

SNCC 40th Anniversary Conference: Welcome and Remembrance of Ms. Ella Baker (PART 2)

Date: April 2000

Location: Raleigh, NC - Shaw University

Host:

M. Iyailu Moses - African-American Cultural Center Director, North Carolina State University

Welcome Speakers:

Everett Ward - Chancellor's Community Advisory Committee Chair, North Carolina State University

Ernest Pickens - Executive Vice President, Shaw University

Rodney Poole - President of the Student Government Association, Shaw University

Joanne Woodard - Vice Provost, North Carolina State University

Harold Pettigrew - Student, North Carolina State University

Moderator:

Muriel Tillinghast - SNCC Field Secretary

Panelists:

[Connie Curry](#) - SNCC Executive Committee

[Casey Hayden](#) - SNCC Veteran / 1964 Freedom Summer strategist and organizer

[Judy Richardson](#) - SNCC Veteran / Filmmaker

[Brenda Travis](#) - SNCC Veteran

CONTINUED FROM [PART 1](#)

****NOTE:** The video continues with a gap. Some dialogue is missing at the beginning.**

Casey Hayden: ...underground world of anti-segregation forces in the South. Programming and human relations involved creating illegal meetings of Black and white students to engage in intellectual programs deconstructing race and racial myths—and to share from the heart, forging bonds that transcended racial barriers.

Our project was designed specifically to create small, integrated race relations workshops for students across the Southeast. I was called a campus traveler. I flew around in little one-prop puddle jumpers to Black and white campuses, often in remote locations.

On white campuses, the Student Christian Association or [indistinct] staff person would secretly organize a small meeting of students. On Black campuses, I was often asked to speak publicly to the student body and publicly welcomed as a white visitor—a very embarrassing deference. In both instances, I recruited students to our integrated workshops.

SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]’s work overlapped with these workshops, as many local campus leaders who attended were also local movement leaders. Human relations projects continued parallel to the movement, or as an integral part of it, depending on your perspective, right on through. This work was undermining and defeating segregation on the personal level, as bringing down the legal barriers would defeat it politically.

I remember Ella beginning our meetings when I got back from a trip by saying, “Let’s see now, what are we doing here?” She really meant it. In all the areas in which I saw Ella operate, she always said just what she meant. It was as though she thought of everything and would show her thoughts polished and smooth from all her years of mulling them over.

She never pulled punches, and after accurately nailing someone’s foibles, she’d chuckle. Although capable of righteous indignation, Ella usually found humanity humorous, and her approach to people was always fresh. She was interested in everyone, and she always asked where they were from and about their family. She was deeply and consciously rooted in her family.

Ella was, politically above all, pragmatic. She seemed to know that however much we think and talk—and however important that is—it is action that makes social change happen. She was always directed toward action—thoughtful action. Her notion of the need to raise up new leaders, to rotate leaders, for example, was pragmatic, based on years of experience of seeing folks join the leaders’ club when they became leaders, leaving their constituents behind. Her broad vision saved SNCC from numerous potential splits—her “both/and” replacing the tendency toward “either/or.”

Personally, Ella was perhaps the most secure, rooted, and self-knowledgeable woman I’ve known. She was an elegant woman—elegant and homey and warm. Her diction was elegant—and her mind. I never saw her flustered or without complete aplomb and self-possession.

I think of Ella now when I comb my hair high above my face, as she did hers—a flattering style for an older woman. This is when it gets hard to talk loud. I think of her when I hold my chin

high. She's in me this way, a role model for the age I have achieved. Until I reached this age, I didn't know how deeply I had incorporated her into myself.

When things were rough for me later, after the movement, it was Ella to whom I turned with late-night phone calls—and she was always right there for me. I really loved her. It was a great privilege to have worked with her so closely.

Ella's presence defined SNCC in many ways. One was the value assigned to women in SNCC. She was a woman—and invaluable in many ways—so that sense of the value of women translated into latitude for all of us.

Another was the value given to hard work at all levels. Ella was a behind-the-scenes, supportive person, and she was invaluable. So even though I was white and chose to work in supportive capacities I considered race-appropriate, I was valued for my hard work.

And third, Ella's views on leadership and the need for mass organizing empowered us all, as well as those we organized, by shining the light on ordinary people—both in communities and in the ranks of the organization. This enabled us to give our best.

Martha Norman, in asking me to speak here, acknowledged all this about Ella's role and suggested I talk about what I was able to do in SNCC as exemplary of these points. So I'll do that briefly in closing.

I worked in SNCC in many areas, at many levels—always doing both the head work and the hands-on work in cooperation with others. I was able to see what was needed, initiate, and move on—training others to take over what I started. That was what I could do. That was what I had to offer. And by doing that—doing what I could do best—both I and the organization profited. SNCC was smart that way.

I came to SNCC as an activist at the University of Texas—a participant in sit-ins, picketing, theater stand-ins there in the spring of 1960. I worked as a campus affiliate over that year before moving to Atlanta in 1961 to work for Ella. While in Atlanta, I went on the [Albany Freedom Ride](#) and took minutes at SNCC staff meetings, as well as speaking about SNCC support nationally.

I was a northern contact and fundraiser and publicist for part of the next year and then came on staff in early [19]63 in Atlanta as the first Northern Coordinator. Working for [Jim Forman](#), who led the way, I set up that program, concentrating on campuses and on establishing networks of information and support.

In the fall of [19]63, I went to Mississippi to help establish a literacy project and became part of the Freedom Votes and the building of the MFDP [[Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](#)]. I was part of the organizing for [Freedom Summer](#), specifically charged with researching, training, and

coordinating statewide toward the challenge of the seating of the Mississippi lily-whites at the [19]64 Democratic National Convention.

After the summer, I was part of the writing of a paper in SNCC. I was part of SNCC discussions about structure and future direction, and initiated a photo project designed to train young Black Mississippians to be photographers—that should be, writing of a paper in SNCC about women.

In the winter of [19]64–[19]65, I began to shift back toward white organizing, moving to Chicago in the spring, still a SNCC staffer, now on loan to SDS to organize white Appalachian welfare mothers. A memorandum I wrote, largely out of that experience in Chicago and mailed with [Mary King](#) to young women on the left, formed the basis for much of the early organizing of the women's movement in the broader white world.

So in this way, the women's movement traces back to [Ella Baker](#). She is behind it, as she was always behind the scenes. Ella provided us with that example. She was always back there, willing to give with no expectation of reward or praise. That willingness, in the SNCC as I knew it, was the primary quality we shared—our very core. I have always loved us for that.

Judy Richardson: Okay, good morning, hello, thank you.

Okay, let me ask you something. How many people had ever heard—now, this doesn't go for the scholars and the adults and all this stuff—how many young people here had ever heard of SNCC or Ms. Baker before this conference happened?

Aha, this is a knowledgeable group. You're a Thelwell. You don't count. He's a scholar. No, besides the scholars. Okay, okay.

First of all, for those who have not seen—now, this is Ms. Baker, right? The way we remember her. But there's another Ms. Baker who was a little younger than this, which is this Ms. Baker, okay?

Now this is the way a lot of us remembered her, mostly. Now, what's interesting is that Ms. Baker at that point was the age that I am now, and she really seemed rather old, okay. But what's important about Ms. Baker? Let me start from the beginning.

First of all, I'm going to just do a quick intro, which is that I came down to work for SNCC in 1963, and then when I left SNCC, I worked for a number of African-American organizations—a bookstore that was started by a lot of old SNCC people in Washington, DC, that became the largest Black bookstore in the country.¹

¹ Drum and Spear Bookstore was a pioneering Black-owned bookstore founded in 1968 in Washington, D.C. by former members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), including Charlie Cobb, Judy Richardson, Courtland Cox, and Tony Gittens.

Worked for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice—all of these, by the way, because of the skills that I had learned in SNCC. Then I went up to Boston and worked on the 14-hour series called *Eyes on the Prize*, which was an Academy Award-nominated—we didn't get it—and lots of awards, and, you know, historic 14-hour documentary PBS system series.

But when I come into SNCC—I should say that SNCC formed me. It changed the way I saw myself. It changed the way I saw my world. It changed my entire worldview. And it changed the direction of my life. And the way that Casey [Hayden] and Connie [Curry] and Brenda [Travis] will—and Muriel will—are you going to talk?

Muriel Tillinghast: I don't know.

Judy Richardson: Oh no, you got to talk. So this woman was the project director in Greenville, Mississippi—one of three project directors—women project directors in... four, because Selma, four in SNCC. But in any event, hopefully she will talk.

But when I come in, it changes the whole way I see everything. So who I am at that point is: I'm coming out of Tarrytown, New York, which is only 25 miles north of the city. However, New Yorkers consider us upstate, because for New Yorkers, anything north of the Bronx is upstate, right? But we're only 25 miles north.

[I] had a wonderful childhood. It was the author Washington Irving's territory. So I went to Washington Irving Junior High School. I went to Sleepy Hollow High School. The football team was the Headless Horsemen. Go, Horsemen, go.

But where I grew up—happy childhood that it was—there were no Black people I saw with any economic or political power. And that is very important in terms of what draws me to SNCC. So I'm not coming out of communities like Brenda, where she sees African-American leadership. I'm not seeing that in Tarrytown.

I go to Swarthmore College, esteemed Quaker college in Pennsylvania, right? Full scholarship. One of eight students—one of eight African-American students—in that freshman class. There had been one Black senior—one female—one Black sophomore—female—and then eight of us coming in. The big push into Swarthmore: four boys and four girls, so that we would not have to date outside the community, right?

So while I'm there, though, there's an SDS chapter on campus, and they're doing forays into Cambridge, Maryland, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. And this is the first time I'm away from home. I figure, you know, who's going to know? I'll get on the bus. We'll see what's up.

I get there, and I find, first of all, that it is a local organization run by—among the community people. The main leader is a woman named [Gloria Richardson](#), who was a strong—I mean, I

always remember Gloria with these brogans. She always had jeans and a work shirt, and was ramrod straight. Just an amazing woman. I had never seen anybody like that in my life before.

Pop Herb, who was the funeral director and her uncle—he was really supportive of the movement. The local SNCC person in that, though, was [Reggie Robinson](#). And so this is my first real connection with SNCC at that point.

And what I come into, when I see SNCC, is a primarily African-American organization with white staff members who have the politics that allows them to want to contribute to an organization that is Black-led, basically.

I see young people who are the age of many of you here, who, at that point in their lives, decided that they would lead what a friend of mine calls a purposeful life. They made that decision—and it was a decision.

Now what I come into, though, is not just a political organization—I come into a culture. And others have talked about this culture. It is very much a family. I didn't realize until reading Joanne's [Grant] book on Ms. Baker, called *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*, how much that culture was influenced by Ms. Baker.

Now let me just say—Ms. Baker would not have known me from Eve. Truly. First of all, I was scared to death. Everybody—I mean, everybody I met in SNCC—knew more than I did. They were coming from local communities where there had been some historic continuity of resistance. They were coming from northern communities—I mean, [Stokely \[Carmichael\]](#) is talking about [Immanuel] Kant and [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel.

There were people who had come out of New York organizations where they had worked with [Bayard Rustin](#), where there was a political consciousness north and south that I knew nothing about. I did not say a word in staff meetings the entire four years I was there. Okay.

However, what was wonderful about SNCC was that—with Ms. Baker, with [James] Forman—you got a sense that they somehow knew the kind of things that you would contribute to.

So when I come down—supposedly with Reggie [Robinson]—and we were coming back from... oh, for SNCC people, it was the marriage of [Bill \[William\] Hansen](#) and Ruthie [Buffington Hansen]. Now I didn't know either of these people but I get to Cincinnati [OH], where they're being married, and for some reason her bridesmaid didn't show up. And I get poured into this skin-tight—skin-tight little [dress]—and I become her bridesmaid. I had never seen her before in my life.

On the way back, however, we come through Atlanta, and Forman finds out that A) I can type 90 words a minute and B) I knew shorthand. I never made it back to Cambridge. I become his secretary in the Atlanta office.

Now I'm going to do something, because what's interesting is that when—the way I came out of SNCC is so different from the way I went in. Again, I'm this little mousy lady. Never spoke. I grew and became more than I ever imagined I could be because of the culture of SNCC. And it was a culture which continues, so that all of us, whatever we're doing, we bring that culture into whatever the work environment is.

And you all know this—people say, "Oh, isn't that interesting that you—" Well, it's a SNCC way of doing that. And Ms. Baker absolutely influenced that environment.

Now I'm gonna—when Joanne—I don't know when I started—when Joanne Grant, who did *Freedom Bound*, was starting the book, she found in the King archives—which is where a lot of the SNCC papers are—she found some notes that I had done of SNCC committee meetings. Now they're in shorthand, and so what she did is asked me if I would decipher this shorthand.

And what's amazing to me is I had not realized how involved Ms. Baker could become if she realized that there were some problems occurring. Otherwise, absolutely, she would sit on the sidelines. She would wait for you to get an answer.

But if she thought that there was a problem—like what happens, you know, in 1960 at the founding between are we going to be direct action, are we going to do voter registration—she would insert herself.

So I'm looking at these— I just Xeroxed these minutes—and I'm looking at what is an Atlanta staff meeting, and I see she says something about—first of all, there's some problem with a local leader. And Ms. Baker says, "What machinery was set up last summer to help so-and-so to prepare?" Knowing, she says, that "some people just don't have leadership ability."

[Ruby Doris Robinson](#), who was larger than life—I mean, when I went into SNCC, Ruby Doris, who had done 30 days jail-no-bail in a South Carolina prison—when South Carolina was not the best place to be at that point. And so she did it. Thirty days jail-no-bail, which is one of the reasons that people say that she died so young and that she got the cancer that she got.

But when I first thought about coming into SNCC, people—[Penny Patch](#), as a matter of fact, who was at Swarthmore then—said, "Look, if you want to get into SNCC, you got to go by Ruby Doris." And so I had to prepare an application and stuff.

Okay, so Ruby says, in response to Ms. Baker's query about what kind of machinery was set up to prepare this guy—Ruby says, "No attempt to develop him. And in fact, we antagonized him

instead. We threw lots of college graduates into this project and made decisions without him,” she says.

And then later on we’re talking about some action within this local project. And Ms. Baker says—because she’s asking, what kind of preparation have you done to prepare for what you’re about to do? And she says, “Sometimes we must”—I’m going through the brief forms “must delay action one day in order to plan for it. Unless we have organization, we’re simply going to dissipate the energy with little result, comparative to the time and the trouble involved.” She says, “We also have to consider that working in this particular community is different from working in the rural South.”

Now, what’s interesting is that of course, for those of you who know Ms. Baker—in the 1940s, she is the field secretary for the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], a lone woman traveling rural Mississippi, Alabama, southwest Georgia, Louisiana at a time—organizing chapters in the 1940s, at a time when you could be killed for having an NAACP card on you. So a lot of folks would hide it in their shoes, in the back of their closets.

This is a woman who in 1957 is the organizer—helps the Black ministers, along with Dr. King—to organize SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, and becomes its first temporary executive secretary. Temporary—why? Because A) she’s a woman, and B) she’s not a minister. And they don’t play that.

And then it’s in that capacity, though, that in 1960 when the sit-ins jump off, she realizes there’s all this energy going on—that the kind of stuff that she had thought would happen, maybe in the NAACP, maybe in SCLC, but didn’t, because they were a little too rigid, and they were adults—maybe it would work with these young people—SNCC.

And then it's in the capacity though, that in 1960 when the sitters jump off, she realizes there's all this energy going on. That the kind of stuff that she had thought would happen, maybe in the NAACP, maybe in SCLC—but didn't, because they were a little too rigid, and they were adults—maybe it would work with these young people. SNCC.

So she calls all these folks together here to Shaw University in 1960, April 1. When Connie talks about those organizing meetings, it was full of energy. It was all these people coming out as local leaders. Julian Bond says he gets into a VW with four other people, and this little VW Bug travels up from Atlanta—from the Atlanta Student Movement.

How many folks were at—because I know Marshall is here too—and Matthew—how many folks were at that original 1960 staff meeting?

Okay? Debbie, Connie... Oh, tell me your name. Oh my God, yes. Hello. And you back there?

Audience Member: Virginia [indistinct].

Judy Richardson: These folks were at that meeting. I'm missing somebody—oh, no, okay.

And so there's all this energy going on, and what she says to these young people is: don't associate with this—with these adults—not “don't associate,” don't *link* yourself. Do not become a wing of these outer organizations. Because she sees this hope, this new, burgeoning hope.

This is the woman who is helping to guide us as we're going through. So when she's talking about this, she knows whereof she speaks. And what was amazing to me, now being the age that she was then, is that she didn't talk more often. Because I get tired. You know, you get impatient when you get to—say, just like, “Listen to me, I know what I'm talking about.” She never did that.

She says at another point in the same meeting, she said, “We must break through the pseudo-sophistication of college students.” Hello? Yes indeed. “And we can't do it with overalls.” She says—okay, I won't go through that.

At one point she's also talking about the mailings, because it's the minutiae—that's what amazed me going through these minutes—that there was a level at which Ms. Baker, and this comes out in the book too, she is paying attention to the teeniest, tiniest little details.

So at one point, somebody says something about, “We're having a problem in the print shop in Atlanta, you know, we're not getting—we're not getting coverage full time.”

She says, “Well, is there any record of the mailings that you've done?” And then she says, “No? Well, why not?” And then she says, “Okay, we need a shipping clerk.” And somebody else says, “Well, there are certain people who want to do the menial work, but we don't—also, we're not clear about who can do what and what.”

Ms. Baker says, “Well, perhaps a high school student could be the shipping clerk. A part-time job. But there must be an orderly fashion for planning mailing orders.” It is always about how do you organize administratively? And so she's operating at all these different levels.

At one point she says, “Pamphlets can be written at home. We don't plan enough,” she says. “Before acting, we must plan the pamphlets according to emphasis and the line that we're taking.” And then she says, “Busyness—busyness doesn't necessarily mean productivity.”

Now, yes. There's another point where—she's—not that—I'm going to move on. She's saying—this is another meeting—and oh, this is dark. How am I gonna read this? Oh, because the office was not being opened as quickly as it should be in the national office at that point.

And she said—in relationship to a rally that was being held—she said, “Someone needs to answer general information questions. We can no longer function on a freewheeling basis,” she says. And then another point, she says, “Give detailed thought to even the smallest things.”

Now let me just say—I didn't know that I was learning from her. I did not know that I was watching her. I don't remember these meetings, even though I took the notes from them. But what happened was that it was almost like osmosis—that there was the kind of leadership training that she always emphasized throughout her entire career.

And what it meant was that I'm sitting at one point in—I'm sitting at an *Eyes on the Prize* production meeting, right, and I'm saying stuff that I didn't even know I knew about how we operated.

So at one point I say, “Well, you know, she would never—she would never direct us. She would always ask us questions.” And she would say, “Okay, if you do this action now, what's going to happen in that community six months from now? What's going to happen a year from now?” Because it was always about the sense that we were just—the organizers. We were not the leaders.

The reason we were in those communities is to build local leadership that would survive even our deaths. And that was important. So we weren't just coming in, doing rallies and moving back out again. We were building organizers and leadership.

And what's interesting is that we were the age that some of you are now. To get somebody 17, 18, 19, to think not just about next week—yes—but next year, three years from now, was an amazing feat. And part of it was because she always reminded us of our responsibility to the local community.

You know that, in a lot of ways, they were at greater risk than we were. All that could happen to us is we could die. You know, which at a young age you don't think will ever happen to you anyway. But what they were putting on the line were the lives and the livelihoods of not just themselves, but their entire community. So she was always talking about that.

I think I'm gonna stop now, because I've gone on too long. But the main point is that she made us—hmmm?

Muriel Tillinghast: You're ok. You have about another three minutes.

Judy Richardson: Oh, if I have another three minutes, I want to say one more story, and then I'm gonna end.

And this has to do with the environment that existed within SNCC, which made you feel that you could do just about most anything. Which is very heady for somebody who's 17, 18 years old at that time.

Now there were a lot of people in the Atlanta SNCC office at that point. And so I was Forman's secretary. Okay, so I got this bird's-eye view of the organization when I first came in. So I knew

LCDC [Lawyers' Constitutional Defense Committee] which was this group of progressive lawyers out of New York: [Victor] Rabinowitz and [Leonard] Boudin, Mike Standard.

So I would have these conversations with them. And then I would know the folks in the field, you know. So MacArthur's over here, and everybody's over there. Well, all these people are over here. Okay.

So I got the sense of what was going on in the support groups. I got a sense of the southern organizers. But I wanted to go to the field, because that's, romantically, that's where the action is, right?

So I kept saying, "Forman, I want to go to the field. I want to go to the field." And he said—of course he needed somebody who was going to type the 90 words a minute. Okay? So he never let me do this.

Well, at one point he comes back from a fundraising trip, and I and other people in the office—Mary King, Nancy Stern, as I remember—anyway, he comes in from this trip, probably rather tired, and we are sitting in front of his office with placards saying, "No more minutes. We shall not be moved." And we're sitting down in front of his office, you know.

Now, what was interesting about that is that even within—I mean, certainly there was sexism within the organization. It was—hello, it's 1962, [19] 63—I mean, 1999, 2000, but has anything much changed?

But still, at that point, within SNCC, because we were the cutting edge, you could, as we used to say, "call the question." So when we said, "We're not going to do the minutes anymore," we didn't do the minutes anymore. The men started taking the minutes.

There were a lot of places like that where you could make folks realize the dissonance between what we said and what was supposed to really happen. And they would do the right thing.

And I never—I have got to say that I was as nurtured by the men as much as I was by the women. And the important part of that was that when I get out into the world, I expect that same kind of nurturing—and don't always find it. But that gave me the sense that it *could* happen. So thank you very much.

Brenda Travis: Oh, wow. Judy is going to be a tough act to follow. But she has all the history behind her—with her notes and stuff—and I have to rely on my memory. And you know, once you reach a certain age, your memory has a tendency to fail you.

As a matter of fact, I'm at that age where sometimes, in the middle of saying something, I say, "Ah! Gotcha!"

Anyway, my name is Brenda Travis, and I was going to try and remember the character in *Freedom Song*—the 16-year-old girl who... What's her name? The movie *Freedom Song*? Did anybody watch that? Okay, so this won't go off too successful.

First, I would like to really thank and show my appreciation to Ella Baker for being the founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, from which I got my story.

I was born in McComb, Mississippi, and I became involved in the Civil Rights Movement at the age of 16. I was arrested for testing the interstate commerce law in Mississippi, and I spent a month in jail. And then later, I spent six and a half months in reformatory school as a result of my civil rights activities. And there was a guy from Talladega College who came along, and he liberated me from the reformatory school. But that union didn't work out, and that was when I met Ella Baker. She became my legal guardian.

And having never ventured from my hometown of McComb, I didn't know how...well, during that time I belonged to the brown paper bag era, you know, where you didn't have enough clothes to own luggage, so you put your clothes in a brown paper bag. But after Ella became my legal guardian, she bought me a few things, and she decided that I should go to Palmer Memorial Institute here in North Carolina—Sedalia, North Carolina—just out of Greensboro. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but I attended there for one semester.

And I called Ella and I told her—I said, "This is so difficult for me." I said, "Because it's almost like being incarcerated again." And so it was at that time we decided—well, I had other friends that I had met. And she said, "Well, what do you want to do?"

I said, "Well, I don't know. I have no idea what I want to do. I have no idea what I'm going to do, but I know that I can't stay here."

So there were friends that agreed to have me live with them in Illinois. But I did keep in contact with her over the years. And then finally we lost contact, and I was so hurt when I didn't realize that she was dead until I think a year or two after her death.

It's difficult to express what I felt and how I felt, because I felt that she actually taught me things that a young woman should know, and things that I had not been taught even from my own parents.

And it was kind of cute, because, as I said, after her purchasing clothes and a suitcase, she told me—she said, "Well, the way you get a lot of things into a suitcase is you fold them like this, and then you take and you roll it real tight. You take and you roll it real tight, and that way you can get a lot of things into the suitcase."

But after conferring with her after leaving Palmer she always had words of wisdom. She would always encourage me to stay strong. And she told me the road to freedom was a long, tough,

tedious, and hard road. And she always told me to just stay focused. And those are things that I never forgot. I just wanted to say that I appreciate her, and I appreciate this university and this state for recognizing such a great lady.

Muriel Tillinghast: Okay, we're at the Q and A section. If anybody wants—

Judy Richardson: You've got to say something.

Muriel Tillinghast: I've got to say something? Well, this is really extemporaneous.

I met Ms. Baker in one of those interminable meetings. I remember meeting her in Waveland [MS], and somewhere along the line saying to my friend Cynthia Washington, "I'm going to go out and get some crayfish and beer. I'll be back." And six hours later, I came back and they were still talking.

And Ms. Baker and William Porter—I have this picture, that's why I'm remembering this—and several other people, and I sort of walked away and we had our own huddle outside in that first Waveland meeting so we could develop a position. Because we always talked about the profound things. We really saw ourselves as moving the earth and that we were the catalytic agents for that.

And if it cost our lives, we—and I don't say this lightly—we were prepared to put it out there. And in that regard, people made decisions about how they were going to go. And some of us went unexpectedly. We paid a very high price—a very high price—for our work.

I can't say that I met her on the road when I was doing PD work, project director work. I was pretty tough, and I ran a very tight ship. Had to. Didn't lose any people. That's how you counted your successes.

And we were able to deal with—because Greenville was the liberal area of Mississippi, although I ran two counties that were not too liberal. So that when we had to do the mock election campaign, etc., to show that if Blacks could vote, they would vote, Greenville had to carry the weight for other parts of the state where even participating in the mock election would get you killed.

Even when we were there in 1960, I can tell you that in the fall was the NAACP recruitment drive for their membership, and that was a very dangerous time. It also happened to be at the same time as hunting season. And so on the back of all the pickup trucks, you saw the rifles. And of course, there were lots of accidents during that period.

So you can imagine what Ms. Baker's life must have been like in 1940—traveling the back roads of the South as the field secretary. Had they known that in this woman, dressed in a suit with her

hat on—the epitome of ladyhood—carried the baggage of the movement? I mean, it was really quite—what is it—ingenuous?

I don't know if any of you have seen the movie *The Battle of Algiers*, but that's a movie you should try to see in your lifetime. And one of the scenes I'll never forget in that movie is the usage of women and children actually to carry the message of the movement, where the French were looking for men. And as you know, the French battled for Algiers vociferously. I mean, they lost. They took no prisoners. And I might say the South took no prisoners as well.

I had the experience—and maybe at some point during the conference, I will tell you—I ran the statewide COFO [[Council of Federated Organizations](#)] office. And as part of my work, I had the responsibility of doing a statewide call twice a day. In the state of Mississippi, we used what was called the wide area telephone system, which allowed us to rather cheaply call our various projects.

And sometimes we had as many as, you know, 15 or 16—or excuse me—as few as 15 or 16. Sometimes we had as many as 50, depending on the proliferation of projects from a center we used. We annexed part of CORE [[Congress of Racial Equality](#)]¹—Southern CORE—which was a little different and a little bit more radical than Northern CORE—functioned with us.

And we actually—the CORE people fed us when we were in the COFO office. We had no money. None. We ate when somebody came by to feed us. Somebody came by—the guy from the Southern CORE office promised to come by at least once a week so we could eat once a week.

We worked 18 hours a day. And at some point I closed that office because I said, "We can't—we can't run this. Just can't run it." We had the FBI, we had the State Sovereignty Commission. [This is] very difficult. This is a real sign that you're getting old, because I used to be able to tell this story without tears.

Ms. Baker rejoined my life when I got married and had my first child. In fact, she's the godmother of my daughter, Bayo. And I have to tell you—we had this African naming ceremony, and Baba[tunde] Olatunji came and beat the drums and called on the ancestors. And Ms. Baker was there. You know, she still had the suit and hat. She—just still cute. I don't know what's going on, but it's okay.

And from that point on, we remained very close friends. And in fact, we became confidants. And I spent most of her last years—we spent together, sitting on the couch, sharing a beer, eating boiled egg, and talking about the movement. She was a wonderful, wonderful woman.

So, with having said all that extemporaneously, I'll go into questions or comments anybody might like to—yes, go right ahead.

Connie Curry: I just want to say, I think that a lot of you all haven't seen *Freedom Song*, the movie that was made for television, and it's going to be shown here at the conference. And I really want to recommend it, and I want you all to look at that and know that that—who you recognize immediately to that 16-year-old—is Brenda Travis.

And I wanted to say that I remember back in Atlanta, Ella saying to me, “Do you know they put that child in reform school?” And I'm just really glad—because I don't know if we ever even met—but I'm just glad that Brenda Travis is here, because I remember feeling the pain for that 16-year-old in reform school for sitting in. And I want you to see her in that movie.

Muriel Tillinghast: Any questions, any comments, any thoughts, any ramblings? Yes?

Question: Would one of you speak for Ella Baker, 40 years later, to give an assessment of what we have accomplished—on the state of the African-American community today, 40 years later? Don't be shy.

Muriel Tillinghast: I never was shy, so I'll try to at least start the ball going, and then maybe somebody else can pick up.

I have to say, in the context of what we tried to do, SNCC was a very small organization, but it had dedicated membership. And when you have a dedicated membership, you can move all kinds of mountains.

What we didn't realize is that when you crawl across one mountain, there's another mountain—and it's even bigger. Nor did we think that all of the forces would finally gather to our detriment. And in many ways, we did—let's talk about what we did do, and then we can talk about the rollback in many ways. SNCC brought denims to the fashion world. Before SNCC, only farmers wore denim.

We opened up Mississippi. Mississippi was like a big prison, as far as I'm concerned. It was a state that had—even in slavery—had said, “If you can't deal with your slaves up there where you are, send them to Mississippi. We know how to take care of them.” So we showed that Mississippi was not insurmountable.

But I will tell you—from those calls around, my calls to the SNCC offices daily became, from that COFO office, became a death count. That was what I was getting. I was getting the names of young—particularly young Black men—who had disappeared, who'd been found.

You may remember that when [\[James\] Chaney](#), [\[Michael\] Schwerner](#), and [\[Andrew\] Goodman](#) [were located](#)—finally, when the government finally decided that \$10,000 [\$102,598 in 2025] was not going to buy information, but they had to go at least \$100,000 [\$1,025,987 in 2025] to pull that kind of information—and they started dredging the rivers of the state of Mississippi.

They found so many headless people they stopped dredging. It was even phenomenal for them. And the Army Corps of Engineers does not move easily.

We were able to raise the issue. As Casey mentioned, the beginnings of the feminist movement actually had very clearly their tentacles in SNCC.

We worked very hard. In fact, I remember sending two organizers to work with César Chávez in California at the time. I don't remember if you know—there still is a strike against grapes—and that was an effort.² At that point, Chicanos were laying down before the trucks coming out of the awful little town—I can't think of it—begins with a B, but it'll come to me. Bakersfield [CA]. Bakersfield, right.

And they were losing their lives. And Chicanos don't count, so we don't report that information. In any case, we sent two field workers to work on that behalf. So we began to forge alliances, which was one of the interesting things about SNCC. We were not territorial. We were quite prepared to help anybody going down the same road we were going.

We developed local leadership. Unfortunately, what happens in this country is when we got to the development of leadership, we had both the Democratic or the Republican Party to look at—and neither one of them was looking at us. So we were in many ways back to: what do you do with a national and an implacable local leadership that just won't yield any of the real substantive gains?

What else do you think we did before we started talking about what they did to us?

Judy Richardson: We changed us.

Muriel Tillinghast: We changed us. Yes, we certainly did. All of us are quite different from just about everybody else I know. Yes, go ahead. Calling on you. Yes, sister, go ahead.

Audience Question: Mississippi gave rise to a very strong and viable and fiercely independent Alabama Movement. I think we did something about culture, and our hair, and who we are as people. And that sense of equality—whether through the legal system or within ourselves, or interaction with people—

Muriel Tillinghast: On the business about African awareness, SNCC—oh, [James] Forman. Sorry, go ahead, Forman.

James Forman: I just want to bring forth something that you said about opening up Mississippi—a lot of other things. Because I was at a meeting during the Summer Project in

² The Delano Grape Strike was a landmark labor and civil rights struggle that began in September 1965 in Delano, California, when Filipino farmworkers from the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) walked off the job to demand better pay and conditions.

1964 in Senator [Jacob] Javits's house. A unified commissioner told me on this—and Roy Wilkins was there—discussing the civil project in Mississippi.

And you can recall, the NAACP was one of the co-sponsors of the Mississippi Civil [Rights] Project was the Council of Federated Organizations. So right now we're discussing Mississippi, and he said that he was very foolish to be in Mississippi.

Now this is the director—the NAACP national director—not just a local chapter. Because I said—well, he felt that we were wasting our time, because Mississippi should be changed from the outside.

And in my discussion I said, we've been working there. That change does not necessarily come from the outside—but a long discussion. And I said, "Well, look your organization is a part of one of the four organizations sponsoring the Mississippi civil project."

I said, "Well, how is it that you take this position and yet you're still on the sponsor list?"

"Well, that's the way it is," he said. "I mean, I just think the change should come from the outside and you shouldn't be inside Mississippi."

And then I said, "But I'm not going to withdraw from the sponsorship of the civil project." And that may help you in terms of reinforcement—except what we did do in opening up Mississippi helped to open up the end of segregation in the United States.

And another little point that I want to make—later on, Julian [Bond] and I had some disagreements about the city...

Muriel Tillinghast: And that was typical.

Question: Yes. Another point—since you're on this point about the political parties. One of the things that started sharpening the politics, but also breaking down the movement in Alabama, was in the summer of [19]65, SCLC got a grant—I think from the Ford Foundation—to do organizing in Alabama.

And the whole training staff was trained to go down and register Black people into the Alabama Democratic Party, which had a slogan that said, "White Supremacy for the Right."

And SNCC was trying in five or six counties—Wilcox, Greene, Lowndes, Sumter—yes, several—to build freedom organizations. Some of them survived, some of them didn't. Lowndes County became a national symbol because of such a wonderful success.

That summer I was trying to build some consciousness within this SCOPE group—Summer Community Organized and Political Education Project—and I couldn't get any hearing. Actually,

one of the few people in SCLC who would listen and talk about this was Martin Luther King himself. And I got stranded by their people—leading a recruiting project up north—and had to walk my way back down to Washington.

And Walter Fauntroy called Martin, and Martin told me to meet him at the airport. Gave me \$25 [\$252 in 2025] and a plane ticket to Atlanta. Said, “Give them hell in Arkansas. Go back there and try to deal with it.”

And I tried to reopen communication with SNCC and to kind of shake up some of this SCOPE thing—to be aware and supportive of SNCC independent work. But I couldn’t communicate with SNCC because things were breaking down.

And then I got thrown in jail for the rest of the year. And when I came back at the beginning of [19]66, almost everything was—it was a different organization in [19]66 than it was in [19]65. And it was hard to start over again.

But Lowndes County—which I guess people will be speaking about this week—was an absolute symbol of what it was all about. It was like COFO in space, but concentrated in one area, to where the people really developed. And it still survives. The name of the organization changed, but the same people still run the county now that began that organization back in [19]65.

Audience Member: The important thing that SNCC did, we broke down HUAC.

Muriel Tillinghast: HUAC. House Un-American Activities Committee

Audience Member: It was a [Joseph] McCarthy type committee that called everybody communists if you did anything for the good of the order. I remember—I can see Forman right now—and we’re 18 years old, Judy, right? We’re young. And this is a carryover from apartheid, to go back to the [19]50s and the Cold War and all of that. And we had consciousness.

I mean, I can never, ever finish talking about what SNCC did for us and for this nation as young people. And so we’re grappling and understanding profoundly what anti-communism is, and how people are being regulated. And we had some understanding of those who were blacklisted, who went to prison in the [19]50s and so forth, and we made alliances with those kinds of folks.

In other words, we probably, as young people, were the first of the anti-communist foray to go and fight this. And so that was tremendous, HUAC. The anti-Vietnam movement—

Muriel Tillinghast: SNCC had the first demonstration against the war in Vietnam. A busload of people from Mississippi came to the Justice Department and put it on the map that there was this war going on, and we didn’t like it, and didn’t want any parts of it.

Audience Member: On Vietnam, it was the FDP office in McComb that got upset because a young local guy who'd been working in the movement got sent to Vietnam, got killed there. When he came back, they tried to bury him in the official cemetery—the white cemetery, if you will—the people in McComb wouldn't allow him to be buried.

And at that point, people got a report and said, “To hell with this war in Vietnam—considering what's going on in Mississippi.” That's how that happened.

Muriel Tillinghast: I just wanted to say that in terms of some of the other things that SNCC did—we began to make forays internationally, which may have been one of the things that put us on the map in Washington, DC., on a very long desk, by people with lots of uniforms who made some decisions about “Oh no, you won't.”

SNCC had a trip—remember the name [\[Jaramogi\] Oginga Odinga](#)? Okay. African revolutionary. Went into various anti-colonial—had a visitation on the continent, basically hosted by anti-colonial personages.

In 1963, several of us got invited to other overseas operations—obviously dealing with student movements. I got invited, just through a mechanism that shall go nameless, to Southeast Asia, where anti-colonial activities were occurring. And you know that anti-colonialism activities were equated with communism—and you do realize that, that's how they, you know—

So anyway, I had an interesting debriefing at the State Department. But we shall talk about that at another time. And there were people who went to Japan. So we began to make those kinds of correspondences.

I'll just give you this aside, though, in terms of impact. I was driving down the street in a chauffeured car in the middle of Manila, Philippines, with this man whom I did not like. And we were driving—his driver was driving, I should say—and we were in the back. And we had been together several times, and I had seen his house, which was quite some house.

And he rolled the window up between the chauffeur and us, and he turned around—me, rather—and he turned and he said something that was really very peculiar, but it always stuck with me.

He says, “We are watching you.” He says, “I represent a group of people who are trying to get the Tagalog language back into our usage in the Philippines.” Filipinos are not allowed to use their own native language. They had to speak Spanish. And that was one of the steps toward self-awareness, self-determination.

He says, “We have been watching the student movement. And you are part of the student movement in the United States.” He says, “I'm really proud to have met you. And I want you to know that you are part of our combustion.”

And I really felt really good about that. Because—boy—the State Department wouldn't know about that. Later. Okay. Anybody else? Any other comments? Any other—yes, go ahead. Go ahead.

Audience Question: [beginning of question is indistinct] It was just a whole different transition in our thinking.

I'm still here to sort of talk about control, conflict, and change—and how we got enjoyment out of reading these kinds of books [indistinct] instead of...[indistinct]. I don't want to belabor the point, but the concept—I'm saying in terms of what we saw as entertainment, we transformed what was the real meaning of education.

[H. Rap Brown](#) has a wonderful speech on that, that you should hear—training or education, what are we—and making it relevant. These are choice words that SNCC introduced into the vocabulary.

And I would sit down and close that—even in the women's movement—the whole concept of choice came from the Black SNCC women. Because it was really about the pill. I think the slogan was “the pill.” And a lot of us in SNCC were kind of toying with the whole concept of abortion. And so we came up with that to tell people to take the pill was imperialistic, autocratic—something that we had been taught in SNCC, to fight against.

And that word “choice.” I think I have minutes or notes of that—and that people ought to have the right to choose. That was a whole concept that came from Black SNCC women—particularly women like Fran [Frances] Beal and some other women that I can name.

So if I could put it in a nutshell—and all the others—what's most important is that SNCC kids, with all of that risk—Black and white—transformed the whole thought process, as far as I am concerned, of this country and of the alliances that we made with others.

We transformed Dr. King around [Vietnam](#). We transformed the NAACP in terms of what its agenda ought to be. So SNCC, to me, was truly the revolutionaries of this modern period. I mean, on the same part as the 1776 Revolution. “Give me liberty or give me death.”

Audience Member: I would just like to build on the educational aspect that has just arisen. Because basically, our whole environment was educational. And it was not just the reading of books.

I remember many, many sessions in our apartment, sitting on the floor with all the staff who was in Atlanta. And we coursed and analyzed every political, social, and personal event of the day, for as long as we could stay awake. These discussions went on into the night.

And one little vignette in this famous apartment that we shared—was, we were all gathered there, and we heard this rap on the door. And it was the police. And here we had this integrated group.

And I remember Stokely and a couple of old men, I think, went for the window and went out the window. It was five o'clock in the morning. I don't remember the hour. But it was one of those evenings where we were talking about—I think that particular evening, we were talking about colonialism and religion in Jamaica.

Muriel Tillinghast: Yes Judy.

Judy Richardson: Yes, let me just mention too—we actually also had a research department, headed by this old, crusty—I think former Communist Party person named [Jack Minnis](#). And what would happen was that Jack Minnis—first of all, you would walk in this room and it'd be totally smoke-filled. But he would have all of these census figures. I mean—there's a whole thing around the way you got things factually correct, the way you interpreted the pieces.

So when *The Student Voice*, for example—and [\[Dorothy\] Dottie \[Zellner\]](#) and Julian will talk—[Julian Bond](#), who's now the Chair of the NAACP, but who was then our Communications Director—they will have a session, you might want to go to that, I think it's on Friday—where they talk about how they were the media arm of that.

But the main thing was that we never oversold. We never—in other words, you would say in a *Student Voice* report or a *WATS Line* report: three people beaten, church burned, so-and-so. It was never, the so-and-so and the Lumpenproletariat...(AUDIO ENDS) **CONTINUED IN PART 3.**