An Interview with Peggy Jean Connor:
A Pioneer in Mississippi Civil Rights

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Hattiesburg native Peggy Jean Connor remembers the day in 1955 that she learned of the brutal murder of Emmett Till. The horrific manner of his death and the failure of the justice system to punish his murderers resonated with her, an early spark that would become a fire fueling her work as one of the state’s civil rights leaders.

After finishing high school and opening her own business in the city’s historic Mobile Street community, Connor became actively involved in the movement, becoming an elected leader in the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and as a key organizer of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She also taught citizenship classes as part of a voter registration effort in the city. For her efforts in the movement, she was honored in 1979 with the Carter G. Woodson Black History Award for Courage in Civil Rights.

Although Till’s murder scarred the state, Connor is proud of how far Mississippi has come in its aftermath. The work that remains, she believes, is to change the hearts of those who bear the same kind of hate that killed him.

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Sixty years ago, Peggy Jean Connor would not have imagined she would one day shed her quiet persona to become a leading voice in the civil rights movement in Mississippi. A member of the last graduating class of all-black Eureka High School, the reticent Connor was anything but outspoken.

“Growing up I was always quiet, not rough with anybody, sometimes I would just take it and not say anything,” she said.

But the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 was the beginning of a change in Connor. She would soon decide she could no longer take her treatment as a second-class citizen because of her skin color. She would break her silence – forever – and say what needed to be said to turn the tide against the racist culture of Mississippi and the nation.

“I was in my early 20s and just shocked with him [Till] being a child how they went and got him out of his uncle’s home,” she said. “That was
up in the northern part of Mississippi and we knew it was rougher up that way. It was just terrible times then.”

Her family and community shared her horror at the tragic death of the young Till, which for them underscored how vulnerable African Americans were in a society whose justice system placed minimal, if any, value on their lives.

“I couldn’t imagine someone coming in our house and taking one of us out. I know my daddy would have died that night himself because he would protect his home.”

Till’s mother, Mamie Till, demanded an open casket so the world could see what happened to her son, to learn of and feel her outrage. “She was a strong woman to do that,” Connor said. “She wanted the world to see what those people did to her child, and I think I would have done the same thing.”

From then on, Connor paid closer attention to the unrest and the violence that took place as the civil rights movement began to build up steam, including the events in Alabama such as the Montgomery bus boycott and the Birmingham church bombing. But it was the murder of Medgar Evers that transformed her slow burn into a firestorm.

“That was the last straw,” she said. “I had just made up my mind that they can’t kill everybody, so I just got out there. I always said that if one of my kids got up on one of those stools at the lunch counter at Kress’s or Woolworth, I was going to get up there with them, not scold them or make them get down.”

Connor earned her beautician’s license after completing a course at her aunt’s beauty school, and opened a beauty salon on Mobile Street in Hattiesburg in what was then a thriving area of commerce and social life in the city’s black community. Soon after a COFO office opened across the street, and one of its organizers, Lawrence Guyot, asked Connor to attend a mass meeting at St. John Methodist Church in Palmers Crossing, a historically black community in Hattiesburg.

At the meeting famed civil rights figure Fannie Lou Hamer spoke and provided the “push” that sent Connor into the history books. “Boy, she was a powerful speaker and she set me on fire that night and I thought, ‘Here I go’.”

Connor began attending meetings regularly to help organize instruction programs in Hattiesburg designed to teach blacks citizenship and help them register to vote, which movement leaders believed was the key to change.
“Victoria Gray Adams [another key civil rights figure] asked me to teach a citizenship class,” Connor said. “So they sent me to a ten-day workshop in Dorchester, South Carolina, to learn how to teach the class, and that is where I met Andrew Young and Dorothy White, who coordinated the training.”

Connor came back to Hattiesburg and started teaching citizenship courses at True Light Baptist Church after prayer meetings on Wednesday nights. The young woman who was once afraid to speak out was now teaching others how to demand their rights. “I couldn’t understand me getting involved liked I did,” she said. “I just got out there and did it.”

Her work in the movement garnered some unwanted attention. She learned that a suspicious white man had been inquiring about the address of the “beautician that lived up the street.”

“I was told that if they had gotten away with killing Mr. [Vernon] Dahmer that I was next on the list, but that didn’t bother me,” she said. “I wasn’t afraid – I didn’t have the sense to be afraid. I knew the good lord was with me.”

Connor was later elected secretary of COFO Hattiesburg, and from there took an active part in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), formed as an alternative to the state Democratic Party because it excluded blacks.

“We couldn’t participate with the regular Democratic Party so we decided to organize our own party,” said Connor, recalling organization meetings for the MFDP at the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street in Jackson. She was selected to go to the 1964 Democratic National Convention as one of the representatives of the MFDP, but their efforts were thwarted when they were offered only two official delegate slots.

Her efforts gained her great respect among her MFDP colleagues and she was elected its executive secretary, much to her surprise. “I didn’t know anyone knew anything about me,” she said.

But soon everyone in Democratic Party circles, white and black, would know who Peggy Jean Connor was after the MFDP sued the state Democratic Party for the right to participate not only as voters, but as candidates for office in a suit focused on districting. Ironically, the lawsuit would read Peggy Jean Connor v. Governor Paul B. Johnson, who was also from Hattiesburg.

“Looking back, I believe it was just God’s will,” Connor said. “It was like an outer-body experience.”
The work of Connor and her fellow COFO and MFDP activists would pay dividends as blacks gained their seat at the political table. Eventually, Mississippi would earn the distinction of having more black elected officials than any state in the union.

Though their success could not save Emmett Till, it would stop a repeat of such injustices, Connor believes. “What happened to Emmett wouldn’t happen today, because people know the courts and laws wouldn’t let them get away with it,” she said. “But that change didn’t happen without a struggle.”

“Things are better, but not what they should be. I believe it’s really laws that have changed, but people’s hearts are not really there yet.”