SNCC 28th Anniversary Conference: "The SNCC Woman and the Stirrings of Feminism"

We Shall Not Be Moved: The Life and Times of SNCC 1960 - 1966 Conference
Date: April 15, 1988
Location: Trinity College - Hartford, CT

Host:
Jack Chatfield - Professor of American History, Trinity College

Moderator:
Barbara Sicherman - William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of American Institutions and Values Emerita, Trinity College

Panelists:
Mary King - SNCC communications staff, 1963-1966; author, Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement

Casey Hayden - Campus Traveller, Student YWCA, 1962; Field Secretary, SNCC 1963-1966; SNCC Training staff, Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

Jean Wheeler - SNCC Field Secretary, Greenwood and Philadelphia, Mississippi, 1963-1966; Coordinator, plantation strike, Leflore County, Mississippi, 1966-1968

Joyce Ladner - Field Secretary, SNCC 1962-1964; Professor of Social Work, Howard University

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***NOTE:** Recording begins after the panel discussion has started.

Mary King: …question upon us. We could get to see any member of Congress that we wanted to see, any senator that we wanted to see. There were many comments made about this, this afternoon. We had former CIA directors flying in to meet with us. Jim [James Forman] talked about that.

The eyes of the world, in a sense, were on us through the television media. We—being the big, big we—all of us, all of the thousands of people, the armies of unnamed people involved in the movement had made it irrevocable for the 1964 Civil Rights Act to be passed. And the deaths of our three fellow workers had in large part focused the legislators on that point, so that there was no return to the status that had existed before.[1]

But we also were not sure of ourselves as an organization. We did not know exactly in which direction we were going to move, and as we pondered all of the possibilities that were open to us, the call went out from Jim and a committee in Atlanta inviting all of the staff flung across the south from Arkansas to the eastern shore to a staff meeting to take place in Waveland, Mississippi in November 1964.

And each of us was invited to prepare a position paper on anything we wanted to write about in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] radical egalitarian tradition. We could say anything we wanted to say, write about any topic, challenge the staff to anything we wanted to challenge them to.

And these position papers were gathered and mimeographed in Atlanta and sent out. There were, as I recall, 37 position papers as we convened for a staff retreat in Waveland, Mississippi. And these papers were not to be the central defining question on the agenda of the meeting, but they were to inform the overall environment at the meeting.

Casey [Hayden] and I had been talking amongst ourselves for at least the two years before that, we had been reading together and studying together at night, long discussions, we began to talk about ourselves as women.

As the staff pondered the question of: what would be our vision now and where would we go? How would we develop a structure to support the direction in which we were going? How would we determine where we were going? Because process questions always underlay content in SNCC? We decided to raise some things that were bothering us, about the subordinate status of women in some projects, about the reflexive use of male organizers as spokesmen and a potpourri of other concerns.

I remember talking with Ruth Howard. I remember talking with Muriel Tillinghast. I remember talking with Jean [Wheeler]. I remember talking with Donna Richards. I remember talking with Theresa del Pozo. I remember talking with Emmy Schroeder during that period, and I started to

[1] The murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in June 1964 were a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. The three civil rights workers—two white and one Black—were abducted and killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan while working on Freedom Summer, a campaign to register Black voters in Mississippi. Their disappearance and the discovery of their bodies weeks later drew national outrage and intense media attention, helping to galvanize public support and political pressure that contributed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

gather examples from bulletin boards and staff meetings and memos that were coming across my desk and so on.

And I put together a memo, and I showed it to Casey, and she said, yes, she would go along with me on it, but we decided we'd better do this anonymously. I was sure that if we put our names to it, it would be greeted with nothing but a wall of laughter.

And to show you how much has changed since then, when Amy Carter read a manuscript of my book, she couldn't believe that part. She said, you weren't really afraid of ridicule, were you? I mean, you'd come to grips with your own death and everything. You were afraid they were gonna laugh at you. Yes, yes, we who had come to grips with our own death, we were afraid of what our fellow SNCC staff members were going to say, when they read this position paper about women.

Well, when we finally got it distributed, we were right. Basically, there were one or two people who stepped forward and—but they were noteworthy. They distinguished themselves in supporting it. The women I've already mentioned, of course, were supportive, but among the men, there weren't too many. I remember Bob Moses and Charlie Cobb being very supportive in particular. But very quickly, people figured out who it was and it was out, it was out there on the table, and the genie never went back in the jar.

Now I'm going to do something that I ordinarily would never do, but Bob Zellner started this last night, so if this offends you or it bothers you, get angry with him instead of me. I'm going to read you a little tiny segment from my book about something that happened after that paper was circulated.

“SNCC workers always worked extremely hard. It was nothing to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week. We were exhausted half the time. I remember one night that I passed out at 3 a.m. when the telephone rang in the Freedom House in Tougaloo, and I went to answer the phone, and on the way back to bed, I just passed out. I fainted. I was so tired. Well, we always worked hard, but we also partied hard.

And that night, a group of us started drifting down to the pier off Waveland, and it was Stokely [Carmichael] and Mendy [Samstein] and Carol Merritt and maybe about 20 of us. Then we went down to the pier and Stokely, whom we had called Stokely “Star” Michael the summer before, because of his natural celebrity, started cracking jokes, cracking jokes one after another.

He usually made fun of himself and the people of Trinidad more than of anyone else. It was the same this night. Several of us were beginning to mellow after the traumatic meetings. We were soothed by the gentle Gulf winds that were still warm in November, the lapping waves and the wine. The moon was bright enough to read by.

Stokely started one of his monologues. He led slowly and began to warm up. One humorous laugh followed another. We became more and more relaxed on the pier. We stretched out lying with our heads on each other's abdomens. We were absorbed by the flow of Stokely's humor and by our laughter.

He reveled in our attention as we were illuminated by the moon. Stokely got more and more carried away. He stood up, slender, muscular, jabbing to make his points, his thoughts racing, he began to gesticulate dramatically, slapping his thighs and spinning around, thrusting his arms silhouetted against the moon like a Javanese shadow puppet. He made fun of himself, and then he dressed down Trinidadians. He was from Trinidad. He started joking about Black Mississippians. He made fun of everything that crossed his agile mind.

Finally, he turned to the meetings underway in the position papers. He came to the no longer anonymous paper on women, looking straight at me, he grinned broadly and shouted, what is the position of women in SNCC?

Answering himself, he responded, the position of women in SNCC is prone. Stokely threw back his head and roared outrageously with laughter. We all collapsed with hilarity. His ribald comment was uproarious and wild. It drew us all closer together, because even at that moment, he was poking fun at his own attitudes."

Now that is my version of an account that has been widely reported as a serious comment and was picked up by a great deal of the feminist literature that followed in the years after that meeting in Waveland. And I wanted to take this opportunity to set the record straight, as I remember it, as Casey and others who were there remember it. And also, if you ever meet him, ask him what he thinks.

But that's the true story, as I saw it. I think it's important to say as well, though, that because all of this occurred in the context of a debate on SNCC's future direction and in structure, that part of what Casey and I were doing in writing that paper was not addressing the concerns of women as a gender statement, so much as it was a belief that if the movement was all that we believed it to be, if leadership was what we believed it to be, then it was appropriate for there to be opportunities to address our agenda too, or for us to raise the things that were of concern to us.

We were concerned that SNCC move in the direction of increasing democratization. I talked yesterday about the deep gulfs, the ravines that SNCC straddled, questions of decentralization or centralization, of more authoritarian approach or a more democratic approach, questions of the highly charismatic leader or of leadership from the bottom.

There were so many issues, so many polarities that SNCC was constantly grappling with. And in that context, Casey and I were arguing and talking about women. We were arguing that SNCC

should return to the earlier vision of the sit-ins, the period when one acted on one's beliefs because of a belief that one was what one believed.

And so in a sense, what we were doing in introducing that paper on women was broadening the debate in the favor of a more decentralized and democratic SNCC, one that implicitly would be able to address our concerns too. And we were also asking SNCC, will there be room for us as women to act out our beliefs, as we had in the sit-ins, as we had with the early vision of the SNCC of the sit-ins.

About a year later, the issue had moved along. It was no longer so sensitive. Casey and I went to Virginia and we wrote another paper. This time, it was no longer secret. We signed the paper, and the ferment on SNCC structure had deepened by then. So we were again basically posing those same questions.

We were calling for a return to the basic values of the sit-ins and the early vision of SNCC. This paper, we sent across the country outside the SNCC circle, to a group of 40 women organizers in peace and civil rights, some of the other organizations, the Northern Student Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, others who were organizing. And we talked about a common law caste system in the larger society, and we said that subtle attitudes forced women to work around or outside hierarchical structures of power which excluded them.

We were no longer talking about SNCC. We were talking about the entire society. I mentioned yesterday that one of the things we got to do in SNCC was to ask questions with astounding implications, and this is what we were doing again.

We also pointed out that many men wanted to join our dialog, but that others found it hard to respond non-defensively. And we concluded all the problems between men and women functioning in society as equal human beings are among the most basic that people face.

We've talked in the movement about trying to build a society which would see basic human problems, which are now seen as private troubles, as public problems, and would try to shape institutions to meet human needs, rather than shaping people to meet the needs of those with power.

I remember years later, when I was in the [Jimmy] Carter administration, that Barbara Raskin came to see me, and she said, “Oh Mary, I'll never forget the day that your memorandum arrived in the mail. We organized a group here in Washington, a consciousness-raising group, it was called later, and we studied that memo, and we restudied it, and we passed it around amongst ourselves. And finally, the thing was so dog-eared that we could no longer read it.”

And in fact, I said to her, Barbara, I no longer have the list of the 40 women that Casey and I sent it to, do you? “And she said, well, you can't read it anymore. That the document is so dog-eared.”

So that memo sent to those 40 women across the country was one spark, one piece of tinder in the modern women's movement.

And a year later, there was the first women's caucus at the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] convention in Champaign-Urbana [IL], and when a group of women walked out of that convention in. The ironic thing was that the only man who stood to support them—this was a group of women who'd been studying that memo—the only man who rose to support them was Jimmy Garrett, who was the SNCC staff member who ran the Los Angeles office.

The women's movement in the modern sense, was clearly the movement that was the successor movement to the civil rights movement. And of course, there are civil rights issues at the core, but it's an error of historiography, not only to fail to recognize the role played by SNCC in the civil rights movement, but it's also an error of historiography not to realize the role of the civil rights movement in building a larger concern for the rights of women in our society.

And in that I want again, to point out what was so unique about SNCC was its openness to these questions, that it could nourish Casey and me and others to ask these questions, to write these papers, to pose these things. That was unique. SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was priestly, patriarchal. These questions could never have been raised, and there were not the women in the organization to raise them.

And I think the last thing that I would like to point out is the incredible synergism that occurs between movements. I agree completely with [Lawrence] Guyot today when he said that women, who are now half of the delegates at the National Democratic Convention, have the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 to thank for it. That is absolutely historically correct.

Furthermore, you can see another effect that no one has mentioned, and that is the freeing of the stigma on the white South that made it possible for a white southerner to become elected president in 1976. And that is a part of the same process that many people have noted with regard to Jesse Jackson. So there is an ongoing impulse from the movement that has taken us from one movement to another.

Barbara Sicherman: In this case, anonymous was two women, the other one being Casey Hayden, who was a campus traveler with the student YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] in 1962, field secretary with SNCC from 1963 to [19]66, and on the SNCC training staff during Mississippi Summer of 1964. She is currently working with the recreation department for the city of Atlanta, where Andrew Young, also part of the movement, is mayor.

Casey Hayden: See if I can get started here. I'll be alright once I get started. I had to get a book to find out what one of the terms in our topic meant. I didn't know what feminism meant, so I went and bought this book of essays called *What Is Feminism*. And the last essay I read,

basically the author said that feminists don't know anymore either. So I figured I was on the cutting edge again.

I also wasn't quite sure what we meant by the SNCC woman, so I thought maybe I would ask all the SNCC women to stand up so we could see what we looked like. So would all the SNCC women stand up. Come on, all the SNCC women.

Okay, so that's the second part of that. Now I'm going to not talk about that because I want to be true to my tribe. So what I'm going to talk about is the roots of feminism in the Redemptive Community.[2]

What I'm going to do first is repeat what Diane Nash said last night. This is where I come from. I came to this raised by a single-parent mother, where I learned what it meant to be poor and matriarchal. I came through the YWCA at the national level, where I learned that roles of men and women were being redefined. And I came through a real heavy Christian existentialist background and a college education.

In April of [19]60—Connie Curry, stand up. Connie Curry, her name hadn't been mentioned. She and Ella Baker were the first advisors to SNCC—two women, one white, one Black, were the first advisors to SNCC. Connie got invited to be an advisor because she paid the phone bill. Julian would bring her the phone bill, and she would pay it out of her grant money for a whole other project. So that's how she got in.

And she came through Austin, Texas, and she recruited me, telling me about the sit-ins, and we sat in this café and cried. And little did we know I would be sitting up here crying now. But I'll be all right. Just a minute—have to just wait a minute, I'll be fine.

So the sit-ins happened in Austin, and because I was living in the only integrated housing on campus, I got involved. And what I got involved in was what Diane Nash described, and I'm going to run through that again. She said that what we were into at that time was the Redemptive Community, that we were into healing and reconciling. We were not into gaining power—that we felt that what we were doing was more efficient than violence in the struggle for liberation and would achieve liberation for all people more rapidly.

She talked about the transition from Gandhi to Lawson to us. Dr. King, of course, was part of this also. And I feel that in claiming our victories, we need to claim the great influx of Eastern thinking into this country, which is often associated with hippies and drugs. But in my experience, this is where I first met it, and that's the path I followed. Many people have been political. I have not been political. My path has been a spiritual path, and this is where I hit it.

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[2] The roots of feminism in the Redemptive Community reflect how early civil rights organizing spaces—grounded in spiritual, collective, and justice-driven values—also nurtured the emergence of feminist consciousness, as women began to challenge not only racial oppression but also gender hierarchies within movement structures and broader society.

She talked about truth and love. She talked about everything being a series of means. It's not really ends and means; it's always means. She talked about how the enemy is never personal, that the systems and the attitudes of racism, sexism, and so on are what are the enemy. She said that oppression always requires the participation of the oppressed, and the role of the oppressed often is to withdraw cooperation.

Now this was not Western, nor was it masculine. It was basically Eastern. It was basically, in my opinion, feminine, and had to do with where you put your weight. If you didn't have any force, you had to figure out how to throw yourself around to catch the other guy off base. You couldn't confront it directly—not while you were still creating mass, which is what we did in Mississippi. We created mass, but at first you couldn't do that. You had to do this other kind of thing.

Now my experience in doing this, by the time I got to the SNCC staff, was that what happened in the process of getting involved in activity based on these very radical notions of what one was going to do with one's life. These were really very radical notions, transcendent, if you will, of what one's going to do with one's life—you kind of got a new self created, a new kind of self was created.

And what happened was, a lot of the old self-definitions fell away so that they weren't appropriate anymore. You really kind of stopped thinking about yourself in terms of the limitations of sex or class or race. What you were doing was being a participant with other people in the creation of something—of a movement. I mean, there's no other word for it—of a movement based on these kinds of notions.

So there we were doing this, and then we started doing it full time. And what we did then was we created a profession for ourselves. We actually created a profession, and it had a name. It's called organizer. We funded it. And here we were, having dropped all these notions of who we were, which were the way society would have defined us. Because to be an organizer was very asexual. We were a community of organizers. It was very asexual. You could just do what you could do, you did. There really weren't any limits.

There we were doing this, and the thing was that we didn't really have any definition then in terms of the general culture. What we had was each other, because we could see ourselves in this new way. That's how I saw the people I worked with. I saw them as my tribe, my family. We lived as a family. We lived communally. We lived communally as a community. We lived off the same money. There was no hierarchy in the distribution of that money. We all got a little bit of it.

When I first came to the SNCC conference in the fall of [19]60, the three people who were doing the organizing work for that conference were women. It was Connie, Ella Baker, and Jane Stembridge. Jane was another white southerner who Ella had recruited to come be executive secretary for SNCC.

Ella, I think, was the main person responsible for this style in which—I think of the nonviolent ethic as the essence of what we were doing, even though, later, a lot of things changed. That kind of place we came from, to me—and I'm only speaking personally—to me, was always the essence, and our style was how we nurtured that.

Because if you're not being seen anywhere, if there's no mirror for you, you got to see yourself in your family or in your community. And that's what we were to each other, and what we did, and what people mean when they talk about the style of SNCC or the way we were to each other…every member of the family was equally valued, just like a mother would value all the children.

So we kind of had to even redefine time. I mean, time was how long it took us for everybody to be able to get into it. When everybody was into it, then we could go do something. And that's what time was. It wasn't an external, hierarchical thing. I mean, we really revolted what it meant.

And the whole thing about leadership, it was—it was like a soft asset, but I thought of it as assets, but hard politics. Like the idea of turning up leadership. Ella had been through so much, and she'd seen so many sellouts, that she knew that as soon as somebody got power and authority, they were going to rise up into another class.

And once they were in that other class, and in a certain relation to white power, they would no longer be able to represent the interests of the class they came from, and they'd be lost. And hey, it happens. We're seeing it happen. We're seeing it happen. Those of us who were there, we're seeing it happen. That's a lot of what this stuff about Jesse is about. I think it has somewhat to do with that.

But it was also that this is the way we had to view each other, because if we didn't view each other that way, we didn't have the sustenance it took to keep functioning. I mean, we couldn't go on if we didn't give everybody the space to talk and get to where we were all comfortable with what we were going to do. We couldn't ask each other to risk our lives.

That was very nurturing. That wasn't patriarchal. Wasn't masculine, particularly. It was really sort of new. It was very nurturing. It was very loving. And it really was the Beloved Community. My sense of what we were doing was we were just trying to bring more and more people into it. And to me—and I was on one wing of this thing. I know I was sort of out in left field.

But to me what we did was a technique to get everybody into our community, where we were living in this communal, egalitarian, sexually equal way, where we were living in a new way. What I wanted was for everybody to be in there with us. Just expand the whole thing, and then we'd have a new society.

I read Nadine Gordimer recently. I never read her, but she says that the reformer is always very practical, but that the initial impetus is always utopian. And I think we were utopian. And maybe for that reason, we couldn't go on beyond where utopia meant something. I mean, when it got to reformist politics, maybe that's where we floundered. I don't know.

So much for that. Have I gone on long enough? Not quite. Oh, I know another thing that had to do with that. The other thing about that was the sense of what—it was sort of like a clan, so that if you had an intact clan, you could distrust everybody else. So, particularly with the press, this was very effective. It was very important not to believe one's own press.

Danny Lyon used the term, "we created our own myth, or our own image." That's very true. But, you didn't want to believe what you saw on the news. And those of us who were there will never believe what we saw in the news. We know the distance. We know the distance between the mass media and the truth. And we had to have what we had together. We had to have that, or we couldn't have had the attitude we had toward what we were getting fed back from the general culture.

This was all going along, and we were figuring out what to do, functioning in that mode. And we did the Mississippi Summer, and then after the summer, we couldn't figure out what to do. See, at that point—and this is where things got very tangled up—the way I think of it is, there were so many things going on that we couldn't weave anymore. There were so many threads in there that it was like tangled up. There was so much happening. It got kind of knotted up. Everything was getting knotted up, and so we all presented these papers.

Now I don't remember doing this Waveland paper. I mean, I could tell I did it, but to tell you the truth, I don't remember it. I remember writing this one little phrase about "this is going to seem laughable." I remember that I wrote it twice. I read this thing today, and I realized I wrote it down twice. I guess I was really nervous about its reception. That I remember. The rest of it, I don't really remember.

I remember it was presented, and then I was involved in it. I remember thinking it was not the right issue for that time. The issue at that time was what we were going to do next. We didn't know what to do next. We'd lost at the convention challenge. We had all these new people down. The Atlanta office had incredible, ponderous problems to handle, caused by the expansion. The cash flow was all chaotic, and everything was knotted up.

And the issue to me was, what are we going to do? Because what I'd been doing was over. I mean, I was working on the challenge. I didn't know what to do next. And there was a big debate there about what to talk about. It was like, should we talk about what to do, or should we talk about how to structure ourselves to figure out what to do?

And the people who wanted to talk about what to do didn't want to talk about how to structure ourselves to figure out what to do. So nobody was talking—except Forman, who was saying, we got to figure out how to structure ourselves to figure out what to do. And, like, nobody else was talking. And there was all this hostility. There were all these papers.

And I'm telling this—you can see between me and Mary [King], you history scholars—how difficult it is to discern historical truth. Those of us who are there can't get it straight. Don't ever believe what you read in the history books. At best, it's a pale approximation.

I remember at that point. What I remember about all that was that I felt so sorry for Forman, but I tried to talk about how we should structure ourselves. I was trying to talk about how we worked in Mississippi—that we didn't have a hierarchy. That what we had were these kind of work groups. We would have, like, this group would talk about that, and then that group would talk about that, and that's what we would do. And then I had this idea that we could all send people to some kind of coordinating group to tell each other, oh, we were doing that. And that was my idea of structure.

I also thought that we shouldn't get money, that we should send money to communities. That the community should get money and we should be funded by communities somehow. So that failed and was badly spoken of later, I hear. But at any point that's where we were at that point.

Now, after that, what I did was—a lot was said about how white people should work with white people and Black people should work with Black people, and if we could just get that straightened out, and get some of these volunteers out of here, then the structure and everything would be okay. So I thought, well, this is the line. So off I went to Chicago to work with white people.

Well, I got to Chicago to organize this women's welfare recipients' union with all these Appalachian women. And it was in the middle—it was an SDS project. I was on loan from SNCC to SDS to do this experimental work with white people.

This group that I went to join was organizing white street kids. And I was organizing this welfare recipients' union. Little did we know what the connection was between the street kids and the welfare recipient women, many of whom were involved with the street kids who—and there was like—very complicated, among which many other things were very complicated.

And by the end of the summer, I realized that we had no idea how to do this, that I wasn't going to commit myself to the five or ten years it was going to take to make a dent on this, that we didn't have a clear strategy. And that I was burnt out.

So I went to the West Coast and the East Coast and, sort of traveled around for a few months, and ended up in Virginia, was married. And at that point, it was clear that we had lost somehow,

in this knottedness, we had lost our ability to be this nurturing—what I consider radically feminine. That's my idea of radically feminine.

So where I'm coming from is really weird, but this radically feminine community…the way we had to keep each other upheld—and that somehow we'd lost it. And, maybe we should have broken into small groups. But at any rate, it was very lonely. And nobody knew what to do. And I certainly didn't know what to do. And there were a lot of rumors. I know there were a lot of rumors.

We've done a lot of reading and stuff. And I said, we should write something. Now is the time to write this. And that memorandum, which I do remember writing, and which I will take responsibility for, and which I read today, and it's a very good piece of writing, and I feel good about it—I do say so myself—was really directed at the notion that it was important to talk about what was important. That it was important to find our issues and talk about them with each other.

Now the sense that we needed to do more work within the community before we tried to go out and organize white women was part of that. To some extent it was strategic, but there was also a sense that it was very important. And I think this is said in the memo—if I can remember the phrasing—I think I can—but it's like: if we could find our own integrity, if we could speak to each other about truth, and thereby establish our integrity so we could keep working. So we could keep working. That was the issue to me. It was, how are we going to keep working? What is to be done now? What can we do now?

That was where I was coming from. More than organizing women, or more than really raising the issue of women, it was like—that was sort of a technique to keep the community intact. Now, I know this sounds offbeat, and I'm not sure how many people can follow it, but the SNCC people will follow this—I think will follow what I was saying—and that, I think, is what matters to me. And that's why I decided to say this.

Barbara Sicherman: Thank you very much. You obviously learned your history lessons well. You can never trust the books. Jean Wheeler Smith was a field organizer for SNCC in Mississippi and Georgia from 1963 to [19]65. She was also a campus traveler for SNCC. She is currently a child psychiatrist in private practice in Washington, D.C., and is also an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Howard University.

Jean Wheeler: Hello. I'm real glad to be here. I see this as a reunion as well as an opportunity to express my thoughts about what happened 20–25 years ago. And I don't usually get into setting the record straight. I usually don't worry about the record, but there's this one point on which I have some strong feeling, and that is this common notion that women were oppressed in SNCC.

I just was not oppressed in SNCC. I wasn't subordinate. I was high functioning. I did anything I was big enough to do, and I got help from everybody around me for any project that I wanted to

pursue. And I know that we can put shadows to it and so on. But I wanted to strongly make this point and then maybe go to the shadows. So let me strongly say that.

Stokely gave me my first ticket South. I think Stokely respected me. I think his comment about women—the position of women being prone—was humorous, that he was a funny guy, and there was a lot of sex in SNCC. We were 20 years old. What do you expect?

That's what makes humor. The specialness of humor is it allows you to say the truth and get away with it. So I think that to some—I think if Stokely were here, if we see him tomorrow, we could have a nice banter about it. But I don't think he was—I think that he respected me and respects the women that he was working with at that time. I think he might have wanted to be a successful male chauvinist badass. Don't think he could have gotten away with it.

I wanted to give you some examples of how I, as a woman, was just very much sort of enabled to function to my highest potential. I was thinking in particular, because I've heard several references today to the death of [Andrew] Goodman, [James]Chaney, and [Michael]Schwerner. I remember when they were missing, and we learned that they were probably dead, that we all said we have to go to Philadelphia. We can't let this go by. We can't appear to be afraid.

And so I guess it was ten or twelve of us [who] decided to go, and people volunteered, and I was one who volunteered. And nobody ever said, "You're a girl, you can't go." It just—there was just no thought that I couldn't go at this very stressful time, in this—in a sense—dangerous situation, because I was a woman.

And as I remembered, I did everything that everybody else in the project did there. I was scared all the time, but I think they were scared too. And I remember that at the end of the time that I was in Philadelphia, and the convention organizing had been accomplished, and a bus came through, and Bob Moses was on the bus. And Bob wanted to know, did I want to come up to the convention, to the challenge?[3]

And I said, no, I think my work here is more important than going to the convention. He said, fine. He got back on the bus. I stayed in Philadelphia. I just had so much freedom to decide how I was going to work, and so much support for my decisions that I just never, ever felt this sense of limitation that people seem to be referring to.

I think if we talked about it some more, it would probably fit into Casey's notions that, at least before [19]65, we were such an egalitarian group that there wasn't room in my mind for the importance of structure. People had titles, but the titles didn't matter. And especially they didn't matter when you were in Mississippi by yourself, and there was some sheriff coming toward you with his gun drawn, the title of you or the guy next to you just had no significance.

[3] The MFDP Challenge refers to the historic effort by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.

So I wanted to go on from there and say something about the female role models that I had in SNCC. Again, I think that the examples before me were of strong Black women functioning at their potential. And I think I want to disagree with Mary a little bit. It seemed like she was making it seem like—you were making a distinction between people like Ms. Hamer and Ms. Johnson and Ms. Baker and us. If you make that distinction, then that pulls them away from the group. They really were a part of the group, as far as I'm concerned.

It didn't matter whether you got paid or not. I mean, what—you were making $9.64 [$102.42 in 2025] anyway. And some people made $27 [$286.86 in 2025], I think if you were married. The money didn't make any difference. The title, as I think and remember, it didn't make any difference. And so I choose to see Ms. Gray, Ms. Hamer, Ms. Baker, as part of the group. And they were great role models for me.

I still remember Ms. Baker monitoring our activity, making sure we were thinking straight, making sure that we were looking at the economic side of things, making sure that this process of arriving at consensus was one that we were carefully sticking to, and that everybody was participating in the decision-making. She was so powerful. And actually, I found she was powerful—I wasn't even that friendly with her, but she was definitely a woman who was functioning at her highest potential.

Ms. [June] Johnson—I remember in particular Ms. Johnson from Greenwood. Correct me, June, if I'm wrong—but I remember that your father stayed home and took care of the children while she went to jail. And I remember very clearly that one morning I woke up in Ms. Johnson's house—June's house—and they were very kind, and I had a place in a bed, and her father—June's father—was on the floor sleeping to accommodate us as SNCC workers.

And I just can't see that that was a male-dominated, chauvinist situation there. And I think that throughout our relationships and our working, at least until [19]65, that just wasn't the case.

I wanted to give some other examples of powerful younger women in the group. Ruby Doris Robinson—everybody had incredible respect for. Ruby was executive secretary for a while. She seemed to run the place as far as I know. My memory is that one day I was sitting around the office in Atlanta—I think I was drinking cokes and flirting or something—and Ruby came up to me and said, "Get up and go get your license. If you want to go to wherever"—I wanted to go to some project—"you can't expect someone's going to drive you there." So it was Ruby who made me go get a license.

I remember Annie Pearl Avery was a gun-toting cab driver who was just completely independent and functioning [in]what you would consider to be a typical male role, if you wanted to call it that.

I was thinking about what could be the reasons for why this difference in opinion has developed. I think one of them is that it's a convenient difference. That is, that as the women's movement has—I don't claim to know much about the women's movement, so this is speculation—but I'm thinking that maybe as the time has gone by, the history just sort of keeps getting rewritten and revised to the convenience of the people who are rewriting it.

I was thinking—maybe also though, that there were some differences between the way the Black women in the organization experienced their situation, and the way white women experienced it. I wouldn't say for sure, but it's something to think about. Casey and I seem to have had about the same experience, but it may be that that changed in later times, and that after about [19]65, people didn't feel as much a part of the organization and how things were being run.

My sense was that, although admittedly the administrative structure on paper was men, that the women had access to whatever resources and decision-making they needed to have or wanted to have, and I don't remember being impeded in this.

I think another way to understand how we could have arrived at differences of opinion about this is that people had different views about what SNCC was. My view was that it was—as I look back on it as a psychiatrist—it was sort of a human potential movement, and that what we were doing was very much like what I do in my therapy work now. That is, we were creating a trusting and loving atmosphere and a supportive atmosphere that we transmitted—which is also why I would do my work—we transmitted the expectation that the change was possible.

People were going to get better. In therapy, that's why I say you're going to get better. We let the person lead. That is, we let the person we were trying to organize lead. We let him express what was important to him, and then we followed. And that's what I would do with a patient.

Having let him lead, we then did two things. We pointed out the contradictions. That is, if you say you want this and this, they don't go together, could you look at this another way? And then we would offer an alternative solution to the historical solution, to the solution that the person we were trying to organize—or in my case, that the patient—had historically operated on.

I think, if that's well said, that is the way I understood what I was doing while I was there. And if you look at it that way, then the hierarchical stuff just doesn't matter that much. And I don't think it mattered—at least until [19]65.

So I wanted to kind of be pushy about that, because I may not get this chance again in another 10 years or something. And I do appreciate that there are a lot of grays and shadings to this, and I'll be glad to discuss those shadings.

Barbara Sicherman: Our last panelist, Joyce Ladner, was born in Mississippi. She was field secretary for SNCC from 1962 to [19]64. She is a sociologist and a professor of social work at

Howard University and she is the author of an early revisionary work on Black women, which is probably known to many of you. *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*, published in 1971.

Joyce Ladner: I should take my glasses off to read. All of us, I think, are past 40. This aging of SNCC is really something. I'm 44, and I was one of the younger [people]. And as I see all of my friends around here who are talking about—they're approaching the end of the first half-century, you begin to wonder. They said, "Oh, you look so good." I said, "Honey, I have to dye this hair red and put all these bright colors on. Keep on doing it, and mellow on out as we approach—as I get to 50."

But anyway, on a more serious note—that's as serious as a heart attack, quite frankly. But anyway, I think it also captures the spirit of SNCC as I saw it, because what all of us are doing here at this conference are defining our roles and how we saw them. And if you ever saw a group of highly individualistic people, they were in SNCC.

Because we had staff meetings that would last for days and days, and you'd think you're gonna arrive at a decision after all these dialectical stuff goes on, and then someone jumps up and says, "Well, who gave you the right to decide?" And then you start all over again.

Ivanhoe Donaldson, God bless him—was one of the main ones. And Stokely—no Stokely. Courtland? Where is Courtland Cox? But it was the Howard University crew. We used to dub all people—different groups of people had different kinds of idiosyncrasies. But the Howard folks would—and that was because they studied with Bayard Rustin in New York, and they were much more ideological, we used to say.

And then we locals—I was a local Mississippi person—and very strong local Black Southern identities. So there were all kinds of clashing identities based on how people perceived themselves and their roles and their purposes for being in SNCC.

I looked through Clay [Clayborne] Carson's book on SNCC this afternoon. Clay is a historian—historian sitting over here—who's written the definitive work on SNCC, and I'm going to quote from it and then move from there.[4] But what he says is that—I hope I have it all in context here—that the assumption of male superiority was so widespread and deep-rooted and very much as crippling to the women as the assumptions of white supremacists are to the Negroes.

Not only did male staff members feel—in quotes—"too threatened"—close quotes—to face the subject, but many female members were—in quotes—"as unaware and insensitive as men," just as there are many Negroes who don't understand they are not free or who want to be part of white America.

[4] *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* is a landmark historical study by Clayborne Carson, a respected historian and founding director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University.

He goes on to say that SNCC should—in quotes again—"force the rest of the movement to stop the discrimination and start the slow process of changing values and ideas, so that all of us gradually come to understand that this is no more a man's world than it is a white world." Pages 147–48, Clay Carson's book *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. This is the part that refers to the SNCC position paper on women.

Now I'm reminded of an incident that occurred with my dear sister Dorie [Ladner], who is the person who should be sitting in this spot here, because she's back there. All of you don't know her, but Dorie and I worked—stand up, Dorie.

When Dorie was about 12 years old and I was about 11—she's 15 years older than I am, even though—she never likes to say that, but she always says, I'm the older one. But when we were 11 and 12, we went to the grocery store, Hudson's Grocery in Palmer's Crossing, four miles outside Hattiesburg, Mississippi to buy some donuts.

There was a white cashier, a man named Mr. Patton, who had no fingers on his right hand. I think he may have had a thumb, but no fingers. They were all cut off for some reason. They were cut off at the nub.

Anyway, as Mr. Patton handed her [the donuts]—Dorie paid Mr. Patton for these donuts—he gave them to her in a brown bag. As she reached for them, he reached over and touched her breasts that were just beginning to develop. She took the bag of donuts and beat him across the head.

Why do I tell you that story? I've stood there as the little sister watching this. We went home—we ran all the way home. We lived a block from the store. We literally ran. Told the mother what happened. She said, "You should have killed him."

Now, that story has importance. It's a great deal of importance, because for us, as two little Black, poor girls, 11 and 12-year-old girls growing up in Mississippi, in a world where you have all these stereotypes about how everyone's oppressed, how people don't know that they're even oppressed—we knew we were oppressed. We always knew.

We also knew, however, that we came from a long line of people, of women, who were doers. Strong Black women who had historically never allowed anyone to place any limitations on them. Therefore, my mother could say to us, "You should have killed him." And she meant it, because she would have killed him. She would have done precisely that.

Mother never heard of Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth. Mother was one of 11 children. Mother went through third grade. But mother also inherited the tradition that a Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman set before them.

She taught us—and I'm not speaking autobiographically so much as I am trying to strike a responsive chord for a generation of young Black women from the South who came into SNCC—our mothers and fathers taught us that we are, in quotes, “as good as anyone.” Never allow anyone to call you out of your name. Never allow anyone to abuse you or to misuse you. Always defend yourself.

All of our parents had guns in the home, and they weren't only for hunting rabbits and squirrels, but out of self-defense. And the South has always been heavily armed, as you well know.

Now, my mother was never involved in the Civil Rights Movement. There were a lot of inherent contradictions in my mother and all the other mothers, because she was terrified of what might happen. When we became involved in the movement, she was scared the Klan would come and burn down the house.

But at the same time, she was the same mother who allowed Vernon Dahmer—who was murdered by the Klan—for Clyde Kennard, who was killed by white racists in Mississippi—she allowed them to take us, as 14- and 15-year-old girls—13- and 14-year-old girls—to Jackson, 94 miles away, to the NAACP state mass meetings, when Roy Wilkins came to town, when Gloster Current, the field secretary director of branches, came to town. When Blacks from all over Mississippi would come to these meetings.

It was illegal to be a member of the NAACP in Forrest County, Mississippi and Hattiesburg, but people carried their cards very proudly. And we, as children in the schools, used to whisper and talk about it, rather proud, and say, “We heard that Mr. Clark, our math teacher, is a member of the NAACP.” And we looked rather favorably on those people.

That was the tradition that I come from. It was a tradition that allowed two of my mentors—three of my mentors, including Medgar Evers—who I met in 19—early, what—[19]56, [19]57, I guess, when we used to go with these people, these adults, to these meetings in Jackson. Medgar Evers came to Hattiesburg in 1959 when we were in 11th grade and helped us to start an NAACP youth chapter.

He never turned to us and said, “You two girls—you two Ladner girls,” as we were referred to, “should let the boys serve as heads of this local youth organization.” No one ever told us anything about our limitations because—about gender.

When we went to college in 1960, we used to slip off campus. We spent our first year in college at Jackson State, and it was the single most oppressive experience I’ve ever had in my life. Period. I mean, I’m 44 years old. I’ve still never—I’ve had a lot of experiences, but never anything that oppressive.

But we used to slip off campus and go two blocks up the street to Medgar Evers' office to talk to him, to keep in touch with what was going on. He told us that students at Tougaloo College were going to stage a sit-in. Sit-ins had occurred all over the South, but not in Mississippi.

But the NAACP did not consider it in any way wise to stage a sit-in in a public accommodations facility, in a restaurant or whatever. What they did decide to do was to challenge another kind of institution. They had two Tougaloo students sit in at the public library.

We asked him if we could participate. And a very strange thing—the one reason we couldn't was because we would have been expelled from Jackson State immediately on the technicality. The technicality—if you can believe this—was that we would have had to sign out. You had to sign out every place you went—to the public library. It was illegal to go there. So we didn't.

But what he told us was that you can be very helpful. You can go back to your campus, and you can tell people—quietly and without attribution as to where this was coming from—that there's going to be an event to take place. So we did that. We knew that—we sat around and listened to the radio all day, waiting to hear the news come across local radio about these students sitting in [and] being arrested.

Anyway, to make a long story short, we helped to organize. James Meredith was one of the people. It was a small core of people on campus. We helped to organize a prayer assembly demonstration that evening in front of the library that turned into a major altercation between the president of the college—it went absolutely crazy—and knocked my roommate down, and beat a lot of other people up, and closed—

Then we began—we marched downtown the next day, and then it became a protest against the school itself. And they closed the school. And they asked us—told us—not to come back next year. We went on to Tougaloo, which was really freedom. It was the first time I really experienced true freedom.

Medgar also—in the spring of [19]61—one day in his office, he told us that there was a young man in his office, and he said, "I'd like to introduce you to someone." We said, okay. You never asked questions back then. We just sort of quietly, sort of fine. He said, "I want you to meet Tom Gaither. He's come here to help Negroes get their freedom." That's all he ever told us.

As it turned out, Tom Gaither was the first organizer. He was a CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] field secretary who'd come in to lay the groundwork for the Freedom Rides. I didn't know that. Never asked about what kind of freedom he has to help us get. But anyway, to move right along here.

It was that after the Freedom Rides—soon after the Freedom Rides, in the fall, early fall, that I began to meet some of the women and men—young men and women—who were my kind of people.

Go back to the day Dorie hit Mr. Patton over the head. When I began to meet people like Diane Nash, later meeting Ruby Doris and all the other people. Then the most important thing was to begin to meet local Mississippi people who had grown up feeling as stifled as I, who had grown up feeling that—they had ideas they wanted to express and that they couldn't, that they had things they wanted to do with their lives, and just to feel totally constrained is a horrible feeling.

But when I began to meet other people throughout the state who'd grown up the same way, it was like I died and gone heaven. To meet people like Susie Ruffin, who lived only 27 miles away. You remember Ms. Ruffin? And Ms. Hamer, and all these other people, and to meet Guyot out at Tougaloo. It was just an extraordinary experience.

Now, none of these women I began to meet knew they were oppressed because of their gender. No one had ever told them that. They were like my mother, and they'd been reared in the tradition of my mother, my mother's five sisters. They had grown up in a culture where they had had the opportunity to use all of their skills and all their talents to fight racial and class oppression—more racially than anything else.

They took their sexuality for granted—for it was not as problematic for them as their race and their poverty. And perhaps they didn't know they were oppressed because of their gender. They were so busy trying to survive and to fight day to day, it would have been a luxury for my mother to focus on gender concerns. I mean, it would never have occurred to her. Neither would it have occurred to me at that time, because it was not a problem. It was never problematic.

We assumed we were equal when we got into SNCC. I would have been ready to fight some guy if he had said, "Well, you can't do this because you're a woman." I'd say, "What the hell are you talking about?" And a lot of the women in SNCC were very, very tough, independent-minded. In fact, the men in SNCC were—the most independent-minded people you'll ever meet were in SNCC. I mean, they would argue with the signpost.

And also, you see, if you were weak and didn't really have very strong and firm beliefs about whatever it is you thought you believed in, you didn't survive. You really could not survive. It was one of the most hostile cultures in which you were trying to operate—I mean, that is, the external culture.

You were trying to operate against a perceived common foe. And that common foe was what kept us so tight and knit together, as Casey has so eloquently put it—our enemy was always an external one. It was not internal, at least not through those early years.

And I think we do have to make a division between pre-[19]65—and I would even say pre-[19]64—and post-[19]64. There are very, very different kinds of ideas and ideologies and values and so on that operated then.

But for many of us, I think the very important thing is that for many of us, SNCC gave us the first structured opportunity to use our skills in an egalitarian way, without any kind of subjugation because of our race or our class or our gender.

And also—it's very, very important that we not be guilty here, or ever, of doing kind of retrospective analysis and imposing current 1988 feminist theory onto the realities of 1963. I think that's a critical factor. We can't take feminist theory—and I read it, I teach it, some parts of it. We can't take those models and impose them onto a different historical era, a different time, a different place. The models that people have described here came out of the context of the times.

Sure, there were no women who ever chaired SNCC. But Ruby Doris—I bet you ten to one Ruby Doris dominated SNCC. Ruby Doris—there used to be a little joke: is Jim running SNCC or Ruby Doris? Who's running SNCC? I mean, what was the chairman? Who cared? I mean, nobody really even cared.

And people in SNCC were so anti-authoritarian that if you thought you were going to begin to emerge—I mean, some of the biggest jokes were made about Stokely, or "Stokely Starmichael," you know. "Who does he think he is?" But people—those same people—we'd still embrace him and love him very much. It was not a hostile and nasty kind of comment at all. But it was just that we were very, very anti-authoritarian.

I'm gonna wrap up here now. But I think the point I'm trying to make is that the context of time was very, very critical. And that for many, SNCC gave us the first structured opportunity to really use our potential, to use our abilities, and to express our views on the world—the state of the world.

We assumed we were equal. We were treated that way. Most people who came into SNCC were more independent-minded than most people in the rest of the country—most people on the outside. The faint-hearted didn't last.

Our relationships were defined, as I said, first and foremost by the task at hand. Matters of life and death were abundant, especially in some of the tough times during Mississippi. I can remember when Jimmy Travis got shot in Greenwood. I can remember a number of terrible events, when you didn't focus on what we would have considered ridiculous concerns. But you focused rather on things at hand.

And I think, to a great extent, that is why we come here now and sing, and have some—it invokes, certainly within me, some of the same feelings. I can texture the same feelings I

remember having felt 25 years ago. Those things fortified us against all of these other concerns out there. It fortified us against the hostile, racist society that was our common foe.

And it was within SNCC that this Beloved Community operated—for a while, I always thought. And it was within that context that I thought I was equal, that I thought I was a full participant. Because all of us came with a stronger sense of our own identity, a stronger sense of purpose. I believe most of us did.

It's not to suggest that everyone was tough and strong and so on. Some people really weren't. And we have a lot of casualties who aren't here today. And I think about that a lot. We discussed that. And but for the grace of God, any one of us could have been a casualty. It was a very tough time to be a young person growing up.

But I think we were emboldened by those experiences. It was not until a decade after leaving SNCC that I began to read some of the works on the movement—maybe a little longer than a decade—Sarah Evans's *Personal Politics*. But it's totally rubbish. I mean, it's revisionist to the core. She didn't even interview the right people. She didn't even talk to the people she should have talked to, who could have told her what really happened.

Michelle Wallace—I would even put at an even lower scale when she talks about *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. I've waited for this chance about 10 years, and I speak on behalf of my sisters out there. I guess—you never know when I walk down, "Who gave you the right to speak?"

But again, I think there's a real danger in people revising or trying to understand what happened without really taking the time and the effort to understand—to get the story right.

Our final point I'll make here is that SNCC challenged authority of all kinds. It's not coincidental that people—Victoria Gray [Adams], who spoke here earlier, who's my cousin—who talked about having challenged authority as a child—I think all of us did. And what we used in SNCC were kind of shock trooper tactics.

And what I think the analysts, the scholars, have gotten wrong—and other popular writers have gotten wrong—is that when they say that feminism emerged because of dissension within the ranks—they're wrong. Rather, feminism is an outgrowth—or emerged because SNCC served as a model, a prototype, of what could become a better kind of society. And it gave rise to not only a feminist consciousness, but other groups, like gay people, the elderly, students, a whole range of people within the society who had also been oppressed began to use the kind of SNCC model to pattern their own movements.

And it was not dissension within the ranks. Sure, there was—a lot of people perceived—it was normal. It was very natural for people to perceive themselves as different kinds of experiences and different interests. That was normal. That was to be expected.

But I don't think that we were oppressed women who got angry because Stokely—and this is putting it overly simplistic, of course—that Stokely said we were—our position was prone. I was just—I was talking like, "What the hell are you talking about?"

People—Black Southern people especially—we understood that as the kind of protectiveness. It was like a brother would protect you, like a father—I don't want to call this man my father, please—but a kind of protectiveness more than anything else.

I would not—but someone else coming along—had you come from the North, were you white, had you had a different set of experiences—you might have perceived that to have been discrimination or whatever. Maybe. You would have wanted to drive. I'll end there.

Barbara Sicherman: Thank you all very much for your very informative and moving and valuable comments. I'd like to open discussion up to the floor with questions or comments.

Audience Comment: I have a comment I think might be helpful in terms of particularly the understanding of young Black women today, as we continue to struggle in our communities, and in relationships, and in families. I resonate with everything that Jean and Joyce said. And Joyce, I really identify with your passion, your kind of outrage at the notion that any of us could have been oppressed because of gender.

That kind of protectiveness—I mean, Sherrod tried it in southwest Georgia. There were—you know—he wanted, he tried, but it was a loving kind of protection, and it didn't work either. Because the other thing is that when everybody was wounded, then whoever would get up first were the ones who had to get up first and move, and that was just the reality.

However, something did happen in our community after 1965. Something did happen as we moved to Black Power and as we moved to Black nationalism, and as the Black Muslim became very, very prominent in terms of their attitudes toward women. And therein was the notion that—and I think that even historically, there's some kind of cycle here, which I don't really understand yet, but I'm trying to—because things have happened generationally to us as Black women in terms of where we stood with Black men.

After that, there was a kind of a sense of the whole matriarchy thing and wanting our families to look like—we were told—white families. And so that many younger Black women at that point became very defensive about their strengths. And we have gone through a period of Black women being extremely repressed, at least in terms of ambivalence about strength, assuming a responsibility for the violation of Black men.

And since I'm in the church, there's an extraordinary baggage that is still alive, and operating against our being who we were in SNCC. So that it is hard now for many male leaders—just as, and you're right—I could not—I am a strong Black woman. I could not have [indistinct] I've always known that.

But there is a need, I think, for us to understand some of those dynamics, in terms of some of the changes that we went through. Some of it is still a poison in the community. There's a whole lot of stuff going on between young brothers and young sisters—"You gonna be my woman? You gonna do what I say do?"

There's a sense in this, for instance in the church, that in order to reclaim Black men, that somehow Black women have to step aside in order to allow that to happen. In so doing, we assist our enemies in our oppression. We participate in the further dividing of us.

So that in this—what is referred to as the underclass—we have a hell over here in which Black males exist—I would not call it life—and a hell over here in which Black women and children exist. Separate from each other, not being able to fire, to embrace, to strengthen, to renew, to support each other in the ways in which we experienced that in SNCC.

And since there has been a kind of a movement to deny what was the reality that we so passionately affirm right now. I'm scared that it could—that what we experienced could be lost, even in the naming and the blaming and the scapegoating.

And I just know that Black men and Black women cannot stand that—that we cannot survive it. So there's a need—and I know I'm talking too much now—but there is just a need for us to kind of move beyond.

Nobody could have pulled us down if they wanted to. And yet, maybe some—maybe there were other ways in which, subtly, we were impacted. And I still—and I see it happening among young brothers and sisters now. And if we don't name it, we won't be able to deal.

Jean Wheeler: I wanted to make one comment in response—to appreciate very much your focusing us on that breaking and naming it. And I—because humor seems to work for me—I wanted to go back to a story about Sherrod to support your point.

And this is that Martha [Prescod Norman] and I were working for Sherrod in Albany, and he didn't want—he wanted to keep and protect us. And we didn't want to stay there. We thought that Greenwood was a much more sexy place to be, much more exciting and dramatic and powerful. And so we waited for Sherrod to go to jail. As soon as he went to jail, we left—midnight—to go and work where we wanted to work in Greenwood, which was much more powerful and dramatic. You dramatic–

Audience Comment: Panelists—or the audience—I guess there's a real desire. I feel a real conflict between talking about what the situation is now versus what it was back then. And I guess there's a real desire to figure out what it all means for now.

But since we are focused on back then, and since I have a certain different kind of experience from the people on the panel back then, I might contribute it.

I was a volunteer in the summer of 1964, and I went back in the spring, from March through June of ’65. I was sort of—I don’t know if Mary remembers it—but I was sort of recruited by her and Emmy Schroeder to go back in March to work on the filmstrip project they were organizing. And I knew Emmy Schroeder at that time more than Mary. But I met them both on a New York street corner in late February, and they talked me into quitting my job and going back down.

And I subsequently became very involved in the early stages of the launching of the independent Women’s Liberation Movement. So I have something to contribute from what I learned as a volunteer and in those later days.

I think—I agree very much with what's been said about that it was basically the positive experiences of SNCC, rather than the problems of male chauvinism, that were really the most significant in the stirring of the women's liberation—the mobilizing of it in this country.

I speak this way even though I did experience it as far back as [19]64. I can give my experience. But in my case, I was already aware or conscious of male chauvinism as a political problem. I had come from an Old Left family, and people talked about male chauvinism and gossiped about who was a male chauvinist.

And I had learned that there was discrimination against women in this society. So that running into it in SNCC—there was nothing really new or special about SNCC. It was rampant in the Old Left, in the New Left. What was new in SNCC were these positive things. I'll get to that.

But anyway, in [19]64, when I was down there in the summer, many of the classic things had happened. It’s not just a question of being protected, although that was an issue that arose. Because on the project I was working on—I can’t remember the details—but there were a lot of people registering to vote in Batesville, Mississippi. It was the only town in the state where there was a court injunction, and therefore it was possible—you didn’t have to read or cite or write about the Mississippi Constitution to register. It was actually possible for people to register to vote there.

Of course, it was a risk. Your name got put in the paper. You got fired from your job. But at least you could actually get registered if you were willing to take the risk.

And so there were all kinds of legal things that had to be done. I forget—you had to post a notice on the courthouse bulletin board, or maybe this was for the Freedom Democratic Party. But there

was a big discussion in the project about who should post the notice on the courthouse bulletin board.

And there were both Black women and white women in the project, and Black men and white men. And all the men immediately decided that it should be a man who should go down and post the notice, whereas my first instinct had been it ought to be a woman, because she would be less noticed, etc.

Anyway, all the men decided. In the end, we didn't just take it, of course. We fought back. It was suggested that women could fight back, but we had to have a struggle over it. And I think we actually won that struggle through logic. But that was—so there was an incident of that—that kind of thing was just interesting. It was so illogical.

But there was the constant problem of sharing the housework. And once again, maybe it was because I expected men to share the housework, and a lot of other people didn't. And I expected especially radical men—even though I knew that it was hard to get them to do it—but still, we would fight about the housework. And with everything—I think Stokely Carmichael plays all kinds of roles in history about this too. Because he was actually quite good on the basic issues as I recall—sharing the housework

On my project, I remember one time we had been struggling for a whole month to get the men to do the housework, and Stokely drove in as a—you know—a roving organizer, helping all the projects with his entourage. And we were all sitting around in this farmhouse cabin. And he just gets up at the end of the meal and says, "Well, let's do the dishes," and proceeds to do them. So—but on the real nitty-gritty issues like housework—in my experience—it was good.

The other part that he played here, I think, was this line that probably many people had, that I remembered, mostly negative. The thing was—"go fight"—to the white people in SNCC—"it's time to fight your own oppressors," or "go out and organize your—no—your own oppressors."

I remember he used that phrase. Maybe other people did too. I'm sure other people did. But anyway, I remember it from him. And even then I was thinking, "Fight your own oppressors." Well, I knew there was a class problem, but I must admit—

Okay, that brings me to March when I came back down. I mean, I almost thought it was my duty as a white organizer to start thinking. But I didn't think about women's liberation until I came down—I mean, women's liberation as a possible movement until I came back down in March.

And I arrived back in Batesville. And another volunteer who stayed all winter, Chris Williams—who later married Penny Patch, who's here, but who was a SNCC staff person from way back—he came running up to me because he had been one of the few men on the project the summer before who had done the dishes and the housework.

And he came running up to me and he said, “Oh, Kathy, you’ll be so excited to know that there’s something going on called women’s liberation.” And he mentioned something about how they’re going to stick in the SNCC office, and that Mary King and Casey Hayden.

Mary asks in her book, “Where did this myth arise that Ruby Doris Robinson had either written—” I heard it that she had read the paper that they had written at the staff meeting. I heard it—that it was in the spring of [19]65, and it was a very specific name.

I don’t know how it came about. Maybe people were trying—other people were trying to pin feminism on Ruby Doris Robinson. I don’t know. But she was—already back then—there was already a legend, as early as [19]65 in Batesville, Mississippi, that Ruby Doris Robinson had read this paper.

And somehow that connection—that a movement was starting on this issue. A movement like the SNCC’s. The thought that—there—I had always known that there was the issue. But the thought—the positive thing—of a movement on the issue, and the possibility of a grassroots movement.

A grassroots movement such as had been spreading through the South—but in this case, of women—oh, the white women out there, who we were supposed to go organize—the white people—were—

Anyway, I think that’s the point. The real point was this possibility of a movement on an issue that I don’t think any of us had conceived of then as being possible to have a movement about, even though it was an old issue. And a movement like the SNCC was what was so important—and was another part of what was so important about SNCC.

Barbara Sicherman: Any other comments or questions?

Jean Wheeler: It seems to me that your comments were just what you said you weren't going to do. That is, you said you thought that the more important thing was the positive modeling that the movement provided for women, for the development of the women's movement, or whatever—or other movements—and then you focused on the opposite. And I'm pointing it out because I think that's what happens when people write their histories.

Audience Comment (continued): No, my point is that you can’t leave out—you need both. They're both true.

Jean Wheeler: Yes, ma'am. I'm just saying—I think—well, you did just what people do.

Audience Comment: I’d like to say something about that too. It was the same issue I addressed myself too last night, that what happens afterwards is that all these people who claim themselves

to be authorities write books or produce TV programs which millions of people see and read and talk about, which then says X, Y, and Z happened.

And I just think it's just like the rest of what happens in America, where you can just barely, barely believe that there's a truth—a seam of truth—in anything you see on TV or appears in the media.

That is the same thing. Sure, there were certain things that were—I mean, you couldn't help noticing certain things that were happening, if you were a man or a woman, and noticing certain patterns. But they were just what they were. They were certain patterns. They were, like Jean says, gray areas.

So if you talked about it somewhat, then somebody else writes four books about it, and says, "Well, it was this, that, and the other thing," and completely distorts the reality and the emphasis—just like the movement has been distorted in its reality and its emphasis. And I think the same thing has happened here.

And I think it's—putting something on the record, for the record, and also for whatever other… young students are here—I think you have to learn to really just, really read this stuff or listen to this stuff with only a very little bit of belief. Because most of it, just like most of the history of mankind on this planet, has been totally distorted by a group of so-called scholars.

Audience Comment: I just got to say something. So, somebody referred to sitting in the [indistinct] office—because I was one of those organizing back then. Yeah, I was tired of doing secretary work. I was tired of taking fucking minutes every time we had exec meetings.

The main point, though, was when I decided to go into Greenwood or into the field—I got a ticket and I went in. And nobody said, "No, you guys come back to the office." Nobody said any of that. That it was a freeing experience for me to be in SNCC, because you're right, it was always supportive.

Because we were so aware of injustice, that when it was pointed out, we became very sensitive to it, both men and women, and then they became responsive again. It was your responsibility sometimes to make the point. But at least somebody took notice of it.

When I wanted to do the [indistinct] Freedom School, it was Stokely who decided he was gonna try and get me the money to do that. And a lot of that had to do—when people mention Ruby Doris—yeah, Ruby Doris was a strong lady. And I remember people cowering when they had to go by her. I remember when I was coming out of New York, they said, "You have to go by Ruby Doris." Yes, you're right—it was rare. But the major part of that experience was very freeing.

Michael Thelwell: This is with great trepidation. [Indistinct] I just want to make two points. One is that if one remembers the history of the organization and the founding presence who gave form and spirit to it—and that is, you know who I mean—Ms. Ella Baker.

Ms. Ella Baker had struggled with chauvinism all her life, and particularly in SCLC. And she molded and inspirited us. And you know she wasn't going to create an organization that was going to recapitulate that. Number one.

And number two—if anybody—I mean, it was with extraordinary pleasure and pride that I sat here and listened to my sisters in the movement talk—for a number of reasons. The first reason being that under the glare of the revisionism—and I said, "This is bullshit" —but I said, "Well, I might be an oppressive male, and insensitive to these questions," so the only people who can say whether my perceptions of what that organization represented are my sisters. And I was very pleased and agreed with what they said tonight.

But the fact is—you don't have to take my word. I'll tell you what—you can solve it with your simple application of intelligence. We were a very self-selected organization—and my recollection of the people in it is that there were heroes. The women and the men.

I had respect—I mean, I'm a very irreverent person. First—I don't respect many people. But I had incredible respect for all those young people in that organization who were taking those kinds of risks and coming through. And the quality of support that they described is absolutely accurate in my recollection.

But I ask you a simple question. No matter how brave and tough and firm the men of SNCC were—and I think they have to have been [indistinct]. But you've listened to people like Joyce Ladner, Mary King, and Sister Jean, and this little feisty one here. Now Ruby Doris would be here, so you don't know her. But look at those women and tell me which man won't [indistinct].

Casey Hayden: I just want to make three short comments. One is, I worked for Ella Baker, and she was my boss in this Y[WCA] job I had. She was also Mary's. Mary worked for her too. And I think a lot of the thinking that we did together really was inspired by her.

The other thing I wanted to say was that Mike [Thelwell]—when Jack was putting this panel together—I had suggested that we have a man on the panel so that it wouldn't look like we were discriminatory toward men, or we weren't revisionist in the direction of separatism. But I don't know, that didn't happen for whatever reason. And about cleaning—and the issues of housework—as far as I remembered, no one cleaned the Freedom House.

Joyce Ladner: I wanted to make one great point to go back to the concerns that Prathia [Hall] put so eloquently. I had a conversation a few days ago with Reggie Robinson, who was—what shall I call him? SNCC—very dear person to all of us. First middle secretary, right?

Anyway, I asked Reggie do you think we could sit down and talk about some organizing tactics that SNCC people would have used or could come up with today that would help us to begin to organize low-income Black people who are called underclass members—and the women are said to be in the feminization of poverty category, and so on?

What would work? How can we stop kids from killing each other at 12 years old? And how can we begin to have—what kind of organizing would work with this? And he said—we talked about it for a little while—not a lot.

But I guess, to go back to Prathia's concern, I think she raised some very, very pressing concerns. And I'm not totally content to sit here tonight and talk about what was. I think the real important thing is to, at some point, address—not tonight—but at some point to address whether or not all these wonderful things we've said tonight about how glorious something from that period—that could work today.

When we see Black people and poor people of all races have sunken to new depths—what would work? How can we restore some of this—if not the Beloved Community—certainly some just very basic common sense organizing, and infuse within the current generation of young people—young activists here tonight—a sense of purpose.

Imbue them with some of our hope that we still maintain after two decades—to go out and to challenge some of the thorniest problems that society has ever faced. And I'll leave it at that. But Prathia really raised some very, very important points.

Barbara Sicherman: Bernice Reagon and I think, in view of the lateness of the hour, that will be the last comment.

Bernice Reagon: I think that I've talked some about the Civil Rights Movement being the boarding struggle for this time, and that there's no progressive organizing that has come out of this society since that is not based on it. And one always has the choice of looking for the strands of continuity and seeing that things have continued to move from one group to the other as they try to grapple with restructuring their space in society. And you can look at that and, in fact, claim it.

And one of the separating things—and I think I hear pain about that charge about SNCC being oppressive to women from SNCC people—the implication is that, let us say, the women's movement was generated in SNCC. The implication is that it was not generated by SNCC—that there were these people who were in SNCC, who created something that was not SNCC.

And I think that happened because of racism. It happened because—and I noticed it in the women's movement myself. They will name the top women singers in the movement, and they won't name Sweet Honey in the Rock. And I say you can't talk about powerful women

progressive singers in the United States, and Sweet Honey isn't the driving most radical group out. But they name the top white singers, and then they add Sweet Honey in the Rock. And it's almost as if we are not a part of the women's movement.

And I have a feeling that there was something racist working—that needed that statement, that thrust, that energy, that memo, to not be a SNCC-generated memo, or a SNCC-generated thrust. And it's not so.

If it is a group that meets for four days, hearing every possible thing under the sun, then everything that comes up belongs to us. And people who have trouble embracing that energy—i.e., that women's movement—I think also are buying into people who spend so much time trying to contend that, in fact, we did not create it.

And I am convinced that it is Black organizing in this country that is the most progressive, and we need to really be cautious about the way racism moves and renames and reshapes things. And we're standing around trying to figure out where we stand on an issue when all of it falls within what was possible within that organization.

And as far as I am concerned, there isn't anything that's happened to Mary King or Casey that was not created in SNCC, in terms of their being able to do whatever it was they did. I didn't do what they did, but SNCC is the place that gave me the ability to do what I did. And it's different, but both happen. All of those things happen.

And I think we really have to watch racism, because if the group is integrated and an energy is created by white people and other people start to read into it, they will separate it out as if it was not created by the structure that's in place. And you can just look at the struggle in the women's movement around how white it is. It's had to struggle with racism the whole time. But I think that's the way it reads. I mean, people really try to make stuff white even if it ain't.

Casey Hayden: I love what you said. I just love that. It just really seems right. I don't know if I could restate it. I'm gonna get it before I leave. That's real profound.

I think I wanted to say that somewhere in what you said is this whole—going back to the notion of the source—the nonviolent source of what we got into. That that source, which sees the enemy as non-personal and structural, with that we can transcend these divisions.

And I think, particularly on the question of inclusion—like, what you're dealing with with your group and stuff like that—it's really important to get back to that source, in a sense, of some kind of unified movement. All this divisiveness is not where we came from. It's not where SNCC came from. The root—that's not where we came from.

And it's important to get radical. See, what you're saying is real radical—like, whatever came out of it is—hey, that's what came out of it. And it came out of a Black movement. I'm not sure

I'm being real clear with that, but back behind there is some kind of transcendent truth, which will live or obliterate all those kinds of things you talk about.

Barbara Sicherman: I want to thank the panelists very much, and people in the audience—both those who spoke and those who have been here this long evening. Thank you very much.

Jack Chatfield: The meeting scheduled to be held in Umoja House has been moved to Wheaton Lounge downstairs.