

Handout #2

Handout #1 for Jigsaw Activity

Source: Fannie Lou, Hamer, "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired", Williams Institution CME Church, Harlem, NY, December 20, 1964 (Excerpted)

Hamer delivered this speech with Malcolm X at a rally at the Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, New York, that was organized to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's Congressional Challenge.

...It was the 31st of August of 1962, that eighteen of us traveled 26 miles to the county courthouse in Indianola, Mississippi, to try to register to become first-class citizens....

...After taking this literacy test, some of you have seen it, we have 21 questions and some is not questions. It began with: "Write the date of this application. What is your full name. By whom are you employed" — so we can be fired by the time we get back home — "Are you a citizen of the United States and an inhabitant of Mississippi. Have you ever been convicted of any of the following crimes." — when, if the people would be convicted of the following crimes, the registrar wouldn't be there. But after we go through this process of filling out this literacy form, we are asked to copy a section of the constitution of Mississippi and after we've copied this section of the constitution of Mississippi we are asked to give a reasonable interpretation to tell what it meant, what we just copied that we just seen for the first time...

After finishing this form, we started on this trip back to Ruleville, Mississippi, and we was stopped by the same city policeman that I had seen in Indianola and a state highway patrolman. We was ordered to get off the bus. After we got off the bus, we was ordered to get back on the bus and told to go back to Indianola. When we got back to Indianola the bus driver was charged with driving a bus the wrong color. That's very true. This same bus had been used year after year to haul people to the cotton fields to pick cotton and to chop cotton. But, this day, for the first time that this bus had been used for voter registration it had the wrong color....

....What I'm trying to point out now is when you take a very close look at this American society, it's time to question these things. We have made an appeal for the president of the United States and the attorney general to please protect us in Mississippi. And I can't understand how it's out of their power to protect people in Mississippi. They can't do that, but when a white man is killed in the Congo, they send people there.

And you can always hear this long sob story: "You know it takes time." For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change. We want a change in this society in America because, you see, we can no longer ignore the facts and getting our children to sing, "Oh say can you see, by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hailed." What do we have to hail here? The truth is the only thing going to free us. And you know this whole society is sick. And to prove just how sick it was when we was in Atlantic City challenging the National Convention, when I was testifying before the Credentials Committee, I was cut off because they hate to see what they been knowing all the time and that's the truth.

Yes, a lot of people will roll their eyes at me today but I'm going to tell you just like it is, you see, it's time — you see, this is what got all this like this, there's so much hypocrisy in this society and if we want America to be a free society we have to stop telling lies, that's all. Because we're not free and you know we're not free. You're not free here in Harlem. I've gone to a lot of big cities and I've got my first city to go to where this man wasn't standing with his feet on this black man's neck.

And it's time for you to wake up because, you see, a lot of people say, "Oh, they is afraid of integration." But the white man is not afraid of integration, not with his kids. He's afraid of his wife's kids because he's got them all over the place. Because some of his kids just might be my second cousin.

And the reason we're here today, we're asking for support if this Constitution is really going to be of any help in this American society, the 4th day of January is when we'll find it out. This challenge that we're challenging the five representatives from Mississippi; now how can a man be in Washington, elected by the people, when 95 percent of the people cannot vote in Mississippi? Just taking a chance on trying to register to vote, you can be fired. Not only fired, you can be killed. You know it's true because you know what happened to Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney. And any person that's working down there to change the system can be counted just as another nigger.

But some of the things I've got to say today may be a little sickening. People have said year after year, "Those people in Mississippi can't think." But after we would work ten and eleven hours a day for three lousy dollars and couldn't sleep we couldn't do anything else but think. And we have been thinking a long time. And we are tired of what's going on. And we want to see now, what this here will turn out for the 4th of January. We want to see is democracy real?

We want to see this because the challenge is based upon the violation of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, which hadn't done anything for us yet. And the U.S. courts tied it to Section 201 and 226. Those people were illegally elected and they have been there — the man that I challenged, Jamie L. Whitten, has been in Washington thirteen years and he is not representing the people of Mississippi because not only do they discriminate against the poor Negroes, they discriminated up until the 3rd of November against the poor whites, but they let them vote because they wanted their votes. But it will run until the 1st of July and we need your support — morally, politically, and financially, too. We need your help.

And, people, you don't know in Harlem the power that you got. But you just don't try to use it. People never would have thought — the folks they said was just ignorant, common people out of Mississippi that would have tried to challenge the representatives from Mississippi. But you see the point is: we have been dying in Mississippi year after year for nothing. And I don't know, I may be bumped off as soon as I go back to Mississippi but what we should realize, people have been bumped off for nothing.

It is my goal for the cause of giving those Negro children a decent education in the state of Mississippi and giving them something that they have never had. Then I know my life won't be in vain. Because, not only do we need a change in the state of Mississippi, but we need a change here in Harlem. And it's time for every American citizen to wake up because now the whole world is looking at this American society. I remember, during the time I was in West Africa — some of you may be here today because I don't know

what it's all about, but I know I can tell you the truth, too — it was a lot of people there that was called the PIAA. "What are you doing over here? Who are you trying to please?"

I said, "All you criticize us when you at home and you're worried to death when we try to find out about our own people." I said, "If we had been treated as human beings in America, you wouldn't be trailing us now to find out what we is trying to do over here."

But this is something we going to have to learn to do and quit saying that we are free in America when I know we are not free. You are not free in Harlem. The people are not free in Chicago, because I've been there, too. They are not free in Philadelphia, because I've been there, too. And when you get it over with all the way around, some of the places is a Mississippi in disguise. And we want a change. And we hope you support us in this challenge that we'll begin on the 4th of January. And give us what support that you can. Thank you