

How Young People Gave Meaning to MLK's "I have a dream" Speech

Review of Jim Dann's "Challenging the Mississippi Firebombers"

By [Global Research News](#)

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[Baraka Books](#)

In June 1964 young black and white civil rights workers risked their lives in the face of violence, intimidation, illegal arrests, and racism to register as many African American voters as possible in Mississippi, which had historically excluded most blacks from voting. With a firsthand account of the details and thoughtful descriptions of key people on the front lines, including Fannie Lou Hamer, Charles McLaurin, John Harris, Irene Magruder, and many more, author Jim Dann brings that historic period back to life. He places those 15 months in Mississippi in the overall history of the struggle of African Americans for freedom, equality, and democratic rights in the South, the country, and throughout the world.

Fraught with lessons from those experiences, "[Challenging the Mississippi Firebombers](#)" is an outstanding contribution to understanding and advancing civil rights struggles. It is also an engrossing story of a pivotal moment in the mid-20th-century United States.

In June 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act for which the civil rights movement had fought for years, while in July, George Zimmerman was acquitted — he "got away with murder" said jurors. Jim Dann's book provides invaluable insight and lessons at a time when some would like to roll the United States back to the 1950s.

Following are excerpts from Jim Dann's book "[Challenging the Mississippi Firebombers: Memories of Mississippi 1964-65](#)" (Baraka Books, 2013). Jim Dann was one of the many young people who helped change the course of history in the South, the United States, and throughout the world. His book takes on new meaning now that some of those accomplishments like the Voting Rights Act are being rolled back.

Jim Dann worked diligently on this book until June 14 and never let on that his health was anything but perfect. Baraka Books finished the first advance galleys on June 16 and then learned that Jim had passed away that day. He died of leukemia. Getting this book had become his absolute priority and nothing would prevent him. The book is now available to order from [Baraka Books](#).

Excerpts

[John F.] Kennedy, a prisoner of his own racist interpretation of history, was politically beholden to the southern white Democrats for his razor-thin victory in the election in 1960. He made no moves to even uphold the rule of law in the South, never mind to oppose

desegregation actively. By the time he was assassinated in 1963 there were fewer blacks registered to vote in Mississippi than in 1900; every school and public institution in the state was totally segregated, even down to the drinking fountains at the courthouses. The Mississippi Democratic Party completely excluded blacks, and the same system of violent intimidation and depraved morality in officialdom that reigned a hundred years prior under slavery held sway with little visible change.

Into this fascist system a courageous band of black Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee workers had been struggling for three years, trying without success to register black people to vote. Jailed, beaten and killed for their efforts, they were ignored by the media and federal government. Now this was about to change: with the full glare of major media publicity a thousand mostly northern college students would enter the fray to share weal and woe with the black people of Mississippi.

(...)

Shortly after I had committed myself to Ruleville, MS, James Chaney, a bright young man of twenty-one and one of the Congress of Racial Equality or CORE staff members in Meridian, came to my room. He was looking for volunteers for his project. He asked me if I would go to Meridian with him. I said I would be happy to but I had already promised that I would go to Ruleville. He then turned to one of my roommates, Andrew Goodman, and asked him. Goodman agreed and committed himself to the Meridian project. Goodman and I had had several friendly interchanges, and for a day or two of the training we sort of hung out together. Goodman came from a progressive Jewish family in New York; he had been active in CORE in New York, where he had been attending Queens College. His parents were totally supportive of his participation in the project. We liked each other, and I was a bit disappointed and a bit envious when he told me before the end of the training that he had to leave early with Chaney; there was some kind of emergency and the CORE leader at Meridian, Michael Schwerner, decided that the three of them should skip the final two days of training and return to Meridian. Unknown to them the chief investigator for the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission got their car description and license plate and gave it to the sheriff of Neshoba County, near Meridian, who immediately laid plans for the lynching of the three.

(...)

On Mondays I would go to Indianola and get my ten-dollar check. John Harris, Charley Scattergood and I would then go to the White Rose Café and buy some hamburgers and drink a pint of scotch with some local friends. On Saturday nights we went to Club Ebony, where B.B. King would sometimes sing. When he did, he always bought the civil rights workers a big meal. If he wasn't there someone else would often buy us a chicken dinner, or the owner, B.B. King's adoptive mother, would serve us and never charge.

(...)

The best Charles McLaurin was able to get for a meeting place in Drew was the outside yard of a black church. So one July afternoon he, I, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ora Doss and some friends, as well as some other volunteers piled into a couple of cars for our first mass meeting in Drew. We were joined at the last moment by Judy Collins, the famous folk singer, who was visiting in Ruleville to show support. We from Ruleville made up the bulk of the

attendees, but a dozen or so young black men and women from Drew hovered in the background and eventually approached us. The police chief and some other white thugs motored around us with threatening looks. Fannie Lou Hamer spoke inspiringly and I recall Judy Collins's eyes brimming with tears, probably as much for the courage and bravery of the small group as for Hamer's inspiring words. We got out of town before the sun went down.

In the relative safety of Ruleville there was another mass meeting filling the church. Judy and another popular folk singer, Barbara Dane, sang freedom songs led and inspired as always by Mrs. Hamer. After the meeting a few of us volunteers sat outside someone's house with Collins and Dane and sang some more-leftist songs than had been sung in the church. Judy was a popularizer of Bob Dylan and sang many of his songs, which at that time were harshly critical of US society. I remember that night her singing "Masters of War," but she stopped at the last verse: "I hope that you die and your death comes soon, I'll follow your casket on a cold afternoon, and I'll watch as you are lowered unto your deathbed, and I'll stand over your grave until I'm sure that you're dead." She said she had told Dylan she couldn't sing that verse. I had not heard the song before and indicated some perplexity; Barbara Dane, more left than Judy, obligingly sang the verse. I had no problem with the sentiment in the song; nevertheless, I was hugely impressed with Judy's sincerity on that issue as well as her emotion at the rally in Drew in the afternoon. The two folk singers were young and beautiful; they had marvelous voices; for us volunteers it was a magical evening, a break from the tensions of the day.

(...)

The question of finding a building for the precinct in that town [Moorhead, MS,] that day seemed very important to our expanding to that fourth town. Janell had a suggestion of a vacant structure, and she was sure the owner would agree. Unfortunately the woman who owned the building was away for a few weeks staying with relatives in the tiny hamlet of Tippto, located in Tallahatchie County, north and east of Ruleville. There was just one road in and out of Tippto.

So without thinking too much about any dangers, John and I left Moorhead around noon for Ruleville and drove east on Highway 8 for about twenty miles. There at a tiny settlement called Phillipp we left the paved road for a one-lane dirt track with cotton fields on both sides which led to Tippto in about twenty miles. There was not another vehicle on that road. In about five miles we passed a road grader off the dirt road parked in the field with a white driver who watched us. Something about that did not seem right to us so John started fiddling with our two-way radio in the SNCC car, just randomly moving the tuner dial, while I drove. After a minute or two of just static we heard the following conversation: "Where are they?" "About ten miles from Tippto. There's a nigger and a niggerlover." "What's the car look like?" "It is a white Plymouth." "Well, by the time it gets to Tippto it will be red with their blood."

I looked at John and he looked at me and without missing a second I wheeled the car around and at top speed raced back down the dirt road. In five miles the road grader was now moved off the field and stood in the middle of the road blocking our way. Without slowing down very much I turned into the cotton field around the road grader and after mowing down some cotton plants I was back on the road. Without losing any speed I turned right on the paved road, pushed the speed up to close to a hundred miles an hour and we didn't stop till we reached Ruleville. There, at the Freedom School, we stopped to catch our breath in

the late afternoon and ran into Charles McLaurin, to whom we told the story. He smiled, shook his head and said he personally never went to Tallahatchie County; it was too dangerous. That county was where Emmet Till had been murdered not six years before.

[*“Challenging the Mississippi Firebombers: Memories of Mississippi 1964-65”*](#) is available to order from Baraka Books.

Praise

“Jim Dann’s *Challenging the Mississippi Firebombers* takes us through the experience of bringing the civil rights movement to Sunflower County, Mississippi. This enthralling book is an original source of living history about the civil rights movement in Mississippi.”

–Stacy J. White, Chairman of the Sunflower County Civil Rights Organization, Associate Professor of Computer Science at Mississippi Valley State University

“Many opposed slavery, but few were abolitionists; many opposed segregation, but few lifted a hand to end it. Jim Dann answered the call. If you want to know the how and why of fighting oppression, open this book.”

–Phil Taylor, Radio Broadcaster at CIUT, Toronto

“‘We shall overcome’ really works, and James Dann provides the evidence in this first-person account of the Freedom Movement which transformed Mississippi and the rest of the country. The lessons of this clearly-written, enjoyable book are needed by all of us, particularly the emerging generation of activists.”

–Kitty Kelly Epstein, PhD, Professor and Activist, 2013 Recipient of the Scholar Activist Award from the Urban Affairs Association

“An original source of living history about the civil rights movement.”

–Stacy J. White, Mississippi Valley State University



Jim Dann volunteered for the Mississippi Summer Project organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1964 and stayed on the following year as an SNCC field secretary. He lived in Vacaville, California. Jim died of leukemia on June 16, 2013.

John Harris (1943-2012) wrote the preface. President of the largest SNCC chapter at Howard University, he joined the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964 and was key SNC advocate for equality and civil rights.

Tracy Sugarman (1921-2013), author, illustrator and chronicler of the civil rights movement, graciously gave some drawings to the author and Charles McLaurin.

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240 pp | 35 BW photos | 3 maps

6 illustrations by Tracy Sugarman

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Click for information on ordering [*“Challenging the Mississippi Firebombers: Memories of Mississippi 1964-65”*](#)

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