



STRUGGLES

MARCH 2009

SOUTHERN ECHO

SOUTHERN ECHO, MS DELTA CATALYST ROUNDTABLE, MS DEPT. OF ED AND MVSU HOLD 5TH AND FINAL ANNUAL DISMANTLING THE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GAP CONFERENCE

Itta Bena, MS — First they spent the day talking some serious stuff, then they par-tayed. 500 students, parents, educators and public officials from more than 20 counties in the Delta region came together at the campus on Nov. 13, 2008 for a one-day celebration of the past 5 years of work together to impact state education policy in the effort to build a quality public education accessible to all children.

This conference was the 5th and final gathering in the series that began in 2004 as a partnership of Southern Echo, MS Dept. of Education, and MS Valley State University.

The conference focused on assessments of the successes, limitations and lessons learned from the collaboration to impact education policies concerning full funding of the **MS Adequate Education Program**, enhanced funding for children at-risk, dropout prevention and graduation rates, the use of state and local budgets to control education policy and the central importance of effective engagement of parents and students in policy formation and implementation at the local school district level.

Dr. Roy Hudson, Interim President of MVSU, gave a stirring Welcome and Dr. Marvin Haire, Director of the Delta Research and Cultural Institute of MVSU, presented one of the opening keynote presentations, served on a panel to address questions and comments from participants, and provided a Keynote Challenge at the end of the conference concerning the education policy challenges that lie ahead.



Leeroy Johnson, Echo Exec. Dir., presents awards to dedicated community activists, students and educators who enabled the Gap Conference process.

State Supt. of Education Hank Bounds, unable to attend in person because of a prior commitment, presented a Keynote Challenge on video at the end of the conference that identified the core strategies that the MS Dept. of Education will pursue in the years to come to address core education issues confronting Mississippi children.

Dr. Kris Kaase, Deputy Supt. for Instructional Programs and Services, provided a Welcome and served on a panel to answer questions and comments from the audience. Steve Williams, former Deputy Supt. for the Office of Accountability, who retired in 2008, provided an opening keynote address.

Southern Echo President Hollis Watkins welcomed participants and led everyone in freedom songs that lifted spirits and touched hearts, while Southern Echo Asst. Director Brenda Hyde served as Conference Moderator and kept the varied agenda on schedule.

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“I learned a lot during the website training. Now it will be much easier for people to learn about Southern Echo and supplement what they already may know by keeping themselves updated.”

**Keith French,
Echo Intern**

ECHO STAFF GETS WEBSITE MANAGEMENT TRAINING FOR THE LAUNCH OF ITS NEW AND IMPROVED WEBSITE

Jackson, MS — Three Echo staff received 5 days of day-long intensive training in November 2008 on website management from Samiya Bashir, principal consultant of Lead Time Consulting of Austin, TX.

Kahlil Johnson and Keith French, Southern Echo interns and students at Tougaloo College, and Mike Sayer, Southern Echo Senior Organizer and Training Coordinator learned how to post news stories, add pages, incorporate photos and videos, develop web-based emails

and the use of the web to promote donations to the organization.

Samiya Bashir works with grassroots community organizations to build and utilize websites to bring their work and their stories to life on the internet, and

to integrate their information and visuals with social networks to expand understanding across generational lines.

Samiya’s easy demeanor, perpetual smile and joyful presence facilitated a smooth transition from the grim visage of HTML training into easy-to-understand and visually accessible posts on the internet.



Samiya Bashir teaches Mike website skills.



A MOMENT OF MIRTH AS KAHLIL JOHNSON (LEFT) AND MIKE SAYER LEARN HOW TO PLACE DOCUMENTS ON SOUTHERN ECHO’S NEW AND IMPROVED WEBSITE.

Organizations that received grants in the SRCELDI cycle:

- Inner City Faith Based Resource Center, A New Gulf Coast Regional Cooperative (NO, LA)
- Wildfire Community Development Corporation (Morgan City, LA)
- Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund (Epps, AL)
- South Carolina United Action (Orangeburg, SC)

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Southern Echo provides grants to 20 low-wealth grassroots organizations to promote land retention, sustainability

For the past 21 months, Southern Echo has worked through its sustainable land initiative to address an historical decline in land owned by minorities and other people of low wealth in rural communities by launching the **Sustainable Rural Communities Environmental and Land Development Initiative**

(SRCELDI) in partnership with the Ford Foundation.

The initiative provides grants and technical assistance to grassroots organizations to encourage land owners who are not utilizing their land to put their land into production, use environmentally safe practices, to recruit, develop and train young people on

the value of land retention, and to utilize community organizing as a strategy to sustain rural communities.

In 2008 the initiative expanded from 14 grantees to 20 grantees. The support to communities of color and low wealth has been identified within specific geographic locations

CONT. ON PG 4

2008 GAP CONFERENCE CELEBRATION CONT. FROM PG. 1

Leroy Johnson, Executive Director of Southern Echo, provided both an opening keynote on the importance of the celebration and a closing Keynote Challenge on the goals of the work yet to be done.

Also participating in the panel sessions were Joyce Parker, Director of Citizens for a Better Greenville, Ashley Mckay a Jackson State University student from Tunica County who is a Southern Echo intern, Dianne Freelon-Foster, Director of Activist with a Purpose (Grenada County), and Martez Harvey, a Grenada high school student.

When the program ended in the late afternoon, a luscious spread of pizza, lunch meats and cookies were laid to waste as younger and older danced to the rhythms dee-jayed by Southern Echo's own Dickey Selmon.



Ashley Mckay, a Southern Echo Intern and Jackson State University Student, addresses the 5th Annual Gap Conference in 2008 on the importance of involving students in building an accountable quality education system, and explains her own immersion in community organizing since she was a young child in Tunica County, MS.

Gap Conference participants were wall-to-wall in the packed 500-seat auditorium at the MS Valley State Univ. Social Sciences Building in Itta Bena, MS.



Echo and Catalyst Roundtable participate in strategic Pushback Network national planning sessions in NYC

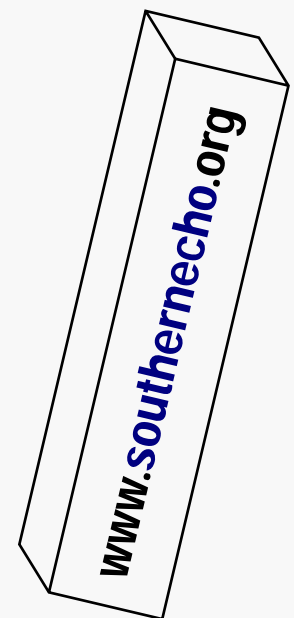
New York City – Grass-roots community organization leaders from eight states, partners in the national Pushback Network, worked together for three days in New York City, Dec. 2-4, 2008, to craft a post-election strategic plan for 2008-2009 to continue to increase voter participation in their respective states and to expand community participation in the work to impact public policies at the state and national levels.

Delegates from Alabama, California, Ken-

tucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Nevada met each day at the Harlem area headquarters of Community Voices Heard, where they were brought to life each morning by cheese danishes, bagels and cream cheese and pots of coffee, while they shared the strategies used to register tens of thousands of new voters in their respective states, and enabled even more to participate in record numbers in the November state and national elections.

During the 3-day grind of intense meetings the Pushback Network organization also reviewed and adopted organizational by-laws to complete its transition from an unincorporated non-profit association to a non-profit corporation organized under the laws of the State of New York, where its national office is likely to be located. Pushback will be applying for its own 501c3 status now that incorporation has been completed.

CONT. ON PG. 5



ECHO'S PROGRAM TO SUSTAIN MINORITY LAND USE CONT. FROM PG 1

SRCELDI grantees, cont.:

- Nollie Citizens for Quality Education, Inc. (Holmes County, MS)
- South Rankin County Farmers Assoc. (Rankin County, MS)
- West Holmes Community Development Organization (Holmes County, MS)
- MS Engaged in Green Agriculture (Bolivar County, MS)
- Marion County Self-Help Organization, Inc (Marion County, MS)
- Winston County Self-Help Cooperative (Winston County, MS)
- Family Farmers Cooperative (Plaquemines Parish, LA)
- McIntosh SEED (McIntosh County, GA)
- Southeast GA Community Development Corp. (Glyn, GA)
- Berean Community Development Corp. (Latta, SC)
- Chimuranga (Laurens Co, SC)
- Freedom Quilting Bee (Alberta, AL)
- Tuskegee Volunteer Power Corporation (Tuskegee Institute, AL)
- Center for Heirs Property (Charleston, SC)
- Penn Center (St. Helena Island SC)
- South Plaquemines United Fisheries Corp. (Port Sulphur LA)

that include the following: all of Mississippi, the Black Belt region of Alabama, Southern Georgia, eastern South Carolina along the I-95 corridor, and 13 Louisiana parishes slammed by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

Southern Echo is working in conjunction with a seven member Advisory Committee made up of knowledgeable and experienced environmentalists and land practitioners from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. They have helped to identify potential grantees from the targeted states who are committed to using land and its resources as an asset and wealth builder for rural communities and who are willing to employ the principles of the initiative.

The programs of work of the 20 grantees include such ventures as using solar energy that provides natural lighting to eco-domes; constructing homes with natural products; using alternative energy supplies for irrigation systems for vegetable, agronomic and horticulture crops; greenhouse construction and production; youth gardening projects; providing produce for large marketers via contractual agreements; assisting single parents to acquire their first home; estate planning; development of fabric and fabric dyes; creating an information desk for landowners; providing community legal education and services to support a low-country landowners association; and assisting people to obtain financial literacy.

During the past twenty-one months Echo's land coordinator, Dickey Selmon, has actively investigated the landscape in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina to identify active local organizations and the nature of the work in the field; provided technical assistance to the grantees in the areas of greenhouse production, land preparation, family financial management, estate planning, for-

est regeneration, and connecting groups with other technical assistance providers through peer-to-peer exchanges.

The lessons learned from this project have educated Southern Echo about the need to help support and nourish existing and current grantees through multi-year funding to further build the capacity of local organizations and land owners in rural communities. It is also apparent that there is a need to encourage leaders from other programs such as the Extension 4-H Program and Future Farmers of America to help young people to understand the value of land both short and long term, and to actively encourage the public schools that have done away with these kinds of programs to reinstitute them.

Southern Echo will continue to utilize the Advisory Committee to assist in the development of a process that will continue to meet the needs of community. The advisory committee members will meet at least twice a year, including once as a part of the Annual Grantee Networking Conference.

It is of great importance to be able to use the Initiative as a vehicle to continue to help minorities and low wealth people utilize land as an asset and wealth builder for economically enriched and sustainable rural communities. Southern Echo will continue to work to secure funding for grassroots organizations to increase the capacity of their constituencies to thrive in rural communities where they can utilize the land as a basis for further growth and development and the building of sustainable rural infrastructure.



ECHO AND MOTT FOUNDATION PARTNER TO SUPPORT GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING WITH 7 GRANTS IN 4 STATES

Jackson, MS -- In 2008 Southern Echo, in its capacity as an Intermediate Support Organization (ISO) for the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, made seven grants totaling \$120,000 to maturing grassroots community organizations based in five southern states to support their community organizing work to empower low-wealth communities to impact the formation and implementation of public policy.

The organizations that received grants through the *Southern Echo Grassroots Community Organizing Initiative* for the 2008-2009 grant period were:

Advocates for Community and Rural Education in Everton, AR (\$17,500); *Chimuranga* in Laurens, SC (\$15,000); *Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County, Inc.*, in Tunica, MS (\$20,000); *Nollie Jenkins Family Center, Inc.*, in Lexington, MS (\$15,000); *South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Group* in Estill, SC (\$12,500); *Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network* in Durham, NC (\$20,000); and *Sunflower County Parents and Students Organization* in Indianola, MS (\$20,000).

Southern Echo since 1999 has been providing grants to new and emerging

grassroots organizations in eight southern states that have applied for funding through this program. The eight states include Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee. In recent years the C. S. Mott Foundation has shifted the focus of the program from support for fledgling organizations to an emphasis on funding more mature and experienced grassroots community organizations.

As part of this ISO program Southern Echo provides on-going technical assistance to the grassroots organizations and leaders that receive grants through the program. In addition, each year current grantees and some of the past grantees are brought together in an annual residential training school to obtain training on issues the grantees have identified as their highest priority.

Southern Echo Assistant Director Brenda Hyde oversees and manages the *Grassroots Community Organizing Initiative*. Southern Echo will be hosting an annual training for program grantees on March 27-28, 2009 in Jackson, MS.

Southern Echo serves as an Intermediary Support Group for the Mott Foundation.

For the 2008-2009 grant year Echo made grants to 7 organizations in 4 states that totaled \$120,000.



PUSHBACK NETWORK CONT. FROM PG 3

At the end of the network's search for a new national executive director to coordinate administrative operations, fundraising and to oversee opportunities for collaboration among several partner states, it hired Mr. Peter Hardie.

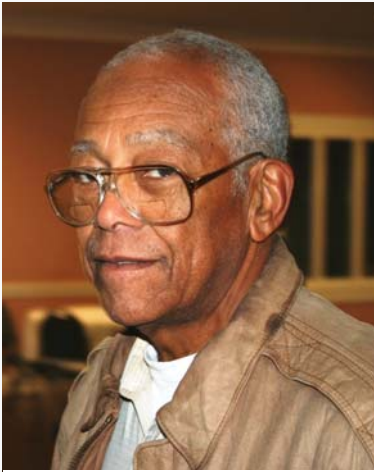
Peter Hardie is an experienced activist in community organizing, civic engagement, coalition building and the struggles to empower communities of color and of low-wealth. He has worked with groups such as Right to the City, the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights, and Roxbury Youth Works.

The Mississippi Delta Catalyst Roundtable, which is comprised of ten partner organizations based in the MS Delta region, is the Mississippi partner in the Pushback Network and is represented on the new Pushback Network Board of Directors by Leroy Johnson, executive director of Southern Echo, and Mike Sayer, Southern Echo senior organizer and training coordinator.



SOUTHERN ECHO'S MEMORY BOOK: CAPTURING MEMORIES

THE ANNUAL CHRISTMAS PARTY



Hollis Watkins, President and one of the co-founders of Southern Echo, sports a wistful smile as he enjoys the Christmas Party.



Southern Echo "family" members party doing the electric slide Delta-style



Josh Marks, Tougaloo College volunteer, and Greg Johnson, Echo Board member and George Washington Univ. law student, laugh and share the Holiday cheer.



Sharing stories at the Christmas Party brings smiles, laughter, an occasional guffaw and more stories

MORE MEMORY BOOK



Mike Sayer tries to make a point during MS Delta Catalyst Roundtable meeting



Steve Williams, former Deputy Supt. of Education, presents keynote address at 2008 Gap Conf.



Barr Elementary School students, of Jackson, MS, perform during 2008 Underperforming Schools Task Force public hearing at the MS Dept. of Ed central offices in Jackson, MS



SAGE Council artwork displayed at a Pushback Network gathering



Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies training session in Greenville, MS for students and activists in 2008

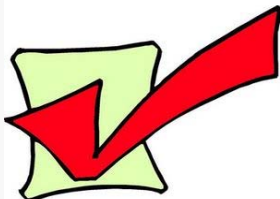
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