

MEMORIES OF MISSISSIPPI 200 TOWN MEETINGS

as told by Sandra Conant Strachan, February 2019

Other people have explained the Town Meeting process, intent and coverage, so I won't repeat their work. I have a terrible memory for dates, people, places that I can only partially blame on age. That said, I want to share one memorable town meeting out of the hundreds we did in Mississippi.

We had approval to do these town meetings from the Governor's Office – though in reality, all he did was not say no. I always suspected that if reporters or local citizens asked him about our campaign, he could honestly say he had no idea what they were talking about. Nevertheless, it was a Good-Housekeeping-Stamp-of-Approval that worked like a charm, and we used it to set up preliminary meetings.

As we visited each town, we would talk to identified community leaders, ask them to arrange a short planning session with as diverse a group as possible (women, men, youth, black, white, religious and civil leaders, etc.) and set a date for the event.

This is the story of one of them: It was a small city of 50-60,000 in the north-eastern part of the state, and I don't remember the name. When we arrived to do the set-up, the downtown was shut due to protests by crowds of locals as well as outside agitators. The meeting was attended by twenty or more people, and I was thrilled at the diversity. I was encouraged by the cross-section represented, but it didn't take long to sense a deep skepticism and tension in the group.

I blithely gave the context for the Town Meeting as a community-building exercise with a format of creating a common vision and practical actions. Then I moved on to talk about the logistics – who would come, the means of inviting them, where and when the meeting would be held, refreshments, committees, etc.

As I wound down, a handsome middle-aged man stood up. He said, "I own the department store here. It's been in my family for three generations. It's closed for the first time ever because of the protests that are going on. I don't believe for a minute there's any way the blacks and whites of this city can come together without violence. We're flooded with outside agitators, and no three-hour meeting can fix the problems we have. I'd like to think it would, but I don't. I do have one question however: Are you planning to be there?"

I was struck dumb. I was terrified. And I agreed with him. I felt like a fool.

But suddenly I heard myself saying, "You may be right, and I certainly can't promise it'll work. But - if you'll be there, I will."

I don't remember much after that, though we obviously set things up, and sure enough, a month or so later, I went back to lead the Town Meeting.

It was in a large community hall. Shortly after our team of two arrived, a skinny guy arrived to set up his microphone which was attached to a long pole. He intended to record the meeting, probably as an example of mayhem and hostility.

Within a short time, the place began to fill up, and by the time we started, there were 200 people – about half black, half white, young people, white-haired ladies, businessmen, preachers, the mayor and aldermen and this one skinny guy with his mike. Within minutes, the mike was waving around the room, conspicuous in its futile effort to catch comments.

We introduced the Vision section, broke into small groups by numbering off. The groups spent forty-five minutes brainstorming ideas and then we organized them. After a break, we came back to design three specific actions that would be taken. These included a community-wide Fourth of July celebration, which we later learned was a joyous event of over 400 people of all races and ages.

The whole Town Meeting was an act of reconciliation and determination, and we were elated. The store owner came up afterward, and we shared our immense relief. The skinny guy with the mike made a quick exit.

The truth is that the Town Meeting miracles are too numerous to recount. In virtually all of them, we had the opportunity to catalyze and witness the reknitting of human connection, frayed by economic and racial divides, ancient prejudices, and fear. We saw a remarkable ability to heal and transcend differences. This moment of revelation passed, but not without leaving a sense that it's always possible to change and that things can change for the better as a result.

At the end of Mississippi 200, we hosted a conference in Jackson and invited every town to participate. Close to five hundred people came from cities, towns and unincorporated communities and shared their victory stories. What seeds were planted? I don't know. But it was a privilege to bear witness.