



HOOKS INSTITUTE TO HOST "TENT CITY" REMEMBRANCE OCT. 27-28

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The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change will host a series of events commemorating "Tent City" and other sustained efforts to gain economic empowerment and African-Americans' right to vote in a hub of the Civil Rights Movement, Fayette County, Tenn. Events will take place at 1:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 27, and 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 28 in the Rose Theatre at the University of Memphis.

The highlights of the weekend, which will include an exhibition of photographs and documents highlighting seminal events of the Fayette County Civil Rights Movement, are the keynote address Saturday on the significance of the Fayette County movement by Charles Payne, Professor of African-American Studies at Duke University, followed by speeches by Movement leaders, including John and Viola McFerren.

The Fayette County movement has been called the "longest sustained civil rights protest in the nation" in an article published by the New York Times on 12 Oct. 1969. This movement began in 1959 when movement leaders attended the trial of a black man accused of killing a white deputy sheriff. During the jury selection for the trial, it became apparent that there were no African-Americans who could serve on the jury because only a few blacks throughout the entire county had registered to vote. The subsequent efforts to register voters resulted in white landowners retaliating against black sharecroppers by evicting them from their farms. Two black farmers who owned their land allowed evicted sharecroppers to move onto their farms and movement leaders set up tents to house them. These makeshift dwellings, known throughout the world as "Tent City," came to symbolize the denial of basic civil rights to African-Americans living in the American South. When Fayette County whites started retaliating against the blacks who registered to vote, the Movement received national attention and financial assistance, however, at no point did the Fayette County leaders relinquish control of their civil rights agenda as they defined it. "The Movement's longevity and sense of purpose," Daphene McFerren, the daughter of Fayette County civil rights leaders, "can be explained by the local people who sparked the movement and continued to carry its torch even after the enthusiasm for civil rights organizing died out elsewhere."

A prominent attorney with years of experience as a prosecutor for the Justice Department and, currently, a Visiting Scholar at the Hooks Institute, McFerren is leading the effort to collect and preserve the oral stories and documents that bear witness to the skills and tactics utilized by Movement participants to educate their own community about the issues facing them, and to garner support for their efforts to encourage voter registration, school desegregation, and economic empowerment. Collectively, these materials show how a community where high school graduation was not taken for granted nonetheless narrated its own story as the events unfolded under a national spotlight. "It is imperative to me that this unique chapter of the American Civil Rights saga be preserved," McFerren, the event planner, says, "because I see the hopes and goals of this community, and the efforts they undertook to reach their goals, as relevant today to poor and underserved communities."

McFerren will present an overview of her conservationist work on Friday that will be followed by a panel discussion. Panelists will include Dr. Susan Glisson of the University of Mississippi, a member of President Clinton's Council on Racial Reconciliation; Dr. Leslie B. McEntore, a founding member of the Fannie Lou Hamer Institute at Jackson State University; and Viola McFerren, a civil rights leader in the Fayette County movement.

"In light of renewed waves of cynicism in some traumatized communities caused by responses to Hurricane Katrina, we as a nation have an opportunity to learn from these activists of the sixties who were fighting for a more just and democratic America for all citizens regardless of economic status or ethnicity," says D'Ann Penner, director of the Hooks Institute. "This conference will provide a space for an interdisciplinary, national discussion of historical community activism in the context of contemporary challenges. Even more importantly, it will give us a chance to honor these heroic men and women who withstood death threats, financial and psychological hardships, and the discomforts of living for extended periods of time in Army surplus tents in order to encourage the country they loved and many of them risked their lives for to live up to its ideals."

The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change is a public policy research center supporting the urban research mission of the University of Memphis and honoring Dr. Hooks' many years of leadership in the American Civil Rights Movement. The Institute works to advance understanding of the legacy of the American Civil Rights Movement and of other movements for social justice through teaching, research and community programs that emphasize social movements, race relations, strong communities, public education, effective public participation, and social and economic justice.

For more information, visit <http://benhooks.memphis.edu/highlights.html>.

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