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Mississippi Summer of 1964: A Santa Clara County judge recalls voting rights struggle

By Len Edwards, Special to the Mercury News

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Len Edwards, center, and his father, Don Edwards, right, then a freshman congressman from the Bay Area, talk with Joe McDonald, one of the Ruleville, Miss. voting rights activists. (Courtesy Leonard Edwards)

Fifty years ago this month I joined several hundred volunteers and traveled to Mississippi to help register people to vote. The project has come to be known as the Summer of 1964 and became national news.

The experience was at once dangerous and inspiring — a time when my ideals of a fair society met a culture determined to preserve racial segregation.

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I was a first year student at the University of Chicago Law School when I received a letter from Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer from Ruleville telling me what to expect when I arrived in Mississippi.

She wrote that she was pleased that I was coming, but Mississippi was a dangerous place. After she tried to register to vote, she said, she had been evicted from her plantation home, jailed and beaten, her life had been threatened, and her house shot at. She warned me that the Mississippi Highway Patrol would be waiting for me at the border.

From my isolated life at law school, I didn't know what to make of all of this, but I was determined to go. Raised in California in a multi-cultural environment, I was opposed to segregation. I felt it was illegal, immoral, and a denial of basic human rights.

The first stop was Oxford, Ohio, where several hundred volunteers were trained and given information about what to expect in Mississippi. The training was intense. The staff talked about their experiences, and we even practiced getting beaten by the police.

Then, in early June, we learned that three civil rights workers, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael "Mickey" Schwerner "disappeared" in Philadelphia, Mississippi. We knew they had been murdered.

Bob Moses, the leader of the Summer Project, told us it would be understood if we left, but almost everyone stayed.

We arrived in Ruleville a few days later, a group of about 20 volunteers in a small rural Mississippi Delta town. I lived with an elderly black couple in the Negro section of the town. During the hot Mississippi summer we had no air conditioning, no shower, and what washing we did was at the garden faucet. During the summer I lost 30 pounds to 135, down from my normal 165.

Our daily activities were going door-to-door trying to persuade blacks to register to vote and teaching in a Freedom School.

The first day I knocked on a door and it opened just a crack. The conversation was very brief. "What do you want?" "I want to urge you to register to vote."

"No thank you," was the reply. The local Negroes, as they were called then, were fearful of registering to vote because their employers would fire them.

I had a car and was able to drive to Indianola, the county seat about 20 miles away, so those willing to try to register would have transportation. Of course, in order to register they had to take a written test on the meaning of one or more parts of the long and complex 1890 Mississippi Constitution. I knew of no one who passed.

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I worked closely with Mrs. Hamer. She was the most inspirational person I have ever met. Whether talking on her front steps or giving her famous televised speech at the

Democratic Convention, Mrs. Hamer spoke from her heart about the wrongs of segregation, and how Americans must live up to the country's laws and ideals. Her spirit shone brightest when she sang. I would drive Mrs. Hamer to churches in neighboring towns where crowds of locals would join her in singing.

When we sang "This Little Light of Mine," the church would sway. Then she would speak about the importance of joining the struggle against segregation and the importance of registering to vote.

My car was firebombed, and I received several death threats. The damage to the car was only a broken taillight, but I was stopped and ticketed the next day. I was followed almost daily by the Mississippi Highway Patrol, and I was arrested five times for minor driving offenses.

I am returning this month for a reunion to see fellow volunteers and local citizens, proud of what we helped accomplish, but also fearful that many gains may be lost.

When the United States Supreme Court struck down Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act in the case of Shelby v. Holder, the federal oversight of voting rights ended. This will permit the Mississippi Voter Identification law targeting minorities and the poor to survive.

Along with most Americans, I am proud of the advances in civil rights over the past 50 years. I hope we remain vigilant about maintaining these gains and continue to resist those who would reverse the trend and deny justice for all.

Judge Len Edwards is retired from Santa Clara County Superior Court. He wrote this for this newspaper. .

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