

Standing On My Sisters' Shoulders



A film by Laura J. Lipson, Joan Sadoff and Dr. Robert Sadoff

*"A powerful and moving film about ordinary women armed with
sheer determination..."*

Jackson Free Press



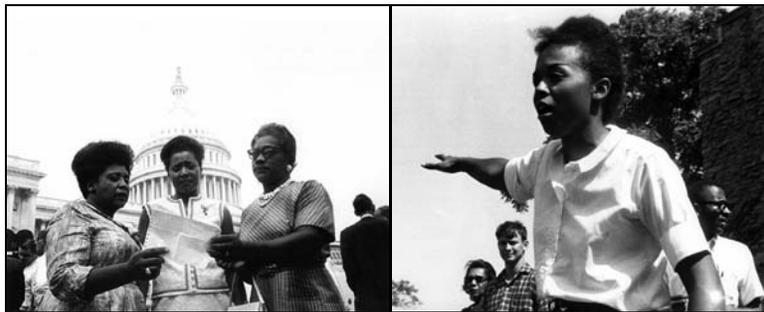
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STANDING ON MY
SISTERS' SHOULDERS

Synopsis

In 1965, when three women walked into the US House of Representatives in Washington D.C., they had come a very long way. They weren't lawyers or politicians. They were not rich. They were women from Mississippi who had been descendants of African slaves. They had worked the cotton fields in the U.S. State of Mississippi and had come to their country's capitol to seek their civil rights. And they were the first black women to be allowed in the senate chambers in nearly 100 years.

STANDING ON MY SISTER'S SHOULDERS is the award-winning documentary that tells the history of the Mississippi women who played a crucial role in the US Civil Rights movement. These living legends give their firsthand testimony and capture a piece of history that is often overlooked in history books. Their achievements go beyond the cotton fields of Mississippi or even the coasts of America. These are true grassroots heroines, who in the most oppressive of societies, proved that anyone can take a stand and fight for human rights.



Festivals and Awards

Savannah Film and Video Festival – *World Premiere/Special Jury Prize*

Atlanta Film Festival – *Audience Award*

USA Film Festival – *Finalist*

African American Women in Cinema Festival – *Audience Award*

Long Island Film Expo – *Humanitarian Award*

Dances with Films – *Audience Award*

Chicago Women in the Director's Chair International Film Festival

Sedona International Film Festival

Big Muddy Film Festival

Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO)



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STANDING ON MY
SISTERS' SHOULDERS



Credits

61 minutes, Color and B/W, Video, Documentary

Director

Laura J. Lipson

Producers

Joan Sadoff

Dr. Robert Sadoff

Laura J. Lipson

Editor

DeAnne Sakaguchi

Cinematography

Kent Moorehead

Don Warren

Music

Brad Warnaar

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BIOS

Laura J. Lipson

Laura Lipson, director and writer of *STANDING ON MY SISTER'S SHOULDERS*, also penned the lyrics for the original opening song, "Freedom Will Come," which was sung by June Pointer of the Pointer Sisters. She is currently Associate Director of movie promotion at ABC and is an award-winning writer/producer. She has 15 years experience in film and television and is a member of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). After graduating with honors from U.C. Berkeley in Visual Arts and winning the Eisner Prize for filmmaking, she worked in Paris as an assistant editor for filmmaker Raoul Ruiz.



Joan Sadoff

Before producing documentaries, Joan Sadoff, M.Ed., M.S.W., spent her professional career as a clinical social worker in hospital, school, family agency, and community settings. On a national and international level, she has lectured to academic, professional and community organizations on the subject of societal change in the family. Joan has often been interviewed as an expert on these issues on television. In addition, she has participated in over 5,000 interviews including survivors of the Holocaust and their families.

Dr. Robert Sadoff

Dr. Robert Sadoff, a practicing forensic psychiatrist, is a clinical professor of psychiatry and director of the Center for Studies in Social-Legal Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. He is past president of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, as well as the American Board of Forensic Psychiatry. An award-winning professional in psychiatry, forensic psychiatry, and legal medicine, Dr. Sadoff is a sought-after international speaker, who has also authored six books on forensic psychiatry and over 100 articles.

DeAnne Sakaguchi

DeAnne Sakaguchi, editor of the documentary, started her editorial career in commercials and went on to edit feature films, music videos, trailers, and television shows. She began editing on film and now edits on non-linear computer based technology. She is currently cutting promotional trailers at ABC television. DeAnne graduated from California State University at Long Beach with a Bachelor of Arts in Radio/Television/Film. She feels blessed to have had the opportunity to bring to light the strength, bravery and spiritual courage of these remarkable women.





BACKGROUND INFO

Inspiration for the film

Laura J. Lipson's early interest in the civil rights movement was originally influenced by her grandmother, who was one of the first to become involved in the Head Start program in California. Her grandmother's mobile pre-school brought her national acclaim and an appointment to a Health Education and Welfare (HEW) Committee for Disadvantaged Children. Laura hopes to carry on in her grandmother's footsteps with her own contribution to the Civil Rights movement with the one-hour documentary "Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders."

Drawn to filmmaking in an unusual way, Dr. Robert and Joan Sadoff found themselves intellectually and emotionally inspired to produce documentaries. Taken by the image of a "Freedom Rider" bus being set on fire, the Sadoffs traveled to the South to learn more about the Civil Rights movement.

During such a trip, they became lost while searching for Mount Zion Church in Philadelphia, Mississippi and approached a local woman for help. Upon hearing of the Sadoffs' interest in the Civil Rights movement, the woman said, "If you've got a tape recorder...we've got stories."

And so began their journey. In 1994, the Sadoffs produced their first documentary, "Philadelphia Mississippi: Untold Stories" about the impact of the Civil Rights movement on the town where three Civil Rights workers were brutally murdered.

A few years later, the Sadoffs returned again to Mississippi to produce their second documentary "Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders," which was completed in 2002. The film tells the personal stories of the Mississippi women, both black and white, who stood up and fought for the right to vote and the right to an equal education in the country's most segregated state.

Selected Biographies of the Featured Women

Fannie Lou Hamer- "Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the most eloquent speakers for the civil rights movement in the south. She worked for political, social and economic equality for herself and all African Americans; she fought to integrate the national Democratic Party, and became one of its first black delegates to a presidential convention."

Annie Devine- "Mrs. Devine, a soft-spoken woman with a ready smile, became deeply involved in the civil rights movement of the early 1960's. She helped organize voter registration drives in Canton and surrounding Madison County, where fewer than 100 of the county's estimated 10,000 black adults were registered... She attended the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City along with Victoria Gray-Adams and Fannie Lou Hamer. Their objective was to unseat their state's all-white delegation and be recognized as delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, of which Mrs. Devine was a founder."





Unita Blackwell- “ ‘I'm proof that things can change,’ says Unita Blackwell, a living legend who went from picking cotton to a leadership role in the civil rights movement. Later, she also became mayor of Mayersville, a small town in the Delta, a mostly poor region Mississippi. She is the first African American female mayor in the state...The year that changed her life was 1964 -- Mississippi Freedom Summer. She joined forces with "the freedom riders and with activists working for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)." The objective was to register African Americans -- fully 36 percent of the state's population -- to vote.”

Mae Bertha Carter- “When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ordered the desegregation of all public schools receiving federal aid, Matthew and Mae Bertha Carter were the only Black parents to enroll their children in all-white schools in Drew for three years under a "Freedom of Choice" policy, before others followed. Although five of the Carters' thirteen children were educated in all-Black schools, there were seven school-age children (and one baby) living at home when implementation of the Civil Rights law was enforced in Mississippi.”

Victoria Gray Adams- “was a community activist in the Hattiesburg area even before the arrival in the state of national Civil Rights workers. Mrs. Adams, a young mother and businesswoman in Hattiesburg in the early sixties, began her Civil Rights work by teaching voter registration and literacy classes that assisted other African Americans to pass the voter registration test requiring interpretation of the state constitution. At that time, although 30 per cent of Hattiesburg's citizens were African Americans, only 50 of them had been allowed to register to vote. Today, the state of Mississippi has more black elected officials than any other state, partly because of the efforts of Victoria Gray Adams.”

Quotes from their Stories

Where they found the Courage

“I was standing on my sister's shoulders.”

Professor L.C. Dorsey

Registering to Vote

“The ballot is perhaps the most powerful weapon to bring about a diversified society.”

Constance Slaughter Harvey

Equal Access to Education

“I wanted [my children] to get a good education because I knew that was the key to unlocking the doors.”

Mae Bertha Carter

Lives on the Line

“We had been told that we were not going to get out of jail alive. They had really planned to kill us.”

June Johnson





White Women Join the Struggle

“One of the roles of a white person in the movement, particularly a white Southerner, was to blend in and fetter out information that would be useful... you had a positive impact, that you were not some outsider coming down from New York telling them what to do, but you were one of their own with a different opinion and that did make an impact.”

Joan Trumpauer Mulholland

Founding the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

“I said, ‘America, you need to think about your soul.’”

Annie Devine

We Must Remember This

“The young people in America, my hopes for them are they will find out what it is all about. Why is it so important to register? Why is it so important to participate in the political process of our country? The reason: people gave their lives –black and white, for freedom...”

Mayor Unita Blackwell



The Clarion-Ledger

■ REAL MISSISSIPPI

Civil rights film 'very powerful'

By Gloria Butler Baldwin
Special to The Clarion-Ledger

Standing on My Sister's Shoulders, a film celebrating Mississippi's civil rights heroines, debuted this weekend at Jackson's Crossroads Film Festival.

The hour-long documentary garnered rave reviews from audience members.

Rob McDuff of Jackson said the film was more accurate than Hollywood portrayals of the civil rights movement.

"Hollywood leads you to think that it was the white people or government like the FBI that were the protagonist of the movement," said McDuff. "But, the truth is, it was black people from our state who risked their lives to make change."

Almost all interviews in the documentary were conducted in Mississippi, said director Laura Lipson.

"Telling grassroots history is really hard because when you go to the archives there might be one photo or some footage," she said. "But we had to gather back the moments from Mississippi from the early '60s from all over the country. The archives had very few images so you almost have to regather the materials yourself."

Producer Joan Sadoff said she became interested in pursuing a documentary on Mississippi's civil rights movement after seeing a PBS series about the John F. Kennedy presidency.

"It was archival footage on that segment that moved me to come to Mississippi and find out through eye witnesses what really happened here," Sadoff said.

Sadoff said meeting "extraordinary women" through the filming of the documentary was "one of the most rewarding experiences" she's ever had.

"Most of our history books don't highlight the contributions of women and clearly there are many who helped change the course of history in this country," she said.

Included in the film are the first African-American woman mayor in Mississippi, Unita Blackwell; Elsie Dorsey, who grew up on a plantation and went on to earn a doctorate in social work; Victoria Gray Adams, Annie Devine and Fannie Lou Hamer, the first black women ever to be seated on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives; May Bertha Carter, whose children were the first to integrate schools in Drew; and others.

Yvetta Williams called the documentary "very powerful."

"I felt really proud and empowered because I see these strong black women on the screen who actually got out there and did something for the cause," she said.

Williams said the film will help younger Mississippians learn about the state's history. "We have a whole generation of young people who don't really understand what the past in Mississippi is really about," she said.

THE CLARION-LEDGER ■ JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 2003



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Soul Sisters

by Jennifer Moffett

The first time Joan and Robert Sadoff came to Mississippi to talk to people about the Civil Rights Movement, they had no intention of making a documentary. The Sadoffs were compelled to go to the South in 1992 after seeing, in a documentary about the 1960s, real footage of a busload of Freedom Riders trapped in a barricaded bus that had been inflamed by an angry white mob in a Birmingham bus station. These horrifying images moved Joan and Robert Sadoff to find out for themselves what changes were going on in the South and what still needed to be done. During their information-gathering trip, they got lost while looking for the Mount Zion Church in Philadelphia, Miss. It was a fortuitous misdirection. When they approached a local woman for assistance, she said, "If you've got a tape recorder, we've got stories." They started recording.

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Eventually, the Sadoffs decided to do something meaningful with all of the material they gathered. Their first documentary, "Philadelphia, Mississippi: Untold Stories," was produced in 1994. "Everybody talked, and everybody had a story," Joan Sadoff says, by phone from Philadelphia, Penn. It was much easier to get a core group together to interview for their second project, which focused on black Mississippi women who fought for black freedom. "Standing On My Sisters' Shoulders," which will compete in the Crossroads Film Festival for best documentary on April 5, tells the empowering stories of courageous women—black and white—who defied the state's white status quo in the 1960s: the first black female mayor in the state (Unita Blackwell), the sharecropper who tried to start a progressive, multiracial political party (Fannie Lou Hamer), the first black woman to graduate from Ole Miss law school (Constance Slaughter Harvey), the first white woman to sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter (Joan Trumpauer Mulholland), then in downtown Jackson.

The name of the film evolved from the women's modesty. As the Sadoffs interviewed the women, Joan recalls that several said, "Oh, you don't want to interview me, you want to interview her." Then, one of the women, Professor L.C. Dorsey, said, "I was standing on my sister's shoulders." Thus, Joan Sadoff (a former clinical social worker) and her

Standing On My Sisters' Shoulders

You see these people come with guns to keep us from registering to vote--this vote really must be about something. And I said if I die, I die for something.

-Unita Blackwell
Sharecropper who became
Mississippi's first black Mayor in 1963



husband Dr. Robert Sadoff (a practicing forensic psychiatrist) had their title.

The film is much more than its name, however. "Standing On My Sisters' Shoulders," which already received a Special Jury Prize at the Savannah Film and Video Festival last November, is a powerful and moving film about ordinary women armed with sheer determination and little, or no, monetary or political resources. These women were

that if I could live differently in other parts of the country I should be able to live that way in Mississippi also," Adams said.

The film shows how women used their positions as organizers in churches as a conduit to civil rights activities. Churches where they worshipped, which played a central role in the African-American community, were also used to meet, organize and inform. "The women

voice resonates in the film: "I said, 'America, you need to think about your soul.'"

Mae Bertha Carter, a sharecropper and mother of 13 children, decided she wanted her kids to get a good education so they would not have to continue a sharecropping legacy. The film shows a "first-day-of-school" photo of her children dressed up and eager, holding their books ready for their classes in their new, about-to-be-integrated school. This image illustrates well the fear Carter must have felt in her stomach every time her children got on the bus to brave an environment filled with landmines of hate. She would not be deterred by the fact that she was the first woman to attempt desegregation in Drew. Her determination and courage allowed her children the best education that was offered. In the film, she says proudly that each of them graduated from Drew High School, and seven went on to graduate from the University of Mississippi—an impossibility when she was young.

"Standing On My Sisters' Shoulders" uses interviews from a varied group of both black and white women of Mississippi involved in the movement, to interlace their experiences in their own words. The filmmakers also use stock footage and photographs to effectively bring the stories to life. "These women have such a strong force of character and conviction," says Laura J. Lipson, the director, writer and co-producer of the film. "[They] are amazing. I got such a strength from them. You could see by their strong determination they were not going to let anyone stop them."

'America, you need to think about your soul.' — Annie Devine

"sick and tired of being sick and tired," as Delta farmer Fannie Lou Hamer suddenly found herself back in the early 1960s. They risked their jobs, their lives and the safety of their families to change Mississippi and America for the better.

The participation of women in the Civil Rights Movement played a vital role in its success, yet throughout mainstream history most of their voices were left unheard, even as men like Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Moses and Medgar Evers became legendary. In this film, the women tell their own stories in their own voices. They explain why they stayed in Mississippi, even as others fled past the borders of Jim Crow segregation. Women like Victoria Gray Adams stayed to make a difference. "I decided

convinced the men to open up the church," Charlie Cobb, an activist and SNCC student leader, remembers.

After Fannie Lou Hamer, along with several other women, was arrested and beaten in a Winona jail because she went to register to vote, Hamer warned her friends of letting their anger take over. "Hate will destroy you," she told them. Instead, they put aside their fear and anger to participate—even more determinedly—in boycotts and sit-ins while remaining active for the cause. And eventually, Hamer, Annie Devine and Victoria Gray Adams took their determination all the way to the U.S. House of Representatives to challenge America and to found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Devine's

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STANDING ON MY
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SOCIALWORKtoday

THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSMAGAZINE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Standing on My SISTERS' SHOULDERS

BY KATE JACKSON

Facing personal sacrifice and enduring arrest, violence, and humiliation, these women persevered first to become grassroots leaders and then prominent figures in the Civil Rights Movement.

Dottie Ladner at Civil Rights training
(copyright Herbert Randall)



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Several decades ago, Annie Devine, a black woman from Mississippi—in a place and time in which a black woman had no voice—spoke to the nation. “America,” she said, “you need to think about your soul.”

Devine and a handful of equally passionate and dedicated women, all improbable heroes, risked everything to force the nation to examine its soul. These ordinary women joined to become an extraordinary force in history that changed the face of the nation. Yet, their remarkable courage and tireless efforts have long gone unrecognized, even though their impact has been enormous.

If independent filmmaker Joan Sadoff, MEd, MSW, has her way, these pioneering women—Annie Devine, Fanny Lou Hamer, Mae Bertha Carter, Unita Blackwell, and Victoria Gray Adams, to name only a few—will take their place along with Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others who changed the social landscape of our country as heroic and essential figures of the Civil Rights Movement.

Sadoff's passion to put a face on history and acknowledge these long-

unsung heroines was driven by a shocking moment captured in a documentary film that aired on public television. When she sat down one evening in April 1992 to watch the second of a three-part public television presentation on the life and times of John F. Kennedy, she had no inkling that the program she was about to view would change her life and redirect her career. Tuning in to PBS's segment on the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi was the first step on a path that would take her from her role as a clinician to one of independent filmmaker—from one who passively listens to others' stories to one who elicits and shapes personal narrative.

This second episode in the three-part series focused on civil rights during Kennedy's administration. The program, she recalls, was all historical footage. “It was not Hollywood's take on what was going on during the civil rights period in Mississippi, but it was archival footage of what actually happened. There was a narrator explaining what the footage was depicting, and basically the narrator said that the police in

Birmingham, AL, had been told not to get involved with crowds who were involved with the riots at the time, but rather to let the crowds handle them themselves.”

This particular footage, Sadoff recalls, showed a busload of freedom riders coming into the Birmingham Greyhound bus station. Someone from the mob that had assembled there ran toward the bus and placed an object behind the door handle so people couldn't open the door from the main side of the bus. “The rest of the mob rushed toward the bus, bashed in the windows with baseball bats and clubs, and torched the bus.” She was watching film of people

visit that part of the country and find out for herself what happened during the civil rights period in Mississippi. So, in summer 1992, she and her husband traveled to Mississippi, visiting Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, Meridian, and, ultimately, Philadelphia, where three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and



Left to right: Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, and Annie Devine at the Congressional Challenge 1965 (copyright Corbis)

The stirring documentary merges archival footage with the oral histories of the participants of the crusade for civil rights to create a window on the American soul at a crucial point in history.

in a burning bus with no way of getting out. Then she saw someone run from the crowd and remove the object from behind the door handle of the bus. “The door flew open, and all the people jumped out in flames and began to roll around on the ground trying to extinguish the flames. I sat there in absolute horror looking at this footage and recognizing that it happened not only in my country but during my lifetime,” Sadoff remembers.

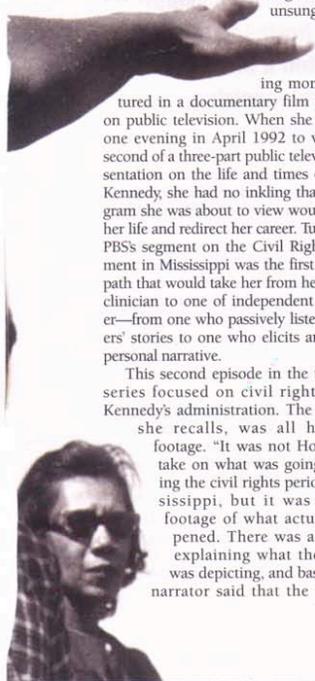
“I had to ask myself where I was when all of this was going on. I was recently married, I was having babies, and I was living as far away from Mississippi as one could live. Mississippi could have been Mars in the sense that it seemed so far away.”

TAKING ACTION

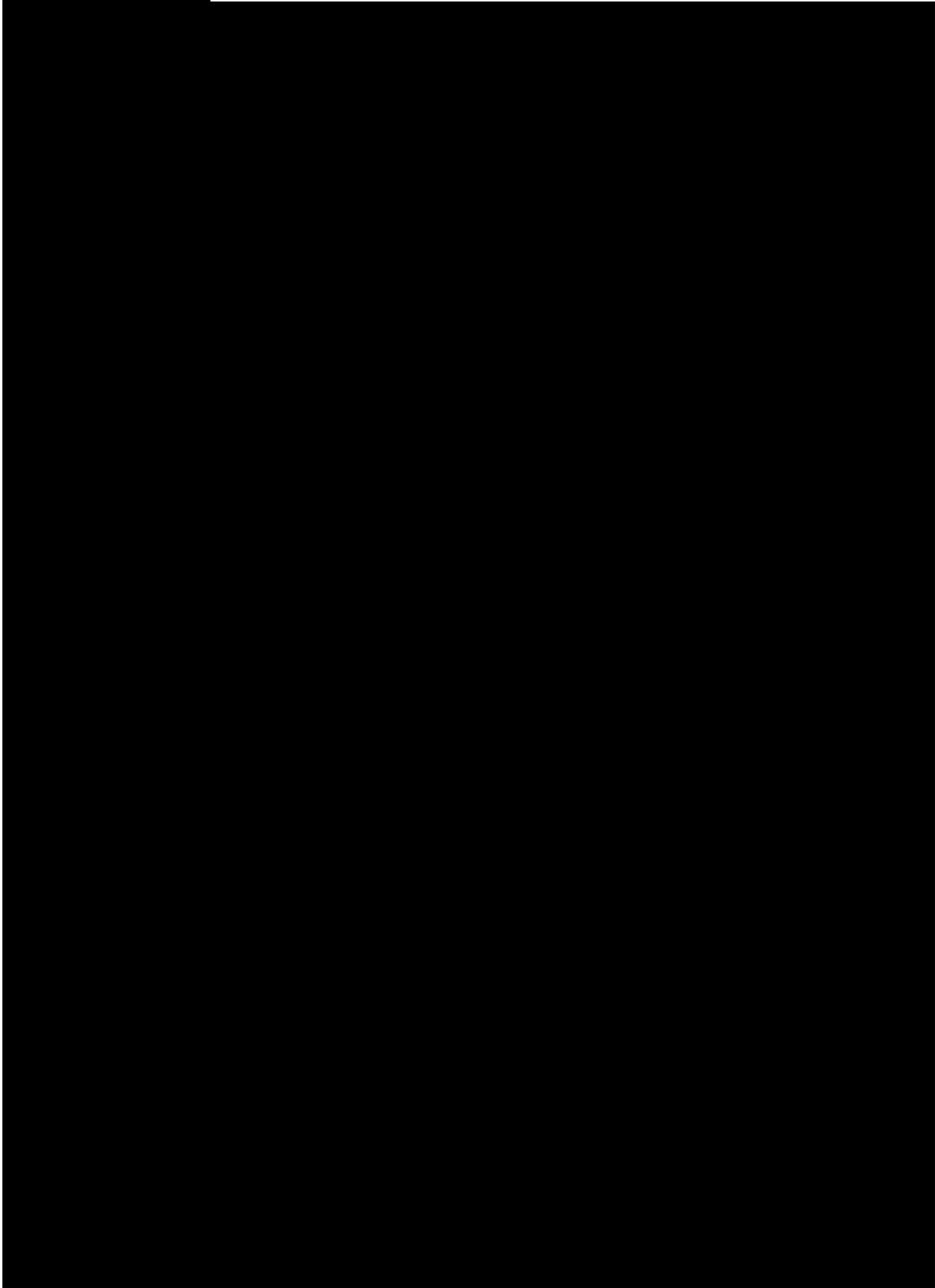
This experience was so jarring and unsettling that Sadoff had to know more. She decided that she wanted to

Michael Schwerner—were murdered in 1964. They also went to Vicksburg, Jackson, and Oxford, where people talked and they listened. “We interviewed people in the streets strictly for our own edification with no project in mind,” she says.

At one point, the pair became lost while trying to find the Mount Zion Methodist Church in Philadelphia, MS. They encountered a woman who helped and inspired. While helping them find their way, she told them her own recollections of 1964. She said, “If you've got a tape recorder, I know people with stories.” After a great deal of planning, negotiating, and fund-raising, the couple returned with a tape recorder. As a result of this experience, the Sadoffs produced their first documentary, *Philadelphia, Mississippi: Untold Stories*, which examined the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on this community in which one of the



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