

Betty Celebration of Life
Judy Richardson
(Dec. 4, 2020)

I was asked to give the Life Tribute, basically an overview of Betty's general wonderfulness and a bit of her history. So, in a minute, I'll read just a few pieces from the SNCC Legacy Remembrance since, in it, I basically included what I wanted people to know about Betty.

But first let me say a few more personal words.

It was harder to write this than I thought it would be. Her passing just came too suddenly, for all of us. We still can't believe it! And, so... we think we can still call or email her about... whatever.

Anyway:

I first met Betty in the SNCC Freedom House in Atlanta in 1963 when we both worked in SNCC's national office. In my diary, a piece of which is in our *Hands on the Freedom Plow* anthology, I wrote:

April 20, [1964] - 5:30 a.m.—been talking with Betty about politics. Read proposals about Miss. – fantastic. Going with her now to office. Decided neither of us is tired.

I remember that during that conversation at the Freedom House she talked about colonialism in Central America and Africa. I always learned from Betty.

But it's the recent memories that I keep recalling:

- Dottie, Betty and I texting throughout both the presidential and vice presidential debates... and dissecting the nominees' responses.
- Betty bringing me fresh tomatoes or cucumbers from her garden.
- Betty talking about the chart she'd made of the growth of Covid in Maryland day by day. She loved stats... and charts... and research!
- Talking with her about a new Black or Latinx children's book that Teaching for Change had mentioned. Betty loved children's books....
- In fact, she loved all kinds of books (she had an insatiable curiosity about so many things).
- Betty talking – with great delight – about a surprise car demonstration to City Hall she was about to participate in (Covid had already hit), in support of Movement for Black Lives.
- Talking with Betty, Dottie and Jean Smith on our monthly – and then twice monthly – Fab 4/Girlfriends calls (and I'm sure she had calls like this with others). On them we'd talk about politics, and personal stuff... and about our annual Fab 4 week-end trip to some local Black historic site. Betty was always the driver – she could drive! We had to reschedule our trip last year after Covid. It was going to be Memphis and Miss... We're still doing it... and it will still be the **Fab 4** trip.

But let me switch now and read a bit from the SLP Remembrance, because it gives a little more

historical context for Betty's organizing work:

So... [Betty Garman Robinson](#) was an organizer's organizer (as Jennifer Lawson said). She understood, early on, the importance of building relationships... not just as a tool of organizing, but because she genuinely liked getting to know people and their stories. She was an amazingly caring human being. As one Mississippi SNCC vet (Freddie Green Biddle), who'd known her since 1964 said, "Betty organized not just with her mind, but with her heart."

The day and evening before Betty fell was typical: she had a long conversation with Tre [Murphy, a young organizer from Organizing Black, whom she mentored] about their call with his mother's Black women's church group about voting and policing. Later that night she had an extended conversation with me: to update me her on an SLP meeting I'd missed, plus talking about politics... and a new recipe she'd found (even though she knew I don't cook). That call allowed her to take a break from addressing voter engagement cards for SURJ and she was waiting for her list of potential Black voters to call as part of the NAACP Get Out the Vote campaign. Just a typical day in the life of Betty Garman Robinson.

Betty was an invaluable member of the SNCC Legacy Project board, and particularly the Planning Committee for the SNCC 60th convening: she was integrally involved in putting the panels together (she had an almost-encyclopedic knowledge of groups working for social justice), in fund-raising, and publicity... and so much more.

I remember the wonderful gathering Betty and Tre put together at her house last year – and some on this call were probably there -- so that some of us SNCC vets could talk about our hopes for the SNCC 60th convening with young Balto. activists... and get their ideas. There were so many folks there that they had to set up extra chairs – in her living room, in the kitchen and up the stairs... and they all knew Betty!

Now to how Betty got to SNCC:

By the time she got to SNCC, Betty had already been in the leadership of both the National Student Association (NSA) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). However, it was while she was chair of UC/Berkeley's Friends of SNCC chapter that James Forman, SNCC's larger-than-life executive secretary, convinced her to leave grad school to direct SNCC's Friends of SNCC department in the Atlanta national office.

She recalled, "In Nov. 1963, I was invited to go to the Howard University conference that SNCC held. At that moment, I fell in love with SNCC: the passion of the singing, the intensity of people's commitment and care and love for each other." And, in a recording of this conference, you can hear Forman calling out her name to come up front with him.

After leaving SNCC staff, there was hardly a movement she didn't work with, from the anti-war and women's movements to helping to build the New Thing arts organization in DC, and working in the DC SNCC office. In 1972 she moved to Baltimore to work in factories in order to organize workers, where she married and began her lovely family.

She then worked for 18 years at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, as a researcher in occupational medicine and HIV-AIDS studies.

But she missed organizing, so she left Hopkins – and a *good* job -- to organize full-time. She received

a coveted Open Society Institute Community Fellowship (and BTW – she gave her Balto. organizing archives to the Univ. of Balto., which they treasure. She recently gave a talk about them at the Univ. and -- as was so typical of Betty -- she was amazed at how interested the audience was in her remarks).

Among her recent Balto. organizing, as you heard, she helped found the Balto. chapter of SURJ... and was also appointed to Baltimore's Civilian Review Board – and that was a freebie where she had to read mounds of reports from victims of police violence.

Now a story: In 2010, Betty organized a large Baltimore book event for [*Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*](#) – an anthology of 52 SNCC women's writings that Dottie, Betty and I co-edited with 3 other SNCC women. The room was packed...

With representatives from the various campaigns Betty had worked on. [Dottie will remember this.] As Betty called the name of each campaign – focused on affordable housing, police brutality, educational equity, immigrant rights, or mass incarceration – one group and then another stood up.

Sometimes those in each group knew each other, sometimes they didn't. But Betty knew them all, *and* helped connect them across the usual organizational boundaries. They were part of her vast network, people with whom she had developed deep and lasting personal bonds.

Organizing and enjoying those around her were integral to who she was... and both brought her great joy.

She loved: attending potlucks where she'd try out new recipes with vegetables from her garden; singing in Baltimore's Charm City Labor Chorus; talking to perfect strangers – workers or customers -- in the grocery line or in restaurants. Betty particularly enjoyed being with her beloved family: daughters Tanya and Keisha and their families, and particularly her precious grandchildren, McKenzie, Jeffery, and baby Thalia.

She also enjoyed learning from young activists and sharing her experiences. She often asked them to consider:

“What kind of a country do you want and what kind of country are you willing to fight for?”

Until her last day, Betty a long-distance runner and one of the best representatives of SNCC's grassroots organizing style... and of the closeness and passion for justice that *continues to exist* -- even today -- within our “Band of brothers and sisters in a circle of trust”. Presente, Betty! I so miss you!

And now, I pass it to my very close SNCC sister, Dottie Zellner.... over to you, Dottie...

###