

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be used for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, Mrs Lillie Ayers have read the above, and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Lillie B. Ayers  
Interviewee's Signature

10-25-28  
Interviewee's Date of Birth

5-5-89  
Date Agreement Signed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Oral History Number Assigned

C.H.O. 89.14

Interviewee: Lillie Ayers

Interviewer: Lavaree Jones/ Rev. J.F. Mc Ree

Subject: Headstart

Jones: This is an interview with Mrs. Lillie Ayers, one of the former employee of the original CDGM Program. It got started in 1965, Mrs. Ayers started off working as a lead teacher, one of the supervision of Mrs. Polly Greenburg of the St. Marks Church pastored by Rev. Minor. This May 5, 1989 in Glenn Allen, Mississippi.  
Before we get into this interview about the headstart program, will you tell me a little something about yourself?

Ayers: I am Lillie B. Short Ayers

NOTE:

THERE ARE TOO MANY PORTIONS OF THIS TAPE THAT ARE NOT AUDIBLE TO MAKE A COMPLETE TRANSCRIPTION.

THIS TAPE IS NOT AUDIBLE FOR TRANSCRIBING.

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1

To be <sup>L Jones</sup>  
Typed +  
Edited 2/13/90

May 5, 1989

Glen Allen, Ms.

Interviewee: Mrs Lillie Ayers

Interviewer: Lavaree Jones

Jones. This is an interview with Mrs Lillie Ayers who was an employee with CDGm. She started with the program in 1965 until it closed in 1971. Her first job was the lead teacher at St Marks Methodist Church in Glen Allen Ms. Pastored by the Rev. Minor. She lives on County Rd no. 38.

Mrs Ayers before we get into Head Start, tell me about your self?

Ayers = I am Lillie <sup>short</sup> Ayers, born outside of Glen Allen in a community called Hampton. I am the fifth of 14 children of Joe and Lillie Shorts. There were 9 girls and 5 boys.

Jones - Where did you attend school?

Ayers - I went to a church school through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, to public school through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

I started to \_\_\_\_\_ but I couldn't

2

continue because my parent had no money to pay. Attending high school was like going to college now, you had to live near the school, buy book and pay rent, or transfer 30 or 40 miles.

Jones. Tell me about your work experiences?

Ayers. After finishing 8<sup>th</sup> grade, there was a white family who needed someone to cook. They lived about two miles from my parents. I accepted the job and was paid 8.00 a week. I would cook dinner and supper, between the two meals I would go to a neighbor's house and stay.

Jones - why didn't you stay where you worked?

Ayers - I didn't want to really. I could have.

I worked there about 9 years, then I moved to Greenville, stayed about 9 months and worked private home for \$25.00 a week. I returned home to Glen Allen, and met the man I married.

Jones - How did you meet him?

Ayers - I met him at a Cofe, we dated quite a while and get married.

Jones - who was it you married?

Ayers - I married the late Joke Ayers. 1953

Jones - How many children did you all have?

Ayers - we had 9 children 8 boys and one girl.

Jones - what did your husband do?

Ayers - He was working in Rolling Fork as a \_\_\_\_\_? He work there until 1956 then he got hired in Greenville, ms. at a factory called the Greenville Mill. He worked there about 10 years and got fired.

Jones - why was he fired?

Ayers - because of his involvement with Civil Rights Head Start and the Labor union. He was getting together with Labor union to change the working conditions at the mill. At that time the Labor union was concerned with equal pay rates of black and whites, equal use of bath room facilities, drinking fountains and lunch times. Whites went to lunch first then blacks could go and eat. Petitions were circulating for signatures about \_\_\_\_\_ and to intergrate the mill by sex. The mill was not favorable to hiring black women. White women worked there in offices and other

menial jobs, but black women even with education could not. They were expected to work for these working women in their homes, keeping their children and cleaning for them.

Jones - why did he fight to integrate the mill by sex?

Ayers - He felt that if whites women could do could blacks. Sex is sex regardless of race. What really motivated him to take a stand was the death of "Emmett Till". He loved to read and was following the case through reading the news. One day we were sitting outside in the front yard waiting for the white carrier to throw the paper. As he was approaching I ran and got the paper before it hit the ground. He stopped his car and just looked at us. I turned, open the paper and immediately started looking for the Till article, when Joke called out "Lillie close the paper don't you see <sup>how</sup> that man is looking at you? He didn't say anything, finally he moved on.

The situation with Emmett Till's death was an impact on changing our lives.

Jones. How did the Community react to the situation, what were they doing?

Ayers - They were doing nothing. I believe they felt like me, in the past I thought that what ever white folk did they were right. That we were suppose to do what ever they say for us to do. We started talking with community people, getting their feelings. As a result the people begin discussing conditions in our community and actions began. Jake started holding meeting in the methodist church. white community people would gather in the bushes around the church, they were seen with sticks and shot guns. They would make loud noises outside raise the motor of their cars, it was frightening.

Jones - Did you all find out who they were?

Ayers - The Barnes family was one who lived close by, they are still there.

Jones - what was happening in the meeting?

Ayers - meeting to educate our people that they were human beings just like white people. That we had a right to be respected and have our needs met like every one else. This little town became very powerful the message become clear. I can recall a "Cross burning" in our yard. One night about 11 P.M. we were in bed asleep when a neighbor call and said "look out your window" we looked out and saw the "Cross burning" in addition there was a line of cars surrounding our block. They were driving around and around, ~~then~~ they would stop in front of our house and raise the meter. we stayed inside, nothing else happened. Later two young men in the community decided to integrate the Cofe. of the 3 Cofes in Glen Allen all operated by whites, one had already opened to blacks. The others we could go to the window make an order, the food would be prepared and handed out the window.



my brother-in-law was one of the young men to enter, he sat down to order food.

Jones - Do you recall what was said or done?

Ayers - A lot was said that I can't use in this interview. I don't remember all the specifics, but something like "We don't serve niggers in here. They displayed their guns and ordered him out. The sheriff's department was called in to settle the matter. But my brother-in-law packed his suit case and left that night.

Jones - Do you think leaving was the best to do?

Ayers - no, because after that, the sheriff's department warned Cofe owners that anyone who come in and ordered food could not be denied. But, later when my brother was in college at Hally String a group went to Perth Simpson, integrated a Cofe and got thrown out.

Jones - Lets talk about the population of black in your town and the voter registration campaign. How was it carried out?

Ayers - The voter registration program was conducted in Washington Co. by the Freedom Democratic Party. Jake worked with them, you know before one could vote, a portion of the constitution had to be interpreted. The majority of Glen Allen's blacks were registered when the elimination of the interpretation came into being.

Jones - What year was this?

Ayers - I am not sure, but I think it was ~~in~~ 1963.

Jones - Lets get into your involvement with Head Start, what was the C'DGM Head Start like?

Ayers - C'DGM Head Start was a program designed to help uneducated people in rural communities learn how to work with their own children, to show the educated community that if given the opportunity to exercise their own abilities, they would become self sufficient. Formal education was only a part of a child's growth and development, being taught and trained at home is equally important. Parents needed training and

given insight to their role and responsibility. COYM Head Start helped the whole family, learning really took place.

Jones - How did Head Start help you?

Ayers - Financially first of all. I learned about who I was and to feel good about myself. I passed these feelings on to my children and impressed on them that they could be anything they wanted to. As my children finished the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and <sup>was</sup> faced with being bussed pass the high school at home (white) to go either to Hallandale or O'Banner in Greenville, I told them (even before integration was enacted) you all are not going to be bussed. Black children were bussed pass two school to enter 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

Jones - what happen during integration in Glen allen?

Ayers - There were stages of integration. The first year 196 was freedom of choice, about 16 children in Glen Allen went to the white school, very few black children through out Wash, Sharkey & Issaquena County went the first year.

no whites went to black schools. ~~The next year~~

The next year integration was forced on schools.

Jones - How did parent deal with who went to the white school the first year?

Ayers - The first year they mandated the first and second grades. The second year they — that children in the western line district go <sup>to</sup> the all white school, what happen was the white children left their school and went private, their school became our school

Jones - what happen to the black school?

Ayers - Its empty, not being used.

Jones - Lets talk a bit about C O G m's philosophy. Black children were taught to feel good about themselves and to be more in control of the way they were treated. How did you see your children functioning in the white school.

Ayers - as I said our children got the building there was <sup>no</sup> whites to experience that factor.

Jones - what was your role in Head Start?

Ayers - In 1965 I was the lead teacher of Glen Allen Center for the first 8 weeks program. The next funding period I was an Area Teacher Guide.

Jones what was your responsibility then?

Ayers - I supervised all teachers in Sharkey, Issaquah and lower Washington Counties. I shared information received from my training by Polly Greenberg and from training institutes on early child education.

Held workshops and guided on the spot techniques in permitting a child to exercise his creativity.

Jones - what was the educational level of your teachers?

Ayers - Most teachers had an eighth grade education. few had finished high school.

Jones - were they productive?

Ayers - very much so, I think they did a good job.

Jones - describe a typical day in a Head Start Center.

Apr - First teachers set up the classroom of activities for that day before the children arrive. Children arrive by bus or car transportation. They get washed up for breakfast, they eat and use the bath room before getting into daily activities. The activities vary depending on the child's individual interest. Some in groups of 2 and 3 will choose the Art area where they use crayon and color, some will choose the math area where they play number games manipulating, counting measuring etc. Some go to the music area and play musical games. Some might want to be alone so they may sit in a corner and look in books or handle their special toy. At group time a story is read to the entire group, or they sing songs, dance, exercise etc. It's been so long since I taught in the classroom. They eat lunch take a nap, have freedom, repeat for comprehension in the afternoon prepare for going home. That's a typical day in a Head Start Classroom.

Jones - Describe the children who came the very first day.

Ayers - Some were very contained, others didn't know how to sit and eat at a table. Some seem not to have been eating very well. They may have been use to a sandwich, a piece of bread or cookie. It was difficult getting them adjusted.

Jones - what ages did you serve?

Ayers - Between 4 + 6 maybe older. In 1965 we had some 8 + 9 who had never been to school. Some children wouldn't talk, very withdrawn.

Jones - Did you have trouble keeping the attendance up.

Ayers - No, any child who went to CDGM Head Start then, would run to get on that bus. I think Head Start was good for everybody. If the child acted like he/she didn't want to go, the parent pushed them out. That still exist.

Jones - Were teachers trained for their role and responsibilities

Ayers - Yes, they got lots of training, Over and beyond what CDGM training provided. They went to Mary Holmes College and other institutions for early childhood training.

Jones - non eligible children who couldn't attend Headstart and whose parent worked there were also trained. Do you think they passed on their experiences to these children?

Ayers. I never talked about that per se, but I feel it was, but some of those parent were in the same conditions as their children, they didn't talk or verbalize either.

Jones - Tell me about the other Headstart Program you worked with.

Ayers - After CDSM closed in \_\_\_\_\_ it was absorbed by Washington Co Opportunities Inc. I got hired by them. So did many others.

Jones - what happen to those who didn't get hired?

Ayers - Friends of children hired some and others were left out.

Jones - Did you continue the same style as in CDSM?

Ayer - Well, I see Headstart now as an agency where you go to work, get paid and go home.



The concept of Headstart has been taken completely away. They have educated it. Not that I have anything against education. I am all for improving the quality of life, but Headstart was doing what the poverty guidelines meant. Now Headstart teachers have gone to schools and gotten master degrees. Unfortunately they didn't get what they needed to teach black children about themselves and how to improve the total community. Many of them went into other areas of employment. The basic philosophy to which Headstart was about such as, bringing a balance in community relationships and giving young children a sense of self worth and responsibility. It also meant that as parent and teachers move up and out of Headstart they would keep that pattern and growth development for those who follow them. That is not happening. Now when there is an opening in the program that spot is filled by someone with a degree and not necessarily one with any early childhood experiences.

Public school teachers are very appreciative of Head Start, because they know that children have completed most of the basics necessary for placement in the first grade.

Jones - How effective have the Civil rights movement been in your community?

Ayers - It would be hard to say, because people have been very contented and satisfied. They are drifting into conditions like the 50's + 60's, as long as there is a fairly decent job they just complain and accept it.

Jones - This has been a fruitful interview Mrs Ayers, and I want to thank you. Are you comfortable as a social worker for the Washington Co. Opportunity Inc.

Ayers - In a way, you see parent of those children most needed, cooperate less than parent of children who can pay. Those parent want their children to get the Head Start services. Children are hard to find in Washington Co. now therefore we recruit any we can find.

Jones - Concluding this interview, is there a statement you would like to make to the students of the future?

Ayers - I have really enjoyed the experiences working in Head Start. I like to talk and share so I talk a lot in social services. I have learned how to deal with family members and others encouraging them to further their education, and keep a positive attitude about conditions they often find themselves. All this I have been grateful to Pally Greenberg, Mary Emmons, and other CDGM Staff.