

## Civil Rights Leader Speaks for History Month Events

By Bruce Poinsette Special To The Skanner News

Portland Community College (PCC) will be bringing in Mississippi Civil Rights veteran Hollis Watkins to speak the week of Feb. 6-11.

"I'm coming to share my experience over 52 years," says Watkins. "I also want to talk about the work today and the work we must do in the future. The battle is not over."

Although Watkins is not a household name of the Civil Rights Movement, he has been a part of many of the era's most iconic moments, including the first lunch counter sit-in in Mississippi and the March on Washington.

He grew up in a spiritual family and says that helped form a number of questions in his mind that he would spend his life seeking answers to.

"I didn't understand why my family had to work so hard and barely make ends meet while white families didn't have to work as hard," says Watkins. "I grew up knowing something was wrong. We're all children of God."

He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Chapter at the age of 17.

Not long after, Watkins became involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The group had two programs to address voting and direct action.

In 1961, he and other SNCC members decided they were going to integrate McComb, Miss. Their first target was a library but it was closed. They eventually settled on the Woolworth lunch counter.

"It was a day of joy and excitement," says Watkins. "We understood we might be kicked, beaten and have hot coffee thrown on us. We were prepared to suffer and even anticipated reprisals against our families."



Watkins today

For his efforts, Watkins was jailed for 34 days. His parents received threatening phone calls and messages and crosses were burned in his lawn.

He says this created anxiety amongst his family, especially his brothers and sisters who thought he was crazy, but there was little tension because he wasn't around. After being jailed he became a full time activist.

Most of Watkins' work revolved around getting Blacks registered to vote. When he wasn't getting people registered or teaching voter education and basic literacy classes, he was speaking to help raise funds.

Watkins began working with the Highlander Folk School in the early 1960s.

Highlander was founded in 1932 and its original focus was on labor education and the training of labor organizers. It began focusing on civil rights in the 1950s.

The school held workshops as a part of an



Hollis Watkins and Arvenna Hall of SNCC, after being released from jail in Jackson, Miss. Photo courtesy Civil Rights Movement Veterans ([www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org))

initiative to develop a literacy program for Blacks who were prevented from registering to vote due to literacy requirements.

Watkins participated in workshops that taught people how to conduct civil disobedience and fill out voter registration.

Watkins thought the more energetic young activists would take jobs away from older, established grass roots workers. He believed that the older workers would be more difficult to reenergize once the young activists left.

Nonetheless, he participated in the project but the result was just as he predicted.

Later that year, he and other activists started the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which challenged the discriminatory practices of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party.

Currently, he is the President of Southern Echo, a group that provides training and technical assistance in all areas pertaining to politics.

Despite not getting as much public acclaim as other Civil Rights figures, Watkins has won numerous awards.

"I feel like it's a way of saying thank you," he says. "Anyone can receive these awards if they put in the work."

Watkins' speaking schedule:  
 Monday, Feb 6: 6 pm. Cascade Campus MAHB Auditorium  
 Tuesday, Feb 7: 12:00 pm, Rock Creek Campus, Building 7 Room 121  
 Wednesday, Feb 8: 11:30 am. Clark College, Vancouver Washington, Gaiser Student Center  
 Thursday Feb 9: 11:30 am. Sylvania Campus, CC Building, Oak, Elm and Fir rooms

### Most of Watkins' work revolved around getting Blacks registered to vote

He provides insight into much less publicized tensions within the movement.

Although Watkins was an organizer of the March on Washington, he wasn't allowed anywhere near the stage. He says this was a result of an agreement between national leaders and the government on who would get visibility.

"Many people were angry," says Watkins. "I was seeing that I could no longer be part of the intimate side of things."

Later on he would have reservations about 1964's "Summer Project," which was also known as Freedom Summer.

Freedom Summer sought to register as many voters in Mississippi as possible by bringing in many young activists from outside the state.

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