

Southern Echo: The ongoing fight for human rights

By Meredith C. McGee
Jackson Advocate Contributing Writer

In December of 1989, two SNCC veterans Hollis Watkins and Mike Sayer, both 48, along with Jessie Griffin filed papers to incorporate Southern Echo, a civil rights organization in Jackson, to tackle Mississippi's systemic racism.

At that time, George H. W. Bush, a Republican, was the 41st president, and Ray Mabus, a Democrat, was the governor of Mississippi; while Blacks had made some social, political, and economic strides, the White power structure's ability to maintain societal lopsidedness for people of color via the legal system was secure.

Both Watkins and Sayer had forged statewide and national alliances with civil rights groups including the NAACP, CORE, SCLC, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party... They understood the significance of collaborations, and envisioned youth tackling problems from the ground up just as they had done in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. They worked with Bob Moses, Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, Vernon Dahmer, Dave Dennis, Unita Blackwell, Robert Clark, Ella Baker, Stokely Carmichael and countless of others.

In 1959, Watkins, a 17-year-old high school student, enrolled at Lincoln County Training School, joined the Pike County NAACP Youth Chapter, and got involved in the Civil Rights Movement. During the Summer of 1961, he and several friends who lived on farms nearby heard Martin Luther King was in town, so they walked upstairs in the Burglund Town Supermarket where they thought King was, and met the legendary Bob Moses, age 25, a native of Harlem, who was holding SNCC meetings. "I asked Bob Moses if he was Martin Luther King?" Watkins noted with a hint of humor. He added, "Bob replied, 'No.'" Moses asked Watkins if he was interested in registering voters. Watkins accepted the task, continued to attend meetings, and joined SNCC.

At another meeting, Marion Barry discussed direct action strategies



(L-R) Leroy Johnson, Hollis Watkins, and Mike Sayer at a Founder's Award Program

with the youth. Watkins, age 19, and his friend Curtis Hayes, age 18, took the leap and became the first citizens to participate in a Woolworth lunch counter sit-in in McComb. Several years later, Bob Moses assigned Sayer, age 22, who had recently joined the communication's leg of SNCC in Atlanta, to work in the COFO building on Lynch St. and Rose St. "I came to Jackson in October of 1963 to get involved in the Mississippi Freedom Vote," Sayer noted.

"We wanted community groups to understand that racism was about people voting to pass policies that were hurtful rather than people saying nasty things," Mike Sayer proclaimed. The organization worked on redistricting from 1989 - 1992. "We used redistricting as a framework to open the doors for Mississippi Blacks to advance politically," Sayer recalled.

During the winter of 1989, Leroy Johnson, age 33, a Holmes County activist who had moved up the ranks at the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center from youth organizer to president, joined Watkins and Sayer and helped them develop strategies for

Southern Echo. His father, James R. Johnson had historically become the second Black elected in 1979 since Reconstruction to Holmes County's Board of Supervisors. Howard Taft Bailey was elected to the board in 1975. Leroy's new wife, Helen, a native of Georgia, was a social worker for Hinds County Youth Court Division. They had two children: Karl and Kahlil.

Leroy and Helen were a power couple and true champions for their race. Helen saw firsthand the devastation of the juvenile justice system on Black youth, and she didn't walk away and stuff her check in her pocket. Helen and her twin sister Ellen Reddy rallied at full force against the School-to-Prison-Pipeline. The Mississippi Legislature honored Helen and Ellen with a proclamation for their advocacy work. Leroy released a Texas size smile when he discussed his late wife of 28 years, who succumbed to cancer last year.

Leroy Johnson said, "One of our greatest achievements is our educational reform work which led to the 1997 legislation known as Mississippi Adequate Education Program...

the old formula to fund public education." Southern Echo publicly opposes EdBuild, the January 16, 2017 revised proposal to fund public education.

Today, Rachel Mayes, a Florence native, is the organization's first female executive director. Leroy Johnson held the position previously. Mayes holds a MBA from Belhaven University and a BBA in Finance from Jackson State University. Rachel said, "Southern Echo will continue to be vigilant in training community and equipping them with the tools and skills to become an informed citizenry that willingly participates in accountable governance that shapes their lives economically, educationally, and that ultimately creates pathways out of poverty."

Presently, Leroy is a senior policy analyst; Hollis is a legislative liaison; and Mike Sayer has retired. Other members of the staff include: Marilyn Young, Education Director, Tunica; Betty Petty, Senior Community Organizer/Trainer, Indianola; and community organizers Janas Saulsberry of Tallahatchie County and Dianna Freelon-Foster of Grenada. Catherine

Jenkins is the administrative assistant; and Kahlil Johnson and Antionette McKay are interns.

Brenda Hyde is the deputy director/chief program officer. Hyde became a student intern 23 years ago while she was completing a masters degree in Public Policy Administration from Jackson State University. Under the tutorage of Watkins, Hyde discarded her preppy clothes, became a community organizer, found her voice, and developed long lasting relationships with community leaders, educators, funders, and politicians nationally as well as abroad. Hyde said, "Southern Echo focuses on community empowerment, through training and leadership development." Hyde declared, "We're always analyzing bills to share with community to keep them abreast of the laws that are being introduced and passed."

The late Henry Kirksey (1915 - 2005) for which Kirksey Middle School (Jackson) is named, was an important ally in the early years. Kirksey learned redistricting and demography during WWII. He started working for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund in 1963 and was a State Senator from 1980 to 1987. He filed the lawsuit which forced the City of Jackson to change its at-large districts to single member districts which opened the doors for the first Blacks to get elected to city government in 1985 since Reconstruction. Kirksey taught Watkins, Sayer, and Johnson how to draw demography maps.

During the 1990s, the trio taught thousands of Mississippians and politicians how to draw redistricting maps wherein the population and deviation were calculated with old fashion pen and paper. By the 2000 census, the trio and their staff were teaching community leaders via GIS Mapping software.

In a phone interview with Mike Sayer recently from his home in Jackson, he noted, "I'm most proud of the fact that Southern Echo crossed racial political barriers by linking people together to maximize their strengths which allowed the Black community to level the

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