

SNCC 40th Anniversary Conference: Ms. Ella Baker's Role in the Founding of SNCC

Date: April 2000

Location: Raleigh, NC - Shaw University

Host:

[Martha Prescod Norman](#) - Early SNCC Organizer / Co-editor of *Hands on the Freedom Plow*

Speakers:

[Lonnie King](#) - Student Leader / Architect of the Atlanta Student Movement

[Charles Jones](#) - Founding Member of SNCC / Organizer of the 1960 Greensboro student meeting

[Joyce Ladner](#) - SNCC Organizer / Sociologist and Advocate for Black youth and women's voices

[Chuck McDew](#) – Founding Chair of SNCC and early student organizer

**NOTE: Video begins with remarks already in progress. **

Freedom Singer: ... about the sit-ins. I'm pretty sure a lot of people that SNCC know the song. It's called *Ballad of the Sit-ins*, was written by Guy Carawan.

[singing]

Time was 1960

The place, the USA.

February 1st

Became a history-making day...

Martha Prescod Norman: The next panel today is about Ella Baker and the actual birth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And three of the people with us on the platform were there for the actual creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

I'm not going to say much except to introduce them. Our first speaker is Lonnie King, who was the founder and head of the Atlanta Committee on Human Rights—one of the several student

groups that came together to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. We'll start with Lonnie King.

Lonnie King: Thank you very much, Mr. Norman. Mr. Chairman, Chuck McDew, my good friend Joyce, and my very good friend Charles Jones, and Connie Curry, and Charles Sherrod, who was our first unpaid field secretary, who created a revolution in this country by wearing blue jeans.

A lot of you people don't realize that—that Charles Sherrod was the first person to really start wearing blue jeans as work clothes, because he had to go down to Alabama, Mississippi, and other places to help us register voters.

And I see [Jim Forman](#) out there, and a number of other people. And I have nostalgia about this whole weekend, because I was in Atlanta two weeks ago for our 40th, and Reverend Dr. Otis Moss ended his eloquent presentation by talking about the fact that it's been 40 years. And I may not see some of you again. And you may not see me again. And because of that eloquent presentation—moving presentation—I agreed to come, to be very honest with you. Because we may not see one another again.

And the struggle that I have been involved in, and that you have been involved in—and I'm hoping many of the young people will become involved in—continues.

Background of SNCC in 1960—as you've already heard—on the 1st of February, four young men sat down in Greensboro [NC]. The following morning, I was at the AC Milton's Drug Store in Atlanta, Georgia, at the AU [Atlanta University] Center. I had breakfast every morning there with a guy named [Julian Bond](#) and a guy named Joseph Pierce. I had met Julian in the registration line at Morehouse. Now, I don't know how it was at your college, but registration was the longest thing—it was long. And you could tell your whole life story to the person behind you or in front of you.

So when I came back from the war, after having served in the Navy for a tour of duty, I met this young man—skinny young fella. We spent about eight hours together talking, and we became friends. And when it was time, I guess, for this movement to get started, I got the newspaper, and I said, "Julian—no, Joe—look at what they're doing in [Greensboro](#). We ought to do that here." And Julian said, "Well, somebody's gonna do it." I said, "Well, why not us?"

And from that, we went out, and we started organizing on these different campuses in the AU Center. Then I got a telephone call—not a telephone call, I got a personal visit from Dr. [Benjamin] Mays's secretary, asking me to come to the third floor of the administration building at AU for an important meeting at three o'clock one afternoon. And I learned that all the rest of our leaders were also having to come to that same meeting. Uh-oh.

So we—we walked into the room. Here were all the six college presidents, most of whom you read about in the history books—Mays and [Rufus Early] Clement and [Audrey Forbes] Manley and so forth and so on. And we really thought that we were gonna be—gonna be put outta school, also what we were doing, all getting ready to do.

They tried to discourage us. But when they saw that we were not going to be discouraged, they then had one suggestion. They said, "Well, why don't you do this? If you're not gonna stop, why don't you set forth a petition for why you are attacking this system—for historical purposes as well as putting the world on notice as to what you're all about?"

And so, with that in mind, we wrote something called [*An Appeal for Human Rights*](#), which many of you may have seen or read about in the history books. On March the 9th [1960], it was published in all three major papers in Atlanta. And the *New York Times* the following week published it for free for us—full page. But we set forth in there our petition, which represented not only what we felt in Atlanta, but we felt that this represented the state of Georgia, the South, and the nation.

And one of the lines that I want to bring forward to you on that is that we felt that the time was out for African- Americans—or Negroes, as we were called at that time—to continue to have our rights meted out to us one at a time. One at a time. And that the time for action was now, and that we were going to use every legitimate nonviolent means to bring about a change in this system—in Atlanta and in this nation. And we moved forward 6 days later to attack several places in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. And we went to jail on that issue.

While this was going on, Nashville [TN] was hopping, and Knoxville [TN] was hopping, and Birmingham [AL] was moving. In almost every state in the Confederacy—former Confederacy—well, I think I was right the first time, in the Confederacy, where there were HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities], young people rose up.

And what happened is that we were fighting this system concurrently all over the South. And the normal kinds of reactionary tactics that the guardians of the old order had used did not work. Because even though they put down Lonnie King, 18 years of age or 20 years of age, and had put down my home address—my home address might have been in California as opposed to there in Atlanta.

So what happened is that the normal way of stopping the movement in the South had been to kill off the leaders—either to shoot 'em or to make sure that they didn't have any jobs or so forth and so on. So therefore, that particular tactic couldn't work against us. And so I think that was one of the important things that helped us succeed.

I also wanted to tell you that the Atlanta movement said—we had a meeting—and we decided that we could not fight this battle without there being some organization. And contrary to what

you read in a lot of history books, I want to straighten out something for you. Julian Bond, [Marian Wright Edelman](#), whom I'm sure you've heard about, and I went down to see Martin [Luther] King in late March—middle March—right after those sit-ins, when he had just come over from Alabama, to ask him to call this meeting at Shaw [University].

Martin was reluctant, but I think we got to put the record straight. Martin King was reluctant. But he said, "Well, I'll get Ella Baker to do it," after we argued with him about it. Because Ella was his secretary at that time—executive secretary—and Ella was a graduate of this university here.

And so she called and got this thing set up here at Shaw. The telegram went out—and Charles, I think it had Martin's name and Ella's name, didn't it?—to all the leaders that we could identify from newspaper accounts. If we didn't really know all of you, we just read about you. And because the white newspapers were so good, it put your names down. We knew who to call. And so that's how you got here in 1960.

Now once you got here—well, before you got—let me also say this to you. There was a little bit of a discussion. Some folks thought that we shouldn't organize, and I won't get into all of that, but we felt in Atlanta that there had to be an organization. Because if you were gonna battle this system, you couldn't do it with unorganized troops. Let me tell you what was happening briefly.

Virginia passed the first anti-trespass law. And within a matter of a few weeks, almost every state had passed the same—almost identical word-for-word—law. Which meant that if you went into a lunch counter and the manager asked you to leave and you didn't leave, then the John Dame—the police—could come and take you away. Now that kind of system was there. So there was a need for a SNCC. You may not have called it SNCC, but there was a need for something where we had some coordination.

And [Tim Jenkins](#) just showed me the first issue of *The Student Voice*, which I'm sure he'll tell you about later on. And in that *Student Voice*, they talked about all these things—most of these things that I'm now talking to you about. But that's history. And Tim has a part of the history back there.

When I came here in 1960, I don't know which building we were in, but it was a little bigger than this, I think. Yeah, it was a very large place. And I met lifelong friends there. You came to Atlanta to start your headquarters there. Ed King, James Stembridge, [Connie Curry](#), [Ella Baker](#), my good buddy Donna McGinty—we all were there during that time trying to make these things go.

Let me give you my concluding remarks about the birth of SNCC and the idea, and why did it come about. I'm about to finish a PhD in history. And after having read all this history now over the last four years, I'm really beginning to get a better appreciation for what we did, you see.

Because we were so busy in 1960 until we didn't have time to think about the historical significance of what we were doing. Because we were so busy trying to get it done.

But when you go back and you flash back over history, you will find the significance of that movement. And let me just quickly say it to you.

There have always been some movements in America ever since Africans came over from Africa to try to get out of bondage. Contrary to what you've read in some of these earlier history books about [how] we were all happy and happy-go-lucky and loved to be in slavery, that really wasn't true. But what happened is that we—we did something that the historians called “slipping the yoke.” Have you ever heard something called “slipping the yoke”? All right.

And what that essentially meant was that we found a way, hundreds of years ago, to try and escape the bullet, to try and escape the whip, to escape the kinds of oppression that we knew the plantation owner was gonna put on us. So that's just what we did. So we weren't really happy—even though we might have been singing—we weren't really joyful. But we were conning the man.

However, while some of us were conning the man, some people were planning revolutions. And I'll just mention two for now, and then I'm gonna move on. Denmark Vesey in this next state down organized a really strong insurrection in the 1820s in Charleston [SC]. And he was a free man, by the way—a free Black man—but he was betrayed and he was executed along with some of his friends and, as they called them, co-conspirators.

Then 1832–33, Nat Turner, also in Virginia—next state over—organized a revolution. And he too was killed, as you know. And in almost every instance, we find that in history, that the people who tried to organize a way of getting out from under this bondage—they were killed.

And I won't go too much further on this end, except to say that in 1909, the NAACP [[National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#)] was organized with [W.E.B.] Du Bois and a number of other people there in New York. And they embarked on a legalistic approach.

Now why did they do that? Because it was safer to do that. If we had the mass movements, we found that the billy clubs and the guns were drawn, and we would be killed—whether it was a hundred, a thousand—it didn't matter. Kill the people who were trying to be the insurrectionists.

In the 1920s, after African-American men battled in the First World War—as Du Bois said, “Let's fight abroad so we can have some democracy at home”—our men came home. And they came home—some were killed in uniform. And especially the state of Texas—really bad on African-Americans who came back from the war.

So there was this thing: we cannot afford to actually confront this system the way it should have been confronted. But then a man named Mordecai Johnson, who was the president of Howard

University—Joyce's school where she headed—decided in 1922, 1923 that Howard University ought to become the law school to train African-American lawyers on how to argue constitutional cases on behalf of Black people.

Dr. Johnson's position simply was that white lawyers are well intended. But when the Supreme Court justices are asking them questions about "How does it feel to be denied these rights?"—many of them somehow never flunk the test, because they'd never been denied.

So he asked Justice Louis Brandeis, would he help him move Howard from a night law school to a day law school training civil rights lawyers? Justice Brandeis told him, "I will do it on one condition—that you not tell anybody about it until after I'm dead."

So they formed this union, and they put together Howard University Law School as a prime law school—day school. And you know the rest of it: Judge [William] Hastie, Spotswood Robinson, or you can call off a number of people—Thurgood Marshall. They went through there.

So the NAACP was prepared for this legalistic approach, and it was gonna take about a century to get us free, folks. We'd still be fighting.

However, along comes the Second World War. And at this time—if you ever get a chance, I'm digressing—if you ever get a chance to go to the Library of Congress, go and look at the NAACP files over there. They have millions of letters and correspondence over there.

But look at what happened in the forties. I just looked the other day while I was there. There are letters from African-American soldiers complaining about how they were being treated. One man charged about how he was shot in the leg by his commanding officer because he had a minor disagreement with him. Another man was in a traffic accident down in, like, Alabama with a white man. They took him to jail in uniform, beat him up, kept him in jail for six months—took off his uniform.

The man had to—he literally had to escape in order to save his life. And I could go on and on and on about the kinds of things that happened during the Second World War. What I did find through most of those matters, though, was that the African-American soldiers kept talking about the dichotomy of fighting for a democracy overseas while we're being denied a democracy in America, even in uniform.

Having said all of that, then, those men had children. I'm one of those children. So when they came home, they talked about some of this stuff. And so by 1960, I ended up at Morehouse College. And I was like thousands of other young Black kids around this country whose daddies, whose uncles, whose brothers had served in the military. And they came home talking about this dichotomy.

Now, there's nothing—one man said—on Earth more powerful than an idea whose time has come. And the time had come in 1960 for African-Americans to change the way they were trying to get their rights. No more meted out one at a time. You had to get a movement together and bring in as many African-Americans—and whites—bring in people of goodwill who wanted to change this country.

And if you look at this movement, you will see that it changed—as Anne Braden said already—not just this country. This movement changed this world. You can look at almost any discipline—whether it's sociology, whether it's public administration, whether it's history, psychology, you name it—1960 ends up being a watershed for reexamination of that particular discipline. Why is that? Because we caused people to think, rethink, and take a second look at what are we doing?

Let me conclude by saying that we had this meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, two weeks ago. And only 30 students came. Thirty. Now, we published a second *Appeal for Human Rights* two weeks ago—full-page ad in all the newspapers—updating where we are today.

And what we found when we did the research is that 40 years ago, 99% of African-Americans—or Negroes, as we would call them—are in the same situation. Forty years later, over half of our people are still in grinding poverty. The same situation, either the same people or their descendants.

So what have we done though? What has Lonnie King done for the last 40 year? I made a lot of money. I've gotten some more degrees, moved to the suburbs, so forth and so on. But I have not done what I should have done over the last 40 years.

And what I'm saying to you is that we all need to think about what it is that we can do as we go forward. But let me go a little further. Our university—Shaw University, Morehouse College where I went—our colleges have not kept faith with the movement. The young people who came through that 40 years ago revolutionized them too.

But I think that they had the responsibility for the institutional memory—to some extent, at least in the history department—to begin to say to the people coming through that you have two responsibilities. One, to yourself—to get the very best possible education that you can to prepare yourself. And two, to give something back. And the second part—to give something back—is what's missing.

My final point. Final, final point. We were so moved by this paucity of people in the audience who did not have gray hair, until we decided that we are going to organize the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights, which is what our group was in 1960, into a nonprofit corporation. And we are going to go and ask the AU Center schools—all of them down there that you know

about—to let us then begin to teach African-American history to every freshman class from now on, ad infinitum.

We believe that we can do this. And a lot of us have academic credentials, so the Southern Association is not gonna be upset. We've got enough PhDs and MDs and masters in all these different areas, so nobody's accreditation is going to be hurt by it. But we need to go back and recognize that benign neglect has not worked for the last 40 years. And we were young enough when we started this movement for us to still be available. For us to still be available. And one more time—thank you.

Martha Prescod Norman: Our next speaker will be Charles Jones, who already introduced himself to you. One of the first field secretaries for SNCC to enter some of the most dangerous places in the South. And he's gonna tell us more about the birth—the actual coming together of SNCC.

Charles Jones: A gracious good morning. And in this spirit, as I stand here, I want to give all of the respect to [Ruby Doris-Smith](#), to Ella, to [\[Eldridge Willie\] Steptoe](#). I want, for a moment, to radiate and reflect those giants who, when faced with the possibility of being killed, stood tall. I want to honor that because I know that only on those shoulders—only on those shoulders—do we not stand.

And while my emotions will communicate the depth of my respect and appreciation and love, I make no apology for these tears. I haven't cried for Ruby Dorris yet. I haven't—I haven't cried for many of our brothers and sisters. I was too busy surviving the trauma of war, where people were shooting at you. physically and otherwise.

I'll never forget Charles coming down to Dawson after the Klan had shot up in the house. I was by myself. I don't know if I told you this, but it was about two o'clock in the morning, and somebody shot at the car. And at that point, I didn't know.

And I had to call on whatever it was we called on Charles' grandma, who told me, “Boy, don't you—don't you sit there and apologize to no man for who you are.” I had to come to grips with that man who was gonna—if he had been in front of me—gonna blow me away. And that's [when] my confrontation with nonviolence in a most spiritual way came when I had to deal with what would happen if he was standing in front of me, and I was standing there, and my grandma was telling me what to do.

And I have to tell you—I'd have taken him out in a heartbeat. And I have to say this to you because of this: my grandmother would not have allowed me to have someone destroy her hope. Your mothers know what I'm talking about. Grandmothers.

That—is he gonna be the one? And Chuck, I never said this, and maybe it's a confession. But given that intellectual and actual confrontation, I made a choice that as between him and I, if I knew he was gonna kill me, I couldn't let him do it.

And we were going around Americus, Georgia, and all that—I don't know how I kept from being confronted by it, but thank God, all. But I want to honor now all of those greats. You all know 'em. You walked the back roads with 'em. You motivated people who were scared and who got beat or shot. You know that pain.

Thank you, Chuck, for that movie though, man—telling a story, man. I was just as proud. Let me tell you. I hope you all saw *Freedom Song*. It was an accurate composite of high effort. And 40 years later, seeing it on my television with some of my neighbors watching, I stood tall. I felt like all of the gods who had come—perhaps sacrificed. But I don't want us to lose, as we talk about these people that have gone on. Particularly Ella.

Ella is still in my spirit. So totally. I can remember when we were—Diane and I—we were at Marion. We would talk, and Ella would sit back calmly, hear each of us, but would not let us turn each other loose until we had come not to a majority—one more than—but until Diane and Charles and Chuck McDew and Tim had felt a common community. We would not go forward.

So, of the uniquenesses that that period brought was this sense of the Beloved Community. And Charles, I was thinking about this when Jim was talking. Charles Sherrod and I were in jail down in Rock Hill, South Carolina. We had chosen to go in at that point when the sit-ins had taken place throughout the South.

And we thought we needed a focal point to organize the efforts of the students and to dramatize that we needed to work together and to keep it going. And Charles and I had been conducting devotions. I see my brother still doing that. Bless you, man. Bless you. And we got put in solitary confinement because we were having devotions.

At that point there was a white section of the jail and a Black section of the jail, but it was a big compound. So we'd built up singing and praying. Charles, you know—Charles still does that so well, thank God. And it so infuriated the guards at the place, who were charged with not only keeping us prisoners, but keeping white prisoners and Black prisoners apart, and somehow maintaining some kind of deference to the white prisoners and trying to deal with us.

At any rate, Charles and I got put in solitary. Four or five days, wasn't it? No blankets on the concrete floor. We did have some of the brothers though slipping us food under the door. I remember several of those folks. And Charles and I later talked about how we were going to—the theological basis. He was in divinity school. I was too. The theological basis.

When we talked about Gandhi, when Charles and I were in the solitary—talking about Gandhi—not only was it a practical, tactical approach, but he and I felt that the only way we could change this—out—the only way—was to change it through the force of our very commitment and bodies, but also with the force of love. We believed that.

So when we left the main guard came up and spoke to us. And—what did he say? “You boys did pretty good. Oh, good luck to you.” This was the guard at Rock Hill. Really—it was the y’all-kind-of-chain-gang—who had been such a racist, aggressive person who, because of this energy, came over and shook our hand, actually. Didn’t he?

And I think that, to me, is one of the essences of how approaching this whole thing from a much broader spiritual context—Jim, and I totally appreciate it. I read again our calling statement, the preamble—that issue we wrestled with. And I do remember. I remember the session. I remember the words.

And so, when I ran them again the other day, I said, “Wow—all that.” And much of that was your own seasoned development of the concept. And I understand you also spent some time in India, so that this was not just an academic con. You saw some of that happen.

So, as I give these honorings—particularly to Ella, who helped us grow up, who helped us come to a point of understanding that the only way you’re gonna do this is by respecting the very individual person. And if that took you some time, then darn it, you stood there and you did it.

I also want to honor my grandfather and great-grandfather and mother. I came to this in a little different context. My father—who’s the youngest of 11 children—he was born in 1910.

All of them graduated from college. Hear me now, as you hear all this stuff about how Black people are this, that, and the other. My father’s family—his father was born a slave—married my grandmother—who was born a slave. Both were teaching at something like 12 and 13 years old, because they were the only ones who had learned to read in a community.

They came to South Carolina, set up a church, set up eight parochial schools. We are in 1870, 1880, 1890—eight parochial schools. I pastored, incidentally, at two of the churches. My grandfather—I was a student pastor—at two churches my grandfather set up.

So all of my uncles finished—Johnson C. Smith [University]. My aunts finished Barber-Scotia [College]. So by the time I came along—I mean, I didn’t have much of a choice. My family looked at me and said, “Of course you gonna contribute.” My grandma took me—“Boy, yeah—you the one.”

So for me, coming to the meeting here—for me coming to the lunch counters—I was just trying to say, “Elders, help me here. I’m here. I know I must keep the faith,” as you did. Through the

Middle Passage. Through the earlier part of slavery. Through all of it—they kept the faith. They survived. They taught us how to survive.

Of course we weren't gonna pick up a gun and take on a preacher. That was absurd. But we had a source of power so much stronger. And I now am sitting here, 20, 40 years later—have you any idea how nurturing this is for those of us who didn't know what we were doing but stood that day.

Who wrestled through, jumped off the cliff, and learned how to fly on the way down. Didn't know whether we were going to crash, but darn it, our brother or sister was there. And we were going to get that. It was no discussion, no articulation of anything about "Why am I here? Why me?" We learned to fly on the way down—and landed, generally, rather gracefully.

Chuck does that so well. He's still the chairman. So I come here as a continuum of the struggles of human beings—not only for their own dignity, but to assert it. Not in an arrogant way, but in an extraordinarily strong way that says: "You will deal with me, because really, I am the best of you you haven't discovered yet."

And I could not set my bar to be equal to you. I had to set my bar much higher. Because the manifestation of your behavior—not only slavery, sexism—you know it all. But if I'm only striving to be there, Jim, what do I bring to the discussion?

So that's what we struggle with—to bring the best of the human experience, the human capacity to each and every confrontation we had. And God knows we stumble from time to time. But I tell you—there were times we stood so tall. I'm proud of that.

So I'm honoring all of those people who came before us. All those folks who walked with us. Those of us who were here—but all of those who didn't make it y'all. In your own spirit, honor—honor that. Because this was rough. [indistinct] This wasn't just a nice intellectual discussion. We were dealing with the power—the total political and military power—of this country. So we fashioned a way to survive it.

Tim Jenkins, let me put a quick context of 1960. Tim and I had been working through the United States National Student Association. Tim was a national officer, indeed he was. And these were the bright minds—the presidents and vice presidents of the student governments throughout this country.

I put myself in nomination for the chairmanship of the Carolinas-Virginia region against the fellow from Wofford [College]—and won the thing. So I was the first chairman of the Carolinas-Virginia region of the National Student Association.

Tim, did you go to Europe? I went to Europe in [19]59. Tim and I went to Cuba in [19]59 and attempted to organize and work with students there. But by the time 1960 came, we had had some communications with a lot of our peers.

I was asked by the House Committee on Un-American Activities to come as a friendly witness. And the reason for that was that in Vienna, Austria, in 1959, I guess it was, I'd been in attendance to an international conference where the Soviet Union was trying to say to emerging African countries, third world countries, "We demand—we the ones—y'all don't, don't worry about United States—we the people you need to go with."

And I went with about 300 students from the United States and found myself from time to time, I guess debating was a good word—with Paul Robeson Jr., about not only what was happening in this country but also positive things, slavery, rebellions, other parts of the picture.

So the House Committee asked me to come, because they knew I was one of their boys. And the chairman said, "Mr. Jones, don't you agree that we are better than the Soviet Union because they indoctrinate their children to believe in communism?"

And I said, "With due respect, my brother, it is easier to be anti-communist than it is to be pro anything—but particularly pro-America. I see you as anti-communist. I haven't heard you say anything about my interests."

So let's discuss. And for the next two and a half hours, all mics, and all that—we went at it. I'd love to get a copy of that. One of the things that I've done is not to read much of what happened during that period, and I'm not sure why that is. I'm beginning to do it now.

Joanne—thank you for Ella. All of you folks who've done this—thank you so much. I've chosen not to read much of what happened. Might just be an ego thing. Maybe I want to remember my own experiences. And perhaps, if I can be honest with them, that is as an accurate—if not more so—expression of what went on than many of our historians. And there are a lot of folks who've written good stuff, but there's also stuff out there that has absolutely no resemblance to what I remember—and being there.

So now, I think we are probably gonna start writing some stuff. Ms. Davis, from Johnson C. Smith—Miss Davis is gonna help us perhaps put something together. And I appreciate that. I do appreciate that. So I'm gonna—I'm gonna do that.

I was coming back from this session, and my paper covered it. *Charlotte Observer* covered both when we were in Europe. Covered, "Boy does good, defends democracy." And we were coming—and the mayor, I ran into him on the street. And he said, "Mr. Jones, we are proud of you, man. You are a credit to the race." Yeah. "And you did a pretty good job for the rest of us, too."

I was coming back from the House Committee's testimony about four o'clock in the morning, up here near South Boston. And I heard, "Today, four students went down to Woolworth's at Greensboro, sat at the lunch counter and did not move."

And I said—yes. Finally, there was a handle. For all of us who had been trying to figure out "how are we gonna deal with this monster?" Obviously we can't take up arms. Obsolete. We can't. What can—? And when they sat out and said they didn't move, I said, "Okay. Party on. Let's jam. Let's put it together."

And I got home, went to a meeting of the student council, announced that I was gonna go downtown the next day. And I thought maybe that would be, you know, the core crew. There were 322 JCSU [Johnson C. Smith University] students waiting to go down and party.

And when we got on the street—interestingly enough—the guys at Greensboro had not said anything. They had done—they knew the press was reporting what and how and when, but no one was saying anything about why.

I ran into the mayor the first day. Same mayor. I must tell you, he kind of looked down and walked around the other side of the street. I spoke to him. I said, "Well, uh, brother, well—how you like that?"

It was that liberation of a spirit pent up by all of the history of my generation. We were ready. We just didn't know how. So from that moment on, totally convinced that Gandhi, as I read him, was a saint. I wasn't quite sure I could always turn the other cheek, but I felt satyagraha—the soul force—the force of the power of the spirit—to stand in front of the bullets, to stand in front of the machinery, to put your body in the machinery.¹ And I said, "Wow. Good stuff."

So we went about putting our body in the machinery. I had met Ella—I'm pretty confident—at a YMCA gathering before 1960. I'm sure I had. And there was something about this woman—always that big pocketbook, always that hat—very quiet. It was something about her quiet confidence. You know Ella—you never got the feeling Ella didn't know how it was gonna end.

You know? I mean, you always had the feeling that she was gonna help us pull it through. And when we stayed up all night at—Holland, was it?—when we were trying to get Diane and the group—the pure nonviolence, as it was called—and the voter registration together.

And there were only—Ella made us stay. And I say "made"—her quiet presence made us wrestle through that night. [Marion \[Barry\]](#) was arguing big and strong, and Tim. But before the dawn was come—not only did we look at each other and smile, not only did we embrace each other

¹ Satyagraha is a philosophy and method of nonviolent resistance developed by Mahatma Gandhi, rooted in the Sanskrit words *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (insistence or holding firmly to). It means "truth-force" or "soul-force," and emphasizes the power of love, truth, and moral courage to bring about social and political change through nonviolent means.

after some of the most vigorous discussions and disagreements—but we came out of that loving each other a lot more.

So by the time we really got into the reality of [McComb, Mississippi](#)—well, where McComb said, “What distinction between direct action and voter registration? Oh, y’all going down.”

And when we voted, it was \$50 [\$535 in 2025] a week if we had it, a person. Ten a week if we had it, a person—living off the land. Ella gave us this capacity to respect the dignity of each person. Whether we liked them or not was irrelevant.

And because of that, our honor—I suggest to you that SNCC and its Beloved Community—means that. Means that from the bottom of our [hearts]. We mean that we want a community where everybody—all of God’s children—are respected, loved, protected, and we’ll fight for your right to be. And I am still, at this point at 62, so blessed to have that total concept in my guts. That’s how I live—with all conflicts.

So by the time we got here—[Johnson C.] Smith [University] did its thing. We were February 8th—the lunch counters were open, I think July of that year. I don’t know the other timeframes of other places.

I know Chuck was down in South Carolina—Sherrod was still up at Virginia, in Virginia—Petersburg. So we didn’t know each other, but we knew the energy. And we knew we had a point of resonance, of knowing what that person had had to do in order to still be alive, number one, and have successfully carried that movement.

So when we came here—when I walked in to Charles doing devotions—I walked in, I felt that same sense: “Wow. Here’s some of these guys. Wow. And girls—young ladies. Wow.” These are some—this is some good stuff. I wonder how I relate to—how I fit in. But that was just embracing. That was just embracing.

So we had been given, from all of the elders, the wisdom of how to survive. The wisdom of the basic love and respect. The strength: you are somebody—and don’t you let anybody—I remember my grandma so well—she’s right here now—don’t you let anybody make you apologize.

And I remember several times we were faced with middle-of-the-night police officers, when we had to say “Yes, sir.” Probably the roughest thing I ever did. I did once between Albany and Atlanta—that night when we got stopped, wherever that was. The police officer was enjoying humiliating us, you know?

And I remember [he said]: “Boy, this your car?”

[I said], “Yes.”

[The officer said] “Yes sir.”

And my grandmother’s spirit was standing. And I’m gonna tell you, that was the roughest thing I ever had to do, Chuck. ’Cause my grandma was saying, “Don’t you do that.” But I knew if I didn’t—tactically—we’d have been strung out wherever. And it wouldn’t happen.

So I said, “Yes, sir.” And I know you all did that too sometimes. We ain’t gotta have no public confession. But if that was the only thing we had to give up—what the heck.

So we came to this meeting here—Ella representing the best of all of the elders. And I think the fact that she was a woman and didn’t bring a certain—that ego baggage that us men tend to—with having to win. I think because she was a woman, she understood intuitively some things we hadn’t even come to understand yet about life.

I think because she was a woman, she brought the other side of the mothers who saw their children separated during slavery and who yearned and who were in pain having lost some of their children. She was the embodiment of all those mothers that you don’t read about through that slavery.

But I want some of us to do this—who above all fought to keep their families together, even when they were trying to be sold away. And even when they were sold away, kept in touch with their children and family. All right.

Ella brought all of that in a quiet kind of dignity and strength. And I remember quite well—and still do—that she nurtured us into adults who were prepared and did take on the beast. And for a moment in history, there were the possibilities. The Kennedys picked up on it—incidentally, y’all remember all them rhetorics and all this—and [Lyndon B.] Johnson picked up on it. Heck.

But I wanted to say to you that I think I have been not only blessed, but seeing each of you and your faces and picking up your spirits again now. And of course, it’s a celebration. Of course, it’s an honoring of us and then the rest of us who evolved from that. Because but for key decisions—Joe, you know—we would’ve been bogged down getting you outta McComb, et cetera.

So I simply come as a conduit—as a continuation of the human spirit—the African side, the European side—determined not only to survive, but absolutely blessed to continue these relationships. God bless each of you. And in your quest, keep all this alive. Keep your faith. God bless.