gloves Off: Women Strike for Peace and ‘the Movement,’ 1967-73” in *Feminist coalitions : historical perspectives on second-wave feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); and Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*.

³³ May, *Homeward Bound*.

attended but did not graduate.³⁵ Both black and white WIMS participants were equally well-educated, and they focused on education as a pathway for furthering integration.

About two thirds of the participants listed an occupation on their WIMS applications. Twenty-eight of the original forty-eight were professional workers,³⁶ but this included a much larger percentage of black women than white. Unlike the majority of black women in this era, the black WIMS women were middle, even upper class. Of the sixteen black women who attended the WIMS trips in 1964, thirteen were employed, most in professional jobs. Etta Moten Barnett was an actress who played Bess in *Porgy and Bess* in Chicago. Her husband was Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press. Two women were professors—Flossie Dedmond, Associate Professor of English, at Coppin State College in Baltimore and Geraldine Woods, former professor at Howard University. Florynce Kennedy was an attorney in New York City. Flaxie Pinkett owned a real estate and insurance business that she inherited from her father in Washington, D.C. Beryl Morris worked as the Lieutenant for the Department of Corrections in of New York State’s Bedford Prison for Women, while Edith Savage Jennings worked in a youth correctional facility in Trenton. And finally, two worked in secondary school systems—one as an assistant principal and the other as a counselor; another worked as a journalist.

These African American participants continued a long legacy of combining work and activism. The historical legacy of black women working for wages in contrast to

³⁴ Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*.

³⁵ “Colleges and Universities Attended by Wednesdays Ladies,” Folder 21, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH and “Out of 45,” handwritten note on 1964 participants, Folder 21, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

white women created one of the most important differences separating the two groups.³⁷

This pattern marked WIMS as well. Yet the black WIMS members worked in middle and upper class jobs as teachers, consultants, and principals; in correctional facilities for women and youth; in entertainment; and as entrepreneurs. Most were firmly entrenched in the professions or ran their own businesses.³⁸

White women, on the other hand, had a much lower level of paid employment. Of the 32 white women who traveled with WIMS in 1964, fifteen filled in the space for “occupation” with something other than “homemaker” or “housewife.” Much like the black women of WIMS, the white women professionals were educators, executives in voluntary organizations, or workers in mass media. Alice Ryerson was a school psychologist, Marjorie Damman was a social worker and a public relations worker with Victor Weingarten, Hannah Levin was a professor of psychology at Rutgers University—Newark, Sister Catherine John Flynn was a teacher at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, California. Frances Haight was the president of the International Social Service in Geneva and the Vice President of Citizens Committee for Children, Ethel Hasserodt was the Executive Director of the Passaic YWCA, Pearl Willen was the

³⁶ “List of Team Members, cont’d.” Folder 6, Box 14, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁷ For more information on the history of black women working in contrast to white, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York City: Basic Books, 1985) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Boston: Harvard University, 2002).

³⁸ For more on black middle class women’s professions see Shaw, *What a Woman ought to Be and Do*. For more on domestic work see Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Also, Susan Lynn points out that black women in the post war years, pursued college degrees at higher rates than either black men or white women. See Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*, 12.

National President of the National Council of Jewish Women, and Peggy Roach, called herself a “Social Action Secretary” and worked for the National Council of Catholic Women. One woman owned small business, and another, Helen Meyner, the wife of the former governor of New Jersey, was a newspaper columnist for the *Newark Star-Ledger*.

Despite their occupational differences, black and white women were united by their overwhelming participation in voluntary organizations.³⁹ Both black and white WIMS women served as presidents or former presidents of progressive volunteer organizations such as CWU, the YWCA, American Association of University Women, the League of Women Voters, the American Red Cross, Human Relations Committees, and the National Council of Women. Most of the black participants belonged not only to one of the above organizations, but also to the NCNW, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and black service sororities such as Delta Sigma Theta or Alpha Kappa Alpha. Jewish women, all of whom were white, belonged to the same progressive organizations as their white Christian counterparts, but also the National Council of Jewish Women. Moreover, most WIMS participants also tended to be interested in global organizations, like the United Nations, although especially in the South these were often suspected of being tainted by communism.⁴⁰ So, too were peace organizations, and Northerners in WIMS were more likely to join and take leadership positions in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and Women Strike For Peace, an organization of mainly white mothers devoted to ending the nuclear arms race.

³⁹ In some cases, as in the case of Dorothy Height and the YWCA, these voluntary organizations paid these women a salary.

The black women of WIMS were also involved in service organizations, including sorority, church, and other volunteer groups that were focused on civil rights activities. Two black women were executive staff members of national organizations—Dr. Geraldine P. Woods was president of Delta Sigma, a black service sorority, from 1963 to 1967, and Dorothy Height was the national president of Delta Sigma Theta from 1946 to 1957 and was president of the NCNW from 1957 through 1998. Another 1964 participant, Arnetta G. Wallace had been the International President of Alpha Kappa Alpha in 1953. Many others were presidents of local chapters of black sororities. Ilza Williams was the president of the Zeta Nu Omega branch of Alpha Kappa Alpha in Westchester County from 1962 to 1967. They also took prominent roles within co-ed organizations as well. Narcissa Swift King was the Chairman of the Women’s Board of the Chicago Urban League. Ruth Batson was a member and eventual chairwoman of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination from 1963 to 1966.

Whatever their organizational affiliations, many WIMS members had traveled abroad. Mary Cushing Niles went to Africa and India with the Red Cross, the U.N., and the U.S. government; Helen Meyner went to Korea with the Red Cross. WIMS team member Rae Dudley was married to Edward Dudley the Ambassador to Liberia from 1949 to 1953 and traveled with the Women’s Africa Committee. Another team member, Carol Guyer (daughter of J.C. Penney), went to Pakistan with the YWCA and the UN and

⁴⁰ Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 2008).

then worked in international refugee camps in New Delhi.⁴¹ Thus, women recruited for WIMS already had considerable experience in voluntary organizations committed to social justice and universal human rights. The WIMS leadership self-consciously recruited those who held leadership positions in a range of clubs and associations, claiming that these experiences would allow them to “be vital communicators to thousands of women across the United States vis-a-vis their Wednesday in Mississippi.”⁴²

Many of these voluntary organizations were also religiously-based, and for many of the women in WIMS, their faith in a higher power drove them to activism for racial justice. Many belonged to more liberal Protestant denominations such as the Society of Friends or Unitarian, Episcopalian, and Methodist churches although many Presbyterian and Baptist women were also involved. Jewish activists recognized a special connection between the obstacles faced by members of their faith and those faced by African Americans, and were disproportionately represented in the civil rights movement.

There were women like Cowan, Logan, and Benjamin who were not particularly religious, but identified culturally with the ethical commitments of their faith. Historian Deborah Shultz argues that although many Jewish civil rights supporters were secular, a sense of their spiritual tradition played a role in their political, antiracist consciousness.⁴³ Cowan, as noted earlier, was deeply influenced by personal discrimination and by the Holocaust, and she considered it a special responsibility to struggle for justice. Jewish women active in SNCC also embraced a commitment to social justice, but many of them grew up in Leftist families with a militant tradition of labor and political activism. Polly

⁴¹ Obituaries, “Carol Penney Guyer,” July 31, 2002, *The Almanac*, accessed on April 8, 2012, http://www.almanacnews.com/morgue/2002/2002_07_31.obit31.html.

⁴² Shirley Smith to David Hunter, July 27, 1964.

Cowan, who had been raised on the ideals of New Deal politics, once wrote a piece for her alumni magazine called “Pleading for Pink” in which she argued for socialism in the United States.⁴⁴ Yet she, like many second and third generation Jewish Americans, eventually substituted a more moderate, less economically based liberal politics for the Socialist and Communist solutions advocated by their immigrant ancestors and New Left counterparts.⁴⁵

While American religious institutions experienced a boom in membership in the 1950s, their progressive wings developed a more ecumenical perspective at the expense of orthodox and exclusionary elements. For instance, Jewish activists like Polly Cowan tried to avoid appearing chauvinistic and thus did not prioritize their own religious and ethnic heritage.⁴⁶ Jewish leaders then capitalized on Cold War anti-Communism “to advocate a version of pluralist democracy consistent with American and Jewish ideals,” including support for civil rights.⁴⁷ The more progressive Christian churches likewise muted their individual beliefs and rituals in order to reach out to others committed to social justice and spiritual uplift.

This ecumenical vision can be traced back to the 1940s. For instance, Americans were riveted by the story of four military chaplains—two Protestant, one Catholic, and one Jewish—who gave their life vests to sailors on the USAT *Dorchester* during World War II and died together as the ship sank. Post-war American liberals saw these men as a symbol of tolerance who demonstrated an ability to sacrifice together for the greater

⁴³ Schultz, *Going South*, 4.

⁴⁴ Shulman, “Polly Spiegel Cowan.”

⁴⁵ Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

⁴⁶ Schultz, *Going South*, 22.

good. The religious organizations connected to WIMS also worked with individuals of different faiths. Several served in both the YWCA and the NCJW. For them, as for many Americans, “ecumenical religion could serve simultaneously as a symbol of American pluralism and American consensus.”⁴⁸ Ecumenical religious organizations focused on educating their members about diversity as a way to create the understanding that could lead to joint efforts for social change. For instance, one WIMS-related organization, Church Women United advanced social reform by organizing meetings and institutes and encouraging concerned Americans to read books about racial inequality. Founded in 1941 as the United Council of Church Women, members of this interracial group believed that they must promote their Christian conviction that all humans were children of God and racial inequality and injustice were intolerable.⁴⁹ As Height claimed: “The United [UCW] [has] a very social action program, so that within it, all the denominations are not at the same point, but they join together. The whole effort of Church Women United was to see how they could work together.”⁵⁰

CWU engaged in a program entitled Assignment Race from 1961-1964, a \$66,000 initiative funded by the Field Foundation to recruit and train women to work for improved race relations. Displaying the intricate relationship between various liberal women’s organizations, the director of Assignment Race was Miss Carrie E. Meares of South Carolina, who was a former teacher and YWCA director in Baltimore and Rochester, New York, and who had spent two years in South Africa and a year in Ethiopia. Meares epitomized the progressive club woman who not only was connected

⁴⁷ Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion*, 5.

⁴⁸ Wall, *Inventing the "American Way"*, 10.

⁴⁹ Denomme, "To End this Day of Strife," 1.

with liberal religious organizations, but who had worked abroad to fight for race relations. They were also closely tied to liberal political leaders. President Kennedy gave the opening address at the ninth assembly of CWU, claiming the work of the organization, “on the new frontiers of human rights, economic growth and universal education at home and in other parts of the world, has become increasingly important in [these] days of tension and crisis. Your enlightened and constructive leadership is a vital contribution to world peace and progress.”⁵¹

The principles of Assignment Race, established in 1961, included “Genuine and full participation of persons of all races at every level of action. Symbolic of this principle is the fact that the chairman of the project is Negro, the director Caucasian.”⁵² Like Height and Cowan in WIMS, this CWU initiative stressed the importance of a visible presence of joint black and white leadership. In the first year report of Assignment Race (1961), the women who met in Dallas spoke of the difficulty of meeting interracially. According to the report, a black and white woman from a small town in southern Mississippi were trying to find six women to form a prayer group. While the white woman had found two other white women ready to join a group, the black woman had not been able to find any other women “because of their fear. ‘I shall keep trying. When we meet we will find a place off the main road so no one will see us.’ At the close of the Dallas meeting this woman said, ‘I think [emphasis original] I can find one or two Negro women for our group. I go back less [emphasis original] afraid.’”⁵³

⁵⁰ Height, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, January 24, 2003, p.43.

⁵¹ Editorial from *The Christian Century*, October 25, 1961.

⁵² Carrie E. Meares, “First Year of the Three-Year Project: Assignment: RACE 1961-1964 of United Church Women,” p.1, in the personal collection of Holly Shulman.

⁵³ Meares, “First Year of the Three-Year Project,” 7.

The project focused on changing personal attitudes and overcoming fear of being socially ostracized or physically assaulted by trusting in Christ. Assignment Race sent women across the country personal commitment cards, which pledged that they would examine racial attitudes and work for equality in their own neighborhoods. According to Elizabeth Haselden, CWU member who later joined WIMS, “What they attempted to do was to bring together Black and white [sic] groups of women who had never sat down and faced issues together, which also was a strategy that required a great deal of honesty as you sat with each other and talked about these things.”⁵⁴ Both WIMS and CWU believed that with more exposure and education, people would change their attitudes toward racism.⁵⁵

One major intellectual influence on these liberal women was Gunnar Myrdal, the author of *American Dilemma* (1944). Viewing social engineering as a solution to American race relations, Myrdal “ushered in a new era in racial liberalism and social policy.”⁵⁶ Liberal churchwomen admired Myrdal and many accepted his claim that the “American Creed” incorporated a belief in racial equality. He “presumed that racist thought was extraneous to the creed’s core civic principles and thus that such thought could be repudiated without calling into question fundamental notions of American identity.”⁵⁷ Yet historically, the American Creed had depended on inequality at the expense of African Americans. Nonetheless, WIMS followed Myrdal in believing that

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Haselden, interview by Doris Anne Younger, Evanston, Illinois, June 26, 1992, transcript, p.11, in the personal collection of Holly Shulman.

⁵⁵ Denomme, “To End this Day of Strife,” 207.

⁵⁶ Denomme, “To End this Day of Strife,” 199.

⁵⁷ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 193.

racial equality was inherently American, and that discrimination and other forms of racial injustice prevented the ultimate realization of the nation's ideals.

In addition to believing in an essential American concept of equality, liberals of the 1950s believed in Keynesian economics as a pathway toward better living for all. Instead of questioning the validity of a capitalist system that depended on economic inequality for cheap labor, WIMS and many other progressive organizations initially claimed that consumer capitalism could help resolve problems in the poorest areas in Mississippi. Their efforts were not grounded in altering the economic opportunities for the people of Mississippi, but in changing the hearts and minds of “bigoted” southerners who they believed simply needed a new perspective. Critical to this change of attitude was recognizing the rights of citizens as consumers. In post-war America, consumer culture came to be seen as critical in defining one's identity and thus individuals must have the right to purchase what they wanted and where they wanted. Racial segregation interfered with the full functioning of consumer culture that promised a better world for all Americans.⁵⁸

The fact that many women in WIMS were the wives of major business executives reaffirmed the post-war liberal notion that racial equality and business could go hand in hand. During the Cold War this helped WIMS justify its presence as an organization that supported fundamental American beliefs in both racial equality and capitalism. There was an added advantage to including businessmen's wives in a civil rights project. In the Cold War era, many Southerners conflated integration with communism.⁵⁹ Indeed as

⁵⁸ See Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*.

⁵⁹ According to historian Jeff Woods, “Rallying to defend Dixie against the perceived threat, southern segregationists and anticommunists led a huge legal, political, and

white Mississippi resident Ann Hewitt, who worked with WIMS, later affirmed “Anything national [or international] in Mississippi was communistic. That’s the mindset.”⁶⁰ WIMS leaders hoped that their corporate credentials could successfully challenge white Southerners’ claims that civil rights equaled subversion.

WIMS’ initial efforts fit neatly with existing voluntary initiatives—in the North and South—in which well-to-do families donated goods and contributed time to assist the less fortunate. Indeed, volunteer religious activities were generally deemed to be part of the private sphere, and thus the realm of women. They were also, thereby, off-limits to regulation by the state. WIMS’ original program reflected this deeply personal, volunteer focus. In a letter dated July 27, 1964, Smith wrote to the Stern Family fund, describing some of the concrete actions that WIMS was taking in Mississippi. For instance, Jean Benjamin adopted the Hattiesburg Freedom School and raised funds for supplies; another “food merchant” (most likely Sarah Lee, since the daughter of its founder was a WIMS participant) had donated 750 pounds of food to Vicksburg for distribution to freedom school workers and host families. Shipments of clothing and art supplies were also sent.⁶¹ WIMS participants also used their personal connections to give freedom workers added support. In the same letter, Smith notes that another member was keeping Robert McNamara advised on the activities of the freedom schools. She thus implied that the

public-relations effort to expose and eliminate the Communist and integrationist enemy.” Woods, *Black Struggle*, 2.

⁶⁰ Anne Hewitt, interview by Doris Anne Younger, May 15, 1997, New York Theological Seminary, transcript, p. 10, in the personal collection of Holly Shulman.

⁶¹ Shirley Smith to David Hunter, July 27, 1964.

group used its personal connections with influential politicians to monitor but also to advocate for the efforts of civil rights activists.⁶²

Cowan's goal of working behind the scenes to alter white southern women's ideas about black people and her decision to use personal connections to support the WIMS project financially and politically was a liberal strategy that ultimately did not lead to systemic change. The crucial problem facing liberals was that individual women, no matter how affluent or influential, had limited influence over tearing down a system of racial and class oppression in existence for over 200 years. Cowan's perspective on building bridges—heavily influenced by her experience as an acculturated Jew and white member of NCNW assumed that ignorance and lack of education stopped white southern women from joining the movement. Increased interracial contact promoted by WIMS might help in reducing individual fears and misunderstandings, but would do little to lessen the physical, emotional, and economic harm that faced black women who joined the civil rights movement.

Cowan, of course, needed help from Mississippi women who were already active in the movement in order to implement WIMS, and the women from Mississippi who helped Cowan and Height design and then implement the WIMS project were an equally impressive group of women. Clarie Collins Harvey was the black Jackson woman who first called Height and Cowan to come to Mississippi to help stir them up with a long-handled spoon, and she had impressive professional and activist credentials. She was born in Meridian Mississippi in 1916. She attended eleventh grade through her freshman year of college at Tougaloo College, a private Methodist college in Jackson, and

⁶² Ibid.

transferred to Spelman in 1934 where she received a Bachelors of Arts in Economics. In 1939 she attended the World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam, Holland at the age of twenty-three. That same year her father died leaving Harvey's mother and herself as business associates of her family's funeral and insurance companies. In 1940 she was a cofounder of the Farish Street (also known as the Branch) YWCA. In 1943 she married Martin Luther Harvey Jr. who became the dean at Southern University in Baton Rouge. They never had any children. She was one of the founders of State Mutual Savings and Loan Association, a black enterprise that became a multi-million dollar financial institution. From 1960 to 1970 she served on the state of Mississippi Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights. She was a member of Women Strike for Peace as well as a member of the board of the Southern Regional Council in 1965. From 1971 to 1974 she was chosen as national president of Church Women United, which represented 30 million women at that time. In 1974 she received "Churchwoman of the Year" Award from the organization Religious Heritage of America and Mississippi Governor William Waller declared December 30, 1974 Clarie Collins Harvey Day.⁶³ Clearly there were women from Mississippi that were deeply engaged in efforts to promote interracialism and ecumenicalism before the arrival of WIMS.⁶⁴

White women had also developed their own progressive organizations before the arrival and during the first summer of WIMS, but in order to attract the necessary

⁶³ Finding aid to the Papers of Claire Harvey Collins, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

⁶⁴ Other women of the black community that aided WIMS were Thelma Sanders, who owned her own dress shop, Ernestine Lipscomb, a librarian at Jackson State College, Lillie Belle Jones, director of the Branch Y in Jackson Mississippi, and there were many others who were a part of Womanpower Unlimited, Church Women United, and/or the YWCA.

constituency to be most effective as well as to avoid negative publicity, they felt that they had to remain segregated. One such local organization was Mississippians for Public Education (MPE), an all-white women's group formed in anticipation of forced integration of the public schools in the fall of 1964. This non-profit group was organized to help keep Mississippi's public school system open without interruption. Although most of MPE's members favored integration as the end-goal, they feared that promoting this message too strongly would be too disruptive. Founding member Winifred Green said that fear of economic reprisals against members and alienating potential members by violating community norms too publicly prevented MPE from integrating. As she said, the thought at the time was, "If you break the community mores you would be excluded as an organization, and that worked very well for white people for quite some time."⁶⁵ Instead, MPE wanted to gain members by focusing on a message that keeping the public schools open was their end goal, regardless of who attended the public schools. They wanted to be public but quiet and not attract additional attention from the local Citizens Council. They claimed to be concerned about the economic drain that would result when whites sent their children to private schools instead of public ones. MPE members like Mrs. Thomas Ethridge of Oxford, the wife of a former U.S. Attorney and sister-in-law of Mississippi Supreme Court Justice W.N. Ethridge, publicly spoke against integration, explaining, "There are a lot of people like me who are not for integration. But we would rather see the schools stay open and our children get an education."⁶⁶ But they sought to

⁶⁵ Winifred Green, interview by Rebecca Tuuri, September 17, 2007, recording in possession of author.

⁶⁶ Kay Pittman, "Mothers Fight Private Schools—And Win," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 21, 1964, clipping found in Folder 10, Box 8, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

convince women to join by putting their argument in economic terms. The head of the organization Mary-Ann Henderson summarized their arguments succinctly: vouchers for private schools would bankrupt the state, the private schools would not be accredited, and unsanitary schools would spring up and claim to be adequate.

Privately they then met one on one with women for coffee and to quietly convince them to send their children to public school. They encouraged them to keep pressure on the state to keep the schools open, and that ultimately, the state of Mississippi should follow the constitution of the United States. Another strategy was to place full-page ads in the newspaper with a coupon to call for more information, passing out brochures, and setting up billboards around the state urging people to continue to send their children to the public schools. Mostly,

We avoided large meetings where the Klan or the white citizens council would come in and terrorize women who were considering taking the right moral position on it. So it was working quietly, but not secretively, you know, we wanted our presence known, we just didn't want to be put in a situation where we could let others take control of meetings.⁶⁷

Green estimates that over the duration of MPE's tenure, it contacted over a thousand white southern women, many who were convinced to send their children to public schools long after the majority of their white neighbors sent their children to private academies established in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

Despite MPE's segregated status, WIMS sensed its underlying motives and worked with MPE during the summers of 1964 and 1965, highlighting the northern and southern women's common concern for the education of their children. As Cowan told the women of MPE, "We are not just northerners visiting the South; we are parents, who

⁶⁷ Winifred Green, interview by Rebecca Tuuri, September 17, 2007.

must act upon our concern – now intensified by our own direct confrontation – that children everywhere in the United States must be able to grow up, to acquire education, and to build their lives without living constantly in the presence of fear.”⁶⁸ Like WIMS the women of MPE “moved quietly” in “loose knit chapters.”⁶⁹ The group’s mission was to quietly influence white women to keep their children in the public school system even if they became integrated. MPE shielded its activism under its segregated status, in hopes that this would keep the Citizens Council at bay. Instead, by the time WIMS arrived in Mississippi, the Citizens Council had already begun a “Dial for Truth” campaign against MPE where callers could dial in and hear about how MPE favored integration and continued to harass the women of MPE well into the late 1960s

In addition to Womanpower Unlimited and Mississippians for Public Education, WIMS developed connections to other southern clubwomen through local affiliates of national organizations in Jackson. One of the most active of these organizations that attracted both black and white Southerners was Church Women United. When speaking about her decision to become involved in the struggle to end segregation in Mississippi, white CWU member Jane Schutt insisted that “it was very much a matter of Christian conviction that this was something that I should do.”⁷⁰ Jean Benjamin, a member of the first WIMS team in 1964, remarked about Schutt: “This woman is the embodiment of true Christianity the way it was meant to be. You just know it when you talk to her. She just glows. It comes out of her face. Everything she says is very simple, but the face is

⁶⁸ Cowan, Commission on Civil Rights Report, 11.

⁶⁹ Kay Pittman “Mothers Fight Private Schools—And Win.”

⁷⁰ Jane Schutt, interview by John Jones and John Dittmer, February 22, 1981, transcript, p. 6, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.

there and uh, she looks like a saint.”⁷¹ Schutt had a significant impact on civil rights in Mississippi. Like many of the southern white women who worked with WIMS, she was not originally from the Magnolia State. She had grown up in Washington D.C., attended George Washington University for three years, and got married in 1934.⁷² She then followed her husband as his career carried them across the South. In 1959, having long been inspired by the ecumenical religious movement, she became the president of Church Women United of Mississippi. During her tenure, the organization released a statement that claimed that it favored a policy of separate races working harmoniously together in a Christian manner. While this policy was interpreted by Mississippians to support segregation, Schutt argued that the resolution was more open-ended. She claimed that the national CWU and the National Council of Churches, which was its sponsoring organization, were in favor of a more integrationist policy. Indeed, recognizing Schutt’s views on this matter, the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights invited her to become a member.⁷³

In the summer of 1963, after submitting the Mississippi Advisory Committee’s interim report she spoke in front of the U.S. Senate subcommittee on behalf of the Civil Rights bill, especially with respect to the need for extending the tenure of the Civil Rights Commission. After her appearance in front of Senate, the economic pressure—put on by the Citizen’s Council—on her husband’s business became too high, and she resigned as

⁷¹ WIMS Team #1 1964 - Conference, 7-13-64, 7-inch reel, Side 2, Folder 17, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 15 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

⁷² Jane Schutt, interview by unnamed interviewer, July 16, 1965, Jackson Mississippi, transcript, p.1, Oral History of Contemporary Mississippi Life and Viewpoint, Millsaps College Archives, Jackson, Miss.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

the Mississippi Advisory Committee's chairman, but continued to work under the radar in a subcommittee of the Commission.⁷⁴ Schutt resigned from the Civil Rights Commission, but she remained active in other reform organizations.⁷⁵ She joined the Mississippi Council on Human Relations, continued working for the CWU, and became one of the only white members of Womanpower Unlimited's Interracial Prayer Fellowship. Thus Schutt provided much needed aid to the movement while deliberately staying out of the spotlight and avoiding the wrath of the white Citizen's Council.

In addition to Womanpower Unlimited and CWU, the YWCA provided crucial southern white and black support for the WIMS project. Dorothy Height recognized that "a lot of enlightened white southerners...were part of the YWCA, [and] the YWCA was their way of getting to [work on social and racial justice]." ⁷⁶ When Cowan was drafting her plan to create WIMS she interacted most often with members of the Y in Jackson. That organization was comprised of a "main building" and a "Branch Y." Although the national YWCA pledged to become an interracial organization in 1946, the Mississippi branches remained segregated. They did sometimes hold interracial meetings but facilities remained separate, including in Jackson where Y leaders promised in the late 1950s to include more board members who favored integration.⁷⁷ The National YWCA struggled with the tension between autonomy for local and district branches and enforcement of the national organization's Interracial Charter. Still, despite its presence as a segregated organization, the Jackson YWCA was one of the most progressive organizations in the city.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁵ WIMS Team #1 1964 – Conference, 7-13-64, Side 2, internal transcription, 14.

⁷⁶ Height, interview by Holly Cowan Shulman, January 24, 2003, 42.

Ann Hewitt, was perhaps the most important white WIMS “angel.” Hewitt described her initial encounter with WIMS women:

I got totally involved in this WIMS because I was at a Church Women United meeting one day in the spring of '64. Polly Cowan was there and Shirley Smith and they wanted somebody who could take them to the black YWCA. I said, ‘Well, I’ve got my car—which is unusual because I have two high school-age daughters—but I can take them.’ So I did. And I sat in and listened to them talk to...the director of the black YWCA [Lillie Belle Jones]. They planned “Wednesdays in Mississippi.”⁷⁸

Hewitt later allowed the WIMS staff members Susie Goodwillie and Dianne Vivell to use her car again and laundered payment for the Magnolia Towers apartment complex that staff members Goodwillie and Vivell stayed in while organizing the Mississippi trips. Hewitt also helped find accommodation for white women by the end of the 1964 trips and during the 1965 trips. Like Schutt, Hewitt had grown up in the South, but had lived outside of it for some period. She also was driven by her spiritual conviction to aid the movement. She was born in Chicago, Illinois and moved to Mississippi, where her mother had grown up, when she was a small girl. She grew up Presbyterian, and though Millsaps College was considered the “best” in town, she recalled that “being a Presbyterian, you could never go anywhere but Bellhaven [the local Presbyterian college].”⁷⁹ Her mother, Helene Alford, also was an important influence on her activist growth. Her mother divorced Hewitt’s father when Ann was still a young girl, moved back to Mississippi, and then remarried a man who was the manager of the largest supermarket in Mississippi. Her mother was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, but resigned from the organization after they would not let Marian Anderson

⁷⁷ Lewis, “The Barrier Breaking Love of God,” 128-9.

⁷⁸ Ann Hewitt, interview by Doris Ann Younger, May 15, 1997, 9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

sing in Constitution Hall in 1939.⁸⁰ Hewitt and her mother both joined Church Women United, under the National Council of Churches. Ann Hewitt's mother also was the chairman of the Negro Women's Conference of the Presbyterian Church in the 1930s and 1940s. They held the conference at Jackson State College every summer. Most importantly, though, Ann Hewitt was a widow and her children were both grown. Thus, she felt that she and her children were no longer subject to any serious economic reprisals for these facts. Given her widowed status and activist credentials, it is not surprising Hewitt worked as a southern white woman to help support the WIMS project.⁸¹ While WIMS promoted itself as an organization that ripped the hole through the cotton curtain, Harvey, Schutt, Hewitt and others had already been working to promote equality for blacks in Mississippi, but they still welcomed outside help from the eager northern WIMS ladies.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2. In 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let Marian Anderson sing in Constitution Hall. In response to this slight, Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady at the time, revoked her membership to the DAR. The Roosevelts then sponsored a concert by Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial on April 9, 1939.

⁸¹ Other white Mississippians that aided WIMS were Florence Gooch, Patt Derian, Willie Hume Bryant, Winifred Green, Eleanor Fontaine, Jeanette King, Joan Moore, Jay Shands, Patt Terry, Janet Purvis, Mary Ann Henderson, Mary F. Hendrick, and countless others.

Chapter 4

“It's that personal involvement... that's hard to translate”:

Personal Witness as Activism, 1964

As black Boston civil rights leader Ruth Batson sat in a Wednesdays in Mississippi preparation meeting in July 1964, she pondered whether or not she really wanted to join the WIMS trip to Mississippi in a few days. WIMS leader Polly Cowan explained to Batson and two white women at the meeting that they would have to travel in segregated vehicles and would be staying in segregated homes during their stay. Batson questioned the idea of making a trip that seemed to reinforce segregation, by accepting the status quo. She had been working in the city's Roxbury district schools to ensure that her daughter received the same educational opportunities as white students in more affluent neighborhoods. She was the chair of the Massachusetts Committee Against Discrimination, a delegate to the 1964 Democratic National Convention, chair of the Social Relations Committee of United Church Women, Education Chairman of the Massachusetts NAACP, and a member of the Advisory Committee to the Massachusetts Board of Public Welfare.¹ She considered herself a firebrand, and others concurred. She had fought for integration for herself, for her daughter, and for her community in Boston. Still, she had never been to Mississippi, and she wanted to participate in some way in the movement, so she packed her clothes and traveled with the other six members of the Boston WIMS team.

¹ Ruth Batson Registration Form, [May 1964], Folder 13, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

In Jackson, Batson did travel in segregated cars and stay in segregated housing. But she also visited freedom schools, community centers, and mass rallies put on by the movement. She met with Doris Wilson, a black WIMS staff person living in Jackson, who reassured her that parts of the trip were segregated out of a concern for safety and in hope of opening dialogue with black and white Mississippi women who were not comfortable with joining the movement yet. Batson learned that the WIMS delegates were not there as “testers,” like the Freedom Riders, but instead as behind-the-scenes communicators.

The Freedom Summer COFO volunteers, on the other hand, had made commotion within Mississippi even before they arrived. In March, in anticipation of the influx of student activists, Jackson mayor Allen Thompson claimed that his police force was anticipating a violent summer. He converted an ice cream truck into an armored vehicle, nicknamed “Thompson’s Tank,” with weaponry to withstand a riot. He also ordered 250 additional shotguns and hired additional policemen.² The 1,000 COFO volunteers meanwhile attended one of two orientation sessions, sponsored by the National Council of Churches at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio in mid-June. The three WIMS staffpersons, Doris Wilson, Susie Goodwillie, and Diane Vivell, also attended the first session from the 14th to the 20th. At this orientation session, they learned about voter registration, community activism, and how to brace themselves for a beating so that it would not be fatal. These preparatory steps still could not save James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Micki Schwerner, three COFO activists who went missing (and were later found dead) while Goodwillie and the others were attending the conference.

Goodwillie, Vivell, and Wilson arrived in Jackson on a steamy June 27 and were picked up by Ann Hewitt's daughter Helene and her husband Jack. They were then transported to the Magnolia Towers, where Hewitt had helped paid for the white staff members' rent, claiming that they were her "daughters," so as to not draw attention to the project. The girls told locals that they were writing a cookbook for Chilmark Press, Lou Cowan's press. They hoped that this ruse would keep them from drawing attention from the Citizen's Council. The white staff members also tried to adhere to what they understood to be white southern mores. They went to church on Sundays and Wednesdays. They also wore dresses and white gloves.³ Doris, on the other hand, stayed with Ernestine Lipscomb, a librarian at Jackson State College, who had been too scared to leave her light on for fear that she would be shot driving into her garage as Medgar Evers had been the year before.⁴ The women had tense moments as they avoided publicity while trying to set up logistics for the teams of women that would soon be arriving to Mississippi. Ultimately, with the help of Cowan and the locals in Mississippi, these staff members arranged for seven interracial teams of between five and seven women to visit Mississippi every week—with the first team arriving on Tuesday, July 7 and the last leaving on Thursday August 20.

The first WIMS team members Dorothy Height, Polly Cowan, Jean Benjamin, Marion Logan, and Anne McGlinchy flew down from New York to Jackson on July 7. Upon their arrival, the white women stayed at the Sun N' Sand motel while the black

² "Police Fear Crisis in Jackson, Miss.: Force Strengthened to Bar Any Negro Demonstrations," *New York Times* (March 8, 1964).

³ Susie Goodwillie Diary, June 27-30, papers of Susan Goodwillie Stedman, 1964, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, Va.

⁴ As cited in Debbie Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," 631.

women stayed with local families. Cowan would have preferred to assign the white women to private homes as well, but she only knew of a few local white women willing to host.⁵ On their first evening white members of the New York City team met with the all-white Jackson League of Women Voters (LWV), headed by Jane Schutt. The LWV had recently invited a speaker from the UN, an organization deemed subversive by the Citizens Council for its commitment to international human rights. The Council then sent out threatening letters to the husbands of the LWV telling him that their wives must leave the organization or their businesses or jobs would suffer. Two thirds of the women left the organization after this attack by the Council. This was the environment that the white progressive women faced in Mississippi.⁶ The black team members visited with their host and attended an NAACP rally. The next morning, the whole team traveled to Hattiesburg, where they visited a Freedom School at Mount Zion Baptist Church. Cowan chose Hattiesburg and the rest of the locations for visits in 1964 because they were deemed relatively safe towns.⁷

Even though Cowan sought “safe” locations, the teams experienced several frightening incidents. During the first team’s visit to Hattiesburg, they visited a COFO

⁵ The Chicago Team, the sixth team to go to Mississippi in 1964, was the first to have white women stay in private homes since by that time WIMS had forged enough contacts with supportive white Mississippi women.

⁶ WIMS Team #1 1964 – Conference, 7-13-64, Side 2 internal transcription, 35.

⁷ When the women of Team 3 who visited Meridian, Mississippi expressed their concern over the fact that it was so close to Philadelphia, where the bodies of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodwin were discovered, Cowan told the women that she was sorry that they were fearful but that she chose all of the locations for the WIMS women to visit because she believed them to be safe. WIMS Team #3 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Team #3 Washington – Maryland, 7-inch reel, Side 2, Folder 42, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 46 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

“Freedom School.” The Freedom Schools were set up to teach black children and adults about black history, community organizing, voter registration and other subjects intended to help empower the black community. Of course, one of the ironies of the COFO Freedom Schools was that often the teachers were white. After visiting the Freedom School, WIMS had lunch at Mt. Zion’s Church with ministers and workers from COFO. When Marion Logan went to the front of the church to call her husband on a payphone, a car with no license plate screeched by and someone threw a Molotov cocktail out of the window. The bottle did not blow up and when those inside heard what had happened, they sang the Hallelujah chorus as a testimony to the fact they had all survived unscathed.⁸ Later that evening, local police arrested Reverend Bob Beech, the white head of the interracial Ministers Project in Hattiesburg, who spoke with police after the incident, and put him in jail. The Justice Department informed Cowan that Beech had been thrown into jail on a bogus charge of overdrawing his account and had been fined \$2,500.⁹

In another incident in Jackson, Logan and Height were again threatened when they went to eat at the recently integrated Sun ‘n Sand Motel with Clarie Collins Harvey. According to Cowan a courteous white manager seated the three women initially. The waitress, on the other hand, was hostile and threw the silverware at the women, reluctantly took their order, delayed their order, and refused to fetch a pack of matches for one of the women. The women waited so long for their food that Height decided she had better let the WIMS staff know that they were fine. While the waitress was making

⁸ Cowan, Commission on Civil Rights Report, 7 and Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 173-74.

⁹ Cowan, Commission on Civil Rights Report, 7.

nasty comments, the black wait-staff began to appear around the women, “as though for protection.” The manager asked the women whether they were from Jackson, and Harvey said yes while the others stayed silent, out of fear. He then asked them if they were nervous, and when they questioned him about why they should be, he responded “You might start a riot, you never know.” As the women left the restaurant, the black staff lined up again as if to protect them.¹⁰

The climate in Jackson and Hattiesburg was saturated with fear—in Hattiesburg no white southern women in the town would meet with WIMS. After the trip, Cowan reported, “We did not see any white women in Hattiesburg. Every effort was made and it broke down. There is one woman who works on voter registration but at the last minute she was afraid to see us and because it was broad daylight, and she can’t move around except at night.”¹¹ While Cowan consistently pointed out the fear expressed by white southerners, that fear was most likely motivated more by concerns about social and economic reprisals than physical danger. It was generally black Mississippians who became involved in the movement who had reason to fear for the lives. While Cowan tried to accommodate white women’s fears by meeting with them secretly, the odds that white women would commit themselves to social integration were still extremely low.

After visiting Hattiesburg, the first team met with local civil rights leaders and then headed back to Jackson but arrived too late to worship with an Interracial Prayer Fellowship. The WIMS women did, however, attend a meeting of Womanpower Unlimited, where WIMS learned that women from the Jackson Jewish community had

¹⁰ Cowan, Commission on Civil Rights Report, 8.

worked with Womanpower Unlimited (WU) in the past and had recently provided the food for a July 4th picnic for COFO volunteers. Still, these white women were not public in their support. Instead, the Jewish women transported food and supplies to the picnic site in the evening, when they were less likely to be seen. At the time of the WIMS trip, Womanpower Unlimited had only two white participants out of a group of over 30 members. Likewise, the Interracial Prayer Fellowship that met right before the Womanpower meeting had far fewer white than black members.¹²

While the reality of violence was greater for black than white Mississippians, Cowan and other WIMS participants did sympathize with their white southern coworkers and commented over and over about the fear that existed in Mississippi on both sides. Flossie Dedmond, a black professor at Morgan State and member of AKA, YWCA, and CORE, remarked,

It seems that everybody is just afraid. I think that's been brought ou[t] here. Everybody's afraid of the other fellow. The whites are afraid of the whites. The Negroes are afraid of the Negroes--afraid to trust them. And the whites uh, mutually--whites and Negroes are mutually afraid of each other.¹³

Trude Lash, a white WIMS team member, spoke with Dr. I. S. Sanders, a black principal in Jackson whose wife Thelma Sanders owned a dress shop and was a leader in Womanpower Unlimited. Dr. Sanders told Lash that the black middle class had become accustomed to fearing anything associated with the freedom movement. Lash said that

¹¹ WIMS Team #1 1964 - Conference, 7-13-64, 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 17, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 14 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

¹² WIMS Team #1 1964 – Conference, 7-13-64, Side 1, internal transcription, 28.

¹³ WIMS Team #3 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Team #3 Washington – Maryland, 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 42, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 65 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

he felt...the fear--he quoted FDR, nothing to fear but fear itself. That the fear has been so inbred into every one that they no longer wait until something is actually threatening, but the knowledge...the feeling that this is going to be so...makes them much less able to do things, which actually they might even be able to--to do.¹⁴

Sanders did say that because he and his wife were in secure positions they could be more involved in the movement, but that most teachers and superintendents wanted nothing to do with the movement. Many members of the black middle class were teachers, principals, or superintendents in state-funded education and risked losing their jobs if they challenged white supremacy in Jackson or Mississippi's smaller towns.

Beryl Morris, a black member of the Boston WIMS team, commented on how her host, while accommodating, had almost *no* interaction with her and refused to join the movement.

But it may not have only been fear that prevented the black middle class from participating in the movement. Northern black WIMS members believed that some black middle-class women in Jackson needed to be shaken out of their propriety from participating in the movement. Ilza Williams explained: "So one of my--one of my personal aims would be to try to involve, or to see if I can involve . . . a middle class Negro. And yet, I don't want anyone to . . . feel that I know what I'm talking about because I wasn't there long enough. But it's just a feeling that you get, that everything is [in] its own polite groove."¹⁵ But of course, WIMS members also commented on the fear and tension that they felt in going down to Mississippi, the state where that same summer

¹⁴ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Team #5 New York to Ruleville, 7-inch reel, Side 2, Folder 18, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 66-67 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

three civil rights workers were murdered. Ruth Hurd Minor from New Jersey recalled the incredible toll that the short trip took on her physically and emotionally. Minor was a privileged black middle class northern woman—she lived in Roselle, NJ, in the suburbs, worked for the public school system and was a member of the Council of Church Women, American Association of University Women, League of Women Voters, Women Auxiliary Urban League, Women Auxiliary National Association Letter Carriers, Phi Delta Kappa, and the YWCA. But the experience of going to Mississippi deeply affected her. She wrote that when returning home to a relieved husband and children, she shook so much that she was unable to hold a pen steadily and drink a cup of coffee. “I was visibly gripped and shaken remembering the manifestations of the delicate balance of terror in Mississippi Negroes and whites because of the efforts being made ‘to alter the course of that state’s movement into a totally ‘closed society.’”¹⁶

By the end of the seventh trip in 1964, Cowan estimated that WIMS interacted with over 100 white women and 150 black women in Mississippi, which she and other leaders considered a success. Team members had offered their help to the COFO Freedom Schools and Community Centers. According to Cowan, they had been “immeasurably cheering to the COFO staff and workers” of the Freedom Summer voter registration project. They also expressed their admiration for the workers to many white and black Mississippians, in hopes that this would help diminish negative feelings towards the activists.¹⁷ In addition, though southern women claimed that bridges

¹⁵ WIMS Team #2 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 24-5.

¹⁶ Ruth Hurd Minor Reflection Report, Folder 3, Box 15, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁷ Cowan, Commission on Civil Rights Report, 5.

between white and black communities existed in Jackson before 1964, others confirmed that no real effort was initiated before outsiders arrived.¹⁸ The teams also sent tangible goods such as books and supplies to movement centers. Indeed, WIMS donated so many books that the book project required its own coordinators.¹⁹

Another strategy that WIMS developed involved opening lines of communication between local activists and organizations that could provide those activists with support. Sister Catherine John of the Immaculate Heart of Mary order in Los Angeles traveled with the Boston Team and visited a parochial school in Canton, Mississippi. She claimed that the parochial school was an “island” separated from the local community during the summer when the gym was closed to be used as a church. Her visit led the sisters of the school to meet members of the surrounding African American community for the first time. The tireless movement leader Annie Devine along with activist George Raymond spoke to the WIMS team at the parochial school. From this experience Sister John became convinced that the South needed outside help. She also put nuns at the school in contact with black movement leaders to work out a plan so that Freedom Summer volunteers might use their facilities. Ilza Williams also sent Annie Devine money for her child to go to college, while Trude Lash set up a program in New York City to sell quilts made by women in the Delta.²⁰

Although WIMS attempted to improve educational opportunities for black southerners, its members disagreed about what lay at the heart of the problem. Some

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ WIMS Copy, Boston Team, Recording Date: Not given, [7-inch reel?], Side 1, Folder 11, Subseries 6, Series 15, NABWH. Page 26 of internal transcription provided to author

white women viewed southern black teachers as part of the problem. Florynce Kennedy, a black lawyer from New York City, argued with her other team members, most of whom were white, about the idea of bringing students to the Northeast to receive a “better” education. When Claudia Heckscher, a white member of team five, suggested that sixteen year olds be brought to the North for a “proper” education, another white WIMS woman Trude Lash chimed in that “there’s absolutely no chance for them--this was addressed by everybody--for a good education in Mississippi,” Kennedy responded that “It isn’t education they need alone, you see? The teachers are educated. You see what education does for many of them.”²¹ Kennedy insisted that the problem was not a lack of education on the part of black southern teachers, but instead the racist system that provided unequal facilities and terrorized those who insisted on equality. She continued:

I am inclined with a view that I won’t be too upset if she does not get a college education, because I think, I think that it is more important for people like her to stay on the scene and broaden their power. Because we have now more educated people and most counties that have a hold back crowd have a lot of restless frustrated, educated people going to the post office.²²

Here Kennedy, a lawyer who knew quite well the difficulty that black women faced when trying to secure a professional position, pointed out that despite black men and women’s professional training in Mississippi, they were often shuffled into jobs far beneath their educational training. Instead of pursuing more or “better” educational opportunities, she suggested that young black women interested in activism continue working towards changing the racist system that prevented them from realizing the fruits of their educational labors. The white team members attacked Kennedy for her sentiments,

by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010 and WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 2, internal transcription, 42.

²¹ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 2, internal transcription, 2.

implying that she dismissed education as a path to change while they, like other postwar liberals believed strongly that education could resolve racial strife. Of course, they suggested that northern, predominately white institutions, not those run by the black middle class in Mississippi, provided the best path to success.

Marie Barksdale, the other black woman on this team, noted that there was “general disrespect” from the young white civil rights activists toward black teachers in Mississippi. As the national executive director of the black service sorority Delta Sigma Theta, Barksdale expressed concern when her WIMS team visited a COFO Freedom school that she only saw one black teacher. White team members pointed out that the head of the COFO project, Charles McLaurin, was black; but the white WIMS women failed to see Barksdale’s larger point that there were too few black role models as teachers in the COFO schools.²³

And the WIMS women did not always agree on what issues were most important to civil rights efforts. White WIMS women especially commented on the dress and appearance of the student activists. Marjorie Damman, for example, was impressed that female students wore skirts. She commented as well about how clean their blouses, dresses and hands were.²⁴ Damman was a white Jewish (not practicing) social worker from New York who was also a public relations worker for Victor Weingarten, Steven Currier’s public relations consultant, and she was on the advisory board of the Urban League of Westchester. Damman, like many other northern WIMS women placed a high

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Team #5 New York to Ruleville, 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 18, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 70 of

value on the respectability and appearance of the activists. Jean Benjamin, a white member of the New York team, expressed anguish at the irreverent dress of a boy from Mississippi. Though he had already been jailed, he still walked daringly around Hattiesburg with a t-shirt with “CORE” on the front and “FREEDOM NOW” [emphasis original] on the back. Benjamin wrote in her reflection paper, “As much as I admire this boy’s courage, I felt strongly that this was going too far. Surely it is unwise to ‘ask for trouble’ in this way when there is a solid job of work to be done.”²⁵ While she was thinking about this one young black Mississippian’s t-shirt, Benjamin wrote about her disdain for the student activists’ appearance in general.

Can’t they be persuaded that they are harming the cause by looking so dirty and sloppy? The white Southerner thinks of them as outcasts from whatever society they came from! They would make so much better an impression in the South if they took the trouble to be better groomed.²⁶

In both cases, Benjamin felt that change might be possible with a more “respectable” appearance. Unlike the students, many of the women of WIMS felt that at the very least, students should acknowledge the Southern code of passive respectability, and try to live within it.

Whatever their opinions on education or civil rights in Mississippi, the most powerful effect of the WIMS visits was that individual members personally witnessed major civil rights projects and met with their leaders. Black New Yorker Marian Logan commented in the team debriefing,

internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

²⁵ Jean Benjamin, “Mississippi-July 1964,” Reflection Report, p.3, Folder 7, Box 14, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁶ Ibid.

But, when I read these things when I came back, it really was just ... too much. It was like ... Lena Horne told me when she came back from Jackson and the second day she was back, that Medgar Evers was killed. And she was so upset about it. Things like that you really feel because you've been part of the situation or a community for no matter how short of time it was, you know.²⁷

And white WIMS participant Gerry Kohlenberg experienced a similar transformation.

“And ... in talking to the people I’ve talked to, I feel that I am—I was where they are in terms of being nice white liberals, and I can’t explain why I’m not quite where they are anymore, except that I’m not.”²⁸ Another white participant, Ethel Haserodt, Executive Director of the YWCA of Clifton and Passaic, NJ wrote Dorothy Height to thank her for being included in the WIMS project, pointing out how the experience had opened her eyes. She wrote,

No matter how much I had read and heard about the difficulty of getting Negroes registered I simply did not know the depth to which our so called American democracy had degraded. Neither had I any real appreciation of the extent to which reprisals are a way of life in Mississippi. Nor had I any real appreciation of the courage of the Negroes in the face of such gigantic obstacles.²⁹

While the personal approach was limited, it did have a transformative effect on WIMS participants. After returning, Haserodt began speaking in front of local YWCA groups as well as local businessmen to discuss ways to open educational, economic, and dialogue opportunities for blacks in her northern community as well.³⁰ Ruth Batson and Pearl Willen, the president of the National Council of Jewish Women, returned to Boston and set up a new interracial organization to support busing program for children in Roxbury

²⁷ WIMS Team #1 1964 – Conference, 7-13-64, Side 1, internal transcription, 44-45.

²⁸ WIMS Team #2 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 7-8.

²⁹ Ethel Haserodt to Dorothy Height, February 5, 1965, Folder 6, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁰ Ibid.

and Dorchester. The program was launched in Fall 1966 and named METCO. Batson was director of METCO and Willen was on its board of directors.³¹

The team members also believed that their presence alone had been inspirational to southern women. Despite hesitation on the part of black and white middle class women to become involved in the movement, they still exclaimed that they were glad that WIMS teams had visited. Again, Logan noted,

But I do honestly feel, and I don't say it because I went--I could say it because I went, because I saw it with others--but I really believe that we helped in going. If only because we let them know that we cared, and there were other people who cared, too, who were coming."³²

Frances Haight, a white participant concurred: "We were welcomed. Uh, there was no question in my mind that they were really very happy that we were there. I think it kind of ... came to a head as far as I was concerned when a woman came up to me and she said you bothered to come all this way."³³ And Ilza Williams talked about how she was working to create a network of communication between the black women of Boston and Canton, who were grateful for the WIMS visits.³⁴

From what they learned, the members of WIMS members also began to advocate for the support of poor women in Mississippi and the country at large. Marjorie Damman expressed her distress that a 60-year-old woman with seven children had her welfare check slashed from \$67.00 by \$18.00 after receiving a few materials from the COFO Freedom Summer project. While Damman was appalled that this had happened in

³¹ Polly Cowan, "PSC Speech, Paterson, New Jersey September 17, 1966 Panel 'Building Bridges...'" Folder 21, Box 4, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³² WIMS Team #1 1964 – Conference, 7-13-64, Side 1, internal transcription, 40.

³³ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 2, internal transcription, 12-13.

Mississippi, Lash, Heckscher, and Kennedy pointed out that that the welfare policy was the same around the country, even in their own northern backyards.³⁵ Thus, through the experience of WIMS, its northern members learned about and taught each other about the plight of poor women across the United States.

Frances Haight noted that the situation had also become much more difficult for black welfare workers after 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education* (a problem that the teachers echoed). Haight recounted her conversation with the black supervisor of child welfare for black children in Hinds County. The supervisor could not attend any professional meetings in Mississippi or the Deep South, and her only professional communication occurred when she traveled to the North. This woman also claimed that Burt Beck, the Assistant Director of the National Association of Social Workers, bypassed her and her agency when he visited Mississippi. Haight exclaimed, “And I have been meaning to say to myself, get on the telephone and call up this man and tell him what you think.”³⁶ Thus, WIMS women hoped to use their national connections to improve the situation for poor black Mississippians and for black middle-class women who provided services to them.

But the WIMS approach had limitations as well. Frances Haight had expressed disappointment that the team that visited Ruleville was all white. When others joined the team from the Westport, Connecticut Society of Friends and the University of Mississippi, they too were white. Thus, COFO workers who met “WIMS” in this visit

³⁴ WIMS Team #2 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 26-7.

³⁵ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 2, internal transcription, 28.

³⁶ Ibid., 59.

met a racially segregated group not an interracial team. As Haight said, “All white--and the people that were added were all white people, so that we never were a team while we were there.”³⁷ In addition, Haight pointed out that poor planning on the part of the WIMS staff meant that her team saw a Freedom School when it was not open. Instead the COFO school in Ruleville opened for a special day just for their visitors to observe what they did when open.³⁸ Haight and the others felt that this setup was contrived and was not honest in its portrayal of Freedom School programs, but was intended to entertain the white WIMS members.

Even within the WIMS project, black and white participants barely knew each other before launching their visits. When Ruth Batson’s hostess asked her about the white women on her team, the Boston activist was disappointed that she could not tell her much about them because she did not know them herself. She could not even say what they did for a living. Batson’s host then pointed out a great irony of the project: why was it okay for her to come to Mississippi to open up lines of communication when none existed between white and black communities in Boston? She and Batson wondered how WIMS participants might transfer what they learned in Mississippi back home.³⁹

Yet during their trips to Mississippi, black and white WIMS members interacted and learned a good deal about one another; however, tensions developed among them as well. In a debriefing that followed each visit, Polly Cowan made a telling comment that aroused indignation among black team members. As she tried to explain a boycott that

³⁷ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 66.

³⁸ Ibid., 68-69.

³⁹ WIMS Team #2 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 18-19.

blacks in Mississippi were engaged in, she called herself a “white Negro.” This statement summarizes many of the problems inherent in the WIMS approach. Despite her limited experience of black life and culture, Cowan identified herself as part of the minority. Marian Logan shot back almost immediately with a simple, yet effective “No, you’re not”⁴⁰ Other white WIMS women held similar patronizing assumptions. Marjorie Damman credited white activists for work that black Mississippians had been engaged in for a long time. She vocalized the sentiments of many WIMS women when she claimed that because of Freedom Summer “these people in the Delta have been awakened to their own identity, their own significance and the[ir] own part--the part that they can play in their own destiny.”⁴¹ She thus implied that it took the influx of northern mostly white students to allow poor black people in the Delta to recognize their own worth.

Yet some WIMS women—white as well as black—were quick to correct such assertions of their white counterparts. Trude Lash reminded Damman that the movement had begun with local female leaders that were pivotal in Mississippi’s black freedom struggle. Lash argued:

I think we have to be very careful because you remember Mrs. Johnson, who is the head of the movement in Ruleville and Mrs. Williams and . . . Mrs. Hicks and Mrs. Hamer and Mrs. Haist[ph] from Drew who--they all have been working uh, ever since Bob Moses came around.⁴²

Still, white WIMS members like Cowan and Damman, who supported the movement with their time, energy, and finances, could never fully understand what it meant to be black and southern. Logan certainly wanted to stop Cowan from assuming that because

⁴⁰ WIMS Team #1 1964 – Conference, 7-13-64, Side 2, internal transcription, 38.

⁴¹ WIMS Team #5 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73.

she was a white supporter of the civil rights movement that she could claim to be a “white Negro.”

In addition to the difficulties they faced within WIMS, black WIMS participants also experienced a new level of discrimination and, like their white colleagues, increased awareness when they arrived in Mississippi. Beryl Morris noted:

And, I just had no idea of the problem. I've read about it, read it, seen it on television, but to actually go down and walk on Mississippi soil and meet the uh-- well, just to feel practically invisible. Because, I'm used to walking down the street and smiling at people and having the people smile at me. It's just one of those things. And I just didn't feel that way. You were looked at and uh, you were looked through as if you just weren't there. And you went on back to business.⁴³

In Mississippi black WIMS women were exposed to a new level of racism that they had never before experienced. It was this deep discrimination that convinced Ilza Williams that perhaps the problems in Mississippi were too severe to be dealt with by changing the hearts and minds of its citizens. Williams said that her three-day trip made her a better person, but it also made her aware that the problems were so deep that they could not be solved regionally. Williams believed that whether WIMS teams stayed three days or three months, changing the hearts and minds of local residents was both unlikely and insufficient. As she commented in her debriefing,

You--you believe that this is America and you know that if you speak out long enough, and if you speak to the right persons, you feel that you have a solution. But I just got the feeling that in Mississippi, everything was so dead. You know, that we were there and--and we would leave it dead.⁴⁴

⁴³ WIMS Copy, Boston Team, recording Date: Not given, Side 1, internal transcription, 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

Batson decided that the trip had been worth her time because seeing the severity of southern racial problems up close profoundly moved her. In the debriefing after her journey, Batson claimed,

[T]his [participation in the WIMS 1964 trip] was the most meaningful thing that I've ever done. I've never been South before. I had no idea of what the problem was, even though you think you know. And--but I got such a feeling of futility because I think I'm a red hot Civil Rights worker [chuckle], and then I go um, South and I see this enormous problem, and so much of it, and such a deep problem, and then I began to feel that actually I'm not doing too much. And it was an awfully desperate feeling that I had when I came home that, gee, no matter what I did it didn't seem to matter [chuckle], so immediately I got into the Mississippi Freedom Fight with the Massachusetts Democratic Delegation.⁴⁵

As a Massachusetts delegate to the Democratic National Convention, Batson would likely have supported the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) even if she had not gone to Mississippi, but meeting MFDP delegates on the WIMS trip solidified her support for their right to be seated. The trip also gave her added credibility at home. An energized Batson voiced her support of the MFDP to local politicians shortly after her return. She reported to her WIMS colleagues, "When I stood up there and I said to them, 'Now I just got back from Mississippi,' well you know eh, they--it was a--it made--it made all the difference in the world. Because they're used to people talking about what happens in the South when you haven't been there." Ilza Williams, another black woman from the Boston team, expressed a similar sentiment about the powerful impact Mississippi had on her. She explained, "When you speak to these groups, you give them so much that they can't turn back. It's that personal involvement... that's hard to translate."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴⁶ WIMS Team #2 1964 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 183.

Batson and Williams valued their trips with WIMS to Mississippi, but clearly questioned the overall effectiveness of a project based in working behind the scenes to create personal relationships and dialogue between different types of women as a method for change. Some of the southern white women also questioned the helpfulness of a group such as WIMS. Winifred Green, a member of Mississippians for Public Education who worked closely with Constance Curry of the American Friends Service Committee did not understand the effectiveness of WIMS' efforts until she saw them bear fruit in poverty projects in the Delta a few years later. "I truly confess I at one time thought I wish they would stay home and send the money," she said, but also acknowledged that she did not know much about their purpose in that first year. Instead, she went to meet with the women on Wednesday mornings to speak about MPE. She and Patt Derian joked with one another that their roles were to be "the white women of goodwill."⁴⁷ Green did comment that she believed the power of WIMS was in the change of heart that took place in the northerners themselves who came to witness the Freedom Summer firsthand and then contributed more money and time to the movement afterwards. But others, such as Willie Hume Bryant, were effusive in their praise of WIMS' efforts.

As a Mississippian (not born here but the mother of 4 [sic] born here) I meant to tell you that I appreciate all that you did for Mississippians this summer. I am sure it was not easy and took real consecration to Christ and courage beyond the average. You have our gratitude and the only words we have which are 'Thank you.' [emphasis and quotation marks original]⁴⁸

On August 15 1964, three days before the final WIMS 1964 team left New Jersey for Mississippi, Polly Cowan testified on behalf of Wednesdays in Mississippi to the US

⁴⁷ Winifred Green, interview by Rebecca Tuuri, September 17, 2007.

⁴⁸ Willie Hume Bryant to Susan Goodwillie, January 10, 1965, Folder 18, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Commission on Civil Rights in Jackson. Cowan used the personal stories of the WIMS women to show the level of violence that existed in Mississippi. Thus, even as WIMS participants spoke with Mississippians behind closed doors, their encounters in the South had some impact on the policies of the federal government. This meeting was closed to the press and public, but the Civil Rights Commission included a transcript in its report the following year. The meeting focused on the nature of the WIMS project; harassment or violence participants experienced, whether from private persons or local officials; the protection (or lack thereof) provided by state and local law enforcement; and finally WIMS' relationship with the FBI and Department of Justice.

In addition to testifying, Cowan submitted a six page, single-spaced report to the Commission, in which she described what she felt the women accomplished that summer. Cowan was proud of the range of women that the WIMS members met. "...[E]ven the most hostile southern woman has been impressed by the honesty and sincerity of team members, and the presence of northern women of such 'respectability' plus a quiet and dedicated approach did modify many of the most antagonistic attitudes."⁴⁹ She believed that WIMS had opened conversations among women in the South who would not have spoken to one another otherwise. "Many women who had felt completely alone in their thoughts discovered through our efforts that other women were like-minded and that it would be possible for them to work together."⁵⁰ According to Cowan, only a small number of black Mississippians had joined the civil rights movement. "Fear blocks well meaning citizens on both sides from identifying with the struggle."⁵¹ Cowan dismissed

⁴⁹ Commission on Civil Rights Report, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

any notion that real communication existed between black and white communities in Mississippi before “outside agitators” arrived. While many of the white southern women WIMS met argued that there was already some communication in place before the influx of northerners in 1964, Cowan noted: “A college professor gave the definitive answer to this time worn argument. He said: ‘There never was a bridge. There was a very narrow footpath, and that footpath led to nowhere.’” In addition, Cowan stressed,

In every conversation with southerners we have expressed our admiration and concern for COFO workers. In so doing, we have been able to dispel some of the misconceptions about the goals and personnel of the Mississippi Summer Project. This was necessary because southern newspapers and persistent rumors have kept antagonism toward COFO at a high pitch.⁵²

After Freedom Summer, the future of WIMS remained unclear. Polly Cowan did not expect to continue WIMS after the end of the last trip returned on August 20. With her testimony to the Civil Rights Commission completed, Cowan believed that the majority of her work with WIMS was done. However, some WIMS participants and the women of Mississippi felt otherwise, and WIMS would be reinstated with a new strategy for the summer of 1965.

⁵² Commission on Civil Rights Report, 5.

Chapter 5

“We have, happily, gone beyond the chit chat over tea cups stage”:

Creating the Female Expert, 1964-5

After the end of the trips, the women of WIMS became more active politically. After passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Height and Cowan became interested in investigating violations of Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act, which stated respectively that state and local governments could lose federal funding if they discriminated based on race and that employers could not discriminate because of race.¹

The transition of WIMS participants from “witnesses” to “experts” occurred at the same time that a transition in leadership was taking place within the larger civil rights movement. Following Freedom Summer, poor blacks in communities that had long been disfranchised grew stronger in their challenges to white political dominance not only in Mississippi, but in the nation at large. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) had registered hundreds of voters during Freedom Summer. That August, the group sent a delegation of 64 black and four white delegates to challenge the legitimacy of the all-white Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. President Johnson expected the convention to be his shining moment since he had no competition as the Democratic nominee in 1964. But the MFDP strongly challenged the legitimacy of the convention itself, beginning with Fannie Lou Hamer’s testimony before the Credentials Committee on August 22. Hamer wept as she told a national

¹ Introduced by President Kennedy. This act prohibited discrimination at public accommodation and gave the attorney general of the United States the power to become involved in lawsuits against states that maintained segregated school systems.

television audience about the horrible violence that she and other black Mississippians endured in order to vote. President Johnson quickly interrupted her speech by addressing the nation in an impromptu press conference. Moreover, worried about alienating white southern Democrats, Johnson refused to seat the MFDP. Instead, he sought a compromise by offering to recognize two of the 68 MFDP delegates as at-large delegates. MFDP members refused the offer as they did not want to give any legitimacy to a system that they felt unfairly excluded blacks from the voting process in Mississippi.

The MFDP's actions at the Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City suggested a larger shift that was occurring in the civil rights movement. The MFDP challenged northern whites to become more involved in the movement by supporting programs launched by the black poor.² During the summer of 1964, WIMS had worked with many of MFDP's leaders—Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Victoria Gray. WIMS members, including Ruth Batson, also recalled visiting the Freedom Democratic Party meetings during the trips. Now they had to decide how to respond to their Atlantic City challenge.

While WIMS was supportive of the women leaders of MFDP when visiting Mississippi that summer, they were nearly silent about the MFDP challenge in debriefing sessions and reports from late August. Instead, WIMS re-imagined its role in ways that were quite distinct from the increasingly black-led grassroots efforts of groups like SNCC and MFDP, and the transformation was supported by both black and white WIMS participants.

² Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 331.

Two days before Hamer's speech, the final WIMS 1964 team returned to New Jersey. Edith Savage, the Supervisor at the Mercer County Youth House and member of the NACW, NAACP, CWU, City of Trenton Planning Board, and the Trenton YWCA, was one of two black members out of seven in her team.³ In a letter dated September 13, Savage recommended that future WIMS programs should include the following: "The strong need of trained social workers for the purpose of health and welfare needs [and] the general concern for the health of the children of Mississippi." She also advocated a "People-to-People program" where a northern family would sponsor a southern black family for ten dollars a month, the amount that they could make and still receive welfare. And finally she called for efforts to "induce the Federal Government to intervene by sending members of the Peace Corps to train adults in special skills in order to increase their earning power."⁴ Cowan wrote Savage four days later to encourage her to write up her suggestions in a formal report. Cowan and other WIMS leaders took up Savage's suggestions and focused on building future programs that highlighted their members' expertise as teachers, social workers, and scholars in fields related to child development. By promoting themselves as trained experts, they promoted a hierarchical system far removed from SNCC and MFDP's embrace of organic leadership emerging from below. In this way, WIMS mirrored larger and more established civil rights organization, like the NAACP and SCLC, that relied on a circle of seasoned leaders. What differentiated WIMS from these groups, however, was their insistence on female leadership and women's expertise.

³ She marries and becomes Edith Savage Jennings years after the end of WIMS.

⁴ Edith Savage to Polly Cowan, September 13, 1964, Folder 3, Box 15, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

On September 18, 1964, the National Council of Churches called together civil rights leaders in New York City to discuss the future of the movement. According to John Dittmer, “White liberals and black moderates wasted no time in moving to undermine the SNCC-led COFO coalition.”⁵ SNCC was largely missing from this meeting, as the group’s main leaders were on a tour of Africa. Instead, leaders of NAACP, CORE, and SCLC, along with a large number of white activists (who comprised a majority of the meeting), condemned what they saw as the divisive tactics of SNCC, MFDP, and COFO. Leaders of more established organizations, such as the SCLC’s Andrew Young, called for “development of a ‘structure of cooperation.’”⁶ Allard Lowenstein, too, encouraged a centralized structure for civil rights activities occurring in the South after Freedom Summer. Dittmer writes, “Such a structure was necessary, Lowenstein argued, because COFO had excluded NAACP leaders like the Reverend R. L. T. Smith and had made ‘authoritarian decisions [that] others have no way of escaping.’ The new governing body would be ‘regularized and democratized and broadened in its base.’... ‘We need structured democracy,’ Lowenstein concluded, ‘not amorphous democracy.’”⁷ In the fall and winter of 1964, officials in the NAACP, NCC and ADA were moving to “isolate SNCC, COFO, and the MFDP and to create a new leadership base in Mississippi.”⁸

Perhaps whites and moderate blacks were calling for more structure because they knew that some grassroots leaders were questioning the role of elites (both white and black) in the movement. Fall 1964 marked a time of uncertainty for SNCC. Some in the

⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 315.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 316.

group wanted to incorporate leaders from within local black communities and extend the Freedom Summer. James Forman, for example, introduced a plan to expand the summer project to encompass the entire “southern Black Belt.”⁹ At the same time, social unrest rocked communities around the country. Race riots erupted across the country in summer 1964—including New York City, Rochester, Jersey City, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Through violent confrontations and other means, black communities began to question their traditional deference to white authority. For many civil rights activists—black and white—this was a disheartening development. Calls for “structure” and for “experts” offered one way for northern leaders to maintain their presence in the southern movement without necessarily challenging segregation in their own backyards and for southern moderates to reclaim their role in the face of more militant groups. WIMS women followed this same path, focusing on integration in and assistance to the “needy” in Mississippi.¹⁰

Unlike SNCC, which began seriously questioning the role of whites in the organization, Cowan and the members of WIMS maintained their commitment to interracial work. Even as the larger movement began to splinter along racial lines in 1965, WIMS members like Rae Dudley, the wife of the first black U.S. Ambassador (to Liberia from 1949 to 1953), continued to speak about the importance of school desegregation. And the group as a whole maintained its strong commitment to interracialism. Accordingly, WIMS sent trained teachers and other social service

⁸ Ibid., 318

⁹ Ibid., 318.

¹⁰ At the same time, however, SNCC was becoming a less democratic organization as more decisions were made with input from fewer participants, and increasingly in the Atlanta office. See Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

workers—black and white--to aid in Head Start and civil rights projects around Mississippi.

But it would take some time for Cowan and other WIMS leaders to develop this new approach. Cowan was not planning to send another set of teams to Mississippi in the summer of 1965, but after the end of Freedom Summer, her thinking changed. She read the reflection papers of the 48 WIMS participants and attended most of the debriefing sessions. She heard northern women express how the visits to Mississippi, though brief, had made a profound impact on them personally, renewing their commitment to integration efforts in Mississippi and at home.¹¹ Cowan also heard stories of Mississippi women who expressed their gratitude that WIMS members had come to witness what was going on in their state personally.

Still, Cowan was not sure if these southerners wanted to have WIMS return in the summer of 1965. On November 12-13, 1964, Cowan organized a conference sponsored by the NCNW to discuss how WIMS could help implement Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. The meeting took place in Washington, D.C. at the same time as the NCNW's Annual Convention. Thirty northern team members and ten southern "friends" as well as representatives from the Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare; Labor; Commerce; and the Civil Rights Commission attended the conference. While the women learned about Title VI, they also affirmed their desire to reinstate WIMS for another year. According to Cowan and Height,

It was the women of Mississippi who attended the two-day meeting who tipped the decision. With a great deal of difficulty these women, who had benefited from the project literally begged that the program be continued. They felt that

¹¹ Polly Cowan and Dorothy Height, "'Wednesdays in Mississippi' 1964," February 1965, Folder 8, Box 12, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

WIMS-1964 started something invaluable, something which, though just begun, possessed a great deal of potential for wide and significant expansion. They even volunteered to house all WIMS teamworkers who might visit Mississippi if the program were continued in 1965, and to make all local arrangements for team visits and local contacts. They felt that with extended civil rights activity in Mississippi during the summer 1965 the presence of an ‘eminently respectable’ group of persons who could not be branded ‘activist’ would be needed more than ever to supplant violence with reason.¹²

Polly Cowan and Susie Goodwillie also received a handful of Christmas cards from southern white women who confirmed this desire for WIMS’ return. One woman wrote, “I appreciate most sincerely your willingness to understand the complexities of the situation here and your efforts to help and encourage us.”¹³ Yet another claimed that her wish for New Years was that WIMS would return—“I hope that 1965 will bring you back this way. I believe we’re making some progress in Mississippi and that the desire to improve our image will ensure a better climate for visitors.”¹⁴ But one wonders whether they were honestly interested in promoting integrated projects in Jackson or if they were more concerned with creating an “image” of progress.

In much the same way, Cowan hoped that her project would be understood and respected by influential policymakers. Although they claimed they wanted to be “under the radar” as a civil rights organization, Cowan and Goodwillie publicized the

¹² Cowan and Height, “‘Wednesdays in Mississippi’ 1964 report,” February 1965, Folder 8, Box 12, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH. The only Mississippi woman who I can confirm attended the 1964 NCNW convention was Thelma Barnes from Greenville MS. Though I also suspect that Ann Hewitt and possibly Patt Derian were there. There were many northern WIMS participants including black participants – Flossie M. Dedmond, Beryl Morris, Ilza Williams, and Marie Barksdale and white ones– Wilhelmina Hetzel, Claudia Heckscher, Joan Moore, Trude Lash, Hannah Levin, Laya Wiesner, Justine Randers-Pherson, Mary Cushing Niles, see NCNW, “Convention Registrations,” [November 1964], p.2, Folder 176, Box 16, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹³ Jean [Carroll] to Polly Cowan, December 1964, Folder 6, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

accomplishments of WIMS to high-ranking women figures in the federal government. In February, they sent their 1964 report to such figures as Edith Green, the Congresswoman from Oregon; Don Edwards, Congressman from California; Muriel Humphrey, the wife of vice president Hubert Humphrey; and Maurine Neuberger, Oregon Senator. Cowan sought to appeal especially to powerful women in the political world. In this sense, they sought to carve a separate space for women's activism, different from the burgeoning feminist movement, but with one similar aim—to take seriously women's activism and to highlight it as equally important to men's activism.

While deciding how to proceed, WIMS continued to investigate and report violations of Title VI. On January 28, Dorothy Height, Ann Hewitt, Susie Goodwillie, and Cowan flew to Washington to attend an all-day meeting sponsored by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to discuss these provisions of the Civil Rights Act. Vice President Humphrey was the keynote speaker. Topics included job training, agricultural and rural development, housing and community development, and education. In her report, Cowan wrote: "Pardon me if I boast, but the meeting was startlingly similar to the one we called for WIMS in November 1964. Many of the same people who spoke to us were panelists at this gathering of 500 people."¹⁵ She noted that several women affiliated with WIMS as team members or representatives of affiliated organizations were among the participants.

¹⁴ Florence Gooch to Susie Goodwillie and Polly Cowan, December 30, 1964, Folder 6, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁵ Polly Cowan, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," February 1, 1965, Folder 19, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

WIMS hoped to ensure that Title VI was being enforced in Mississippi, since the state received \$750 million annually in federal assistance.¹⁶ To report on what was happening in the state, WIMS relied heavily on contacts they had made the previous summer. Cowan very much appreciated the “insider” status of southern white women like Patt Derian, Ann Hewitt, and Florence Gooch, who reported their findings to WIMS. But these southern women were also too afraid of reprisals to report violations of the Civil Rights Act directly to the federal government, so the New York based WIMS office sent the complaints to the appropriate federal agency. As a result, WIMS intervened in several cases in Mississippi. As early as October 1964, Polly Cowan wrote Robert Weaver, the administrator of the federal Housing and Home Finance Agency, to inform him that the rent of Annie Devine, the Canton civil rights leader who had worked with WIMS in the summer of 1964, was doubled by the local housing authority, most likely because of her voter registration activity. Cowan acknowledged that the Civil Rights Commission already knew about this situation, but she wanted to add the voice of WIMS to the case. She wrote, “I am writing you to express our concern, to let you know that we care deeply and that we will continue to watch the situation carefully, with high hopes that you will be able to correct this particular injustice and prevent any future occurrences of this kind.”¹⁷

While WIMS members from the North and the South investigated violations of the Civil Rights Act, they also became involved in the War on Poverty efforts launched by the Johnson administration. Americans had become increasingly aware of poverty

¹⁶ Cowan and Height, “‘Wednesdays in Mississippi’ 1964 report,” February 1965.

¹⁷ Polly Cowan to Robert C. Weaver, October 28, 1964, Folder 6, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

thanks to several important studies published in the early 1960s. In his 1962 book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, Michael Harrington pointed out that although the United States was indeed a wealthy nation, within its shadow lay a large indigent population. Harrington proposed that the federal government provide financial resources and infrastructure to end poverty.¹⁸ Other scholars also recognized this problem, and argued that it could be solved. The Johnson administration took note. On January 8, 1964, only a little over a month after taking office, President Johnson announced that his administration would fight a “War on Poverty.” His efforts to combat economic injustice greatly expanded on the Kennedy administration’s approach to civil rights. Now the federal government sought to make American society more equal in education, housing, and employment. Johnson proposed creating a “Great Society” based on a liberal notion of universal equality.¹⁹

The President then tried to enlist the help of the business community, believing he could forge unity between it and the poor.²⁰ In summer 1964, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, which created programs such as Job Corps, Head Start, community development projects, and work-study funds for college students. Though many wealthy Americans balked at these programs, Johnson was able to convince the majority that these programs were necessary both economically and morally. He convinced the public that helping the poor would help everyone, even the wealthy,

¹⁸ Maris A. Vinovskis *The Birth of Head Start: Preschool Education Policies in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6-7.

¹⁹ Bruce J. Shulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 1995), 84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85

become richer and that the alternative would only lead to disorder.²¹ Between 1965 and 1967 Congress passed over 150 bills that advanced Johnson's War on Poverty, including health care for elderly and poor people, community development projects, and job training programs.

WIMS was ready to spring into action around these initiatives this time playing the role of expert and facilitator for their Mississippi constituents. Over the next few months, WIMS researched how Mississippians could take advantage of the burgeoning grant opportunities from the federal government. In a letter to Jane Holden of Columbus Ohio, Goodwillie wrote, "As you may know, our role in Mississippi will be somewhat expanded this year. We have, happily, gone beyond the chit chat over tea cups stage, we think, and several leaders from within the Mississippi community have suggested special jobs that we might do."²² On April 2, only two days after Goodwillie sent her letter, William Taylor of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights argued that while building understanding had been crucial to the efforts of Freedom Summer, "additional efforts should be made to bring to the South persons best able to communicate needed skills, in education, welfare, and community organization..."²³ The WIMS staff took heed and recruited only women who they believed possessed such skills. In spring 1965 Goodwillie, now the WIMS executive secretary, wrote to the wife of the Dean of Humanities at the Rhode Island School of Design, rejecting her application to join

²¹ Ibid., 72.

²² Susie Goodwillie to Jane Holden, 31 March 1965, Folder 23, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²³ Remarks of William L. Taylor, Staff Director-Designate, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights at the 17th Annual Conference of the National Civil Liberties Clearing House, Washington D.C., April 2, 1965 p.11, Folder 18, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

WIMS. Goodwillie noted that while she had much life experience as a mother and housewife, WIMS now needed women with professional education and particular areas of expertise.²⁴ Thus, despite the group's previous emphasis on participants' roles as mothers and caretakers, it now sought members who had social work and educational experience, especially to work with the new Office of Economic Opportunity's (OEO) Head Start program.

In 1965, the OEO's Community Action Program launched an eight-week summer Head Start initiative, a pre-school program for disadvantaged youth. After a January 12 speech to Congress in which Johnson called for federal support for preschools, the OEO moved fast to establish Head Start programs for that summer. In 1964, WIMS had portrayed itself as a project of concerned mothers, visiting freedom schools and community centers and working with organizations like Womanpower Unlimited and Mississippians for Public Education. Many of the participants also had professional skills as teachers, social workers, and community organizers, but these were not highlighted in 1964. Now Head Start provided a perfect opportunity for WIMS to make the transition from personal bridge building to expert consulting.

That spring WIMS took steps toward implementing Head Start in Jackson. In late February, Cowan and Ann Hewitt, WIMS "angel" and a southern member of Churchwomen United, spoke with Dudley Morris, an officer of the OEO. They learned that the government planned on spending \$26 million for 8 weeks in July and August,

²⁴ Susie Goodwillie to Tiny Hoffman, June 16, 1965, Folder 20, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

spending about \$85 dollars per child per month.²⁵ Their meeting allowed them to better understand the program and offer suggestions of women in Mississippi who might want to develop or become part of a Head Start project. Morris told Cowan that OEO had made contact with Millsaps College, a white, private, Methodist school in Jackson, to support Head Start projects. Cowan and Hewitt voiced concerns about this choice since Millsaps remained segregated, but Morris insisted that Millsaps was perfect since the federal government wanted the support of the local government, which respected the college.

On March 2, Cowan flew to Jackson and stayed with Patt Derian, a white supporter who had been active in WIMS and in Mississippians for Public Education. She met with local women to discuss how to create Head Start programs.²⁶ She then shared the information she gained with key figures in New York. On April 30, Cowan met with representatives from Martin Deutsch's Institute for Study and Research in Pre-School Education in the city. White Jackson "angels" Florence Gooch and Ann Hewitt, staff members Susie Goodwillie and Margery Gross, and prospective 1965 team member Carol Guyer also attended this meeting. They hoped to learn how WIMS could best deploy volunteers to assist the Head Start program.

On March 8, Johnson made public the "President's Report to the Nation on Poverty," in which he revealed plans to spend \$50 million on Head Start classes in the summer of 1965. With only four months before the project began, OEO director Sargent Shriver frantically wrote 35,000 letters to public health directors, school superintendents,

²⁵ Polly Cowan to Dudley Morris, February 24, 1965, Folder 11, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

mayors, and social service commissioners to announce the program. He also contacted the 300 poorest counties to alert them to funding opportunities for Head Start, with an application deadline of April 15. The OEO wanted programs that would help children grow and develop so they had to offer educational lessons as well as health and social services. The programs would be financed by the OEO up to 90 percent of their cost; 10 percent must be provided by the local community in cash or kind, that is by providing space, equipment, utilities or personnel.

Despite the short notice, the response to Shriver's call for applications was overwhelming. Many of the staff members who sorted through the flood of applications were unqualified, and this helped lead to a great disparity in the quality of programs offered.²⁷ One scholar has noted that the "hectic pace led some observers to call the entire operation 'Project Rush-Rush.'"²⁸ Indeed, OEO staff member Polly Greenberg remembers the reckless way in which projects were approved, with OEO funding approximately 82 percent of the proposals.²⁹ By mid-May, Johnson announced that 1,500 summer Head Start projects would operate 11,000 Child Development Centers, servicing 530,000 children.³⁰ The total cost totaled \$84 million, or \$150 per student in the eight-week program. Edward Zigler, a member of the planning team, recalled that Deputy Director Jules Sugarman assured him that they would cut unsuccessful programs, but the OEO had a difficult time cutting funding for any Head Start programs.³¹

²⁶ Polly Cowan to Gwendolyn Wallace, February 24 1965, Folder 11, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁷ Vinovskis 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

In addition to the hectic schedule for proposals, the Community Action Program, Head Start's parent organization, stressed the concept of maximum feasible participation from poor communities. Although the OEO sent out a booklet saying that the summer projects needed well-trained professionals, it also encouraged parents and community members to become involved as volunteers or paid employees of the center. This policy converged with Johnson's agenda, but it also led to serious conflict between local and national authorities. Although most Head Start programs functioned without controversy, the Children's Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) made national headlines. Northern and Mississippi civil rights workers joined together with Mary Holmes Junior College to create the largest Head Start program, running 85 centers to serve 6,000 total children. Although this project was honored as the best Head Start program in the nation, local critics of CDGM claimed that MFDP teachers, many of whom were poor and black, were unqualified. Senator John Stennis, a Democrat from Mississippi and a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, opposed funding the CDGM because he believed it was supporting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

In the face of white critics such as Stennis, WIMS became involved in the fight to help save Head Start funding for CDGM. WIMS worked with the pro-CDGM organization Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP) to aid War on Poverty projects at-risk of being attacked by local governments. The organization was chaired by union leader Walter Reuther, and Rabbi Richard Hirsch served as secretary. It included representatives from a range of progressive organizations.³² On June 2, 1965, the

³² Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, "Memorandum On Meeting Of CCAP Task Force On Head Start Project of Office of Economic Opportunity," June 9, 1965, Folder 11, Box 7, Series 19, NABWH.

Executive Committee of CCAP met to discuss how it could best assist projects that “were designated as among those most likely to need citizen organizations support.”³³

Individuals in affiliated organizations would take responsibility to contact at risk Head Start projects—such as CDGM—and offer help. A small number of unaffiliated individuals, most notably WIMS members, also attended CCAP meetings. On June 9, Cowan, Goodwillie, Caroline Smith, and Oceola Walden (the latter two working as Mississippi staff persons during summer 1965) participated in a meeting to discuss Head Start. And when Shriver and the OEO withdrew funding for CDGM one year later, CCAP spearheaded the campaign to reverse the decision.

In addition, Cowan anticipated and reacted to many of the problems that would eventually plague the Head Start program. Long before critics claimed that unprepared workers headed too many projects, Cowan wrote to Sargent Shriver that while she was thrilled at seeing so many people interested in Head Start,

We have been concerned, however, that many of the individual communities which have received grants from the O.E.O. for the Project have not seemed to have available to them, in planning curriculum, the guidance of people trained and experienced specifically in the education of pre-school children from culturally deprived environments.³⁴

She suggested that Shriver engage Martin Deutsch’s Institute to conduct training programs for volunteers and professional staff. Julius Richmond, Program Director for Project Head Start, wrote Cowan that he appreciated her interest in the training aspect of Head Start, but that the OEO would be using the National University Extension Association and its 108 member affiliates “which has had extensive experience in short

³³ Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, “Memorandum On Meeting Of CCAP Task Force.”

³⁴ Polly Cowan to Sargent Shriver, May 7 1965, Folder 11, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

term programs of this type.”³⁵ Cowan then went ahead and encouraged potential 1965 WIMS participants to attend Head Start Training sessions in their local communities.³⁶

Reflecting this new emphasis on training and expert knowledge, Cowan sought to learn more about the Head Start program from academic experts and disseminate that knowledge to Mississippians as well as future WIMS participants. For her teams, she requested a list of books on racial and ethnic relations. One of the books recommended by the Institute for Developmental Studies was *My Dog Rinty* by Ellen Tarry and Marie Hall Ets, and Tarry was recruited as a member of the 1965 WIMS team from New York. In a June letter to Ann Hewitt, Margery Gross suggested that the WIMS members bring books toys, games, and dolls to Mississippi. Gross created this list from the suggestions of various developmental institutes and libraries in New York City. The women then planned to spend ten dollars each on materials to take to Jackson that summer.

On June 1, Goodwillie sent out a letter to prospective WIMS team members in which she pointed out that the work “will be very different from WIMS’ experiences last summer.” She sent information to help them, as northerners, understand that the problems of pre-school education in Mississippi are “very different in kind and degree from those we have in our own communities.” WIMS would later send a kit of background material to participants, which included statistical information about the socio-economic, educational and political state of Mississippi, a glossary of terms related to Mississippi projects, suggested team member responsibilities, itineraries, staff telephone numbers and addresses, legal contacts, safety precautions, and even wardrobe

³⁵ Julius Richmond to Polly Cowan, May 28 1965, Folder 11, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

suggestions. They also sent an analysis of the Civil Rights Act, with special emphasis on Title VI, and a report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hearing in Jackson in February. They also requested that each team member write a report about her visit to Mississippi.³⁷

Goodwillie claimed that Head Start was “desperate for trained people in the field of Education, and our team will be doing all they can to contribute needed skills and expertise to the HEAD START projects in Mississippi.”³⁸ The women offered assistance as teachers and even as lawyers in some projects. Goodwillie also mentioned that they hoped to have one member of each team who was a qualified speaker who would talk on any subject of choice—except civil rights. This was because she and Cowan wanted to encourage whites, who might be turned off by a discussion of civil rights, to attend these events. In the process, Cowan hoped to attract an interracial audience that would learn something about education, social work, or youth programs from a northern expert.³⁹ In a letter dated June 16, 1965, Goodwillie quoted Mississippi liberal Patt Derian that more than anything Head Start “just needed white faces in those classrooms so desperately...we’ll need everybody.”⁴⁰

While Cowan focused on recruiting experts, she still sought women who would not be too public in their condemnation of segregation. She wanted WIMS participants

³⁶ Susie Goodwillie to Prospective Team Members, 1965 Memorandum #1, No date, Folder 19, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁷ Susie Goodwillie to Team Member, June 1, 1965, Folder 12, Box 7, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁸ Susie Goodwillie to Sister Claire Marie, May 31, 1965, Folder 22, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁹ Susie Goodwillie to Jane Holden, 31 March 1965, Folder 23, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

who “could communicate without arousing hostility, who could listen as well as talk, who were aware of the national scope of social ills that concerned them, and who were committed to resolving civil rights problems in the North as well as the South.”⁴¹ And she remained committed to the view that respectability--in the form of proper feminine behavior and dress--was as crucial to WIMS success as experts as it had been to their work as witnesses. Thus she suggested a wardrobe that included: “light weight dresses, one medium dressy dress, a sweater or thin jacket, for air conditioned cars and homes, comfortable walking shoes and a pair of dressy shoes, a rain coat, ‘wash and dry’ cloths (you may have to ‘freshen up’ on the fly), white gloves.”⁴²

The structure of the second year as well as the women’s appearance looked very much like the first. Seven teams from New York, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Chicago, Washington, Minneapolis, and Boston traveled to Mississippi between July 6 and August 26. Before these teams visited, WIMS sent four art teachers from Boston as experts to help Head Start instructors incorporate art projects into their classrooms. Each team flew to Jackson, where staff members Caroline Smith, a white writer and research analyst from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Oceola Walden, a black social worker from Albany, Georgia, met them.⁴³ Some groups stayed to work with Jackson’s Head Start program while others traveled to other projects in smaller towns. During the summer, forty-eight women went to Mississippi with organized WIMS teams while six others

⁴⁰ WIMS staff to Caroline Smith, June 16, 1965, Folder 19, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴¹ Margery Gross and Frances Tenenbaum, “Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report,” 6-7.

⁴² “Suggestions for Supplies and Wardrobe to Take to Mississippi,” Folder 10, Box 8, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

went on special assignments. They visited Jackson, Greenwood, Greenville, Oxford, and Philadelphia, Mississippi.

As experts, WIMS members met with southern counterparts in professional organizations. For black southern women who had been excluded from local professional groups, WIMS provided an important conduit to national organizations. Three northern black social workers met with three white and five black southern social workers in an evening meeting where the women were able to openly express their concerns. WIMS also clarified how southern black women could become members of the National Association of Social Workers. In addition, two librarians met with black and white officials to find ways to facilitate integrating libraries and improving these facilities in Mississippi. They also spoke with staff and leaders in the Mississippi Library Commission, the executive secretary of the state association of Negro teachers, a librarian at Jackson State College, librarians from the public school system, the head of the Jackson Municipal Library System, and chairman of National Library week for Mississippi. Finally Dr. Anne Keller a pediatrician from Philadelphia, met with doctors of the Jackson Medical Committee on Human Rights (MCHR), a team of mostly white, northern medical professionals who came to Mississippi to aid the civil rights activists in Freedom Summer and later civil rights demonstrations.⁴⁴ Upon her return she was able to secure equipment and supplies for the MCHR as well as the larger black community.⁴⁵

⁴³ Draft letter to 1965 participants, June 10, 1965, Folder 6, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁴ For more on this organization, see John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York City: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Margery Gross and Frances Tenenbaum, "Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report," 21-2.

That summer WIMS contributed its expertise primarily in the fields of educational instruction and psychology. It worked closely with the Jackson Head Start program, headed by Esther Sampson, the black director, and Ann Hewitt, the white assistant director and WIMS “angel.” The planning committee was also integrated and included several women who worked with WIMS 1964. These women and their husbands worked with Head Start to provide psychological, medical and legal services. By the end of the summer, the members of the planning committee were meeting in each other’s homes. The WIMS final report stated that this was something that “would certainly not have been possible last year or without the impetus of a program such as Head Start.”⁴⁶ Still the Jackson Head Start program, like many others around the country, suffered from a lack of local support. The state refused to let any schools, black or white, be used for the integrated Head Start projects. Instead, the projects had to be run out of black churches, parochial schools, community centers, and one Unitarian church (no other white churches agreed to host the programs). Despite these handicaps, the Jackson program included 1200 children in 80 classes in 18 Head Start centers. This was a welcome addition in a state with no kindergartens or compulsory school law.⁴⁷

Although they aided projects around the state, WIMS members did not have universally positive responses to their time spent with Jackson Head Start. Carol Guyer of the New York team expressed difficulty with the project: “Yes, I . . . felt that in Jackson that . . . we were fifth wheels. That they were courteous to us, but that they were so busy, the people who were involved in Head Start, for instance... obviously were

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

burdened by our presence there.”⁴⁸ After hearing Guyer’s frustration, Cowan lamented that Jacksonians did not utilize the skills of the women who visited: “Except they had the four art teachers in there, and they still didn’t appreciate that something could be done by our teams.”⁴⁹ She went on to claim, “But Jackson has--for us, for Head Start, was not a success. It was--it was something we had to test, and we failed.”⁵⁰ But Guyer and Jean Dillinger felt that the problem lay more with WIMS being out of touch with the needs of the locals than any lack of appreciation for their skills. Guyer’s experience as chairwoman of the contemporary arts committee in New York and Dillinger’s as chairwoman of the Christian World Missions of CWU were of little use to Jackson Head Start, which put them to work organizing the medical records of the registrants. Unlike Cowan who seemed frustrated with this situation, Guyer and Dillinger came to understand the needs of the Jackson project. As Guyer stated: “Well this is all they needed anybody to do. They didn’t want anyone to come in and teach at that point. They had to get their records straight.”⁵¹ These two team members argued that their job was not to impose their expert advice on the centers, but instead to offer help according to the Mississippians’ needs. Guyer claimed in her debriefing, “Well that one has [to be] prepared just to serve as they see fit, really, and to forget what you think your own ... qualifications are and just to serve as needed.”⁵²

⁴⁸ WIMS Team #1 1965 Conference Mississippi Review, Team #1 New York to Mississippi, 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 22, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. Page 48-9 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 50-51.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 54-55.

⁵¹ Ibid., 52.

⁵² Ibid., 52-53.

WIMS also tried to lend its expert knowledge to CDGM's program at its headquarters in Mt. Beulah, in some cases by simply offering white bodies to comply with federal orders for integrated Head Start programs. In the spring WIMS had attended an initial organizing meeting of CDGM and later observed the efforts of its staff in Mt. Beulah.⁵³ Rae Cohn, a member of the National Board of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Philadelphia team, stated in a brief report that the Child Development Program was great in that its "emphasis is placed on the community around the child, by encouraging mothers to take an interest through the PTA."⁵⁴ She recommended that more funding be given to this organization. While one woman described the Mt. Beulah projects as "disorganized organization," another pointed out that it met the needs at hand, providing education, food, and happiness to students and staff.⁵⁵

WIMS did make one important intervention in 1965 by challenging sexism in the movement, including Head Start, through the presence of female experts. And the problem was formidable, rooted in the claims of white male experts and black grassroots leaders. CDGM leaders, including Tom Levin, stressed the need for women to defer to male authority figures in front of children at the Head Start program. In her book *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes*, written in 1968 following the collapse of the CDGM Head Start program, Polly Greenberg was clearly influenced by Moynihan's psychological explanation for black dysfunction. She wrote that in the black community there was not a presence of strong, black male authority figures.

⁵³ Gross and Tenenbaum, "Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report," 8.

⁵⁴ Rae Cohn to Susie Goodwillie, August 26, 1965, Series 19, Box Folder NCNW Papers

⁵⁵ Gross and Tenenbaum, "Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report," 10.

Potent men of this kind were not in most homes to block infantile fantasies, the search for magical fulfillment through a powerful mother, waves of rage at frustration and disappointment, and unlikely aspirations that resulted in feelings of complete inadequacy and inaction. Therefore, childlike feelings remained childlike, instead of being channeled in directions that were useful to adults. The cycle perpetuated itself. Passive men produced passive little boys who sought powerful mothers and wives, who married passive men and produced passive little boys. So poor Negro family structure and its products were different from middle-class family structure and products.⁵⁶

Greenberg pointed out that Levin believed that strong authority figures could also exist in the public schools and influence the black community in this way:

Nonmatriarchal [sic] women interacting productively with men of strong character didn't need to be in the home, as long as they were in the children's immediate, trusted community. Therefore, concluded Tom, it was neither stimulation nor male teachers CDGM most needed, but opportunities for children to see virile male members of *their* communities functioning in significant roles, and women from *their* communities working creatively instead of dominantly with these men.⁵⁷

While CDGM could see beyond the idea of the expert as a middle- and upper- class individual, it but could not break out of the gendered expectation of what a healthy familial relationship looked like. The WIMS experts challenged the idea that women should *not* be experts in the schools.

In addition to working with Head Start, WIMS women also participated as educational experts in two desegregation institutes at the University of Mississippi. Over 120 teachers, principals, and superintendents attended the two sessions. The first ran from June 10-July 19 and the second from July 19-August 20. The program sought to disseminate information about desegregation to school personnel, aid participants in creating school policies, and finally create a program designed to assist schools affected

⁵⁶ Polly Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes: A Biased Biography of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), a Story of Maximum Feasible Poor Parent Participation*, 1969 (Washington D.C.: Youth Policy Institute, 1990), 99.

by desegregation.⁵⁸ Kate Wilkinson, the assistant director of the institutes, was completing a Masters at the University of Mississippi and was also a WIMS “angel.” She encouraged WIMS members to serve as experts during the two days before or after their “Wednesday” in Mississippi. The staff at the Desegregation Institutes were delighted to have the assistance of WIMS.⁵⁹ Indeed, Gabe Beard, a Desegregation Institute staff person from the University of Mississippi confirmed the positive effect that WIMS women had on the institutes:

I got to sit through all these meetings where these people would come from Yankeeland to talk to us, and I got to see these teachers black and white—cause this was an integrated group, [and it was] the first time many of these white teachers were involved with these black teachers in the same way and then the superintendents would come and they too went through these programs, and it had to impact them because they’d never seen people like this....They’d never seen educated, brilliant black folks...like this.⁶⁰

Six 1965 team members and four additional WIMS women attended the institutes, including Dr. Jeanne Noble, a black NYU faculty member in the School of Education, and Dorothy Height. According to WIMS, “For the first time, the teacher-students were exposed to prominent Negroes and they were impressed by them.” But Height also insisted that her race gave her something in common with all blacks, claiming, “Other Negroes and I stand alike as we try to be served in a hotel or a restaurant. I’m no higher than the one who is furthest down because we are really indeed equal when it comes to justice and to voting.” Many of the white participants claimed that they would never hold the same prejudiced views after meeting Height while Noble was asked to speak in three

⁵⁷ Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes*, 99-100.

⁵⁸ Polly Cowan to Susie Buffett, June 1-2, 1965, Folder 27, Box 1, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵⁹ Gross and Tenenbaum, “Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report,” 11-12.

Mississippi communities. Kate Wilkinson was also invited to visit northern institutions, including a trip to Rutgers University, where Hannah Levin was a psychology professor, and the Fellowship House in Philadelphia.⁶¹

WIMS continued its focus on expert advice concerning interracial education in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner had been murdered the previous summer. With the help of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, WIMS organized two special trips for teams from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to visit its southern namesake. There WIMS women helped local white and black residents establish a branch of Mississippians for Public Education. In a Jackson meeting, the black leaders from Philadelphia, Mississippi met with white southern counterparts to hear the northern women's suggestions about community development. One black participant, Mrs. Lillie Jones was known as "the biggest little woman in the world" and had worked with WIMS the previous summer. She had ten children and continued to insist on equal treatment from whites in Mississippi. When Philadelphia Mississippi officials cut off the water supply for Freedom Summer volunteers, Jones let the students use water from her house. The city responded by issuing her a bogus water bill, five times the cost of her usual bill. She marched down to city hall and paid the bill, defiantly stating: "It's my water and I can do what I want with it."⁶² WIMS helped Jones register to vote that summer by simply going with her to the registrar's office. Whereas the registrar had previously turned her away, when she went

⁶⁰ Interview with Gabrielle Beard by Rebecca Tuuri, May 1, 2008, Greensboro, NC, In possession of author.

⁶¹ Gross and Tenenbaum, "Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report," 12.

⁶² Ibid., 14.

with a WIMS member, the registrar “treated Mrs. Jones graciously, invited her to sit at the table opposite him, and—most important—permitted her to register.”⁶³

Despite the advances made during the summer of 1965, WIMS voiced less optimism about the power of personal activism than the previous year. By the time that Margery Gross and Frances Tenenbaum wrote the WIMS 1964-5 Final Report, five black girls had been attacked in Philadelphia’s now integrated high school. The report concluded,

This incident in Philadelphia points up both the need for action on the part of citizens of good will and the fact that these groups can be effective in only a limited way. Until the real leadership of the community, the so called power structure, shows a determination to act forcefully, citizens’ groups must rely on the intervention of the Federal Government.⁶⁴

Unlike 1964, when Cowan and the WIMS leadership believed that person-to-person visits would be enough to create great changes in the South, they now made a more realistic assessment. Thus even WIMS leaders acknowledged the limitations of their personal approach and began to insist on the necessity of governmental intervention.

And while there had been some great successes in 1965, such as the Desegregation Institute, there had been some serious disappointments that summer as well. Perhaps most disheartening, the YWCA was more resistant to working interracially in 1965 than the previous year. The Y in Jackson technically was integrated, but had two branches, a black Y – named the “Branch Y” —and a white Y –named the “Central Y.” Ellen Dammond, a black member of the National Board and of the New York WIMS team, met with Y members in Jackson. When Dammond came to speak with the local board, she was surprised to find that some of them had also joined the white Citizens

⁶³ Ibid.

Council. These women did not attend Dammond's talk, but the remaining board members did. Dammond spoke about how the Y's charter required that all programs be interracial and that this was not yet achieved in Jackson. In 1965, the Branch Y opened a new building, and Dammond suggested that this offered an opportunity for more interracial activity.⁶⁵

Following Dammond's visit, the national president of the Y board went to Mississippi along with Florence Harris to see what the effect had been on the Jackson women. While Cowan did not know the details of what happened, Harris phoned Cowan and reported, "Please do not have any more Wednesday in Mississippi group meetings at the Y-W-C-A. Anything you do from now on must be one-to-one, face-to-face, individual meetings. We will have to handle the Y-W-C-A, from the national point of view, as we see fit."⁶⁶ Margery Cassell of the Chicago team met with the executive of the central branch of the Y, and as Cowan said, "served mostly as a crying shoulder for that Executive [Barbara Barnes]." Still, Cowan pointed out that while the group could no longer use YWCA facilities for group meetings, the WIMS visits, especially Dammond's trip, pushed the national Y to pay attention to Jackson and recognize its need for stronger integration efforts.⁶⁷

WIMS faced challenges working in interfaith settings as well. In 1965 it opened up the first interracial, interfaith meeting, sponsored by Church Women United. Previously, there had been an interfaith prayer meeting, but the general interfaith meeting

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁵ WIMS Team #1 1965 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 14.

of CWU had never been integrated before.⁶⁸ Elizabeth Haselden of the Chicago team went into Jackson as a member of the CWU and gave a speech in front of the integrated group. The other women on her team could not believe that this was the first time that the meeting was integrated. Still, Haselden went well prepared. According to Cowan, “She said she never worked so hard for a talk in her whole life as she did for that one.”⁶⁹ Cowan went on to exclaim: “if--if we haven't accomplished anything else, and I think we have, it was due to Wednesdays in Mississippi that the interfaith meeting was opened.”⁷⁰

However, WIMS had less luck meeting with Catholic and Jewish women in 1965 than the previous summer. These women became more resistant after the release of a confidential report written to a group of women in Jackson.⁷¹ Gladys Zales, a member of the New York team and the Hadassah National Board, stated in a report entitled, “Journey Into Fear,” that the Jewish women of Jackson were as racist as the non-Jewish women. Unlike previous participants, Zales was unwilling to give her co-worshippers in Mississippi the benefit, and she doubted that their experience was as harsh as that of the black community. Zales wrote,

I must say that the night before the--my host--I won't say my genial host--but my host explained to me that ... the Jew in the South has a very peculiar position. The city of Jackson I think has about ... two hundred and fifty thousand people, I understand, approximately a quarter of a million. There are a hundred and twenty Jewish families in the whole city. Most of them are storekeepers. Next to the Negro, comes the Jew, as far as boycott and everything else. Well I could understand this. I really--I could've forgiven them, if it were true. I--I honestly--the way this man explained it, I--I understood. I--I'm not in that position, and I don't have children that have to be brought up and that need food, and this was the way he impressed me, and thought that it would just be food taken out of their children's mouths. I'm sorry to say that this isn't true. That it has nothing at all to

⁶⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁷¹ Ibid., 22.

do with economic boycott. There's just race hatred. They are as southern as any of the other southerners, and it was very disheartening for me. I found it very disheartening.⁷²

Indeed the Jewish community remained closed to Jewish WIMS members until two from the Chicago team were housed with Elaine Crystal, a local Mississippi Jewish leader.⁷³

Crystal was interested in working with WIMS, and the WIMS members also met with Rabbi Nussbaum and his wife as well as Mr and Mrs. Stamm, the president of the temple. According to Cowan, the two Chicago members expressed the same point of view as Zales and received the same defensive reaction.⁷⁴

Still, Nussbaum and Stamm *did* have good reason to be defensive of outsiders' efforts and to be fearful of anti-Semitism. Only two years later, on September 18, 1967, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the brand new Temple Beth Israel, the only synagogue in Jackson. Two months later, the KKK bombed Nussbaum's house while he and his wife were inside. Although they were not injured in the blast, there were real threats against Jewish families in Jackson. As Clive Webb notes, the majority of Jewish people involved in the civil rights movement came from the North. "Such was the importance of their contribution to the civil rights cause as to cast a shadow of suspicion on those Jews who refrained from any active involvement."⁷⁵

Catholic women, too, continued to be difficult to recruit. Ellen Tarry, the storyteller from New York met with Father Bernard Law, then chair of the Mississippi Council for Human Relations, who said that there was virtually no interracial Catholic

⁷² Ibid., 18-19.

⁷³ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁵ Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 24-25.

movement in the state. Cowan exclaimed: "I must say, since Ann McGlinchy went in with the first team in 1964, we've had nothing from the Catholic community. I've struggled. I've met both...Bishops. I've had my own conversations with Father Law. I met Father McGuff. We have done certain things for them, through Lou, that-- that...Father Law asked for. Nothing has moved them...."⁷⁶ One local Catholic, Barbara Brinston, wanted to get involved with the WIMS trip to the Pax Christi mission, but could not find childcare. Cowan lamented that another Catholic Woman, Mrs. Code, whom WIMS met at the first meeting with Ann McGlinchy in 1964, had never been heard from again.

Cowan did acknowledge the importance of "prayer" support from a Catholic group in the North, the Maryknoll Sisters, who were not allowed to accompany the group on their trips. She wrote that although they did not travel to Mississippi, they sent representatives to their briefings, debriefings, and prayed for the group over both years. Cowan would recall in 1973, long after WIMS was defunct, that "Often, when we barely escaped one or another 'incident' I thought of the Sisters praying for us and was grateful."⁷⁷

WIMS did have great success in 1965 working closely with the Pax Christi mission after women from the Washington D.C. team stayed overnight at the mission in Greenwood. The mission had been established by Father Nathaniel Machesky in the mid twentieth century and directed Miss Kate Foote Jordan, to attend to both white and black communities in Mississippi. In summer 1965, the mission ran a Head start program with

⁷⁶ WIMS Team #1 1965 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 45.

fifty summer volunteers from eighteen states.⁷⁸ When they returned to Jackson, the WIMS group spoke with local Catholic women who later visited the Pax Christi mission on their own.

Much like the previous summer, WIMS members continued to experience great personal change. Jean Dillinger, a member of the Philadelphia team who traveled from California to join the group, wrote “For those of us who were able to go to Mississippi, it was an invaluable experience both in terms of our own reactions, and of our ability to do some interpreting of the situation to our friends.”⁷⁹ They had gone as experts, but had experienced events that challenged notions of their own knowledge. Such transformative experiences no longer satisfied Cowan, however. While these women went south to offer their expertise, Cowan noted that too little had been accomplished that summer. She said, “I think one of the problems that we've had up to now is there's been too much observing and too little work.”⁸⁰

Cowan had wanted WIMS 1965 be in the thick of things, but after the summer, she once again rethought the group's mission to southern women. Members, she stated, wanted now “not so much [to] work for them, but with them.”⁸¹ This was an important change of attitude in that it showed WIMS' willingness to alter its approach in response to what the people in Mississippi wanted. This change was indicative of both a flexibility and maturity in WIMS' strategy. This new attitude also dovetailed nicely with the Poor

⁷⁷ Polly Cowan, “July 4, 1973, Note,” typed notes for WIMS Book Material, p. 2, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

⁷⁸ Gross and Tenenbaum, “Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report,” 15.

⁷⁹ Jean Dillinger, 1965 WIMS Reflection Report, July 13-15, 1965, p. 2, Folder 6, Box 15, Series 19, NCNW Papers.

⁸⁰ WIMS Team #1 1965 Conference Mississippi Review, Side 1, internal transcription, 48.

People's Corporation, which was also established in Mississippi in the summer of 1965. Mississippi activist Jesse Morris began the corporation and within a year sixteen "self-employment enterprises" existed in ten counties. The corporation also opened outlet stores in Jackson and New York City that sold clothing and craft items. Much like the MFDP challenge, the Poor People's Corporation fought for Mississippi's poor people to have the opportunity to take control of their own destinies. WIMS' next project would be to find ways to work *with* them.

Yet WIMS retained its belief in the importance of bridge building and began turning to the North as well as the South to implement it. In their concluding remarks in the WIMS 1965 report, Tenenbaum and Gross stated,

Out of our experiences in the past two years, we conclude that the techniques developed by WIMS could well be used or adapted by larger groups working in the fields of human rights. A bridge of dialogue, understanding and general communication needs to exist not only between the North and South but between the white and Negro citizens of all communities.⁸²

WIMS would soon carry their experiences as bridge builders and experts into northern communities even as they sought new ways to work with the communities they encountered.

⁸¹ Ibid., 49.

⁸² Gross and Tenenbaum, "Wednesdays in Mississippi – Final Report," 37.

Chapter 6

“It was time to work with not for these people”:

The transition from Wednesdays to Workshops in Mississippi, 1966-70

At the end of the 1965 trips, Cowan again did not know whether the WIMS project should continue, and she asked funders and other influential backers of the project to offer their opinions for a second time. At the same time, Cowan sent out her “Final Report” on WIMS’ activities to influential government officials and liberal businessmen who might be able to lend her organization credibility, finances, or both. Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote to WIMS in September 1965:

Your chairman, my old friend Polly Cowan, and all of the hard-working and interested women have my congratulations for your contribution through the Wednesdays in Mississippi program. Thank you very much for letting me be advised... The progress of the past years could not have been realized by law and by government alone. It is the person-to-person and the people-to-people effort and expression toward good will of which we can be most proud. I know, of course, that you are continuing your efforts.¹

Meanwhile, Trenton participant Edith Savage again organized a benefit concert to help raise money for WIMS that October. Coretta Scott King, a close friend of Mrs. Savage, sang in exchange for two-thirds of the funds going to the Southern Christian Leadership Council. Initially, Savage asked Cowan to speak during intermission, but Cowan believed that Dorothy Height would be a better speaker for the event, and encouraged Savage to ask Height instead. Height agreed and gave a “splendid” presentation, according to

¹ Hubert Humphrey to Susan Goodwillie, September 21, 1965, Folder 19, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Cowan. The benefit raised \$7,000, but only one-third ended up in WIMS hands.² While this concert raised money to pay for the activist projects of the previous summer, Cowan and Height waited until the NCNW's November annual meeting to determine WIMS' future.

The theme for the 1965 NCNW meeting, in the wake of the Moynihan Report, was "The Negro Woman in the U.S.A.: New Roles in Family and Community Responsibility." The convention was co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor and many women from prominent governmental organizations participated. In early October, WIMS was to play a special role in the November 12 session entitled Women in Community Relations where members reported on their experiences in the summers of 1964 and 1965.³ But as the NCNW conference drew nearer and the response from WIMS women was encouraging, Cowan decided to organize additional panels for WIMS members to discuss their experiences and also the future of the organization.⁴

This November WIMS conference, in conjunction with the NCNW one, was a success. Twenty-two WIMS members, five guests, and nine government resource people attended the six separate WIMS-related workshops. The women present debated what would be the most effective use of WIMS womanpower and resources, and discussed ideas ranging from opening "lines of communication" in other parts of the South or the North or training WIMS women to assist communities in acquiring federal funding for

² See Polly Cowan to Edith Savage, June 30, 1965 and Polly Cowan to Mrs. Jones, October 15, 1965, Folder 4, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³ Polly Cowan, Letter to WIMS team members, October 9, 1965, Folder 24, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴ Polly Cowan to Arthur Chapin, October 22, 1965, Folder 24, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

their integration initiatives or poverty projects.⁵ Though there were various ideas offered about what to do next, the consensus was that the interracial activities were in fact valuable to these women and that the organization should thus continue them in some form. As Polly Cowan wrote to David Hunter, chairman of the Stern Family Fund, a major financial supporter of the 1964 and 1965 projects: “the women [who attended the 1965 WIMS conference] feel that a program so successful in Mississippi, and so helpful to the local areas from which the team originated must continue. This sentiment was echoed by the resource people from the [C]ommunity [R]elations [S]ervice and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights who attended the conference.”⁶ But by the end of the conference, Cowan and WIMS staff decided to move forward as well with another suggestion from the conference: to take WIMS’ approach to racially tense communities in the North.

WIMS hoped that its approach could help stave off “white backlash,” especially in communities that were rocked by race riots in the mid 1960s. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Americans were fixated on stories of racial violence in the South, but problems had also been growing in the North and West for a long time. From the early twentieth century on, African Americans had left the South in high numbers to find economic opportunities in northern cities. However by the late 1950s, these areas were becoming de-industrialized, many manufacturers had moved their work to the South or overseas. Thus, these same migrants now faced high unemployment as well as ongoing problems with poor housing and schools. In addition to de-industrialization in the North,

⁵ “Second WIMS Conference Report, November 11-12, 1965,” Folder 2, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

other companies moved to industrial parks in the suburbs where large numbers of white ethnic residents provided a ready workforce. As importantly, blacks were drastically underrepresented on police forces, which often committed acts of brutality against African Americans. Segregation, unemployment, and brutality were the reality for blacks living in urban America in the mid 1960s, and violent uprisings erupted in many of these areas to protest the condition of their lives. Concerns with white backlash intensified in the summer of 1965, when race riots/rebellions erupted in a range of cities. One of the worst occurred in August 1965, when desperate citizens in Watts, a section of Los Angeles, set fire to their neighborhood. Residents had grown frustrated with high levels of unemployment, police brutality, substandard housing and schools in the black community. By the end, 34 people had been killed, 4,000 arrested, with more than \$35 million dollars in property damage.⁷ Reacting to such violence, Cowan and Height became more convinced of the need for WIMS programs outside the South.⁸

From 1966 through 1970, WIMS began a transformation, first to develop projects to address the spreading urban rebellions and later to reorient its program in the South to address practical needs of poor communities. During these years, WIMS maintained its commitment to building bridges, but the most successful bridges were now formed between southern poverty workers and governmental officials with the help of WIMS.

⁶ Polly Cowan to David Hunter, November 19, 1965, Folder 44, Box 6, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁷ William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II, Seventh Edition* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011), 305.

⁸ A proposed budget for WIMS in 1967 included a potential trip to Los Angeles to conduct workshops there. This project never materialized. See "Projected Budget, 1967" Folder 12, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

In early November 1965, Dorothy Height attended the White House Planning Conference on Civil Rights where she spoke about the WIMS model. Then, Cowan and others from WIMS attended the NCNW Conference on November 11 and 12. In both meetings, federal agents from entities like the Community Relations Service and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights encouraged the organization to move its efforts northward.⁹ Yet as with earlier trips to the South, Cowan stressed that the group had to be invited by concerned local women before proceeding.¹⁰ Cowan reached out to “southern and northern women who as citizens, mothers and community leaders are concerned about civil rights and human relations.”¹¹ While she pointed out the usefulness of “outsiders” to Mississippi in the summers of 1964 and 1965, she argued, they were only effective because local women had specifically requested WIMS’ help.

Although there had been an enthusiastic response to the continuation of WIMS in some form at the November conference, many of the northern participants reacted with ambivalence to the idea of WIMS coming into their own communities. In winter 1966, Cowan sent out a questionnaire to participants from 1964 and 1965 asking them if they might be able to work on a training institute in their town or city or participate in or host a WIMS team for four days or longer. She then asked them if they felt that their own community should be on the northern WIMS list and whether they would be willing to assist a project in their hometown.¹² Some women, such as Ethel Haserodt, an

⁹ “WIMS-Boston Project, Progress Report, February 18, 1966,” Folder 11, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁰ Polly Cowan to David Hunter, November 19, 1965.

¹¹ “Confidential Draft, Wednesdays in Mississippi – Boston Project, Winter 1966,” p.1, Folder 11, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹² Another part of the application had been altered from the previous applications from WIMS. Behind the space to write “husband’s business, there was now the explanation

enthusiastic participant of the 1964 trips, said that she could indeed help with a northern project in Boston in August, but many of the other white women insisted that they were unsure of their schedules in the summer and that they expected to be very busy with other activities, many related to social justice. Jean Davis, a white housewife from Winnetka, Illinois, involved in the League of Women Voters, YWCA, Girl Scouts and United Church Women, described her activism in Chicago. She had been chairing her church's benevolence committee, which was working closely with two inner-city churches, Warren Avenue and West Side, which were working closely with Martin Luther King Jr.'s housing project there. She concluded, "I truly don't know whether there is a place for WIMS here—my 'opposition' stemmed, I think, from my concern as to where WIMS could do the most good with the least effort or change in format."¹³ Other white participants, including Anne E. Keller from Philadelphia, expressed similar concerns. While she believed there was still a need to direct attention to Mississippi, "I see a real danger in a group like this getting 'delusions of grandeur' and spreading itself very thin. I would think it could function in Mississippi for the next million years without running out of work to be done."¹⁴ Similarly, Marjorie Damman, a white social worker from New York City, claimed there was simply no need for a WIMS project in her community.¹⁵

"for purposes of your work in a community" in parenthesis. Perhaps Cowan, in response to the growing feminist sentiment—even among some WIMS participants—felt the need to explain why asking for the woman's occupation and her list of organizations, she then asked about the woman's husband's business.

¹³ Jean Davis, Future of WIMS, Winter, 1966 Questionnaire, Winter 1966, Folder 5, Box 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁴ Anne Keller, Future of WIMS, Winter, 1966 Questionnaire, Winter 1966, Folder 5, Box 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁵ Marjorie Damman, Future of WIMS, Winter, 1966 Questionnaire, Winter 1966, Folder 5, Box 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Yet other WIMS participants applauded the new initiative. To the inquiry, “Do you think that your own community should be on the list of the 10 to 12 communities which will be named in our proposal?” Floynce Kennedy answered “Absolutely.” Kennedy, who lived in New York City, believed that she could be most useful in teaching about “Government and business delinquency in race and civil rights matters. Anecdotes, e.g. Consumer pressure.” She also believed that her community could benefit from concentration on “Voter and consumer education,” “Economics and politics of wars against wars against poverty,” and “Attention to youth groups and more cooperation with them especially regarding... priority of war over national problems and projects.”¹⁶

Edith Savage affirmed the need for WIMS in Trenton. She wrote:

Our town needs this bridge of communications, we have a problem of Negro and white women (and men) not working together in our community at this time. Our Council on Human Relations is at the critical stage. I feel middle class negro [sic] and white women working together would increase concern and bring about new ideas. ([There] are people who would [say] no,) but I feel if we under judge our needs we are [at a] loss. Most Urban [sic] towns now have this design. The responsibility rest[s] not only with government leaders, but just people understanding each other in their municipalities.¹⁷

Overall black WIMS members tended to be more in favor of moving WIMS operations to the North than their white counterparts.¹⁸

WIMS moved ahead with plans for projects in Boston and Paterson, New Jersey. Both had been at the center of contentious debates over school integration. Paterson had also been the site of a race rebellion in 1964 and continued to suffer from massive white

¹⁶ Florynce Kennedy, Future of WIMS, Winter, 1966 Questionnaire, Winter 1966, Folder 5, Box 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁷ Edith Savage, Future of WIMS, Winter, 1966 Questionnaire, Winter 1966, Folder 5, Box 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁸ For more information, see the Winter 1966 Questionnaires in Folder 5, Box 12, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

flight. Boston, however, was to be WIMS' first northern test case. As they had done in Mississippi during the previous two summers, WIMS again sought to work initially with middle-class women. The group's preparatory report argued:

As these Negro and white middle-class women work together and find increasing success in their work, it is hoped that they will learn to relate to, and work with, the more disadvantaged members of the community, who will then take increasing responsibility as they understand their role in relation to mutual concerns.¹⁹

Cowan described the participants of the northern WIMS workshops as "citizens, mothers and community leaders [who] are concerned about civil rights and human relations."²⁰

And she again stressed the importance of "outsiders" as a "catalyst" even while acknowledging the importance of being invited by local residents. Cowan's statement also belies a problematic assumption that WIMS participants could teach disadvantaged women how to "take increasing responsibility" for their economic, social, and political choices. This assumed that poverty was, at least partly, a matter of individual choice and initiative. To encourage such individual transformation, WIMS again encouraged informal conversations among women.²¹

¹⁹ "Confidential Draft, Wednesdays in Mississippi – Boston Project, Winter 1966," p.1 Folder 11, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 2. For more information about the history of the problematic assumption that poor non-white women who require government assistance lack initiative and responsibility, see Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997), and Anna Marie Smith, *Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007), Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare from Colonial Times to the Present* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994), and Gwendolyn Mink, *the Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917-1942* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

But unlike in Mississippi, when Cowan and her staff conducted field visits to Boston, they met significant resistance to the development of a program that pinned so much responsibility for large-scale change on the individual. On February 10 and 11, 1966, three staff members conducted visits with representatives from liberal organizations in Boston (such as the YWCA and NCNW), the Catholic Interracial Council, the Urban League, the American Jewish Committee, an OEO funded multi-service center in Roxbury, and the retreat center Packard Manse. That evening, Cowan and seven WIMS members joined twenty-five local activists, including black women from Roxbury housing and educational organizations and white women from the Catholic Interracial Council, at the home of Ruth Batson, the Massachusetts Commissioner Against Discrimination. Cowan described WIMS' strategy for trips in the South and asked whether the same tactics might work in the North. The black and white women resisted the whole idea of "building bridges." Black women from Roxbury especially challenged Cowan's implied notion that they were the ones who needed to "learn" something from middle-class white women in the city. They even pointed out the problematic choice of Roxbury as the place needing "help." In the process, these northern black women taught lessons to Cowan much as their southern counterparts had.

She wrote in her report,

It became obvious immediately that the WIMS sheet that we had prepared was much too naïve for the sophisticated audience assembled in Ruth Batson's living room...The Negro women reacted to our wording with reasonable hostility, and pointed out their objections to the stratification of our 'middle class.' They also pointed out the errors of concentrating our work in Roxbury, instead of South Boston, or other areas where the bigotry exists.²²

²² "WIMS Boston Project – Meeting at Ruth Batson's –Thursday Evening, February 10, 1966," p. 1, Folder 11, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

The Roxbury women were hostile to the idea that “outsiders” needed to come in to help them, pointing out that they had been working for years on trying to establish interracial organizations but had encountered significant resistance from the white Catholic community. Cowan continued, “They know how to proceed to solve the problems of integrated housing and schools, if the political structure can be changed—but unless we can show them the way to alter this political structure which is strangling Boston, we might as well go home.”²³ The black participants in the discussion pointed out the subtle racist, classist, and gendered assumptions underlying WIMS’ efforts and pointed to the prejudice of white Bostonians as the main problem. And Cowan, to her credit, recognized the limitations of her own assumptions in pinning responsibility for change on the black women of Roxbury. She acknowledged these women’s ideas as “sophisticated” and even justified their hostility toward the project as “reasonable.”

But Cowan believed that WIMS still had relevance. She explained the black Bostonians’ resistance to the project as caused by racial tension over the election of Louise Day Hicks. In 1965, despite great efforts on the part of the black community to mobilize against Hicks, the die-hard opponent of school busing for integration was re-elected to the school board. Cowan insisted that this event polarized communities in Boston and “gave the Negroes a sense of helplessness and defeat that has resulted in tremendous hostility against the GDDG (God Damn Do Gooders) – especially the white liberals with whom they have been working on interracial committees for many years.” Those “do gooders” had not been able to stop other whites from voting en masse for

²³ Ibid.

Hicks.²⁴ According to Cowan, it was not that the personal workshop approach had limited merit, but that white liberals had not been able to combat the efforts of people like Hicks.

Hicks appealed to Boston's white middle-class Catholic men and women, many of whom were Irish and Italian immigrants who were deeply resistant to integration. Dubbed "middle Americans" by analysts at the time, families in this category earned between \$5,000 and \$15,000 a year and were estimated to comprise 55 percent of the population.²⁵ Historian William Chafe describes them as "blue-collar workers, lower-echelon bureaucrats, school teachers, and white collar employees." Although they were not poor, their economic situation was precarious and seriously affected by inflation and indebtedness. They feared losing the little wealth that they had worked hard to attain.²⁶ But they were also threatened by the recent turn toward black power, believing that the African American community was arguing for immediate compensation for jobs, goods, and education that this "middle American" group of white ethnics had received through hard work and patience. Thus they were not only economically threatened, but also believed "that the rules were being changed unfairly in midstream."²⁷

Like the black women, the progressive white Catholic women at Batson's house also rejected Cowan's project. But their criticism stemmed mainly from the idea that black Bostonians or WIMS leaders could teach them something worthwhile. When

²⁴ "WIMS-Boston Project, Progress Report, February 18, 1966." In 1961 Hicks was first elected to the Boston School board. In 1963 when the NAACP demanded that the city acknowledge its *de facto* segregation in its public schools, Hicks refused to acknowledge this. Hicks rose to power largely by appealing to the racism of the white Boston community that resisted school integration through busing.

²⁵ Chafe, *Unfinished Journey*, 323.

²⁶ Ibid.

Cowan suggested bringing in Mississippi Catholic activist Kate Foote Jordan, the Boston women argued that she was too much “on the missionary level to be applicable in Boston.”²⁸ Thus, the women displayed their sense of regional superiority, feeling that very little could be learned from southern Catholics, especially from a small parish in Mississippi that promoted interracial activity. A local white Catholic activist, Mrs. Snowden politely suggested that WIMS find a city other than Boston in which to introduce their program.

Although the participants rejected WIMS’ plan, Ruth Batson, who had been at the forefront of activism in Roxbury, came to its defense. She pointed out that it was WIMS that enabled her to set up this meeting between black women and the Catholic Interracial Council, and she pointed out that communication between the races in Boston was still poor.²⁹ Cowan then broke the women into smaller groups, where “a great many misunderstandings were settled in the small groups, before the meeting resumed, and warmth overcame the hostility.”³⁰ Thus despite their initial hesitation, Cowan claimed that by the end of the meeting, “the climate seemed to have changed 180 degrees.” Though no concrete plans were made, the women believed that the meeting had opened up lines of communication and had a “definite therapeutic value.”³¹

²⁷ Ibid. For more information on the antibusing in Boston, see Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

²⁸ “WIMS Boston Project – Meeting at Ruth Batson’s –Thursday Evening, February 10, 1966.” Indeed, after the WIMS 1964 trip, Batson and another WIMS activist Pearl Willen realized this gap and created METCO to promote interracial activism for school reform.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

After this initial meeting, WIMS leaders still believed that there might be benefits to their project. Yet after speaking again with members of the black community of Roxbury, they decided to target only the white communities of South Boston and Charleston, “where bigotry is strongest.” Also, instead of creating interracial teams, WIMS now decided to bring Catholic women from other cities to speak directly to their sister communities in Boston and offer help to the Catholic Human Relations Council as well as local religious leaders.³² But in a follow up meeting in March, Cowan was again stymied by white ethnic women who argued against any WIMS initiative. When Cowan suggested setting up a meeting with women of the CIC from the Bronx

They saw no point in ‘talking to themselves,’ and felt that it was much more important to ‘do’ than to ‘talk.’ They suggested that if the Bronx women needed encouragement, they would be better advised to get it from National CIC than from Boston. The exchange visits might meet the therapeutic needs of some individuals, but would not serve the greater good.³³

In the end, Cowan deferred to both black and white Bostonians, who insisted that they should solve their own problems. Unlike in the South, Cowan did not challenge the wishes of local leaders who questioned the effectiveness of the WIMS approach. In many ways this marked the beginning of the end of her bridge-building initiative. Northern women had pointed out two fundamental flaws with the WIMS approach: first, by setting up a “dialogue” between “equal” parties, it assumed that racism lay as much within the black community as the white, and second it placed the burden of accounting for large-scale systematic unemployment, poverty, and substandard schools and housing on black participants. The problems in the late 1960s were simply too great and too

³² “WIMS-Boston Project, Progress Report, February 18, 1966.”

³³ “WIMS –Boston Project, Meeting at Packard Manse,” March 22, 1966, p. 3, Folder 11, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

entrenched to fix by informal, personal communication and education. And yet, as Ruth Batson pointed out, even for a brief moment, WIMS exposed white and black women to the other's point of view.

WIMS had better success in Paterson, a smaller city in northern New Jersey that Cowan described as “decaying” due to white flight and a race riot in 1964. Again, WIMS stressed that it had been *invited* to come at the request of the president of the Passaic Council of Negro Women, Mrs. Madie Horne.³⁴ During the NCNW's 1965 Annual Convention, Horne had heard about WIMS' efforts in the South and then requested that the group initiate workshops in Paterson. She gathered three local women to lead the workshops—Mrs. Jerome (Florence) Brawer, a white housewife with a degree in business administration who had been taking on City Hall for five years; Mrs. Paul (Marion) Rauschenbach, a white member of the Paterson Task Force and president of the Passaic County Community Council; and Mrs. Theodore (Bessie) Jamison, a black executive of the Paterson Task Force, a local poverty program funded by the OEO. Although Horne selected these women, Brawer and Rauschenbach were both white-upper class women who probably did not share the same concerns as those of “middle Americans.”³⁵

³⁴ “Paterson Report, November, 1965-September 1966,” Folder 21, Box 11, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁵ Grace Smith, “Interracial Conference: Women Build Bridge of Understanding,” *Morning Call*, Paterson, NJ, September 19, 1966, included in Folder 22, Box 11, NCNW Papers, NABWH. See also “Progress Report” October, 1966, Folder 22, Box 11, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Nonetheless, in the spring and summer of 1966, WIMS met with over 100 local women to develop a workshop that would be most useful to them.³⁶ This time WIMS used the local media to publicize the event. At 10:30 on September 17, 100 women met at the Young Women's Christian Association building in Paterson to attend "Building Bridges of Understanding: New Ways to Work for Greater Community Service." Joining the three local leaders were Trude Lash, who was white, and Ilza Williams, who was black, both 1964 WIMS team members. Horne chaired the session and Cowan moderated the panel. The call for participants stressed that women needed to learn to be sympathetic to the needs of others by highlighting similarities and minimizing differences. For instance, "Learning that most women want the same things for their children and have the same problems in raising them" was stressed.³⁷ The "conversation" ranged over a variety of topics, including education, welfare, "problems in education, housing, health, and general lack of communication with the community."³⁸ According to a post-conference internal report: "Over and over again the women asked that a combined mechanism be set up. Using the phrase 'building bridges' they asked how the organizations and groups could become related to each other in utilizing this womanpower for effective action."³⁹

The WIMS strategy of uniting women by exploring their shared concerns echoed a common liberal belief in minimizing differences between blacks and whites by focusing on their common humanity. But by 1966, SNCC and other civil rights organizations were

³⁶ "Paterson Report, November, 1965-September 1966," Folder 21, Box 11, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁷ Press Release, [ca. September 1966], Series 19, Folder 22, Box 11, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁸ "Paterson Report, November, 1965-September 1966," 3.

growing more and more suspicious of white liberals, arguing that their tactics often diminished black people's concerns under an assumed universality of white concerns. A few months before the Paterson workshops, Stokely Carmichael, the new leader of SNCC, led a Mississippi crowd in chanting Black Power, and the slogan quickly spread throughout the nation. This nationalist strategy was very different from the liberal, integrationist perspective that Cowan and Height were promoting.

But the WIMS idea of building bridges on a personal level was embraced by the women who attended the Paterson conference, and one Paterson woman even asked if their new group could be called Wednesdays in Paterson. Later in the WIMS report, the author stated,

WIMS has become more than the experience of a group of women who went to Mississippi, it has become an opportunity for us to begin to communicate on a meaningful level. It is a means of getting to know your neighbor and to learn to listen. It is a means of seeing what the real issues are and arousing people to get them to take action.

Still, a change was also occurring within WIMS. In addition to promoting a personal approach, WIMS acknowledged that larger scale change was also necessary within Paterson.

This whole conference has been geared to action with the recognition that we must understand the rights of people and people must also understand their own rights. The day has gone when we can solve problems by ourselves. We must deal with problems by tackling the system which has created the individual's problems and his hopelessness. We must work together to bring about the kinds of change in our society that count, that will make life better. We hope that this conference will be the beginning.⁴⁰

Thus, WIMS called for both communication between individuals and structural change.

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

The Paterson group named itself “Women’s Council for Community Service” and scheduled another meeting for October 5. Thirty-five women attended the October meeting and came as individuals, but most hoped that the larger organizations to which they belonged would choose to be represented in the Council.⁴¹ Senator Anthony Grossi, Congressman Charles S. Joelson, Alderman William Kline, Alvin D. Moore, Joseph Ford, and mayoral candidate Lawrence F. (Pat) Kramer attended. As an organization that promoted interracial understanding, WIMS seemed non-threatening and was thus able to draw major political figures to a meeting attended mainly by housewives. But white participants also acknowledged the importance of self-determination for different racial and ethnic groups and the necessity of systemic change.⁴²

The Paterson conferences provided a setting for poor and middle-class black women in the community to voice their concerns and be listened to with respect that had traditionally been denied them. According to the report, white female participants especially learned that

it was time to work with, not for these people [emphasis original]. The white angel of charity had given way to the realization that more long-range and far-reaching solutions were needed....They [the white and black women] had come together to work from a common base. As citizens of the same city they were concerned, and concerned about the same things, seeking similar solutions

At the end of the conference, the group formed a new council composed of middle-class women from liberal organizations (YWCA, NCNW, NCJW, etc.), representatives from the Catholic Interracial Council and the National Committee Against Discrimination in

⁴¹ “Report on October 5th meeting Women’s Council for Community Service, Paterson NJ,” Folder 22, Box 11, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴² Grace Smith, “Interracial Conference: Women Build Bridge of Understanding.”

⁴³ “Observations – Community Organization – Paterson, NJ, October 1966,” p.2, Folder 22, Box 11, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Housing, and a vocal group of poverty program leaders with expertise on housing and welfare, many of whom were members of the poorest communities. Cowan acknowledged her excitement, but also her anxieties; this was a new type of project, where women from many different religions, races, and perhaps most importantly, *classes* were coming together; “Whether these women, from diverse backgrounds, will actually constitute a power force in the community will depend on whether they can organize themselves effectively and agree on tactics subverting their differences for the good of all.”⁴⁴

Cowan believed that white women had learned the necessity of listening to black women, both the middle class NCNW women and the “more militant, younger [poverty] Task force employees.”⁴⁵ But she was noticeably concerned with the increasingly vocal and “more militant” black women of the Paterson Task Force. She commented,

The Task Force personnel form a strong and important force within the coalition. However, they may find it difficult to distinguish between their roles as Task Force employees and citizen members of an action group. The ideas and aspirations to be implemented by both groups may be the same, but the methods and approaches differ. To use the Women’s Council for Community Service to strengthen and support the programs of the Task Force may eventually be a useful function. At this time, however, it could destroy a newly founded group that has not had time to develop a program beyond conviction and which has no record of accomplishment in its own right.⁴⁶

WIMS’ initial mission in Paterson was to stave off white backlash by increasing communication between middle-class blacks and whites. Thus she lamented the militancy of black women who wanted this coalition to produce tangible poverty projects

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Cowan wanted to also include the Spanish-speaking women of Paterson, (Cuban and Puerto-Rican) in addition to the white and black English speaking community.

for the black community rather than mollify nervous middle-class whites. While the black middle class women of the NCNW fit her model, the Task Force women did not.

As Cowan sought to expand WIMS' programs and Stokely Carmichael challenged civil rights leaders to adopt a new strategy of "Black Power," Dorothy Height called an urgent meeting of NCNW leaders at a retreat center in Capahosic, Virginia. It was here in July 1966 that they decided what direction to take the NCNW. Height stressed the need for unity as a national organization, but tape recordings of the two-day meeting show that the discussion was anything but unified. Members expressed everything from a liberal integrationist point of view to militant calls for the organization to adopt Black Power as its slogan.⁴⁷ What did unite the whole organization was a defensive tone—the members of NCNW felt under attack from more militant activists as a result of their class politics, their stance on integration, or both.

Height began the meeting by acknowledging the difficult situation that moderate organizations faced as the tide turned more nationalistic and militant. She stated, "Part of what we are caught up in today with the struggle between a SNCC, and a SCLC, and NAACP and all the rest of this, and part of what we have caught then is the problem of the generations."⁴⁸ But she was well aware that the problem also included differences of class and ideology, as she defended (and appeared defensive about) the NCNW's approach. Far from openly supporting the new direction of the black freedom movement, Height chafed against the turn toward more grassroots, militant, control. She felt that

Although they had attended a pre-meeting, they were not present at the September or October conferences.

⁴⁷ "Capahosic Conference – Capahosic, VA, July 8, 1966 P.M. and July 9, 1966 A.M.," 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 13, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

there were dangers in letting people with little formal education lead the struggle--“when you say to people well that's not a very sensible way to approach this, they couldn't care less because: a) they have nothing to lose. They have nothing to protect.”⁴⁹ But sensing that she had no other option if she wanted the NCNW to remain significant, Height called for recruiting more diverse groups of women as members. At the November 1966 Annual Convention, the NCNW's program goals included recruiting and training black women for participation and leadership within community service organizations, developing cooperative and independent projects, “work[ing] for legislative enforcement and administrative and legal action to protect civil rights and to combat poverty,” and finally broadening the base of women participating in these activities.⁵⁰

The new agenda was aided considerably by a Ford Foundation grant of \$300,000 that the NCNW received to fund a new initiative called Project Womanpower. The project was intended to train 6,000 black female volunteers over two years to serve as leaders in their local communities. Another goal of Project Womanpower was to expand the base of participation in the NCNW by recruiting more local leaders. Project Womanpower was fundamental to the NCNW's ability to attract grassroots women in 1966 and train them for volunteer activities. This was the project that Unita Blackwell joined before becoming a director in the Turnkey III housing effort. Many other black

⁴⁸ Ibid., 37-8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 43

⁵⁰ “Okolona Center: Family Development through Education,” NCNW Application Report to Title X – Rural Housing, Section 1002, August 1968, pp. 4-5, Folder 11, Box 5, Series 13, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

women in Mississippi also first joined the NCNW via Project Womanpower. And these women changed the composition of the organization and the agenda of WIMS.⁵¹

In 1966 Project Womanpower trained a “Vanguard” group of 117 women by “develop[ing] in them the skill and commitment to work in their local communities.” They led Community Service Institutes that consisted of anything from two-day workshops to a series of small seminars in over 30 areas of the country, including the rural South, small urban cities such as Plainfield, New Jersey, and large cities like Los Angeles. Anywhere between thirty to 300 people attended these seminars which dealt with some urgent concern of the local community, including food production, housing, consumer education, and daycare. One of the most important and successful parts of the program was the black heritage kit that was distributed to all of the participants. This included information on black history, especially stories of liberation. As one woman from Mississippi wrote, “The session I liked best was the one on black history, because it told me so much about myself and my people.”⁵² The NCNW hoped for a “multiplier effect” as this vanguard of activists became involved in mass meetings, community projects, conferences and other efforts to increase black women’s community involvement.

The final report from Project Womanpower suggests that the NCNW, like WIMS, had come a long way in understanding and learning about the needs of the poor in two years. Its final recommendations stated first that addressing “bread and butter pressures” were important in order for women to sustain their volunteer activities—such as securing

⁵¹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York City: Bantam, 1984), 287.

money for a car or bus ride to the project location in order to volunteer. Second, the NCNW recognized that “an indigenous local coordinator...is vitally important to sustain the ground work, once laid, and to help local groups gain momentum in community service and community action. And finally, the NCNW concluded Project Womanpower staff needed to provide help to the local coordinator for an extended period.”⁵³ Clearly as the NCNW spent more time around local activists, members came to appreciate the needs of grassroots leaders. In addition, following the NCNW’s acquisition of tax-exempt status in 1965, it could hire staff members for Project Womanpower, rather than rely, as it had in the past, on volunteers.⁵⁴ When selecting these staff members, the NCNW “made a conscious and deliberate effort to break with more traditional patterns of leadership that tend to be politically and socially conservative” and engage young activist women in their program.⁵⁵ Prathia H. Wynn, a SNCC field leader who had first alerted Height to the situation in Selma in 1963, was appointed as Assistant Director of Project Womanpower while Frances Beal, who helped found the SNCC Black Women’s Liberation Committee in 1968, was hired as the Administrative Assistant.⁵⁶ Through these choices, the NCNW gave practical meaning to their reconsidered principles.

Thanks to Project Womanpower and similar projects in the late 1960s, many new NCNW chapters, known as sections, were organized. From 1966 to 1968, the NCNW

⁵² “Project Womanpower Final Report,” August 31, 1968, p. 125, Folder 3, Box 29, Series 10, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵³ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁴ It seems that Polly Cowan provided a key personal connection that helped the NCNW acquire tax exempt status. See Polly Cowan to Ruth Sykes, December 4, 1967, Folder 14, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁵⁵ “Project Womanpower Final Report,” August 31, 1968, 132-3.

grew by 47 new sections, with a 58 percent increase in individual memberships and a 47 percent increase in local sections.⁵⁷ Growth in membership was greatest in the Mississippi Delta where, for example, membership in the Sunflower County Section doubled from 125 to 250 members. Membership increased so dramatically between 1966 and 1968 that the NCNW created a simplified booklet explaining how to establish a new section so that any women, “regardless of their educational level,” could use it. At the national convention in 1967, the NCNW also altered its policy for annual dues. It reduced annual dues from \$5.00 to \$2.00 in impoverished areas and allowed half that amount to stay in the local treasury – moreover in exceptional cases where women could not even afford that price, they could join for free.⁵⁸ The NCNW attributed the development of a relationship between the Council and indigenous leadership to the Wednesdays in Mississippi trips of 1964 and 1965. It was through these channels of communication that the organization was able to learn about the concerns of Mississippi women and expand the base of participation on the Council.⁵⁹

While Project Womanpower worked to create more indigenous leadership and a broader base of support for the NCNW, Polly Cowan also sought to transform WIMS in ways that complemented the Council’s larger shift in strategy. In late 1966, Wednesdays in Mississippi became “Workshops in Mississippi” and redefined itself as a liaison organization between poor black activists in Mississippi and government agencies distributing War on Poverty funds. WIMS remained interracial, utilizing the ability of its

⁵⁶ The Black Women’s Liberation Committee later became the Third World Women’s Alliance, and Frances Beal went on to write “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” in 1969.

⁵⁷ “Project Womanpower Final Report,” August 31, 1968, 121 and 134.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

white, affluent, and well-educated members to secure funds for a variety of projects in Mississippi and elsewhere. The organization now used its fundraising abilities, political connections, and experience with social activism to help design and support a series of NCNW workshops beginning in November 1966 that were led and attended by local Mississippi women. These workshops were very different from the Wednesdays in Mississippi activities of the previous two years. Instead, WIMS now offered funding and staff, including Cowan, Ann Hewitt, and a new WIMS staff member Helen Rachlin, to support these efforts, but only a handful of northern participants from the previous two years, such as Marie Barksdale and Ruth Batson, acted as consultants for the new Mississippi workshops. WIMS also sought the aid of the white staff of the Desegregation Institutes, including Dean Katherine Rea, professors Roscoe Boyer and Julian Tatum and graduate students Kate Wilkinson and Gabrielle Beard, all of whom were white and from the departments of Education and Sociology at the University of Mississippi.

The first workshop took place on November 18 and 19, 1966 and a training session occurred the following January. By this time, the differences between Wednesdays in Mississippi and Workshops in Mississippi, on the one hand, and the NCNW, on the other, were fuzzy; but this likely did not matter to the workshop participants, who were willing to work with whichever organization was willing to help them.⁶⁰ While NCNW publicly sponsored these new workshops, WIMS helped work behind the scenes and provided many of the staff and consultants.

⁵⁹ "The Power in 4,000,000 Women."

⁶⁰ In his study of SNCC, Clayborne Carson points out that often locals did not draw sharp distinctions between civil rights groups. When Carmichael was in Lowndes county: "Rather than impose his views on Lowndes County blacks, Carmichael avoided discussing the difference between SNCC and SCLC. He knew that civil rights workers

The NCNW took charge of publicly directing the workshops, and Dorothy Height sent a personal invitation to “Friends” of the NCNW in Mississippi for the first Workshops conference. She noted the importance of job training, child-care, and consumer education to local communities, but also encouraged the women to write her with suggestions for panels and sessions.⁶¹ The planning sessions drew on support from CDGM, MAP, WICS, the Urban League, and the Mississippi Council on Human Relations in Jackson as well as the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor.⁶² Thus, this first workshop maintained some sense of the “traditional” expert with an “educated” steering committee and Height herself chairing the event. Marie Barksdale, a 1964 WIMS participant and former executive director of Delta Sigma Theta, served as a consultant for the conference as well.⁶³

It may have been this “expert” perspective that limited initial interest in the conference. Only 25 women had signed up in advance, but over twice that number showed up on the day of event.⁶⁴ In the end 53 women attended from 14 different towns. Nine of the women were community organizers, 14 had been working with Head Start,

were not separated into groups by local residents; they were just ‘civil rights workers’ or ‘freedom fighters.’” Carson, *In Struggle*, 163. And Carmichael exploited enthusiasm created by King. Carson, *In Struggle*, 164. In much the same way, the lines between WIMS, the NCNW, Project Womanpower, and other projects were sometimes blurred as women moved from one sub-organization in WIMS to another.

⁶¹ Dorothy Height, “Dear Friend,” letter to prospective participants of Mississippi Women’s Planning Session, November 7, 1966, Folder 19, Box 9, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁶² “Schedule for Polly Cowan, November 16-21, 1966,” Folder 19, Box 9, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁶³ “Mississippi Women’s Planning Session – Report, November 18-19, 1966, Jackson, Mississippi” p. 6, Folder 19, Box 9, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁶⁴ “Mississippi Women’s Planning Session, Jackson, Mississippi – November 18 – 19, 1966, (with consultants from the University of Mississippi, the Office of Economic

11 were or had been teachers, 4 were social workers, one a librarian, and several worked in volunteer social agencies.⁶⁵ Yet not all the participants were impressed initially with WIMS.

Unita Blackwell sat in the conference with about 50 other black women.⁶⁶ Blackwell was a SNCC member, a community organizer for the CDGM, and one of the 1964 Democratic National Convention challengers from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). She had been invited by a friend from the NCNW and Coleman Miller of CDGM to come to the “Branch” Y (which was now *de jure* integrated, but *de facto* remained segregated) in Jackson to discuss what could be done about poverty in Mississippi. The two also invited Blackwell’s friend Gloria Cotley.⁶⁷ As part of the meeting, the NCNW paid for both Blackwell and Cotley to stay in the Heidelberg Hotel, a location that had been integrated only two years before with the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Blackwell did not know much about NCNW, but as someone who had worked for over two years in black-led civil rights organizations, she noted that the women she spoke with initially were out of touch with the concerns of the black community in Mississippi. As she recalled in a 1968 interview,

So, we went to the meeting, and I just couldn’t stand it, you know. ‘Cause it was just some bunch of little biddies sittin’ there, what I call these ‘highly elites,’ you know. And they didn’t know what in the world was going on in the community,

Opportunity and the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor,” p. II, Folder 19, Box 9, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁶⁵ “Mississippi Women’s Planning Session – Report, November 18-19, 1966,” 2.

⁶⁶ For the number of attendees, see Cowan, Interview by John Britton, March 8, 1968, 39.

⁶⁷ The transcription of the interview says “Cotley,” but this was most likely Gloria “Cotton.” Unita Blackwell, interview by Robert Wright, August 10, 1968, Mayersville, Mississippi, transcript, p. 28, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

but they was there, you know talking about flowers and beautification programs and all this other kind of stuff, which you know wadn't even hittin' nowhere what we was talking about.⁶⁸

Blackwell was so frustrated by some of the women present at the meeting that she and fellow activist Gloria Cotley got up to leave and return to her hometown of Mayersville in the Delta. But on her way out, Doris Dozier, a Project Womanpower NCNW staff member, asked them to stay. Dozier and another NCNW member then asked if there was any way that they could channel the meeting “into really getting down to something, you know, what is happening in the communities and what should be done.”⁶⁹ After Dozier’s appeal, Blackwell decided to stay, and the tone of the meeting changed.

By the end of the first workshop, local activists like Blackwell had taken control of the “Mississippi Training Program.” They became task force leaders who were charged with the responsibility to “decide what the National Council of Negro Women can do to meet the overall needs of poverty, by developing potential and determining the projects and places which need leadership training for volunteer work.”⁷⁰ Task force leaders included Gloria Cotton of McComb, Annie Devine of Canton, and Blackwell. These women emphasized to the NCNW, and to WIMS leaders, that local involvement was influenced by resources—i.e. if they didn’t have the money to travel to a conference, they could not come. Grassroots activists also encouraged WIMS and the NCNW to consider that the wealthier areas of Mississippi like Jackson and the Gulf Coast had

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁰ “Mississippi Women’s Planning Session – Report, November 18-19, 1966,” 4.

problems different from those in the rural Delta. Thus, for the second workshop, women traveling from impoverished communities would need travel stipends.⁷¹

The second workshop, held in Oxford from January 27-29, 1967, reflected the change in direction. Local activists Annie Devine and Jessie Mosley of Jackson served as co-chairs, with a host of local leaders on the steering committee. Boston activist Ruth Batson moderated the event. Consultants came from the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Department of Agriculture, but of the 43 women attending, only twelve had a regular source of income and the rest the NCNW classified as "economically deprived." They came from eight rural communities with populations under 2,500, three small towns of populations between 2,500 and 10,000, and eight cities of 10,000 or more.⁷² According to the workshop report, the government consultants were skeptical that much could be done in a three-day conference, but in fact the women produced four workable draft proposals.⁷³ The first was for a day care center, another for a community center, another a residential training center for disadvantaged girls, and the final one for a school breakfast program. And, within a few years, drawing upon the proposals first developed in Workshops in Mississippi, the NCNW helped create a day care center in Ruleville, a school breakfast and gym uniform program in Canton, and a home for unwed mothers in Okolona.⁷⁴

⁷¹ "Mississippi Women's Planning Session, Jackson, Mississippi – November 18 – 19, 1966, (with consultants)," III-IV.

⁷² "Workshop in Mississippi on Program Grant Writing, Oxford, Mississippi - January 27-29, 1967," p. 1, Folder 4, Box 10, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁷³ "Workshop in Mississippi on Program Grant Writing, Oxford, Mississippi - January 27-29, 1967," 2.

⁷⁴ The project in Okolona had to be modified as the local white government spread rumors that this would be a home to house prostitutes. After an extended silent battle, Okolona became a day care center. Avoiding the debate about black women's sexuality,

WIMS staff made a sincere effort to open dialogue between poor women and government agents at the meeting as well as expose the problematic ways in which government employees continued to interact with impoverished clients. One key moment in the Oxford conference occurred when Mrs. Lillian Palmer, a white federal extension agent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture from Mississippi State University, came to speak about how to stretch one's income through budgeting. Implicit in her presentation was the fundamental misunderstanding that the poor women in attendance had enough money to even consider budgeting and that poverty was a product of their own irresponsibility. The attendees pointed out that many of them made less money than Palmer's assumed lowest salary for a family. And Cowan went one step further. Throughout Workshops in Mississippi, she taped the debriefings of the various teams. After Palmer's presentation, Fannie Lou Hamer became so angry that she nearly left the meeting. "I thought we'd lost her for NCNW." Yet the WIMS founder was able to bridge the divide between Hamer and federal officials: "I told her that I had everything on tape (with the agreement of the reps.!) and that I would take the part which had angered her and play it for someone high up in the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture in Washington. Which I did." As the wealthy, politically connected wife of the former president of CBS, Polly Cowan used her clout at the Department of Agriculture. The recording was later used by the Department to teach future agents the proper ways to address welfare recipients with more respect and dignity.⁷⁵

WIMS silently relented to the racist and sexist fears of local whites. This response fits clearly with Deborah Gray White's assessment that the NCNW was loathe to publicly defend black women's sexuality. See White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 234-5.

⁷⁵ "Synopsis" Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, p. 4. Later, Cowan sent a report of another workshop, "Closing the Communication Gap" to the Department of Housing and Urban

A third WIMS Workshop, “Closing the Communication Gap,” took place in Indianola, the county seat of Hamer’s Sunflower County, on June 27 and 28, 1967. Though Cowan and WIMS had written the proposal for the workshop, which the Office of Economic Opportunity agreed to sponsor, in the report of the workshop, WIMS subsumed its identity under that of the NCNW, referring to itself a few times as “The National Council of Negro Women’s Workshops in Mississippi,” but more often as simply the NCNW in its official report.⁷⁶ Cowan and the WIMS staff kept the focus on the NCNW, and asked the question “How can we get better relationships in the future than we have had in the past?”⁷⁷ WIMS and the NCNW hoped that they could continue the dialogue between the rural poor and government agents, especially those from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and NCNW now believed that the government officials, more than anyone else, could learn from the interaction. Thirty-one women from rural communities, nine members of Sunflower County Progress, Inc., which was the local Community Action Program, and fifteen members of federal, state, and local agencies, including the Office of Economic Opportunity, Farmers Home Administration, Soil

Development. B.T. McGraw, Assistant to the Secretary, Department of Housing and Urban Development sent Cowan a letter informing her that the report was helpful to know how to reach the “urban disadvantaged” and have these people participate in a more meaningful way. They also circulated the report around the department, even up to Secretary Robert Weaver. B.T. McGraw to Polly Cowan, November 14, 1967, folder 1, Box 4, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁷⁶ For examples of how WIMS subsumed its identity within the NCNW, see National Council of Negro Women, Inc. and Workshops in Mississippi, “Closing the Communication Gap: The Problem Solving Approach, Report of a Demonstration Rural Training Workshop, June 27-28, 1967, Sunflower County, Mississippi, ” October 1967, p. 2, 3, and 5, Folder 20, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH and *Rural Opportunities*, August 1967, Vol. 2, No. 8. Reprint from War on Poverty bulletin, Rural Services Division, Community Action Program, Office of Economic Opportunity, Folder 20, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Conservation Service, County Welfare Department, Mississippi Employment Service, and the Social Security Commission attended.⁷⁸ The OEO newsletter *Rural*

Opportunities wrote: “It’s all part of the cooperation that can be developed between poor communities, CAA’s [Community Action Agencies] and the Technical Action Panels in order to get services where they belong—to the low-income people.”⁷⁹

Height again moderated the workshop, while the NCNW leaders, including some WIMS staff, asked Mrs. Hamer, whom they paid to be the Sunflower County coordinator, to select the twenty local community experts. Then in a diplomatic move that acknowledged the local Community Action Project board, NCNW asked the board to select an additional eleven women from the rural poor. NCNW chose the final consultants from the CAP group while everyone on Hamer’s list was included. In this workshop, the women of Mississippi clearly voiced their opinions about the harsh poverty they endured. WIMS, as a separate organization, helped fund the travel and lodging of the poor women who participated. The NCNW (with WIMS working behind the scenes) also identified the grassroots representatives as community experts in case local white officials questioned the women’s authority or right to be present at the meeting. By insisting that all participants in the Sunflower County workshop be paid as consultants, these groups made a self-consciously political move to establish the rural poor as equals in that county (as well as making it feasible that they could attend). The report of the conference stated,

⁷⁷ National Council of Negro Women, Inc. and Workshops in Mississippi, “Closing the Communication Gap,” October 1967, 1.

⁷⁸ *Rural Opportunities*, August 1967, Vol. 2, No. 8.

⁷⁹ *Rural Opportunities*, August 1967, Vol. 2, No. 8.

Although they were unanimously eager to learn how to achieve a better life for people in the Delta, they had come to the workshop with trepidation. Some women had dropped out because of fear of reprisal; their places had been taken by other women who had faith that the organization called the National Council of Negro Women [sic] could help them, protect them, and connect them with the benefits offered by the American system and its institutions. They looked to the Council to understand their deprivation: not just to stand there, but to do something.⁸⁰

The conference report pointed out the great fear among black women in *registering* and *staying* in a motel away from the security of their own communities, suggesting that the Council helped them to overcome such concerns. Notably, although WIMS helped organize and pay for the conference, the report attributes the workshop to the NCNW.

The fears of the participants were quite real. Sunflower County had traditionally drawn sharp divisions between the white planter elite and the poor black workers, and this division was enforced through a system of violence against blacks who chose to transgress the racial boundaries that separated the two communities.⁸¹ That violence was perpetrated by whites against blacks regardless of class. Although the white staff of the motel agreed to comply with the Civil Rights Act and let workshop participants stay in the previously all-white motel, the staff were also frightened for their own safety. However, as the report noted, “Our [white] Mississippi Workshop Coordinator [Ann Hewitt] who had made the physical arrangements, served as a model for the motel-keepers in her consistent use of courtesy titles, her concern that each woman be housed comfortably. The natural sincerity of her respectful manner gave every local woman a

⁸⁰ National Council of Negro Women, Inc. and Workshops in Mississippi, “Closing the Communication Gap,” October 1967, 3.

⁸¹ For background material about Sunflower county violence see e.g. J. Todd Moya, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*; and Dittmer, *Local People*.

new confidence.”⁸² The report then attributes the success of the workshop to the initial teams of Wednesdays in Mississippi. “The contacts and skills growing out of team visits and Workshops over these years has built confidence, understanding and cooperation with government, with the white community and among Negro women.”⁸³ The most important aspect of these trips was the “respect which is felt by each woman for the other regardless of her professional training, her social standing, her economic level. These years have taught us all that professionalism in this field comes with working in depth with the program, and that serving with the program becomes a career in sensitivity training and team work.”⁸⁴

The black women of the Delta were able to air their grievances to governmental officials at the event safely. One woman commented that she had to put on full rain gear inside of her house when it rained because there were so many holes in her roof. Another explained that her family had to sleep in scarves and winter clothes to combat little to no heat in their home. And a final woman told officials about how her home had so many gaping holes that there was no place where she could not see outside (and this was not because of windows). When one government agent argued that food stamps were so cheap that they surely were affordable to all people, a local woman shot back that he had just met one woman who could not afford them.⁸⁵

But this workshop was not without its costs. Workshops in Mississippi had helped the NCNW write up the grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity for the

⁸² National Council of Negro Women, Inc. and Workshops in Mississippi, “Closing the Communication Gap,” October 1967, 4.

⁸³ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

workshop. Just before the workshop convened, Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson vetoed the grant from the OEO.⁸⁶ Workshops in Mississippi then went ahead not knowing whether or not the governor's veto would be honored by the OEO and then spent a month waiting to see if they would have to pay for the workshop. As Cowan wrote, "It was a successful workshop—the report is just being written—and we may go broke over it but I think it was worth it."⁸⁷ The OEO grant did not go through, and Cowan and WIMS had to pay for the entire workshop, which cost \$4,000. The organization spent several tense months fundraising to cover this debt.⁸⁸ Thus, while the NCNW publicly sponsored the workshop, WIMS women worked hard behind the scenes to pay for poor women of the Delta to have an opportunity to design programs that would directly aid them.

On August 5, 1967, Dorothy Height, Unita Blackwell, and Polly Cowan met to discuss the progress of Workshops in Mississippi. Gone were the discussions about direction and with it the defensiveness about what a middle class women's organization could do for local people. Instead, WIMS had found its stride in helping Mississippi residents learn about programs available to them and to teach government officials the reality of how their programs affected the poor. In the process, the poor themselves became the educators. By utilizing their connections with wealthy benefactors and government officials, WIMS activists provided a safe space for Mississippi women who otherwise would not be treated with dignity or be encouraged to articulate their concerns.

⁸⁶ See Polly Cowan to Dorothy Steffens, June 24, 1967, Folder 1, Box 4, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁸⁷ See Polly Cowan to Julian Tatum, July 22, 1967, Folder 1, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Height pointed out how helpful WIMS' national political connections were to achieving results for the poor in Mississippi and beyond: "I think what really we're saying is--is we're talking about political strength and the use of...power--we have to learn what it is it produces some kind of--of leverage...we're part of a national effort."⁸⁹ Utilizing the power inherent in the national network of women, the Council, and its sub-organization WIMS, were able to achieve "clout" with local contractors and builders in Mississippi, even white ones. Most of all, these local authorities feared that they might report negative experiences back to Washington. Height stated: "And, this is very important--at least--and a man in. . . Sunflower County told us, 'Don't you even [unclear] saying that,' because they could just visualize, we're gonna report back to the nation."⁹⁰

While WIMS had success in promoting poor black women's concerns in the Mississippi workshops in 1966 and 1967, it had less success in the North and West in promoting dialogue as an activist strategy. In July 1967, after months of tension resulting from the lack of sufficient housing, education, job opportunities and the disruption of black neighborhoods through urban renewal, Newark, New Jersey erupted in flames. Cowan responded to the violence the best way that she knew—by organizing a communication-building workshop. She chose to do this not through WIMS, but instead through a new organization that she and Dorothy Height had founded in early 1966, the Commission on Community Cooperation (CCC). The CCC was very similar to WIMS,

⁸⁸ Draft of "Closing the Communications Gap, June 28-9, 1967," Folder 20, Box 2, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁸⁹ "CAPAHOSIC--Tape5--Aug. 5, 1967 Sat. Morning (middle) Unita Blackwell," 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 97, Subseries 5, Series 15, NCNW Papers, NABWH. P. 75 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

utilizing the idea of building bridges of understanding, but its name did not limit its activism to one state. It was sponsored by the NCNW and was even located in the same office as WIMS.⁹¹ WIMS participant Helen Rachlin became the organization's director and Cowan was the new organization's chair.⁹² By the time of the Newark rebellions, the CCC had already begun working on a job-training program in New York City as well as a consumer workshop in Indianapolis.

The problems in these urban areas seemed overwhelming for the bridge-building approach, yet Cowan and Rachlin tried their strategy anyway. On the evening of July 12, 1967, police arrested and severely beat a black cab driver named John Smith in Newark's Central Ward. Neighborhood residents saw police dragging Smith's body into the police station and quickly congregated in front of the building, demanding to see Smith. In frustration they threw bricks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails at the precinct. The police eventually moved into the crowd of protesters and began to beat them as well. As historian Komozi Woodward writes, at this point, for the black community, "The nonviolent phase of the struggle was over."⁹³ For five days, angry, exhausted, and disgruntled black citizens of Newark fought against the perceived injustices of the city. They set fire to businesses owned by whites whom they felt charged too much or treated them poorly. They shot at the police force, whom black Newark residents felt had been unnecessarily violent and brutal towards them. At the time, there were only a few blacks

⁹⁰ "CAPAHOSIC--Tape5--Aug. 5, 1967 Sat. Morning (middle) Unita Blackwell," Side 1, internal transcription, 75-6.

⁹¹ Cowan, interview by John Britton, March 8, 1968, 41-2.

⁹² Finding aid to the Papers of Polly Cowan, NABWH.

⁹³ Komozi Woodward, "It's Nation Time in NewArk: Amiri Baraka and the Black Power Experiment in Newark, New Jersey," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles*

on the police force, as it had only been integrated in 1962.⁹⁴ Not only was it the lack of representation on the force that upset black citizens, but the ubiquity of police brutality. The white-dominated police force shot back at rioters, often with indiscriminate vengeance. Several reports later revealed that the police had fired shots into residences with women and children. By the end of the revolt, thousands of dollars in property had been lost, at least 725 people had been injured, and 26 people had been killed. The National Guard and the New Jersey state troopers had shot and killed 24 of the victims, most of whom were innocent black residents.⁹⁵

Citizens of Newark responded in different ways in the aftermath of the chaos. Members of the black community tried to recover from the enormous devastation wrought in their neighborhoods. Though it had already been gaining a foothold in the North prior to the riots, Black Nationalism gained greater attention in Newark in the aftermath of the devastation. At the same time, arguing that the city was no longer safe for them, many white residents and businesses moved out of Newark and into the suburbs. As the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders argued, the country was not moving towards integration, but was instead "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal."⁹⁶

Despite the deep divisions in Newark that seemed to have been cemented by the rebellion, Rachlin and the CCC believed that the community might still welcome an

outside the South, 1940-1980, eds. Jeanne Theoharis New and Komozi Woodard (New York City: Palgrave, 2003), 295.

⁹⁴ United States, Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968) (hereafter cited as the Kerner Commission Report).

⁹⁵ Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno, *Revolution '67*, DVD (San Francisco, Calif.: California Newsreel, 2007).

interracial project that could lead to tangible benefits for local residents. The CCC designed a special project for Newark--the "Program for Housewives"-- which involved a series of workshops called "What's Happening in My World?"⁹⁷ Black and white lower-middle class housewives would meet one another and discuss their common interests related to the well-being of their families and the community. The primary goal of the workshops was to increase communication between women of different races. A secondary goal was to encourage these Newark women to support, and possibly volunteer in, racial integration projects in local schools and community institutions. During the planning stages, women from Paterson requested that the CCC develop a similar set of workshops in their city. Between 1967 and 1969, Newark hosted three workshop series and Paterson, two.⁹⁸ Participants listened, sometimes screamed, and often cried as they sat next to women whose skin color and class differed from their own. Even when they disagreed with one another, they were forced to hear the other side of the story. And by the end of the workshops, most women not only listened to the stories of their counterparts, but many of them had also changed their opinions and ideas about racially-charged topics such as welfare, education, and police brutality.

The leaders of the CCC felt that their organization was the ideal vehicle for educating white women engaged in racial backlash through exposure to the points of view of black women. An internal NCNW planning document explained, "under our

⁹⁶ Kerner Commission Report.

⁹⁷ These workshop series were also called the Community Service Institutes. From now on, I will refer to "Program for Housewives" and "What's Happening in My World" without the use of quotes.

⁹⁸ The dates for the Newark workshops were November 14-December 19, 1967; May 7-June 11, 1968; and April 19-June 18, 1969. The dates of the Paterson workshops were March 5-April 10, 1968 and October 16-November 20, 1968.

auspices as a Negro organization and as a women's organization committed to the total community, [the CCC] can do a great deal to develop new insights, new approaches to problems and ways of working."⁹⁹ In many ways, the proposal to enact cross-racial projects under the umbrella of a black female organization challenged the expected racial leadership of most civil rights organizations in the North. Although the chairwoman of the CCC and the director of the Program for Housewives were white, the chairwoman for the Newark workshops was black; and one of the two chairwomen of the Paterson series of workshops was black as well. Instead of trying to reduce racial tension by asking the black woman to change, the NCNW now directed a workshop that focused on how both black and white women could learn and change according to the ideas of *black* female leadership. However, white women still held a slight majority of leadership positions.

Once the CCC began to recruit women for the workshop, the leaders employed the tactics that they thought would best attract "middle American" housewives to their project. According to an internal document, the CCC believed that white ethnic women "work[ed] hard to maintain their homes and families,"¹⁰⁰ valuing their roles as family caretaker above all others. So the organization tried to appeal to this presumed interest. As Rachlin stated to a group of housewives, "there are always panels of experts who express their opinions on something and that really sometimes we [women] know very well that we know more than the experts because it's our day to day experience but we

⁹⁹ Commission on Community Cooperation, "Description of Commission," p. 2, Folder 8, Box 7, Series 10, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁰⁰ Commission on Community Cooperation, "Program for Housewives," p. 2, Folder 8, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

never get the chance to speak.”¹⁰¹ Thus, women’s roles as caretakers should lead to more important roles in their communities, where they were capable of changing the racial atmosphere of northern cities in ways that men had not.¹⁰²

While the CCC attracted white “middle American” wives, it had much more trouble attracting black women to the housewives program. While the white housewives traditionally stayed home, black women usually worked during the day so midday workshops did not fit the schedules of most black middle class women recruited in fall 1967. Because the CCC insisted on recruiting black women for daytime workshops, they ended up with many applicants who were on welfare. While this lessened the common ground between black and white participants, the workshop provided an excellent forum for debunking many myths that white women harbored towards the black poor.

The CCC’s first workshop series was held from November 14 to December 19, from 10-2 every Tuesday at the Rutgers University student center in Newark. In order to facilitate the gathering, the workshop offered day care to participants and a 100 dollar

¹⁰¹ “Draft – Community Service Institute – Tape -- October, 24, 1967,” transcription of tape, p. 3, Folder 8, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁰² These women viewed themselves as community “experts” because of their everyday experience with the community as consumers. Karen Brodtkin Sacks, in her book *Caring by the Hour: women, work, and organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), argues that women fighting to obtain more rights as medical workers at Duke Medical Center, were most effective as organizers because they were working-class, and because they were women.¹⁰² As “center-women” these women had an access to the community that other people because of their class or gender, did not have. In her book *Community Activism and Feminist Politics*, Nancy Naples argues that Sacks shows that “the key to urban working-class women’s effectiveness as organizers was the way they understood the social organization of community.” Nancy Naples, *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organization Across Race, Class, and Gender* (New York City: Routledge, 1998), 4. Thus, women had an expertise, and a power, to discuss community building more than men who consistently were the “leaders” in other social activist movements. It was the women of the community who were on the ground, working day to day to make the community a better place.

stipend. Eventually, through offering these incentives and with the help of a strong staff, the CCC was able to recruit a wide variety of women, from mothers to retirees.

According to a summary report, women came from every Newark ward. Participants in the first workshop were evenly divided between black and white. Five women were married to municipal workers, which the CCC defined as police officers and sanitation foremen. Eleven were married to blue-collar workers, but the report does not define more fully what was meant by this. Nine were married to white-collar workers (again there is no definition). A few said that their husbands were professionals; others said that their husbands were dead or retired. And finally, six women did not designate any occupation for their husbands. Rachlin proudly stated in the report: “The diversity of backgrounds and sections of the city represented made an immediate impression upon the participants.”¹⁰³

The workshop format was intended to expose the women to the lives of persons of other races and classes. Rachlin wrote that on the first day, “Each participant was carefully groomed, making it impossible to distinguish the PTA officer from the welfare mother.”¹⁰⁴ Though Rachlin certainly employed her own stereotyped assumptions about the “typical” appearances of women of different classes and races, she also pointed to the ways in which other women who held those stereotypes began to rethink their assumptions. The women also had to interact with one another during the day. Not only did they talk about issues in the discussion sections, they also spoke with one another at lunch and in other informal gatherings. These moments of exposure were crucial to the

¹⁰³ “What’s Happening to My World? Report of 3 Workshops for Urban Women,” p. 8, Folder 9, Box 7, Series 10, NCNW Papers, NABWH, 8.

women's growth during the workshop.

In addition to exposure, the women also focused on learning by "doing." They went on field trips, where they witnessed the efforts of community organizations outside the areas in which they lived. They visited the Child Services Association, Youth House, and Urban League in inner city Newark. They also had homework in which they were supposed to interact with neighbors and observe any racism within their communities. One homework assignment called for the women to speak with their family members about their ideas about race. Another assignment had them go to different stores to compare prices, to see which areas were charging more and then to discuss it back at the workshop. The women soon discovered that goods were more expensive in poorer areas of Newark.

Despite the growing knowledge of participants, consensus on issues was not always easy to reach. The women differed in their views of welfare, police, and education. In one heated incident regarding welfare, one of the few middle class black women stood up and cited welfare abuses such as "furniture bought for them with taxpayers money...wall-to-wall carpeting...free medical care when I pay cold cash..." At the end of her tirade she claimed, "Don't expect life to be handed to you on a silver platter!"¹⁰⁵ A welfare rights activist then stood up to argue that it was societal conditions that made welfare a necessity. Another shot back, "They have babies, over and over...if

¹⁰⁴ Commission on Community Cooperation, "The Workshop in Action," p. 1, Folder 16, Box 7, Series 10, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 22.

a woman is well enough to get all these illegitimate babies, she's well enough to go out and get a job...women should start learning morals!"¹⁰⁶

The women fought back and forth, black and white on both sides of the issue, until one woman stood up. This woman was a recipient of welfare. Visibly shaken by the conversation revolving around the economic system upon which she had to rely, she stood up and said. "W-E-L-F-A-R-E. [sic] I hate the word. My children hate the word. But without the welfare we couldn't live." According to Rachlin, the whole room was shaken by this experience. The women suddenly realized that they were speaking about workshop participants, just like themselves, who were forced into financial situations in which welfare was a necessity. "I didn't mean you," said the woman who first led the attack. "Who did you mean, then?"¹⁰⁷ the mother on welfare replied. Confrontations like these, though uncomfortable and tense, became opportunities for women to learn from one another and be accountable to real-life people instead of stereotypes.

The later workshops in Paterson shattered the stereotypes held by white women about the black community. During a field trip to visit a children's shelter, the white women responded that they were appalled at the poor conditions there. A few black women commented that this situation was minor in comparison to the way that the shelter handled discipline. They told their white counterparts that the shelter actually locked up children to punish them. Rachlin writes, "The white women, already upset by what they had seen, did not really believe her." But one week later, a story came out in the newspaper about a boy who was locked in his room at the shelter for eight days because

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

he was caught smoking. “The white women began to understand the hostility of many of the black women to the ‘establishment.’”¹⁰⁸

The Newark and Paterson workshops gave black participants a chance to convince white women of the discrimination and inequality that blacks faced daily. It also gave women, especially white ones, the opportunity to recognize and alter their own opinions. According to Emily Schneider, a Psychology PhD researcher who came to evaluate the Paterson workshop, although only 10 percent of black participants felt that they had changed their minds about white people after attending the conference, 47 percent of the white participants felt that the Workshop had helped them reverse their attitudes about blacks.¹⁰⁹ Helen Rachlin commented that the black participants in Paterson were far more knowledgeable about racial inequality in the city. Overall, 76 percent of the Paterson participants said that they had “gained knowledge, the majority specifying new information about concrete problems such as welfare, education, government processes and consumer problems.”¹¹⁰

In addition to rethinking their views, women also developed tangible relationships with one another. After the workshops, alumnae groups and individuals met every week to touch base and discuss plans for new projects. Additionally, though it hardly seems revolutionary, some women visited one another in their own homes. Again, for some, this was a big step, and as they developed closer relationships with the women of the workshop, they began to see the shallow nature of their prejudices. One white woman from the first Paterson workshop began carpooling with a fellow participant from a low-

¹⁰⁸ “What’s Happening to My World? Report of 3 Workshops for Urban Women,” p.13.

¹⁰⁹ “Report of a Study of the Participants in Paterson Women’s Workshop,” Folder 14, Box 8, Series 10, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

income, black neighborhood. According to the CCC internal reflection report, the woman stated, “I’m not afraid to go in there since I know Mary lives there.”¹¹¹

Also, acting on behalf of the community as a mother was empowering for black and white women. By visibly showing their concern as mothers, black women at the conference were able to contradict contemporary racist stereotypes of them as uncaring, inattentive mothers. Their visible caregiving also contradicted racist ideas that black families were dysfunctional and thus to blame for their own economic and social setbacks.¹¹²

Finally, women, both black and white, experienced personal empowerment as activists. Simply being active outside of the home had been an important experience for some participants, including one black woman in Newark who only attended the first session of the workshop. Rachlin and the others thought that she had left and not gotten much out of her short experience. However, at the end of the workshop, she reappeared to tell the group that her one day with the CCC had given her the courage to apply for a

¹¹⁰ “What’s Happening to My World? Report of 3 Workshops for Urban Women,” 15.

¹¹¹ “Paterson Report” p. 7. Folder 14, Box 8, Series 10, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹¹² This debunking of racial stereotypes of the black mother mirrors the black Boston mother Ruth Batson’s activism of the late 1950s and 1960s. In her article “They Told Us our Kids Were Stupid,” Jeanne Theoharis writes about Batson, who helped push for local change in schools by stressing her role as a responsible, conscientious mother. As a black woman, this action not only helped her child, but it was also a challenge to racial stereotypes of the time which claimed that the black family was dysfunctional, and that ultimately, they did not, or could not care about their child’s education. Jeanne Theoharis, “‘They Told Us our Kids Were Stupid’: Ruth Batson and the Educational Movement in Boston,” in *Groundwork: Local Freedom Movements in America*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward (New York City: New York University Press, 2005).

new job, which she had successfully been offered. Several other women became involved in community projects.¹¹³

The transition from Wednesdays to Workshops in Mississippi and the parallel CCC Program for Housewives enabled black and white women of all classes to come together to better understand one another's concerns. They also gave women the opportunity to learn more about local social welfare programs and to acquire federal funding for much-needed projects. These workshops were the planning grounds for poverty projects that the NCNW would sponsor in the late 1960s and 1970s. Without Wednesdays and Workshops in Mississippi, the NCNW could not have created the ties with northern women necessary to build support for these projects. However, after these series of workshops, WIMS was only present in Mississippi and northern cities in a very minimal way. On February 3, 1969 Ethel Haserodt, who was a member of a 1964 New Jersey team, wrote to Dorothy Height saying that she had extra time on her hands, and

¹¹³ Temma Kaplan writes in her book *Crazy for Democracy*, activist women sometimes developed a "female consciousness" in which they came to realize their own political power through enacting their role as traditionally feminine women. Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 6-7. Though the "female" consciousness is different from the "feminist" consciousness, in her article "Blue-Collar Women and Toxic-Waste Protests: The Process of Politicization," in *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. Richard Hofrichter (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993). Celine Krauss does say that many women did experience a pseudo-feminist realization of consciousness. Krauss points out the strength for activism that these women experienced from acting as mothers. "The traditional role of mother, of protector of the family and community, served to empower these activists on a number of levels." Over half of the women who were highly active in the Love Boat canal protests, which Krauss examines, became divorced either during or shortly after the protesting. Celine Krauss "Blue-Collar Women and Toxic-Waste Protests," 143. "As these women became involved in the public arena, they confronted a world of power normally hidden from them. This forced them to re-examine their assumptions about private and public power and to develop a broad reconceptualization of gender, family, and government." Krauss "Blue-Collar Women and Toxic-Waste Protests," 131.

would like to volunteer with Workshops In Mississippi. She also sent money for Workshops.¹¹⁴ A few weeks later, Polly Cowan wrote Haserodt back to tell her that “At present WIMS is engaged in using this office primarily as a resource for persons who need information on Mississippi and in a northern project called Community Service Institutes [emphasis original].” Clearly WIMS as a Mississippi activist group was winding down. Cowan also pointed Haserodt to the CCC for activism.¹¹⁵ By the late 1960s, WIMS, in its New York City office, acted as a clearinghouse for information for those interested in the movement in Mississippi, but was clearly having financial difficulty.¹¹⁶ And by June 16, 1970, the last financial transaction in the WIMS ledger book shows that the organization sold \$710.89 worth of stock. No financial transactions were entered after this date.¹¹⁷

In the 1970s, Polly Cowan shifted her focus from WIMS to her role as a member of several boards: the Brandeis University Center for Study of Violence; Hampshire College national advisory board; and the National Council of Negro Women. In 1973 she began work as an interviewer for Radcliffe College’s Black Women’s Oral History Project at the Schlesinger Library to interview Dorothy Height over the course of two

¹¹⁴ Ethel Haserodt to Dorothy Height, February 3, 1969, Folder 11, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹¹⁵ Polly Cowan to Ethel Haserodt, March 1, 1969, Folder 11, Box 3, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹¹⁶ Ann Hewitt to Ruth Sykes, January 15, 1970; Polly Cowan to Ruth Sykes, March 10, 1970; Polly Cowan to Ann [Hewitt], June 16, 1970; and Polly Cowan to Ruth Sykes, June 16, 1970, Folder 14, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH

¹¹⁷ Ledger Book for WIMS, Folder 17, Box 5, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH. While this date was not the definitive end of WIMS, by this point the organization was clearly losing money and was no longer actively participating in workshops in Mississippi. See footnote 115 above as well.

years.¹¹⁸ Sadly, only a few days before Cowan was to conduct the last interview, she died alongside her husband Louis in a fire in their New York City apartment on November 24, 1976.¹¹⁹ Dorothy Height stated in her eulogy at Cowan's funeral that she was "eternally grateful to Polly for her invaluable work as a board member [of the NCNW] and for the model on which we must now build in working with women of the poor majority in less developed countries."¹²⁰ Cowan was, and remains, a virtually unknown hero of the civil rights movement, who worked tirelessly behind the scenes on behalf of the NCNW and other social justice organizations. The program that she and Height first implemented in 1964 incorporated strategies and tactics that were meaningful to a large number of black and white women in the 1960s. Even after the end of Workshops in Mississippi around 1970, the legacy of "building bridges of understanding" between northern and southern, poor and wealthy women remained viable as the NCNW utilized this strategy to create new projects both in the United States and abroad. And most importantly, perhaps, was the "bridge" of friendship created between Height and Cowan through WIMS. As Height recalled, "We knew and loved each other as persons, and it is bound to reflect in the quality of what is recorded [in Cowan's interviews of Height]."¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Finding aid to the Cowan Papers, NABWH and Resume of "Mrs. Louis G. Cowan (Polly)," [ca. 1972], Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

¹¹⁹ Dorothy Height, Eulogy for Polly Cowan, [November, 1976], p. 5, Box 1, Series 1, Cowan Papers, NABWH.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Chapter 7

The Legacy of WIMS:

The Personal Approach in Domestic and International Development Projects in the 1970s

The attempt of Wednesdays in Mississippi to move beyond the South and build bridges of understanding in Boston, Paterson, and Danville resulted at best in a few new connections among individual women in the newly created Women's Council for Community Service and at worst in women, like those in Boston, completely rejecting the project. Sensing the limitations of the model in urban areas, Polly Cowan abandoned WIMS' proposed Watts project in 1967 and shifted responsibility for fostering dialogue in northern cities to another newly formed NCNW organization, the Commission for Community Cooperation, which shared an office and some staff with WIMS. In Mississippi, Cowan and a few other WIMS staff persons helped the NCNW create and implement a handful of workshops that built relationships between poor black women and local and national officials. Since Johnson's War on Poverty called for maximum feasible participation of the poor, WIMS focused on providing expertise in grant-writing and networking to channel money from newly created government programs to the people who needed it most. After the end of the workshops, the NCNW developed and financially supported these projects that grassroots women created. The bridge building model of WIMS' earlier years remained, but the people on each end of the bridge now looked very different from the first middle-class beneficiaries of Wednesdays in

Mississippi.¹ Still, even as NCNW secured money from government sources and businesses for economic development projects, it shrouded its projects in the language of “self-help,” reflecting (and responding to) both the growing political conservatism of the American public at-large and black nationalist calls for self-determination.

The poverty programs first conceived of in the Mississippi Workshops and implemented in the late 1960s and 1970s demonstrated the possibility for a middle-class liberal organization to significantly alter its viewpoint—from equating an “expert” with an middle-or upper-class woman educated in a college to one who possessed the “wisdom of the pinched toe and empty belly.”² Indeed, women on both sides of the class divide reconsidered their attitudes towards one another, allowing community members to design and implement projects that gave poor women food, shelter, and day-care facilities. However, the focus on self-help and training—in how to effectively run a daycare center or a pig farm, for instance—continued WIMS’ early emphasis on individual change as the means to eradicate racism and poverty. Thus, building “bridges of understanding” remained an appealing mission not only for the War on Poverty programs but also, after 1968, for federal officials who sought to limit government spending on antipoverty projects and place the burden for new initiatives onto voluntary organizations like the NCNW. It was the volunteer-based, person-to-person approach initiated by WIMS and adopted by NCNW that appealed to the United States Agency for International Aid

¹ For more on the connection between Wednesdays in Mississippi, Workshops in Mississippi, and the NCNW poverty projects, see comments that appear to be from Polly Cowan, “Recording Date: Unknown, Mississippi,” Sony DC-9, p. 4-16 of internal transcription, Side 1, Folder 3, Subseries 6, Series 15, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

² Historian Clayborne Carson quotes Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist Charles Sherrod in Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 142.

(USAID) in 1975 when it issued the NCNW a large grant to create antipoverty projects in Africa.

One of the NCNW poverty projects in Mississippi developed in the context of working with grassroots activist Fannie Lou Hamer in 1967. After witnessing the black candidate Thelma Barnes lose her recent bid for Congress in a county with a 70 percent black electorate, Dorothy Height asked Hamer how this was possible. She explained the insidious repercussions of hunger in preventing change in the South. According to a NCNW report of the conversation, Hamer told Height, “You see, Miss Height, down here food can be used as a political weapon. But if you have a pig in your backyard, if you have some vegetables in your garden, you can feed yourself and your family, and nobody can push you around.”³ A year later, in June 1968, it began the “Hunger, USA” program to combat hunger in Sunflower and Bolivar counties in Mississippi and Macon County in Alabama. The NCNW established cooperative food centers in these locations, implementing plans made by the poor themselves. The people of the Mississippi Delta hoped that these centers would create employment opportunities and furnish them with food, which they were not receiving under state or federal War on Poverty programs.

The first step in “Hunger, USA” was for the NCNW to provide seeds for turnip, mustard, kale, and collard greens for Fannie Lou Hamer’s “Freedom Farm,” community plots of land in Sunflower County. The NCNW also purchased 50 white Yorkshire gilts and five brown Jersey boars for a pig bank to accompany the vegetable plots. The NCNW had purchased the pigs for \$25 each from the Heifer Project (later to become

³ National Council of Negro Women, “Sisters” August 2006, Volume 3, Issue 2.

Heifer International) with the help of Willis McAlpin, a retired farmer in Iowa.⁴ The three-month-old pigs arrived on October 10, 1968. Over time, each pig produced about six to eight piglets in a litter and gave birth to about five litters. Each family that owned a pig then donated two pigs back to the pig bank, reproducing the supply. By the end of the project, the pig bank had produced 2,000 pigs.

The pigs arrived in time for the WIMS-sponsored “Operation Daily Bread” workshop from October 11 to 13. Height moderated the workshop, Cowan was the chair, and Gabrielle Beard was on the staff. These were the only staff persons from Wednesdays in Mississippi who were present at this workshop.⁵ Still, this workshop resembled the group’s earlier activism as prominent black and white women traveled to the conference as consultants from major sororities and social, and religious organizations. The WIMS participants observed the NCNW’s Hunger, USA program and helped develop training programs (for the caretaking of pigs) and spoke with local recipients of the animals.⁶ As outsiders, the WIMS staff vowed to follow up the workshop with additional aid to the poverty projects. One New York woman who served on a foundation board began to seek funds from her foundation to pay for a community center. Another woman petitioned her sorority to pay for the farm tools and tractor that the women of Hamer’s Freedom Farm requested.⁷

⁴ McAlpin worked with the Heifer Project, in cooperation with the Prentiss Institute, in 1968. For more information on the relationship between Prentiss Institute and Heifer Project, see Jayman Matthews, “Remembrance of Days Past: The Prentiss Institute at 100,” *World Ark* March/April 2007, 26.

⁵ Jean Carper, “A Report on Operation Daily Bread,” October 1968, p. 20, Folder 5, Box 11, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁶ See Jean Carper, “A Report on Operation Daily Bread.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

In describing the NCNW's Hunger USA program, Cowan and Height promoted the self-help aspect of the project that ironically appealed to both political conservatives and black cultural nationalists. Following the successful launch of the hunger program in 1968, Height proudly recalled the role that the "poor women themselves" played in the process, no doubt recognizing the power that such a motif held for potential funders, but also for black nationalists who called for black self-determination. "It was the women themselves who said give us the seeds and we will plant some food. Give us some pigs and we will grow our meat. And we responded." She continued, "As soon as we got to working on this, we realized that this kind of self-help program was important. And that what we were doing was not just giving people food, but we were giving them the tools of food production so that they would be able to feed themselves."⁸ Undoubtedly, the self-help, privatized, and volunteer-based NCNW strategies appealed to the Nixon administration. These programs would enable the people of the Mississippi Delta to help themselves, while making connections with local businesses to support the projects. Over and over Height stressed that it was not that these women and men did not want to work, it was that they could not find work, or if they could, it did not pay them enough to live. The NCNW was simply providing them with the tools for self-sufficiency, a central tenant of black power as well as politically conservative federal officials.

Similarly, after the suggestion for better housing at the Mississippi Training Workshop in January 1967, NCNW set up a low-income home ownership program called Turnkey III. This program brought together a local builder, the housing authority, and the

⁸ "Press conference of National Council of Negro Women," Nov. 26, 1969, 7-inch reel, Side 1, Folder 85, Subseries 5, Series 15, NABWH. p. 6-7, internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

homebuyer to create a low-cost, high quality home ownership program from the late 1960s through 1975. Under this program the NCNW worked with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to help families that “qualified” for public housing move into their homes without a down payment but with an agreement to do maintenance on their properties for subsidized payments. The NCNW then set up a Homebuyers Association and trained members to work with Turnkey III to manage and maintain their homes. After 25 years, occupants would receive deeds of ownership. Although the initial funding came from HUD, the bulk of the project was supported by the Ford Foundation, a private philanthropic organization. The NCNW also worked with home-builders and banks in the areas where they set up housing units. By the time the project was completed in 1975, several thousand housing units had been built in cities not just in the South, but all over the country.

Inspired by the WIMS model, the NCNW facilitated communication between diverse groups in order to get maximum results for local black communities. Indeed, the NCNW now built bridges primarily between government officials and poor southern families. During the Turnkey project a member of the housing authority in Greenville, Mississippi, called the NCNW to explain that local white leaders would not cooperate in providing crucial information to help with a housing project. The white NCNW housing director Dorothy Duke then called Mrs. Barnes, a black leader in Greenville and a NCNW contact person, who was able to find out the information that the builder needed. But Mrs. Barnes had only spoken to the builder one previous time, and she needed the NCNW to introduce her. The NCNW complied, and the builder was able to acquire the

information needed to proceed with constructing low-income housing units. As Duke wrote about the encounter:

I think the significance of this is the builder and the Negro woman lived 10 blocks apart in Greenville, Mississippi – yet to be able to converse on a problem of intense interest to both, a bridge had to be established through an N.C.N.W. staff person that was traversed at least 5 times in less than 4 hours.⁹

Here and in many other situations, the NCNW employed both technical and community experts and opened dialogues between governmental officials and community activists to get things done.

In August 1968, the NCNW developed the Okolona Project, responding to concerns first voiced in the Mississippi Training Workshop of January 1967. The organization again made the connection between WIMS' bridge-building model and anti-poverty efforts. The Okolona report states,

Two and one half years ago the National Council of Negro Women, Inc., began to work in Mississippi, focusing on the bringing together of concerned women from the North with concerned women from the South to build bridges of understanding...the friendships built through these activities and with the knowledge of this broad base in the state, helped the National Council of Negro Women to determine that it could work in Mississippi on the program goals adopted in its 31st convention [to work with indigenous Mississippians on poverty projects].¹⁰

The NCNW responded to the priorities suggested by local leaders and applied for funding under Title X for a home for unwed mothers in the former Okolona Junior College campus in Mississippi. The Council proposed a community outreach program for about 200 girls between the ages of 14 and 16 in their first pregnancy, including full-time housing for 40 to 50 of these girls. It planned to offer participants a wide array of

⁹ "National Council of Negro Women" undated report on Housing Project, p.13, Folder 15, Box 7, Series 19, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

¹⁰ "Okolona Center: Family Development through Education," April 1968, 4.

educational, economic, medical, psychological, and vocational services in hope of training them for acquiring and maintaining a job as well as behaving in ways deemed socially appropriate. The 1968 proposal states that each young woman would be trained “for meaningful and appropriate roles as individuals and for responsible parent roles in relation to her child.” And the Council promised that the local community would have input into how the home functioned.¹¹

The NCNW also wanted to use the day care program established at Okolona to conduct research into the reality of life for single teenage mothers. The NCNW hoped that they could provide some data for how best to serve this fast growing demographic in the rural South and that the data could then be used to aid in developing other programs for young women.¹² The Council sought funds from federal departments such as the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, but also received donations from private foundations such as the Irwin Sweeney Miller Foundation, and businesses, including IBM which donated typewriters and keypunch machines and the Merck Corporation that donated pharmaceuticals.¹³

While NCNW received tentative approval to move forward with plans for the home in summer 1968, that fall its funding was revoked by the federal government after Congressman Thomas Abernathy complained that supporting the project would be encouraging prostitution.¹⁴ Not able to battle these local prejudices, WIMS staff altered their approach and created the Okolona Day Care center instead. After this change, they did receive funding from various sources, including the federal government and the

¹¹ Ibid., i-ii.

¹² Ibid., ii.

¹³ Ibid.

Appalachian regional council. The day care center then employed some single mothers who took care of fifty children, their own and others.

At the workshops in 1967 and 1968, women in Mississippi had argued for better daycare facilities in the area. Thus in January 1969, NCNW also set up the Fannie Lou Hamer daycare center.¹⁵ Originally the center was established to work alongside a garment factory in nearby Doddsville. Although the garment factory no longer exists, the day care continues to be operated with the support of the local chapter of the NCNW in Ruleville. The center was set up to be community-sponsored but with a governing board of private and professional local residents who were responsible for its “proper function.”¹⁶ Thus, community involvement was overseen by local officials and professionals. Still, the day care center benefited from some government participation as it received help in food planning from the State Department of Public Health and Agriculture.¹⁷ The center was initially run by the Delta Opportunities Corporation, a Community Action Agency of the Office of Economic Opportunity, with the NCNW serving as a “delegate agency” for the OEO. As a delegate agency, the Council agreed to run the day care center, provide family services and manage the finances.¹⁸

As it had always done, the NCNW maintained a “respectable” public presence. While it developed (with WIMS) and defended projects for housing, daycare, and food

¹⁴ “Recording Date: Unknown, Mississippi,” Side 2, internal transcription, 10.

¹⁵ “Interviews with Fannie Lou Hamer and Day Care Center Workers Recording Date: 1973,” Ampex 361 C60, Side 1, Folder 1, Subseries 6, Series 15, NABWH, p. 12, 16 of internal transcription provided to author by Kenneth Chandler, archivist, NABWH, February, 2010.

¹⁶ The National Council of Negro Women and Rural Poverty” Folder 3, Box 1, Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss., 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

production, and employed single mothers in its programs, the organization refused to publicly support the rights of black women who demanded radical solutions to poverty. Politicians and sociologists continued to view single black mothers as damaging to the community and the nation, and most were unsympathetic to any effort by these women to organize on their own behalf.¹⁹ In a similar vein, despite the numerous workshops offering black women the opportunity to educate and advocate for themselves, the NCNW was reluctant to offer public support for the grassroots efforts promoted by the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), the largest national organization led by poor black women, many of whom were single mothers. When Russell Long called the women of the NWRO “brood mares” in 1967, Height had failed to speak out against his characterization. Nor did she openly advocate the positions of the NWRO, such as its insistence that women receiving welfare should not be forced to endure invasions into their intimate lives even if they needed aid from the government. But within its poverty workshops, many NCNW members were privately supportive of welfare rights. Even in a 1969 Hunger conference, Height found subtle ways to offer support to the welfare rights movement. For instance, she included Henrietta Rice, a member of the NWRO and vice-chairman of the citywide coordinating committee of welfare groups, on a panel.

In part Height’s reluctance to publicly support the NWRO arose from her continued adherence to a nuclear family model.²⁰ In fact, according to Mary Spinks

¹⁸ “Delegate Agency Basic Information,” Folder 3, Box 1, Papers of Fannie Lou Hamer, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

¹⁹ For more on black women organizing see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) and Rhonda Y. Williams *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggle Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁰ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 235.

Thigpen, a 39 year resident of Forest Heights, the first Turnkey III community, “only legally married couples with children were eligible to apply, and the husband had to have a job”²¹ Thus NCNW, which claimed to speak on behalf of all black women, still placed restrictions on their behavior. In part by sidestepping debates around black women’s sexuality the Council could continue to gain support from governmental organizations and private foundations. Learning from its failed efforts to open a home for unwed mothers, the NCNW returned to its strategy of respectability, which helped it survive in the conservative national political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s.²²

Still, despite limitations to its approach, the NCNW helped create and sustain anti-poverty programs that made a great impact on the lives of poor beneficiaries. In one debriefing in 1974 in Mississippi, a local black woman stood up and told the assembled NCNW leaders,

we as black women appreciate what... talent in all these women who have come into us and help us to make these inroads... Yes, and [if] we had eventually years, and years, and years later been done but it wouldn't have been done this soon without them. And we'll always remember that.²³

Unita Blackwell wrote that even though by the late 1960s, student groups such as SNCC, CORE, and COFO “were long gone,” Height and the NCNW maintained a significant presence in Mississippi.²⁴ As local poverty organizations in the state multiplied, the NCNW continued to offer its help in ways both pragmatic and political. By providing the

²¹ “Mary Spinks Thigpen: Passionate activist works for rebirth of rehab neighborhood,” *Habitat for Humanity: The Carter Project* http://www.habitat.org/jcwp/2008/feature_stories/mary_thigpen.aspx (accessed on 12/1/2011).

²² White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 255.

²³ “Recording Date: Unknown, Mississippi,” Side 2, internal transcription, 12.

²⁴ Unita Blackwell, *Barefootin’: life lessons from the road to freedom* (New York City: Crown, 2006), 166.

pigs for farm cooperatives, for instance, the Council helped free the poor, rural black community from economic and political control by a racist establishment. Even Owen Brooks, radical leader of the grassroots Mississippi organization the Delta Ministry, said that Height

could handle bureaucrats in the fashion that she needed to handle them, in order to win the day for the cause [of improving conditions for black Mississippians]. And she would win the day. Yea, she was good at that. So I have a great admiration for her with what she was able to sustain organizationally to make it happen, cause she was that kind of woman.²⁵

Recognizing the problems the black community would face when the increasingly conservative federal government transferred responsibilities to state governments, the NCNW strengthened its presence in the South as well. At its 34th annual National Convention in November 1969, held in Washington D.C., the organization vowed to act as a watchdog at the state level. During the early 1970s, NCNW leaders also encouraged more fundraising from the private sector, and, in an act of self-preservation, shifted direction to preserve their organization. Yet the Council also promoted self-help projects that were black-directed. And the organization vowed to intensify consumer education, including support for the establishment of a presidential committee on consumer affairs.²⁶

Although it had employed grassroots experts like Blackwell and Hamer, the NCNW continued to stress the importance of the financial and educational status of its members in determining their worth to the group. This stance contrasted with the more fluid and experiential-based concept of “expert” it embraced in the mid 1960s. In 1969, the NCNW created a Resource and Development Committee, which provided elite

²⁵ Owen Brooks, interview by Rebecca Tuuri, April 16, 2008, Jackson Mississippi, in possession of author.

members of the organization with a more central role. In justifying the move, Council leaders noted:

Over the years, NCNW has acquired some degree of sophistication with respect to funding. We recognize a positive role for those supporters of NCNW whose stature on the American scene is so prestigious as to either attract direct contributions or to be able to influence the funding of our various programs as they are developed. Often such individuals have time only to serve in such a limited capacity and are willing to do so since this is how they can best serve the Council.²⁷

The NCNW thus continued to strengthen its alliances with powerful people, not alienate them. In addition, at the 1969 Annual Meeting, Council leaders proposed reducing the size of the board, claiming that the 200 women then on the board of directors made it difficult to meet and conduct business. The directors would now only include the officers of the NCNW, presidents of affiliated organizations, chairmen of the standing committees, and five members elected at large by the convention. The presidents of the young adult and junior section and presidents of the local councils were thus removed from their national leadership posts. While this certainly made the organization more efficient, it also made it less democratic.

The NCNW also took steps to change its field structure from a regional to a state model. In 1970 a task force urged the Council to begin this shift. A chairman, elected by delegates from local sections, would oversee programs in each state. But the taskforce did seek to ensure a mix of members at the state level according to age and urged state

²⁶ "Resolutions Adopted by the 1969 National Convention of the National Council of Negro Women," Folder 219, Box 18, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁷ "Proposed Constitutional Revisions to be Voted on at the 1969 National Convention," p. 3, Folder 218, Box 18, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

organizations to be “issue-oriented,” not “status oriented.”²⁸ Despite this nod to issues, the NCNW continued to shift away from having a diverse class constituency in its local sections. At the 35th annual convention in 1971, a task force even suggested that “Multiplicity and full diversity need not be achieved in every group. New sections may be built around vocations or special interests etc. The diversity will be realized as the number of sections in a given community coordinate their efforts and work with each other.”²⁹ In 1973, a discussion paper from the Annual Convention recommended that the Council’s main task was to strengthen the power of the state organizations, claiming “we choose this method of organizing because more and more interest, in terms of problems, and planning, in terms of funding by the government, is shifting from Washington to the states.”³⁰ Again, this move made sound political sense to the preservation of the organization even as it diminished local influence.

The shift to state leadership occurred at the same time that the Rockefeller Brothers Fund sponsored a leadership training program for the NCNW. The grant enabled current and future national and state leaders to attend, but the new program had a conservative tone promoting accountability. As the Council stated:

It is very important that there be some assurance of NCNW realizing the benefits in growth and effectiveness of local sections in light of community needs and NCNW program goals. Taking part in training cannot be treated as an award, as recognition, or as the prerogative [sic] of the president or any other officer.

²⁸ 35th National Convention National Council of Negro Women, “Working Paper for Organizational Growth and Development ‘For reaching and greater involvement of the 4 Million!’” [ca. 1971], p. 1, Folder 226, Box 19, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³⁰ “Discussion Paper – Some Functions and Relationships of National Council to a State Organization System,” [ca. 1973], p. 4, Folder 237, Box 19, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Specific and realistic ways of assessment will be utilized. Locally and Nationally NCNW must prove accountable.³¹

The NCNW more strongly embraced the concept of self-help in other ways as well. The 1973 annual meeting, entitled “Unity and Self-Reliance,” highlighted the Council’s long involvement in home ownership, hunger and nutrition programs as well as new projects focused on at-risk young women. The organization also focused on job training—creating a Center for Career Advancement in New York City. Beginning in 1970 with a grant from the US Office of Education, the center achieved significant corporate support from AT&T and Chase Manhattan Bank. Then in 1974, the Andrew Mellon Foundation took over funding of the center. Meanwhile, in July 1973, the NCNW started Operation Cope to provide vocational training to black women, which was funded by the U.S. Office of Education under the Adult Education Act. Reflecting this concern with black self-reliance, the NCNW proposed that it invest in black child development, not only to care for black youth but to “assist them to become self-sufficient.”³²

And yet, the NCNW was certainly not a conservative organization. It supported the massive March to end the War in Vietnam on November 15, 1969 and spoke out against the imprisonment of Angela Davis in 1971. Inspired by the controversy surrounding Davis’ imprisonment, Height delivered an address at the national conference that year on corruption in law enforcement agencies around the country, pointing out the deaths of two Black Panther youth in Chicago and trouble in San Quentin and Attica prisons in “recent months.” She stated that

³¹ 35th National Convention National Council of Negro Women, “Working Paper for Organizational Growth and Development,” 2.

³² 36th National Convention of the National Council of Negro Women, “Resolutions,” December 3-9, 1973, Folder 236, Box 19, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

Legal institutions of the society seem increasingly to have taken on an implacable adversary [emphasis original] role in relationship to Black Americans, with institutional emphasis being disproportionately directed to maintenance of unassailable authority lines at the price of inadequate consideration of other priorities.³³

The NCNW then resolved, “As women who are aware of the multiple dimensions of struggle—physical, moral, and intellectual—we do not believe that a strong and wise nation need to fear its young rebels, but rather to understand their despair. Prolonged attempts to destroy them, increasing in recklessness and employment of the massive and ruthless powers of state, can only lead to disaster for all of us, we believe.” Members then called for the release on bail of Davis for medical and legal reasons, movement of her trial site to San Francisco and continued support for Davis’ defense.³⁴ That year the NCNW also vowed to support rehabilitative programs for incarcerated black youth.

In hope of contributing to a new type of program against the growing carceral state, the NCNW developed a program the following year named Operation Sisters United, which was funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the U.S. Department of Justice. A pilot program was established in Washington D.C. in 1972 with the intention of moving it to Greenville Mississippi, St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, and Dayton, Ohio by 1975. Operation Sisters United was developed as a rehabilitative program and paired an NCNW member with an at-risk young girl who would otherwise have been sent to juvenile detention. By 1979, over 600 girls had participated in the program, which used one-on-one relationships with NCNW members

³³ National Council of Negro Women in National Convention Assembled, “Resolution on the case of Professor Angela Davis,” November 6, 1971, p. 2, Folder 226, Box 19, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁴ National Council of Negro Women in National Convention Assembled, “Resolution on the case of Professor Angela Davis,” 4-5.

as an alternative to institutionalization and offered “sisterly” guidance as well as “academic tutoring and support services to the family of the young offender.”³⁵

In addition to protesting the growing incarceration of blacks, the NCNW also continued to support welfare reform, although it now did so mainly behind the scenes. An organizational report stated, “Although through myths and stereotypes, welfare has become synonymous with black families, statistics prove that more non-minority individuals and families receive welfare.” It continues, “The black family and the black individual on any so-called welfare program has been degraded, maligned and debased.” The NCNW encouraged members to push for reforms at the local level, insisting especially that “workers maintain sensitivity and understanding of the needs of poor people.” It urged members to educate black communities about their rights, especially to welfare, and to provide job training in public works and public service jobs for women on welfare.³⁶ The NCNW had come a long way since Senator Long’s remarks in 1967. With programs like Operation Sisters United and job training, the NCNW sought to find a middle ground between the more conservative turn of the federal government and black power militants.

According to the 1971 “Commitments for Action,” the NCNW also continued to work for economic and emotional stability for families by supporting appropriate legislation on housing, employment, and day care. As part of this commitment, they “urge[d] with indignation that our individual representatives reconsider the bill recently

³⁵ NCNW, “‘Fulfilling the Promise,’ 1979 NCNW Annual Report,” p. 4, Folder 257, Box 21, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁶ National Council of Negro Women, “Plan of Action: A Plan to Identify and Intensify Productive, Constructive Actions toward Greater Progress for the Black Woman During

passed by Congress which dealt a death blow to quality education by allocating funds for the integration of public schools with the crippling stipulation that none be used in busing.” The NCNW resolved to monitor programs for black children’s education, including vocational and college programs. They also insisted on developing mechanisms for making public schools accountable as well as making black children and youth “self-sufficient.”³⁷

In this same period, the NCNW formed a tenuous relationship with the growing feminist movement. In 1971, the Council voted against the Equal Rights Amendment, but by 1977, it had reversed its position. With respect to abortion, most black organizations remained ambivalent in the 1970s because of their concerns about forced sterilizations of black women and the fears of genocide expressed by Black Panthers and other militant organizations. Yet some African American feminists were speaking out about their need for reproductive control. The NCNW recognized both that black women had the highest annual rate of illegal abortions and were the primary victims of forced sterilization. The 1971 Annual Convention’s “Commitments for Action” included a recommendation to join the Black Women’s Task force of the Women’s National Abortion Action Coalition, which not only fought abortion laws, but also kept tabs on any actions in the country “that promote Black genocide.”

The NCNW was also concerned about equal employment opportunities. It recommended that black women seek out trade schools sponsored by unions that offered black women training for skilled jobs. At the 1973 NCNW meeting, participants resolved

the Decade for Women 1975-1985,” Report at 38th National Convention, November 6-13, 1977, p.14, Folder 251, Box 20, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁷ National Council of Negro Women, Inc., “Commitments for Action,” 1971 Annual

that “the guarantee of a job is a basic right, and the fight for human dignity and equality is not won without jobs for all.” Thus as an organization, the Council offered its “total support to legislation which would provide for a truly full employment society; specifically, Congressman Hawkins’ Full Employment Bill of 1976.”³⁸

Throughout the 1970s, the NCNW proposed solutions to a wide range of problems that relied on a combination of private, public and volunteer efforts. Recognizing that the federal government was no longer willing to serve as the primary vehicle for programs addressing poverty, civil rights and gender equality, the NCNW nonetheless continued to work with those agencies that offered support for programs in these areas. At the same time, the organization relied increasingly on private foundations and corporations to aid the volunteer efforts that had long been a staple of their work. Thus in 1977, they developed a plan to aid the black elderly poor that depended largely on volunteer groups. The plan included organizing church groups to provide “meals on wheels;” forming coalitions to establish a network of programs and activities for the elderly poor; and providing an escort service to help them cash their social security checks and shop.³⁹

Suggesting the need to work within a conservative political framework, the NCNW stressed the use of its private business connections to make a difference in American society. “The private agencies have a significant role and responsibility in the education, development and nurturing of the black families.”⁴⁰ Moreover, “to assure that

Convention, Folder 225, Box 19, Series 2, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

³⁸ 36th National Convention of the National Council of Negro Women, Inc., “Resolutions,” December 3-9, 1973.

³⁹ National Council of Negro Women, “Plan of Action,” 1977, 6-13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

black families continue to receive benefits from private agencies and to provide opportunities for black women to be a part of the decision-making processes” in private companies, the NCNW recommended that members seek positions on agency boards and committees and volunteer in organizations and programs that focus on leadership skills, community development, literacy, and education.

During the culture wars of the 1970s, the NCNW sought to develop programs on whatever middle ground remained. The difficulty of negotiating the political terrain at home inspired Council members to begin to consider whether its interventions might be more effective abroad. Many NCNW members had visited Africa and other “developing” nations as individuals or with affiliated organizations. Height herself studied at the Delhi School of Social Work in India in the early 1950s, during a time of great political debates over land reform. She later claimed, “I personally came to understand more about land and the relations between land reform and economic growth and development, than I think I ever could have gained in this country.” Height visited Travancore, the Communist province in India as well as the one with the highest number of unemployed college graduates. The students “challenged everything. They challenged whether or not social work was an opiate of the people, whether or not even the school itself wasn’t a Western way of keeping them....”⁴¹ Now Height found herself caught in the same political dilemmas at home, between a radical left politics and a more conservative approach.

As a black woman representing the United States, she often found herself in the awkward position of defending her country, despite widespread racial segregation and

⁴¹ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, November 10, 1974, 133.

discrimination. In 1959, Height traveled with a group named “International Seminars,” formed by George Denny in the wake of strong anti-American protests in Latin America. The group was engaged in “World Town Meetings” and traveled to Uruguay right after Prince Edward County, Virginia closed its schools in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Height and Edith Sampson, a Chicago court judge, were the only two black people in the group of thirty-five. In other ways, such as political ideology and age, the delegates were mixed. The International Seminar concept, much like Wednesdays in Mississippi, was to introduce U.S. men and women to their counterparts in countries in Latin America and speak about issues of mutual concern.⁴² Interestingly, when white delegates from the U.S. tried to lead discussions, leftist students and other concerned activists begged to hear from the two black women. Yet when students in Montevideo pointed to the school closings in Prince Edward County as evidence that the United States was intent on depriving all black children of an education, Height found herself defending her nation, pointing out that Sampson had been trained as a lawyer in the Midwest and that Height had attended schools in Pennsylvania and New York where she was not the only black pupil. The students from Montevideo were so intrigued by Height that many of them asked her to talk at their university.⁴³

Height felt proud of her role in sharing her experiences as a black woman with Latin Americans. She, Sampson, and the rest of the delegation spent several weeks traveling to Uruguay, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Colombia. The two African American delegates helped contextualize many of the racial issues that citizens in Latin America had been reading about. She pointed to the power that she possessed in

⁴² Ibid., 135.

speaking with non-white Latin Americans. She also pointed out the effect that her and Sampson's presence had on the white Americans in the delegation. "[T]o me the most satisfying part of the whole trip was to recognize the extent to which most of those white Americans had never been in a situation where people of color, in another part of the world, were hating them for their racial policy, or were questioning them because of the racial policy, or were trying to ask, 'Well, why did you drop the bomb on Hiroshima? Why didn't you drop it on Germany?'" For many whites, this was the first time that they had felt put on the spot about their country's racial attitudes. Height was glad that Latin Americans were aware of these problems, but she was also pleased that she could help explain the situation to them as well as to her white counterparts.⁴⁴

In 1960, Height had participated in another organization named the Committee of Correspondence, a group of fourteen women brought together by Anna Lord Strauss and Rose Parsons to create connections with women abroad, this time in Africa. The group wanted to ensure that they received the resources most useful to them. The African women came from the Girl Guides, Red Cross, YWCA, and other groups friendly to Western organizations. In Ghana and Nigeria, market women organized their own groups. Height was sent on behalf of the Committee to visit Guinea, right after the French had left, as well as Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia. She had to return to the U.S. early, however, and Sarah Lee Owen, a diplomat who was working with the State Department took her place. Having been inspired by the trip, Height then joined the Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, which stressed that Americans of African-descent should take an active role in trying to influence US policy on the continent.

⁴³ Ibid., 136-7.

Through these connections, Height developed a close relationship with Nigerian delegate to the United Nations, Chief Adabo. When the Committee met with Adabo, they expressed their concern over South Africa's system of apartheid and U. S. business dealings with the segregated country. However, Adabo cautioned them about ignoring U.S. policies in other countries where food was being used as a political tool. Height recalled Adabo emphasizing: "There is no way of saying that the food has been distributed in proportion to the need. So that the use of food as a political weapon, or use of other resources, you see, and a denial to some of the African needs, is something that could easily escape us."⁴⁵ Height's experience with delegations employing a personal approach no doubt influenced her support for projects like WIMS in the following years. It also inspired both her and her co-activists to rethink their racial attitudes as well as U.S. policies. Height seemed to learn more from her peers when she was with all black delegations like those in Africa, whereas in Latin America, when she was with white majority groups, she saw herself primarily as a teacher.

These experiences, along with her involvement with WIMS, certainly shaped her response to USAID, which sought to utilize her ambassadorial power and that of the NCNW in 1975. The women's program of USAID awarded the organization a grant to "enable NCNW to increase its capacity to plan, implement and evaluate the development of an international program." The program, which ran from June 18 to July 14, began with a small conference during the International Women's Year celebration in 1975, after which delegates visited Mississippi to witness the self-help projects there and ended up in Daytona Beach, Florida for the Mary McLeod Bethune Centennial Celebration.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 139.

After receiving the grant, the NCNW had only a month to organize everything for the program, including finding the women to participate. Leaders made contacts with missionaries and clubwomen in the countries who would be attending the IWY and received recommendations from the organizers of the larger conference to find speakers and participants. The group that they invited to this special conference under the rubric of the IWY meeting was indeed an impressive international group. One woman was a midwife as well as the vice president of the Economic and Social Council in Senegal, while others included a chief of police from Uganda, a tribal chief from Zambia, a YWCA staff person in Ghana, and the president of the Caribbean Women's Association from Trinidad. The delegate from the Bahamas was the first female president of that country's senate. A woman representing the Economic Commission for Africa, a development division within the United Nations, also attended. Every delegate was a trained working woman, skilled not only in her own craft, but often involved in local, national or international politics as well.⁴⁶

For this conference, the NCNW program sought to create a global network of women of African descent from 15 countries "to implement International Women's Year goals through self-help activities." Although the NCNW had expected thirty women to participate, between fifty and sixty women actually joined the sessions at the conference. Unlike the formal IWY conference, where there were too many events and people for ywomen to meet with one another in intimate gatherings, the NCNW conference gave participants the opportunity to speak directly with one another.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 143-4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 237-8.

The objectives of this international conference shared some characteristics with Wednesdays in Mississippi, by emphasizing that personal relationships between women from around the world would be an effective tactic for developing ongoing projects. The USAID representatives who spoke with the NCNW appreciated this emphasis on personal communication between trained persons. “He explained that in the early 1970s, AID began to de-emphasize the trickle-down theory of assistance and developed a more direct people-to-people program. The trend now is to work with rural and poor populations with special emphasis on participatory planning.”⁴⁷ The international work invoked the principles of Workshops in Mississippi (and the larger War on Poverty), with its emphasis on creating “participatory planning” and self-help projects to aid women with housing, job creation, and daycare. In the International Division Newsletter in 1977, the NCNW states: “One of the main currents of cross-cultural exchange will flow between the Mississippi experience and the BLS [Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland] countries. The story of NCNW in that state has certain aspects that can be repeated wherever there are problems to be solved concerning food, health, housing, education, and all the basic components of living common to families.”⁴⁸

When the IWY conference finally arrived, Height and the NCNW charted a moderate path. Unlike many of the female delegates who reacted angrily to the fact that Daniel Parker, a man and the director of USAID, headed the US delegation to the conference and many men headed other national delegations, Height did not voice

⁴⁷ Gertrude Martin, “Southern African Women in Development: How Shall the National Council of Negro Women Respond?” December 14-15, 1977, p. 3, Folder 7, Box 2, Series 37, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

criticism. When a group of women in the U. S. delegation protested Parker's leadership, Height offered a neutral response: "My position was, and still is, that the delegations to an official international body are designated by the heads of their governments, and once that is done, and you get on territory outside of the United States, there's no need of standing at the door and saying, 'We demand another delegation.'" In her characteristic practical manner, Height also pointed out the favorable aspects of having men who were heads of state there witnessing what women were asking for.

They were the ones who had to take a stand. So that it's like saying International Women's Year is not about women; it's about equality of partnership and opportunity of men and women. So I think that a lot of the women who went on about the fact that there should be no more men here and so forth were thinking that this was an international feminist movement....Which was not what it was at all. It was a movement to say, "The governments of our countries, the private sectors of our countries, business and industry, every element of the country, is to open up opportunities for women."⁴⁹

Height did not seek to create a new order around a Western feminist agenda, but to achieve what she could for women around the world. Moreover, she linked her experience of trying to achieve power for her race in the United States by working interracially to her efforts to attain power globally for women by working with men.⁵⁰

When a small group of women, led by young black women from CORE, grabbed the microphone and hooted Parker down, Height lamented that the reporters focused on this moment instead of paying attention to more moderate voices. When groups of Mexican feminists fought among themselves at the conference, Height helped organize a panel

⁴⁸ National Council of Negro Women, *International Division Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 1977, Washington, DC, Folder 27, Box 1, Series 37, NCNW Papers, NABWH.

⁴⁹ Height, interview by Polly Cowan, November 10, 1974, 230-1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 231-2.

where the women could discuss their common problems and figure out a way to work together.⁵¹

After finishing their week at the IWY conference, the group of international women then traveled to Mississippi on July 4 to visit the self-help projects in Jackson, Ruleville, and Okolona, Mississippi. In Jackson, delegation members met with members of the Jackson NCNW, headed by the Jacksonian NCNW president Jesse Moseley. They also met with Fannie Lou Hamer and Unita Blackwell. The participants traveled to Liberty House, an NCNW-sponsored marketing and purchasing cooperative, owned by thirteen handicraft producing cooperatives from four counties in Mississippi. The women also visited two home-ownership neighborhoods, a pig bank, community gardens, and the Fannie Lou Hamer and Okolona day care centers. The women participating in the IWY seminar were most interested in the pig bank. By having the participants visit Mississippi, Height exposed the parallels between Mississippi and African nations just emerging from colonialism, showing the women from developing nations that extreme poverty, hunger, high infant mortality rates, and shortened life-spans existed in the United States as well. The group ended the seminar at Bethune Cookman College for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Mary McLeod Bethune. This celebration focused on Bethune's enterprising spirit in opening a college for black youth in Florida when none were available. Again, the NCNW highlighted the message of self-help at the Bethune celebration.

Height and other NCNW leaders made a direct ideological connection between the activities of Workshops in Mississippi and the NCNW international programs. In one

⁵¹ Ibid., 232.

debriefing session before a team from the NCNW left for Africa, a leader encouraged the women to learn from the antipoverty projects in Mississippi—“the goal, again, [with Workshops in Mississippi] was to know what the people who had the problem...wanted done about the problem to give the skill to help all of us learn the skill of letting the people develop the program.” The speaker continued, “And it's marvelous to think that Mississippi has been the taillight and now they're headlight [is] showing another place which way to go.”⁵²

It is hardly surprising that USAID funded the NCNW to promote its community development project. As black women, the members of the organization were self-proclaimed “natural allies of southern African women,” but they were able to successfully promote an American liberal version of community development that sought to work (voluntarily) within established legal structures instead of promoting economic redistribution.⁵³ The NCNW's moderate efforts did not strongly challenge American capitalism or racial and gender stereotypes and were thus supported by USAID, an organization often criticized by more radical groups. Yet in the process, the NCNW gained greater influence in human rights projects and policy abroad in the 1970s than did their radical critics. One white Mississippi woman with whom WIMS worked in 1964 and 1965, Patt Derian, became the first Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights under President Jimmy Carter. Thus, the NCNW, its sub-organizations, and its members

⁵² “Recording Date: Unknown, Mississippi,” Side 2, p. 4-5 of internal transcription. Based on the context of what this speaker says, she is most likely Polly Cowan. Height also makes this comparison in her speech at Polly Cowan's funeral. See Height, Speech at funeral of Polly Cowan, [November, 1976], p. 5.

⁵³ Gertrude Martin, “Southern African Women in Development: How Shall the National Council of Negro Women Respond?” 4.

were all active at an important moment in establishing U.S. development projects and a human rights agenda around the world.

While the NCNW's international work was sponsored by USAID, the women of the countries who participated in it also sought to use the Council to further their own goals. Thus, they were hardly puppets of the US government's development policies. The first three countries that the NCNW became involved with were Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. These countries were chosen because of their proximity to (in the case of Lesotho—their location within) South Africa, with its system of apartheid. After the NCNW had visited all of these locations, it learned from the African women themselves what they most desired from their organization. Gertrude Martin prepared a report entitled "Southern African Women in Development: How Shall the National Council of Negro Women Respond?" for the Council's 1977 meeting. After visiting each country a few times, the NCNW learned that

the liberation of South Africa from minority white domination is the highest priority for Black Africans. The persistent charge to NCNW was that it use its voice to sensitize the United States foreign policy to the need to deal in positive ways with liberation goals of Black South Africa.⁵⁴

In addition to political change, the African women also stressed the need for economic liberation. The women pointed out that despite political independence from European governments, these countries continued to be under the control of European multinational corporations. In order to augment the control of local government services, the King of Swaziland worked with the NCNW to produce a pig bank much like the one in Mississippi.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1.

In 1979, the NCNW won another grant from USAID, this time to make feasibility visits to the BLS countries as well as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo, Barbados, Jamaica, Haiti, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, and St. Vincent Islands, Honduras.⁵⁵ They also proposed new projects in Senegal and Togo and of increasing communication links between African and black women's organizations. Another three-year USAID grant awarded the NCNW funding to establish the LaKara Skills Development Training Center in the Lakara Region in Northern Togo. Its purpose was to help rural women in Togo upgrade their skills in farming, gardening, and handicraft production.

Ironically, at the same time that the NCNW pointed to self-help projects in Mississippi as indicative of its potential as an organization that could facilitate development abroad, many of those domestic programs were dying. By 1971, the Freedom Farm possessed 700 acres (almost one third of the total land owned by blacks in North Sunflower County), but much of the land remained underdeveloped due to the lack of an irrigation system. This prevented the development of a cash crop.⁵⁶ In March 1973, the farm began replacing vegetables with cotton to produce such a cash crop, but that same month, local officials reported that the farm was a "dream struggling to survive."⁵⁷ Then Freedom Farm leader Joseph Harris had a heart attack in April 1973 and died the next year.⁵⁸ Hamer's health, too, started to decline in 1973, and the farm ultimately shut down after her death from breast cancer in 1977. Still, by the end of

⁵⁵ NCNW, "'Fulfilling the Promise,' 1979 NCNW Annual Report," 8.

⁵⁶ Chana Kai Lee cites Northern Sunflower County Memorandum (ca. Nov. 1971), 5-6, folder 22, Box 11, Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, in Chana Kai Lee *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 148.

⁵⁷ Lee *For Freedom's Sake*, 161. Lee cites a March 1973 progress report. Progress Report (Mar. 1973), "Introduction," Folder 23, Box 11, Fannie Lou Hamer Papers, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

Freedom Farm's existence, it had fed thousands of malnourished people in the Delta, and for that reason, it was ultimately a success.

The housing program fared a bit better than the community farm, though it too would be phased out by the mid 1970s. By 1975, the NCNW's Project Homes had created 8,761 housing units, but in October 1973, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development made Turnkey III a Federal Housing Program. Congress voted in 1974 to include the program in section 208 (a) of the Housing and Urban Development Act. As the federal government incorporated Turnkey into its own programs, the NCNW participated in a study of fair housing laws for minority women in the United States. In 1975, the NCNW attended five hearings in Atlanta, St. Louis, San Antonio, San Francisco, and New York City as part of HUD's equal opportunity staff. In 1976, the NCNW published its report "Sex Discrimination in Housing," pointing to another issue that plagued women, especially poor and working-class women.

The NCNW continued to take pride in its role in housing, pointing out that the organization had produced more than \$60 million worth of low-income housing and conducted the 1975 commission that dealt with discrimination against women in housing. Nonetheless, a 1977 resolution promised no more money, only that the NCNW would "continue its fight to eliminate discrimination against women in housing." On the other hand, many of the original families that inhabited Turnkey III homes remain in them today. When Forest Heights, the first community to be built under Turnkey III in Gulfport, Mississippi, was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, it was one of the first communities visited by President Clinton who vowed that this community with a proud

⁵⁸ Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 161.

past would be rebuilt. In 2008, the restoration project was nearly finished with the help of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project. And a year later, the community received a levee to help with drainage in the area.⁵⁹

In retrospect it appears that in order to survive as an organization, the NCNW moved its focus away from domestic poverty projects in the 1970s to international projects devoted to development, using many of the bridge-building tactics used by Wednesdays and Workshops in Mississippi. Careful to promote itself as a “self-help” organization, the NCNW promoted initiatives in Africa even as its original, domestic programs suffered from a lack of funding and support and died out.

⁵⁹ For more on the efforts of local activist Mary Spinks Thigpin in rebuilding Forest Heights, see “Mary Spinks Thigpen: Passionate activist works for rebirth of rehab neighborhood.”

Conclusion

In 1964 Dorothy Height and Polly Cowan initiated WIMS, a unique program in the black freedom struggle. Formed under the auspices of the NCNW, the largest national black women's organization at the time, this ecumenical and interracial organization was remarkable in its constituency and its leadership. While in Mississippi, the participants of WIMS met in interracial groups and provided support to the students of Freedom Summer and the women of Mississippi. The black and white WIMS "angels" who risked their economic, social, and physical safety for this project were also remarkable. To diminish the risk involved in the project, WIMS sought to work quietly to create personal relationships as a method to create change. And even though some WIMS members, such as Ruth Batson, chafed at the strategy of traveling in segregated groups and remaining behind the scenes, they ultimately relented, perhaps because they came to understand the great fear of reprisals that both black and white middle class participants imagined. Mississippians were desperately afraid to be linked to the movement out of concern for their lives and livelihoods. As WIMS staff person Doris Wilson pointed out to Batson, the group's job was not to test whether Mississippi honored national policies of integration, like the Freedom Riders had in 1961. Instead, the purpose of the WIMS trips was for northern women to witness race relations in the state of Mississippi and then to open channels of communication with southern women in that "closed society" while rallying more northerners to join the movement.

As Height recalled, the project would not challenge existing laws but work within them in order to foment change:

No, well, you see, we had to stay within the law. It was not a respect for it, but it was just a recognition that we had to operate within the law. First, it was enlightened self-interest, because if you disobeyed it, you might get into trouble for nothing. If you wanted to be of help, you had to follow the pattern.¹

Much like Mississippians for Public Education, a white women's organization that remained segregated in order to gain more support for keeping the newly integrated public schools open, WIMS also "stay[ed] within the law" and promoted a moderate strategy that they hoped would not put black Mississippians in harm's way while convincing white women in the state to support the movement.

While northern visitors certainly aided the struggle in 1964, their main contributions were personal in nature. They made contacts with potential team members, financed their trips to the South with their own money, created individual friendships with women from Mississippi, and then financially supported the local projects which they had personally visited. Just as importantly, these trips altered the women's perspectives about race relations in their own communities. After returning from Mississippi, both the white and black women of WIMS realized that they needed to foster better communication in their own backyards as well.

After the end of the Freedom Summer, following the pattern of other moderate national civil rights organizations, WIMS promoted the expertise of its well-educated, well-trained, and professional constituency and redefined itself as a source of experts. Throughout fall 1964 and spring 1965, WIMS helped southern women investigate abuses of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and then reported these to federal authorities. In the summer of 1965, they returned to Mississippi to act as educational experts in the Office of Economic Opportunity-sponsored Head Start programs. While WIMS members found

the integration of accommodations vastly improved that summer, they had other setbacks. For example, the YWCA refused to allow WIMS to speak on behalf of the Y, and the Jewish women of Jackson were much more hesitant to participate than they had been the year before. Still, by the end of the summer, Cowan and Height believed that “building bridges of understanding” between white and black middle class women in Mississippi had achieved sufficient results that it was no longer a priority.

Instead, WIMS moved north to set up dialogue-building workshops in Boston, Massachusetts and Paterson, New Jersey. While Paterson activists succeeded in organizing a wide range of black and white women of all classes, the Boston women rejected the WIMS approach, claiming that they could solve their problems by themselves. Polly Cowan then helped establish a new organization, a WIMS of the North of sorts, called the Commission for Community Cooperation. They focused on job training as well as dialogue building for housewives in Newark and Paterson in the wake of major urban rebellion there.

Cowan, however, could not leave Mississippi alone. After her experiences in 1964 and 1965, she decided to promote a new agenda for WIMS that would mirror the black power movement, which was growing stronger across the South in the mid 1960s. In late 1966, Wednesdays in Mississippi became Workshops in Mississippi and now constructed “bridges of understanding” between poor grassroots activists and federal and local governmental officials. Workshops hoped that it could close a communication gap by providing a culturally sensitive bridge between groups that had rarely interacted with one another. Now, WIMS women used their expertise and personal connections to help fund and staff a series of workshops in the late 1960s where the poor designed their own

poverty projects in a safe space. After the last workshop in October 1968, the NCNW took over these programs and helped poor black women acquire funding and political backing for projects such as the pig bank at Hamer's Freedom Farm, a school breakfast and gym uniform program in Canton, Mississippi, day care centers in Ruleville and Okolona, Mississippi, and a low-income home ownership project that built 8,761 housing units around the country.

One of the most ironic situations related to the poverty projects of the 1960s was that the NCNW promoted them as "self-help" efforts, thus endearing itself black nationalists and political conservatives. Self-help became a way for the NCNW not only to raise funds for its poverty projects around the country but also to survive as an organization in a time when private donors and the federal government became more hesitant to sponsor black power projects. This was a way for NCNW to promote itself as a volunteer organization, outside of government control, again an idea that appealed to those on both the far left and political right. With its political brokering, NCNW was able to gain real money and support for poverty projects in Mississippi, while also employing women such as Frances Beal, founder of the Third World Women's Alliance, and Prathia Hall as staff members. These women were able to make a living working for the NCNW, but were also able to engage in more radical activities outside of the Council as volunteers. Thus, Height and others at the NCNW were able to support more radical activists in a practical, behind-the-scenes way.

Viewing the NCNW in this way sheds new light on the Black Power movement, for while rhetorically a wide range of black political leaders were calling for self-determination and criticizing black moderates as unsupportive of those efforts, some

moderates were active behind the scenes in promoting and supporting projects for the poor in Mississippi.² Progressive whites, such as Polly Cowan and Helen Rachlin, as well as moderate blacks like Dorothy Height, made decisions to “win the day,” as Owen Brooks pointed out.

In 1975, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) awarded the NCNW a grant based largely on the perceived success of their Mississippi economic aid projects. The NCNW created a twenty-eight day seminar for women of African descent from across the world. They first met in Mexico City, where the NCNW convened a conference for women of African descent in tandem with the larger IWY conference. After the IWY conference, the women traveled to Mississippi to view the NCNW’s poverty projects and then finally to Daytona Beach, Florida, to view Bethune-Cookman College and celebrate Mary McLeod Bethune’s centenary. The Mississippi economic development programs were the projects that Height most wanted the international group to observe.³ After this series of events, an NCNW delegation worked in Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland to establish projects to promote economic stabilization using the Wednesdays in Mississippi strategy of “building bridges of understanding.”⁴ This history shows that alongside governmental officials and grassroots activists, middle class female brokers using moderate, yet effective tactics to join people together and mobilize resources in support of the disfranchised and poor.

² For more on the criticism against black moderates, see Rhonda Y. Williams, “The Pursuit of Audacious Power: Rebel Reformers and Neighborhood Politics in Baltimore, 1966-1968,” in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³ Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, 236-7.

⁴ See Height, Eulogy for Polly Cowan, [November, 1976], 5.

Though fraught with tension and at times limited in its success, the bridges of understanding built by WIMS were an important part of the black freedom movement and of the changing landscape of white liberalism. The group's history charts the transitions that occurred within a liberal interracial, interfaith volunteer women's organization during the 1960s and 1970s as it adapted to a shifting political terrain--beginning with the beloved community of Freedom Summer and ending with black self-determination. WIMS and its parent organization, the NCNW, made crucial decisions not only to help black Americans gain social, political, and economic equality, but also to support initiatives that helped strengthen the NCNW at home and abroad. Indeed, it is the only major black clubwomen's organization to survive to the present day.⁵

⁵ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 253-6.

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