

"We Are Not Going to Take This Anymore"



Jessie Divens, one of McComb's young activists

IN 1961, WHEN CIVIL RIGHTS workers set up shop in Mississippi, it was the poorest, most backward state in the Union. Its blacks lived and worked in conditions mimicking slavery and were made to understand that, for them, equality and freedom were unattainable dreams. As bad as the records of other Southern states were in regard to racial outrages, Mississippi's was worse. It had the largest number of lynchings, the most lynchings of women, the worst mob atrocities. Nearly six hundred blacks were known to have been lynched in Mississippi between 1880 and 1940. The actual number may have been far higher.

By the time of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, lynch-

ings had become quite rare in other Southern states. Mississippi, however, had seven racial murders in 1955 alone, among them that of a fourteen-year-old-boy named Emmett Till. In 1959, a man named Mack Charles Parker, arrested for the rape of a white woman, was taken by a mob from his cell in Poplarville, beaten, shot, and thrown in chains into the Pearl River.

And just in case murder and intimidation didn't do the trick in keeping blacks servile, the Mississippi legislature in 1954 passed laws making it virtually impossible for would-be black voters to register. In addition to the longtime poll-tax requirement, applicants had to fill out a four-page form, including a section in which they had to copy and interpret an excerpt from Mississippi's constitution. The excerpt was chosen by the county registrar of voters, who was empowered to decide if the interpretation was acceptable. Blacks, no matter how highly educated, rarely seemed able to interpret the constitution to the liking of the registrars, whose own education in many cases did not reach even an eighth-grade level. Whites, on the other hand, were almost always able to satisfy the registrars' standards of constitutional scholarship.

For most Mississippi blacks, the idea of attempting to register to vote was as far-fetched as the hope of earning a profit on a cotton crop. Many could not read or write, and thus could not fill out the application. Isolated on plantations and farms, with no protection by the law, the impoverished blacks of Mississippi did everything they could to avoid conflict with whites, just to stay alive. Jane Stembridge called Mississippi "the ultimate in hatred, not that the hatred is of greater intensity, but that the hatred is everywhere and there *is* no escape."

All this, then, was what the young SNCC activists faced when they arrived in Mississippi. They had come to join forces with Bob Moses, a former math teacher from New York, who, at the urging of Jane Stembridge and Ella Baker, had traveled to Mississippi the year before to stir up interest in SNCC and the movement. Moses had set up a voter registration project in the tough little hill town of McComb, in the southwestern part of the state—dangerous country for anyone encouraging blacks to vote.

Still there'd been a small nucleus of black adults in McComb ready to help Moses, and he located another group of eager recruits almost as soon as he and a couple of other SNCC workers set up a voter registration school in the town's black Masonic Temple. They were students from McComb's Burgland High School, and most of them were girls. It was a pattern that would occur again and again, as the movement spread throughout the Deep South in the early 1960s. Almost invariably, the first

group of local people to throw themselves wholeheartedly into civil rights work were teenagers, who, full of the fire of youth, were impatient with the caution shown by their elders. And at least in the beginning of the local movements, the majority often were girls, who had grown up relatively free of the fear of stepping out of line instilled from childhood in their brothers and male friends. "[T]he brunt of the violence in the South was directed toward the black male," noted James Bevel. "The females had not experienced that kind of negative violence, so they didn't have the kind of immediate fear of, say, white policemen as the young men did." Bevel's observation echoed what black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier wrote in the 1940s—that a black man in the South "is not only prevented from playing a masculine role, but generally he must let the Negro woman assume the lead in any show of militancy."

The local girls in the movement had been raised, for the most part, to be feisty and independent. "My mom brought me up to believe that I could do anything, that I could be anything I wanted to be," said Jacqueline Byrd, who was fourteen when Bob Moses came to McComb. One of ten children, Byrd was not inclined to let anyone, regardless of color, push her around. Not long before Moses' arrival in town, she had been in McCrory's five-and-dime store in downtown McComb. She stood in line to make a purchase, but whites kept pushing her aside "as if I had no value at all." Finally, a white girl not much older than Byrd told her, "Well, if you want to get waited on in this store, you'll have to say, 'Yes, ma'am,' and 'No, ma'am' to everyone here." Byrd looked at her. "No," she said. She put down the item she wanted to buy and stalked angrily out of the store. "I could have punched her lights out," she later told one of her brothers.

Byrd, Johnnie Wilcher, and Brenda Travis were among the students recruited to go door-to-door asking people to come to Bob Moses' voter registration school. Moses had already taught the students about the poll tax and instructed them on how to fill out the complicated registration form at the courthouse. Eager to share with others what they had learned, they were shocked and hurt when people they had known all their lives slammed the door on them or pretended not to be at home or, in at least one case, slapped a young canvasser. "We felt our own people were not really listening to something that was worthwhile," Byrd recalled. "It wasn't until I was an adult that I understood how afraid they were of losing everything."

One of those who felt most thwarted by the adults' reaction was fifteen-year-old Brenda Travis, whose lifelong rebellious spirit had finally found an outlet. Like Jackie Byrd, Travis did not tolerate insults from whites. Once at a bus stop, a white woman tried to elbow her out of the way. If

Travis didn't move, the woman said, she would slap her face. "Well, you can imagine what I told her," Travis recalled. "My best friend said, 'Girl, you're crazy!'" When the teenager got involved with the voter registration effort, her mother ordered her to stay home. She was told that "what I was doing was dangerous, and I should get all that mess out of my head." Travis ignored the warning. "I decided that I was going to do it anyway, and I did."

Not all the girls, however, let their parents know what they were doing. Ruby Divens, the mother of twelve-year-old Jessie Divens, was a cook for Phoebe Jones, a white woman in McComb. One day, Jones asked Ruby Divens if she knew Bob Moses. *No*, Divens replied. *Well*, said Jones, *your daughter sure knows Moses. She was over at the Masonic Temple the other day.* When Divens got home, she asked Jessie if she knew this outsider from the North. Jessie admitted she did. Her mother had told her never to talk to strangers, but Moses had brought hope and excitement to town, and Jessie wanted to be part of it. "I always knew I was equal to everybody else, and he had come to prove that to us," Jessie Divens said later. "To me, it was a revolution that had started . . . something I had to be a part of or just burst wide open."

For Jessie and the others, Moses' charisma had nothing to do with eloquence or oratory. More than anyone else in SNCC, Moses was the spiritual offspring of Ella Baker. Profoundly influenced by Baker's philosophy of leadership, he did not preach, did not tell people what to do. He listened to them, worked alongside them, became involved in their lives, convinced them they had the power to tear down the walls of segregation and to overcome racial injustice. "We would have followed him to the ends of the earth," said Jackie Byrd.

Jessie Divens certainly felt that way. Obeying the letter of her mother's instruction, if not the spirit, Jessie at first followed Moses wherever he went without engaging him in conversation. Finally, however, Moses' diminutive shadow could not restrain herself. Standing outside a cafe, watching him eat his lunch one day, she jerked the door open, walked in, and announced to Moses, "I'm Jessie, and I'm going to help you." When Ruby Divens found out about Jessie's involvement, she was frightened, but unlike Brenda Travis' mother, Divens did not forbid her daughter from canvassing. "I just didn't get on Jessie, like a lot of mothers . . .," she said. "I figured that Jessie had a mind of her own. And a good mind, at that."

From then on, whenever Divens' employer asked her if she knew Moses yet, she always said no.

What is he teaching the children?

I don't know, was the invariable reply.

Jones took to sitting for hours on her front porch, waiting to see if Moses would pass by, "thinking, I guess, I'd holler, 'Hi, Bob!'" Ruby Divens said. "Everywhere you went them days, white folks was asking, 'Who is Bob Moses?'"

Besides the early participation of teenage girls, another pattern would soon become apparent to Moses and the organizers who followed him. Wherever they went, older local women would join the girls, many of whom were their daughters and granddaughters, in the vanguard of the movement. Warm, generous, and fearless, the older women served as role models for the younger ones. "Those women stood up to the system," said Jackie Byrd. "They talked back, and in the process, taught me how to be a strong woman." Local women also welcomed the young civil rights workers into their homes, feeding them, housing them, mothering them, and marching with them to the courthouse.

And they were almost always out front. "Violence is a fearful thing," said SNCC activist Avon Rollins. "People don't realize how frightened you get. I remember . . . where the words wouldn't come out of my mouth, where my teeth were just crushing together, chattering because the fear was so strong in me, not knowing what was going to happen. Then I'd see these black females out there, and I knew I couldn't let them take the beating, and the words would come out, and I would make my stand."

But, more often than not, women took the beatings, too. They risked all they had—their families, their homes, their jobs, their lives—in this chancy fight for equality. Many said they were on the front lines because it was too dangerous for men to be there, that men would be killed for doing what they were doing. It was generally thought that Southern whites did not see black women, who worked in their houses and took care of their children, as much of a threat. But racists in Mississippi, as in the rest of the South, did not seem to share that point of view, never thinking to spare women in their terrorist campaigns. Women lost their jobs; their houses were bombed and torched; they were shot, beaten up, and thrown into jail. Family members were assaulted. If no black women activists lost their lives in the movement, many came perilously close to doing so. "I think the women *were* stronger," said Ivanhoe Donaldson, another SNCC organizer. "Many of the men were beaten down."

Hardships were nothing new for these women. Toughened by poverty, brutal racism, and myriad other forms of adversity, they believed that the civil rights struggle held out the glimmering hope of a better life—for them, but, more important, for their children and grandchildren. "You

could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices," said Fred Powledge, who covered the movement for *The Atlanta Journal* and later *The New York Times*. "They were standing up, saying, 'I'm not going to take any more of this shit. Send me to jail, shoot me, but no more.' It was the fiercest, most courageous, heaviest battering ram against segregation in the whole movement."

Few of the women activists in Mississippi had to be pushed very hard to get involved. Like Rosa Parks in Montgomery and countless other black women throughout the South, many had already been involved in their own battles for freedom; the movement was the same war on a larger battlefield. Among them was Aylene Quinn, who owned a popular diner in McComb called South of the Border. One day, an NAACP activist came by to tell her Moses was in town. If Moses should drop in, the man said, Quinn should feed him, even if he happened to find himself without any money. Quinn did not need any convincing. An NAACP member, she had long wanted to register to vote; in fact, she had paid her poll tax eight years before and tried to register two years after that, as the law required, but was told she had not passed the test.

When Moses did drop in at South of the Border, Quinn not only welcomed him, she soon transformed her little neighborhood cafe into a hub of movement activity. She knew the risks and understood how vulnerable she was to official retribution. Mississippi was a dry state by law, but the law was universally flouted. Like many restaurant owners, white and black, Quinn sold liquor under the table. Everybody knew it, including the local police, whom she regularly paid off. She wasn't comfortable breaking the law, but she had children to support and educate. "I seen where I could make a living, and that's what I did," she said. "And if I could outsmart the law, I did that." But she knew, as she got even more deeply involved in Moses' voter registration work, that it was only a matter of time before the law struck back.

While most blacks in McComb seemed to want little to do with Moses and his voter registration school, sixteen residents gathered enough courage to attend the school and then go down to the county courthouse in Magnolia in early August to take the test. To everyone's surprise, six passed and were registered. Impressed, local activists in Amite and Walthall counties, where no blacks had been permitted to register in anyone's memory, persuaded Moses to come and work his magic in those areas. On August 15, he took three blacks to the Amite County courthouse in Liberty, where all three were turned away and Moses himself was arrested

and sent to jail for a night. Fourteen days later, he returned to Liberty with another small group and was badly beaten outside the courthouse by a cousin of the sheriff.

When he returned to McComb, his head swathed in bandages, he found the Masonic Temple in an uproar. Fresh from the Highlander free-for-all, a dozen SNCC activists had descended on the town, and the direct action advocates, led by Marion Barry, had recruited several local young people for nonviolent protests. Indeed, the first demonstration—a sit-in at the lunch counter of the downtown Woolworth's—had already taken place, ending with the arrests of two of the protesters, Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins.

Many students in McComb, including the impetuous Brenda Travis, were fired up by the drama and excitement of direct action. Moses was less than enthusiastic. He had asked SNCC to send people to help with the voter registration project, not to conduct sit-ins. Such protests would inflame the area's hard-core racists—who, as far as Moses was concerned, were inflamed enough as it was—and might also antagonize the middle-class, middle-aged NAACP activists who had invited him to McComb in the first place. Moses, however, did not feel he could order Barry and the others to desist. So planning for the next sit-in went ahead, with Brenda Travis determined to play a part.

Because the SNCC organizers had decreed that demonstrators must be eighteen or older, the fifteen-year-old lied about her age to Barry, who approved her participation. On August 30, with a toothbrush and a fresh set of underwear in her purse, she and two young men set out for the train station and its whites-only waiting room. The police knew of their plan and kept the demonstrators under surveillance. When the young people got to the station, they found the door locked. They proceeded to Woolworth's, where the lunch counter waitresses were conducting a sit-in of their own, occupying all the stools to prevent the demonstrators from sitting down. Undeterred, the three walked over to the Greyhound bus station, where they had less than a minute to enjoy the air-conditioning in the white waiting room before they were arrested. That first night in jail, Travis felt more exhilaration than fear. "To be honest," she said later, "I was really excited because there wasn't much going on in McComb . . . so this was sort of like the highlight of our being, the highlight of our existence . . ." The only thing she worried about was what her mother would say when she found out.

Stunned by Travis' arrest, black McComb received an even greater shock when she was sentenced to four months in jail. The idea of a young girl behind bars with violent criminals was horrifying, and Mrs. Quinn and

other women in town did what they could to support her, including bringing in food to her and the young male activists who were jailed with her.

After a month, Travis was released, and her classmates at Burgland High School rallied around her. She had not been a student leader at Burgland, but now she was the one they all looked up to. She had missed the first month of the new school year, and there was a rumor afloat that Burgland's principal, hoping to appease the town's whites, did not intend to readmit her. The night before she tried to return to school, SNCC staged a mass meeting, during which James Bevel, in town from Jackson, ignited the crowd with his spellbinding exhortation for more direct action. Many of Travis' fellow students were at the meeting and, fired up by Bevel's oratory, held a rump session afterward to decide what to do if Travis was turned away from Burgland. If that happened, declared Johnnie Wilcher, they must all walk out behind her. Everyone agreed. After making some protest signs and hiding them in the Masonic Temple, they went home to await the morning.

When Travis reported to school the next day, she was indeed told by the principal that she could not return. At a school assembly later that morning, a senior named Joe Lewis stood up and asked the principal what he was going to do about Brenda. If she was not readmitted, Lewis said, the rest of the students would walk out. As the principal began to remonstrate, the students stamped their feet, clapped their hands, and yelled. Suddenly, more than two dozen got to their feet and marched out of the auditorium. Outside, they decided they needed more students if their demonstration was going to have real impact. So they returned to the school and its adjacent junior high, bursting into the classrooms and urging the students to come with them. "The teachers said, 'Get away from here . . . You can't pull anybody else out,'" recalled Annie Pickett, one of the ringleaders. "We said, 'Come on.' . . . The kids ran out after us." As teachers braced themselves in the classroom doorways, attempting to block their charges from leaving, the students, some as young as eleven and twelve, wriggled through their legs and under their outstretched arms. Watching her fellow students pour out of the building, Jackie Byrd had the unsettling feeling that she and they were about to change their lives, leaving behind everything that was comfortable and familiar, and heading off into "something totally unknown." When one student said nervously, "My parents are going to kill me for doing this," another responded, "If we do this, then they will have to follow us."

More than one hundred students formed themselves into a ragged line outside the building. Their leaders decided they would march all the way

to the county seat in Magnolia, but first they had to stop off at the Masonic Temple to pick up their signs. As they started out, the older students walked up and down the line, giving a quick primer in the discipline of nonviolence, urging the younger students to keep their cool.

At the temple, meanwhile, SNCC leaders had gathered from throughout the South to hold their fall executive committee meeting. It had been Ella Baker's idea: to close ranks, after the wounding Highlander sessions, in a place where the two SNCC wings had already joined forces.

Engrossed in debate in a second-story room at the Masonic Temple, the SNCC leaders first heard the faint strains of "We Shall Overcome," then were confronted by a swarm of teenagers who had come to claim their placards. Although some of the SNCC people had covertly encouraged the walkout, others, including Bob Moses, were opposed, fearing the kids would be chewed up by McComb's racists. Still, in the face of so much youthful determination, the SNCC grown-ups felt they had little choice but to join the march. "We have to direct these kids," said Chuck McDew, "or they're going to get their heads busted . . ."

Outside, the SNCC people organized the Burgland students into a double line, girls on the left, boys on the right. Instead of going all the way to Magnolia, they were persuaded to march to McComb City Hall. Remain on the sidewalk, they were told. Don't talk back to the police or anybody else. Stay off the grass. And so they set off, singing lustily, waving their banners, a bunch of black kids marching defiantly toward the downtown of one of the meanest, most violent places in the South. When they got to the red-brick, white-pillared City Hall, they found a large crowd of whites, cursing and yelling and shaking their fists. As she looked up, Annie Pickett saw a noose dangling in a front window. Undeterred, the students, one by one, climbed the steps to pray. "Throw those niggers in jail," roared someone in the crowd. The police promptly complied.

After spending several hours in jammed cells, the marchers under eighteen were released to the custody of their parents. While some parents were furious, most were supportive. When Annie Pickett's mother came to pick her up, one of the policemen told her, "Grace, we want you to have that girl back here for court." A bootlegger, Grace Pickett knew the cop well, since she paid him off regularly. She said, "I'd rather for a snake to spit in my face than you say anything to me. Come on, Annie May." With her daughter in tow, Mrs. Pickett marched out of the station.

Ruby Divens retrieved her daughter, Jessie, from jail. She was nervous about the repercussions but by now she endorsed what Jessie was doing even though her husband, Jessie's stepfather, had already lost his garbage-

collecting job because of it. (A few nights later, dynamite was thrown at a house across the street from the Divenses', and cars filled with white men were parked in front of their house early in the morning. Night after night, Ruby Divens stayed up until dawn, a shotgun in her lap.)

When Aylene Quinn's daughter, Caroline, returned home after her brief time in jail, she was treated like "a big star." She asked for a glass of milk, even though she usually did not drink milk, because "I thought that since I had been in prison—that was what I should drink." Her family's reaction, she said, "was wonderful. My mother was very proud of me."

There was no such hero's reception for the SNCC activists, who stayed in jail for several days before their release on bail. When they got out, they discovered that most of the students who took part in the march had been expelled from Burgland after refusing to sign a pledge that they would never get involved in such action again. The SNCC organizers set up a makeshift high school at the Masonic Temple, and later arranged for them to attend at Campbell College, a black school in Jackson.

The students' lives had been turned upside down. For many, the idea of spending more than six months in Jackson, separated from everything that was familiar, was even more frightening than the walkout and march. Thirteen-year-old Willie Martin, for one, had never spent a night away from home in her life, and now she would be apart from her close-knit family, in a strange city, for what seemed an eternity. "I was terrified," she recalled, "but it was something I believed in, something I had to do."

Jessie Divens was too young to attend the classes at Campbell, so she and a few others attended a Catholic school in Jackson, riding city buses to and from classes. Jessie had never ridden a municipal bus before, and on one of her first days in Jackson she sat in the front seat on the way to school. When a white woman got on a few stops later, the bus driver yelled, "All the niggers go to the back." Jessie had been poised to get up and give the woman her seat, not because she was white but because she was older, but when she heard the driver's demand, she sat back down again. He repeated his order, and she replied, "I paid my money just the same as she did. I am not budging out of this seat." At the next stop the driver got off the bus and summoned the police, who arrested Jessie and carted her off to jail.

The defiance of this tiny girl, who looked considerably younger than twelve, threw the Jackson legal system, and SNCC, into an uproar. A city judge threatened her with reform school if she didn't apologize and promise never to disobey the city's segregation laws again. Jessie refused. No one could get her to change her mind—not the judge, not the lawyer SNCC had retained for her, not James Forman, SNCC's new executive sec-

retary, who had come from Atlanta to mediate the crisis. "They kept asking me, 'Are you going to do what we're telling you to do?'" she recalled. "I told them, 'No, just lock me back up, and let's forget the whole thing.'" Stymied, the Jackson authorities and the SNCC leader finally reached a compromise: Jessie would stay in Jackson and out of reform school, but she would be sent to a new school. A school that she could attend without having to ride the bus.

Brenda Travis was not so fortunate. Clearly wanting to make an example of her, a judge in McComb sentenced the fifteen-year-old to an indeterminate term in reform school on the grounds that, by marching with the other students, she had violated the probation she had been granted after her sit-in conviction. She ended up spending more than six months there.

The sentence infuriated McComb's blacks, and many blamed SNCC. Adding to the anger and fear was the September murder of Herbert Lee, a farmer in Amite County, who had been helping Moses with voter registration. Moses and the others realized that, for the time being at least, their voter registration campaign was dead in McComb and the outlying counties. They retreated to Jackson, and made plans to head north, to the Delta.

McComb, meanwhile, seemed to return to its somnolent, pre-children's crusade racism. Appearances, however, were deceptive. As Jessie Divens pointed out, things started changing the day that "children reared in this community publicly stood up and went against the grain and said, 'We are not going to take this anymore. And here we are. Deal with it.'" Imbued with a passion for freedom, Jessie, Jackie Byrd, Annie Pickett, Caroline Quinn, and all the other young McComb activists bided their time, waiting for the outsiders' return to stoke the fires of rebellion once more. "It was a job incomplete," Divens said. "It was a job that had to be done. And because we were kind and loving to them, I knew they would come back."

When they did reappear in 1964, McComb would erupt in an even greater wave of terror and violence.

SNCC's assault on McComb was just one campaign in "Move on Mississippi," the war against segregation that the direct action wing was planning to wage in the state. In Jackson, Diane Nash, along with James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette, attempted to recruit high school and college students as the vanguard for the mass protests they had in mind. Terrified, however, by the almost certain repercussions of getting involved in protests, most blacks in Jackson wanted nothing to do with the young integrationist outsiders. When SNCC sent a group of kids out to demon-

strate and sit in, the Jackson authorities cracked down on the outsiders from Nashville, not the young protesters. Bevel, Lafayette, and Nash were arrested, and convicted of "contributing to the delinquency of minors" for encouraging youths under eighteen to violate the segregation laws in Mississippi. They each received two-year prison sentences, which they promptly appealed.

In the midst of all this, Diane Nash, the incandescent beauty of the student movement, married its most controversial hell-raiser, James Bevel. Many of their colleagues were confounded by the news. "Diane and *Bevel*?" Julian Bond asked incredulously when he found out. Every man in the movement, it seemed, had had a crush on Nash at one time or another. Every man, Stokely Carmichael said, wanted to marry her. But the one who actually captured this proper, middle-class Midwest native was a quarrelsome, woman-chasing cyclone of energy from Itta Bena, Mississippi, a thoroughgoing eccentric who wore a yarmulke and claimed to hear the voice of God. In many ways, however, their union made perfect sense. They had the same intensity, the same ardent commitment to nonviolent direct action, a commitment that bordered on obsession. Both had no patience with the pragmatism of their SNCC coworkers. They opposed making political deals with the Kennedy administration. This was a holy crusade, and in their view, one couldn't be a politician and a crusader, too. As would be true of other movement love affairs and marriages, Bevel's and Nash's passion for each other was inextricably tied to their passion for the movement. For the moment, at least, both passions would serve to mask their obvious differences (not to mention Bevel's incessant philandering).

Nash's marriage effectively ended her position of leadership in the movement. From that point on, the dynamic young woman who had led the Nashville sit-ins and saved the Freedom Rides was eclipsed by her charismatic husband, who soon would join the staff of SCLC. "Bevel's a genius," observed SNCC organizer Ivanhoe Donaldson. "He's crazy but he's a genius. He's overwhelming, and I think he just overwhelmed Diane. And so she faded into his background while his star was out there shining."

She had been one of the most daring, creative, committed leaders of the student civil rights movement, as well as a brilliant strategist and tactician. But she was also a young woman who had grown up in the conservative 1950s. Independent and strong-minded as she was, she had been raised with the notion that a wife should defer to her husband, even if that wife once had stood up to the President and Attorney General of the United States. She became pregnant almost immediately after their marriage, and

while she remained a key behind-the-scenes strategist, she soon had to juggle her movement work with the responsibilities of caring for her infant daughter and her husband. Yet before the baby was born, Nash showed once again the dramatic inventiveness for which she was famed.

In the spring of 1962, when she was five months pregnant, she announced she was abandoning the appeal of her conviction in Mississippi and would go to prison for two years. She was upset that most movement activists had abandoned the "jail, no bail" policy that she and other SNCC activists had implemented by spending thirty days in the Rock Hill jail the previous year. Especially disappointing to her was the fact that Martin Luther King had been quickly bailed out of jail in Albany, Georgia, a couple of months before. Nash asked Anne Braden to help get the word out about what she was doing. As much a purist as Nash, Braden felt a deep kinship to the younger woman, knowing full well the conflicts implicit in being a wife and mother as well as a civil rights activist. "As I think you know, I have a special sense of identification with Diane and will be willing to do anything you want me to in order to make her sacrifice more meaningful," Braden wrote to James Bevel.

She helped Nash write an open letter to explain her determination to go to jail and to urge others to follow her example. "I can no longer cooperate with the evil and corrupt court system of this state," Nash declared. "Since my child will be a black child, born in Mississippi, whether I am in jail or not, he will be born in prison. I believe that if I go to jail now, it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free—not only on the day of their birth but for all their lives." Nash's statement, circulated by Braden and widely publicized in the black press, hit the civil rights movement—and Mississippi authorities—like a jolt of electricity. Nash was well on her way to becoming a martyr in the eyes of the American public, and state officials wanted none of it. Judge Russell Moore, who had imposed the initial prison sentence, begged her to continue with her appeal, but she refused. The judge asked Bevel to intercede with her.

"Judge Moore, you don't understand Christianity," Bevel said. "All the early Christians went to jail."

Answered the judge: "Maybe so. But they weren't all pregnant and twenty-one."

In the end, Nash served only ten days—for refusing to move from the white side of the courtroom. Moore simply refused to implement the earlier sentence.