

## SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

### Lowndes County Freedom Party (LCFP)

Speaker 1 (00:05:19):

Hello, I'm Dr. Asan, Kwame Jeffries associate professor of history at the Ohio state university, uh, where I teach courses on African American history, uh, and the civil rights movement. I'm also the author of *Bloody Lounges, Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama Black Belt*. And I'd like to welcome you, uh, not only to the SNCC 60th conference, but specifically to this concurrent session, uh, entitled the lounge county freedom party, the LC FP, putting black power into practice. 1965 to 1969, Lowes county, Alabama in 1965 at the start of 1965 was a majority African American county, 80% black, uh, but it had of the 5,122 African Americans who were eligible to vote a voter registration age, not a single one was on a voter registration roles, uh, political exclusion in lows county, Alabama at the start of 1965 was absolute, but by the end of the following year, by the November of 1966, not only had a majority African majority of local black folk, majority of African Americans, uh, a near majority become registered to vote.

Speaker 1 (00:06:38):

Uh, but they had formed their own, uh, radically democratic, uh, small de democratic independent political party called the Laos county freedom party in which they fielded seven African Americans, uh, for as candidates, uh, for control of the local county courthouse. And they ran, uh, under, uh, the black Panther ballot symbol. Uh, the lows county freedom party was in fact, the first, the original black Panther party. Now this remarkable political transformation, uh, occurred because of a partnership between local people, local activists and members of the student nonviolent coordinating committee. And today I'm, I'm really excited to, to say that we are joined by two SNCC veterans, uh, who participated, uh, in the project in Lowes county, Alabama, that started in 1965, uh, that led to this remarkable experiment, uh, in small de democratic politics. Uh, we have Ms. Jennifer Lawson. Uh, Jennifer was born in Fairfield. Alabama was a participant, uh, in the children's March, uh, in 1963, uh, in Birmingham, Alabama, and for her participation, uh, in the children's March, she was actually expelled temporarily from high school.

Speaker 1 (00:08:03):

There are consequences for the sacrifices and the activism, uh, that we, that we do. She continued her work in the movement as a student, uh, at Tuskegee university, uh, and there became a part of, uh, or led directly to her work in SN, uh, and she became a part of, or participated in the 1964 freedom summer, which was a transformative experience for her, uh, and, and, and, and continued, uh, created a pathway for her to continue her activism, uh, during 1965 during the voting rights campaign, her and other Tuskegee students, uh, protested at the state capital, uh, in Montgomery, Alabama, uh, Jennifer then moves on to work in Lowes county, Alabama, which is situated just between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. Uh, she eventually felt the pull to the movement fully, uh, leave school and works, uh, as a full-time secretary starting network in Alabama black belt, uh, and among the things that she contributed to the movement as an amateur artist, she drew illustrations, uh, for one of the SNS, uh, critical contributions to the political education of the people there, which was the freedom primer, uh, putting those skills to use, uh, to help a, uh, population that suffered from high levels of adult illiteracy become educated in the ways of local politics, as well as state politics, uh, later in life, uh, gene, uh, Jennifer Lawson, uh, became the head of programming at PBS and founded her own media company, Jennifer Lawson.

Speaker 1 (00:09:38):

Thank you so much for being here and welcome to the panel.

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Speaker 2 (00:09:42):

And thank you very much. It's my honor, and pleasure to be here today and to talk about lows county, because I think it represents one of the examples of people, really ordinary people exhibiting change, creating change for themselves. And I think it's a very powerful example, and I look forward to talking about it.

Speaker 1 (00:10:07):

Well, thank you so much, Jennifer. Uh, we look forward to hearing your insights and, uh, to learn more about the experiences that you have, uh, on the ground in Lowes county, Alabama, uh, were also joined, uh, by Cortland Cox, who shortly after the voting rights act, uh, was signed in August of 1965 by Lindon Johnson, uh, penned, uh, a a and memo, if you will, uh, in which he laid out, asked a critical question, not only of people of lows county, but really of African Americans nationally, uh, what would it profit a man or woman? Now, we would say what would've profit a person, uh, to have the vote and not be able to control it. Uh, Cortland Cox spent his childhood, uh, shuttling between New York city and, and Trinidad. Uh, he arrived at, uh, Howard university, the, the Mecca, uh, in, in 1960, uh, where he joined the non-violent action group nag and there, uh, he partners with, uh, other, uh, folk who would have a critical young people who have critical role in, in, in SNCC and in the movement Stok car, Michael ed brown, uh, gene Wheeler.

Speaker 1 (00:11:13):

And so, and so many others. Uh, he became nags representative, uh, on SNS coordinating committee, uh, and eventually would, would head down and be a part of the, the freedom struggle in Mississippi. Uh, but after the MFD P's challenge, uh, that is spur in Atlantic city, uh, he joins other SNCC activists, uh, including Sophie Carmichael, uh, and eventually Jennifer Lawson in lows county, Alabama. And there would play a critical role, uh, in the, uh, developing the political program and implementing the political program that would lead to the formation of the Lowes county freedom, freedom party, uh, brother Cox became SNS program coordinator, uh, and in 1967, travel, uh, to Stockholm, uh, to represent SNCC, uh, in the international war tri war crimes tribunal, uh, Corland Cox's, uh, political activism, uh, was consistent and constant, uh, long after he was, uh, uh, long after his time with SNCC, uh, in 1974, for example, uh, he helped organize the sixth pan African Congress in Tanzania, uh, Cortland Cox, uh, welcome to the panel and, and thank you so much, and not only for your contributions to the movement for, uh, but for being here to share some of those experiences and lessons with us.

Speaker 3 (00:12:38):

Yes, son, thank you. I think it's very important that we really examine this example of what we need to continue doing as a people in terms of organizing ourselves in order to achieve political and economic power.

Speaker 1 (00:12:58):

So critical, so critical. Uh, now I wanna invite, uh, both Corland and Jennifer, uh, to, to, to join neon screen. Uh, and we have some, um, some images, uh, that we want to share and just have a little bit of a conversation. I'm gonna provide a little bit of background, a little bit of context to the, the project in Lowes county, uh, and the emergence of that movement and some of the obstacles. And then I'll turn it over to Jennifer and Cortland to really dive in and, and share some of their experiences and the lessons they learned at the time. Uh, and then we will save some

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time on the back end, uh, after we listen and learn to Jennifer and Corland, uh, for your, for your questions. So there, there will be time for that. Um, the, you know, be, as we think about LOEs county, and we think about sort of what came out of Lowes county, um, the, the creation of this radically independent political party, the first black Panther party, uh, we can't understand what happened if we don't understand, uh, what people were facing.

Speaker 1 (00:13:59):

Uh, and so, you know, start, the starting question is so critical to really understanding what went down in Lowes county, Alabama, what was the problem now? You know, this is, you know, 1965, and I think it's critically important that we understand the date chronologically. So the voting rights act has had not been passed, but the, the civil rights act of 1964 had already been passed. This is 10 years after the brown decision. This is 10 years after the Montgomery bus boycott, uh, which occurs literally, uh, in the county over next door. And yet in Lowes county, Alabama political exclusion is absolute. There are absolutely no African Americans on a voter registration roles, and it's not because they were uninterested in politics. Uh, it was because of a long history of purposeful disenfranchisement in 1901, Alabama rewrites, a state constitution for the sole purpose of disenfranchising African Americans, uh, and in Lowes county, the number of, uh, African Americans who were registered to vote in 1901, uh, is about 5,000, uh, in nine by 1905 it's it's it's, it's down to 50, uh, and that is enforced by racial terror and racial violence.

Speaker 1 (00:15:10):

Uh, and so that's critical. African Americans were kept off the voting roles by law, but also by the use of terror and the use of violence. And this created an opportunity, uh, for the all white democratic party of Alabama to assert its control and influence. And in 1965, the state party of Alabama its symbol was a, of, was a rooster and its slogan, the official slogan, uh, of the state party of the democratic party of Alabama was white supremacy for the right. I mean, this was, this was a clear, uh, statement of where they stood that black folk were not to be a part of the political process under any, and under any circumstances. And this is critically important because this signals to local people on the ground that they are not wanted within the democratic party. And so, you know, there, there will come a point, uh, where a conversation is had among African Americans and SNCC organizers.

Speaker 1 (00:16:10):

Once the voting rights act is passed and say, okay, now that you have the vote go, and this was your question, what do you do with it? And I would distinctly recall a, uh, an activist by the name of Frank Miles Jr. A local person. And he said upon reflection, he was sitting there and he was thinking, you know, and he said, the democratic party that's at this national level, that was the party that had turned away, Fannie Lou Hamer and others in Mississippi, the state democratic party. This was the party of George Wallace and the party who slogan was white supremacy for the right and the local Democrat, the local Democrats. He said, those were the people who had quote, done the killing in the county and have beat our heads. And so why would we want to join them? Was there another way forward? And that really opens the door, uh, as we will see for the creation of the independent political party, uh, Jennifer, next slide. Next slide, please.

Speaker 1 (00:17:04):

In the end, what we're talking about, uh, is where political power actually resided, uh, and this is a photo of the, uh, LOEs county courthouse, uh, and, and this was a seat of power. Um, and, and, and it's, what's so fascinating and what's so interesting, uh, about, you know, thinking of thinking

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about not only the allows county courthouse, but also thinking about what it represents. I mean, literally this is the place where African Americans in the courtyard in the front, uh, had, had been, had been publicly murdered, right? I mean, so it's not just a theoretical seat of power. This is also the seat of, of, of white power, uh, that was enforced through political exclusion, but also enforced through the of violence. And so a decision will be made at one point that when African Americans in seeking how to, how to gain access to the levels of levels of power in order to make decisions that impact their lives, they specifically target the county courthouse by going after the, the elected offices, uh, that, uh, and officials, uh, who control the county government.

Speaker 1 (00:18:13):

And so we will see candidates, uh, by the following year running for a county sheriff tax assessor, coroner tax collector, and for school board, you know, I, I want, I I'm, I'm gonna take a step back now, right? Because I only study this. Uh, but, uh, Jennifer and Cortland, uh, you, you, you live this, you live the project, you lived working with local people, uh, coming up and thinking about how to organize, to gain control of the mechanisms of, of, of local political power. And, and so I'm just gonna take a step back and, and, and I'm, and get my pen out. So I can take some notes and listen and learn, uh, to, uh, about your experiences, the insights that you gained in the moment, what informed the decisions that you were making in partnership with local people and the decisions that they were making. But then also of course, uh, the legacy, the lessons that came out of the work, uh, that SNCC did in Lowes county, Alabama. So Jennifer, I turn it over and Courtland, I turn it over to you.

Speaker 2 (00:19:17):

Well, thank you. Thank you so much, Hassan. And I think that you can see what we saw then as the problem when we went into Lowes county. And the next question for us became what's the, that that's where in 19 Courtland, Stokley Carmichael, and so many other people from, with the local people there. And that's such an important part of it in my view, because John Hewlett and all of the other local people in Lowes county were <inaudible> as to what the future of that county would be. And those conversations then led to that, the creation of the lows county freedom organization, and subsequently the lows county freedom party Courtland. Would you like to?

Speaker 3 (00:20:14):

Yeah, I, I mean, I think, I think for us the real problem, I think the real thing of the real beauty of Lowes county is we saw a problem and as opposed to saying, okay, there is a problem and keep celebrating the problem. The question is, what do you do with it? How do you use the resources that you have? How do you now involve the community that you live in and how do you use their energy to make a difference? So I, I think if I, I mean, we're gonna go into the specifics of lows, but if we look at Lowes county at a 30,000 foot level, the lesson to be learned from that is the, the, the solution to the problem is always in the communities that face the problem. It is their energy and their strength that will make the difference. And I think the, as we talk about the specifics of lo I think that's the big lesson, um, you on this, on this slide, I mean, I think this slide that, that Jennifer has put up is I would say one of my favorite slides. And again, it's the essence, miss Ms. Baker talked about talking to your neighbors, talking to the community that you exist in. And I think this picture of Stokley Kwame, Tre talking to somebody in Lowes county, it's really one on one and really intimate in a sense, because what the building this relationship, because what, uh, Kwame or Stokley was asking this man to do, whether it was stated or

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unstated is risk his life, risk, his job, risk, everything he has to establish that he had the right to vote.

Speaker 2 (00:22:11):

And the women and men of Lowes county were so courageous in that respect, they knew what was at stake. They, they knew quite well, what was at stake when they invited us in and, and, uh, it should be that they were be Lowes county is right between Selma, Alabama and Montgomery. So the March, the 19th, the March from Montgomery from Selma to Montgomery had gone through Lowes county and people in the county in seeing Martin Luther king and seeing John Lewis and others on their way to Montgomery kept thinking about the future of their place of Lowes county and wanted change. And that, I think it was incredible, the kind of courage that the women and men there exhibited about really inviting SNCC, inviting civil rights workers to come in and help them register people to vote, to transform the county. And it was the wonderful thing was that it wasn't then just that, oh, get registered to vote, but it was this intentionality about it, this whole question of why are we doing this? What is it that we want? And they began to talk about how they wanted to change the county to transform things for themselves and to have then instead of having to worry about what the sheriff was doing to them, to be able to be the sheriff and to hold office and do those things themselves.

Speaker 3 (00:23:47):

Yeah, Jennifer, one of the things that I think is important, and as we look at the, the next slide is that to, to say we lived in the county, we ate in the county, we slept in the county. We faced all the situations and consequences that the people in the county faced and it wasn't a week. It wasn't a month. It wasn't six months. We were there for years. So in order to make the difference that we took the time and did the kind of organizing within the county so that people could see and believe in us, because half of the battle was their believing that we were prepared to engage with them.

Speaker 2 (00:24:31):

And they made great sacrifices. These tents reflect the fact that there were many people who were evicted from the farms where they worked and that they then, uh, we helped and worked with them. SNCC workers helped to raise money and to people could live in temporarily while more permanent housing was thought. But there were times when they were act violence, people would shoot into the area near the tents. And so there was this constant air of intimidating and violence

Speaker 3 (00:25:09):

Regard. I think also, I think also that while we had the violence, that, that the strength of the people was reflected in their decision, that, that the flying violence would not deter where they wanted to go to build a party that they thought was necessary to, to get them to vote.

Speaker 2 (00:25:29):

Asan mentioned earlier that the, uh, black Panther was the, this black Panther was the first of the black Panther

Speaker 2 (00:25:41):

Because the people of Lowes county, John Hewlett, and some of the others when they sort of started thinking about, well, they needed a symbol because people at that time would generally

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vote on the basis of the symbols. They would say, well, you go for your party, even if you can't read and write that well, you'll know your candidates by the symbol. And so they, when we talked about what symbol would the Lowes county freedom party want, then they said, we need a mean black cat to run that white rooster out of this county. And that, that was then the, their choice of the black Panther. And we then began to put that on their ballots and on posters and other materials around the county.

Speaker 3 (00:26:31):

Yeah. I mean, and I, I, I think what it has also besides the, uh, the, the ferocity of the look <laugh>, it really was important to tell people who to vote for, because we are dealing with a crowd, a lot of it who, people who could not read and write. So they were voting for the symbol as opposed to just voting for the candidate.

Speaker 2 (00:26:57):

And another element of that was the question of, in addition to getting people registered, to vote, to educating people about the importance of the vote, which they understood in so many ways was the helping to build confidence. That's one of the things that was so moving to me and so important to me, which was you had people who said, yeah, well, you know, I don't know, I've never been a sheriff. So I don't know if I could be the sheriff or could be the tax assessor. And so the question became, how do we then work with the people of Lowes county to, in, to help build that confidence about what is possible to go beyond what has, has been the past to what is possible for the future? So we began to get the information from the state of Alabama about the different roles within the county. So what is the job? What's the, what's the job of the tax assessor or the coroner in the county and, or the people on the who head up education. And we go ahead formed that material to boil it down to a way in a way that people would easily understand.

Speaker 3 (00:28:21):

Yeah. One of the things Jennifer, that I think I'd like to point out here is that while we were, and people need to understand that we are talking about people who are between 17 and 25 years old in 1965, I was 24 years old. Jennifer was much younger than me. So we were talking about, we are talking people that age, but we're also talking about a sophistication because we had a research department that was headed by Jack Manis, who was a little older than us, who was able to do the kind of research. And at those during those days, you couldn't go to Google. You couldn't go to Wikipedia. You couldn't go to all these places. You had to actually get a book and you had to get several books in order to do the research. So one of the things, as we talk about the research that was done about tax assessor tax collector, sheriff county clerk, and so forth, you've gotta realize the circumstances 1965, that you actually had to do a lot of heavy lifting in terms of research. And we were really dealing with young people who were between 17 and 25 years old.

Speaker 2 (00:29:36):

And we used what we had. We, uh, the building that you saw us, uh, coming out of earlier, uh, that was one of the offices at our office in Lyes county for the ly county freedom party. And we are talking about doing this organizing work at a time when there were no cell phones, uh, when the, there were no computers. And so what we were using was the, the sort of basic things that if we wanted to have a mass meeting, generally the way we'd get the word out would be that we'd go out into the fields or to other places where people worked. And we talked with them about what we were doing and how there was a plan for a meeting on the weekends or one evening,

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and then people would assemble at the meeting. And that's usually where most, the real heart of the activities took place.

Speaker 2 (00:30:32):

If we wanted to send something in writing, the best that we had was one of those old mimeograph machines that you ran by hand, where you could print out things. We could get, uh, our SNCC office in Atlanta, Georgia was much better equipped of course, and that we could have things formally printed there, but normally for the work that we were doing right there in the county, we were then just doing things by hand. And so when Cortland and I began to think about how could we get over the information about the tax assessor and others? We realized that, well, we could use what we had and we could, I could draw some images and that Cortland would write the text. And the two of us then began to collaborate on creating what became known as the Lowes county comics, which were simply our way of describing what the roles and responsibilities of the different officers of the county were. And the lovely thing was that it did have the actual chosen effect, which was that people did feel empowered to actually think about then running for office. And so we had a full slate of candidates.

Speaker 3 (00:31:55):

Yeah. I mean, and I think it was, it's really important. And I think little things like using the pictures of the candidates under comic books that we developed that was so important because we were not only fighting a battle that dealt with the question of literacy. But the question of self-esteem the question of are we worthy enough because you remember you, what we are saying here is we are gonna taking people from zero to 60. We're not just saying you need to register to vote and go down and vote and then vote for somebody we're saying, you need to not only vote, but you need to run this county. So we were not just talking about an election. We were talking about regime change. We were talking about if we had the problem, you ha you have to, you as the person with the problem have to solve it, you need to be where the resources are. And the resources are at that county house. You saw at the beginning of the, of the discussion and that you now have to not only get out of the fields that you're in and go down to vote, but also some of you have to go into the county to run the county courthouse and to become tax assessor tax collector and so forth.

Speaker 2 (00:33:18):

The man in this image is John Hewlett who, uh, would eventually become the sheriff of lows county and held that role for almost 20 or over 20 years. And I think the other thing that this image reveals is the kind of interest and pride that people took in voting and that when the on election day people would get dressed up in their Sunday best with hats and would, uh, would go down to, uh, vote. And it was always the, the sort of spirit and the energy, there was an electricity about the activity of going down to vote.

Speaker 3 (00:34:05):

Yeah, I mean, and I think, and because I think it represented the energy represented, the liberation, it represented, uh, uh, uh, as Hasan talked about earlier, miss Haman talked about, and Ms. Baker talked about everybody that we now going to be responsible for our own lives. And I think as we went into, into the county, you know, they were the what very, what helped us a great deal. There were people like Ms. Jackson, Mr. Jackson, Ms. Strickland, uh, and others who, who were the, the pillars. They were the pillars of the community. And it was around their strength that we were able to build a party. Because my, my sense is that there were a few people who

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owned their own land, where they weren't sharecroppers, and that they were the ones who would set the examples of what had to happen in terms of how we moved forward with the vote in 19 65, 19 66.

Speaker 2 (00:35:11):

And it's fascinating to visit lows county today. And they have this, these people there have a great deal of pride in their role within the civil rights movement, even to the ex there's an interpretive center there with the national park service, where they talk about the role that Lowes county played, then within the freedom movement, and that here with, uh, the white hall, they even have this sign where they talk about Lowes county was the home of the tent city. And people are able, you know, to feel removed enough from the horror of that, to be able to reflect upon it, uh, Courtland and I, with the drawings and the booklets that we did, we went beyond just, uh, eventually over time, we went beyond just the information about the various offices within the county to really also talking about the purpose of the vote and the purpose of continuing beyond the vote, uh, to create change within a place.

Speaker 2 (00:36:20):

And certainly even today that Lyes county is not a paradise. I mean, in, in the same way that there isn't a true paradise anywhere in this country. And that there are people who are continuing the fight there for economic justice, for environmental justice and for, to, and for improved education and access to jobs. And so it's really interesting to visit Lowes county today and to see both the pride and the history of what happened in the sixties, but also to see the fortitude of the people in continuing to work towards change and improving their lives within Lowes county.

Speaker 3 (00:37:07):

Yeah. And I wanna talk a little bit more about, uh, the comic book, us colored people, uh, because it's, it seems to me that it is, it is the battle. What really, what really is important in getting people motivated even today, uh, is the whole question of what is the narrative. And the, we used that we used that comic book to create a narrative was called us colored people. And we got this, that I got that quote from a woman in Mississippi, in a mass meeting. And she said, you know, us colored people been using our mouths to do two things to eat and say, ya, sir, it's time. We said no. And it, it really, that statement was a statement of defiance. It was a statement of resistance. It was a statement that we are prepared to go and battle. So we took, we took that statement from Mississippi all the way to Alabama, because we knew that while it was a different state and different, slightly different circumstances of people who were sharecroppers would understand clearly what was being said.

Speaker 3 (00:38:21):

And so one of the things that is really important as we think about how we organize is in order to get people in motion in order to get them to do things and to act as a unit and to act as an organization is important to create a narrative that makes a difference that holds the group together. And I think that comic book, us colored people is something that did that. And, and the, the, the binding of it was not something that we brought. It was something that people from Mississippi brought to the people from Alabama.

Speaker 2 (00:39:05):



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And that it's, uh, seems as though we've had a couple of questions, which is great. And someone wanted to know that, uh, how did the work, if SNS initial gold in Lowes county was to voter registration, how did that change and morph into a larger campaign?

Speaker 3 (00:39:32):

Okay. Um, you know, I, I think, I think part of the, the MF DP and what particularly what happened in Lowes county, I mean happened in Atlantic city really was one of the reasons that we chose to move to independent political party. I think that, uh, Hassan Jeffries earlier spoke of the role of the democratic party in nine in the sixties. I mean, the democratic part today, when people think of where the people who support right supremacy exists, it was, you know, it's now the Republican party, but during that time, it was the democratic party and they were called the Dixiecrats. And one of the things that happened in 1964 in Atlantic city, as we went to, to, to, uh, to support the MFD P to be seated as the delegation for Mississippi, uh, we, we saw that the democratic, the, the democratic party, including the president down all to the sheriff in particular places, did not believe in the question of right and wrong, because we understood that the MF DP did everything that was supposed to be done.

Speaker 3 (00:40:52):

The MF DP abided by all the rules of the democratic party, the MF DP had right on their side. And they had all of that stuff. And what, when it came to, to making a decision Lydon Johnson, the democratic party believe that if they alienated the white supremacists in the south, they would lose in 1964. So therefore we understood that if we wanted to organize people politically, that in fact we could not look to the democratic party, the Republican party was a very distant place. And so therefore we had to look to ourselves. And so my sense is that the impact of the MF DP on the lows county freedom organization is that it gave us the rationale what happened in Atlantic city. When we tried to see the MF DP in, in Atlantic city, at the democratic convention, and what the result of that told us that we now had to look at politics at and creating independent parties and not try to become part of the democratic party.

Speaker 2 (00:42:07):

And I think it was that it, it reflected a level of, at that particular moment in time, a level of being willing to forge your own and, and to, to find way forward that didn't depend upon anybody or any side in that respect. Uh, we had another question here, which was, I thought was quite interesting. Someone wanted to know about our particular backgrounds and how our work in Lowes county was affected by my being a southerner and Courtlands being a northerner. And I should point out that we had a number of people who, uh, Gloria House St. House, a number of people who worked in Laos county, who came from all across the country. <inaudible> you wanna?

Speaker 3 (00:43:00):

Yeah. I mean, I, I think, you know, I think when I think about it, I think when you are in the, the, the midst of fighting and the battle, you know, my, my sense is that you all won you. I mean, my, you know, they, the, um, I mean, I, I think, you know, as an organizer important for an organizer is that you have to be able to understand the culture of the people that you're dealing with. And so one of lemme, just for an example, so people, uh, in lows county were poor. I mean, they were sharecroppers and you would go to their house, asking them to register, to vote. And, you know, if they said, you know, will you share a, you know, some meal with us, will you break bread with

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us? It was important to say yes, even though you knew that they did not have much, because what was important was building the relationship within that community.

Speaker 3 (00:44:08):

So whether you from New York as I was, and, or Fairfield, Alabama as Jennifer was, or other places, it was important to relate, the important relationship was not with each other, but was with the community. And that each, each of us understood how we had to deal with the community. We would build a consensus about how we were so that there was not gonna be much difference whether you were from New York or Fairfield, Alabama. The other thing we were all young, again, we were 17. So we liked the same kind of music. You know, Motown was big at that point. We, we, we also learned to dance. I mean, we not learned to dance, but we were up on the latest dances. We were, I mean, we were not militants without fun. So, you know, so my sense is we had a lot of energy. I mean, and one of the things that we did again, in terms of the organization, we would sit up all night to debate and discuss the issue, any issue in the world. Uh, and so my, my sense is that what our, our whole circumstances brought us together. I mean, so these distinctions really disappeared after a minute cause they weren't really important in terms of the, what we were trying to do.

Speaker 2 (00:45:28):

There was, uh, someone asked whether I was the first artist, that whether I was the artist who drew the first black Panther. Um, and so I think that we should, that we, I did not draw or create the first, uh, black Panther. I reproduced a black Panther that was sent to me from the Atlanta office. And that, uh, later we learned that it was the football mascot for Clark college Clark university. And <laugh>, so that's where that the image actually came from. I reproduced it widely for our use in Lowndes county and that the people in, uh, California and other places, uh, in Wilcox county and some other places began to use the symbol of the black Panther, uh, for their political parties and activities. And as you can see from history that black Panther continued to move beyond Lowndes county to his own place in the world.

Speaker 3 (00:46:36):

But I, I do think the reason that the black Panther began to take on such importance, whether you were talking Oakland, California with the, the black Panther parties or internationally, is that it would, it, it became a symbol of strength. It became a symbol of defiance. I mean, so as, as Jennifer just said, it existed at Clark college for years, I mean, and several probably colleges and universities had a black Panther, but when it was endowed by the people of lowndes with a sense of strength, with a sense of defiance it, then everybody said, ah, this is what I want rep to represent me because they wanted to make a statement, you know, because, you know, you know, and as, as, um, it's probably was talked about, uh, at that point, and I'm saying I really, and really exploded in 1966 when Stokely talked about black power people, people in, in the sixties. And, you know, after world war II were beginning to think about new ways of making sure that the relationship that existed previously did not continue to exist. So we were exploring ways to, to excite who we were. And so when politically something was said by with the black Panther, it just, I mean, people said, yes, we should embrace this. This is what we want to do. And so it, it became highly political and very, you know, very public in terms of the international community.

Speaker 2 (00:48:15):

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Another question here, and that's that, uh, one is that we talked about that in the plenary session, they had talked about accountability necessary in black political power. Do we see movements building now that resonate with the focus of the Lowes county freedom party?

Speaker 3 (00:48:35):

Yeah, I mean, you know, I mean, you know, my sense is I, I think that one of the things that we have to start thinking about at this point is in some respect, collective action, you know, at this point we tend to see elections and we, we tend to see elections around candidates. And that is probably not the best way to look at elections. Elections should be about collective actions that allow us the government that reflects what we want to happen. And the, the, the expenditure of dollars that improves our community. So we have to, I, I think that as we begin to think about how we proceed, now, we have to do a couple of things. I think the first thing is to make sure that government does us no harm. So we need to make sure we need to take collective action to make sure that government doesn't no harm.

Speaker 3 (00:49:47):

And I think with the last four years showed, you know, what the possibilities are on that. I think the second thing is the, the, the thing that the question implies is that we need government that reflects our interests. And we need to say to ourselves, we are gonna engage politically. We need not just to vote for a person. We need to act in a collective way that send people who we designate should be there and not somebody to run because they, they, they're a businessman. They, they finish cool, or, you know, some other thing they have to have our interests. And I think at this point, I don't see the kind of thing that we are talking about in, in, in Lowes county in terms of collective action. But I think as we move forward, we're probably gonna be forced in that position, uh, because of what's coming at us in terms of things like stop the steal

Speaker 2 (00:50:52):

Someone asked, and I'm so glad they did about the contributions of Bob man in Lys case. Oh yeah.

Speaker 2 (00:51:01):

And I think, and I'm so happy. I'm so glad we are all here at this next 60th reunion. I wish that we were here together in, in person as opposed to, you know, online. But one of the reasons that I'm glad we are together is because it gives us a chance to celebrate so many of the people who aren't here with us, if Bob, Matt was still alive, we wouldn't be able to talk about Lowes county without Bob being the person who was doing the presentation practically of Bob mass cared so deeply about Lowes county, that he continued to live there. He was not originally from Lowes county, but after his work, he married and became a community member there in Lowes county. And I think that his name to me reflects also something that we haven't talked about, which is the economic side of it. We've been talking more about the politics, but that Bob was someone who was also very, definitely interested, uh, in how do you get economic justice? What's the nature of improving the community in and making strides forward and in economic way. And that's something that was, uh, very, it was very natural to Laos county because there were many people, uh, Courtland mentioned the Jackson family. There were many families who had come through the reconstruction era and had created their own, uh, businesses who had bought land and become prominent land owners there in the county.

Speaker 3 (00:52:46):

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There, there's another question that, um, I think, I mean, I, I just say, I just wanna say Bob is a good friend and he is, well, he will be missed. I mean, he is, I mean, he is always funny and he will be missed

Speaker 2 (00:53:04):

Black churches. Black churches were very, definitely another question was about the role of churches. And I will add with that, another question that came up, which was that, uh, the person, uh, asked whether we ever met hostility from people, the black community there. And the answer is very definitely yes, there were people who definitely had a different opinion about how one, what should happen and what the role of black leadership in the county should be. And the debates around the school in particular were some that I remember as being, you know, very, very strong where people felt that, that they shouldn't, that the people who were registering to vote and doing these things were jeopardizing the circumstances of the black growing black middle class, the ING black middle class there. And so they just felt that no, no, don't rock the boat. We'll be better off if we just take it slow and easy. And I think you've heard those of people like that before.

Speaker 3 (00:54:21):

And I think the example in Lowes county that I remember is the school principal. <laugh>, uh, the principal in Lowes county school for where the black, uh, students were. Uh, and he was, he was, you know, in, he seemed to be in debt to, to the white community that was running the, the county. So, I mean, I think that was, to me, that's, uh, an example of somebody who was definitely opposed to what we were trying to do. There's a, there was a question, uh, Jennifer, that, that, that said, asked about things that, uh, either, uh, that I remember things that Stokely or, um, or Kwame tu Ray or, or miss Hamer things, things that they said, uh, there was a question on that. Um, you know, I, I think that as we think about miss Hama, I mean, it wasn't, well, there's three things I think about miss Hama first was her leadership.

Speaker 3 (00:55:32):

And the leadership really was, I mean, she had a fourth grade education and one of the things that, and Charlie Cobb talks about this all the time, her position in the communities that she lived in, if I, a person with a fourth grade education and a shared Cropper can stand out here and defy the weight of the Mississippi government, the Klan, the white citizens council, and others who oppose me and oppose you, you need to join us together. So, so the leadership by demonstrating and her ability to be a voice from Mississippi inside Mississippi was something that I thought was, you know, particularly important. The second thing that I think about Ms. Hamer is her presence. I mean, and I mean, a great example of that is 1964 in the, in the, uh, the Atlantic city convention, she was so powerful and her presence was so strong that Lindon Johnson, the presidents of the United States tried to take her off TV by calling the press conference to announce it was Tuesday to say nothing, but he knew that if she continued and if she was on television, the way she was her presence, it would have a tremendous impact on the democratic party.

Speaker 3 (00:57:08):

So her leadership and her presence, and also the third thing, which probably has, you know, is connected to the other two, was her voice, the music. I mean, one of the things about the move, the, the movement is the music. I mean, it came from the church. We were talking about the church earlier. I mean, it came out of the church, the movement, the music of the movement

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came outta the church, so it helped bind people together. So I think about that in terms of, of, of, uh, miss Ms. SEMA in terms of Stokley, you know, we grew up together. I mean, I mean, probably, you know, Stokley and I had the same kind of background, both of our parents from, from Caribbean. You know, we both lived in New York and we both went to Howard university, but you know, the thing about Stokley that I think, I think another two or three things I think about him the first is his generosity.

Speaker 3 (00:58:06):

He was an absolutely generous person in terms of things that he had. I mean, he, he was always prepared to be highly generous, you know, Stokley went to the Browns high school of science and could have gone to almost any university in the United States, but he decided to come to Howard because he thought it was important that he included himself in the black community to make a difference. And I think the third thing, he was quite a bold person. I mean, <laugh>, you know, he was, you know, he was, you know, he, he would go where a lot of us probably did not wanna go or didn't go. Uh, and so his decisions about black power, his decisions about Panafricanism his decisions about a number of things, uh, were probably, you know, ahead of some of the people who were in, in, in SNCC. So, you know, my sense is that both of both Ms Hamma and Stokley were, were people who I think had the energy, had the vision, had the leadership, had the presence in order to make a difference as we tried to, to deal with the issues before. So human in civil rights,

Speaker 2 (00:59:27):

I had the, uh, the honor and privilege of working with miss Hamer in Mississippi after my time in lances county. And that I was working with her on a project, uh, spearheaded by the national council of Negro women and that Darris Crenshaw and, and a number of us, uh, Gwendolyn Simmons, Zara Simmons. We worked with a group of women in rural Mississippi to create economic co-ops. We were, uh, exploring economic development spearheaded by women. And it was a serious to be, uh, to work with Fannie Lou Hamer because Ms. Hamer was such a natural leader and a strong leader and in her own, right. And that we, I have, uh, really great memories of time spent meeting on their front porch, where we would then talk about what was happening both around the country, but also there in sunflower county and how then we could bring about, uh, greater economic development for the women in those areas.

Speaker 2 (01:00:45):

And it, she also connected us with you need a Blackwell, another person who in a very powerful woman who worked with SNCC in Mississippi, the names are endless because there were so many people, uh, like, uh, you know, these powerful women leaders who, whose names aren't as well known, but they were there. And it was really, it was a wonderful experience to be able to learn from them. When, uh, I think of Stokely. I also think of the times in lows county, when our long, long hours, days and nights of working together in the lows county freedom house, where we would then have really detailed, long discussions about issues. And this is something I kept feeling that we had that SNCC had become a learning organization where our work during the day was one thing, but that during the afternoons evenings, when we weren't working, we were really learning.

Speaker 2 (01:01:53):

We were talking, we were reading things, exchanging things. And we were teaching ourselves about how to, how to maneuver in the world that we found ourselves in. And whether that was

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something about what happens if there's violence in the community, or whether it was about what position we wanted to take in terms of something that SNCC was involved in on a national level, like the coming of the, like the Vietnam war. So it was those days and evenings were just rich with the experience of learning. It was, I learned more in my time there than I in Lowes county, probably that I learned in my years at Tuskegee, just from the intensity of the experience.

Speaker 3 (01:02:45):

I just wanna say for those who would like to know more about SNCC, they should go to the SNCC digital gateway, the SNCC digital.org. Uh, I, I think we had to get that commercial in <laugh>, but I do think SNCC digital gateway, snitch dig SNCC, digital.org. I see there's a question here about Virginia and the president, uh, the present, uh, election there. I think, you know, that did says, can we get the kind of energy? Can we get the kind of thinking that came outta Lowes county and so forth, uh, you know, here in Virginia, uh, and, you know, begin to talk about, uh, you know, you know, so I mean, one of the things that I think that we have to think not only about Virginia, but in the elections in 2022 and 2024, the stop, the steal that is being talked about today is not a lie.

Speaker 3 (01:03:48):

People need to understand. That's not the focus of the term, stop the steal. It is a battle cry. It is a battle cry like the south will rise again, it is a battle cry, like, you know, you know, we need to 40, you know, we cannot shot stay this way. So basically it is a battle stop. The steel is the battle cry of the white supremacists in this country. And we have to understand that each election, we cannot just focus on the candidate, whether it's, you know, the candidate for governor of, of Virginia or a candidate for governor of Georgia or state secretary, or the sheriff or whatever we have, we understand, we need to understand now that we are facing in the existential question, that is to say, there are people in the, in the political life of this country who are now dedicated to make sure that our vote is both suppressed and nullified, to make sure that we go backward.

Speaker 3 (01:05:00):

And that's our fight. Our fight is not about who is elected governor. Our fight is to ensure that the forces that we are talking about, that we are gonna support in any election, whether it's the Virginia election or whether it's, you know, the Alabama election or the New York election or so forth, it is about our interest. And our interest in the Virginia election is to ensure that people do not come to power who will harm us. So the, so the discussion in the black community, if we are gonna challenge the black community in Virginia, we're gonna get the black community in Virginia together. It needs to be around making sure that nobody goes into the governor's office or the Lieutenant governor's office, who in fact has, as Hassan talked about, you know, the, the whole discussion of hate. So my sense is we need the important thing about organizing and mobilizing the black community in Virginia in 2021 is to begin to talk about our interests. And at the minimum, our interest is to make sure that nobody gets into power in terms of the governor's office and governor's office, who in fact has a policy to support things like stop the steel, which is in which is geared a battle cry to hurt the black community.

Speaker 3 (01:06:34):

I put my glasses on to see the next question. <laugh>

Speaker 2 (01:06:37):

<laugh>

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Speaker 3 (01:06:39):

Okay. Um,

Speaker 2 (01:06:43):

I think that we, we have, uh, probably time for like, maybe one more question. And while you I'll give you a chance to look at at the question that are there Corland if you want to, but that, I would also just want to note that this session will be available in the, on demand session, uh, section of the website, after following this, it will be placed there as well as the other, as the videos from the other sessions. So if you are missing some of the concurrent sessions, this will be that'll, you'll have the opportunity to see those. And that. I would also just like to remind people that there is the, there are a number of wonderful films that are available at the freedom film festival, which you can access from the lobby area of the conference as well. And the hands on the freedom plow, which represents, which is based upon the book with interviews by 52 women in SNCC is also their interviews, 19 interviews with authors, from hands on the freedom plow that are available in the meet the authors section, along with authors, from SNCC. Uh, and so, so that there are some wonderful books there that you'll find ly you have a chance to look at the questions.

Speaker 3 (01:08:06):

Yeah, no, I wanna just, I wanna probably begin to make some closing statements and, you know, I, I think that if we look at Lowes county, uh, the first kind of thing that we need to do to think about is, I mean, and it's really simple. That is to say, you know, I was 24 at that time, you know, I am now 80 years old. And so we, we need to think about, and, and some of the questions that we tried to answer in Lowes county in 1965, we are still trying to answer now, but as Hassan Jeffries talked about, we were trying to deal with at the turn of the century in 1877. So my, my sense is that we cannot just use Lowes county as something back in history. We have to use it as a point in history that helps teach us what we should be doing and where we should be going.

Speaker 3 (01:09:11):

Because what we are trying to deal with is a relationship that exists. And that relationship was, you know, established where one party believed that it should have all the power and that EV and it uses the resources of one group in order to feed its power. And the other group group party thought that we need to end that kind of relationship. And we need to have shared power, is all people in terms of human rights and civil rights. So that's the battle that keeps going on, whether it occurs in lows county, whether it occurs in Selma, whether it occurs in, in St. Louis, whether it occurs in New York, whether it occurs, you know, in, in Haiti, whether it occurs wherever the question is the battle for human and civil rights. And so my sense is we should not just look at the place and the details, and we should try to look at the efforts of the people who engage in that struggle to try, try to change a fund, a relationship that is very negatively impacting one community. And we need to think about how we do that on an ongoing basis. It's a 24 hour, uh, seven day a week discussion. And you know, that is the lesson of Lowes county. That it, it is something that we need to use the energy of the oppress to begin to change the relationship with the oppressor.

Speaker 2 (01:10:46):

I think that LOEs county also offers us the lesson that all of us have the ability to create change that each and every one of us can make a difference. And that if you study the story of LOEs

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county, you'll find the remarkable women and men there who did make a difference in their community and made a difference in our lives. And that it's not, um, a world where we need sort of the big people, the big men, or the big women of history to be the, the charismatic leaders to make a change. It's just ordinary people, seeing a problem, coming up with a solution and being determined to actually do something it's working together, collaborating and making things happen. And that for me, is the story of what happened in Lowes county. Thank you for your interest today.