

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021
Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

Speaker 1 (00:00:14):

We're can't make why you can't make the good and winner everybody, the winner and

Speaker 2 (00:02:33):

People

Speaker 1 (00:02:33):

Get ready. A you don't need baggage. You just is faith to hear the love chicken you just

Speaker 2 (00:02:56):

Love.

Speaker 1 (00:03:06):

So people get ready for the train, the believe

Speaker 2 (00:04:01):

Pity on those

Speaker 1 (00:04:04):

Chances against the, so you just,

Speaker 3 (00:05:00):

Hello everybody. I am so excited, uh, to be with you all today to host this great panel with a, uh, great conversation, um, that we're gonna engage in today. Um, so just to get started and let get ready to jump in our discussion today, our, 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. Uh, that's gonna engage in this conversation and we look forward to spending, uh, some time with you. So first up, uh, let me introduce our first panelists, our first guest with us today. Uh, we have mayor, uh, an Toumba from the city of Jackson

Speaker 4 (00:05:39):

Greetings. Uh, it is truly a pleasure to be a part of this panel with such, uh, distinguished panelists, uh, and also to be in conversation with my friend, uh, Corey Wiggins. Uh, also, uh, it is honor is an honor to be a part of a panel, uh, that is hosted by, by SNCC, uh, and, and the strong history that it represents nationally. Uh, but particularly, uh, in, in Mississippi, uh, as I look at, uh, my introduction into political office, uh, it is by way of, of my parents who were both organizers, uh, and so believed in the cause of building self-determined communities, uh, that they moved our family to Jackson, Mississippi in 1988. Uh, at that time, uh, doing political work against, uh, police violence, uh, surrounded around, uh, peace in the streets and unity in the community efforts, uh, engaging in political education, uh, and a number of efforts out of our organization, uh, the Malcolm X grassroots movement, uh, we were at that time probably antagonistic towards, uh, electoral politics only to grow in an understanding, uh, that if you can only organize people who think like you, you're not much of an organizer.

Speaker 4 (00:06:57):

And so, uh, over time, uh, I believe that our political position has matured in a way that we understand that by being able to fight for the material benefits that people so desperately desire,

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

uh, then it provides a segue, uh, in order to introduce some of the struggles that we deal with, um, in a more global sense. And so I I'm here, uh, understanding that our struggle for electoral politics or the struggle to be a part of electoral politics is one that is rooted in the understanding that electoral politics is less, uh, is, is more a means to an end in my perspective, uh, than the end itself, uh, and the end itself should be about how we build, uh, self-determined communities and how we democratize power, uh, for people across this country. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this panel.

Speaker 3 (00:07:57):

Thank you, mayor, and thank you for the comments and look, thank you for all the work that you do and continue to do, uh, in your leadership here in the city of Jackson. Uh, I'm so proud of, uh, of the work that you're doing, uh, even the connections and partnerships, uh, that we continue to have here with the Mississippi NIAC and the city of Jackson. Uh, so next up, I'll, uh, excited to introduce our next guest, our next panelist, uh, Shirley Franklin, former mayor of Atlanta,

Speaker 5 (00:08:27):

I'm Shirley Franklin, former mayor of the city of Atlanta from 2002 to 2010. Uh, during that period, I, I was able to get the mentorship of my former bosses, mayor Jackson and mayor young, um, under whose leadership I served as 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, um, the NIC summit and the anniversary,

Speaker 3 (00:08:59):

And, and thank you for that, those comments, and thank you for the work that you continue to do even, uh, post, uh, uh, being a mayor as folks say, or have said, uh, once a mayor, always a mayor. And I continue to thank you for the work and the leadership that you provide. Uh, so many, not only in center Atlanta, uh, and Georgia across this country, uh, next up, uh, I'm excited to also, uh, introduce our next panelist. Uh, uh, we have mayor of Steven Reed, uh, from the city of Montgomery, Alabama.

Speaker 6 (00:09:32):

Hi, thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of this Corey. Uh, it's great to be on with, uh, mayor LA Mumba. It's great to be on with former mayor Franklin. Uh, it's a pleasure to, to have this discussion, uh, with those, uh, who still have reverence for the student nonviolent coordinating committee. I am sitting in, in this office, uh, that was built in 1936 at a time when black people in Montgomery, uh, could not vote, had no rights, uh, and had not thought of protesting nor the Montgomery bus boycott, but it is a strong reminder for me to be, uh, part of this panel because my father, uh, was one of those who was sent to Shaw university, uh, in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1960 by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther king, Jr. He was serving as a, uh, SGA president of Alabama state university right here in Montgomery.

Speaker 6 (00:10:34):

His name is Joe Reed. And I say that because of those, whether it's, uh, Bernard Lafayette or whether it's the late John Lewis or even Congressman Jim Clyburn have told me, uh, stories of the founding of SNCC and how many of the student leaders from that time came together and what the ultimate goal was. And 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

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

represent. And so, uh, 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 eye, violent coordinating committee, and so many who have helped to make it, what it has been over the years and decades. Uh, what we have, I think on this panel, uh, is a result of the work is a result of the sacrifice is a result of the intentional efforts, uh, from grassroots to grass tops to make change through politics and to make change through the legal system and to make change through the corporate system.

Speaker 6 (00:11:51):

And we have to continue to do that. And I'm excited that in almost two years, since I've been in office, we have brought about, uh, 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, uh, there's a special place in my heart for 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. And I look forward to the discussion that we'll have. Thank you so much.

Speaker 3 (00:12:33):

Thank you, Mary Reed, and thank you for those comments and thank all of our panelists again for joining us, uh, today. Uh, we are really looking to get looking forward to getting into this conversation, to touch on a number of issues, a number of things that are facing our communities and utilizing your office or utilizing political office, uh, to make change in our communities. I think all of our guests, again, for their opening statements and comments, and let's jump into the conversation, uh, and I start with Mary Reed, uh, Mary Reed, you talked about the historical context, uh, into your candidacy and serving as a role of mayor in Montgomery. Uh, could you just speak a little bit about, you know, going to sort of into elected office, uh, 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?

Speaker 6 (00:13:30):

Well, you know, I I'd be remiss if I didn't point to the work that, uh, mayor Franklin did as, as mayor. And certainly, uh, someone who we all have, have looked towards Mayard, Jackson's historic run in Atlanta as being a, a blueprint for what I saw needed to be changed here in Montgomery. We have not had the economic, uh, intentionality here in our politics. Um, and I thought that it was something that we could change on the outside. And I tried to do that when I moved back to Montgomery, after telling my parents, I never would move back here. Um, but I thought it was something that, you know, we needed to address because we were talking, uh, voting rights and, 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, uh, opportunity.

Speaker 6 (00:14:21):

And that was something that I experienced and learned about in Atlanta. Um, one as a, 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. And so through education, through, um, economic opportunities, those were changes that I really wanted to press for here in the mayor's office. And we have started to do that not only through, uh, more support for small,

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

uh, businesses or more support in particular for black owned businesses, uh, looking at, uh, disparity studies and spending from city and county government and making sure that we are pushing forward a minority participation programs, not just as a bottom line, but as something that we expect to achieve through excellence. And 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, on the outside. And I thought it was important to the advancement of the student, non violent coordinated committees work over the last few decades that we make sure that money and capital and economic empowerment plays central role in the progress of black people in this country. And certainly in the south and in Alabama in Montgomery, uh, to be the core of that

Speaker 3 (00:15:45):

Mayor, uh, mayor re talk a little bit, a little bit about some of the work that's happening in Montgomery, but I wanna start with also the same question too, is when you think about, you know, 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?

Speaker 4 (00:16:04):

Well, well, first and foremost, I echo the sentiments that mayor Reid expressed in, in, uh, expressing gratitude, uh, for the example laid by mayor Franklin, uh, and so many other individuals. Uh, and when we think on that history, uh, we think about the fact that at one time, our mission was to get leadership that looked like us. And now our, our mission must be to have leadership that thinks like us. Uh, when I think of, you know, uh, great philosopher, revolutionary France, for none who wo once wrote in his book, wretched of the earth, each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it. And 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, uh, is less reflective of, you know, GDP, less reflective of, uh, the, the new buildings that we're building in our city and more a notion or a marker of, of what are the sustainable development goals that we are achieving for people.

Speaker 4 (00:17:11):

Uh, Jackson, like far too many cities that resemble, uh, Jackson are marred in cycles of humiliation, where we see poor performing schools, where we see, uh, high blight, uh, high crime, uh, where we see failing infrastructure. And so our mission must be, how do we bring a quality of life to people that they so justly deserve? Uh, how are we making certain that there are fresh fruits and vegetables, uh, within people's, uh, reach? How are we ensuring that the quality of our education is one which prepares our young people, uh, for the world ahead of them. And so these are the things that, that I believe that we have to be centered on. And I believe that that is only achieved by a means of democratizing power. How do we give greater people greater access, uh, to, to, uh, their governance? Uh, we are doing this in Jackson through, uh, participatory budgeting process, uh, understanding that a budget is a moral document. It reflects what we value as a community. And so we have to value communities input into that, that process. Uh, how are we, uh, looking, uh, at, at things like, uh, improving the state of our education, how are we, uh, looking to build our infrastructure, which is failing around us? And these are all critical questions, uh, that I believe that, that have to be at the center of our work.

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

Speaker 3 (00:18:33):

Thank you. Both of y'all both of you all, uh, reference, uh, mayor Franklin and the work that she did and Atlanta and building off the legacy. Uh, there, uh, one of the questions I also want to ask is, 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?

Speaker 4 (00:19:00):

Hmm.

Speaker 3 (00:19:03):

Anyone married, you look like you were jumping at double Mary

Speaker 4 (00:19:07):

<laugh>,

Speaker 6 (00:19:09):

You know, uh, so about this in a, in a way, because Jackson is a capital city. Montgomery is a state capital city. Atlanta is a state capital, uh, city as well. And so it is rewarding, but it's also challenging because what we are seeing is a shift in the playing field that so many, uh, who are part of SNCC, uh, tried to conquer. And just as we began to conquer that and see the progress, it seemed to be a changing of the rules of which we were not informed, and that happens in our state legislatures. It doesn't just happen in Washington DC. And when you are sitting this close to state power and state government, you see what happens as it relates to, uh, the people that we're trying to represent the gaps we're trying to close healthcare, disparities, education, economic. And so it is, you know, something that, that can be, uh, very fulfilling in what we're doing.

Speaker 6 (00:20:15):

Because again, I, I certainly recognize those who never thought that there would be a, a black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, or Jackson, Mississippi, or, uh, Birmingham, and so many other Southern cities. But we also see, I think in, in, in our spaces, what is still being shifted, uh, as we try to quote unquote, play by the rules, the rules seem to, uh, evolve, they seem to change somewhat. And so that can also be frustrating because just as we laid, you know, down some good policies and some good initiatives, something is tweaked legislatively of which for many of us in cities, we, we can be overwritten by, uh, these legislatures, which seem to be polar opposites of what we are trying to do in cities, uh, across not only our states, but across the south and this country. And so, um, being a mayor in the south really comes with, uh, you know, a, a, a tale of really multiple emotions, but I, I wouldn't change it.

Speaker 6 (00:21:25):

Uh, I would not give it up for anything at this moment because there's so much work to do. And I feel like mayors, like, uh, <inaudible> and myself and, and so many other, our friends and colleagues have learned from, uh, those who blaze trails before us light mayor Franklin, uh, Richard Anton in Birmingham. Uh, 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, to make sure that we

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

represent, uh, our residents and our people, uh, in a way that provides the production and the results that we all want to see and not just the symbolism. Yeah. I appreciate that. Mayor re

Speaker 4 (00:22:18):

I, I, I guess I can, uh, I can join in into that, uh, that particular, um, discussion, uh, first and foremost, uh, I'd like to say I, I agree with the notion that, that I wouldn't trade it for the world, uh, and I'm grateful to have this opportunity to lead. Uh, and, and I wouldn't wanna do it in any other place other than Jackson, Mississippi right here in the south, uh, mayor Reed was kind in saying that it is challenging. Uh, it is, it is, you know, all that and more, uh, when I think about, uh, the many efforts to try to, uh, negate what we are trying to achieve in our cities, uh, what is clear to me when I see, uh, the efforts of state legislatures, uh, across the south that are attempting to impact voting rights. Uh, when we look at, uh, the aftermath of, uh, January, the January 6th, uh, insurrection, uh, and we compare that, uh, to the lawful, uh, social justice movement in the wake of George Floyd's death.

Speaker 4 (00:23:19):

What we discover, uh, is that America is still infected with its, um, with, with the disease of racism that it has been since its inception. Uh, what we discover is that the rules typically only apply to those who are not making them. Uh, and so this is exactly what brings us into office. Uh, I want to be clear that racism does not only exist in the south. Uh, you know, someone once put it, uh, in, in a very succinct way. They said, you know, in the north, uh, maybe some people don't care how high you go so long as you don't get too close. Uh, and in the south, maybe they don't care how close you get so long as you don't go too high. Uh, but nonetheless it is still pervasive, uh, in this country. Uh, and so that is why I think our leadership in the south is, is so particularly, uh, important, uh, because if we're able to get, bring models of change, if we're able, uh, to build the, the sustainable or, or, uh, or the dignity economy that I was talking about earlier, uh, in places like Jackson, Mississippi, or Montgomery, Alabama, or Atlanta, Georgia, uh, if we're able to achieve it in the belly of the beast, uh, then what does it say for the ability to achieve progress, uh, globally?

Speaker 4 (00:24:34):

And so, uh, to steal a phrase from, from a show that my wife and I, uh, love to watch, uh, Madam secretary, uh, which asks the question, what do you do? Uh, 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. Uh, and I believe that that has to be our mission is that we change the world from right where we're standing.

Speaker 3 (00:24:56):

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for that. Thank you all, you know, um, as I was listening to your comments and thinking about both the challenges, um, that you all face in leading your cities, and even the opportunities I want, want to sort of ask two questions, one on challenges and one on opportunities. So first on challenges, and I think you mentioned this Mary that as, uh, 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 Republican control, uh, legislatures we've seen in the past, uh, you know, previous administration at the federal level, all of the, the

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

challenges that was faced there. Um, and 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? Uh, there's an opportunity to be preempted by state law. Um, there are structural issues that you inherited in most cases from a disinvestment in, in, in your communities. So how are you facing those challenges as you're thinking about moving forward? Uh, Marilyn,

Speaker 4 (00:26:12):

Well, well, I appreciate that question. And, and the question actually brings into mine, uh, some words of, of brother Malcolm, uh, who, who stated that, you know, in order to advance our objectives, uh, we have to have a diverse approach. So he said it required that he be a, a revolutionary, uh, nationalist freedom fighter that he had to be all of those things in order to advance, uh, the aims of, of our, of our people. Uh, and, and when we look at electoral office, uh, we have to understand the limitations. Uh, we have to understand, uh, that the master tools will never dismantle the master's house. Uh, and so I think that, that we are closer to our objective, uh, when we have someone in position, uh, who is drafted by community, uh, who is committed to the aims and objectives, that community is attempting to advance, uh, and, and can, you know, create policy, uh, that, that resembles that.

Speaker 4 (00:27:08):

But at the same time, uh, just as we saw, as I mentioned earlier in the wake of George Floyd's death, it wasn't, uh, it wasn't, you know, the action of someone who was the mayor of a city or, or someone, you know, elected into the halls of Congress, uh, that really led to communities rising up in the social justice movement. Uh, it was, it happened on the grassroots level. It happened on the ground floor, uh, where people wanted to see change and where people were demanding change. Uh, if I'm critical of that, I, I think that, uh, that our persistence in those demands have waned. Uh, and I think that we have to recognize, uh, that we are a part of retracted struggle and, and, and we have to be consistent in those demands. Uh, but I think that it requires both work internally and externally, uh, in order to, to advance those objectives.

Speaker 4 (00:27:59):

And so, you know, I, I was quite clear and, and have been clear and, and to some extent have the benefit of watching my father's administration, uh, and understanding the, the, the push and tug and, and, uh, you know, both the victories and the setbacks that took place. Uh, I jokingly tell people that, that when my father won office, because, uh, he had been a part of, of so many, uh, organizing, uh, objectives that we were used to fighting, right. We were, we were used to the struggle, uh, when he actually won what we were not used to was the winning. And so it was kind of the, the, oh, hell moment, you know, what do we do now? Uh, that, that was really educational. And we could see both the advantages of office, uh, and, and the limitations of office. And I think that we have to be quite clear on both.

Speaker 3 (00:28:48):

Thanks, Mary.

Speaker 6 (00:28:50):

You know, I, I think that, uh, you have to push forward. Uh, again, I, I think about what those generations before us dealt with, and I'm grateful, uh, for their sacrifice. Uh, we enjoy the shade

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

under the trees of which they planted. So I, I, I recognize, uh, 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 that came even after them, uh, in various cities. And so we, we are at a point where, um, regardless of what we see, you know, our, our history teaches us as a, uh, community, as a race of people that they have always been challenges to black progress. Uh, 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, uh, looking forward to fighting or to having a battle, but I'm prepared at need be.

Speaker 6 (00:29:55):

And so I think what we do here in the city is we look for allies. We look for people who really, uh, not only wanna say there about it, but really who want to be about it. And we wanna make sure that, you know, from our standpoint, whether you're local or whether you're somewhere else in the country, whether you're somewhere else in the world that we find partners who want to see our residents, uh, progress and prosper. And for us, that means philanthropic organizations. That means corporate entities. That means individuals, that means many people, uh, who are considering relocating back to the south, as we have seen in the reverse migration, uh, in recent, uh, decades to get them to think about, uh, Montgomery, Alabama, or maybe at Jackson, Mississippi, and not just one or two other, uh, cities that, that most people kind of are, are, uh, attracted to.

Speaker 6 (00:30:55):

And so we look for that return home of talent and experience to help us, because as mayor Lamumba stated, the office of the mayor in this case, uh, certainly has its powers, but it also has its weaknesses and limitations. So it takes a collective in order to, uh, advance our agenda in the face of strong headwinds, uh, in the face of so many obstacles that some are known and, and some are being created as we speak. But I think that we continue to, uh, forge ahead and we continue to anticipate some of those, uh, challenges to be put forth so that there is a, a plan, a, a plan B, a contingency plan, uh, that we have in order to achieve the outcomes that we wanna see for our residents and those that, uh, have elected us in the office with the hope, with the hope and the prayer that our leadership would deliver to them better results. And at the end of all of this, uh, I measure what I do every day, every week, every month, uh, and the, of, uh, in the, 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. And there's yet, um, a lot more to accomplish from this seat and from this office,

Speaker 3 (00:32:30):

Thank you, Mary Reed. And I know we have, uh, mayor Franklin who's with us, who's having some technical problems. And so we are also weaving in an interviewing conversation with her into this. And as I, before I close, sort of my last final question, uh, for you, for you all is, is that so often we think about, uh, and when I see our, our, our elected officials having to respond, uh, or react to things that are happening or things that you may have inherited from previous, uh, administrations, but I want to give you an opportunity if you would just speak to a little bit about opportunity, right, as you continue to govern, as you continue to think about how are you using your office to make change, where are the opportunities that you see on the horizon for a city of Jackson or for a Montgomery, uh, and I'll start with, uh, mayor Reid first with this one.

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

Speaker 6 (00:33:21):

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, uh, power that we may see as aligned with ours, that we still have to do for ourselves, that we have to look towards one another, um, for the collective advancement, many of the things that help those young college leaders, uh, form the student nonviolent coordinating committee, many of those things that help, uh, SNCC continue to, uh, not only be relevant, but to bring about change in the years after I think of principles that we have to embrace Mala Mumba spoke of the grassroots effort in, in the wake of George Floyd's, uh, murder. When I think of the black lives matter movement, I tie 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.

Speaker 6 (00:34:14):

Uh, I commend them for pushing us as elected officials who believe that we were going at a good pace for forcing us to go further. And I hope they will continue to do that, not just around criminal justice reform, but around access to quality healthcare, around 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, uh, that I can't quite recognize someone can help me see it. And 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, uh, mayors like myself and mayors like, uh, mayor Lamumba and do, and partner with us across the south. I, I don't know how we get there, uh, in this country without the south being more included, uh, in the economic prosperity of this country.

Speaker 6 (00:35:15):

And that may come in different forms and I'm open, uh, 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. And we are frustrated by the obstacles that we have, that we miss those opportunities and that we seize them. And what I would hope that those that are, uh, watching this and those that are maybe even, uh, questioning what their mayor may be doing in, 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. And 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. Thank you, mayor re and Marilyn Lamumba.

Speaker 4 (00:36:34):

Yes. Uh, you know, I, I think that, uh, our communities are pregnant with possibilities. Uh, it merely requires that we nurture it. Uh, and, and so, you know, as we think about, uh, the challenges that we see, uh, you know, and I think, think back, and, and, you know, I'd be remiss in this conversation, not to hearken back to the, the history and the, the organizing efforts of people like Bob Moses, uh, people, uh, you know, as I, I mentioned, uh, people like Malcolm

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

earlier and, and, and 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. Uh, it is oppression that allows people to take an introspective, look into their world and, and look at what needs to be changed. And 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, uh, that I believe needs to be concretized.

Speaker 4 (00:37:32):

Uh, it needs to be, uh, utilized in a way, uh, that we, we offer history and, and, and lessons learned over the course of time so that we can build a movement of a world, uh, build a society beyond contradiction that we wanna see, um, as we, we look at our communities, uh, yes, uh, we, we will have more resources, uh, more money infused in our cities than, than ever before. Uh, how do we not only use that money, uh, sufficiently to build, you know, sustainable infrastructure, uh, but equitable infrastructure, uh, one that, that doesn't leave, you know, one, one community, uh, at the mercy of good and bad weather or, or, or climate change, uh, more so than, than another community. Uh, how do we look at the, the equity issues with, within our school system? Uh, how are we making certain that people have more access, uh, towards, towards, uh, controlling the, or, or dictating the quality of life that they so justly deserve?

Speaker 4 (00:38:31):

And I see that within our communities, I see that opportunity within our communities, uh, you know, we could talk about, uh, the, the, the makeup of our cities and, and how they're positioned. Uh, you see that there's a reverse migration taking place back to the south, uh, where people want to attach themselves to, to a history that, that, you know, maybe they don't even personally, uh, remember, but, but understand that there is something calling them back to, uh, back to home, back to the place where their grandmother and grandfathers, uh, were from just like my grandmother was, was from, uh, Lafayette, Alabama. Uh, and I find myself doing work, uh, in, in Jackson, Mississippi. Uh, and so, as I said earlier, uh, the opportunity is not only one which allows us to correct the challenges that we see within our cities, uh, but become a model for the rest of the world.

Speaker 4 (00:39:23):

Uh, and, and I look forward to being a part of that. I'm grateful at this moment, not only do I have the history of, of those people that I mentioned to, to look back on, uh, but I also have the friendship of people like mayor Steven Reed, uh, the friendship of, of mayors, like, uh, Randall Woodfin in, in Birmingham, Alabama, Adrian Perkins, and, uh, Shreveport Louisiana, uh, or, uh, lava Stony and, and Richmond, Virginia, uh, as we are facing these challenges, uh, we have the opportunity and the friendship, a sincere friendship that allows us to, to call on one another and ask, you know, you know, what are you doing, uh, as we're learning our way through COVID, uh, what are you doing, uh, to, to advance, uh, the participant participation, uh, uh, participation, excuse me, a little tongue tied of, of black businesses and, and how are we not being apologetic in that mission? Uh, and, and so, uh, there's, there's tremendous opportunity, uh, but there's also, uh, a wealth of, of resources at this time that we can lean on.

Speaker 3 (00:40:26):

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

Thank you both. And, and look, as we shift to, I wanna make sure we have enough time to hear any closing thoughts or remarks. And so, uh, what we'll do is we'll start with you, uh, Mary Lamumba, any closing remarks that you want to share, uh, with the folks who've been so gracious of their, of their time to, to be part of this conversation with us?

Speaker 4 (00:40:46):

Well, once again, uh, just truly honored to be a part of this distinguished panel, uh, and, and truly honored, uh, to, to be a part of an, of an event that is organized by SNCC, uh, grateful, and, and may our brother, uh, Bob Moses rest in power, uh, peace and power. Um, and, and may we, uh, continue to, to take the, the torch and, and, uh, make certain that we are just as motivated as, as all the things that, that led them into organizing, uh, the student nonviolent coordinating committee. Uh, I think that it is important that we have these conversations, uh, not only for our own edification, but we take them to the streets that we make certain that they're not academic, uh, but that they, uh, they are practical and, and they are information for our communities, uh, to feed off of and, and build off of, uh, it is important. It is important that, that our young people understand that, that there is some advantage to electoral office, uh, but they also have to understand those limitations, uh, and may, uh, the selection of our leadership be less about political ambition and more out of necessity, uh, more out of recognition that we need to draft, uh, people into office, uh, that are committed to the aims of advancing our people

Speaker 6 (00:42:10):

File coordinating committee, uh, for their, their work and dedication and blazing, uh, so many pathways, uh, for people like myself, uh, for people like mayor Lamumba and, and, and others, uh, mayor Franklin, so many others, um, really just, we are grateful for what you have done. And I hope that throughout this panel, you see some, uh, glimmer of hope and pride, uh, in the opportunities that, that we have been blessed with. Uh, we certainly understand the responsibility and we certainly understand the opportunity that we have. And I want, uh, the young activists, I want the young student leaders, uh, to look at the elders, uh, 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. And I wanna make sure that for all the elected officials at the state county, sea level, big city, small town, whatever it may be, uh, you are a part of this.

Speaker 6 (00:43:22):

Uh, we can't get where we need to go with just one person in a mayor's office. Uh, it takes a collective, it takes organizing, it takes activating, and it takes sacrifice in order to get the results and to achieve the goals and objectives that I believe most in our community would like to see. And so I've been, uh, enriched by this conversation. Uh, I have stolen some mental notes from male LA Mumba and certainly appreciate, uh, mayor Franklin's, uh, presence as well. And Corey, I appreciate you moderating this on, on the behalf of SN because I believe while we must, uh, continue to move forward, it's, it is important to understand, uh, the roles that we've traveled. And it's important for us to understand, even in positions of elected office, that there's more work to be done, that we cannot be satisfied with the titles.

Speaker 6 (00:44:19):

We cannot be satisfied, uh, 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

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

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. And we will continue to work in the best effort in the best interest of our community. And those that helped found, uh, 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.

Speaker 3 (00:45:03):

So thank you. And thank you for being with us here, mayor Franklin. I just wanna start there. You talked about, uh, serving under the, the leadership of mayor Jackson, uh, 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, uh, becoming elected, uh, and the opportunity for change that existed, given everything that was going on at the time?

Speaker 5 (00:45:29):

Well, I had to, uh, the, the pleasure of having two mentors when I was a young woman, uh, working in their administrations, and then they were very much present and involved, um, in city city affairs, uh, and in leadership when I was elected. So I had them for the full almost, uh, 20 years. Uh, they, they were not short on advice, uh, and critique <laugh>. Uh, and I, I suspected mayor Lamumba and mayor Reed have had similar experience. Um, it was an exciting time for Atlanta, uh, 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. Um, I had the distinction of being the first woman, mayor of Atlanta. And a lot of people thought, I don't know what they thought. Some people thought I had stripes, um, but I was very much a hands on day to day, um, management type.

Speaker 5 (00:46:35):

And I really, um, 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, uh, was open and expanded. Uh, and that fairness, um, and justice social justice were issues that had to be incorporated in 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 darnest to actually check them. So Atlanta Atlanta had a long history of minority and female employment, affirmative action, minority and female business, uh, opportunity. But frankly, the wealth gap had been growing for a decade or so. So the issues around poverty, um, were, were key issues. Uh, when I came into office,

Speaker 3 (00:47:46):

You know, thank you VI that because, you know, Mary and Marilyn Luba has, has sort of talked about, um, systems and structures and institutions and how they are at play with some of the challenges that, that, that some, that communities face, but it's not just challenges. It's also opportunities. You mentioned some, as you were talking about, uh, that you faced as a mayor, could you sort of speak to, uh, if you would, to like what you experienced as a mayor and things that are, are happening today, uh, around like those challenges, are they same? Are they different? Like, what are, what's your perspective on that?

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

Speaker 5 (00:48:21):

Well, there's, first of all, there are 400 years that we're trying to correct. And we, it doesn't get corrected all overnight. A lot of it, um, it just, you just 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? And I would say that we started internal to city government when I came into office. Um, there were almost, uh, 10% of the city's workforce was not, not making a living wage. In other words, they were working 40 hour work week. Um, and they were making 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 actually raise the, the minimum pay of city employees from seven and \$8 an hour to over \$10 an hour, um, for permanent employees.

Speaker 5 (00:49:22):

And then we had another five or 600 employees, um, who were seasonal employees. In other words, they had no benefits. Um, they didn't have healthcare, they didn't have, uh, 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. Uh, we then brought them on over a period of two years as full-time employees with benefits and moved their pay up to the \$10 and 20 cents. Now that was just the beginning of the conversation about what do we do. I believe that you have to look internal and external simultaneously. Uh, and then we obviously advocated, uh, for a living wage for all of our contractors and what we faced was a state government, and the legislature actually passed a law that prohibited any city in Georgia from setting a wage rate of, for its contractors to keep the city of Atlanta from actually setting a minimum wage rate for its contractors and vendors.

Speaker 5 (00:50:44):

Um, 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, uh, for them to support themselves and their families

Speaker 3 (00:51:04):

Look, mayor you, you, you must be reading my mind. You went right into what my next question was. And it was really framed around this idea of anytime there's change, where there's resistance, where there are, where there's change makers. There, there is a reaction, um, and, and Mary Luba and mayor Reid 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's 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?

Speaker 5 (00:51:44):

Well, around the issues of minor, I talked about the wage issue, um, 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, in order to support the people who are actually doing the work.

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

Um, and, and 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, I mean, we talk about what mayor Jackson, so courageously did with minority and female, uh, business, um, 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, um, placed on cities and counties and authorities in order to have those programs are much more stringent.

Speaker 5 (00:52:48):

You actually have to prove discrimination, um, which seems kind of foolish because we all know it existed. Um, and history tells us that, but now cities have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars actually doing disparity studies, uh, in order to prove, uh, that discrimination exists and that there's no level playing field. And 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, um, to continue to improve, to enhance the programs that were started in the seventies, uh, and the current mayors like Lamumba and Reed, uh, 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, uh, in Birmingham or married John mayor Johnson had in, in Mississippi. And just, if you could go back, you could see there was much more flexibility at the time.

Speaker 5 (00:53:54):

Now that's not to say you don't want accountability. Of course you do. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, but you don't wanna have to prove the obvious and, and prove it. And, and, um, every single time. So on the, 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 in order for us to include minority and female participation in our multibillion dollar airport expansion and our water expansion. And we not done that, we would not have had the opportunity to really spend to literally tens of millions of dollars with small, uh, black, uh, black and brown and female, uh, 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

Speaker 3 (00:54:56):

Mm-hmm <affirmative> well, you know, oh, wait, mayor, I'm sorry.

Speaker 5 (00:55:00):

No, I was gonna say, and, and 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 actually develop this program was a, was pennies compared to what we're spending. But the, 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, uh, some of the programs that we know work because they can't, they cannot get authorization, um, or don't have the money, uh, in order to, or, or don't have the votes on the council or the board, um, to proceed with the kind of rigor you need in order to meet the federal standards now.

Speaker 3 (00:55:53):

Well, I wanted to ask you this question, too, right? So often I imagine as a leader, as a leader of a city, there are things that happen that you have to respond to, right. Crisis moments of

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

emergency. But I wanted to ask you this question around governing for opportunity. Um, we know challenges exist, but a lot of folks are 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? Uh, you know, we have mayor Reed, mayor Lamumba folks who are currently in office now, where do you see where opportunity exists for folks in elected office to make change?

Speaker 5 (00:56:36):

Well, I, I will tell you, I think mayor re and mayor Lamumba are doing a great job. I follow them. I read about them. Um, this is a very hopeful time for black mayoral leadership because of people just like them. And, um, congratulations. Uh, and then we have many more black women now than we've ever had, uh, as mayor. So congratulations to all of those folks, uh, including our own mayor, uh, bottoms in Atlanta for really during COVID during a, a pandemic during an economic downturn during, um, um, really the realization of the country that a George Floyd could die the way he died, uh, and the police, um, uh, brutality that 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, 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.

Speaker 5 (00:57:38):

So I can't claim the accomplishments. Um, they are our accomplishments in Atlanta, but the key to that is actually setting very clear, aggressive, long term sustainable, uh, goals. Um, the key is to do those things that are going to benefit your city and the people who live in it, um, 50 years from now, mm-hmm <affirmative>, and that's at the personal level at the human level, at the physical level, uh, at the infrastructure level I'm known as the sewer mayor. And there's nothing sexy about that. However, uh, clean water. I mean, if we don't know the value of public health after COVID, we ought to yeah. The value of potable, clean, accessible water, uh, to a community that wants to grow and thrive and families want to grow and thrive, um, somehow or another, we've gotta integrate all of those things. I, I urge people to push as far to push the envelope as far as they're willing, 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.

Speaker 5 (00:58:55):

And 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, who said cities of America. And, and those led by blacks ought to be a part of the international growth of the economy. And he promoted that, uh, mayor Campbell, who came in and said, we need to do a different kind of housing, a different kind of approach, uh, to devastated, uh, areas and underinvested areas. And that model is a mixed income community neighborhood focused place based focused model. And then I come in as the sewer mayor, um, 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. And each of those mayors, before me were looking long term, they were not looking to a two year or four year cycle. And that's the hardest

SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, 2021

Making Our Way Into Political Office To Make Change

thing to sell to the people that you serve, that we are making these investments for your grandchildren's children.

Speaker 3 (01:00:16):

Mayor, look, you could run a whole masterclass on your, on your own around leadership, uh, responsibility and, and, and strategic thinking. I just appreciate you 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, uh, as we wrap up, I just want to ask, you know, do you have any closing remarks or closing thoughts that you wanna share?

Speaker 5 (01:00:40):

Well, I want, I want to say something about the P nonviolent coordinating committee. I mean, I stand here as a former mayor, um, because of the work of SNCC and people who put their lives on the line. I am really 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 the democracy for people of color, people of difference and for women. And 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,

Speaker 3 (01:01:23):

Uh, mayor Lamumba, mayor Franklin, mayor Reed. I just personally want to thank each and each and every one of you all for participating in this conversation. Uh, and honestly, I wanna just thank you for your leadership. So often people want titles, uh, 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, uh, shows about your leadership in the context or responsibility to do what's right for people to listen to community. I also want to thank SNIC for hosting this conversation and all of the contributions that you made in helping to be part of the building block that that has led and continue to continuously lead to the type of change that we want to see, not only in the south, but across this country and in the world. Uh, and thank you all guests, uh, and panelists, uh, and the audience for joining us for this conversation today. Thank you.