

# ESTHER'S TRUMPET



News and Views from Alabama's Black Belt

November 1, 2010

## Don't Talk to Strangers?

I have this habit of opening my home to strangers. It cannot be helped. They arrive on my doorstep; always with a worthy mission. They may be doing a paper on civil rights history for school. They may be writing a book. They may be looking for art, or inquiring about the Okra Festival. They have produced books, films and all kinds of great products from their visits.

This year, a small group of young people from Washington DC and New Orleans wanted to come to the Okra Festival, (which took place August 28) and they arrived with wonderful hand made aprons and napkins to sell. They probably made a bit of money, but they gave so much more than they got. Bubbling with enthusiasm, they enchanted everyone around them and got center stage in Montgomery Advertiser's article about Okra Festival 2010. After the festival, it was this group that organized the clean-up. I did not have to lift a finger, and trust me, after 3,000 people leave your house, there is a bit of trash! Then they camped out in Annie Mae's Art Place and after a night of sleeping on the floor, they strategize as to where they would go next.

I sent them to Wilcox County. I sent them to Lowndes County's Civil Rights Interpretive Center, then on to Camden to Black Belt Treasures, to Eutaw to the Folk Roots Festival and finally to Thomaston to the Rural Art Studio. I sent them West because I wanted them to see our BlackBelt. I wanted them to ride the Gees Bend Ferry, find the quilters, and experience the jewel that is our BlackBelt.

Opening my home to strangers gets me wonderful gifts. A movie crew came here from France several years ago, and I entertained them with a great meal even though most of us did not speak the same language. It led to a film about activists, "Raising Cain" that was released in France. A reporter from the Guardian in United Kingdom came to visit, resulting in a book, "No Place Like Home", published in Great Britain. Then there was the young college student 10 or 12 years ago looking for information for his thesis. That resulted in "Bloody Lowndes", a great book released last year. Now I adore living alone and need my space. But I met a young woman, Estizer Smith, who was taking photographs of Lowndes County for her book, "Welcome Home". She came all the way from Pennsylvania. Her book is one of my treasures. She stayed with me for a couple of weeks. We are in close touch today. I am so glad to have found her!

Once a group called Project Hip Hop arrived from Massachusetts, dozens of kids exploding out of a large van; a profusion of dreadlocks and t-shirts. They were so much

fun! They were on a civil rights tour. I have entertained the Dean of Canterbury in England, and had nuns cooking chicken on my grill celebrating the Jonathan Daniels Pilgrimage held each year in Hayneville.

In this day and age, we are so scary about strangers. We barricade ourselves in our homes. We read about horrible atrocities, and indeed crime has permeated every corner of our neighborhoods. But we cannot allow fear to stop us from taking a few risks. Most of us have better instincts than we know. I certainly trust mine! I hate to think how much I would have lost if I had not opened my home to strangers.....who always become friends. They have been old and young, rich and poor, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu and atheist. They've come in all colors. They never fail to enrich my life, and I am a better woman for it.

The Christian Bible teaches us that we are to "love strangers as ourselves" (Leviticus 19:33). But what it does not say is that when we open our homes, we are the ones who are blessed!