“We Were All Prisoners of the System”:
William Winter, Susan Glisson, and the
Founding of the William Winter Institute for
Racial Reconciliation*

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Over the last two decades the state of Mississippi has become a regional,
national, and even international leader in working toward and creating
processes for racial reconciliation. The state that possesses perhaps one of
the worst historical records on racial violence, discord, and division in the
history of the United States has become one of the greatest examples of places
working through that history in an attempt to pursue racial harmony, unity,
and reconciliation. Noting this, former Governor of Mississippi William F.
Winter often mentions to audiences, “Mississippi has come farther than just
about any other state on issues of race.” He then smiles his famous smile and
in a deep, north-central Mississippi drawl quips, “Perhaps that’s because we
had farther to go” (W. Winter, Symposium).1 He would know. Over his long
life and public career, Winter has overseen and helped implement sweeping
changes in educational reform as well as race relations in his beloved home
state of Mississippi (Mullins, Measure; Bolton). In an interview with the
author, the ninety-three year old joked that racial reconciliation is a “goal
that I have had as a lifelong Mississippian . . . and that is a long time.”

* Rather than presenting a formal history of the creation of the William Winter Institute
for Racial Reconciliation by drawing on all of the entities, individuals and documents
connected with the center’s development, this article’s purpose is to tell the story of the
institute’s creation primarily through the words of the two people most directly involved
with the center’s creation: former Governor William F. Winter and Dr. Susan Glisson,
former director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. The author was
able to interview these individuals at length and here interweaves portions of these inter-
views with some historical context.
Indeed, one of the biggest reasons why Mississippi has become a laboratory for studying and creating processes for reconciliation is because of the long work and perseverance of former Governor William F. Winter, the commitment and drive of Dr. Susan M. Glisson, the former director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation (WWIRR), and the work of board members, staff, interns, students, community partners, and citizens of Mississippi affiliated with the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, which is housed at the University of Mississippi.

The institute was officially established in August 1999, and named for Winter in February of 2003, in honor of his eightieth birthday. The mission of the institute is “to foster reconciliation and civic renewal wherever people suffer as a result of racial discrimination or other effects of trafficking in human differences, and to promote scholarly research and teaching on race and the impact of race and racism” (Winter Institute, “Genesis”). Through the work of the institute, many who are passionate about reconciliation have been able to maneuver “the closed society” (Silver) throughout the twentieth century and bring about racial progress. The formula for the institute’s success is complex. Through the combination of a long-term political vision imbued with the notion of Southern progress, along with a protective advocacy, within a paternalistic framework (dominated by a ruling white hierarchal structure), along with a steady, grassroots-oriented activism committed to giving a voice to local people of the state of Mississippi, the WWIRR has been incredibly effective. To be sure, the success of the WWIRR was dependent on both a top-down and bottom-up structure, which combined a protective advocacy along with a grassroots movement, bringing together old and young, black and white, Republican and Democrat, rich and poor, in order to create a stronger society.

Given the difficult and troubling history of race in Mississippi from the late 1790s through slavery in the antebellum era, to Reconstruction and Redemption, through the Jim Crow era into the civil rights movement and even to the present day, it is remarkable that a state fraught with a history of racial violence and injustice would become an example of how those injustices could be reconciled by its citizens. Indeed, Mississippi was the architect of the Mississippi Plan, which displayed to other states how to remove African Americans from the political process during, and in the decades following, Reconstruction. It taught the South, through its constitution of 1890, how to discriminate against African American citizens and remove them from voting processes. In the landmark Supreme Court case Williams v. Mississippi, the court found that the wording and processes through which the constitution of 1890 removed African Americans from the political process through literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses were constitutional. Mississippi was the model of a racially segregated society in the United States.
Mississippi was also the leader and author of white political Redemption through violence and intimidation, disfranchisement and a kind of “new slavery” through a racially prejudiced convict lease system (Oshinsky 31-36). Throughout the early twentieth century, it was Mississippi that often led or co-led the nation in the number of lynchings per capita. Mississippi would also become ground zero for a burgeoning civil rights movement, beginning with the brutal murder of Emmitt Till and subsequent acquittal
by an all-white jury. The murderers later confessed their involvement in the
grisly crime. Further, Dr. Martin Luther King mentioned Mississippi more
times than any other state in his “I Have a Dream . . .” speech, claiming
Mississippi to be “a state sweltering with the heat of injustice” (4). It was
Mississippi that saw the deaths of Medgar Evers, Andrew Goodman, James
Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and many others who laid down their lives on
the altar of freedom. Indeed, Mississippi has been a regional and national
leader on racial oppression through violence for more than two centuries.

Given this history, there is no other state with more opportunity to lead
the nation on a path of reconciliation between its black and white citizens.
Susan Glisson agrees. In a candid interview with the author, after being asked
if there were any other institutions or states that have had the kind of impact
on racial reconciliation as the WWIRR and the state of Mississippi, Glisson
responded, “Without feeling like I am bragging, not that I am aware of.”

Over the last three decades Mississippi has made itself a national and
international leader on racial reconciliation. Indeed, there is no other state
with more organizations, institutions, conferences, programs, professionals,
churches, educational opportunities, and community organizing events
around issues of racial reconciliation than Mississippi. Likewise, there is no
other state that has been working as actively for as long as Mississippi to
formally process race and reconciliation.2 If there is such a thing as a ranking
of states, countries, and regions that, given their racial history, have worked
to process and deal with that history in order to reconcile with one another,
the state of Mississippi has to rank at the very top. Since 1997 both Winter
and Glisson have been at the very center of this work. Winter was the first
major public figure in the state to recognize racial reconciliation as an issue
that moved beyond religious leaders and scholars to politicians, economists,
business leaders, healthcare workers, students, and educators. Winter rec-
ognized that if Mississippi were going to move forward, then every sector
of the once “closed society” would need to process how race affected its
development—or lack thereof.

Seeds of Change

Winter’s life displays a gradual understanding, driven by personal
experiences, of issues of race in the South. From his childhood, military
service, and political career, through his service as governor and as a member
of the advisory board of President Bill Clinton’s One America in the 21st
Century: The President’s Initiative on Race campaign, beginning in 1997,
Winter helped expand the conversation on racial reconciliation from local
faith communities and academic panels to statewide political, educational,
and economic policies. Eventually, Winter would help bring this discussion to the national level, thus making Mississippi a nationwide leader on issues of race and reconciliation. What had formerly been localized in a smattering of small conversations and personal interactions, Winter helped broaden and fashion into a new “Mississippi plan” that might be a model for the still burgeoning New South. This shift would position Mississippi to change its trajectory from a state that served as a regional model of segregation to a state that served as a model of racial reconciliation for the nation and, eventually, the world (Bolton 4).

Winter grew up on a farm in Grenada, Mississippi, in the 1920s, and this context shaped him deeply. Like many Southern white boys in the early twentieth century, Winter grew up with romantic notions of the antebellum South and the Civil War. As a child Winter sat on his grandfather’s knee and listened to him tell stories about his experiences in the Civil War: “I grew up enamored with the romance of the Civil War. I was a true Confederate. My heroes were figures of the Civil War” (W. Winter, Interview). However, Winter also lived among and socialized with the African American families who worked his father’s land as sharecroppers. As a child Winter remembered, “I played with those black kids. I hunted with them, I fished with them, I learned to swim with them and did everything that young children do.” These relationships had their boundaries, and certainly Winter benefited from the dynamic of being at the top of the ruling power structure as the son of the land owner. However, human relationships are complex and interacting and socializing with African Americans as a young boy would have a lingering effect on Winter’s racial understanding for decades to come. Further, his parents seemed to instill within him the notion that all human beings deserved respect and dignity. Indeed, he “was always reminded by my parents to treat folks ‘right’ whether black or white. I was raised to be respectful of black people.”

Winter also realized early on that he was privileged in ways that his black companions were not. For instance, they didn’t go to the same schools, and when they did Winter “would get on a bus to school” in the early fall, “and they [African American children] wouldn’t start school until November, until the end of cotton picking season.” Like many Southern whites, Winter just accepted the status quo as the way things were. Indeed, few had the ability, as children and young adolescents, to recognize these problems and even fewer had the ability to question them. As Winter described, “I was never a crusader for the elimination of segregation. As a matter of fact I was a segregationist and thought this was acceptable just like every other white person I knew.” However, Winter would begin to question these social structures as he entered the Army during World War II. Personal relationships with
African American soldiers and experiencing segregation with them would have a profound effect on the young officer.

Winter’s experience in the Army had a tremendous impact on his racial thinking. He entered the US Army in the fall of 1944, and he found it “as segregated as Mississippi was. Black units and white units.” Winter graduated the top of his class from officer candidate school as a lieutenant. Arriving at Fort McClellan, Alabama, he was assigned to command one of the only two black infantry training regiments at the fort. Winter remembered, “I was sitting there in what was the heart of massive resistance to integration” and “this was the first time I had been associated with educated African Americans.” Eating together, sleeping in the same quarters, and sharing of facilities was common for African American and white soldiers at Fort McClellan, but once they took the bus off the base it was a different story. Winter remembered,

On weekends we were going to Anniston on a weekend pass. We would get on a civilian bus and go to the bus station and my officer friends, one from the University of Michigan, for example, would have to go to the back of the bus. When we would get into Anniston we couldn’t go to lunch together, we couldn’t go to the movies together, and we couldn’t even go to church together. I realized for the first time just how unfair that was, and I knew then that after the war things were going to change in the South.

Winter’s experience in the Army during World War II pushed his already maturing position on race. However, the political landscape of the postwar South was not a space where a moderate on racial issues was going to be successful at the poles. Winter’s position here was buttressed by his understanding of reading law at the University of Mississippi law school. Indeed, he “wrote an article for the law journal at Ole Miss in 1947 on one of the white primary lawsuits saying we are not going to be able to maintain the position that we have with respect to the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments.” Even in law school, Winter recognized that “I thought it was only a reality that we begin to make some adjustments or else we were going to punish ourselves terribly.” Winter laid it out this gradualist or “third way” position saying:

I saw it as a pragmatic thing at first. Then I saw it ideologically as I developed my own sense of what was right and what was wrong, and then I found myself thinking—and then ultimately saying—that we were trying to defend the indefensible. I grew as people did at that time out of these experiences into
one who recognized that we were on the right side. I also realized that if I wanted to be successful in politics that I could not die in every ditch that came along. So I had to say some things that later I wish I had not said, but it was part of the reality of that time.

There is great complexity to this position that should not be overlooked. Winter’s advocacy for a racially moderate stance was not wholly altruistic. As with many political positions throughout US history, there are often ethnical as well as pragmatic and political motivations to taking what, upon first glance, may seem like a position wholly driven by ethical precepts. Winter claimed, “[I frankly thought, and said so at the time, [that] we white southerners should concentrate on eliminating the barriers to voting and build up a black political [Democratic] constituency, and then we could find leadership to make some other changes.” Ever the pragmatist and politician, Winter was forward-thinking about developing a stronger Democratic party in the future for Mississippi. This gradualist or “third way” position failed, though, since Mississippi voters did not agree with even a slight change to the racially segregated social order. In large part, powers at work in Mississippi, such as the Sovereignty Commission and Citizens’ Councils, which were undergirded by an intense individual and collective racism, prevented this shift. “Of course, there was the Citizen’s Council over there keeping tabs on every time you stepped out of line,” Winter claimed. “They kept tabs on me, I know that.”

This resistance to racial moderation in the South would continue. Winter and some of his colleagues in law school were interested in running for the legislature. One of their greatest desires was to outlaw the poll tax, but the Dixiecrat movement overran that desire. Winter lamented that Truman’s position on race “caused a storm of protest in the South, and that’s when the Dixiecrat party started. So instead of our being able to do anything as members of the legislature by way of improving the status of black folks, we were caught up in that Dixiecrat movement and were overwhelmed by it.” Further, when the Brown v. Board of Education decision came down in 1954, Winter faced a political landscape of massive resistance to any potential elimination of segregation. Indeed, as Winter described, “So from the time I went to the legislature from 1947 to the mid-1960s, we had a total resistance to accommodating any changes. That made it very difficult for anyone like myself to be in politics. I had to trim my sails.”

Taking a long view of political transformation with the regard to race, Winter knew that he had to be careful about his statements and his timing to remain politically viable so that when the right time came he would be in the
right place. Winter was identified by his peers in Mississippi as a moderate on the race issue, which at the time, was, according to Winter, “the worst thing anybody could say about a politician.” His hometown of Grenada was “as racially conservative a community as there was in the state. Some of my very good friends were leaders in the Citizens’ Council.” One event that had a tremendous impact on Winter’s thinking was an event that several of “those friends” invited him to in the summer of 1954 in Greenwood. Winter said, “When I got there I realized that this was the beginning of a movement that later became known as the White Citizens’ Council. I went to that meeting.”

At this meeting, one of the suggestions from the audience was that “we cannot afford to let even one black go to school with whites in Mississippi.” Indeed, part of the work of the White Citizens’ Councils in Mississippi was to, Winter said, abolish the “public school system, lease the public schools to private organizations, and the education of children would then be on the basis of private effort.” This was an effort to bypass the entire Brown decision. In response to this discussion Winter stood up at the meeting and said, “I want you to know that I am concerned about the effect of the Brown decision. I have children in school right now, and I share your concern. I am opposed to the desegregation of the schools, and I think it would cause a lot of problems.” He went on to say, “It’s not going to be as easy as simply abolishing the public schools and selling the buildings. The Supreme Court is not going to let us get by with that. They have decreed that we cannot do by indirection what they have directly forbidden you to do.” Remembering the chilling silence after having spoken these words Winter recalled, “I made that speech, and I must tell you that I did not get any applause when I got through.”

From the very outset Winter met resistance to this more moderate position: “As I walked out,” he recalled, “one old lawyer, a friend of mine from Greenwood, put his hand on my shoulder and said ‘I heard what you said in there, and I think you are right, but I don’t think we can do that. I don’t think you are going to be able to interfere with this process.’” This chilling language from a friend was surely a wake-up call to Winter. The resistance was not only going to be massive, but total. Rather than fully going with or moving completely against this opposition, Winter took a third approach of accommodation while attempting to reasonably ameliorate the more radical effects of efforts coming out of the councils. He realized that in order to do anything in the future, he would have to remain politically viable. After the meeting in Greenwood he “came on back to Grenada with my friends. I made no pretense about not being for segregation. I was a segregationist.” In the late 1950s, a politician simply had to be a segregationist. “I realized that I could not maintain a successful political stance if I was perceived as
not being for segregation," he said, "and I said frankly when I was running for governor that I am a segregationist and I always have been."

Despite his position on segregation, Winter declined joining the White Citizens’ Council, saying to friends who asked him to join the council in Grenada,

I don’t know where that’s going. I have great respect for you, and I even applaud your efforts to maintain segregation, but I don’t think as a member of the legislature, in the first place, and as an individual that I’m comfortable about going to get into an organization that I don’t know the leadership and where it will wind up.

This was a dangerous position for a member of the legislature to take in the Mississippi in 1954. It displayed both Winter’s wisdom and political acumen to support a position while not associating himself with the organization. This deft move would cause him political difficulties, but it also allowed him the freedom to maneuver with regard to issues of race in the future.4

However, Winter described himself as a “kind of foot-dragging supporter of changing race relations in Mississippi,” which cost him political points in the racially charged Mississippi of the late 1960s. “I got beat in ’67 for governor because I was perceived as a moderate,” he said. “Ross Barnett would run and say ‘you know what a moderate is don’t ya? A moderate is a nigger lover.’ You know he would say that in public speeches. He said it at the Neshoba County Fair.” This was the kind of charged political rhetoric that Winter was up against. Throughout his unsuccessful run for governor and, later, as the state lieutenant governor (1972–76), Winter focused on developing an orderly society and making moderate adjustments along racial lines. He recalled, “I maintained as progressive a position as I could and still be politically eligible.”

In 1979 the timing was right and Winter would be elected governor. Throughout his term as governor he would not forget the failures of the 1950s and ’60s to desegregate public schools in Mississippi. As governor, he became a champion for educational reform. He worked to alleviate the suffering of Mississippi’s poor whites and African Americans through enhanced educational opportunities brought about by the Education Reform Act of 1982 (Mullins, Building 133-84). However, Winter also had not forgotten his involvement in a racist system that promoted white supremacy, and during the 1980s he also began working toward racial healing, a goal that Winter said, “I have had as a lifelong Mississippian” and “that is a long time.”
Winter has been very clear publicly about his segregationist views and that he once favored this position. This is important both for the historical record and for his racial reconciliation work moving forward. To be sure, part of the process of racial reconciliation is admitting one’s own previous beliefs and complicity in a white supremacist system. In speaking truth about his position and with a repentant posture, Winter has modeled to many Mississippians of his generation, and many more since, the humility it takes to truly work for racial reconciliation. As the governor and, many would argue, chief citizen and statesman from the State of Mississippi in the twentieth century, Winter has become the civil archetype in modeling reconciliation. Winter’s leadership on this issue, and in helping to guide the creation of an important institute for racial reconciliation at the University of Mississippi, is perhaps his greatest legacy.

Building a Lasting Legacy

The context for the creation of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation developed out of President Bill Clinton’s initiative on race through his One America campaign in 1997. In an interview Susan M. Glisson—former longtime director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation—remembered this was the first time that “a sitting president had called for a national conversation on race without being precipitated by a crisis.” After Clinton’s reelection in 1996, Mike Wenger, special assistant to President Clinton, sent a letter to Winter saying that Clinton was creating an advisory committee on race. The genesis of the WWIRR came out of a public meeting at the University of Mississippi in March of 1998 with members of the advisory committee, students at the University of Mississippi, and local Oxford citizens participating. Glisson was intricately involved in the process leading up to that public meeting as well as with the events that transpired in the years that followed.

While Winter was learning about this new advisory committee, Glisson was finishing her PhD in American studies at William and Mary, writing a dissertation on the grassroots activism of Ella Baker and Lucy Randolph Mason. She was also a graduate of the Southern Studies master’s program at the University of Mississippi and had just accepted a position to return and coordinate the graduate program. At the time, Glisson was very interested in issues of race, racial reconciliation, and how the University of Mississippi could potentially play a role in serving this new committee. One day, in a conversation with Mary Hartwell Howorth, the longtime administrative assistant for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, Glisson learned that William Winter was going to be on the
President’s advisory committee on race. Howorth knew of her interest in this work and mentioned, “One of his daughters lives in town. You should call her” (Glisson, Interview).

Glisson did just that and remembered Winter’s daughter saying, “I think daddy would like the whole board to come (to campus). Here is his number. Just call him. He talks to anybody.” This kind of accessibility was both surprising and encouraging to Glisson who quickly realized in conversing with Winter that she would have an important ally and advocate with political influence in the state of Mississippi. This would be important in helping move a potential grassroots effort for racial reconciliation forward. It was this marriage of top-rank political advocacy with local grassroots efforts that brought about an important discussion on race at the University of Mississippi, the university with perhaps the most difficult racial past of any university in America. Glisson said,

The whole thing started in Mississippi because of a conversation with Governor Winter and Bill Clinton. Winter showed a picture to Bill Clinton of his grandson’s school classroom in Mississippi. Half of the class was black and the other half white. Clinton said ‘that was what every classroom in America should look like.’ They started having this conversation. So it all started in Mississippi.

That effort to begin a conversation on race with the president’s committee began on Christmas Day of 1997. Glisson remembered, “Mike Wenger called me on my mother’s home number and said ‘We are coming in March. You need to get back to Oxford and start planning how this is going to work.’” By early January Glisson had created a committee consisting of community representatives from the arts, religious, education, business, labor, and environmental sectors. The idea would be that each community could speak to and advise the president’s committee about how issues of race were active in their fields and could therefore make some substantive recommendations. Glisson recalled, “We made an appointment for me to meet with Governor Winter,” and he said, “You should call the people in the Lyceum (administrative office building at the University of Mississippi) and tell them this is happening.” (Glisson, Interview).

What became evident was that Mike Wenger’s and William Winter’s involvement and advocacy was necessary for Glisson to continue to push the process forward in a grassroots manner. In order for substantive conversations on race and processes for reconciliation to happen, it would require both a grassroots effort from the people in the communities and advocacy
from places of power and influence. Moving forward, Glisson would have to fight for things like a question-and-answer session at the event and to let people from the audience speak as opposed to a committee selecting the speakers and what, specifically, they would ask. Glisson recalled that every time someone would talk to Wenger or Winter about the event, the response would be, “Susan is our appointee on this, and you have to do whatever she says.”

The advocacy of these power brokers combined with Glisson’s organizing and community engagement initiatives helped create a space for an event that was a real, organic, and transparent discussion on race. For this to happen in 1998 was groundbreaking for the state of Mississippi. It would lay the groundwork for other communities in Mississippi, such as Philadelphia, Greenwood, and Clinton, to begin to work through their own racial histories as a community. It created a model and roadmap for how reconciliation efforts could be attempted in public spaces. In Mississippi, still a very “closed society” in many ways, power brokers with political and social influence were needed to become advocates and partner with those without it. Further, a movement from local people in Mississippi would add weight, a voice, and real relationships in order for a process of racial reconciliation to be truly authentic. It was Glisson’s vision and bravery, supported by Winter’s advocacy, that eventually broke the dam of racial silence, thus creating a flood of discussion and reconciliation efforts over the next fifteen years, which are continuing today.

On the night of the event, March 17, 1998, in Fulton Chapel, the Initiative on Race public forum was “standing room only.” On the panel were the Reverend Susan Johnson Cook from Harlem, Governor Winter, African American historian John Hope Franklin, and Bob Thomas (CEO of Nissan). Winter remembered, “One of the members was a wonderful minister from Harlem (Susan Johnson Cook). She had never been in Mississippi before and never spent much time in the South.” Before accepting the invitation to attend, she said to Winter, “Well, I really would like to go to that meeting, but do you think I will be safe?” Winter replied, “You just come on down and see.” He later remarked, “She came, of course, and she was overwhelmed with hospitality. She has been back twice since then on her own” (W. Winter, Interview).

For the forum, Glisson selected a diverse group from among the audience who “gave reports and the board responded back.” In all there were ten different groups with a total of twenty representatives. Each group had “one black and one white person” (Glisson, Interview). The reports were substantive. For instance, the medical group reported that there was not one black doctor in Oxford. As a result of learning this information, “business leaders
recruited the first black doctor” to the small university town in Mississippi. Winter recalled, “One man got up and said, ‘I want to know why I can’t wave a rebel flag when I go to a football game up here.’ Two young ladies, students at Ole Miss, one white and one black (Allison Grisham and Jada Love) got up and told him from their perspective why that was inappropriate.” Further, Glisson mentioned that these students, Allie and Jada, responded with grace and dignity: “Allie wanted to ask folks on campus not to bring the Confederate flag because it hurt Jada’s feelings.” Glisson recalled that during the question-and-answer session they stood behind a podium shaking but holding hands, which only Glisson could see from backstage. Also, they stayed for two hours to talk to the man in the audience. After the conversation with Jada and Allie, “he promised that he would not bring the flag to the campus.” Winter recalled that the man “later became an advocate when we were trying to change the flag several years later.” After the event, Allie and Jada would go on to found Students in Equality Envisioning Diversity (SEED), which, Glisson recalled, “was the student group that has grown into One Mississippi. That was the start of student activism on campus around race.”

The conversation in Oxford included real people voicing tangible concerns. This gave the board substantive information to take back to Washington to report to President Clinton. Further, it was “the only Deep South public forum. In every other public meeting they had they just called the mayor’s office, and the mayor just picked people to speak on these issues.” Glisson recalled proudly, “It wasn’t grassroots anywhere but Mississippi.” The committee often discussed what a wonderful event the evening in Oxford was, and Glisson remembered Winter telling her a story about one evening when the committee was in Denver. At one point, several Coloradoans were yelling at the group and “John Hope Franklin leaned over to Winter and said ‘I wish we were back in Oxford.’” Glisson had the opportunity to fly to Washington as the board presented its findings to Clinton. She recalled that she was “sitting two rows behind Rosa Parks.” She remembered that in that meeting Clinton said, “The board told me that the best meeting they had was in Oxford, Mississippi.” Indeed, not only did the board consider the Oxford meeting one of the most successful events they attended, but there was a groundswell of action toward racial healing and reconciliation that followed.

Soon after the event in Oxford the “New York Times released this great article” on the event, and “it was the same time the state decided to release the sovereignty commission files.” Glisson remembered that it was like “this zeitgeist was opening the closed society.” A few weeks after the event, the Chancellor of the University of Mississippi “talked with the Black Alumni Association about how pleased he was” that the President’s Initiative had come to the Mississippi campus.” Glisson recalled, “I thought, if he is go-
ing to take credit for it then that means he has to do more.” Glisson went to Winter, and they started a conversation about the need for the University of Mississippi to “create an institute to do this work.”

As the new institute was taking shape, Glisson was appointed to be a half-time, interim director. The first big initiative of the WWIRR occurred in Rome, Mississippi, in Sunflower County during the summer of 2000. At this point, it is important to understand how the WWIRR considers itself with regard to engaging communities for racial reconciliation purposes. Seeing itself as “demand-driven” rather than seeking out spaces to spread its influence, the institute focuses on responding to calls to support a community already engaged in reconciliation work. One of the first calls came from a friend and mentor to Glisson named Constance Curry, the only white woman at the founding of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Curry called Glisson to talk with her and help her think about what the institute could do about getting a sewer system in place for a majority African American community in Rome. Curry put Glisson in touch with Betty Smith who got Glisson connected with Gregory Braggs, pastor of Silver Star Missionary Baptist Church in Rome. At the time, Glisson felt that “anybody who called us, we should say yes to. We had that obligation. Then I immediately called Governor Winter and asked, ‘How does one get a sewer system?’ Because I have no idea how to do that.” Working with Smith, Braggs, and other members of the community, with the assistance of the WWIRR, Ms. Willie Knighten, parishioner at Silver Star MB Church, “took a grant-writing course at Delta State” and “wrote a grant and got a $500,000 USDA grant” for the system.

Another issue Glisson recognized was that the community needed advocacy to work with the county board, negotiations with EPA, and “rights of way from white citizens to put their pipes in” (Glisson, Interview). Glisson claimed that the real help from the WWIRR came in that “we helped the African American community show the white political leaders that they had social power. They could pick up the phone and Ole Miss would come. We got Bennie Thompson’s office to come. So within about nine months the sewer system was in place.” Glisson recalled, “The money wasn’t the issue. It was the political capital to get it done. The Clarion-Ledger wrote articles about “resistance of the white community” to putting the pipes in. Glisson said to one reporter, “One of the men [resisting the implementation of the pipes] was the cousin of the murderer of Emmett Till. I said ‘Hey, ask about his cousin,’ which was not a very reconciliationist way to start.”

The University of Mississippi hired a new director of the WWIRR in 2001. Soon after he was hired 9/11 happened, and “the world changed ten days after he came on board,” Glisson said. “Whatever he was doing, it wasn’t going to go quickly.” Glisson started looking for other work. After the first
full-time director left the job in 2002, Glisson recalled that Winter called her and asked, “Would you be the director?” Glisson said, “I’m not wearing a suit, and I’m not sitting behind a desk.” Soon after the job offer, Glisson received a phone call from Myrlie Evers, the widow of Medgar Evers, the assassinated civil rights activist and NAACP field secretary for Mississippi. Glisson remembered, “She called me, and she said ‘I really think you have got to take this job. Let me tell you about the first job I had after Medgar died and I moved to California and what they did to me.’ So I couldn’t say no to both of those people.” In November of 2002, Glisson accepted the position as director of the WWIRR.

In place as director, Glisson and the WWIRR began to work on a number of initiatives, both locally and across the state. She was a part of the conversation encouraging the chancellor to offer an apology from the University of Mississippi for its historic exclusion of African Americans. According to Glisson, a racially diverse committee, including Glisson, advised the Chancellor that an apology was necessary. Glisson remarked, “we got the apology to honor people who had not been admitted because of segregation. This was unprecedented, and the next year we worked with the University of Georgia and the University of Alabama on similar statements. So we started advising other places.” The WWIRR had become a regional advisor to other Southern universities who struggled with similar histories, guiding them on how to begin a reconciliation process.

The WWIRR also began to work with cities in the state with a problematic racial history that wanted to move forward with processes in reconciliation. In October of 2002 Glisson worked with community leaders in Newton, Mississippi, “where Charles and Medgar Evers were run out of town when they tried to register to vote at the courthouse.” Glisson remembered that the WWIRR was able to help the community gather a multiracial group of people, erect a historic marker, and put together “an evening where Charles Evers, his family, and Myrlie” met “in a school auditorium, and the community apologized for what had been done to Medgar and Charles.” Given the works in Oxford, Rome, at the University of Mississippi, and in Newton, by 2002 the WWIRR established itself as the state and regional authority on helping universities, communities, and individuals move forward in processes of reconciliation. However, there were several more communities in Mississippi that needed to begin this process. Glisson recalled, “I remember sitting in some of those meetings [in Newton], and people said, ‘You are never going to get those people up in Neshoba County to do something like this.’”

In January of 2004 Glisson received a phone call from a local leader in Neshoba County who said, “We are coming up on the fortieth anniversary of the murders [in Neshoba County of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner,
Andrew Goodman and James Chaney], and “will you work with a community group to talk honestly about this issue?” Glisson agreed and recalled, “I was terrified.” She met with a committee of local Neshoba County people, including “the new chairman of the NAACP and the new editor of the Neshoba Democrat” and some citizens on the “chamber of commerce who wanted to create a civil rights driving tour and had pulled some people together.”

They asked if she “could talk about what y’all did at Ole Miss. We think that would give the community ideas about what to do.” Glisson remembered there was “no agreement. No consensus. Black folks wanted a march. White folks got pale and said we needed a resolution. Black folks rolled their eyes.” For the next meeting Glisson said, “We didn’t have an agenda. We just asked people to talk about why they were there. They needed to build trusting relationships, and then it was clear that they needed a call for justice.” There was a ceremony on June 21, 2004, and the coalition of citizens read a “call for justice.” Glisson recalled, “six months after the call for justice they indicted Edgar Ray Killen.” However, members of the coalition also mentioned, “If all we ever did was put this old guy in jail, then we would have failed our community” (Glisson, Interview). More work would need to done to unite the citizens of Neshoba County.

During the trial of Edgar Ray Killen, Glisson and the WWIRR played an important role in advising the coalition, working with the press and helping local police officers think through the perception of their actions. Glisson recalled, “This was the local community lifting it up,” and many came from across the state trying to take the credit, “but it was local people” that did this work. Regarding the work of the WWIRR in Neshoba County, Winter noted, “The institute, I think it is accurate to say, was the principal initiator of that atmosphere.” Glisson agreed that the important work of the WWIRR in Neshoba County “changed everything for us” (Glisson, “Telling”).

People saw one of the most notorious places in Mississippi offer leadership. People saw the positive press that they got when they did it. You could see that it was doable. Based on Philadelphia, I was asked to come to McComb. I was asked to go to Tallahatchie County. (Glisson, Interview)

Winter also noted, “Anyone who has followed the work of the Winter Institute would say that in Mississippi our greatest successes have come in the two counties with the worst record” (W. Winter, Interview).

Indeed, throughout the history of the WWIRR, there was an important combination of grassroots activism and a protective advocacy that allowed it to maneuver the most delicate of climates. During a recent interview, Glisson beamed as she began to talk about Winter:
Governor Winter has had to be our protector. We would not be where we are without him. It doesn’t matter how much grassroots work we might have done. If he weren’t advocating for us and protecting us at the university level... It takes advocacy.

Through the leadership of Glisson and the advocacy of Winter, the WWIRR has worked with local people of Mississippi to “bring ideas, resources, connections, and support to enhance the work” of racial reconciliation in the state of Mississippi. Indeed, it has created a long record of promoting advocacy and public policy, and has worked to “prepare community leaders to address their own challenges” (Winter Institute, “2011–2014”).

When asked what he thought the legacy of the WWIRR would be, Winter reflected,

We judge people by stereotypes and what we think we know about them when we really don’t know anything about them. I hope the institute will help to eliminate some of those stereotypes and create a broader understanding that we are all members of the same race. The human race. (W. Winter, Interview)
Reflecting this sentiment and perhaps setting the model for the future work of an institute bearing his name, in 1983 Winter invited Myrlie Evers to a luncheon at the governor’s mansion on the anniversary of the death of Medgar Evers. Winter recalled saying, “Mrs. Evers, we white folks owe as much to your and your husband and your colleagues in the civil rights movement as the black folks do, because you freed us, too. We were all prisoners of the system.”

Mississippi College

Notes

1 This line was delivered in a speech by former Governor William F. Winter on September 3, 2015, at Mississippi College in remembrance of the 140th anniversary of the Clinton Riot of 1875. Governor Winter spoke on a panel of historians, politicians, and local Clintonians through a locally organized symposium to help the people of Clinton process the history of the Clinton Riot and the subsequent massacre and to help the community move forward in a process of racial reconciliation.

2 Mission Mississippi is the nation’s oldest and longest standing organization working for racial reconciliation and has roots that date back to the 1970s (Slade).

3 Indeed, attempts at racial reconciliation had been ongoing in faith communities in Mississippi since the mid- to late 1960s. African American individuals like the Rev. Dr. John Perkins and the Revs. Dolphus Weary and Neddie Winters have worked alongside whites like the Revs. Will Campbell, Ed King, and Chris Rice for decades to foster racial reconciliation and community development in Mississippi. From a perspective of reconciliation in faith communities, Mississippi was an early national leader. What has made Mississippi truly unique in a national and international context was the confluence of the aforementioned faith communities and community organizations along with the creation of a public university institute whose entire mission and focus was racial reconciliation. This combination brought support for ongoing efforts and has lent scholarly, academic, and political weight to something that was largely happening on the grassroots level.

4 A remarkable anecdote in the interview about Winter’s role with Hodding Carter is a great example of this “freedom to maneuver.” Winter told the story that “As issues would come up in the legislature, for example, in the Spring of 1955, there was a special session of the legislature called to respond to the Brown decision and the hysteria of the hour was apparent in that special session. There was a resolution proposed about an article by Hodding Carter in Look magazine branding the Citizens’ Council for what it was and that was a racist organization. So the resolution was presented and there were about fifteen of us in the legislature who voted against it. When I got back to Grenada one of my Citizens’ Council friends said, ‘I saw how you voted in the legislature. Are you a friend of Hodding Carter’s?’ I said ‘I’m not his friend. I know him.’ He said ‘I saw where you voted to support him.’ I said, ‘I didn’t vote to support him I just voted not to censure him. I didn’t think that was any business of the legislature. He said ‘well I’d like to hear what he has to say.’ So I called him up. I said, ‘Mr. Carter, you may not get many invitations from Rotary Clubs, but I am extending one on behalf of the Grenada Rotary Club.’ I said, ‘Would you come?’ and he said, ‘I’d be glad to come.’” At the next meeting of the Rotary Club, word got out that I had invited Hodding Carter and so another of my Citizens’ Council friends got up and moved that we rescind the invitation and that really fanned the fire. I said ‘that’s not right. I don’t agree with Hodding Carter on a lot of things, but I don’t think this Rotary Club ought
to rescind an invitation to a respected leader of the press in Mississippi. Whether we agree with him or not, I will personally be embarrassed if I have to call him up and say that his invitation has been rescinded, and I think this might reflect adversely on the Rotary Club.’ By a vote of about 60-40 they supported me, and I invited Hodding Carter, and he came and made a great speech about maintaining the effectiveness of our education and not letting the Brown decision throw us off. It was a good speech, and I don’t think anybody in the club was offended by it. It was another indication of how hysteria could come in and move people to do things.”

5 Winter also discusses this position in a 2014 documentary directed by Matthew Graves.

Works Cited


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