

Freedom Summer Oral History and Library Curation Project at the University of Florida Begins to Process Interviews with Mississippi Civil Rights Veterans

Gainesville, FL—George A. Smathers Libraries approved a mini-grant proposal to transcribe the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP)'s Mississippi Freedom Project collection. The collection features in-depth oral history interviews with leaders and activists involved in the civil rights movement in Mississippi. The completion of this project is timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer during the summer of 2014.

The Mississippi Freedom Project is a collection of over 100 interviews focusing on civil rights activism and organizing in the Mississippi Delta, including important events such as Mississippi Freedom Summer, the nationally-recognized voter registration drive that took place in the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1964 amidst racial violence and oppressive Jim Crow laws, and the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the political formation most responsible for the formulation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Mississippi Freedom Project collection is an ongoing series of interviews conducted since 2004, when the Sunflower County Civil Rights Organization and Dr. Stacy White extended an invitation to SPOHP to conduct interviews with local leaders. Every September, SPOHP sends a team of researchers to the Mississippi Delta to collect interviews and facilitate public workshops and lectures with veteran activists, lending the collection a unique focus on the lessons and work of community organizing in the Civil Rights Movement as it connects to the current social and political climate in Mississippi today. The Mississippi Freedom Project includes an interview and organizing workshop with Lawrence Guyot, Director of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, and interviews with Liz Fusco, who served as Mississippi Statewide Coordinator of Freedom Schools, Kelvin Williams, elected the first African American sheriff of Bolivar County since Reconstruction in 2011, and students at the Sunflower County Freedom Project as well as the former Teach for America volunteers who now direct the program. Several interviews also contain reflections from individuals who worked directly with Fannie Lou Hamer, chair of the MFDP and a formidable civil rights leader and community organizer, as well as the experiences of lawyers whose depositions and affidavits formed the justification of Section 5, the heart of the Voting Rights Act.

In September 2013, SPOHP will send another team of researchers to gather more interviews for the collection. SPOHP shares all interview materials with the Sunflower County Civil Rights Organization for educational purposes, and is also a co-sponsor of the organization's 50th Anniversary of Freedom Summer Reunion, to take place in June 2014.

African American Studies librarian Jana Ronan developed the proposal in collaboration with SPOHP researchers, and the proposal was approved by the mini-grant committee in May of 2013. The transcribed interviews will become a part of the University of Florida Digital Collections online, where they are available to researchers and educators. SPOHP will also

present these transcripts to veterans of the Mississippi Freedom Summer at their 50th anniversary reunion in July of 2014. This processing project will leverage existing knowledge, resources, and partnerships to promote online access to the Mississippi Freedom Project collection, including the development of a Freedom Summer LibGuide, two new podcasts, and a second phase which involves continuing transcription, Google Optimization of transcripts, and expanded Mississippi Freedom Project content on SPOHP's website.

As the upcoming 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer approaches, students, teachers, professors, and interested citizens will be seeking more information about the summer of 1964, and in-depth understanding of the context in which these historical events took place. The richly diverse thematic focus of the Mississippi Freedom Project interviews will help to promote a broad, interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of African American history, US social history, public policy, psychology, agriculture, and technological change, among other topics. Once processed, these interviews will support new research questions and intellectual outcomes.

The digitized, accessible oral history interviews in the Mississippi Freedom Project collection will be findable on the web at the University of Florida Digital Collections site, as well as through mainstream search engines such as Google or Bing, and represented in scholarly search engines such as Summon.

Press Release

The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program and University of Florida Libraries

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