

# **A Salute to Past Generations and Encouraging the Upcoming Generations**

## **SNCC 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference**

### **October 2021**

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#### **Speakers include:**

**Courtland Cox - SNCC Veteran, SNCC Legacy Project Chair**

**Dejuana Thompson - Founding Partner at Think Rubix, Founder of Woke Vote, President of Birmingham Civil Rights Institute**

**Betty Mae Fikes - SNCC Veteran**

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**Dejuana Thompson:** Hello, everyone. My name is [Dejuana Thompson](#), and I am the president and CEO of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. I am pleased to join [Courtland Cox](#) in welcoming you to this closing session of the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] 60th anniversary conference.

I honestly feel like this is an honor of my life to be here today. I know that you have enjoyed all of the conference sessions and all the different learnings and teachings. And here we are at this very sacred moment. Well, for well over a year, I've been able to enjoy the opportunity to call him Mr. Courtland. He hates it, working with Courtland [Cox] to bring together multiple generations to have a discussion about critical issues that are facing our country right now in our communities. We value these discussions and the exchange of ideas and perspectives that we've gained. We've fought a little bit, but we've learned so much, and we've grown together.

Now, Courtland has summarized these lessons that he's learned, not just from our last year, but from all of his years as an SNCC organizer and strategist, and to capture some of those, he has recorded them into a video talk, which we will see momentarily, and I cannot wait. After the video, I'll return and share some of my observations about where we are right now and how we can take this journey together, how we can take everything that we've learned during this conference and put it forward, to change the material conditions of our communities. Then we'll be joined by the dynamic [Ms. Betty Mae Fikes](#), who will use her powerful voice to lead us outta the conference and enter our individual journeys. And so now here's Courtland's video, lessons from Courtland.

**Courtland Cox:** Good afternoon. I want to thank all of you who registered and are attending the SNCC 60th anniversary conference. I also wanna spend special thanks to those registrants who registered over two years ago in 2019 to attend this conference and stuck with us through the whole time, through the whole COVID experience where COVID slowed everything down. Unfortunately, we could not meet in person, and we now have to meet virtually, but you are still

stuck with us. I also want to thank the panelists, the moderators, and the performers, all who said yes when asked to contribute to this conference. I am sure the contributions that you've made have made this a special occasion for all of us. I wanna thank the young people, especially today's activists and organizers, who came to us after we had to postpone the first conference, the in-person conference, and said, we need to talk to you.

We need to have intergenerational conversations. We need to understand what your thinking is about what's happening today, and for us to tell you what we see so we can move better together. I want to extend a special thanks to Michael Lomax of UNCF, the United Negro College Fund, and Russlynn Ali of the XQ Institute, who were early financial supporters of this conference. They are also panelists in this conference.

Finally, I want to thank the SNCC Legacy Project board of directors and the planning committee for this conference, whose time, energy, and whose tremendous efforts made this conference a success that would make all SNCC veterans proud. This afternoon I would like to take time out to talk about the lessons that I have learned from 60 years of involvement in the movement for human and civil rights. The struggle for human rights is multilayered.

And each generation may only have one or two layers of the problem that they are able to solve. And that, you know, for a young person, that is really a very difficult lesson to learn. I started out in the civil rights movement when I was 19 years old, and I felt my time and my energy were sufficient to make all the difference in the world. But I soon learned that after 60 years, some of the SNCC veterans have grandchildren that were the same age that I was at that time; it is a long struggle. And even though you make good contributions, and we did, SNCC veterans did make contributions in the area of public accommodation, in the area of voting, in the area of education, and in many such areas. But the struggle for human and civil rights is a long, long struggle, and we need to come to grips with that so that we do not get frustrated.

My first encounter with understanding how long the struggle was was the 1963 [March on Washington](#). The Kennedy administration wanted [John Lewis](#) to change his speech. [Jim Foreman](#), John Lewis. And I thought we were not gonna change his speech, Cause this was our speech. We were gonna do that. We were not gonna listen to the Kennedy administration, but [Bayard Rustin](#) brought [A. Philip Randolph](#) to us to talk to us. And he asked us to make changes to John's speech because he wanted the March on Washington not to be disrupted. He said to us that he wanted to have the March on Washington in 1941. The year I was born, this is 22 years later. And I am thinking to myself, 22 years, that is such a long time. But he, we decided because of his involvement, not only for the March on Washington but for the <sup>1</sup>Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to make the changes to John's speech.

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<sup>1</sup> Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters- The first African American labor union that was created to improve the working conditions of African American railroad porters and maids employed by the Pullman Company.

So, as I began to think about it recently, I'm thinking about something that happened 80 years ago, and, before that, A. Philip Randolph and others had been involved in engaging in struggle, trying to make a difference for human and civil rights. And so when you begin to think about it, even though I was a young man and felt that things needed to happen in a hurry, A Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin and others, given the perspective and telling us how long they were involved in the struggle began to make us understand that the struggle would be much longer than we thought it would ever be. I wanna talk about the second part of that statement. Multi-layered, Miss [Ella Baker](#) said to us when we were 19, 20, and 21 years old, that the struggle is for more than a hamburger; we were involved in the sit-ins.

We were trying to make sure that public accommodations were available to everybody. So we did not want restaurants or diners or whatever to say, No, you cannot come in here because you're black. We did not want black people to have to ride the back of the bus because they were black. So, we felt that we needed to take on public accommodations as a way of ending discrimination in the United States.

But Miss Baker, who understood more than we would ever understand at that point, said to us, you need to see that this is more than a hamburger. She was saying to us that the struggle is more than what you see right in front of you; whether it's a hamburger, whether it's housing, whether it's public accommodation, whether it's education, there are many layers to this struggle, and you need to understand that it's multi-layered, you need to understand that even if you achieve the things that you are trying to achieve, as we did with public accommodations, there's something behind that.

So, the struggle is almost like peeling an onion. Every time you peel that layer back, there is another layer under it. You have to keep going to get to the essential layer. One of the things that we used to talk about, and I remember [Stokely Carmichael](#) and I used to talk about it all the time, was that as we peel back these layers, the core layer was gonna be the economic discussion, but we could did not understand all of it.

We did not understand where we could go with this understanding, but we just had to continue generation after generation after generation, trying to do the things that were necessary, even if they were not sufficient. The second lesson that I learned is that many of the things that you and I see as a problem, others see as a solution; I think for the African American community, the big issue was that slavery was a problem.

Some Americans saw it as a solution. <sup>2</sup>Jim Crow was a problem. Some Americans saw it as a solution, but let's bring it to today. The question of the vote is seen as a solution, but other people see it as a problem because the issue of the vote has been central to our lives in this country since 1877; let's bring it to today. The question of whether African Americans are able to vote is

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Crow- A collection of laws, both state and local, that legalized racial segregation

central to the political dialogue that is happening today. Just as in the past, everybody realizes, some people realize that the voting of African American communities, which is a solution for them, is a problem for the other people. So my sense is that what we really now have in this country is that African Americans and other minorities began to expand their numbers.

Certain groups of people do not want them to expand their power. And therefore, we are now seeing that people are now engaging in voter suppression and nullification. That is a problem for us. That is a solution for them. And we need to understand that what we are seeing, not the individuals or the governor of Texas or the governor of Arizona or the governor of Georgia or Donald Trump, or whoever, are bad people; it's not about bad people. It's about who will exercise power, and people who have power now do not want to relinquish it. So they feel that anything that will give us power, anything that will give the African American community power, anything that will give people of color power is a problem for them and a solution for us. And therefore, they want to make sure that we don't have power, which is a problem for us and a solution for them.

So, my sense is that as we begin to look at what is going on, we need to begin to see that this is a struggle over power as we become more and more of the population of the United States. Another lesson learned over the past 60 years of engaging in the struggle for human and civil rights is politics, is the expression of economic interests. The vote is the currency of politics. In reality, the vote is used to determine two things: the direction and size of government and whose economic and political interests will be served. This is, again, hard because, generally, we think elections are about individuals, about whether this individual or that individual should be elected. It is about that. Yes, that is. That is part of it. When you begin to really look at politics, there are two really fundamental things that we should look at; the first is who will define.

The second is who will decide. Now the question of definition, the question of definition is really the legislative function that says, you know, what are the laws? What are the rules? Who sets the rules, and also what you go to jail for, and what you get taxed for? All of the kinds of things you need to have people who have a particular view of the world that says, these are the things that people need, and the government should be doing. What we have in the United States, in a lot of ways, is not; it's a pyramid and an economic pyramid. And the people at the top really set the political agenda. The fight for us really is how do we broaden that political agenda so politics really reflects the interests and the necessities of those further down the economic chain. So, my sense is that we need to understand that politics and economics are really connected, and our political interests and economic interests are connected.

So, therefore, the ability to have people and elect people in the legislature who have our interests, uh, on the legislative side is really important. And secondly, people on the executive side who really define, and when I say define in government, we are really talking about budgets. We're really talking about who gets expenditures and puts them into their area of interest. We're looking

at whether, in fact, we build a baseball stadium or we build affordable housing. We're looking at whether, you know, we have tax breaks for the rich, or whether, in fact, we have Medicare<sup>3</sup> and expansion of Medicaid.<sup>4</sup> We're looking at whether, you know, people who are wealthy pay taxes or whether we support the work that has to be done for climate change. So that, I mean, the vote isn't just about a vote. It's not just about, you know, electing an individual.

It's about exercising collective power to make sure that two things happen. One that our economic and political interests are served. And two, the government, the direction of the government, supports all the people, as opposed to just a few. Okay. Another lesson learned that really struck me as I've gone through life. It is always important while engaging in a struggle to control the narrative. If you don't control the narrative that defines the struggle, then you've lost the battle for human and civil rights. Fortunately, I think I'm just a gift and experience for SNCC.

What I think SNCC did in terms of controlling the narrative and establishing the narrative. And then some of today's activists. I think that in the early sixties, we established the narrative of freedom. And we kept saying that freedom, all our songs were about freedom. So that, I mean, so that the question of what was happening in our communities and what we talked about in terms of the world and what America had to deal with, who wanted to maintain segregation, is that they were acting as people who did not value freedom.

So that, I mean, so one of the things that we did, I mean, if you listen to the music, particularly the music from the civil rights movement, it all talks about freedom. So, we established freedom as a narrative and an objective that was very important in terms of rallying the black community, putting those who were opposed to us on the defensive, and making sure that the international community supported us.

And so, the maintenance of segregation became very, very difficult because we established the whole concept of freedom through our actions in our music. The second narrative, the second, I think, contribution to controlling the narrative that I think was, you know, made a big contribution in that SNCC made a big contribution to was I would say, black power and was interesting because it was not black power was a tremendous explosion in the black community.

But it was not; it was opposed by the white community, but at that point, it didn't make a difference. Let me just kind of give you an example in 1966, excuse me. In 1966, when black power was stated, we were all Negroes. We, I mean, if you called somebody black, it was, we were ready to fight. We did not wanna be black. We didn't wanna be African. We were ashamed of ourselves. We conk our hair to straighten it, to look like white people. We put bleach in our, I mean, [ ] and other kinds of chemicals on our face to brighten our skin. You know, we, some, if some people, went to the extreme because our broad noses put in closed pins on our noses

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<sup>3</sup> Medicare- An health insurance plan for adults 65 years old and older.

<sup>4</sup> Medicaid- An health insurance plan for low income individuals.

because we were ashamed of our noses. So there was, I mean, one of the things that we had in the sixties, you don't see it today, that we were ashamed of ourselves. We were ashamed of our people. We were ashamed of everything that was associated with the African American community.

### **Brief Video Playing**

Don't be afraid, don't be ashamed. We want black power. We want black power.

### **Video Ends**

When Stokely [Carmichael] talked about black power, and when we emphasize black power about black being beautiful, but black being worthy, black being all the things that are necessary for humanity. Then we now began to assert ourselves in a way, in terms of our own community, that made the difference in our community and made the difference in America.

So, while we didn't control black power, it wasn't a narrative appreciated by everybody. It was a narrative that the black community embraced, and it changed the black community. So today, if you call somebody a Negro, you know, that's viewed as an insult cause people wanted to be known as Black and African Americans, whereas in 1966, it was the absolute reverse.

So, it means that the sense of controlling the narrative is the frame of reference from which actions are taken. I also think that you know, looking at today, you know, [Black Lives Matter](#), Black Lives Matter also is a narrative that also was helpful because it began to put, you know, the lives and the situations of black people on the stage.

So my sense is that as we begin to take action, as we begin to engage and struggle, we always have to have a narrative that works and, first and foremost, binds the black community and other communities that are engaged in struggle. That's the most important thing. Secondly, begin to make sure that those who are listening to us understand our humanity and understand what we are struggling for. So that, in fact, they will join us as opposed to opposing us.

Mr. Say, ain't nothing, Mr. Do's the man, that is a guiding principle that I've lived by all my life. Actually, I heard this said in Mississippi, in 1964, in a mass meeting where a woman who was a sharecropper got up and said, you know, Mr. Say, ain't nothing, Mr. Do's the man. She captured the kind of things that SNCC veterans really were engaged in.

We weren't engaged in talking about this and that. We were engaged in organizing. We engaged in involving ourselves in the community. We're engaged in doing the things that we thought necessary and that we saw as necessary. So the guide, my guiding principle over the last 56 years has been Mr. Say, ain't nothing, Mr. Do's the man. And I hope today's activists and today's organizers have begun to understand that and use it as their guiding principle that Mr.

Say, ain't nothing. Mr. Do is definitely the man. Over the next 10 years, the SNCC legacy project will be engaging in a number of activities. The first is to begin working with today's activists and today's organizers to create the movement history initiative. It is a project to help those who are working today, who have been working over the last 10 years, to work with archivists and other people who understand how to organize history, to begin to tell their stories.

We understand that we have to tell our stories from the inside out and from the bottom up because if we don't tell our stories from the inside out and from the bottom up, others will create stories for us. We've seen that. We've seen how that goes. So we need to make sure that part of the efforts that we are engaged in right now to make sure that future generations don't have to go through what we went through is to begin to tell our stories from the inside out, what was the true story of the movement, who was engaged?

We need to talk about the sharecroppers. We need to talk about the barbers. We need to talk about people who worked in the factories. We need to talk to all the people who really made the movement happen. Not somebody in Congress. It was somebody who, in fact, hardly had a job, struggled to feed their families, and that they, because they believed in themselves and had a sense of themselves, were able to make history. So that is what we want to do.

These people, these young people, who've made history. These people who were disregarded, who made history, all the people who made history, we want them to tell their stories. So we are now working to make sure that that happens over the next 5, 6, 7 years. The second thing we want to do the SNCC legacy projects want to do, is once we have these stories organized, and once we have them digitally, we want to create a place, almost a digital shopping mall, where people can go and understand what has happened.

What is the history? How do people do what they need to do to make a difference? So the second project we want to engage in over the next 10 years is to create that shopping mall, where we have the SNCC digital gateway, you know, Civil Rights Museum Archive, you know, maybe the [Crisis magazine](#) from the NAACP [National Association of the Advancement of Colored People], maybe other organizations that in fact have been doing work in the black community, over the movement over the past 100, 150 years, that they'd be able to tell their stories.

So anybody can go there and see that our objective over the next 10 years is to build the infrastructure that controls the narrative. It is important that we understand who we are and that other people understand who we are. So SNCC legacy project over the next 10 years will be spending its time working with young people to help develop telling the stories and controlling the narrative. Now we are, and this is an optimistic statement because, you know, I'm 80 years old. And so, I mean, 10 years is an interesting approach. But I do think, as you know, that woman told me, that sharecropping woman told me in 1964, Mr. Say, ain't nothing. Mr. Do is the man at any age; you have to believe that you have to do and make a difference.

**Dejuana Thompson:** Wow. I am so full from what we just heard from, now I really wanna call him Mr. Courtland. Those messages for those of you who aren't able to speak right now, I think I wanna say, on behalf of all of us, thank you to SNCC as an organization and to the leaders, both who have gone before us and who are still sitting with us right now in the community and willing to teach us and to guide us. Thank you so much for your bravery. Thank you so much for your sacrifice, for your passion, and for your commitment to freedom, justice, and liberation. My dad is a pastor, and we say something in the church. We say, don't preach over the preacher. Now, he just preached in that last video. I know that when he comes to the screen, he will bring even more incredible words.

I heard so many things now I'm, I'm putting on a shirt. Mr. Say, ain't nothing. Mr. Do is the man. Now, I don't know if I could put a woman on there if that's okay, but I love, I love the idea that we have to transform the words and the, the passion that we have into action. And that's what we've been learning. That's what we've been hearing as a part of this entire presentation over the last several days. Another thing that I heard that I think is so incredible, incredible is to follow the money and follow the power, but also build the power, right? As you're following the money and you're following the power, you have to build those resources so that we can do the work to do two things: make sure that we have economic and political interest, and that we're stable in that.

And two, that we can be sure that the country continues to go in the direction that best benefits all. So we didn't hear anything else. Those two things should be our charge to action. And so there's a scripture that says Hebrews 15: 4, it says *"everything that was written was written for our learning. So that by reading it, we could have hope"*; everything that they have shared with us, everything that we've heard just in the last 20 minutes, it was written, it was done so that we could have hope that we can move forward.

So I sit here as a beneficiary baby of the hope of this conference, of the hope that I've learned as we've talked over the last several years with SNCC veterans and others who have poured into us. I sit here with the hope that there is still work to do that can change the material conditions of our community. And so with that, it is my honor, my privilege to bring to you a lifelong organizer, SNCC organizer, and strategist, and chair of the SNCC legacy board. Mr. Courtland Cox.

**Courtland Cox:** Thank you. Dejuana, I really, really appreciate those words because as you and I know, we've been engaged in conversations over the last year, and we know that again, looking at the, the woman the statement in Mississippi, we know that action is the motion for both men and women and that we've been having intergenerational conversations over the past year and we plan to continue. I really appreciate the conversations that we've been having. I would like to close out my statements today for this conference by saying that if we were there in person, if we had an in-person meeting, I would buy all of you around the drinks to celebrate the success of this SNCC 60th-anniversary conference. However, the pandemic demands that we meet virtually.



So, later today, I'll raise the glass to celebrate the work of the conference planning committee members, with the exception of two people who are all over the age of 75.

I'm sure they didn't want me to say that, but it is what it is. I will also toast the consultants for the conference, who were mostly young, gifted, and black, for making our conference ideas a reality. As you know, each letter recession started with Ella's song. This song was written by [Bernice Johnson Reagon](#), and it captured the words and beliefs of Ella Baker. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. Ms. Baker started her work with this belief in freedom nearly a hundred years ago. SNCC veterans started their work over 60 years ago with the belief in freedom, and today's activists and organizers started their work over 10 years ago with belief in freedom.

In order to succeed, today's activists and organizers and future generations of activists and organizers will have to believe in freedom until it comes. Over the past 60 years, the Emmett Till<sup>5</sup> generation, which SNCC veterans, belong to the Trevon Martin generation and the George Floyd cohorts have carried the burden and done the main work to make America a place where human and civil rights exist. For this extraordinary work. We will all be rewarded, and that reward, of course, is more work. However, in order to achieve the goals of the Declaration of Independence, where all Americans can look forward to life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, we must all continue to struggle.

Again, we who believe in freedom cannot rest. I wanna thank all of you who took time out of your busy schedules to attend this conference. I look forward to seeing you in person as we continue our efforts to make America a more democratic society. It is now my privilege and honor to introduce an SNCC veteran, who, and friend who've been engaged in the struggle for. Well, I'm not gonna tell you how long she's been engaged in the struggle 'cause I'll be telling on her. So I'm just gonna say she's a wonderful singer. She's a person who's kept our spirits alive, Mrs. Betty Mae Fikes.

**Betty Mae Fikes:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Good evening, everyone. So glad to be a part of this 60th anniversary in songs. And in spirit, I come to you today with the little clique of saying why I still do the things that I do today. The spirit of freedom rings out loudly. The songs came from the old Baptist churches in different churches out in the rural area where I came from Selma, Alabama. The freedom songs were taken out of this character. Gospel turned into freedom songs, but before then, they were singing things like, "*Oh, I need thee.*"

### **Betty Mae Fikes Singing**

That's how we would start the mass meetings today. I'm asked the question numerous times of what is missing in the movement today. I tell them the only thing that I'm finding while I am still working, but the spirit is not there. The moans and groans, someone died and paved the way for

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<sup>5</sup> Emmett Till- A 14 year old Black American boy who was kidnapped and lynched by a mob of white supremacists in 1955 after being accused of whistling at a white woman.

me. So I still have to reach back and say and sing the old songs, touch me, Lord Jesus, with our hand of mercy. So as we sing today, I want you to sing along with me in your homes and in the chat room, because we have come a long way, but we still got a long way to go. I'm still crying because I just left the grounds of [Harriet Tubman](#) and [Frederick Douglass](#) in Maryland. Also, [Gloria Richardson](#), I sung for those three, two weeks ago and hearing the stories of Harriet Tubman and hearing the stories of Gloria Richardson had me drinking tears for water, because someone died for me. So I have to continue this, put your hands together and sang, I woke up this morning with my mind set on freedom.

### **Betty Mae Fikes Singing**

We're in the struggle of our life right now; everything we have fought for, for 60 years, they still are trying to take it away. So while standing, listening to the office talk about Harriet Tubman. Only thing that I could hear when they were saying how she was hitting the head with the iron pike, trying to protect a little boy who was running from one of the slave masters.

### **Betty Mae Fikes Singing**

Can you understand that all those years, 1400, 1500, 1600 we are in the 21st century, but we are still fighting the same fight.

### **Betty Mae Fikes Singing**

Thank you. See you in the next 10 years. May God bless you in a mighty way because this little light of mine, I am going to let it shine. We've been in the storm too long. God bless you.