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May 15, 1970: The Miracle at Jackson State College

Gene Cornelius Young

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one. Or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle.... The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. If we ever get free from all the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.¹

—Frederick Douglass (1857)

With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed. How could they be initiators, if they themselves are the result of violence? How could they be the sponsors of something whose objective inauguration called forth their existence as oppressed? There would be no oppressed had there been no prior situation of violence to establish their subjugation.

Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized. It is not the unloved who initiate disaffection, but those who cannot love because they love only themselves. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate terror, but the violent, who with their power, create the concrete situation which begets the “rejects of life.” It is not the tyrannized who initiate despotism, but the tyrants. It is not the despised who initiate hatred, but those who despise. It is not those whose humanity is denied them who negate man, but those who denied that humanity (thus negating their own as well). Force is used not by those who have become weak under the preponderance of the strong, but by the strong who have emasculated them.²

Back at Jackson State, nearly all students who lived on campus had gathered on the dimly lit lawn in front of Alexander Hall. They were told that President Peoples would address them. Many moved through the weeping crowd, searching for friends to make sure they were all right. Others were shouting there should be a march downtown to show they would never submit to the white pigs. But the students who opposed the march yelled that the National Guard had sealed both ends of Lynch Street. A move off the campus would mean only more bloodshed.³

In the glow of the dorm lights, a male student addressed the sobbing crowd on the lawn. He was Gene Young, a former civil rights worker called “Jughead.” He was his known for his imitations of Martin Luther King, Jr.

and his “I Have a Dream” speech, which he knew verbatim. Some students had asked him to perform it now, to soothe the crowd. So he tried.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

But the crying continued, and when President Peoples arrived in the yard, he was startled. He smelled gunpowder and blood. The sight of all the broken windows and the crying students sickened him. And all the talk of a march downtown scared him. Peoples turned to the students for suggestions.

“Jughead, help me,” Peoples said. “How can I calm them down?”

“Doc, why don’t you pray?”

So they brought President Peoples a table from the dorm and he lifted his tall, thin frame upon it. The students knelt and bowed their heads as he said a prayer. “There’s been a slaughter tonight,” he told them, and he asked the students to go back to their dorms so there would be no more killing. But their grumbles told him there was no way the students would leave.

“We ain’t goin’ in, Doc,” Jughead yelled. “Every sister, get with a brother—all of you—come out from the dorm and bring some blankets!”

After Peoples left to call local hospitals, the students sat on the lawn under the dark sky. They prayed and sang freedom songs—the same songs they had learned as youngsters in the civil rights marches and church rallies of the early 1960s.

Ain’ gonna let nobody turn me ‘round
Turn me ‘round, turn me ‘round.
Ain’ gonna let nobody turn me ‘round,
I’m gonna keep on walkin’, keep on talkin’
And marchin’ up to Freedom Land.

They stayed there all night on the lawn, sobbing and singing, just waiting for the sun to rise.⁴

The murders of Phillip Gibbs and James Earl Green would have been just another page in the long history of racist violence inflicted upon Blacks in my native state of Mississippi. But, coming on the heels of the murders of four white students (Allison Krause, Jeffrey Glenn Miller, William K. Schroeder, and Sandra Lee Scheuer) at Kent State University in Ohio, ten days earlier, conscientious and compassionate individuals could not ignore the tragic events on an all-Black college campus in Jackson, Mississippi.

Growing up in Mississippi in the early 1950s, you became accustomed to the countless acts of racist violence endured by Blacks and you accepted the reality that in this tyrannical system of southern white supremacy and

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segregation, that no white person would ever be held accountable for victimizing Blacks. During this period, which preceded the era of highly publicized civil rights protests, the only way to describe racial relations in Mississippi was that of the oppressor (white) and the oppressed (Black).

Indelibly etched into the collective memory of most Black Mississippians are the acts of almost legendary proportion, in which whites viciously harassed, brutalized, and murdered Blacks. I can never forget being informed of how a young teenage Black male was lynched and murdered in Money, Mississippi on August 28, 1955. Brutally beaten, shot repeatedly, and severely disfigured, the body of young Emmett Louis Till was thrown, carelessly, into the muddy waters of the Tallahatchie River. This was the price he paid for allegedly "flirting" with a white woman, and even though there was a mockery of a trial, no one ever served a day in jail for this shocking and sadistic act. Similarly, in April of 1959, Mack Charles Parker, a truck driver accused of raping a white woman, was taken from his jail cell and lynched by a mob of masked white men in Poplarville, Mississippi. No one ever served a day in jail for the murder of Mack Charles Parker.

Were it not for the indefatigable investigative persistence of Medgar

MARTYRS OF MAY 14, 1970

PHILLIP GIBBS (1948-1970)
FROM RIPLEY, MISS., WAS
A JUNIOR STUDENT AT
JACKSON STATE COLLEGE
AT THE TIME OF HIS
DEATH.

PHILLIP GIBBS WILL
REMAIN IN THE
MEMORY OF ALL
JACKSONIANS AS A
MARTYR WHO NOBLY
RELINQUISHED HIS LIFE
FOR THE CAUSE OF
HUMAN BROTHERHOOD.

JAMES EARL GREEN (1953-
1970) WAS A SENIOR
STUDENT AT JIM HILL
HIGH SCHOOL OF JACKSON
AT THE TIME OF HIS
DEATH.

GREEN, LIKE GIBBS, DID
NOT CHOOSE TO DIE
BUT WAS A VICTIM OF
DEATH'S MANDATE.

HE NOBLY TAKES HIS
STATION AMONG OTHER
MARTYRS OF THE CAUSE.

CLASS OF 1971

Inscription on the monument dedicated to Phillip Gibbs and James Earl Green, placed outside Gibbs' dormitory at Jackson State University.

Wiley Evers, Mississippi's first NAACP Field Secretary, little or nothing would have been known or revealed regarding these and other heinous and inhumane acts which took place in Mississippi. Medgar Evers, who would also be victimized by the virulence of the violent racial climate in June of 1963, was, primarily, responsible for providing the impetus for many of the positive changes in Mississippi's political, educational, and social institutions. At the age of 37, Medgar Evers was gunned down by an assassin's bullet in front of his home in Jackson, as he returned from a civil rights mass meeting. His leadership in advancing numerous causes which called for progressive change and his legion of accomplishments were unparalleled during this period of the Black struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.⁵

The arrival of Freedom Riders in Mississippi issued in a new era of civil disobedience and my participation in demonstrations to protest their arrest, incarceration, and accompanying acts of harassment and brutalization, served as my introduction to the freedom struggle. As a twelve-year-old, seventh grade student at Lanier High School in the spring of 1963, I followed the lead of my older brothers and other schoolmates who walked out in protest of the inequities, injustices, and inherent racism which permeated every sphere of existence in Jackson, Mississippi.

Attempts to desegregate the public facilities at the Jackson bus station were met with harsh resistance and, as bad as the jails of Jackson and Hinds County were, the Freedom Riders housed here were deemed to be a bit more fortunate than their brethren who were transported to the state penitentiary at Parchman.

With each passing day, the atmosphere of racist resistance grew stronger, as did, too, the determination of the Black community. Shortly after my release from jail for participating in a mass march, I was chosen to speak at a community rally to encourage greater support for the ongoing activities in Jackson. Both Lena Horne and Dick Gregory were in Jackson that evening to show their support, and I had to stand in a chair to reach the microphone in order to address an audience which had filled the auditorium of the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street. Medgar Evers was there that evening, too, but within a matter of days, because he was perceived as being the chief of the rabblers, troublemakers, and "communists," his life would soon be terminated.

The summer of discontent continued on many fronts and I was arrested again, this time "trespassing" at a city park designated for whites only. Later, with others from the Jackson freedom movement, I attended the historic March on Washington and I could not help but think of Medgar Evers on that warm, beautiful August day, when the preacher from Atlanta shared his vision before the multitude of marchers assembled in front of the Lincoln Memorial:

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I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

I was happy to be a participant in this monumental and memorable effort. I was proud to be among the contingent of Mississippians who were present, and I was inspired and instructed by the message:

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

The protests continued—demands for desegregation of public facilities, integration of the public schools, ending racial discrimination in employment and business practices, and eliminating practices which prohibited full participation in the political process, were among the many thrusts of the rejuvenated civil rights movement. The tensions created from the increased and continuous onslaught of the status quo were routinely met with continued racist violence. The jubilation and euphoria from being at the March and hearing the dream was short-lived. After my thirteenth birthday, the nation was shocked and saddened by the tragic bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on Sunday morning, September 15, 1963. The dreams of four young girls had been deferred and added to the long list of those who had become victims were the names of Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, all fourteen years of age, and Denise McNair, age eleven. A few weeks later, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth President of the United States, would have his rendezvous with destiny while riding in a motorcade in Dallas.

The Freedom Summer of 1964 would provide a painful preview of how white America responded when the victims of racist violence were white—“outside agitators”—sympathetic supporters of the Black struggle. Along with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and others, my testimony on police brutality in Mississippi was inserted into the *Congressional Record* of the United States House of Representatives.⁶ A few weeks later, while I was traveling with Anne Moody on a fundraising tour for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the national media reported on the search for three civil rights workers missing in Mississippi. The interest in this investigation was intense and the conscience of this country was aroused because, this time, two of the three civil rights workers were white.⁷

Shortly after the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill on July 2, 1964, I met Mrs. Fannie Chaney, the mother of the Black civil rights worker, James

Chaney, and while she found some comfort in national interest in the case, she believed that her son was already dead. Regrettably, Mrs. Chaney was right. During the long and exhausting search for Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, the media noted the discovery of several Black bodies that were unidentified and one was reported to have been wearing the familiar CORE t-shirt with the words "Freedom Now" printed on the back. Another gruesome and grotesque reminder of the insignificance and indifference illustrated when there is a loss of a Black life in Mississippi:

America has strayed to the far country of racism. The home that all too many Americans left was solidly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage: all men are created equal; every man has rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state, they are God-given. What a marvelous foundation for any home! What a glorious place to inhabit! But America strayed away; and this excursion has brought only confusion and bewilderment. It has left hearts aching with guilt and minds distorted with irrationality. It has driven wisdom from the throne. This long and callous sojourn in the far country of racism has brought a moral and spiritual famine.⁸

Antiwar protests against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, demands for changes in campus governance, calls for the establishment of Black Studies programs, issues of injustice, inequality, and discrimination characterized the climate of student activism which swept across the campuses of this nation in challenges and confrontations. In the spring of 1970, no institution of higher education was left untouched by controversy and the courageous chorus calling out or change.

In the climate of the May 4 shootings at Kent State University, and the murders of three Blacks in Augusta, Georgia (all shot in the back) on May 11, the campus protest at Jackson State was like most others, but the historic racial hostilities were additional ingredients that made for an explosive and lethal situation.

Following several days and nights of protest and campus unrest at Jackson State and disturbances along Lynch Street, law enforcement officers from the City of Jackson and Mississippi Highway Patrolmen marched onto campus to confront a jeering crowd of students who were assembled in front of Alexander Hall, a women's dormitory. As the evening went on, tensions grew and taunts and racial epithets were uttered. The sound of a thrown bottle was heard shattering against the pavement.

Following a thirty second fusillade, Alexander Hall had been riddled by more than 230 bullets. In the aftermath of this wanton display of police violence, Phillip Gibbs, age 21, a pre-law major from Ripley Mississippi, and James Earl Green, age 17, a senior at Jim Hill High School in Jackson were dead. Several other students had been wounded and all present had been

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traumatized by the unwarranted and deadly act which they had just witnessed.

Once again, in Mississippi, the victims were Black and the perpetrators were white, and as was true in the case of so many others, no one served a day in jail for committing this criminal act. If it were not for the tragic events at Kent State University ten days earlier, this murderous Mississippi morning would have, perhaps, received little or no recognition and indignation. Considering the size of the crowd of students present and the amount of deadly force directed at them, the miracle is that only Phillip Gibbs and James Earl Green died on May 15, 1970, at Jackson State College.

But it is not too late to return home. If America would come to herself and return to her true home, "one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," she would give the democratic creed a new authentic ring, enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men. *If she fails, she will be victimized with the ultimate social psychoses that can lead only to national suicide.*⁹

Notes

- ¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder) 1972: 41.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press) 1988: 78-79.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ The Civil Rights Research and Documentation Project, *Remembering Medgar Evers... For a New Generation* (Oxford, MS: Afro-American Studies Program, The University of Mississippi) 1988.
- ⁶ *Congressional Record*, U.S. House of Representatives, 16 June 1964: 14001-14005.
- ⁷ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dial Press) 1968.
- ⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Racism and the White Backlash," *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row) 1967.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*



Alan Canfora shortly before he was wounded by National Guardsmen at Kent State, May 4, 1970. Photo © by John P. Filo.