

# Making Our Way Into Political Office to Make Change SNCC 60<sup>th</sup> Conference October 2021

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## Speakers include:

**Former Mayor Shirley Franklin - Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia from 2002-2010**

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba - Jackson, Mississippi**

**Mayor Steven Reed - Mayor of Montgomery, Alabama**

**Corey Wiggins - Executive Director, Mississippi State Conference NAACP**

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**This discussion panel will emphasize the power of political office, political policies, and the legislative and financial needs of the Black community in America. The panelists will also express the challenges of being a public servant and what improvements can be made to see change within the black community.**

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**Corey Wiggins:** Hello, everybody. I am so excited to be with you all today to host this great panel with a great conversation that we're gonna engage in today. So, just to get started, let's get ready to jump in. Our discussion today, or our conversation today, is about making our way into political office to make change. I'm so excited about the panelists that we have with us. That's gonna engage in this conversation, and we look forward to spending some time with you. So, first, let me introduce our first panelists or our first guest to us today. We have [Mayor Chokwe Lumumba](#) from Jackson.

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba:** Greetings. It is truly a pleasure to be a part of this panel with such distinguished panelists and also to be in conversation with my friend [Corey Wiggins](#). It is a honor to be a part of a panel, that is hosted by SNCC[ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], and the strong history that it represents nationally. But particularly in Mississippi.

As I look at my introduction to political office, I see that it was by way of my parents, who were both organizers. Who so believed in building self-determined communities that they moved our family to Jackson, Mississippi, in 1988. At that time, doing political work against police violence, surrounded by peace in the streets and unity in the community efforts, engaging in political education, and a number of efforts out of our organization, the Malcolm X grassroots movement. At that time, we were probably antagonistic towards electoral politics, only to grow in an understanding that if you can only organize people who think like you, you're not much of an organizer.

So, over time, I believe that our political position has matured in a way that we understand that being able to fight for the material benefits that people so desperately desire provides a segway in order to introduce some of the struggles that we deal with in a more global sense. So I'm here understanding that our struggle for electoral politics<sup>1</sup> or the struggle to be a part of electoral

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<sup>1</sup> Electoral Politics - refers to the process of class struggle and conflict within democratic systems, where individuals vote for political candidates or parties based on their social class, leading to shifts in political affiliations over time.

politics is one that is rooted in the understanding that electoral politics is less more a means to an end in my perspective than the end itself. The end itself should be about how we build self-determined communities and how we democratize power for people across this country. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this panel.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you, mayor, for the comments, and thank you for all the work that you do and continue to do in your leadership here in the city of Jackson. I'm so proud of the work that you're doing, even the connections and partnerships that we continue to have here with the Mississippi NAACP[National Association of the Advancement of Colored People] and the city of Jackson. I am excited to introduce our next guest, our next panelist, Shirley Franklin, former mayor of Atlanta.

**Shirley Franklin:** I'm [Shirley Franklin](#), former mayor of the city of Atlanta from 2002 to 2010. During that period, I was able to get the mentorship of my former bosses, [Maynard Jackson](#) and Mayor Young [Andrew Young](#), under whose leadership I served as the chief administrative officer of the city of Atlanta and the chief operating officer of the city of Atlanta. Thanks again for having me; I am excited about the SNCC summit and the anniversary.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you for those comments, and thank you for the work that you continue to do even post being a mayor. As folks say or have said once, a mayor is always a mayor. I continue to thank you for the work and the leadership that you provide. So many, not only in Atlanta, Georgia but across this country. Next up I'm excited to also introduce our next panelist; we have the mayor of Steven Reed from the city of Montgomery, Alabama.

**Mayor Steven Reed:** Hi, thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of this, Corey. It's great to be on with Mayor Lumumba. It's great to be on with former Mayor Franklin. It's a pleasure to have this discussion with those who still have reverence for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC]. I am sitting in this office that was built in 1936 at a time when black people in Montgomery could not vote, had no rights, and had not thought of protesting or the Montgomery bus boycott.

But it is a strong reminder for me to be a part of this panel because my father was one of those who were sent to Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1960 by [Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) He was serving as an SGA [Student Government Association] president of Alabama State University right here in Montgomery.

His name is Joe Reed. I say that because those, whether it's [Bernard Lafayette](#) or whether it's the late [John Lewis](#) or even Congressman [Jim Clyburn](#), have told me stories of the founding of SNCC, how many of the student leaders from that time came together, and what the ultimate goal was. I don't believe it was just for me to be in this office. I think the ultimate goal was for us to bring about change to our community and change to those that we represent.

As I sit here as the first black mayor in the 200-year history of Montgomery, Alabama, I recognize the importance of organizations like the Student Violent Coordinating Committee and so many who have helped to make it what it has been over the years and decades. What we have, I think, on this panel is a result of the work is a result of the sacrifice is a result of the intentional efforts from grassroots to grassroots to make change through politics, to make change through the legal system, and to make change through the corporate system. We have to continue to do that. I'm excited that in almost two years since I've been in office, we have brought about change in equity.

We have brought about change in equality and really change in the system as well. Now we've got a lot more to do, and I hope that we'll be able to discuss that on the panel, but certainly, there's a special place in my heart for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and SNCC. And for those that were a part of it, and I am just grateful that I've been asked to participate, uh, with such change agents like we have on this panel. I look forward to the discussion that we'll have. Thank you so much.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you, Mayor Reed, and thank you for those comments, and thank all of our panelists again for joining us today. We are really looking forward to getting into this conversation to touch on a number of issues and things that are facing our communities and to utilize your office or political office to make changes in our communities. Again, I thank all of our guests for their opening statements and comments. Let's jump into the conversation. I start with Mayor Reed. You talked about the historical context of your candidacy and serving as the role of Mayor Montgomery. Could you just speak a little bit about going to sort of get into elected office in this role now serving? What are other opportunities, or what did you see as opportunities to make change even before you were elected when you were running for office?

**Mayor Steven Reed:** Well, I'd be remiss if I didn't point to the work that Mayor Franklin did as Mayor. And certainly, someone who we all have looked towards Mayor Jackson's historic run in Atlanta as being a blueprint for what I saw needed to be changed here in Montgomery. We have not had economic intentionality here in our politics.

I thought that it was something that we could change on the outside. I tried to do that when I moved back to Montgomery, after telling my parents, I never would move back here. But I thought it was something that we needed to address because we were talking about voting rights and politics. Yes, but we weren't talking enough about money. We weren't talking enough about capital and we weren't talking enough about economic opportunity.

That was something that I experienced and learned about in Atlanta. One as a student at [Morehouse College](#), and then certainly even living there. But I thought that it was time for our political discussions to be more impactful economically. So through education, through economic opportunities, those were changes that I wanted to press for here in the mayor's office.

We have started to do that not only through more support for small businesses or more support in particular for black-owned businesses but by looking at disparity studies and spending from city and county government and making sure that we are pushing forward minority participation programs, not just as a bottom line, but as something that we expect to achieve through excellence.

That was something that I was not able to do in my previous office as county probate judge. And certainly, I was not able to do as a small business on the outside. I thought it was important to the advancement of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] work over the last few decades that we make sure that money capital and economic empowerment play a central role in the progress of black people in this country. Certainly, in the south and Alabama in Montgomery, to be the core of that.

**Corey Wiggins:** Mayor Reed talked a little bit about some of the work that's happening in Montgomery[Alabama], but I wanna start with also the same question too, is when you think about when you decided to run for office, like how did you view running for office and being elected as an opportunity to make change in your community?

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba:** Well, first and foremost, I want to echo the sentiments that Mayor Reed expressed in expressing gratitude for the example laid by Mayor Franklin and so many other individuals. When we think about that history, we think about the fact that, at one time, our mission was to get leadership that looked like us. No, our mission must be to have leadership that thinks like us.

When I think of the great philosopher, and revolutionary [Frantz Fanon](#), who once wrote in his book, *Wretched of the Earth*, that each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it. So I think today, our mission and what we're trying to do in Jackson, and what we have to try to do with electoral politics is bring it to a place, uh, where, you know, our desired end of, of what is a successful economy is less reflective of, you know, GDP, less reflective of the new buildings that we're building in our city and more a notion or a marker of what are the sustainable development goals that we are achieving for people.

Jackson[MS], like far too many cities that resemble Jackson, is marred in cycles of humiliation, where we see poor-performing schools, where we see high blight, high crime, where we see failing infrastructure. So our mission must be, how do we bring a quality of life to people that they so justly deserve? How are we making certain that there are fresh fruits and vegetables within people's reach? How are we ensuring that the quality of our education prepares our young people for the world ahead of them? So these are the things, that I believe that we have to be centered on. I believe that this is only achieved by democratizing power.

How do we give greater people greater access to their governance? We are doing this in Jackson through a participatory budgeting process, understanding that a budget is a moral document. It

reflects what we value as a community. So, we have to value communities' input in that process. How are we looking at things like improving the state of our education? How are we looking to build our infrastructure, which is failing around us? These are all critical questions that I believe that that has to be at the center of our work.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you. Both y'all both of you reference Mayor Franklin and the work that she did and Atlanta and building off the legacy. One of the questions I also want to ask is, when you think about this work in the context of being a Southern city, we know all of the stresses and pressures and the history and the context of the South. What does it mean to do this work as a mayor in the South?

**Mayor Steven Reed:** You know, I have talked about this in a way because Jackson is a capital city. Montgomery is a state capital city. Atlanta is a state capital city as well. It is rewarding, but it's also challenging because what we see is a shift in the playing field that so many who were part of SNCC have tried to conquer. Just as we began to conquer that and see progress, it seemed to be a change in the rules that we were not informed of, and that happened in our state legislatures.

It doesn't just happen in Washington DC. When you are sitting this close to state power and state government, you see what happens as it relates to the people that we're trying to represent and the gaps we're trying to close healthcare, disparities, education, and economics. And so it is something that can be, very fulfilling in what we're doing.

Because again, I certainly recognize those who never thought that there would be, a black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, or Jackson, Mississippi, or Birmingham[Alabama], and so many other Southern cities. But we also see, I think, in our spaces, what is still being shifted as we try to quote-unquote, play by the rules; the rules seem to evolve, they seem to change somewhat.

So that can also be frustrating because just as we laid down some good policies and some good initiatives, something is tweaked legislatively, which, for many of us in cities, can be overwritten by these legislatures, which seem to be polar opposites of what we are trying to do in cities across not only our states but across the south and this country. So being a mayor in the South comes with a tale of really multiple emotions, and I wouldn't change it.

I would not give it up for anything at this moment because there's so much work to do. I feel like mayors like Chokwe, myself, and so many others, our friends, and colleagues have learned from those who blazed trails before us, such as Mayor Franklin and Richard Anton in Birmingham. When we think about [Marion Barry](#) in DC, we could go down a list of so many others. I think that we are up to that challenge, but we understand that there are a different set of rules that we must play by, and we must adapt to make sure that we represent our residents and our people in a way that provides the production and the results that we all want to see and not just the symbolism.

**Corey Wiggin:** Yeah. I appreciate that, Mayor Reed.

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba:** I guess I can join in on that particular discussion. First and foremost, I'd like to say I agree with the notion that I wouldn't trade it for the world. I'm grateful to have this opportunity to lead. I wouldn't wanna do it in any other place other than Jackson, Mississippi right here in the south, Mayor Reed was kind in saying that it is challenging.

It is, all that and more when I think about the many efforts to try to negate what we are trying to achieve in our cities. What is clear to me when I see the efforts of state legislatures across the South that are attempting to impact voting rights. When we look at the aftermath of the January 6th insurrection we compare that to the lawful, social justice movement in the wake of George Floyd's death.

What we discover is that America is still infected with the disease of racism that it has been since its inception. What we discover is that the rules typically only apply to those who are not making them. So this is exactly what brings us into office. I want to be clear that racism does not only exist in the South. Someone once put it in a very succinct way.

They said in the North maybe some people don't care how high you go so long as you don't get too close and in the South, maybe they don't care how close you get so long as you don't go too high. Nonetheless, it is still pervasive in this country. So that is why I think our leadership in the South is so particularly important because if we're able to bring models of change.

If we're able to build the sustainable or the dignity economy that I was talking about earlier in places like Jackson, Mississippi, or Montgomery, Alabama, or Atlanta, Georgia, if we're able to achieve it in the belly of the beast then what does it say for the ability to achieve progress globally? So to steal a phrase, from a show that my wife and I love to watch Madam Secretary, asks the question, what do you do? When you see a lack of integrity everywhere you look, you find it in yourself and you begin to change the world from where you stand. I believe that that has to be our mission is to change the world from right where we're standing.

**Corey Wiggins:** Yeah. Thank you for that. Thank you all, as I was listening to your comments and thinking about both the challenges, that you all face in leading your cities, and even the opportunities I want to sort of ask two questions, one on challenges and one on opportunities. So first on challenges, and I think you mentioned this Mayor Reed that as you have moved forward, and I've seen this firsthand also, mayor Lamumba, as you have sort of inserted your leadership into this space and into our community, the rules are changing.

The game is changing, right? Our state legislatures that our Republicans control, legislatures we've seen in the past previous administration at the federal level, all of them, the challenges that were faced there. I just wanna ask you a little bit about that, right? Like, how do you operate in that space when you have to fight against preemption, right? Anything great that you're doing in the city? There's an opportunity to be preempted by state law. There are structural issues that you

inherited in most cases from a disinvestment in your communities. So how are you facing those challenges as you're thinking about moving forward? Mayor Lumumba.

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba:** Well, I appreciate that question. The question brings to mind some words of Brother [Malcolm\[X\]](#), who stated that to advance our objectives, we have to have a diverse approach. So he said it required that he be a revolutionary, nationalist freedom fighter that he had to be all of those things to advance the aims of our people.

When we look at the electoral office we have to understand the limitations. We have to understand that the master tools will never dismantle the master's house. I think that we are closer to our objective when we have someone in a position who is drafted by the community who is committed to the aims and objectives, that the community is attempting to advance, and can create policy that resembles that.

But at the same time just as we saw, as I mentioned earlier in the wake of [George Floyd's](#) death, it wasn't the action of someone who was the mayor of a city or someone elected into the halls of Congress, that led to communities rising in the social justice movement. It happened on the grassroots level. It happened on the ground floor where people wanted to see change and where people were demanding change. If I'm critical of that, I think that our persistence in those demands have waned.

I think that we have to recognize that we are a part of a retracted struggle and we have to be consistent in those demands. I think that it requires both work internally and externally in order to advance those objectives. I was quite clear and have been clear to some extent have the benefit of watching my father's administration understanding the push and tug and both the victories and the setbacks that took place. I jokingly tell people that when my father won office because he had been a part, of so many organizing objectives that we were used to fighting, right?

We were used to the struggle when he actually won what we were not used to was the winning. So it was kind of the oh, hell moment, you know, what do we do now? That was really educational. We could see both the advantages of office and the limitations of office. I think that we have to be quite clear on both.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thanks, Mayor Reed

**Mayor Steven Reed:** I think that you have to push forward. Again I think about what those generations before us dealt with, and I'm grateful for their sacrifice. We enjoy the shade under the trees which they planted. So I recognize that it is not what it was for those first black mayors that came into power in the early seventies, across the country. It's not what it was for those who came even after them in various cities.

So we are at a point where regardless of what we see our history teaches us as a community, as a race of people that they have always been challenges to black progress. They've always been that

there's always been that resistance if you will, and we have forced through, and that's not to say that I'm looking forward to fighting or to having a battle, but I'm prepared if need be.

So I think what we do here in the city is we look for allies. We look for people who really not only wanna say there about it, but really who want to be about it. We wanna make sure that from our standpoint, whether you're local or whether you're somewhere else in the country, whether you're somewhere else in the world we find partners who want to see our residents progress and prosper. For us, that means philanthropic organizations.

That means corporate entities. That means individuals, that means many people who are considering relocating back to the south, as we have seen in the reverse migration, in recent decades to get them to think about Montgomery, Alabama, or maybe Jackson, Mississippi, and not just one or two other cities that most people kind of are attracted to. So we look for that return home of talent and experience to help us, because as Mayor Lumumba stated, the office of the mayor in this case certainly has its powers, but it also has its weaknesses and limitations.

So it takes a collective in order to advance our agenda in the face of strong headwinds. In the face of so many obstacles, some are known and some are being created as we speak. I think that we continue to forge ahead and we continue to anticipate some of those challenges to be put forth so that there is a plan A, B, contingency plan that we have in order to achieve the outcomes that we wanna see for our residents.

Those who have elected us in the office with the hope, with the hope and the prayer that our leadership would deliver to them better results. At the end of all of this, I measure what I do every day, every week, every month, and in every year that I've been in office by the lives that we are changing lives, that we are impacting if I can't point to those things that are impacting the very least of these, then I have a lot more work to do. There's yet a lot more to accomplish from this seat and this office,

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you, Mayor Reed. I know we have Mayor Franklin who's with us, who's having some technical problems. So we are also weaving in an interview conversation with her into this. Before I close, sort of my last final question for you all is that so often we think about when we see our elected officials having to respond or react to things that are happening or things that you may have inherited from previous administrations.

But I want to give you an opportunity if you would just speak a little bit about the opportunity as you continue to govern, as you continue to think about how are you using your office to make a change, where are the opportunities that you see on the horizon for a city of Jackson or for a Montgomery and I'll start with Mayor Reed first with this one.

**Mayor Steven Reed:** Well, I think the opportunity starts with us. I think the opportunity starts with understanding that despite having a black president, despite having a democratic control

Congress and, power that we may see as aligned with ours, we still have to do for ourselves. That we have to look towards one another for the collective advancement.

Many of the things that helped those young college leaders form the student nonviolent coordinating committee, many of those things that helped SNCC continue to not only be relevant but to bring about change in the years after. I think of principles that we have to embrace Lumumba spoke of the grassroots effort in the wake of George Floyd's murder. When I think of the [Black Lives Matter movement](#), I tie a direct line between them and many of those who are young and on the front lines of the civil rights battle, I commend them for what they did.

I commend them for pushing us as elected officials who believed that we were going at a good pace for forcing us to go further. I hope they will continue to do that, not just around criminal justice reform, but around access to quality healthcare, access to quality education, and equal opportunity in terms of economic and financial advancement.

I want them to continue to push up so that if there's a blind spot that I can't quite recognize someone can help me see it. I also wanna make sure that those who have put themselves forward as wanna be a part of this change, do more and be more deliberate and intentional in helping, mayors like myself and mayors like Mayor Lumumba do, and partner with us across the south. I don't know how we got there in this country without the South being more included in the economic prosperity of this country.

That may come in different forms and I'm open to that. What works in Richmond may not work in Shreveport and what works in Memphis may work well in Montgomery. I'm open to all of those things, whether it's Augusta or Savannah or Jackson or Selma, I'm open to that. I think there are opportunities. I think we have to make sure that we aren't just so way down by the past.

We are frustrated by the obstacles that we have, that we miss those opportunities and that we seize them. I would hope that those who are watching this and those who are maybe even questioning what their mayor may be doing in their hometown. We have to go about this with a different playbook.

We have to go about this with a different strategy at a time when the federal government is poised to infuse more money into this country than we've seen in the last 50 to 75 years, then it's gonna be important that we get our fair share. Some will say maybe even more than our fair share because that will then help us to achieve the goals and objectives that we have as mayors of Southern cities. And I think that will not only help the cities and the communities, it will help the nation as a whole.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you, Mayor Reed and Mayor Lumumba.

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba:** I think that our communities are pregnant with possibilities. It merely requires that we nurture it. As we think about the challenges that we see and I think back, and, I'd be remiss in this conversation, not to hearken back to the history and organizing efforts of people like [Bob Moses](#). People I mentioned people like Malcolm[X], [Fannie Lou Hamer](#), and Mississippi, all of these great organizers that we have to point back to the reality is that the greatest organizer of all time is oppression.

It is oppression that allows people to take an introspective, look into their world and look at what needs to be changed. So, as we're dealing with COVID, as we're dealing with social justice movements, what I am grateful for is the energy of young people that I believe needs to be concretized. It needs to be utilized in a way that we offer history and lessons learned over the course of time. So that we can build a movement of a world.

Build a society beyond the contradiction that we wanna see, as we look at our communities, yes we will have more resources and more money infused in our cities than, ever before. How do we not only use that money sufficiently to build, sustainable infrastructure but also equitable infrastructure? One that doesn't leave one community at the mercy of good and bad weather or climate change, more so, than another community. How do we look at the equity issues, within our school system? How are we making certain that people have more access to controlling or dictating the quality of life that they so justly deserve?

I see that within our communities, I see that opportunity, we could talk about, the makeup of our cities and how they're positioned. You see that there's a reverse migration taking place back to the South, where people want to attach themselves to a history that maybe they don't even personally remember. Understand that something is calling them back to back to home, back to the place where their grandmother and grandfathers were from. Just like my grandmother was from Lafayette, Alabama. I find myself doing work in Jackson, Mississippi.

As I said earlier the opportunity is not only one which allows us to correct the challenges that we see within our cities but become a model for the rest of the world. I look forward to being a part of that. I'm grateful at this moment, not only do I have the history of those people that I mentioned to look back on, but I also have the friendship of people like Mayor Steven Reed.

The friendship of mayors, like Randall Woodfin in Birmingham, Alabama, Adrian Perkins in Shreveport Louisiana, and Lavar Stony in Richmond, Virginia as we are facing these challenges. We have the opportunity and the friendship, a sincere friendship that allows us, to call on one another and ask what are doing as we're learning our way through COVID. What are you doing to advance the participant participation excuse me, a little tongue-tied of black businesses and how are we not being apologetic in that mission? There's a tremendous opportunity but there's also a wealth of resources at this time that we can lean on.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you both. Look, as we shift I wanna make sure we have enough time to hear any closing thoughts or remarks. So what we'll do is we'll start with you Mayor Lumumba,

any closing remarks that you want to share with the folks who've been so gracious of their, of their time to be part of this conversation with us?

**Mayor Chokwe Lumumba:** Well, once again just truly honored to be a part of this distinguished panel, and truly honored to be a part of an event that is organized by SNCC. May our brother Bob Moses rest in peace and power. May we continue to take the torch and make certain that we are just as motivated, as all the things that led them into organizing the student nonviolent coordinating committee. I think that it is important that we have these conversations not only for our edification, but we take them to the streets.

That we make certain that they're not academic but that are practical and they are information for our communities to feed off of and build off of, is important. It is important that our young people understand that there are some advantages to electoral office, but they also have to understand those limitations. The selection of our leadership be less about political ambition and more out of necessity, more out of recognition that we need to draft people into office who are committed to the aims of advancing our people.

**Mayor Steven Reed:** Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for their work and dedication and blazing so many pathways for people like myself and people like Mayor Lumumba, Mayor Franklin, and so many others just, we are grateful for what you have done. I hope that throughout this panel, you see some, glimmer of hope and pride in the opportunities, that we have been blessed with. We certainly understand the responsibility and we certainly understand the opportunity that we have.

I want the young activists, I want the young student leaders to look at the elders with a sense of pride as well, and not as someone standing in the way. But as someone who can help make a way for you in what you are doing. I wanna make sure that all the elected officials at the state county, sea level, big city, small town, whatever it may be are a part of this. We can't get where we need to go with just one person in a mayor's office.

It takes a collective, it takes organizing, it takes activating, and it takes sacrifice to get the results and achieve the goals and objectives that I believe most in our community would like to see. So I've been enriched by this conversation. I have stolen some mental notes from Mayor Lumumba and certainly appreciate Mayor Franklin's presence as well. Corey, I appreciate you moderating this on behalf of SNCC because I believe while we must continue to move forward, it is important to understand, the roles that we've traveled. And we need to understand, even in positions of elected office, that there's more work to be done, and that we cannot be satisfied with the titles.

We cannot be satisfied with some of the perks, we must make sure that we are willing to do the work and that we understand that whatever we face is no different than what those who come for us have faced as well, maybe in a different form, but they have faced it and they have faced it down in one, and we must continue to do that. We will continue to work in the best effort in the

best interest of our community. And those who helped found this so important organization and honor the work that has been done. Thank you for having me and I look forward to seeing you all down the line, stay safe.

**Corey Wiggins:** So thank you. Thank you for being with us here, Mayor Franklin. I just wanna start there. You talked about serving under, the leadership of Mayor Jackson and Mayor Young, and then becoming the mayor of Atlanta yourself. Could you sort of speak a little bit about, like your thoughts about going into office and becoming elected and the opportunity for change that existed, given everything that was going on at the time?

**Former Mayor Shirley Franklin:** Well, I had the pleasure of having two mentors when I was a young woman working in their administrations, and then they were very much present and involved in city affairs, uh, and in leadership when I was elected. So I had them for the full almost 20 years. They were not short on advice and critique I suspected Mayor Lumumba and Mayor Reed have had similar experiences. It was an exciting time for Atlanta as a woman and Atlanta had never elected a woman mayor, although some great women had run, but had not been able to get elected.

I had the distinction of being the first woman, mayor of Atlanta. A lot of people thought I didn't know what they thought. Some people thought I had stripes but I was very much a hands-on day-to-day, management type. I enjoyed the day-to-day operations of this city. But in addition to that, I understood that the role of the mayor was not just to run the trains on time or to be sure the services were delivered, but also to be sure that the wealth gap was closing, that equity issues were considered that minority and female business opportunity was open and expanded.

That fairness and social justice were issues that had to be incorporated into everything that we did. It's not always easy to check all those boxes, but you have to know and have to be willing to check all, to look at all those boxes, and to do your darndest to check them. So Atlanta had a long history of minority and female employment, affirmative action, and minority and female business opportunities. But frankly, the wealth gap had been growing for a decade or so. So the issues around poverty were key issues. When I came into office.

**Corey Wiggins:** Thank you for that because, Mayor Reed and Mayor Lumumba had sort of talked about, systems and structures and institutions and how they are at play with some of the challenges that some communities face, but it's not just challenges. It's also opportunities. You mentioned some, as you were talking about that you faced as a mayor, could you sort of speak to if you would, to like what you experienced as a mayor and things that are happening today around those challenges, are they the same? Are they different? Like, what are, what's your perspective on that?

**Former Mayor Shirley Wiggins:** Well, there's, first of all, there are 400 years that we're trying to correct. We, it doesn't get corrected all overnight. A lot of it just, you have to keep working at

it. So one of the issues around poverty, you'd say, well, what did you do for the people of Atlanta around the issue of poverty? I would say that we started internal to city government when I came into office. There were almost, uh, 10% of the city's workforce was not, not making a living wage. In other words, they were working 40 hours a week. They were made under what was considered even a living wage, certainly not enough, uh, income to close, uh, any wealth or equity gaps. So one of the first things that I did was to find a way to raise, the minimum pay of city employees from seven and \$8 an hour to over \$10 an hour, for permanent employees.

Then we had another five or 600 employees who were seasonal employees. In other words, they had no benefits. They didn't have healthcare, they didn't have life insurance. They didn't have sick days or vacation days. They were seasonal. And they were brought in for nine months out of the year. Now these are people who were living and trying to support their families living in the city of Atlanta. So they were living again below the poverty line in terms of their income. We then brought them on over two years as full-time employees with benefits and moved their pay up to \$10 and 20 cents.

Now that was just the beginning of the conversation about what we do. I believe that you have to look internally and externally simultaneously. Then we advocated for a living wage for all of our contractors and what we faced was a state government, and the legislature passed a law that prohibited any city in Georgia from setting a wage rate for its contractors to keep the city of Atlanta from actually setting a minimum wage rate for its contractors and vendors.

That is the kind of law that needs to be addressed because it depresses wages, especially for entry-level jobs, uh, and for people who have limited skills and it makes it almost impossible if not impossible for them to support themselves and their families.

**Corey Wiggins:** Look, mayor, you must be reading my mind. You went right into what my next question was. It was framed around this idea of any time there's change, where there's resistance, where there are change makers. There, there is a reaction and Mayor Lumumba and Mayor Reed talk about this. You talked about this in the context of even where you have states or in enacting laws to prevent right, black elected officials, our leaders from making the types of decisions that are best for their community. Could you talk about the resistance of the reactionary sort of things that happen where you're trying to be this change agent in leading your city?

**Former Mayor Shirley Franklin:** Well, around the issues of minorities, I talked about the wage issue and the city has since really about 15 years later, maybe 14 years later looked at the wage rates. And that is something that the city ought to look at periodically every few years, to be sure that people are paid a fair wage and above the minimum wage, to support the people who are doing the work. Not just worried about the people at the top of the food chain, but also the folks who are doing the day-to-day work.

But in addition to that, we talk about what Mayor Jackson, so courageously did with minority and female, business programs back in the 1970s, and then Andy in the eighties, and then

continued into my administration. Well, of course, the federal laws changed around that, in that period, and the requirements placed on cities and counties and authorities to have those programs are much more stringent.

You actually have to prove discrimination which seems kind of foolish because we all know it existed. History tells us that, but now cities have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars actually doing disparity studies in order to prove that discrimination exists and that there's no level playing field. If you cannot prove it, you are not allowed under the law to proceed with a program.

So that makes it much, much more difficult to continue to improve, to enhance the programs that were started in the seventies, and the current mayors like Lumumba and Reed, have the challenge of working in a much more restricted environment when it comes to minority and female business than a Mayor Jackson had, or a mayor Arrington had in Birmingham or married John mayor Johnson had in Mississippi. Just, if you could go back, you could see there was much more flexibility at the time.

Now that's not to say you don't want accountability. Of course, you do. But you don't wanna have to prove the obvious and, and prove it. Every single time. So on the city's watch on my watch, the city spent over a million dollars to prove this, the disparity in economic opportunity for women, uh, African Americans, Latino Americans, Hispanics, and others for us to include minority and female participation in our multibillion-dollar airport expansion and our water expansion. We had not done that, we would not have had the opportunity to spend tens of millions of dollars with small black and brown and female businesses as we were spending that money, which would've sent us back to the forties, fifties, and sixties when we got none of the business.

So what happens is a large city like Atlanta that's about to spend, we were spending \$7 billion, so a million dollars or almost \$2 million to develop this program was a, was pennies compared to what we're spending. But then, the bottom line is it, those studies cost that much, whether you're spending 10 million or 30 million or a hundred million, and a lot of times smaller communities are hampered in their ability to advance some of the programs that we know work because they can't, they cannot get authorization or don't have the money, too, or, or don't have the votes on the council or the board to proceed with the kind of rigor you need to meet the federal standards now.

**Corey Wiggins:** Well, I wanted to ask you this question, too, right? So often I imagine as a leader, as a leader of a city, some things happen that you have to respond to, right? Crisis moments of emergency. But I wanted to ask you this question about governing for opportunity. We know challenges exist, but a lot of folks in our communities are looking at, uh, leaders around thinking about what's available tomorrow. What's available around opportunity? I wonder if you could just speak or just share some thoughts around, like, where do you see opportunity that exists? We have Mayor Reed, and Mayor Lumumba folks who are currently in office now, where do you see where opportunity exists for folks in elected office to make a change?

**Former Mayor Shirley Franklin:** I think Mayor Reed and Mayor Lumumba are doing a great job. I follow them. I read about them. This is a very hopeful time for black mayoral leadership because of people just like them. Congratulations and then we have many more black women now than we've ever had as mayor. So congratulations to all of those folks, including our own Mayor Bottoms [Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms] in Atlanta for really during COVID during, a pandemic, during an economic downturn during really the realization of the country that a George Floyd could die the way he died.

Police brutality has been shown to black people for a long time, but that is now recorded and visible for all of us to say. So the key, to my work, and I won't call it success because I mean, I stand on the shoulders of the folks that came before me. So I can't claim the accomplishments. They are our accomplishments in Atlanta, but the key to that is setting very clear, aggressive, long-term sustainable goals. The key is to do those things that are going to benefit your city and the people who live in it 50 years from now, and that's at the personal level at the human level, at the physical level at the infrastructure level. I'm known as the sewer mayor. There's nothing sexy about that.

However clean water, if we don't know the value of public health after COVID, we ought to. The value of potable, clean, accessible water to a community that wants to grow and thrive and families want to grow and thrive somehow or another, we've gotta integrate all of those things. I urge people to push as far to push the envelope as far as they're willing to go because we need that kind of bold leadership, the kind of bold leadership that brought Maynard Jackson into office at 35 years old.

He said, I am going to, he didn't say democratize, but I'm gonna open up the doors of city hall to people who've been locked out. They're black, they're brown, and they're female, Andy Young [Former Mayor Andrew Young], who said cities of America and those led by blacks ought to be a part of the international growth of the economy. He promoted Mayor Campbell, who came in and said, we need to do a different kind of housing, a different kind of approach to devastated areas and underinvested areas. That model is a mixed-income community neighborhood-focused place-based focused model.

Then I come in as the sewer mayor, basically saying infrastructure is what holds up the economy are any of those things more important than the other? I could argue that any one of them is more important than the other, but the bottom line is together. They are important. Each of those mayors, before me, was looking long term, they were not looking to a two-year or four-year cycle. That's the hardest thing to sell to the people that you serve, that we are making these investments for your grandchildren's children.

**Corey Wiggins:** Mayor, look, you could run a whole masterclass on, your own around leadership, responsibility, and strategic thinking. I just appreciate all the work that you've done, the work that you continue to do, and the value you continue to create for so many people. As we

wrap up, I just want to ask, do you have any closing remarks or closing thoughts that you wanna share?

**Former Mayor Shirley Franklin:** Well, I want, I want to say something about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I mean, I stand here as a former mayor because of the work of SNCC and people who put their lives on the line. I am clear about that. The opportunities I've been given were opportunities that were available to me because young people, people of faith and conviction stood up and opened the doors of democracy for people of color, people of difference, and women. I wanna say a big thank you to you, Corey, for continuing that tradition and to all of those people out there who have contributed over the years,

**Corey Wiggins:** Mayor Lamumba, Mayor Franklin, Mayor Reed. I just personally want to thank every one of you for participating in this conversation. Honestly, I wanna just thank you for your leadership. So often people want titles but they're afraid and scared of the responsibility. I think the leadership that you all have shown and continue to show whether in the elected office or not shows your leadership in the context of responsibility to do what's right for people and to listen to the community.

I also want to thank SNCC for hosting this conversation and all of the contributions that you made in helping to be part of the building block that has led and continuously leads to the type of change that we want to see, not only in the south but across this country and in the world. Thank you all guests, panelists, and the audience for joining us for this conversation today. Thank you.