

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT—THE ANSWER

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I am Ruth Wilson, Director of what was formerly the Governor's Office of Volunteer Services, but as of Thursday a week ago, it is now the Governor's Office of Citizen Participation. On behalf of 2,350,000 citizens of Mississippi, I greet you: I want to say that it is a pleasure to be in Chicago once again to visit the Institute of Cultural Affairs, to see so many friends, and to renew the precious friendships that I have had over the years.

Just to be standing here is a great experience. I am overwhelmed by it. The Institute has meant a great deal to me. My relationship to the Institute dates back to your Evanston days. I remember a couple of meetings there, which, in retrospect, I associate with one of the major changes of direction of my life. It was here that my search for meaning began to take on new dimensions and to grow in depth. My engagement and struggles in the Fifth City Project, my being a part of the first mobile cadre, my beating the pavements when we were getting ready to open our preschool and being turned away with, "What are you doing and what is that?" I was also part of the Board, without really understanding where we were going. As I was listening this morning, it occurred to me that the great strength of this body of people is that we do not always know where we are going. Somehow, though, we continue the journey.

One of the things that I began to understand early in my life with the Institute was that if you are really interested in making a commitment and if you are really interested in serving, then being here is just absolutely critical. The experiences here have helped me to understand that in order to respond to desperate human need, one must be aggressively dedicated and committed to acting upon those needs. I learned here that there is no caring without action, and that there is no action without understanding.

Most of you know that in 1977, I moved back to Mississippi. There was a series of things that led up to the decision to move, partly a series of family tragedies that made my presence at home important. I had always wanted to go back, but not under those circumstances. In trying to make the decision, there were so many people who said, "You are out of your mind to go back to Mississippi, to give up a job you've had for 15 years. You know you aren't going to get the salary you've been making here." But I did decide to go back, and not just because my mother wanted me to go back. I felt a commitment to the place where I had been born. Having been raised in Mississippi, I wanted to someday be a part of what might be called "solutions."

Going back to Mississippi and accepting the job as Director of the Governor's Office of Citizen Participation has provided a great opportunity for me to respond in a small way to the issues that concern not only Mississippians, but concerned people all over the world. The Governor's Office of Citizen Participation was established by Executive Order. Its goal is to unite citizens with human care agencies to respond to problems throughout the state. Even in the midst of providing the kind of technical assistance that would enable some 500 agencies to involve citizens, I knew this was not the way that citizens could really respond to their own needs, or have a meaningful role in the decision making process that concerned their lives. It was at this point that I began to raise the question, "What can we do, or what can be done so that the citizens in this state can understand that they are in the driver's seat?"

It was at this time that I met Frank Powell, Jeff Roper and many of the other ICA staff members from Pace. I spoke with the Governor about the possibility of allowing us to bring in the Town Meeting program to increase the opportunity for citizen participation. He said to me, "It sounds like a good idea, but I don't know whether we have the money." He designated a staff person to help us put together a proposal for him to look at. We invited the Pace staff down and we created the proposal for him to look at. We invited the Pace staff down and we created the proposal, a proposal to do 200 Town Meetings throughout the state of Mississippi for \$52,500. The next question was getting the money. We found out that there was some anti-recessionary money that had been allocated to the state that might be used for the Town Meetings, but we would have to go to the State Budget Commission for it. The -Budget Commission is made up of State Legislators, most of whom have been around for a long time and can be

pretty tough on new programs requesting money. With dread and in fear and trembling, we appeared before the Commission. They came through in great style, allocating \$25,000 for the first 1130 Town Meetings and instructing us to come back when they were done to look at the possibility of another allocation of \$77,500. We were delighted, because that was a major victory. That was November. I will never forget it; it was November 2nd. We had already, in October, started doing the 200 Town Meetings—we knew that somehow we were going to bring off the state funding. The Governor, though, did not know we had already started, but we had.

It has been an exciting experience in Mississippi. It has begun to provide hope for those who were hopeless. It has begun to heal the alienation and isolation that has existed for so long in our state. There are so many aggregates of people living throughout the land that have not yet become community; in Mississippi that is beginning to happen. People are learning to come together, to work together toward common goals and common objectives. We started with the Town Meetings in the small towns, working with the mayors and elected officials. We've done the rural communities. To date, if you look at the map before you, we have done 112 Town Meetings with nearly 5,000 local citizens participating. Now that would not have been possible even if every agency in Mississippi that had been trained in the management of Voluntary Service programs for the purpose of allowing citizens the opportunity to experience decision-making about their own life. Well, it just couldn't have happened.

So we have really been excited, and the people of Mississippi are excited. We have had: legislators attend our Town Meetings, and they are beginning to get excited. Mayors are excited, and they are writing us letters telling us that they are excited. To sit there and get the phone calls—I got a phone call from one mayor just before I left for Washington. He said, "You know, we set our Town Meeting date for April 29, but we are not going to be able to keep that date. I wonder if we could change it, because I don't want to miss it. A Town Meeting is just what we need here." We changed his date. That is just one example of how Town Meetings are being received throughout the state. The Governor attended a Town Meeting in North Biloxi and said to me, and I quote, "This is exactly what Mississippi needs." Later when I had the chance to visit him in his office, he said, "Ruth, I would like to see this Town Meeting program become a permanent program of Mississippi." I said, "Governor, you're right. It's the only solution." I might say that we are fortunate to have a governor who listens. I guess he decided to listen since he didn't want us to keep coming back to him. We won't let him rest. It takes persistence and perseverance to get your top officials to really see the problems that we are responding to in the state. Citizens these days are ready to move. Mississippi is ready; it's really ready.

I would like to see us, and I know that we will, not only continue Town Meetings, but expand our program in the coming year. We want to see the Pace Project expand, too, and we know that this can happen. We want it to happen, because the people want it to happen. Such expansion would have some support. As one of the legislators said, "I don't see how in the world that you are so effective in this program at the cost." I told him, "Sir, it is the most cost-effective agency in the state." We budgeted our Town Meetings at about \$262 each, and we see day after day the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent without any benefits being derived. The return on our investment is immense; you will never realize what has come out of it. We did the Global Women's Forum, which I was just very excited about, in the Governor's Mansion for about 120 women. They were from all over the state, women from all walks of life, both black and white, from every economic level, who sat together in those workshops and really decided that this was the greatest thing that had ever happened to them. I have not been able to complete the evaluations of that Forum, but what those women said is astonishing, saying that "they will never be the same again," and that they "are going to reinvest that experience across the state." It keeps coming out in different ways. One group of women who attended in connection with the International Year of the Child is deciding what the issues are regarding our children in Mississippi and what can be done about them by a group of women who care.

In the rural communities where people have not ever come together before, Town Meetings are something. In one little community there is a small church, if it can be called a church, and they meet there once or twice a month, two Sunday services and Sunday School. They also have a little building, formerly a school building, that belongs to the church. Crossroads decided that they wanted to do a Town Meeting (the crossroads lead to four different communities). It was the six VISTA Volunteers there who

decided that, "We want to work with whoever works on the Town Meeting." They got together and got 130 people out to the Town Meeting at the Crossroads. This is a rural community where no services exist. They didn't think that this could happen, and initially there had been some resistance. To get the use of the building at the church for the meeting, the Trustees of the church had to be approached. They asked, "What is a Town Meeting? We don't want anything going on in that building that's sinful; remember it's a church building. And furthermore, maybe the government is trying to take over the building, who knows." They did give their permission, and they came to the Town Meeting. Now we have the approval for the use of the building for the whole year. Now that was a community that was hopeless and a community in which the church was not being the church. But they are even now getting ready for the second Town Meeting that they will do all by themselves, and I can tell you, Crossroads will never be the same again.

There are many indications that "Mississippi is leading the way." When I stood in the old Supreme Court Chamber last year where we had our first Volunteer Recognition Day and looked out on that audience, I was overwhelmed. I sat there with tears in my eyes. Five years ago that could not have happened in Mississippi -a black woman heading an agency celebrating and recognizing white and black volunteers together. That was an experience for me, because it was not many years before that, while on a visit in Mississippi, that I was told in a conversation with a white person, "Mrs. Wilson, you know, pretty soon you people are going to be just as good as we are." These kinds of experiences can be responded to in Town Meetings where blacks and whites come together as one community. I think it was the Executive Director of the YMCA at the Women's Forum who said, "This is the greatest thing that has ever happened to us. The thing that has impressed me most at this meeting is that we have all kinds of women around this table, talking about our roles and the issues and the things that we are concerned about. I wouldn't have believed it could have happened." Town Meetings have really provided an opportunity for the power and the spirit of Mississippians to be released. Believe me, it is released, and it is going to keep on being released.

ACTION had planned a conference for Volunteer Service state directors in Washington earlier this week, but I had decided not to go. I was planning to send my Assistant Director, but a member of the staff of the ACTION Regional Office in Atlanta who had visited Mississippi and had seen the Town Meetings found out that I wasn't planning to go and called me. He said, "Mrs. Wilson, the things that have been accomplished through your Town Meeting, the benefits that have derived to the state as a result, we would like to look at this program as a model for other states." So this week the Assembly of my counterparts in other states met in Washington to look at models for increasing citizen participation and providing an opportunity for democracy to work. Town Meetings are democracy working—and it's starting where it should start, at the bottom and working up. There were something like 30 states represented at the Assembly. Even though we had only about three to five minutes to do our presentations, there was a lot of interest in Town Meetings. Florida is interested in them, Connecticut is interested and Alabama is also interested.

We are now in the process of really looking ahead to expand our program. We are writing a proposal for a Competitive Demonstration Grant from ACTION, not just for 250 Town Meetings next year but to follow them up and to prepare for expansion from Pace as well. I think that a program around the Human Development Projects is just critical. We have ten Planning and Development Districts in Mississippi. I would like to see us at least start off with two Human Development Projects in Mississippi, and I would like to see us do that relatively soon. To have those projects accessible to these towns where Town Meetings are going on will help us to effect the model that Mississippi is going to give to the rest of the country.

The rest of the country is ready for that model. While in Washington at the Assembly this week, I was approached by Mrs. Wanda Lewis of Mrs. Rosalyn Carter's staff at the end of the first day who said, "I would like to talk with you at length about your program in Mississippi." That day we did talk at length, and the next day she came back to me again and said, "Could I have a few more minutes with you, because Mrs. Carter is very excited about what she has heard about this program." I was told before I left to get Mrs. Carter a letter in the mail on Monday inviting her to the State Town Meeting Assembly. Can you imagine seeing 200 towns being represented by 800 to 1,000 people, presenting their Town Meeting documents to the Governor, seeing perhaps Senator Thad Cochran, and maybe even Mrs. Carter? Can you

imagine what this is going to do, not just for Mississippi, but for this country! It is going to be a new day, a day that we have not experienced-in the history of Mississippi, to be sure. I think that it is going to be a new day for all of the states, because I believe that we are going to be able to provide them with these models that will make it possible for other states to do what we are doing in Mississippi.

I don't want to leave you thinking that what we have accomplished since last November, 104 Town Meetings, four Global Women's Forums, and six Community Youth Forums, has been done without effort and without work. It is hard work. The Town Meeting/ICA office is in the Governor's Office of Citizen Participation on the top floor of the state office building. Town Meetings are having a great impact on state government. It provides the link between the local citizens and service providers. It is the vehicle for two-way communication. Agencies are looking at the documents from the citizens in order to respond to community needs. We are going to be called upon to share information, and community citizens are going to become the consultants and the experts to providers of service. We are already being called upon by the Agency of Human Services, the Department of Welfare. We are going to be looked at carefully, and there are others that are already looking at the methodology we are using in the Town Meetings. They are seeing it as a way to really identify issues in their own agencies. I think the impact is going to be far reaching, far broader that we can even realize now.

I would like to invite all of you to come to the Assembly on June 23rd in Jackson. I would like you to bring friends, and those of you who are here from other states, I would certainly like to see state representatives from your state. We are going to send our letters to other governors and to my counterparts across the nation inviting them to that Assembly. I just want to say here that I wonder if this could have happened had it not been for the courage, the perseverance, and the commitment of the whole staff of the Pace Project. If it had not been for the dedication and the willingness to really lay ourselves on the line to provide authentic opportunities for the spirit of people to be invested in caring, then none of this would have come to be.

We did not, by the way, get the remaining \$27,500 for completing the 200 Town Meetings, but they will be completed as planned anyway. Something else is beginning to happen as a result of all this—there is a public and private sector partnership that is growing from the base of the Governor's Office of Citizen Participation and ICA partnership, itself a public and private joint venture. A coalition is beginning to form of people and organizations, the Corporate Involvement Committee in Jackson, the banks like Deposit Guaranty, and the utilities like South Central Bell and Mississippi Power and Light, all of these and more are beginning to provide support for the program in significant ways.

In closing, it there are answers and there are, to the American-dream of finding solutions to man's problems, the basic approach must be one of bringing together massive citizen resources throughout this country, material and human, to coincide with massive needs. Genuine citizen action must become the dominant method of helping people; maximum effective genuine involvement of all citizens must be the key concept. The Town Meeting program allows the citizen to realize that he is in the driver's seat and that it is his effectiveness that will determine the future directions of his community. Mississippi citizens for so long have had to take the back seat. They have not been able to participate in the decision-making/problem solving process about matters concerning their lives and that of their local communities. Citizens want to share the Town Meeting experience. "We must utilize what we have learned from these Town Meetings so that we can provide enablement for others around the state," said Mrs. Ervin. As an institution involved in the process of citizen awakening, ICA must continue to assess this process not for the purpose of sustaining an institution but for the sake of man in his effort to bring into being a new kind of existence that breathes harmony and corporateness. Placing emphasis upon the opportunity for the maximum development of human potential surmounts all of the barriers of this nation and this world. If we can conquer the enemy within, then all of us together, privileged and deprived, black and white, shades of brown and yellow, can conquer any enemy without. I would like to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King: "I have a dream . . . that one day . . . the state of Mississippi will lead the nation . . ." We intend to see this dream fulfilled. It takes vision and courage to create; it takes faith and courage to prove.