



SOUTHERN ECHO

CASE STUDY

a case study:
SOUTHERN ECHO

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BUILDING A MOVEMENT IN THE RURAL SOUTH: A CHALLENGING BACKDROP



HE UNTILLED FIELDS and abandoned shells of homes and businesses along Highway 51 – the 300-mile route that cuts through the heart of the Lower Mississippi Delta – serve as a bleak backdrop for the community organizing work of Southern Echo, a nonprofit leadership education, training, and development organization. The rows of cotton and other crops that once dominated the landscape are now overgrown with brush and twisted vines. Businesses have relocated, and residents have followed, leaving behind communities ravaged by poverty and neglect – but also people with stamina, determination and resolve to rebuild their lives.



THE DELTA IS, IN MANY WAYS, AS MUCH ABOUT *PLACE* AS IT IS ABOUT *PEOPLE*. It's about legacies of a fading agricultural economy and the race-based system that fueled it. The region's rich, dynamic history shapes its future, as much as it shaped its past. And although change and modernization have come to the Delta, the region struggles with systemic, long-term economic problems that stifle the quality of life for residents.

Mississippi, along with other states throughout the Deep South – where Southern Echo focuses its work – continues to rank at or near the top on all the wrong lists: highest rates of low-birth-weight babies, illiteracy, and teen pregnancy; lowest state expenditure per student in public schools. Here, the human face of poverty is heavily represented by children.

Of the 50 counties with the highest child poverty rates in the United States, 48 are in rural America and most of them are in the South. According to the U.S. Census, poverty rates for children living in the rural South was higher than any other region in the country. Compared with urban areas, unemployment in these communities is higher, education weaker, and social services severely limited.

A report prepared in 2004 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Loyola University of Chicago found that the gap between child poverty in rural and urban areas nationwide has widened in recent years. Today, one in five children in rural areas lives in poverty.

Although poor rural enclaves exist throughout the nation – from Southwestern border towns to communities in the Midwest – hardest hit are places along the southern *Black Belt*, the stretch of counties from Texas to Virginia, where the majority of residents are African American. It is here where Southern Echo and its affiliate groups – despite seemingly unsurmountable odds – are having remarkable success tackling some of the toughest issues facing families and children today.

“We have a lot of success stories,” said Al White, leader of Action Communication Education Reform (ACER), a community organizing group based in Duck Hill, MS. “A lot of folk who have come out of the work we’ve done get into elected positions – they are key to gaining ownership of our communities and having some kind of control over our destiny.”

Incorporated in 1989, and co-founded by a former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee leader, Southern Echo's principles of organizing low income families and students are rooted heavily in the Civil Rights movement. Southern Echo builds strategic partnerships with African American and working class community groups throughout

Mississippi and the South. The organization focuses its work on developing leaders and organizing low-income families to tackle complex issues including government accountability, environmental justice, and equity in public education. It aims to build inter-generational leadership as it works to empower communities and to hold state and local officials accountable to community needs. Among other skills Southern Echo brings technical and legal acumen to help communities confront the many challenges they face.

“We have high quantitative numbers that show the work we’re doing is having immense gains, and immense support in terms of what’s going on throughout the South,” said Leroy Johnson, executive director of Southern Echo.

INCREASING BLACK LEADERSHIP THROUGH REDISTRICTING

In 1990, Southern Echo began its first major effort at redistricting – to reverse a system that made it difficult for blacks to win elections. After an 18-month struggle, the Mississippi State Legislature adopted a redistricting plan which included the maximum number of districts where African Americans could be elected. The subsequent development of a black caucus resulted in a number of gains, including the 1995 ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. (Largely symbolic, it nonetheless served as a testament to the determination of Southern Echo and its community groups.)

Southern Echo is now working on the final stages of negotiation with local elected officials and the Department of Justice around fair redistricting plans for local elections of school boards, county supervisors, and aldermanic districts.

“Our model speaks to decentralization and making communities powerful. Helping oppressed, depressed, disenfranchised, and suppressed community have an opportunity to use the power that they have. Our argument is, if you give communities skills and tools... they can become their own experts.”

– Leroy Johnson, Executive Director of Southern Echo



The Making of an American Mayor: *The Story of Dianne Freelon-Foster*

Grenada, Mississippi

ON MAY 3, 2004, Dianne Freelon-Foster became the first African American and the first woman mayor of Grenada, Mississippi. Her victory represents a part of Southern Echo's continuing efforts to build new grassroots leadership and to support organizations that make the political, economic, environmental, and education systems accountable to the needs and interests of African American and low-income communities.

Freelon-Foster is among the growing number of African American mayors whose victories are attributed, in part, to the effective community organizing and political redistricting efforts promoted by Southern Echo in its work to reverse a statewide attitude that kept many low-income black citizens from voting and made it difficult for blacks to win elections. With training from Southern Echo in community organizing and education on the electoral process, and leadership from Southern Echo's local partner, Activists With a Purpose, residents of Grenada mobilized to elect their first black mayor.

For African American residents of Grenada County, Freelon-Foster's mayoral victory is a shared triumph. In one of several congratulatory emails,



MAKING QUALITY EDUCATION A TOP PRIORITY

Although it's been 50 years since *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Mississippi remains a state with a divided school system – black children attend underfunded public schools with low performance on standardized tests, high dropout rates, and severe disciplinary problems. White children most often attend private “academies.” *The Mississippi Education Working Group* – a statewide coalition of grassroots community organizations working in local school districts to create a quality public school system for all children – relies on Southern Echo to provide training, and technical and legal assistance to support their efforts to impact policy in local districts, and to pool their resources to bring about equitable educational policies at the state level.

A major focus has been the *Schoolhouse to Jailhouse* program, which works to reverse the growing and disproportionate number of African American boys quitting school and winding up in jail. Southern Echo is also working with its partners to abolish corporal punishment in public schools in Mississippi, where spanking is still common. During the 1999-2000 school year, nearly 50,000 students in Mississippi – almost 10 percent of the total student population – were subjected to corporal punishment.

Local victories include the selection of school superintendents and other officials who are accountable to their communities, more parents who speak up for their children in unfair disciplinary cases, and slow-but-sure improvements to the overall quality of the education of children in Mississippi. Funding was also increased statewide



with the passage of the 1997 Mississippi Adequate Education Program, which appropriated \$650 million over five years to improve school facilities, enhance technology, and increase teacher salaries. Prior to 1997, school funding in Mississippi was based on the Minimum Funding Education Act of 1955, its name alone an indictment of misplaced priorities.

Leroy Johnson explained that challenging school authorities was one of the most difficult things to do in Mississippi. “School districts yield power. The school superintendents are the most powerful people in Delta counties because they’re the biggest employers. If you ain’t got no factory, the biggest employer is the school district.”

As an outsider, Judy Rhodes, the Mississippi Department of Education’s director of accountability, is perhaps in the best position to attest to the impact of Southern Echo and its work with local groups like Holmes County-based Citizens for Quality Education (CQE). “They’ve had a tremendously positive impact in several areas of the state with regard to education funding and education issues. I appreciate their professionalism. They always do their homework. They deserve credit for working so hard for the children and parents of Mississippi.”

“If you’re not ready to talk to people outside the box or to challenge, then you support the old system, and we know that the old system has not worked for African American children, for poor children, or for children with disabilities. So it’s really about changing the whole culture of education in Mississippi.”

– Ellen Reddy,
Executive Director for Citizens
for Quality Education, and
Helen Johnson, Education
Coordinator for Southern Echo

Lynell Hardaway-Lawless wrote: “You have bestowed dignity and true leadership upon the black citizens of Grenada.” Sandra Matthews’ email said: “My sincerest congratulations on becoming the first African American mayor of Grenada. Mayor Freelon-Foster, you have made us all very proud.”

Activists with a Purpose had its roots in an African American women’s book club. “Some of us wanted to read fiction. But somehow we ended up reading a lot of serious literature,” recalled Freelon-Foster. “We were always talking about what was happening in Grenada, and what we saw, and what we were trying to do. And it seemed as if we could never get a grip on it – as if we were always going back. I had assisted in elections or coordinated elections – I probably spearheaded the campaign of every African American that ever ran in Grenada or in Grenada County, Caucasians as well – but the problems just kept compounding. We just couldn’t figure out what was going on. And one day I was desperate. I got on the Internet and found Southern Echo’s website.”

Grenada, like so many other towns in the Mississippi Delta, suffers from social and economic problems that contribute to the Delta’s dubious distinction as one of the poorest areas in the nation. Low performing schools, a dwindling manufacturing base, and a largely unskilled workforce have all taken their toll on the quality of life here. Perched on the hills that border the eastern edge of the Delta, Grenada appears to be



divided into three sections: a lovely, older part of town with large, well-kept homes, and residents who are mostly white; an area with smaller, well-worn homes near the town's fledgling business district where many African Americans have lived for decades; and a sort of neutral territory of big box retail stores as well as truck stops and motels that highlight the fact that this is the midway point between the cities of Memphis, Tennessee and Jackson – Mississippi's capital.

Grenada also has historical significance as a place where civil rights activists fought for voter registration, jobs, and school desegregation in the sixties. It is here that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered speeches at Bellflower Baptist church before marchers faced crowds of hate-filled racists, and where the Ku Klux Klan mobilized to attack children on their way to and from integrated schools.

"I was one of the students that integrated the

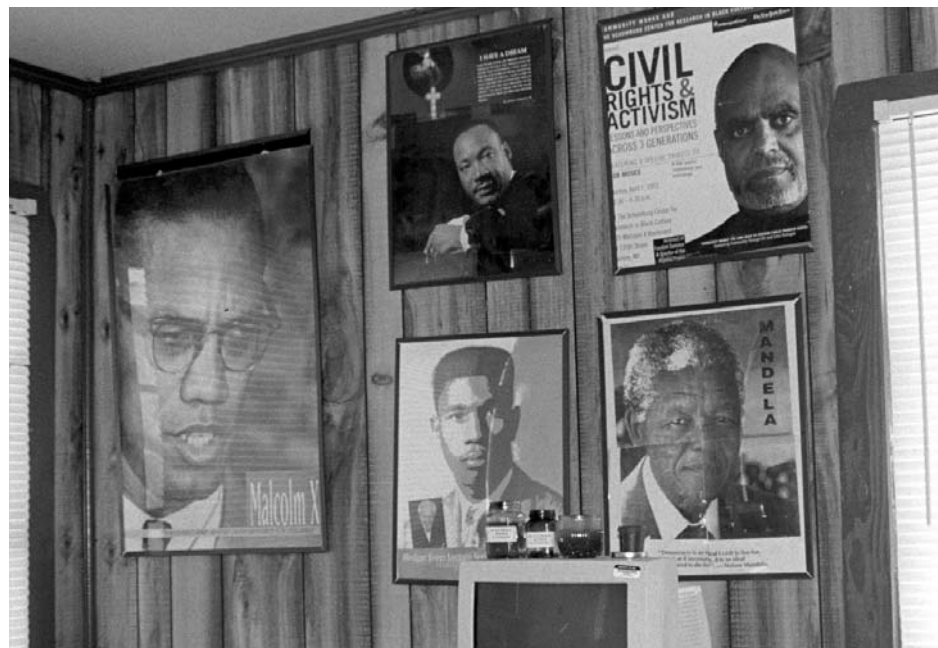
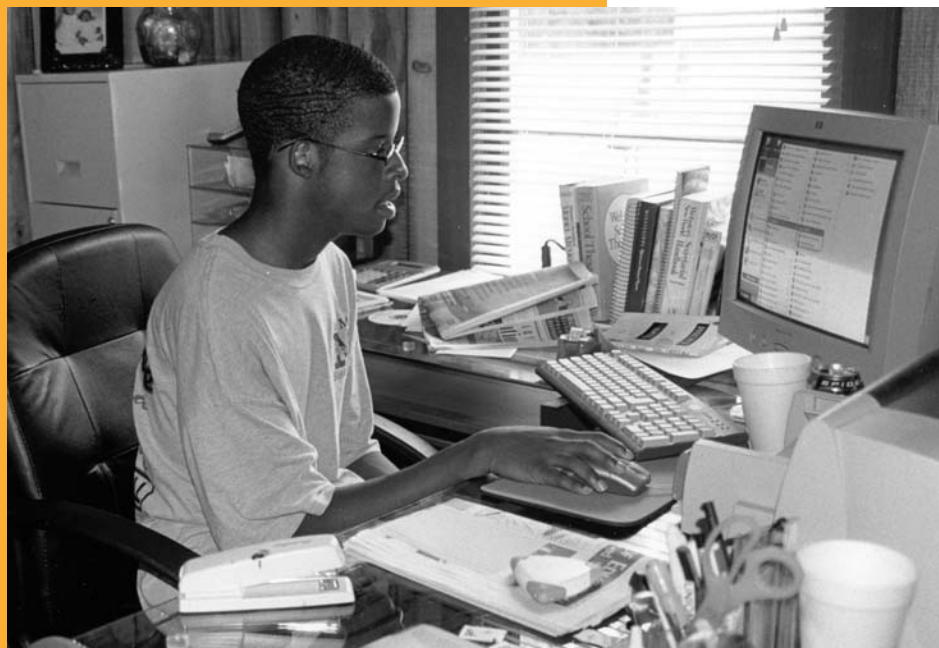
More specifically, Rhodes said that in addition to documented gains in education funding, school board representation, and other issues, she has seen an increase in attendance and participation among parents and even students. And school board members in counties where Southern Echo works are better informed of local issues as the result of more community participation.

LOOKING AHEAD

Although CQE leaders Helen Johnson and her twin sister Ellen Reddy have seen many positive changes in local schools, they temper their enthusiasm by noting that there is still much work to be done.

"I was just thinking that when we look at where we've been – starting in 1954 with *Brown vs Board of Education* – and how far we have come, it's not in people's heads that we've come a very long way," said Helen Johnson from her office in Lexington, MS. "We have an African American school board and African American superintendent. We have new school buildings. But academic performance is still not where we want it to be. When our children leave high school, they spend the first year of college in remedial education. That has to change."

But hope is very much alive in the communities where Southern Echo and its partners work. These are close-knit districts where victories and defeats are shared by many. In Lexington, there wasn't a person Ellen Reddy didn't know as she walked the streets of the town. Although some might not have been up to speed on the latest issues CQE was tackling, they understood that she and others were working on their behalf to make changes for the better.





school system here,” said Freelon-Foster. “We were beaten. There was a lot of violence. Even now, forty years later, I find it hard to understand how people could hate children so much that they would beat them for coming to school.”

She described the experience of finding Southern Echo’s leaders as one that changed her world because they understood her experiences and beliefs. “I called them, and picked up some of their booklets. And then a friend who lives in Duck Hill gave me Southern Echo’s manual about community organizing. I read the whole thing. And then I realized that we had done a lot of mobilization, but we had not done any real community organizing. That was the missing piece.”

Barbara Dylan, program director of Activists with a Purpose, explained how mobilization produced only limited results. “With mobilizations, we’d bring people together to react to situations. But we were never able to keep them together because we were not doing workshops or education activities around issues. We had no follow-up. People would come out for a demonstration and then they’d leave.”

Soon, Freelon-Foster found herself attending Southern Echo training sessions, and Activists with a Purpose was born. Book club members took on various roles within the organization. The small staff of three with minimal compensation – mostly reimbursements for travel expenses – remain at the core of the organization’s activities and also





act as advisors to the new mayor. Freelon-Foster earns her living as an apartment manager for a private housing management company.

Cassandra Gibson, a former book club member, joined Activists with a Purpose when she learned that Freelon-Foster was running for mayor of Grenada. Dylan got involved when her daughter was sent home from school without a coat on a cold winter day. “She had just been out the week before with the flu. It was 17 degrees. And so I wrote letters to everyone, including Dianne.”

The women credit the Southern Echo workshops for instilling optimism in them despite such an entrenched history of struggle, racial division, and systematic disenfranchisement in their community. “Southern Echo’s workshops make you an optimist,” said Dylan. “They have been in it a long time. They have a lot of knowledge. They encourage you.”

Activists with a Purpose has addressed issues in the schools including the need for more funding, and the organization is also actively involved with Southern Echo’s *Schoolhouse to Jailhouse* coalition.

“When we started, we hoped to form a parent advocacy group. But most parents just wanted their own child’s issue taken care of. They had not reached the point where they wanted to be advocates for all children. Some of them were not even ready to advocate for their own children,” said Freelon-Foster.

For the newly inaugurated mayor, young people are the biggest concern and also the greatest hope. “Young people are the forgotten group. With racial profiling and being pushed out of schools and



IMPROVING LIVES THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Change doesn’t come easy. The crowded ramshackle wooden bungalows that dot the fertile landscape remain, as do the boarded-up businesses. In larger communities like Grenada, there is now even less chance of being competitive – as big box retail developments like WalMart threaten to destroy small commercial enterprises. Persistent poverty and lack of resources make economic development and decent, affordable housing difficult to attain.

Many parts of rural Mississippi are used as illegal dumping grounds by residents and industries alike. Southern Echo is focused on identifying the location of illegal waste dumps and locations of hazardous materials that are in or near residential communities and schools. CQE has worked with Southern Echo to create safety zones around schools, churches, homes, and waterways in poor communities, to ensure that residents are kept a safe distance from potentially toxic materials. To ensure that these issues have traction and that succeeding generations understand the impact of this work, CQE worked with students from local schools to create a color-coded map that identified 35 illegal dump sites in Holmes County. They photographed each site and wrote descriptions of what they saw. As a result, county officials cleaned some sites. Now, the group is demanding dumpsters be placed at designated locations.

And, since many schools throughout the Delta are situated near plantations on which huge amounts of agricultural chemicals are sprayed, community members negotiated with county officials to stop spraying near schools, and are promoting organic and sustainable agriculture as alternatives to pesticides and herbicides.



DEMANDING EQUAL JUSTICE AND BETTER WAGES

In collaboration with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Southern Echo has been working to get Mississippi to adopt and fund a statewide public defender system. Currently, the salaries of Mississippi's prosecutors are paid by the state, but counties are left to scramble for funds to pay for public defenders who represent indigent clients – resulting in a two tiered legal system. A statewide public defender system would allocate equal resources in courtrooms. A bill introduced in the state legislature in 2004 that would have funded the measure was quickly killed in the Senate, with legislators blaming the state's \$700 million shortfall. But Southern Echo continues to push for an equitable system.

Southern Echo is also working to raise the hourly minimum wage in Mississippi from \$5.15 to at least \$7.50. Partnering with CQE, local leaders were successful in getting Holmes County officials to increase the hourly wage for county employees.

CHANGING THE FACE OF LEADERSHIP

In Duck Hill, a town of about 750 people situated on Highway 51 midway between the slightly larger cities of Grenada and Winona – where African Americans were elected to key city posts in recent years – the commercial district is all but abandoned except for a beauty shop that serves as a local gathering spot as well as a place of business. Heat and humidity slow the summer pace but the stride of social change has quickened – thanks to Southern Echo and its local affiliates like Action Communication Education Reform (ACER) and Youth Innovation Movement Solutions (YIMS).

into jails, they're just pushed aside. I want them to have a voice. I want to bring them to town hall meetings. Let them say what it is they want to say, and allow them to express themselves their way." But first, Freelon-Foster believes young people need to restore their self confidence. "Then they can effectively work to make a difference. When people my age went to school, we lived in a segregated society, but there was race pride. We were taught who we were," she said. "And teachers recognized we had a sense of confidence. But our children didn't get that sense of confidence. I am attributing that to the disconnect in terms of the fact that the civil rights movement stopped. It just stopped."

At the top of the group's current agenda is the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. "We don't want that in our schools, but we have to do workshops because so many parents think it's okay," said Freelon-Foster. Added Dylan: "When the school calls, some parents say 'Well just spank him and send him back to class.'" The group hopes to educate the community about the negative physical – as well as psychological and emotional – effects of corporal punishment.

Another goal is to increase the number of African American teachers in the local schools. Of approximately 310 teachers, just 16 percent are black, while the student population is more than 60 percent black. Activists with a Purpose hope to diversify the school board, which hires both the superintendent and teachers. Currently two of the five school board members are African American.





Working with Southern Echo, Drustella and Al White have spearheaded important changes in Duck Hill and surrounding communities through ACER and YIMS. Al grew up in Duck Hill and returned after college. In 1995, he purchased the house where his mother had worked as a domestic for 54 years. “ACER started on the front porch of the house because there were meetings over at the schoolyard next door. So we just started coming over here after we would protest at the school about issues that came up, because of the experience I had with Echo,” he said.

Drustella had worked as a schoolteacher in Jackson after moving to Mississippi from California. She began attending Southern Echo training meetings in the early ‘90s after seeing many injustices in schools and observing local politics, which she stresses is very different from what she knew in California. While Al took on redistricting efforts and other political challenges, Drustella decided to work with youth and formed YIMS. “I became aware that I knew very little about social change,” said Drustella when describing her introduction to community organizing and the transformative power of civic engagement. “I knew very little about my own history. I am supposedly an educated person and I’m an educator, but I’ve had this very rude awakening.”

Working with local residents on everything from school board elections to voter registration drives, the couple has been a significant force for change in Montgomery County. “Through our work, we have impacted decisionmakers to be more proactive and think about positive social change in the community,” noted Al. “We now have numerous African American elected officials in these counties.”

For Drustella, success is measured qualitatively. “For the first time, parents in Montgomery County have been presented with an opportunity to dream,” she said. “In the past, they’ve just done what they’ve been told to do, and they never knew they could have a voice in their children’s education. They never knew that they could help make the rules. They always thought the rules were made, and they had to abide by them. Now, families are being educated coming up with their own vision. Their eyes have been opened, and they’re visualizing.”

HONORING THE PAST, WORKING TOWARD A BETTER FUTURE

One of the main challenges for Southern Echo is honoring the past while moving forward. The organization’s vision for change is based on the history of community struggle in the civil rights movement. While this provides motivation and inspiration for people to get involved in social change, these same memories and experiences paralyze some African Americans.

“We had five African American boys that were throwing peanuts on the school bus, and they were charged with 5-20 years in the state penitentiary. We were able to save them. Echo helped us to obtain an attorney, gave us technical assistance around that issue, and the charges were dropped.”

– Al White,
community organizer with
Action, Communication, and
Education Reform (ACAER),
Duck Hill, Mississippi

Freelon-Foster also sees linking with other organizations to fight the bigger battles that affect people in other jurisdictions as a top priority. “I think the biggest piece is the coalitions. Because the coalitions – like *Schoolhouse to Jailhouse*, the *Mississippi Education Working Group* – with all of us coming together, if we can change policies at the top, then things will automatically change for us here.”

Southern Echo seeks to have organizations like Activists with a Purpose in every town or region of the Mississippi Delta in order to fight for those changes at the state level. Local groups take responsibility for ensuring the changes are implemented locally.

A major challenge for Freelon-Foster will be maintaining the dual roles of running a city and being a community activist. “It’s really frightening,” she said. “There have been nights when I thought I was going to lose it. Even this week, I woke up with the thought: ‘I don’t want to lose who I am. I’m here to serve the community. And yet, I know that I’m the mayor of the whole city. But I know *who* put me in office and I know *why* they put me there.’”

Despite all the injustices and inequities of the past, as mayor of Grenada, Freelon-Foster says she feels the pressure to be fair and balanced. “I’m a community person. I came out of the community. And I don’t intend to lose that. So it’s a battle to remain impartial. And I understand it’s going to be a battle. So that’s where the community comes in.”



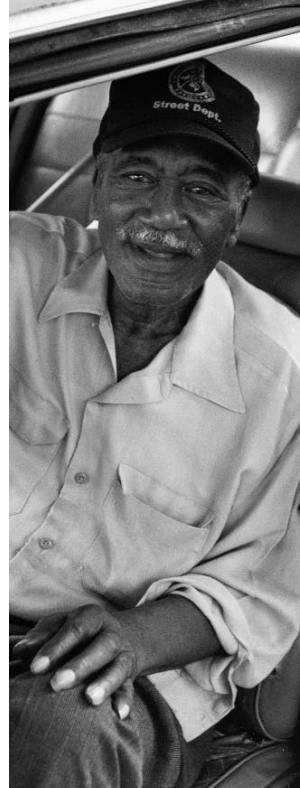
For residents of Grenada, it's the small but largely symbolic acts that count, like bringing a Juneteenth celebration to Union Street in the city's main business district. "Union Street is where we grew up. It's the historical area for us. It is where we left on buses for Bellflower church, which became the local headquarters for the Civil Rights Movement. It is where the tear gassing took place, and where the Union Street Theater was. That's our area. That's our culture. We didn't know anything about the buildings downtown. We were not allowed to come into the buildings downtown." One of Freelon-Foster's plans is to revitalize Union Street.

In the end, Freelon-Foster describes her mayoral victory as an opportunity she and her community supporters – with the help of Southern Echo – were prepared to seize, winning just enough votes in the city's black districts to win the mayoral race and avoid a runoff.

"I've tried to get people to understand. It was a moment in time. People say, 'Rosa Parks was just tired that day she refused to give up her seat.' No, she wasn't. She wasn't tired. She was prepared. It was a moment in time." Now it's time for Diane Freelon-Foster.

Grenada is located in north central Mississippi where the Delta meets the Hill Country, nearly halfway between Memphis and Jackson. Unlike many of the communities located on the edge of the Delta, Grenada's economy is primarily based in manufacturing rather than agriculture – although a number of companies have taken their operations overseas in the past few years.

The population of Grenada is approximately 12,000, according to U.S. Census figures. There are about 22,500 residents in Grenada County. African Americans make up about 44 percent of the county.



In its training, Southern Echo emphasizes the importance of knowing one's past in order to move forward. "We always tell folks that you've got to know your past in order to be able to learn from it, and also to learn what not to do in terms of how you shape where you're trying to go," said Leroy Johnson. "There's no way to build a map to Louisiana and not know that there's Black Creek, and the Big Black River, and the Tapahoosa River, and the Pearl River. You ain't got no bridges across and you're going to drown all those folk going with you. And so the question is how do you build those bridges. For us, it is important to make sure we understand why we are where we are. And so history becomes key. But history should not prevent you from going forward. And so the question becomes: 'What have we learned?' And that is the most important and best part of history. If you wallow in it, you can't go forward. If you wax nostalgic, you can't go forward. You can't keep wishing you can go back (and I don't know that black folk would want to go back). So we've got this real conundrum about making sure that folks don't get caught in the process of tying *everything* to history."

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS A KEY STRATEGY

Building relationships with key public officials has been an effective strategy for Southern Echo and its community partners. For example, when the State Department of Education pushed for legislation to hold local districts accountable for low performance on standardized tests, Southern Echo's Mississippi Education Working Group drafted specific language to provide for the participation of parents and community leaders in the evaluation of local schools

and the development of improvement plans – much of which was adopted by the state legislature. Key to the process was the relationship Southern Echo had built with the chair of the Senate Education Committee, Alice Harden, a former school teacher who had worked on redistricting issues in the early 1990s.

Another important relationship-building strategy involves the myriad community groups themselves, uniting for a common purpose, and using that energy to move other large agenda items forward. “Our strategy is to create a nucleus of groups from all over the state – like the Mississippi Education Working Group – to work on issues as a united force,” explained Leroy Johnson.

Southern Echo and its partners also recognize the need to reach out to other allied groups as part of a network-building strategy. “We’re reaching out. We’re working on a race and justice grant that we just received that looks at building more substantial relationships within the white community as well as within the Latino community. We’re working with the Latino community on organizing efforts in the poultry plants in Mississippi, where the majority of the workers are Latino,” said Leroy Johnson.

ENSURING CONTINUITY BY INCLUDING MULTIPLE GENERATIONS

At least one-third of the participants at Southern Echo’s training sessions are youth (middle school to college age). They work closely with adults, enabling both age groups to develop organizing skills and to learn the tools needed to become effective leaders, and ensuring the continuation of the struggle.

“We learned early on when we analyzed the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and other movements, that the biggest victories happened when young people and adults worked together,” said Leroy Johnson. “But we also learned that adults think about ‘the

“There’s an African proverb that says that knowledge comes from the tearing down or taking apart, but wisdom comes from the building up or putting together. So we have to be knowledgeable enough to tear down, but we also have to be wise enough to build up, to connect these pieces together.”

*– Leroy Johnson,
Executive Director
of Southern Echo*





“Another African proverb says that when spider webs unite, in time they can hold the king of beasts. That’s why I think the Echo model is so perfect, because it is about how we link those fragile webs together. Once they are linked, they become strong. We’ve got to reach out, to connect, and to link up.”

– Leroy Johnson, Executive Director of Southern Echo

present’ more than they do ‘the future.’ They talk about the future, but they think about the present. But young folk are asking, ‘What’s it gonna be like when I get there?’ So putting the present together with the future means you are strategically looking ahead. For us, the inter-generational model is a way of looking ahead.”

But the links to the past that are needed to forge a stronger future are often missing, according to Southern Echo organizers. “Young people get excited when they learn about the past because nobody wants to tell them about their history,” said Johnson. “Parents and grandparents don’t always want to tell you about how they suffered. Even when there are victories to explain, like winning the right to vote, they don’t want to talk about it. Folks got killed in that process.”

Leroy Johnson believes the impact of community organizing efforts will be seen in the number of young people who either stay in Mississippi or come back after they live elsewhere. “One way to show you’ve grown people is to show they’ve overcome fear and taken risks to change the conditions they live in. It’s easy to run away to some other place where things may be better,” he said. “It’s hard to stay in a difficult place and try to make change. Martin Luther King was right,” Johnson continued. “The true measure of a man is where he stands in terms of conflict and cause, conflict and struggle. I don’t think you’re much of a woman or a man if you’re not willing to make a place you love better. And you really got to love Mississippi to stay in Mississippi. That love also says to me, I gotta make it better. I don’t want to live like this. I don’t want my children to have to leave Mississippi. If they want to stay, I want them to be able to stay. For that to happen, I gotta change my surroundings. I gotta transform Mississippi, and we’re doing it brick by brick.”

INCREASING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

From the outset, Southern Echo viewed itself not as *the* primary agent of social change, but rather as a catalyst for the growth and support of grassroots organizations – many of which are predominately African-American – each working separately, in control of its own agenda, part of a coordinated effort with common and larger goals than any could reach alone. This is an important strategy that is passed on to community leaders. “One of the messages that we’ve always put out there, is that this is about the community. And it can only change if *you* get involved,” said Diane Freelon-Foster, who with help from the local Southern Echo-supported group, Activists With a Purpose, was elected the first African American and the first woman mayor of Grenada, Mississippi in 2004.

CONQUERING FEAR TO EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE

The recurring challenge that organizers in Mississippi talk most about is overcoming fear. Years of political, economic, and social inequality and disenfranchisement created a culture of fear in the African American communities of the Deep South. To help community members effect change, and to confront those responsible for improving conditions, Southern Echo has made overcoming fear an essential part of its training process.

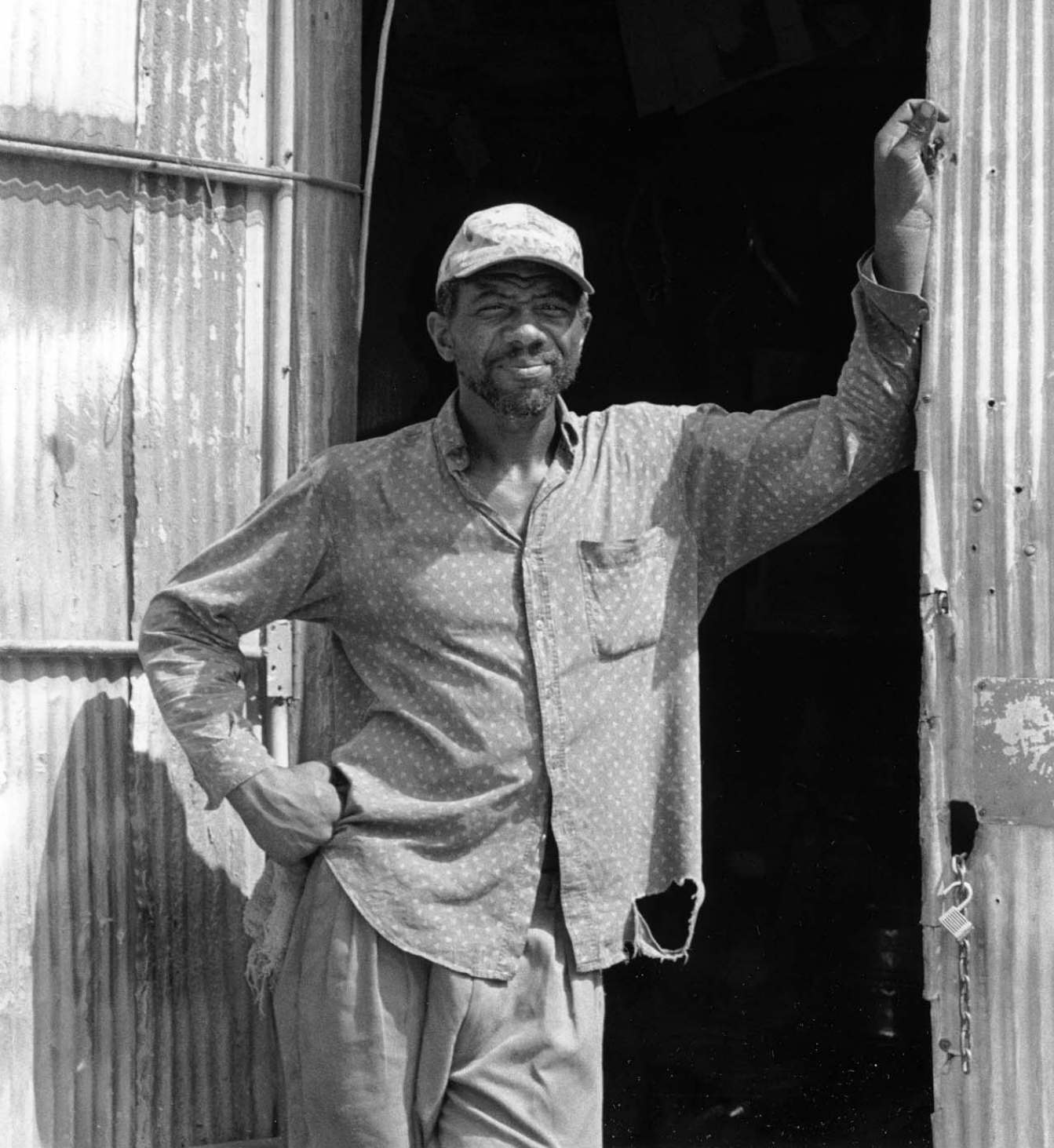
Drustella White believes poverty is the biggest obstacle. “I don’t think you can successfully overcome fear until you deal with the problem of economics and poverty. You can’t empower yourself when you don’t control anything.” In Duck Hill, the culture of fear is pervasive and entrenched. “We’ve had opportunities to elect black school superintendents. We had three, four qualified candidates, and none of them wanted to run because they didn’t want to challenge the powers that be.”

LEARNING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MOBILIZING AND ADVOCACY

While veteran African American community leaders and activists are adept at mobilizing around specific crises, they lack the know-how to engage in the kind of long-term community organizing that changes basic power relationships within the community and between their community and white communities.

“I realized that the missing piece was real community organizing. We had done a lot of mobilization, but we had not done real organizing,” said Freelon-Foster. “Any time something came up, we were able to bring people together – to mobilize – but we were never able to keep them together because we were not doing workshops or education activities around larger issues. That’s what I consider community organizing.”





Having learned these and other lessons, Southern Echo organizers attribute much of their success to tenaciousness. “We are not going to go away,” said Helen Johnson. “We may go away for a week or two, but we keep coming back, and we keep bringing up these issues. We won’t permit you to sweep them under the table.”

In its work to support communities to change political, economic, environmental, and educational systems, Southern Echo strives to make these institutions accountable to the needs of those people who are often disenfranchised and disillusioned. Over the years, Southern Echo has partnered with local community groups and leaders and worked with parents and students in the majority of Mississippi’s 82 counties – improving the lives of residents, young and old.

For Leroy Johnson, the greatest indicator of success has been the change he sees in community residents. “That’s the biggest victory we’ve had in terms of justice: folk going from worthlessness to full of worth. When you’re worthwhile, you don’t accept everything. We now have people saying, ‘You will *not* represent me with this foolishness.’ And that’s a huge thing that can’t be weighed.”