

The Importance of SNCC

A Discussion, 2008

In conjunction with the Ella Baker Tour (2008), [Theresa El-Amin](#) posed two questions:

How did your SNCC experience shape who you are today?

Why was the SNCC experience significant/important?

The following is a transcript of a Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement discussion.

Participants: [Chude Pam Parker Allen](#), [Hardy Frye](#), [Bruce Hartford](#), [Don Jelinek](#), [Mike Miller](#), [Willie B. Wazir Peacock](#), [Jimmy Rogers](#), and [Jean Wiley](#).

How Did Your SNCC Experience Shape Who You Are Today?

Becoming Free — Wazir

Wazir: How SNCC changed and shaped my life is that, number one, I felt free. I was part of an organization, but I was free to come up with ideas and strategies to try things that had not been tried before.

As Bob Moses would say — we would ask him a question, and he might have known some things, but he wouldn't allow himself to be put in the position as a know-it-all person. Bob would say, “*Sometimes you have to play it by ear.*” And what he meant by that is that: You got a brain. You can think. You're on the line. Your life is on this line. What would you do if your life was on the line?

So it shaped myself to thinking, okay, to continue doing what I'm doing and to act out my commitment and not run and hide and to strategically do certain things, I have to figure all this stuff in. How am I going to survive? Is it important that I survive, to keep on doing what I'm committed to do? And how do I do that without endangering myself too much, and endangering others that I'm asking to be involved.? And if I'm not going to do it, how can I ask anybody else to do it?

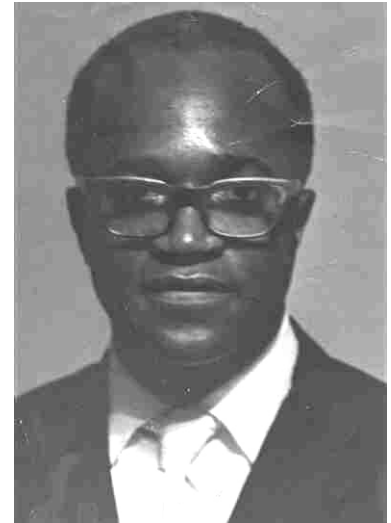
And I figured this is a thing that needs to be done. Somebody needs to do it. And I had heard the word before about what Truman said, “The buck stops here.” With an organizer, such as a SNCC person and the other organizers that was down [in the South], the buck stops here. So I had to figure out, late at night, my whole — for the first time in my life, I ate, slept, walked, and talked, Movement strategies. All the time I was thinking that way. How do we do this? How do we not lose anybody?

Jean: [Agreeing] You don't have an “organization,” a structure to defend. You're encouraged to go here and there and, like you were saying, figure it out for yourself. And for me, personally, figuring it out for myself was so liberating. I mean, I don't think I'd ever been told I could figure anything out.

[Laughing] Somebody always had an answer — whether I accepted it or not — but it was right there for me to pick up. I remember thinking how fun [figuring it out] was, and I will really always be deeply appreciative of that.

Wazir: It caused me to act. And I learned that this is not just about myself. This is something that I want to see happening. How do I get other people involved to help my dream come true, and translate it to them to show that — in their own language — this what they're talking about too. And finding like minds. Not to bring something, but to find something.

And SNCC brought me to a place where I could truly know that I could commit to something. And I find that throughout life now, that I work better — like the job that I have [now] to make a living, [SNCC] shaped me in such a way, I can't just have a job for a job. I could have the kind of job where I make way more money than working for Stepping Stones. But in SNCC, it wasn't about a job — \$9.64 was not about a job [SNCC workers were paid \$9.64 a week]. And so that shaped me in that way. I could not do just a 9 to 5 job, make a lot of money, and just be about a job. And so here I am, a “young” man with no retirement, nothing saved up, and ain't even worried about it, as far as the job that I got. So I've been thinking about what's the next thing that I'm going to do to bring this dream — I'll make things a little better. That's how SNCC shaped me. That's what it all kind of meant to me.



Willie “Wazir” Peacock, SNCC.

Moving From Wall Street to Freedom Street — Don

Don: When I went South, I went right out of Wall Street into the South. I was living in Greenwich Village, so I was living kind of a schizophrenic life, but nonetheless, I felt that it was fine because I felt all the right things. If we picketed Woolworth's, and I had to give up that wonderful ice cream sandwich that they used to make with those toppings on it, so be it. And if there was a march, I marched. And if there was a picket line, I was on the picket line. And if I could afford money, I donated it. But in hindsight, I didn't feel anything about the cause. I might as well have been watching Gary Cooper in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* about the Spanish Civil War. It was a kind of abstract humanity that I felt. When I went down [South], I felt extremely noble, that I would take a risk and give up the pleasure I had planned for my summer vacation. And for the first couple of weeks in Jackson, I really kind of felt that I had made a mistake coming, that I might as well have been on Wall Street handling a *pro-bono* case.

Bruce: You should explain that when you first came down you were not working for SNCC.

Don: Right. I was working for ACLU [as a three-week temporary volunteer lawyer]. And SNCC was not welcome in the office. Most of the Civil Rights workers were [considered to be] kind of in the way. They were excellent test case plaintiffs, and that was it. Except most of them got in the way of the camaraderie that the [ACLU lawyers] wanted to maintain with the [legal] community. That reflected very much how I felt. I even had a fantasy once — I still remember this — that I would go up to somebody important and I'd say, “*I'm a lawyer from Wall Street, and I know how to do these things. It isn't going to work well for you if you keep doing this. And can we just talk about this rationally? We should be able to figure out a way to make things happen.*” I really had that fantasy. And I sort of believed that if I could just get heard, then they would understand.

[But I became] alienated from ACLU, and in my last week, they really wanted to get rid of me. And so they sent me up to Holly Springs [with] a lot of stops along the way. And for the very first time, I saw poor people. I hadn't seen them in Jackson, and I hadn't seen them in anything I had been doing. I stopped off at a family, and they quickly mentioned that there was a lawsuit, and they really could use a lawyer. And I said that I'm not allowed to, I can't work on it [because] this county is off-limits. But I saw the children, and the children looked like the photographs I had seen of Africa, with their bellies extended and the flies on [their faces] too tired, without the energy to brush them off. And it suddenly hit me that this was real. It wasn't an abstract thought. And then of course, who was it that was behind all this work? It was SNCC.



Taylor, Don Jelinek, Stu House, Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (H. Rap Brown), Kwame Ture (Stokeley Carmichael), and Jimmy Lytle, at Selma, AL, "inciting to riot" trial. 1967

And by the time I got to Holly Springs I was thinking less of the lawyering that I was there to do, and I actually began to question how really important it was. I was very impressed with the SNCC work that was going on. Because it dealt with the people, and it cared for the people. And I know [I've mentioned this](#), when my time was up, my three weeks were up, Aviva [Futorian] offered me (challenged me) to come up [to Benton County] for a week as a Civil Rights worker.

And I came back to Jackson, and I told Bronstein, the boss, that I was going to do this. And his first remark — well, first he said just, "*Absolutely not. You can't. No.*" And I said, "*Wait a second. You have no control over me. I mean, I came for three weeks. I'm not getting paid. I mean, you can't really tell me how to lead my life.*"

And he said, "*Oh no, you really have a duty, because we have a working relationship with the white power structure, and you can tip over the line and what-not.*" And I refused, and I said, "*I'm going.*" And then he said something that was so astute. He said, "*All right. It's a deal, if you keep your suit on.*" Don't go into the coveralls. [Laughter]

He really was very smart. He totally understood what I planned to do. And he also understood how it wouldn't work if I kept the suit on. And once I was in the coveralls, all that protection of the suit left. And then came jail. And I wrote to family and friends, and I tried to explain that I was feeling kind of differently, and nobody understood it, certainly not by the mail. And then Aviva suddenly was leaving — I mean after [being there for] years. She was suddenly leaving, and I was offered the job to replace her. And I was trying to talk myself out of it, because it was so impractical. You know, I had a good career waiting for me, money, two divorces, three ulcers ... [Laughter]

But and on the other hand, I really had found something here, more valuable maybe than anything I'd ever had before. And so I accepted and stayed on, and I was never the same person again. It totally changed my life. Now it taught me one thing, that I don't deal with abstract feelings. Every morning I read the Times, and I read these terrible things that are happening, but they don't reach me. I have to live it. And that's the way SNCC differed from most of the other groups. SNCC was living it.

I mean, I remember my first night in a sharecropper's shack. I asked where the toilet was. [Laughter]

Jean: So did I. [Laughter]

Don: And then, I started looking for the switch on the wall for the lights. [Laughter] Now I knew all about poverty intellectually, but it had never gotten through to me.

At one point some years later, I was in a very hairy situation and Dorothy Cotton asked me how did it feel that you were likely going to die? And I said, *"I basically felt that I'd lived more in these years than I ever expected to live my whole life, so it didn't really matter. I was way ahead of the game."*

Opening Up a New World — Hardy

Hardy: I think SNCC answered a question for me. I think the Movement answered a question for me. I grew up in the South, Tuskegee AL. Growing up, the whole idea — if you weren't going to go to college, and I wasn't going to go to college at the time, my Dad was not one of the Black bourgeoisie — so as a consequence of that, getting away from the South was the greatest thing in the world, to me. And so I did that through the Army. The whole idea was, you go to the Army, you get out, you get a job in the post office, you move to New York or you move to Los Angeles, and you get a job, and you raise a family. And that was the greatest thing that could possibly happen to you.

[But] when I was in the Army, I kept reading about this Movement. I was [in Alabama] during the Montgomery bus boycott — I left home in the summer of '56 — and Montgomery didn't finish before I left. But I read about it a lot when I was in the Army, in Jet primarily. And I wanted to understand what this was all about, because it sure was not there when I left.

Immediately after coming back from the Army and getting discharged and moving to Los Angeles, I heard about the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and I joined that. It was also the beginning of my intellectual career. I lived in South Central L.A, in Compton, an all-Black world. There was that world, and then there was something called the Movement. And when I joined CORE it was mostly all white. There were a few Blacks. And we did demonstrations, we would sit-in around housing and all that kind of stuff. I divorced from my first wife who wouldn't go on a picket line with me. The first picket line I went on, she laughed at me. So this whole picket line, and all that stuff, opened up a whole different life for me.



Hardy Frye & Howard Jeffries, Holly Springs, SNCC.

And then there was this group called SNCC. We established the Friends of SNCC, so I came in through the Friends of SNCC door. I was going out selling buttons and posters and all that kind of stuff. I was seeing these [SNCC] guys when they came through Sacramento where I was going to school. And I didn't know the difference between SCLC and SNCC at that time, and then the '64 project came up. And I decided to go on the '64 Summer Project, and it was an amazing thing in my life, because I was doing just the opposite of what most people that I had grown up with were doing. If you made it to the Promised Land, you had to be a real fool to want to go back. [Laughter]

When I got to [Freedom Summer training at Oxford Ohio] I met all these people. I met Black college students, and that was very interesting, because prior to that I hated Black college students, because I grew up in Tuskegee where they made a big distinction between where I grew up and was raised versus on the campus. We fought each other. We threw bricks at each other and that kind of stuff (we threw bricks, they didn't). SNCC gave me a different view on what Black college students were capable of. I mean, Charlie [Cobb] and all these guys and [Lawrence] Guyot and all these guys I see — I wouldn't have associated with them before the Movement, because there would have been no connection. There was no connection there.

Chude: Because they were college kids and —

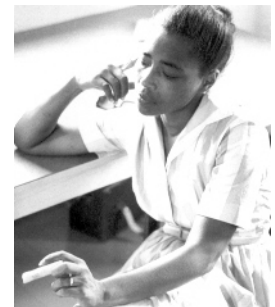
Hardy: They were college kids. They were “better than.” But I was going the other road which was a good job, you know, be in the Army, and all of that. And Oxford gave me, for the first time, a real strong feeling about this Movement that I’d been reading about in *Jet*. I saw people singing, this whole thing felt — it felt good. And it dealt with my fear when Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were reported missing, and also, not being afraid to go to jail.

At the same time, I also did something with SNCC that will affect me for the rest of my life. And that was that I became somewhat of an organic intellectual. We had all these books that they brought down for Freedom Schools, Marxism, and learning about the economy, and all that kind of stuff.

And then when I came back, I started reading people like Julius Lester. He used to write in the *Guardian*, and I had a stack of *Guardians* by my toilet, and I would read all these articles. So I got a real interesting education about things “larger than.” And between my experience in CORE and my experience in SNCC, I’ve learned how to articulate my position and began to argue and debate all these questions. All that has helped me to learn up. It’s helped me to be able to practice my profession of academics being a professor and teaching social movement at the same time, but always being able to relate it to the real world. Half my papers are written on the Movement. I mean, I could read Marx and European social science, and all that kind of stuff and learn from it, but whatever I’m talking about or writing about I always bring it back to what it meant for being Black, and my whole experience in Mississippi — in terms of talking to sharecroppers, in terms of riding on dirt roads, being in those churches.

So there I was, in Holly Springs [in the summer of 1964]. And Ivanhoe [Donaldson] and Cleve [Cleveland Sellers] sent me downtown to do this shit, dealing with white people. The first time in my life I had seen white people that were afraid of me, and it interests me like hell, because I’m just a nice guy, right? And yet somehow, what I was doing was threatening. These people were threatened by it.

The other thing that SNCC did for me was I became a part of a community that’s “larger-than.” Just like we are sitting here, there was a national community then. Wherever you went, when you traveled and had to stop, the first thing you would do is find the SNCC house, or you’d find somebody that was Friends of SNCC, or you’d call somebody you knew in Mississippi. And it created a whole different world for me which took me off the track of stabilizing a family. So I’d wind up not having — not getting married and having kids until I was 46 years old, when my daughter was born. So that whole period there, I was either working with the farmworkers or working with Mike Miller putting out *The Movement* newspaper, or arguing with Stokely Carmichael. All this kind of stuff, and you know, if I had a choice, I don’t think that I’d do anything different.



Victoria Jackson Gray,
SNCC & MFDP

I can understand these young people today, because they’re looking for the world that we had. I mean, it allowed me to go hear James Baldwin speak. To actually sit in a room with James Baldwin and talk with him. I mean, this is like a baby in a candy factory, that’s what it meant for me, to be able to [meet] white politicians and all these kind of people, and to [meet] Harry Belafonte and Sammy Davis and all these kind of people. If I hadn’t been in the Movement, I would have never had that experience, because there are tracks in the Black world out there. If you were in that kind of working class, taking-care-of-your-family, live-in-the-city [track], you don’t go far beyond that.

[SNCC] put me in a completely different world. And so I had to learn how to talk to the white world, the white and Black worlds, the upper class world, even though I could critique it. So the consequences, I think, was it allowed me to live a wonderful life. Because it’s kind of nice to turn on the TV and see

somebody you know. When I worked with [Congressman] John Lewis — shit, I was in jail with John Lewis — and I got to see him 40 years later, 20 years later.

Crossing the Divide — Chude

Chude: I want to [come back to] the overalls as a symbol, because I don't think people understand it today in the way Jean and Wazir and Hardy talk about the class shifts. And what it meant for people — Southern Blacks — who were on that college track to choose those overalls. I [attended] a whole debate at the spring SNCC Conference of 1964. And those Morehouse students, they were begging the SNCC people to please put on suits when they came. [Laughter]

Wazir: It was serious.



Delois Polk and Chude Pam Parker Allen. 1964.

Chude: I mean, this was serious stuff. It was exactly what Hardy was just finishing saying. It was that question — Are you going to step off the track? Whether you were Southern or Northern, whether you were Black or white, if you took that step with SNCC, you were agreeing to go off the track. Now Don didn't know when he went down there that he was going to get mixed up with SNCC and go off the track and leave Wall Street. And I'm sure there are some people that went back to more lucrative lives than others. But for anybody who — whether they literally put on those overalls or whether they figuratively did in terms of who they were — you never were the same again. And yes, at one level, it was making that commitment to the poor, but that sounds romantic, and it is easy to get into romanticism with that. What it also meant was a rejection of all those values that are [so much] worse today. I can remember concepts like conspicuous consumption. I can remember the concept of trying to be better than the Jones's. [For me] this is coming in from the white side, but at Spelman, it was all there, it was so clear.

Wazir: It was at Tuskegee too. They rejected, they wouldn't let [SNCC organizer] Frank Smith back in Morehouse is what I'm saying.

Chude: I remember Bernice Johnson [Reagon] and the others from Albany State were brought in to Spelman [after being expelled for participating in the [Albany Movement](#)]. They were allowed to come to Spelman. But there were still the values there, you know, the high heels, and the hose, and the nice dress. There was that thing, "*What a lady would do.*" And I mean, a lady certainly wasn't supposed to be going around knocking on doors in rural Mississippi or Georgia convincing people to vote. I mean, the young women from Spelman who made the choice to join the Movement, they were partly breaking with the mold, just as I was.

Jimmy: Jean, I've always enjoyed hearing about the reaction in Tuskegee to your natural hair style. [Laughter]

Jean: We're not putting *that* on this tape. But there will be people who will remember. Oh God!

Chude: What's interesting coming from the white Northern side, [is that] from about age of six on I knew I was to be a leader — I'd been identified that by teachers. (Although I've never been quite clear what that was supposed to mean because I was supposed to grow up and get married.) My mother was so proud that I was to be a leader, so what happened to me by going South was, of course, that I became a follower. And I had to be very clear about that. I mean, by being in Atlanta that spring I really got clear, even before I went into Mississippi, that my job was to be a follower. I didn't know enough. I was a Northern white. My job was to listen.

So for me, SNCC, along with everything else, provided leadership. And I think this is a very interesting contradiction, because SNCC on the one hand claims no leaders, but in fact all SNCC people were leaders. That's what was so interesting.

And their respect for the local people was one of their leadership qualities, that they were teaching the rest of us, right? But I didn't leave the South thinking, "I'll never be a leader." Of course not. I left the South with SNCC's admonition: "Go and organize whites!" I mean, that's what I was called to do. I accepted that, but I understood that I had to take on a leadership role. But remember, every day in that Freedom School, I was taking on a leadership role. I was following leadership, I had my mimeographed sheets that I read the night before, but still, when I walked into that classroom, I was the teacher.

And what was the main thing I had been educated about being a Freedom School teacher? The same things the organizer was. "You figure it out." Here's the basics, but you figure it out.

And again, I think what people may not understand today is, we didn't believe in the educational institutions. They didn't know more than us. I mean, they literally didn't know more about Black history. In Holly Springs, we were still [college] students, but when the professional teachers came down after [us] they were assigned to be our helpers. And nobody all of sudden dropped everything and said, "*Oh! You're the professionals. Tell us what to do!*" I mean, that's SNCC, you know?



Jean: Right, right.

Chude: And that didn't make any difference whether you're white or Black. That was a real radical break with how people who were sent to college had been taught. You were supposed to think that the people with the degrees and the teachers knew everything. And here we were in a context where we were encouraging the students to think for themselves. And the only way we could do that was to think for ourselves, and that's where I certainly agree with Hardy and Jean and Wazir and all of you talking about the way we changed. One of the ways we changed was once you start thinking for yourself — I mean you can't stop.

Bruce: You're in deep shit. [Laughter]

Chude: Yeah, there's no going back.

Affecting My Life — Mike

[Mike Miller was unable to attend the meeting. He sent in the following email.]

"How did your SNCC experience shape who you are today?" In addition to SNCC, I've had several organizing experiences in my life that deeply influenced who I am. The Berkeley student movement was one; directing a Saul Alinsky organizing project was another; my San Francisco organizing is a third. SNCC affected me as deeply as any of these.

On the positive side:

1. I learned an immense amount about oppression, social change, building people-power and the difficulties an organization like SNCC can experience.
2. “The Beloved Community” was real; there were deep personal friendships that formed in SNCC that carry on today; it was a profound experience of friendship and commitment.
3. Challenging race and racism became central themes of my life.

On the negative side:

1. I went through a period of being cut off by many people with whom I'd worked closely and who I thought were friends; it was very painful. I had many things said about me that hurt.
2. I still have a sense of wariness about organizational commitment because of the pain of the SNCC organizational commitment (the Alinsky one too, but that's a separate story).

Becoming an Activist in the Best Sense of the Word — Jean



Jean Wiley, SNCC.

Jean: In my own life over these years — I'll just say for the moment, because I really could talk about SNCC forever — it has influenced every aspect. There is no aspect of my life that SNCC has not influenced, in values, in hopes and dreams, in the way I treat people, in the way I treat strangers, and by further development toward a class analysis, which I certainly didn't have before SNCC.

I mean, in all of that, it made me an activist in the best sense of the word: curious, intellectually hungry for learning about, reading about movements, national and international. And there's just no aspect that it didn't touch, including being a parent. You know, you'd think it might be opposite, because so few of us were parents when we were down there at that time. But it actually became a way — has become a way of life. And that way of life sometimes saddens me when I see what's going on these days in communities all over the country, not just Black communities. But it also gives me a lot of hope, because nobody predicted us, and we rose to the challenge, and I think that can happen again any day.

Why Was the SNCC Experience Significant/Important?

SNCC, the “Talented Tenth,” and Young People

[Historic note — In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois wrote “[The Talented Tenth](#)” an article that urged the most capable Blacks to seek higher education and develop themselves into community and political leaders for the purpose of opposing racism and alleviating the suffering of all Blacks. This was a direct challenge to the self-help through manual labor, and accommodation to segregation, strategy advocated by Booker T. Washington (see “[The Talented Tenth Argument](#),” Gibbs Magazine for a brief summary of this debate).]

Jean: Well, you know, SNCC was never supposed to happen, really. In those days, a high school diploma was rare enough. Any Black student who was even close to getting through a college door — any college door — was one of the Talented Tenth whether he or she knew it or not. I mean, that's what

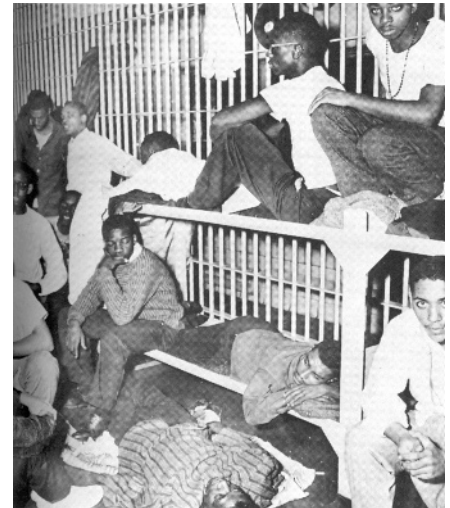
parents struggled for, to get that daughter or that son into higher education. It was the DuBois' dream come true: the Talented Tenth, the "race man" or "race woman."



Except something happened, something intervened to distort DuBois' dream. I suspect it was the peculiar funding of higher education for Black people. I suspect it was white philanthropy focused not on creating race leaders but on creating a buffer class between the larger white society and the masses of Black people, the class that would keep the masses under control. Of course, we didn't know that, it's not as though anybody told us that. And we certainly didn't agree to it. What we did know was that personal advancement and achievement were never going to free us, or anybody else.

Suddenly the decade of the 1960s dawns. Suddenly the Black colleges erupt with the massive sit-in protests and the massive arrests. These take everybody by surprise — including us. The Talented Tenth reborn and revived. The fact that SNCC happened at all is incredible to me, under those circumstances. Its coming together, its gelling, is still quite remarkable to me.

Again, coming out of the '50s, it was young people. SNCC was the first time, that I know of, where young people realized and started to use their own power, their own voice, their own movement. I mean, it showed us the importance of young people — from 15 up. And that's something that I hold onto today, because I'm thinking, *Nobody predicted the Black Student Movement which gave rise to all those other things.* So maybe there's something happening today that my generation doesn't know about but certainly ought to be much more willing to jump in and assist than the previous generation did.



I think we scared the shit out of [our parent's] generation. I really do. I mean, give them a break. We did. The fact that young voices could be defiant, and to say "NO" to established Black authorities beginning with our parents. And while that may have been somewhat true in white communities too, in Black communities, it was absolute. You just didn't reject. You didn't say "No." You might sort of disappear to do your own thing, but you didn't say "No." So that act of in-your-face defiance — hopefully and usually respectful — was a very new thing. And it was a thing — it had to break that stranglehold of the established versus the young voices. Something had to break that, and I think that SNCC did it. And if it could take credit for nothing else, that would be a tremendous success to have done.



Gracie Hawthorne,
Hattiesburg, MS. 1964.

Wazir: And I just wanted to make one comment — Jean said nobody in the Black community questioned the older people — not only just your parents, any that are older, elders — you didn't question. And such people like [June Johnson](#), she got a whipping every day for coming to the SNCC office, but she never stopped coming. She broke her mother down, and her mother started coming to the office. Lullabell said, "*June kept coming down here, and I whipping her every day. I had to come and see who you folks was.*" [Laughter]

Jean: The parts of SNCC that, like I said, still amaze me 40+ years later — the versatility. You know, the student movement erupts on the basis of lunch counter [\[sit-ins\]](#). Within months, [Freedom Buses](#) are being taken,

further and deeper. [They] start out in North Carolina, well that's the Upper South. Now you're going deeper in a matter of months.

Bruce: Right, like in [Cambridge](#), Maryland, in the struggle there that Gloria Richardson led, when they did house-to-house organizing and actually asked the people in Cambridge — the issues that the Black community in Cambridge were concerned with were housing and jobs, far more than desegregating the cafes and lunch counters, which is what the students who started that movement there wanted to do.

Jean: Yes, you suddenly shift [with] the people in Cambridge working with Gloria who say, “*No, no, no. What we need is housing.*” And you shift. And then you make that shift again when you go to Mississippi. That, I think, seems remarkable, even now.

SNCC and Issues of Class

Bruce: In thinking about the question: “What was the importance and significance of SNCC?” the first thing that came to my mind, was that SNCC, more than any of the other organizations, raised the issue of class. CORE did to some extent. Dr. King personally did to some extent. But SNCC was the one that really began to look at that intersection of race and class. It was SNCC who raised the question of social change for who? For whose interests?

SNCC was also the one, I think more than any of the other organizations, that raised the question of who makes social change? And who do you organize? You know, people used to laugh at SNCC — not us of course — but other people used to jeer at SNCC because the SNCC people wore those overalls. But the reason the SNCC members, and to some extent CORE and SCLC field workers did, was because they wanted to organize the sharecroppers, the day laborers, the maids, the people at the bottom of the society. So SNCC really challenged this whole question of — Does social change come from winning over the legislators and the judges and the business elites? Or does social change come from below, from pressure from the masses of people below?



Bob Moses, Julian Bond, Curtis Hayes, unidentified, Hollis Watkins, Amzie Moore, and E.W. Steptoe.

The other thing is that SNCC was extremely radical in the actual, technical sense of word “radical” — which means “get to the root, get to the bottom.” In later years, in the late '60s and the 1970s when people would say, “*Oh, I'm a radical,*” what they meant was that they're bombastic, that they say outrageous things, that they're very enraged. That they talk “bad.”

But the SNCC kind of radicalism was getting to the root of things, understanding things as they really are, looking at things outside of the traditional mental box. Both Don and Jean used the term the “white power structure,” well, that term was from SNCC — that whole concept of looking beyond racist ideology, looking beyond Jim Clark and Bull Connor and Governor Wallace to the economic forces behind them. Going deeper than thinking those guys are racists because they have racist ideas, and that's all there is to it. SNCC came up with the term “white power structure” because behind those ideologies, behind that rhetoric, behind those segregationist politics, there are economic forces. There are corporate forces. There are interconnected motivations of economics and ideology. And it was SNCC that brought that understanding to the Movement. Dr. King had a moral understanding of class, but he didn't begin addressing corporate power until late in his life. Maybe that's one of the reasons that they killed him when they did.

But in regards to SNCC, let me read something from *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana*. This quote is in relationship to the New Orleans protests in the late summer of 1963:

On August 9, four days before demonstrations were set to commence, Mayor Schiro finally agreed to some of the black demands: as of August 12 all racial signs would be removed from City Hall, black garbagemen and firemen would be hired within thirty days, and the city would not delay integration by appealing federal court orders. Lolis Elie, the principal black negotiator, was struck by the fact that the city's leading white businessmen, not the mayor, seemed to be making all the crucial decisions. "After we agreed," he later recalled, "I remember Darwin Fenner got on the phone to Vic Schiro, and he says, 'Vic, this is Darwin. Come on over here. I want to see you.' And in five minutes, here comes Vic. This agreement is shoved in his face and he signs it and leaves." By 1963 civil rights activists everywhere suspected that a "white power structure" exercised a dominating influence in virtually every community. Nobody did more to popularize this assumption than Jack Minnis, SNCC's director of research, who painstakingly laid bare the connections between politicians, the civic elite, and financial institutions.

I think that's something important that SNCC did.

Jean: I hadn't thought of that, but yeah. That's absolutely true.



Hollis Watkins & Arvenna Adams, SNCC.

Hardy: One of the reasons was that to a certain extent we had to because of where we worked. I mean, when you leave Holly Springs and go out to the field, we got churches burned down, we got all this shit going on, right? We were part of — we almost became a part of the fabric of those communities, to a certain extent. And so you knew who owned the land. You knew. You saw people. You saw people hungry. I go out one night and I tell people, "We're going to talk about voter registration." And we go back, me and Pat, and they've burned these people's houses. They burned these people's church down. See, that's different from leading a demonstration. That's very different. You [have to] know who Mr. So-and-so is. The Sheriff in Holly Springs, [Flick] Ash. We talked to him. We knew where he was buying his [illegal] corn liquor from. We knew that because we planted ourselves inside those communities. You can't do that from the outside.

Wazir: You cannot. [The local people] knew the power structure, and they didn't say it the way we're saying it — in those terms — but those were the people that would tell us, "If you want Sissy's thing to happen, you got to talk to so-and-so." Because Chief Larry, he's up there. You got to go talk to so-and-so. And we do that, and the next thing we know, Chief Larry was singing a different song, you know? On that particular case. If SNCC hadn't known about white power structure, with our dedication and the way we went into communities, we would have found out that there was a white power structure. And like you said, you can't do that from the outside. These are the kinds of things that the power structure tries to keep hidden from the masses, that there is power behind the throne.

Jimmy: Like in Tuskegee, the main person in the so-called white power structure —

Hardy: Parker and Thompson. These were the two.

Jimmy: Well, wherever I been, we were able to use some of the local Black people to let us know who that person was. And in Tuskegee, it was Parker, the banker. In Lowndes County, it was a guy named Carl Goson. He owned more land than anybody else in the county. He had more political contacts that anybody else in the county. Because a lot of the people who were connected politically in Birmingham and Montgomery were friends of Carl Goson. So they said, if Carl Goson wanted something, you know, he's going to get it.



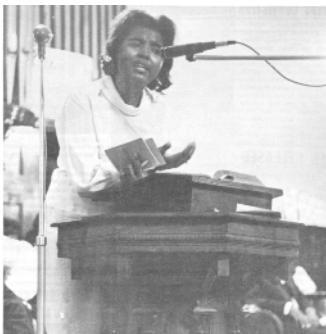
Betty Poole, SNCC & NAACP.

Hardy: SNCC gave me an education about the South. I've gotten in trouble writing about this stuff, when I talk about having a class analysis, and people say, *"Well, if you don't talk about race..."* But they didn't know that you can be raised in Tuskegee, and race just didn't matter.

Jean: Exactly.

Wazir: It was class. The first time in my life I saw Black people with maids and butlers — in Tuskegee.

SNCC's Concept of Leadership



Prathia Hall, SNCC.

Bruce: SNCC used to say, *"We have no leaders."* But of course that was not literally true, SNCC itself was a kind of leader, and within SNCC individuals played leadership roles. What SNCC's "no leaders" position meant was no self-promoting, no *"I'm the boss," "Look at me," "Do it my way,"* type leaders. It's the concept — which seems to have been lost today — of ego-less leadership. It was the complete opposite of the kind of leadership that seems so common today — *"I'm the leader! I'm in charge! I'm important! I'm on the stage! I'm the one who goes on TV!"*

Wazir: And we found leadership in the community [as opposed to "developing" leadership]. The people who had been leading all the time, like [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) and June Johnson's mother, Lullabell, and all those kinds of people, who were already leaders. And not selling a program, but showing them that this is what you all have been dealing with and trying to talk about all the time. And we are here to help you do that.

Hardy: We had a good group of [SNCC] people in Holly Springs. And I think we had some pretty good leadership. We had Ivanhoe and Cleve. We fought and argued, but we'd go out in the morning and stay all day. And in Jackson in 1967 — I think it was — they literally scooped us up — we were going to do something — and they put us in garbage trucks, and they took us to jail.

Wazir: They loved to put you in garbage trucks.

Hardy: And they put us in this, where they have these agriculture shows.

Wazir: The fairgrounds.

Hardy: The state fairgrounds. And they gassed us before they — they backed up those Jeeps, they pull out the throttle, and they put a little gas in there. And they didn't do it long, and then they put it away. But they kept trying to figure out who the leaders were. And so they dragged some of us off. But they didn't know that they could drag one off, and someone else just steps up, right? They drag off one “leader” and you know the next person just steps up. [Laughter]

That could be the legacy for SNCC. The people did not stop when we left. And they didn't go back. And I think we were true to the mission of respecting the masses, because those same people in all those counties are some of the people who came into the organization who we respected and didn't treat differently, and they became leaders.

Bruce: Because you learned from them, and respected them, and did not impose your pre-conceived ideology upon their reality. That's another thing that people today seem to have lost sight of, helping the people lead themselves rather than imposing your belief system on their reality.

The SNCC concept of leadership was you led by serving the people (which at one point was a major Movement slogan). Seeing leadership as responsibility rather than ego-gratification. You led by your example. You led by what you endured. And that's why, when you had a bunch of people in jail, and the one that was identified as the “leader” is taken away, someone else steps up. Because the kind of leadership that SNCC exemplified, or taught by example, was not a leadership of position, but was a leadership of example, of hard work, of endurance, of courage. I think that's a fundamental thing that SNCC had, and if people are studying SNCC, that's something that needs to be re-learned.

And the thing that was so different between SNCC on one hand and SCLC and to a lesser extent CORE on the other, is that for a number of years — the early years — status in SNCC was not based on how good you could make a speech, on how good you could write, whether you had a title or an office, or whether you were the one that the newspapers quoted or TV put on the camera. Status in SNCC was based on how successful you were in organizing the people, the rank and file people in the counties, how successful you were in making some actual change, how successful you were in organizing yourself out of a job so that you were no longer the leader and that local people were the leaders and you moved on to the next place — and also on what you endured. Now that seemed to get lost, I think, in the later years outside the Southern Freedom Movement where status was based who could make the most bombastic statement, who could make a hit with the press — at least on the white side that was true.

SNCC Didn't Ask Permission



Dorie Ladner, SNCC.

Bruce: On of the things we had in the Freedom Movement that people today need a lot more of — see, there's this thing in society where folks feel that they cannot do something unless they have permission from some higher authority. You can't hold a rally at school unless you have permission from the principal, you can't picket without permission from the police, you can't do this, that, or the other thing, without someone else saying it's okay. We did not suffer from *permissionitis*, we were not infected with that attitude. [laughter]

To this day, none of us feel we need permission for us to do stuff we think needs to be done. Most people today, even young people, assume you can't do anything until you've obtained permission. Sometimes the people who actually exert leadership are the people who just do it whether they have permission or not — “*This is right, I'm going to do it.*”

And that's because we stood by a fundamental principle that needs to be restated: You don't ask for your human rights, you assert them — and you don't ask for permission in advance. And, if necessary, you suffer the consequences for acting without prior permission. But a “right” that you need to ask permission for is not a right.

And just as Movement activists did not wait for permission, neither did SNCC as an organization, or for that matter, SCLC or CORE either. They didn't feel they had to obtain the permission of the established Black leadership organizations before moving into some kind of new action. But that doesn't mean that organizations, or individual activists, just go off on their lonesome doing their own thing. There has to be discussion, consultation, organizing, education, support building, coalition forming — but that is not the same as subordinating yourself or your organization to the permission of someone else.



Joyce Ladner, SNCC.

There's another thing too, it's not just that people think they have to have permission from authority (government, school, parents, boss). There's an even more insidious kind of permissionism which is feeling that you have to have permission from your peers. Too many young people today, I think, suffer greatly from peer pressure. They fear to take a public stand on some issue they care about, or make a statement out loud, or engage in action, out of dread of what their friends might say — that they might be jeered at as a “do-gooder,” or laughed at as some kind of idealist, or even just frowned upon for stepping out of line. And so they try to get everyone they know to agree it's okay for them to do something, and if they can't get universal approval, they don't do it. But young people in the Freedom Movement broke out of that containment.

Chude: And it's also about numbers. Sometimes you start with just four people. That is also missing today, that understanding that you don't have to start with hundreds of people. I still think that some of the most effective picket lines I on was on were in Atlanta and they were small. If you have a meeting and four people come and not 200, it's not a failure. That's what people don't understand today. And if the media doesn't pick it up and advertise it and say how wonderful it was, it does not mean it was a failure — it might mean just the opposite.

Bruce: Yes exactly, There were a couple thousand Black college students in [Greensboro](#) NC, but ONLY FOUR of them sat in on February 1st, 1960, and they didn't first obtain permission from the dean, or from the police, or even from their circle of friends. They just went ahead and took action.

Assessing SNCC

[Mike Miller was unable to attend the meeting. He sent in the following email which was read and discussed.]

Regarding the question, “Why was the SNCC experience significant/important?” To me there are two SNCC' periods. Each has different answers to this question. In the first period, and I want to focus on The Albany Movement, the Mississippi movement and Lowndes County, SNCC was competent and self-confident. Despite the fact that during most of this time it wasn't using the term “Black power,” it was in fact building Black power. These are what I think are the most important lessons from that period:

1. In a period of social movement, a small group of organizers with a positive vision, program, and strategy, can move the whole country. The industrial union movement did that, as did earlier

movements which might not have had an organizing group like SNCC, but that started with a relatively small number of people.



John Hulett. LCFO & SNCC. First Black sheriff elected in Lowndes County AL.

2. SNCC's confidence in the capacities of previously uninvolved, fearful (for good reason), formally uneducated, people made it possible for SNCC to release a tremendous pool of commitment, energy, and talent. Contrast this with the "Talented Tenth" view that relied on the courts and discussion among elites.

3. SNCC did not seek to impose any ideology on the people it was putting in motion. It had a broad values framework which allowed a lot of people to work together because they shared a lowest significant common denominator. Both The Albany Movement and COFO were expressions of this.

4. Those who paid attention should have learned that power yields nothing without a demand. Frederick Douglass' statement on this is as true now as when he made it during the slavery period. We lacked the power to finally pull off the Atlantic City Challenge. Those engaged in serious challenge of the status quo need to learn that it will take significant people power to accomplish that.

The second period about which I want to comment is SNCC in decline.

You can choose the Peg Leg Bates staff meeting, or the January 1967 Coordinating Committee meeting as the point from which to start, but somewhere around that time there was a great turning and SNCC began to fall apart. I think the following lessons are to be learned from that:

1. We failed to pay sufficient attention to the problems of stress, fatigue, post-traumatic stress syndrome that were going on within the organization. If people are in the struggle for the long haul, they need to take care of themselves and their relationships with one another as well as pay attention to what is going on "out there" in the world. COINTELPRO was able to successfully disrupt the Movement because we lacked a way to recognize that the most militant was not necessarily the best, that we should be suspicious of people who were always raising the stakes in their rhetoric and demands and that we should carefully explore the consequences of various options before us.
2. We failed to adequately understand the power structure we were up against. I'm not sure what might have been done differently had we understood what LBJ could do to peel off votes in the Credentials Committee [at the Atlantic City Democratic Convention in 1964], but I think we would have had some back-up/fallback position. I don't believe in so-called "moral victories" or "educational campaigns." I think we got beaten, plain and simple, and that it was a big and very demoralizing defeat. Organizations and social movements do not do well when they suffer big defeats. For example, it took a whole generation in South Africa before the African National Congress could rise again after it had been suppressed by the apartheid government the first time it went into armed struggle with the government.
3. The problem was not lack of an ideology. A lot of people say that we didn't have an ideology and that was our problem. I don't think so. Having shared values and a lowest significant common denominator was plenty. The search for an ideology is one of the things that divided us during the period of downturn.

I could say a lot more on this question, but I'll let it go here.

Don: I dramatically disagree with Mike. I think that SNCC evolved. First it evolved from the name, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee — leaving out that they weren't any of those things — became something else called “SNCC” which bore very little relation to that early organization. And SNCC evolved all the way through, and all the way to Black Power, which has dominated the degrees of consciousness in the United States since then. Of course SNCC made mistakes, and I should always say I have a skewed view, because I was the white that was allowed to stay. So I'm certainly — I certainly didn't have the heartache that other people did, but putting that aside, I think SNCC evolved as the period evolved.

It's not that they made mistakes — anybody would have said that they made a mistake from day one, all that they're doing — organizing against all this mass of power in the South. And all they're doing on the buses when nobody else would ride them, and who could be crazy enough to go to Mississippi? So every stage along the way it was easy to criticize and consider it crazy, but I think SNCC was one of the great organizations of our times, and I've very proud of it and very happy for what it did for me.



Ruby Doris Robinson, SNCC.

[Mike response via email to Don's comments:]

I'm not sure that I understand what Don is dramatically disagreeing with, so let me take his points one-by-one. Don says, “I think that SNCC evolved...” Of course it did. But:

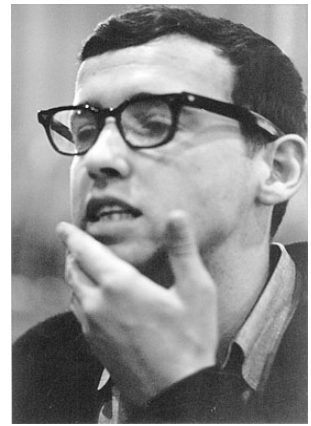
1. The beginning of SNCC's transformation was in 1961/62 when students dropped out of college to become full-time “field secretaries” working in the Black Belt South to engage poor Blacks in the Movement.
2. When students became organizers (some successful, others not) they were doing something qualitatively different from what they did in sit-ins and freedom rides.
3. I gave a speech at the *People's World* Annual Banquet in 1964 in which I talked about that. In 1966, that speech was reprinted in *The Movement*, the SNCC paper published by our office in the Bay Area. Stokely Carmichael wrote a brief introduction to that speech in which he said, . . . [T]he so-called 'new direction' in SNCC is not so new after all. I hope SNCC staff and supporters across the country will give this talk their attention. At a time when SNCC is being misinterpreted by the press and misunderstood by its friends, it is useful to look into the history of the organization and see that we are taking no great departure from our original direction — the direction of independent power for Negroes in America. It is important to note that this speech was given almost two and a half years ago — before the 1964 Summer Project...

Obviously I was for Black power in 1964, as I was in 1966, as I am in 2008. But “Black Power” as rhetoric was part of the decline of SNCC, not part of its growth.

Don says, “SNCC evolved all the way through, and all the way to Black Power, which has dominated the degrees of consciousness in the United States since then.”

Just as SNCC evolved from campus based sit-ins and freedom rides to building independent Black power, so it also evolved — I think in a negative direction — from a language that rooted it deeply in Black communities in the South to one that was divisive in Black communities in the South, and certainly one that divided it from its non-Black allies in the north.

I'm not sure what Don means by "...dominated the degrees of consciousness in the US since," but "Black Power" is not the language of the Black caucus in the Mississippi legislature, or of the Black-led, labor-Latino-Black alliance in Mississippi, or of the Obama campaign, or of just about anything else that I'm aware of that now has popular support in Black communities. The evolution has been through a rhetorical period to one that more carefully tries to match rhetoric with possibilities in the real world.



Mendy Samstein, SNCC.

Don says, "It's not that they made mistakes — anybody would have said that they made a mistake from day one, all that they're doing — organizing against all this mass of power in the South. And all they're doing on the buses when nobody else would ride them, and who could be crazy enough to go to Mississippi? So every stage along the way it was easy to criticize and consider it crazy..."

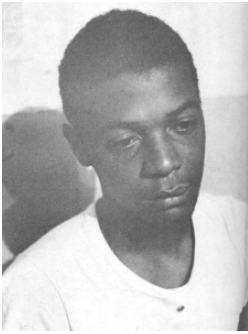
Anybody can say anything about anything. The question is whether they are right or wrong. In the middle of the action, that's hard to tell. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight it's easier. It seems to me that if we want to be useful to scholars or young activists, organizers, leaders, rank-and-filers and their supporters, we ought to do more than say "every stage along the way it was easy to criticize and consider it crazy..." Be bold. But also be canny. And beware that the most militant among you just might be a government agent provocateur.

As part of our rhetoric, we were angry at Kennedy for his speech that called civil rights a "moral issue." And we were pissed at LBJ for coopting "We shall overcome" when he used that language in an address to Congress. I was among those in SNCC who angrily denounced this "hypocrisy." Contrast that with what John L. Lewis did with President Roosevelt's signing of the National Labor Relations Act. He told workers, "*The President wants you to join a union.*" Roosevelt was furious, and had, in fact, said nothing like it. But he couldn't deny it either. Lewis coopted Roosevelt. I think John L. Lewis was smarter than we were. Looking back, again with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, I think we should have said, "*JFK agrees with SNCC: this is a moral issue.*" And we should have said, "*LBJ finally get it; he's now saying what we've been saying for five years.*"

Don says, "...but I think SNCC was one of the great organizations of our times, and I'm very proud of it and very happy for what it did for me."

Ditto.

Hardy: I think that, yeah, there were problems, but I guess I agree with Don on this. I mean, you can always criticize, but I tell you one thing, we fundamentally changed this shit. We really did. I mean we started some shit that we don't know where it's going to go, for one. For number two, we started some stuff that opened up a whole lot of stuff — we created what we got now. And that's the reality, and we've got to learn to live with that. And we might disagree with it, et cetera, but somebody had to play our role. And when I read Taylor Branch's books, and I can actually see — I can remember the "Saturday Revolution." When I read Forman's book I remember the "Toilet Revolution," when we pissed on all that.



Silas McGee,
Greenwood, MS.

So, I don't apologize for nothing that we did. I don't get caught up in all the arguments about whether we were racist, sexist, all that kind of shit. Yeah, we probably were all of that, but we were also people that — it's very important to understand, we were a set of people who were willing to take our lives off the track. We were willing to take our lives off the track, when a lot of us could have stayed in school and done all kinds of other things, and we probably would be driving a Lexus [now]. But we were a generation of people who took our lives off the track to do something we believed in. And we paid a hell of a price for it — and we're still paying a price for it. But we did it, and nobody can deny it. And the most important thing about us is we built something else. And so we were, as Tom Brokaw talked about, we were the Great Generation. We were the Great Generation.

[Mike response via email to Hardy's comments:]

Hardy says: I think that, yeah, there were problems, but I guess I agree with Don on this. I mean, you can always criticize, but I tell you one thing, we fundamentally changed this shit. We really did. I mean we started some shit that we don't know where it's going to go, for one.

No doubt we were an important part of changing things. But can you say, “we fundamentally changed this shit”? Not if by “fundamental” you mean what SNCC then meant by “fundamental.” SNCC wanted to bring full civil rights to Black people in the South. That, really, is not a very radical idea. We were radicals doing the work of liberals when we worked for full civil rights. Liberals talked about it. We did it.

But SNCC had far more radical goals than equal civil rights. One of these was the real democratization of American society. By this we then meant that all people should be able to meaningfully participate in making the decisions that affected their lives. A second of these was ending poverty. On the two goals of real democracy and ending poverty, we didn't do very well. I don't see how anyone can deny that.

Hardy says: For number two, we started some stuff that opened up a whole lot of stuff — we created what we got now. And that's the reality, and we've got to learn to live with that.. [Later Hardy says,] And the most important thing about us is we built something else.

In 1967, there was a “conversation on revolution” between Saul Alinsky, SNCC's Ivanhoe Donaldson, and others that was published in the *National Catholic Reporter*. Ivanhoe said, in effect, “*These are revolutionary times.*” Alinsky agreed, but cautioned that we were unleashing forces larger than those we could ourselves bring to the struggle and that to do so was to invite victory of a counter-revolution. The 1968 Nixon election represented that counter-revolution; so did McGovern's abysmal showing in 1972. Ever since the mid-to-late 1960s it has been a struggle to keep what was won rather than to move forward. SNCC alone didn't create the counter-revolution. But SNCC was part of the crazy radicalism of post-1966/67 and what followed. I don't think it was necessary that we be that. There are things that could have been done differently.



Frank Cieciora,
SNCC

Whether we built something is also questionable to me. We certainly unleashed something, and others built on the energies that we unleashed. But going back to what I said earlier, the people we hoped would be the principal beneficiaries of our work remain for the most part marginalized in this country.

Nor is this a matter of, as Hardy later says, “apologizing,” I'm not interested in apologizing; I'm interested in learning from mistakes of the past so they aren't repeated in the present and future.

SNCC Made Real Changes in Peoples' Lives



Charlie Cobb, SNCC.

Hardy [continued]: I mean, I know what it meant to grow up in the South where you can't go to the movies. You can't go to the water fountain. You can't go to a working toilet. You're liable to be — if you leave Tuskegee 40 miles out, your ass is grass.

Hardy: Ten miles out, and your ass is grass. And then all of a sudden, I saw — When I go back to the South now, and when I went back to write my book (*Black Parties and Political Power: A Case Study*), when I wrote a book on politics, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe what had happened.

Jimmy: The most important thing that I think I did while in SNCC was centered around voter registration. And the reason why I say voter registration was that through the vote that Black people would be able to get a lot of the things that they didn't have then. That after you had a sufficient number, or a significant number, of Black people who were registered to vote, that things would change. Their economic situation would change. Their political situation would change. Their life in general would change.

And in many respects this turned out to be true, because when I was working in Alabama, I had yet to see one Highway Patrolmen that was Black. And a few years later when I returned to Alabama to attend the reenactment of the Selma to Montgomery March, I saw about 40 Highway Patrolmen, and they were all Black. And I couldn't believe it. I looked, and I said, "*Oh no, this can't be right.*" Years before, you couldn't find one, and in this little mill town a few years later, you've got 40 of them right there in front of you. It was just amazing. And there wasn't as much tension there as there was say in '68 and '69 as there was in '65 and '66.

And you can sort of see a lot of the problems that we had, you know, were sort of like melting away, because, I believe for the most part that Black people were able to register to vote, and to vote, and make some changes in terms of who took over the local political apparatus, like sheriff. They had a Black sheriff in Lowndes County. They had a Black sheriff in Macon County. And in two or three other counties, they had Blacks, you know, as the sheriff. There were Black tax collectors, and Blacks in other political offices. And big companies started moving in to Alabama, and from what I understand, the same thing happened in Mississippi. And people were able to sort of like get better jobs, too. And so I feel that the voter registration really brought about significant changes.

Hardy: One of the things that explains why that was so important, [is that] SNCC was not necessarily concerned about getting a piece of legislation passed at the national level. That is very different. I don't know SCLC, I know reading King's history, the whole time he's there, from Montgomery on, he's concerned about national policy.

Bruce: But the national politics and the laws also had to be done.

Hardy: I'm not arguing that they didn't, you're right. What I'm saying is it's a different thing. You're talking about taking some food up to Palmer's Crossing or somewhere, and giving people basic needs, [that's different] than when you're talking about dealing with legislatures. I'm not saying it doesn't need to be done. I'm just saying, [doing that is] what made us like we were.

Don: And I think it was ideal that both were going on independently.



Ralph Featherstone,
SNCC