

SNCC 40th Anniversary Conference: Chuck McDew's Remembrances and Ella Baker as Mentor (Joyce Ladner) (CONT'D)

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

CONTINUED FROM [PART 8](#)

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

Charles McDew: Thank you. When I first met Charlie [Charles Jones], [\[Charles\] Sherrod](#), Lonnie [King], and [Tim \[Jenkins\]](#), who had come—traveled—in Europe, I had never been out of Ohio. I mean, the only place I'd ever been from Ohio—outside of Ohio—was Orangeburg, South Carolina.

And I came here as a freshman. And by the time I had gone home for Christmas, I had been arrested like five times. My jaw had been broken, and my arm had been busted because it was the first time in this new world of South Carolina—having come from Massillon, Ohio. And it was a strange world.

And so when I went to Sumter for Thanksgiving, the only reason I went to Sumter is because they closed the campus down. You had to go. You know, “somewhere—you gotta get up outta here” sort of thing.

So I went to Sumter. It was the first time I’d been off campus since I had been placed at South Carolina State. And we went to a party, and my friends drank. At that time, I didn’t. So I was the designated driver after going to this party.

As we were driving home, the police stopped me. I had never been confronted by a police officer in my life at that time—16 years old—in South Carolina. And we started talking. And the officer finally said, “Where you from, boy?” I said, “Ohio, why?”

Not only that, I said “I’m from Ohio. You got the license—can’t you read?”

It was the beginning. That’s when he said, “What? Didn’t they teach you to say yes sir, no sir up there in [Ohio]?”

I said, “You gotta be jiving.”¹

It was an auspicious speech. That man hit me so hard. But from the steel mill of Ohio, I had a few tricks of my own. I was hitting and kicking as I went down. And before his fist left my face, I had struck him back. And his partner grabbed me, and we just got it on down there on the side of the road in Sumter, South Carolina.

They got the better of me—broke my jaw, busted my arm. And as they were beating me, I was saying to the guys in the car, “I’m going to get you.”

’Cause where I came from, you didn’t let your partners be whipped and not help. That, of course, was long before I’d ever heard of nonviolence. And I only knew of direct action.

So I got my jaw busted and went to jail. And when I got out of jail and went to get on the train coming from Sumter back to Orangeburg, the conductor said, “All right, get on back to the baggage car.” I said, “What? Not for \$7.82 [\$86.34 in 2025] so I ride with a bunch of old cheap suitcases and mangy dogs? There are seats here—I’m sitting here.”

I look back now and say, “Was I naive—or just a fool?”

And I think it was a combination. It was a combination. But out of that combination of things, I had that reputation of “that nigga’s crazy.” And so most of the students sort of passed me by at Orangeburg—say hello and make wide circles around.

¹ “Jiving” in this context is African American vernacular slang meaning “kidding,” “joking,” or “not being serious.”

So I finally got home, and my father decided this little venture—meeting your brothers and sisters in the confines of a Black college—this wasn't going to be for you. "I can't afford to have you there," the way he put it, "and besides, you going to be killed."

So my year of penance was to end early, with the understanding: "I'm taking you back to that campus. You stay there till I get there and come back and pick you up." I said, "Fine."

Well, on February 1st, 1960, there were sit-ins in Greensboro. Greensboro—Orangeburg is 80 miles from here. And a group of students came to me, and we were talking about, "Did you hear what they did up in Greensboro?"

I said, "Yes, of course I did."

Said, "We want to do that here."

I said, "Go ahead and do it. What's that got to do with me?"

Said, "We want you to be the spokesperson."

I said, "Y'all crazy. You all are out of your mind. If you're gonna put up with what them crackers are going to do to you, you do that. It's not my place to interfere. I got 20 more days in this place, and I'm gone. And I will never see anything south of Cincinnati again in life."

While I was reading—I was reading the Talmud.² And you all know all about that part of my life. There's a section of the Talmud that says: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself only, what am I? If not now, when?"

And I thought about that. And I spent the night thinking about it. And I spent the night thinking about my life. I was born the night Joe Louis knocked out Max Schmeling. Where? In Massillon, Ohio. There was jubilation.

I used to thank my father, when we got older, for several things—not naming me Joe Louis—and for every one of my birthdays, they had trotted out this old eight-millimeter film of the fight. When, in one minute and 28 seconds of the first round, Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, knocked out Max Schmeling—the Great White Hope of the Western world.

And what my father would say is, "Look at the crowd. Look at the crowd." And it was full of men with swastikas on. He said, "These are the people you going to have to deal with." And he used to call 'em peckerwoods all the time. Said, "These peckerwoods are going to make your life hell."

² The Talmud is one of the central texts of Rabbinic Judaism, comprising a vast collection of teachings, commentaries, debates, and interpretations of Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs, and history.

I'm four years old: "When we gonna cut the cake? When we gonna get the Kool-Aid?"

And he talkin' 'bout, "You have to do something for the race. You are a race baby."³ And that's the first time I ever heard anything—boy or a girl—this man talking about, "You a race baby." And I'm talking about, "When we gonna get the Kool-Aid?"

But that started very early for me, which taught me something later with my own child—that those early lessons come back and guide you.

That night, when I was thinking about these students from Claflin—most of them Claflin College—had asked me to lead them or be the spokesman in the sit-ins. All of those things came back—the pictures of the fight, Yankee Stadium filled with Nazis screaming, discussions with my father about, "You know, three Black people were killed in Detroit after that fight. Four Black people were killed in Cincinnati after that fight. And Lord knows how many they killed down South after that fight. And don't you ever forget."

So that night, after I thought about where I had come from and what I was supposed to do, I knew that next morning that I was supposed to be involved in this movement.

So I went back to these people and apologized for my being flippant and said, "I will do whatever I can to help." And joined the Orangeburg Movement for Civic Improvement. And was the chairman of the Orangeburg Movement for Civic Improvement.

And we were sitting in by the 6th of February—1st when it started, on the 1st, and on the 6th I was leading demonstrations—not knowing a thing about what was happening except they said, "If these white folks hit you, don't hit 'em back."

Made sense to me, because last time I—

[laughter]

I'll do that until we figure out something else—at least until I get enough of y'all to join me.

And we were having sit-ins. And by that first sit-in on March 6th, went to jail. That next week I was in jail. And by March 12th, led the demonstration of 1,500 students in Orangeburg, of which 1,200 of us went to jail. We were put into an outside enclosure and attacked with water hoses.

And then we got the call—I think I mentioned this morning. The only thing I knew about Dr. King was what I read in newspapers and magazines. But when they mentioned Ms. Baker—when I mentioned to our advisors in Orangeburg—the Ms. Baker letter came, asking us to this meeting. Ms. Baker sent the letter.

³ A "race baby" refers to someone born into and shaped by the Black freedom struggle—someone whose identity, consciousness, and purpose are deeply rooted in the historical and ongoing fight for racial justice.

And I remember Reverend McCollum telling me, “If Miss Ella Baker said that she wants you to do something, you can put your life in her hands.” And we talked on the phone after that, and we were sort of ready.

And when I came here, there was already a sense that we were, like Charlie said—I knew the names. I knew Charles Sherrod, [Diane Nash](#), Lonnie King, and Charlie Jones. And what we had shared was—I remember—the first thing we talked about was the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision.

And just about everybody had a copy of the *Jet* with the picture of Emmett Till. We had a common sense of remembering what was happening to our people with that picture of Emmett Till lying in his cloth and his coffin.

So we all started at a common sort of ground when we got here. I thought that compared with people like Charlie, who had been world-traveling and Lonnie from Atlanta—I had never been to Atlanta. And these people from Nashville—hey, great God, these were hot city people—hot shots.

And the thing that sustained me was [Jim \[James\] Lawson](#), because Jim was from my hometown. And I knew growing up that he had been in prison. And he had been in prison as a pacifist. I knew what a pacifist was. And I knew there had been hours of discussion about going to jail for ideas—for beliefs—because we had an example from our small little colored community in Massillon, Ohio, of someone who evidenced scholarship, courage, compassion, and commitment.

And it was again—someone who had gone to school with my aunts and stuff. And so the idea of going to jail for an idea was already acceptable—acceptable to me.

When we came up here, there were people who argued and discussed the whole nonviolent philosophy. Most of these people were from Nashville—Diane and Bernard [Lafayette] and [James] Bevel—and that whole concept of discussion, and discussion of a Beloved Community, was discussed.⁴

And I felt that we were already in it, because these people I saw already as kindred spirits and brothers and sisters in a common struggle. So we cleaved very quickly. We all came together very, very quickly. And we talked. I met Tim. And there was this feeling that we came from the same backgrounds, wherever we came from. For the most part, we were the sons and daughters of working-class people—working people.

⁴ Beloved Community refers to a vision of a society rooted in justice, equal opportunity, and unconditional love, where racism, poverty, and violence are overcome through nonviolent struggle and shared human dignity.

I remember—and if you had any sense of shame from where you came—when Tim Jenkins told me he was raised—his first crib was the bottom drawer of the bureau in his parents' bedroom. Yeah. They'd say, "And I moved up to the third drawer."

I said, "Well now, if that ain't upward mobility."

And we all had an appreciation—a thirst for knowledge—and a commitment to doing something. As Sherrod mentioned earlier, we didn't know what it was going to be, but we knew it was going to be something. And you came to trusting each other by spending time talking together, learning together, planning together.

I remember with pride when Jim got kicked out of Vanderbilt. He was in graduate school—in the school of theology there. And my thing was—you see, in a Christian school of theology they kicked him out. They ain't serious about [being] Christians. That was me continuing with my other rebellion. But that was—I hadn't seen him since I was a kid, but I had this feeling that we were kindred souls.

And then there were all these others, and we started in the early discussions—when we talked about the Student Coordinating Committee, the "coordinating committee," nonviolence was kept out of it. And it was then, in a concession—what Lonnie talked about—those purists, the nonviolent purists, that kept us together, kept us on the road.

And so it became a thing thereafter—a mantra—that we gave us: do this in the spirit of nonviolence and love. I had never told a man I loved him in my life. Wasn't too many girls I said more than "I like you."

And here we were talking about love—a word and a concept I use all the time now, because it was through the movement that I came to understand the deeper meanings of agape—and love of my fellow man, my brothers, and my sisters. And there came a time that I understood how you could love somebody and an idea so much that you would die for it. And that became the case with all of you all.

I remember when we first went—me, Tim Jenkins, Charles Sherrod, Charlie Jones—when we decided that we were going to drop out of school and spend full-time helping to build the movement, at whatever cost that was going to take. And we found out about that cost very quickly—when Charlie Jones hit a little Black dog owned by a big white lady, driving to Alabama. Came the first ideological split.

The ministerial stewards—Jones and Sherrod—were saying, the lady came—big white lady came out and said, "Oh my God, my baby's dog! He got polio and if y'all could just give 'em a few dollars to make him happy so I can buy a new dog..."

Jenkins said, “Dog ran in the street. We don’t have extra money to pay for this woman’s dog. Let’s get outta here.”

We’re standing out there debating. “In the spirit of nonviolence, we should pay for this dog. Should’ve had the dog on a leash.”

The big white lady got tired of our discussion and told us, “If you don’t pay for this dog, you will never make it outta Alabama alive.”

White folks have a way of defining issues.

So we moved to a different level. It became—no longer a matter of compassion—it became, “Sherrod, no. Let’s go. We ain’t gonna pay for that dog. Let’s go.”

I’m there like, “How dare she threaten us?”

These good Christian brothers done stopped talking about paying for the woman’s dog—which, next—and I said all along, “We shouldn’t do it.” And we prepared.

But we wouldn’t have left there alive. The woman was right. There was a white man who looked like old Colonel Sanders. Had a white linen suit—I remember that—had a white linen suit on. And he came out as this crowd was gathering around us in Pell City, Alabama, and he was the head white man in town.

He told her, “These boys didn’t do nothing wrong. I saw the whole thing. The dog ran out in the street, and they couldn’t help hitting it. So y’all just let ’em alone.” And told us, “Y’all better get outta town. Quick.”

And I remember we started driving—turning to the highway, driving towards Mississippi, outrunning—’cause people were getting in cars, coming behind us. I’ll never forget this. But when we got to the border of Mississippi, we stopped—scared—running from Alabama, but still scared to go into Mississippi.

I swear. I know each one of us who was in that car remembers that day. ’Cause Sherrod, too, had tried to use the bathroom along the way, and the man said, “One drop—blow your brains out.”

It was a terrible time. Speaking of time. Thank you, Martha. There’ll be time to continue this later. We’re trying to keep a rather close schedule. And I realize that I drifted off of it, but it was here 40 years ago that I learned the deeper meanings of comradeship and love and trust and a willingness to do anything to help bring about a change.

And I knew, at the different points along this journey, that we wouldn't all get here together. So I'm very happy and proud to be able to celebrate with you—and those of us who have made it on thus far. Thanks.

Martha Prescod Norman: I really wanna apologize for the time. I just wanna make sure that we all get some lunch a little bit later.

I think that [what] we're hearing in these talks is a different sense than the traditional—of what leadership can be. Of something that can be created by people themselves when they decide to act. Or that can be a quiet, unassuming kind of thing that really makes pivotal and important decisions that can change the course of history.

And right now, we'll hear from Joyce Ladner. And I'll say this—when we were doing the program, as you know, we were doing all this at the last minute and everything. So we were trying to put in people's—before their SNCC accomplishments and their present-day accomplishments.

And one of the reasons that we just totally gave up on the whole project and said we're just gonna put people's names in is that when we came to Joyce's name, there were so many accomplishments on both sides, we said, "Well—it'll take up half a page."

So I won't say anything else and let her come and talk to you about the spirit of Ms. Baker and organizing in Mississippi.

Joyce Ladner: Good— was about to say good morning—but it's good afternoon.

The war stories that I've heard from the three previous speakers remind me of a time back in the [19]60s when we used to hear people who came out of the [19]30s movement, and we used to say, "God, I'm so sick of the thirties." And I can imagine that some of you may well feel like my son and my niece—my sister Dorie's daughter—when we tell them, "Watch this program."

Recently, I told my son, "Watch *Freedom Song*. It's coming on." He said, "What is it? About SNCC?"

I said, "Yes." He said, "I already know all about SNCC."

"Mom, you've taught—"

I said, "You don't—you gotta see the real SNCC."

He said, "Well, what is this you've been telling me all of my life then? It wasn't the real SNCC?"

But I think that—first, I want to thank the organizers for bringing us together so that we can tell the war stories, because there are deeper meanings hidden within all of them. And the second is

that in remembering Ms. Baker, I think she would want us to remember a legacy of doing, because she was indeed a doer.

She was a quite eloquent speaker, but you can probably count the number of times that she was the keynote speaker. She tended to want to shy away from that role.

I'm going to make two points. One is to describe what Mississippi was like when Ms. Baker's philosophy began to resonate in that state. And why did it resonate? And then just say a few things about the lessons she taught us.

All of us necessarily have to be autobiographical in making our comments. And so, I was a high school senior—16 years old—in 1960, on Easter weekend, when SNCC was founded. Probably don't remember having read about it in the *Hattiesburg Mississippi American* newspaper because it censored everything. I do remember that it did carry some information about the sit-ins that were occurring.

Nevertheless, all of us—well, not all of us—but I was particularly blessed because I have a sister, [Dorie \[Ladner\]](#), who's coming later today, who's only 15 months older than I. And I cannot remember a time in our lives when race was not the central, most important thing that we focused on.

I have always been—and I say carried—I've always carried both the burden and the blessing of this strong racial consciousness. And perhaps it came from my mother, who taught us that you look white people dead in the eye and don't blink.

I remember all the salesmen or insurance collectors, people who came around our house, deferred to her. And she always told us, there's a certain way you carry yourself in order to keep your dignity, so that white people don't walk over you.

So when Dorie and I were at the grocery store—Hudson's Grocery—a block from my house, we were looking at magazines and Dorie had bought some donuts. And I remember clearly, because she'd probably just gotten her first bra, but we were entering puberty, and I was the younger and certainly had not yet bought my 28 AAA bra. That was the size—I remember clearly—of the first one.

And there's this man—this white cashier in the store, who—all four of his fingers on the right hand had been cut off, for some reason. And he walked up behind her and tried to touch her bra. She turned and took the bag of donuts and began beating him over the head.

And we ran all the way home and told Mother, “Mother, Mother, guess what happened!” And we told her, and she said, “You should have killed him.”

So we were taught to stand up for our beliefs.

So another thing she taught us—she becomes the plural because we learned this within this all-Black community called Palmers Crossing, four miles from downtown Hattiesburg—we were taught to stand up for our beliefs. And if you couldn't stand up for them, they weren't—Mother used to say that they're not worth very much. And if you can't stand up for what you believe in, beliefs can't be worth much to start with. But they taught us how to survive with dignity.

And that was walking a tightrope. They told us that we could indeed stand tall and have the courage of these convictions, and carry ourselves in such a way that if a white man makes a pass at you—and they did, they were quite plentiful—you stand proudly and don't even respond. Just walk away like a lady. And it worked.

We knew we couldn't turn around and beat too many people over the head with donuts for fear that we could have been killed. I remember some things that had an impact on us, that became threads throughout the larger society, but that followed us as well from the time of childhood.

The *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision—I remember very, very clearly—and how the local newspaper covered it. I read the newspaper. From the time I was very little, I used to spend a dime a day to buy the paper. And I know that the day the decision was handed down was referred to as “Black Monday.”

But we didn't get—there was no rush to integrate. No, no attempt at all to desegregate the Hattiesburg schools or schools anywhere in Mississippi. What we got were new public schools. The county built us a new school that we had always needed. And that was their way of staving off any attempts to say that we were unequal or had unequal facilities.

We lived in a very, very closed society, but it was possible to get certain information. I don't even remember whether I—maybe I heard national news on the radio. But we got a television station—WDAM—in Hattiesburg in about 19—it was the late [19]50s. And they were very, very racist.

But I do remember seeing—it was an NBC affiliate—so David Brinkley, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley. That was the one window of national news that we saw.

But what was most important was that we had this friend—an older man who came by our house all the time. We called him Cousin. Cousin—he really wasn't our cousin—but we called him that. Others referred to him as Dr. McLeod. And he was a race man.

He sold herbal medicine. Today he'd be en vogue. Back then, my mother said, “I wouldn't take anything Cousin gave you. Might poison you.” She said, “Those roots that he's boiling—I don't know what's in them.”

But Cousin was a race man. He was a member of the local NAACP. I was 10, 11, 12—12, maybe a little bit older—but probably not 10, but 11, 12, 13. And he brought us, weekly, *The Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and we got the monthly *Ebony* and *Jet*.

It was funny—I think Charles referred to it as “the” *Jet*. Black people in the South always called *Jet* magazine “the *Jet*.” And that is where we got information.

He also brought books. I read the first biographies about Black people. I don’t know where he got the books from, but I guess he ordered them. But he introduced us to literature on Black people. And he used to tell us, “You girls are going to have to change things. It’ll be your generation that’s going to change things when you get older.”

Several references were made to the veterans of World War II and I would add World War I. My uncle Archie went to France. And the French asked him if he would pull down his pants—according to him—and show them his tail, because they had been told that Black people were kin to monkeys that had tails.

He told us this. And I remember, as a little girl, sitting on his back porch when he talked about how disappointing it was to come back home and see how terrible conditions were. But going to France had given him a perspective that was very different.

The veterans of World War II especially were very, very important, because they were sent abroad to fight for freedom with the expectation that they were also going to reap some benefits. They came home, they saw the white soldiers reaping the benefits—but they did not.

And many of these people were the founders of the then-underground NAACP in Mississippi, throughout the state. I cannot emphasize enough how important the role of these men were. They were the ones who—I always felt that my generation was the one they felt would be...was ours was the generation that would change things. That there—the environment was pregnant with possibilities of all kinds of change. But it was almost as if they were on the precipice of it—but they knew it was to come.

I refer to ours as the Emmett Till generation, because I cannot think of a single thing that had a more profound impact on so many people who came into SNCC, who had seen the cover of *Jet* magazine—cover of [Emmett Till’s body](#)—where they didn’t do any cosmetic surgery to the face of him.

And in the 1980s, I asked Mrs. [Mamie Till] Mobley—his mother—why did you have him buried with an open casket without them—they pulled him out of the river, so he didn’t, you know—he did not look like anyone’s son. I mean, it was just an awful picture.

And she said, “I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby.”

And we were his age. We were—in terms of psychosocial theory—we identified with him. I felt personally that if they killed a 14-year-old, they could also kill me. They could kill my brothers. We knew that men were lynched, but we'd never known of a child being lynched before. And I believe that on a deeply, profoundly personal level, that had a strong galvanizing effect on all of us. The image is with me still. It became etched in our consciousness.

We were also very, very fortunate to have mentors. Eileen Beard was a member of our church. Eileen Beard was the sister of [Vernon Dahmer](#). Mr. Dahmer and Clyde Kennard, who lived in that same community—and [Medgar Evers](#) were the three mentors I had who were killed.

And I thought about this recently—that it's so ironic that these three men who had such a profound influence on my life were—all died for their beliefs.

Mr. Dahmer, Mrs. Dahmer, Brother Beard, and Sister Beard—as we called them in our church—and Clyde Kennard used to take Dorie and me with them to Jackson, to the state NAACP meetings, when we were in the [19]50s, when we were in high school.

I think mentors—you seek mentors out as much as they—and this is the message I'd like to give to the young people here today: That it's not just a matter of older people saying, “We want to mentor young people,” but young people also have to seek out the older people.

It's possible that the reason they took us—quite likely—is because they knew we had this interest in race. We talked about it.

And it was then that we saw people like Ruby Hurley—who was the first Black woman lawyer I ever saw.⁵ Probably didn't know one existed. She was the Southeastern regional director of the NAACP. So she would come and speak. Then Gloster Current, Director of Branches, spoke. But we saw these outside people coming into the state. And all the meetings were held at the Masonic Temple, up the street from Jackson State College.

We also organized—these same mentors, especially Clyde Kennard and Mr. Dahmer—helped us to organize an NAACP youth chapter in the very late [19]50s.

And Clyde was a very—how many of you know, heard of Clyde Kennard? And all the older people—but the younger people don't know him.

He came back home after having been in the military, having been a student at the University of Chicago. His father died, he came back to Hattiesburg to help his mama run the farm. He wanted

⁵ Ruby Hurley was a pioneering civil rights activist and one of the first women to hold a national leadership role in the NAACP. Often referred to as the “lady NAACP,” she served as the organization's Southeast Regional Director and was instrumental in investigating racial violence, organizing desegregation efforts, and protecting activists in the Deep South during the 1950s and 1960s.

to go back to college. So he applied to Mississippi Southern College, now the University of Southern Mississippi—twice, I believe it was. Two times, maybe three.

But at any rate, it was in the late fifties. And they planted some—they arrested him for having \$3.50 [\$38.64 in 2025] worth of stolen chicken feed in his car. Sent him to the Forrest County Jail, then sentenced him to Parchman State Penitentiary. Got cancer and was literally dying by the time Governor Ross Barnett gave him a pardon.

For something he never—I mean, it was awful. I have never cried yet. I still feel the tears that one day will come over how terrible they treated him. But he got out after the pardon, went to Chicago—University of Chicago Billings Hospital—and died within, I believe it was a month or six weeks from cancer.

He was a very quiet person who moved easily without your noticing his presence. Except there was a profundity there that—and I must confess also that I had a crush on him for some reason, even though he was like an older man. He was early thirties. No, but he was an older man. I was maybe 14, 15, and up to 16.

There was also a network of students in the high schools around. I knew Leslie McLemore, who stood up to criticize the organizing of this conference from high school, because he lived in Northern Mississippi and I lived in Southern Mississippi.

But what facilitated a lot of the younger people my age joining the movement or getting active in the movement—was that we were also active in certain high school organizations. Like, I believe you were state president when I was state president. Tri-Hi-Y—you were state president of Hi-Y.⁶ So we traveled around. I had been out of Mississippi but once, maybe twice. You'd go to New Orleans. But then—but most of us traveled within that closed circuit.

I often wondered—how did our high school teachers, and especially music teachers—teach? Where did they learn opera when they taught, say, Dorie, who had a great voice—taught her to sing opera? Or where did they get their books from?

Because our librarian had \$150 [\$1,727 in 2025] a year to buy books. And we got the hand-me-down used textbooks from the white schools. After they used them five years, we got them. And I bristle even today when I walk past that public library that was for whites only. Because as a child, I wanted more books to read than there were available—and they didn't give them to us.

⁶ These were YMCA-sponsored clubs that emphasized character development, leadership, and civic responsibility. Being elected *state president* shows that these students were already recognized as leaders among their peers.

Anyway, we went to college, to Jackson State, in the fall of [1960. And this again—I began to see some of those same freshmen in my class and some older upperclassmen that I’d seen at the Masonic Temple at the state-wide NAACP meetings.

One of the students—an older student—was [James Meredith](#). We used to sit—before he—he’s very strange now, but back then—I mean, he’s very, very strange. And because this is all on tape, I won’t say how strange he is. But he wasn’t strange then. And we knew absolutely nothing about the fact that he had applied to go to Ole Miss—nothing.

And I was as close to him as the other small group around him. He was an upperclassman, been in the military, was married. We could recognize who each other was in a way. I don’t know if I’m getting through to you.

As a freshman, every Wednesday afternoon was free time. So you could sign out, always, to go downtown. And that meant—to shopping. Dorie and I would go up to see Medgar, whose office was on the second floor of the Masonic Temple. Because, as I said, we had met him when we were in high school.

And one time we went in to talk to him. And he would always tell us what was going on in NAACP chapters around the state. One time he told us that there was going to be a sit-in. And we said, “Really? Can we join?”

We didn’t know what—they were gonna sit-in where, or when, or what. And he said, “Um, well, yeah, you can.” And we said, “Oh, that’s great. Tell us when.”

And he said, “I’ll let you know later.” And each time we passed by his office, he would say—it was vague. And you knew not to ask too many questions. Because having information could be dangerous to you—I mean, if you were ever pressured enough to give it up.

So finally, he told us that—he said, “You really can’t.” He said, “I would never be able to explain to your parents why you were arrested. That would be important to me.”

Because one time he had seen my mother in the grocery store in Palmers Crossing, and she’d given him some money and said, “Will you give this to Joyce?” He saw—just ran into her accidentally. He came on campus and found me and gave me this money.

But he finally told us that the sit-in is going to be on such a date. And it was within—I would say a short period of time. My memory is not very good—maybe a week or two weeks or so.

And he said, “What you can do is try to organize the students on Jackson State campus.”

And that was—talk about being ingenious. So we began to do things like—Dorie was president of the dorm council. So we had a meeting one night in the dormitory—regular scheduled meeting. Everything in Mississippi at the time was opened with a prayer.

She said, “You give the prayer.”

And I talked about, “Oh dear Lord, there are perilous times ahead. Please protect us as we go into this danger.”

And so the next morning, we were called before the Dean of Students—Dean Rogers. He asked, “What did I mean about the prayer and perilous times ahead?”

And most of you know Dorie—well, she is a hell-raiser. And the guys in SNCC were scared of her. And that’s why I say that the thesis about men dominating women in SNCC—well, they never dominated Dorie. She dominated. But anyway—that’s an aside.

I said, “What do you mean, asking me about what I said to my God? You have no right to question me about my relationship with Jesus.”

And Dorie jumped in and said, “As a man of the cloth, how could you?”

Because he was also an ordained minister. So we went off on him and walked out of there on him. And he said, “Well, you’re right, you’re right, you’re right.” And we walked out laughing.

We began to talk about the—what we actually did was just...you spread rumors so that they could never get back to you. But something is gonna happen, and we gotta be ready—have students to support it when it goes down.

What happened was nine Tougaloo students sat in the Jackson Public Library—sponsored by the NAACP youth chapter on the campus, and supported by Medgar. He organized it, actually.

And what happened is that—because they didn’t go to Woolworth’s or the Kress store—because they wanted to attack a facility that was—where taxpayers—Black people paid taxes too—tax-supported by Blacks.

What we did was—a number of us at that point got together and start spreading the rumor again, that couldn’t be traced back to one person—that there was gonna be a prayer meeting in front of the library at seven o’clock that night.

So what happened is that the guys gathered first because they had free reign. They didn’t have curfews like the girls and so on. All the women were to sign out to go to the library. So by the time we got out there at seven o’clock—Emmett Burns was also a minister and a student—was in the middle of his prayer when all out of the blue we heard this noise:

“Stop it! Stop it! Shut up!”

And everybody was looking, “Where’s this coming from?”

And it was Jacob Reddix, the president of the college. He ran through. He was absolutely out of control. He was in a frenzy and like, “What is this? What’s going on? Stop it!” And he—his arms were flailing. And one of my two roommates, Margaret and Eunice—he took Eunice by the shoulder and pushed her like that on the ground.

And then we turned on him. And the rest—they brought—they brought a lot of police on the campus that night. And the next day we tried to march down to the courthouse when the Tougaloo students were being arraigned. All I remember saying is, “Oh Lord, they’re killing us.” It was tear gas canisters going—being shot and they sounded like guns.

And I hid, and we ran into different people’s homes. And I’ll never forget—there was this older, this Black lady, and we were just knocking on her front door. I heard the radio, I reached a hand through the hole in the screen and unlatched it and ran in her house and told her what happened. And she said, “Come on in. Nobody’s coming in my house.”

The funeral home—some of the kids were hidden in the embalming room. I mean, it was—it was bedlam. But I’ll never forget—this lady kept ironing. And it was on the radio. And she kept saying, “It’s a low-down, dirty shame. These white folks are treating these children like dogs.” she was quiet, soft-spoken, and she was talking to herself, you know.

Eventually we got back to campus. They closed school early the next day and sent us home for spring break. And we came back—it was quieted down. They expelled the president of student government.

Now, we kept going to Medgar’s office. One day, he said, “I want you girls to meet Tom Gaither. Tom has come to help us get our freedom.”

And we said, “Oh, that’s good. How are you?”

You didn’t ask any questions. I didn’t ask him maybe—“What is he gonna do?” He was the CORE [[Congress of Racial Equality](#)] organizer who had come to organize Mississippi to get ready for the Freedom Rides.

That’s what Mississippi was like before Ms. Baker’s philosophy entered. There were a lot of people who carried on their work underground, lest they be killed. And many were killed, even without it.

Ms. Baker came into a state that was no longer totally closed, but a wedge had been put in it. It was being pried open, because there were the Vernon Dahmers, [Amzie Moores](#), Steptoes, Clyde

Kennards—I could go on and on—of the local men and women—Ms. [Fannie Lou] Hamer, my dear cousin [Victoria Gray](#).

These are people who had taken stands. So by the time the SNCC people came in, direct action couldn't be carried out in Mississippi. I mean—but we'd also matured to a point where we realized that eating at a lunch counter was not as important as having the right to vote. And we thought, naively, that if you get some political power, you can change things. We hadn't really progressed yet to a point where we understood that the economic power was very, very important.

Ms. Baker taught us several things. First of all, I saw her as a kind of mother figure. She reminded me, quite frankly, of my mama. I never, ever thought of calling her Ella—even today, if she were still alive—I mean, she'd be Ms. Baker.

Ms. Baker was kind of secretive. No one has said that, but I remember asking her over and over—and when I lived in New York in the [19]70s, when I used to go over to visit her, “Ms. Baker, tell me about your husband.”

It was not until I read Joanne's [Grant] booklet I got to know who Ms. Baker's husband was. And she didn't really talk very much about herself, or what she believed personally in. It would've been hard. She wasn't a talker about the philosophy of things, as to me, as much as she was a doer. I understood who she was from her actions.

I think she felt that we should—it was important for all of us to have a very—to be firmly grounded, have a strong sense of our identity, because it was the source of our strength. I think she believed that we needed to know who we were, because we were going through some turbulent times, and whatever strength you could derive from your roots. And that's why I believe, in part, the kind of circle and embracing of each other in SNCC as brothers and sisters came out of that.

She believed firmly in a democratic ethos. The concept we used to always say, “Let the people decide”—was very, very much Ella Baker. She also was anti-hierarchical. And don't get her talking about Black Baptist preachers. Now that's the one thing she would go off on.

She also taught me that courage is—and my mother taught me the same thing—is that courage is not the absence of fear. It is not the absence of fear. But that you keep on even in the face of—understanding, recognizing, and accepting that fear is a natural reaction to dangerous situations.

But despite it, it goes back again to the strength of your beliefs to be such that you risk something. A lot of us probably didn't think that we—and I've heard this more from SNCC guys

than from women—didn't think we'd live to see 30 years old. I didn't even think about the next month—not to consider a long-term lifespan.

She taught me, as she did the others of us, that we had to work with what we had. That we had to be resourceful. That whatever was available in the environment, you use as prudently as possible. And that you don't stop your work because you don't have a lot. I mean, the \$10-a-week check that SNCC sent out was actually \$9.64 [\$102.42 in 2025] after taxes.

People like [Sam Block slept for the first several weeks in his car in Greenwood](#) before he found someone who would take him in. But that was what was meant by being resourceful.

She very, very much taught us that we had to start with where the people are. That you don't go in and tell people that, "You're to do this, you're to do that," but to get a sense of the lay of the land and where the people are, and then try to begin to build the consensus. Help to work with them to build a consensus.

And she felt that leadership emerged out of the local people—that they already had it there, but you had to be able to—as a facilitator—to help bring it about.

She also taught us that we had to be resilient. And I learned this at the feet of my parents—that just because you fall down doesn't mean you don't keep getting up. I think one of the reasons the nonviolent philosophy was able to prevail for as long as it did was because we were taught to be tough. And to understand that times would get rough. That you get beaten up.

I was never beaten—never in a situation—but I spent a week in jail. And it wasn't easy. But we also knew that this is just part of what being involved in this kind of very dangerous social change work meant.

She taught us that we had to think on our own. I can't think of anything more important than her empowering us to be free thinkers and to be critical thinkers.

And that's why—do you remember that SNCC meeting in—I believe it was the spring of [19]63 or [19]64... **(AUDIO ENDS MID-SENTENCE - CONTINUED IN PART 10/11).**