

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Hellen O'Neal-McCray

PERSON

O'Neal-McCray, Hellen, 1941-2010

Alternative Names: Hellen O'Neal-McCray;

Life Dates: March 4, 1941-February 24, 2010

Place of Birth: Clarksdale, Mississippi, USA

Occupations: Civil Rights Activist;

Biographical Note

Civil rights volunteer, Hellen Jean O'Neal-McCray was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi on March 4, 1941 to Willie Long Anderson and Lester Calvin O'Neal. She attended Immaculate Conception School, Myrtle Hall Colored School and Holy Rosary School in Lafayette, Louisiana. Keeping up with current events, O'Neal-McCray knew activist druggist "Doc" Aaron Henry and read the Chicago Defender. A member of the school band, she graduated from W.A. Higgins High School in Clarksdale in 1959.

In 1961, O'Neal-McCray met Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) organizers, James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette and they encouraged her to get involved in the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement. As a student, O'Neal-McCray helped Diane Nash when the Freedom Rides came to Jackson. She and Charles Cox became co-chairs of the Jackson Non-Violent Movement, working with Paul Brooks, Thomas Gaither, Marion Barry, Levaughn Brown, Richard Haley and Jesse Harris. They organized a demonstration at the Southern Governor's Conference at the Heidelberg Hotel, enraging segregationist Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. O'Neal-McCray was arrested (the first of many times) for "disturbing the peace and tranquility of the State of Mississippi." Defended by William Kuntsler, O'Neal-McCray was sentenced to six months, but only served ten days. Soon, her civil rights activity found its home with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She served as a SNCC staff member before graduating from Jackson State in 1963. O'Neal-McCray, knew and worked with SNCC's Ella Baker, Bob Moses, Casey Hayden, Annelle Ponder and Fannie Lou Hamer. She taught in a SNCC Freedom School in McComb, Mississippi.

In 1965, O'Neal-McCray helped staff the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee in Shreveport, Louisiana. She worked for the Southern Regional Council and National Sharecroppers Fund in Atlanta before retiring from intense movement activity. Moving to Yellow Springs, Ohio in 1966, O'Neal-McCray quietly worked at Fels Research Institute and attended Wright State University. She taught school in Springfield, Ohio

for twenty-nine years and taught African American literature and composition at Wilberforce University. She attended the 30th Anniversary of Freedom Summer and the 40th Anniversary Freedom Riders Reunion in Jackson, and O’Neal-McCray wrote about her experiences in the Movement.

O’Neal-McCray was married to fellow SNCC activist, Willie McCray and has two grown sons, a grandson and a granddaughter.

Hellen O’Neal-McCray passed away on February 24, 2010.

Related Entries

W.A. Higgins High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Immaculate Conception School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Myrtle Hall Colored School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Holy Rosary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Holy Rosary Headstart School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

W.A. Higgins Middle School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Lawyer's Constitutional Defense Committee [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Charles Morgan Law Firm [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Wilberforce University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Professor