

North Shore Summer Project

Activists: Past and Present



Mary Powers

Becoming involved in the NSSP was natural for Mary, who had majored in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin and had always been involved in social justice matters. The Winnetka Human Relations Committee on whose board she served was dedicated to safe and just communities, open to all who desired to live, study, or work there. She was also “concerned with the larger framework of social and racial justice in the broader community.” Meeting with volunteers from several North Shore suburbs, the NSSP activists sought to bring together a cross-section of people with similar goals.

One of Mary’s most daunting tasks was to obtain the permit to use the Village Green for Dr. King’s speech --no mean accomplishment, considering that the president of the Winnetka Human Relations Committee who had preceded her had failed to obtain approval at the previous meeting. The Village Council pressed her on issues like “Why Winnetka?” and “Why should homeowners be inconvenienced with strangers parking on the street on Sunday afternoon?”

Mary said she was apprehensive that Winnetka might prove to be less welcoming than the NSSP supporters had hoped to portray. After all, she had surveyed the homes on Lincoln Ave from Tower Road to Pine Street and found only one homeowner who professed to being willing to rent or sell to a person of color, should the home go on the market. But she prevailed.

Participation in the NSSP had a profound impact on Mary’s life, opening doors to lifelong friendships and involvement in other interracial efforts, both locally and nationally, from the Contract Buyers League in Lawndale, to the National Coalition for Police Accountability. She is proud of her limited role in such significant organizations and of the unlimited hope that the 2015 reincarnation of the Justice Project inspires a new generation of dedication and leadership for the challenges ahead.

[July 2015, by Sherry Medwin]