

# 1960s Still Strain on 'Mentor'

By Laura Murray  
Washington Star Staff Writer

At his inauguration last week, Mayor Marion Barry Jr. hailed James Forman, former executive director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as his mentor, the man most responsible for making him what he is today.

Forman, 50, was there to hear himself praised.

"Come and meet Forman," one of Barry's aides told a reporter.

But, when Forman was pointed out, the reporter looked in disbelief, not recognizing him. The struggle of the 1960s remains etched in Forman's face today, in the lines of his forehead and the pits of his eyes.

A nine-year-old news clipping describes him as "burly." But today he is slender, almost frail. And for him, the struggle continues.

For years he lived on the dangerous front lines of the civil rights movement, a highly visible national figure. For years, he said he was "hounded" by the FBI and other groups, adding he was not removed from the FBI's security index until 1976. He still feels hounded, so much so that he refused to be photographed.

Forman, who has reviewed 2,200 pages of FBI documents on himself, said an agent once wrote of him, "he is currently living in the city of Detroit, married to some dirty old white woman." Another entry: "He's broke, but his wife is filthy rich."

"You should print that. It's very important that you print that," he said in an interview yesterday. "The FBI was finally able to separate my family."

He said he and his wife were divorced four years ago. They have two children.

He presently is working on two graduate degrees at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. He is completing a master's thesis on the "Meaning of Self-Determination" as it relates to the black American experience, and digging into requirements for a Ph.D. in labor relations. He was a Teamster for 17 years.

He also heads the SNCC History Committee and chairs the Unemployed and Poverty Action Council, based in Ithaca, which among other objectives, seeks to "mobilize trade-union support for the unemployed." In the mid-70s, when Forman was living in Detroit, he fought to keep "runaway industries" — those considering relocating in the Sunbelt — in the city.

His presence in Washington during the last week gave rise to thoughts that he might be coming to work in his old protegee's administration. He scotched such suppositions, first lightly, then firmly, although as a matter of general principle "it would be an honor" to work for Barry, "even as a janitor."

He might teach when he finishes his studies. The country's academic community needs the leavening presence of more black professors, he said.

But even if he never stands up behind a college lectern, he has taught his generation of students, the students of SNCC, the ones he led through the South, teaching by example.

"He educated these naive kids," Barry's press secretary and former SNCC supporter, Florence Tate, said. "He gave his life to the movement."

In addition to whatever anxiety and hounding he felt on his own behalf, he carried the weight of the fear of the students he led, said Courtland Cox, once one of the "naive students" and now director of the Emergency Fund for Southern Africa.

"Let me tell you about the fear and terror," he said. "We were in Oxford, Ohio, getting ready to go to Mississippi, in 1964. Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman were missing." (The three young civil rights workers later were found slain in Philadelphia, Miss.)

"I used to have dreams of escapism — how to get away if the white folk were after you. It was a general nightmare. But we knew we had to go."

"It was Forman's strength that held us together," Cox continued. "He kept us singing. But it drains you."

Forman today continues writing, thinking and speaking about what he sees as the biggest problems facing the nation: the death of black and white youth from drugs, government infiltration of public movements and private lives, including his own.