



the
SNCC Legacy Project
Founded in 2010

Remembering SNCC veteran

ELIZABETH "BETTY" GARMAN ROBINSON

January 8, 1939 - October 11, 2020



Betty Garman Robinson was a superb organizer. It was a role she totally enjoyed, and one for which she was ideally suited. 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, who'd known her since 1964 said, "Betty organized not just with her mind, but with her heart."

She died, suddenly, on October 11, a day after falling outside her neighbor's house. As the news spread, the many networks of people across the country, whom she had touched so deeply, responded with an outpouring of grief, respect and love. They also paid tribute to the many community organizing skills she had taught them over the years... skills and strategies she first learned while on SNCC staff: in the Atlanta National office in Mississippi in 1964; and later in SNCC's Washington, D.C. office, directed by Marion Barry and focused on home rule and a D.C. bus boycott. These early Movement experiences served as the basis for her life-long commitment to organizing.

[See her Library of Congress interview: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655415...>]

The night before she fell, 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 regarding voting and policing. Later that night she had an extended conversation with another SNCC Legacy Board member, updating her on the specifics of an SLP call earlier in the week. That call had allowed her to take a break from addressing voter engagement cards for SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice) while 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.

She was an invaluable member of the SLP board's planning committee for the SNCC 60th convening, particularly on outreach and panelist suggestions, since she had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of groups and individuals around the country who were organizing in marginalized communities around social justice issues.

Joining SNCC

Betty began working with SNCC after graduation from Skidmore College, where she organized support for the sit-ins. While at UC/Berkeley's Graduate School she continued her very active

involvement with both the National Student Association (NSA) and then 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 executive secretary, convinced her to leave grad school to direct SNCC’s Friends of SNCC department in the Atlanta national office. She recalled that earlier, “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.”



Betty in SNCC Office (Greenwood, MS, 1964)
(Photo credit: Tamio Wakayama)

Building on the SNCC Tradition

After leaving SNCC staff, she worked with the anti-war and women’s movements. In D.C., she helped found the New Thing Art and Architecture Center. In 1972 she moved to Baltimore to work in factories in order to organize workers. She then worked for 18 years at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health as a researcher in occupational medicine and HIV-AIDS studies (she loved research).

In 2003 she received a coveted Open Society Institute Community Fellowship, focused on popularizing the history of Baltimore’s social justice organizing. She was the Lead Organizer for the Citizens Planning and Housing Association (CPHA), which organizes Baltimore area communities around quality of life issues. She worked with SURJ, a national organization of white people who work for racial justice as allies with people of color organizing in local communities. She was also appointed to Baltimore’s Civilian Review Board.

Throughout her life, Betty was passionate about organizing against injustice and she used whatever tactics seemed most appropriate. She also stressed that organizers should be guided by the issues the communities themselves identified as their priorities... that they should be careful listeners.

In 2010, at a large event she put together in Baltimore for [***Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC***](#) -- a book she co-edited with 5 other SNCC women -- the room was packed with representatives from the various campaigns she’d been involved with. As she 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, because she had joined in their struggle... or had helped bring them together. 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 parts of who she was; they were the inseparable parts of her life that brought her joy. She loved being with people: attending potlucks where she’d try out new recipes with vegetables from her garden, singing in Baltimore’s Charm City Labor Chorus, reading about all manner of topics (she had an insatiable curiosity) and discussing them with friends and family. Betty particularly enjoyed being with her beloved family: daughters Tanya and Keisha and their families, particularly her precious grandchildren, McKenzie, Jeffrey, 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?”



Betty (far right) and other SNCC vets in a Rockettes kick.

As Tre Murphy wrote: "To me Betty Robinson [who we always called Ms. Betty] was one of the greatest souls ever to walk the earth. She was humble enough to know that it took more than her to win freedom for Black people, gifted enough to see possibilities none of us could visualize, and fearless enough to keep fighting even when the outcomes looked grim or wasn’t what we expected.”

Michaela Gramelis, from SURJ posted: “I am crushed to have lost the smile, hugs, and incredible guidance of Betty Garman Robinson...Betty was a literal and metaphorical gardener, and in her care and company, things bloomed and grew.”

Until the end, Betty was 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!



Betty's home with tributes.

OFFICERS

Courtland Cox, Chair
Robert "Bob" Moses, Vice Chair
Larry Rubin, Treasurer
Cynthia G. Palmer, Secretary

BOARD MEMBERS

Geri Augusto
Freddie Greene Biddle
Charlie Cobb

Bruce Hartford
Timothy Jenkins
Sharlene Kranz
Joyce Ladner
Jennifer Lawson
Maisha Moses
Judy Richardson
Betty Garman Robinson
Cleveland Sellers
Zoharah Simmons
Frank Smith

Karen Spellman
Maria Varela

EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS

Jamil Al-Amin
Phil Hutchings

EMERITUS MEMBERS

Bernice Johnson Reagon
Charles Sherrod

Keep up to date with the SNCC Legacy Project:

SNCC Digital Gateway - www.snccdigital.org
SNCC Legacy Project email - info@sncclegacyproject.org
SNCC Legacy Project website - www.sncclegacyproject.org

Join us in 2021 for the
SNCC 60TH ANNIVERSARY CONVENING
Washington, DC
June 3 - 5, 2021

To register, click [here](#)