Mike Miller

November 11, 2020

SUMMARY

Mike Miller was born on January 24, 1937, in San Francisco, California. He grew up in the San Francisco Mission District and the Sunnydale housing project where he attended Balboa High School. His parents were union activists. Mike attended the University of California Berkeley where he was the founding chairman of SLATE, a campus political party that was a precursor to the Free Speech Movement. He joined SNCC in 1962 becoming a field secretary serving mostly in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1962-1966. He traveled south and worked in the Greenwood area of Mississippi during the summer and fall of ‘63 where he nearly died from a ruptured spleen when refused medical treatment due to his civil rights activism in the area. Mike worked closely with Robert “Bob” Moses and befriended Fanny Lou Hamer while in Mississippi. Mike was in attendance at the famous Peg Leg Bates SNCC gathering in 1966 when SNCC kicked out all the White activists. He then went to work with Saul Alinsky leading community organizing projects in Missouri and elsewhere.

Mike has spent nearly 60 years as a community organizer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is Executive Director of the ORGANIZE! Training Center. He has served as a consultant, workshop leader, teacher, writer, trainer, and initiator of projects around the nation. Mike is a published author of multiple books and articles. He has also taught community organizing and urban politics at Stanford, University of California, Notre Dame, San Francisco State, Hayward State, and Lone Mountain.

LOCATION

Recorded via Zoom teleconferencing system. Mike Miller was at his home in San Francisco, California. The interview team was in their separate homes throughout the San Francisco Bay Area during the “shelter in place” order due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTERVIEW TEAM

Lead: **Simona Nigusse** ('21)
Supports: **Makana Leavitt** ('21) and **Jean-Luc Desnoyers-Piña** ('22)
Instructor: **Howard Levin**, Director of Educational Innovation

TRANSCRIPT PROCESSING

Transcript and video content represent the interview in its entirety with minor edits due to breaks and occasional language. Initial automatic transcription via Otter.ai by Simona Nigusse (‘21). Howard Levin completed editing (03/13/2022). Please report additional suggested edits to: howard.levin@sacredsf.org

Notes:

1. content within [brackets] remain to be further checked
2. content within (parentheses) are editorial additions

Introductions

Simona Nigusse
My name is Simona Nigusse.

Makana Leavitt
I'm Makana.

Jean-Luc Desnoyers-Piña
My name is Jean-Luc Desnoyers-Piña.

Simona
And we are interviewing Mike Miller on November 9, 2020, in San Francisco via Zoom. Mike, as you know, we are here to record our conversation with you with the intention of publishing your story as part of Convent and Stuart Hall's Oral History Production Class. We are recording video of this interview and intend to publish this on our school website, as well as on other nonprofit educational websites, along with a text transcript. This means your story will be available once published to anyone via an internet connection. If you agree, please say your name, the date, and if you agree to allow us to publish your story.

Mike Miller
I'm Mike Miller, it's November 9th, and I agree to the publication of my story.

Simona
Thank you. What is your birth date? And how old are you now?

Jean-Luc
I'm almost 84. My birthday is January 24, 1937.

Simona
Wow. What is your earliest childhood memory?

Mike
Related to what I do or just generally?

Simona
Just in general, like your earliest memory doesn't have to be about civil rights.

Mike
Being in my apartment on Valencia Street in San Francisco, crawling around. My earliest political memory is being on my father's shoulders on a picket line for striking workers. I think I was at Sears.

Simona
Talk more about that experience that you just said.

Mike
My dad was involved in labor education. Both of my folks were politically on the left, and very involved in union organizing and stuff like that. And so my dad would take me to various things. And I have a vivid memory of sitting on top of his shoulders, walking around in front of a store on Mission Street in San Francisco. I think it was Sears. I'm not positive about that. It might have been a Woolworths. And that was the Department Store Employees Union. That's the elaboration of that.

Simona
Could you tell us more about your home on Valencia and what your childhood was like there?

Mike
We were in a little like a studio apartment. There was a bed that folded down from the wall. I think they call

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them Murphy beds. And you open the closet door and swung it around 180 degrees. And then the bed would be there. And then you folded it down. And that's where my folks slept. And there was a crib where I slept. It was a pretty tight space. And then there was a little kitchen with a table for us to eat. So we moved out of there when I was [unclear] to Sunnydale housing project out by the Cow Palace in San Francisco. That's where I grew up in the Sunnydale housing project until I went to Berkeley, to Cal.

Simona
And just before I forget, could you in about one to two minutes, give us a summary of your life, basically start from birth and then state other geographic movements, without story or explanation, just state, basically your whole life like where you've been and things like that.

Mike
From the beginning to now?

Simona
Yeah.

Mike
Okay. When I was about 10...we lived in the Sunnydale housing project until I went to Berkeley. But when I was about 10, my father got a job as an import-export representative for a company that was a fish packing company. And we went to Europe. So we were in Norway, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. And then we returned in '47, back to our apartment in the Sunnydale housing project. And I was there until I went to Berkeley. I lived in Berkeley, from '54 to '58 and then went to New York. In New York a year and a half. And then back to Berkeley until about '62, or '63. And then to San Francisco. And then at the end of '66, Kansas City, Missouri for a year and a half. In '68, back in San Francisco until about '75. And then in Los Angeles for six months, and back to San Francisco. Then Kansas City, Missouri. I'm sorry, I got that wrong. Kansas City, Missouri was '67 to mid '68. And then back to San Francisco. I left out Mississippi, I was in Mississippi for the Civil Rights Movement in '63, summer and early fall. Then pretty much San Francisco for the rest of my life in San Francisco from the mid-70s until now. I took vacation trips, but I'm a San Francisco kid.

Simona
That's nice. So now back to like your childhood. How was your relationship with your parents?

Mike
We had a warm relationship. My dad died when I was about 13, it had a big impact on my life. He was a big influence on me and had a big impact. And my mom, she had to work, so I was what they call a "latchkey kid," which then I went home after school to our apartment, but my mom was still at work. So for a while I kind of acted out in school, I got U's in citizenship, but I still got good grades A's, mostly A's. And then I calmed down after about a semester.

Simona
How did your dad impact your life? Talk more about that? What was he like for you?

Mike
He certainly impacted what I did with work in my life. Because the values that I grew up with at home have guided me (audio freezes momentarily)

Simona
Okay, now going back to the interview. You were talking about how your dad impacted your life and what kind of role he played for you.

Mike
Yeah, so the other part on the personal level, later in my life when I was about 50, I married a woman who had three kids. So I became a stepdad. And I think he had an impact on my way of being a dad, being present and

spending time with them and helping them with whatever. So we still have a great relationship, even though their mom, we're divorced now, but we're good friends. And I have six grandkids too.

Simona
So what did your parents tell you about the things that were going on, like in terms of civil rights, what did they say?

Mike
In those days it was pretty rare for White people to have Black friends. We had Black friends. We had Black people over to our house for dinner, like that. So when I was at school, I had Black friends at school. And I remembered a Scholarship Society dance, which was in the afternoon in junior high, I danced with a Black girl who was a member and my friends thought that was a little weird that I would do that. It's hard for you guys to imagine, even in San Francisco – it is in San Francisco – what issues of race were like then. And, to me, when I got on the bus, the Muni bus, if a guy had a TWU button on his cap, which was the Transport Workers Union, which was a CIO union, versus if he had an Amalgamated Transit Union button on his cap, which was the AFL union, which was the more conservative Labor Federation then – I would say something to the guy with the TWU button, "I like your button" or something like that, or "I like your union." So I have a union consciousness and a racial consciousness. And when I was in high school, I read a book called something with freedom in its name, and it taught me about the First Amendment, and I got very committed to civil liberties. So all that's before I went to college.

Simona
When were you first aware of the segregation going on in your town? I know you said even when you're in elementary, it was weird to be friends with a Black person. But when were you first aware, like, "Oh, I can't do this with the Black person just because they're Black?"

Mike
I never had a "I can't do this" until Mississippi, really. I mean, there wasn't anything I couldn't do, there just were things that I didn't do. There were no Black people in the circle that I hung around with in junior high or high school. So when I had Black friends, it was kind of independent of the circle that I was in. And there weren't all that many Black kids in my schools. Then San Francisco was still pretty segregated. Black people were in Bayview and Hunters Point and in the Western Addition, which then was mostly called the Fillmore. So, the relationships that I had with Black people that were closer were with adults who were friends of my folks. It was a pretty segregated city.

Simona
Did you know anyone that was in favor of segregation or didn't want to... like, if they saw you doing something with a Black person, they would just be like, "I don't have a problem with you?" Did you know anyone who was in favor of segregation and didn't want integration at all?

Mike
We didn't talk about it much, but I'm pretty sure... I had high school friends who used the "N" word. Probably most of my junior high and high school friends were racially prejudiced. White people aren't doing a whole lot better now. I mean, look, a majority of them voted for Donald Trump.

Simona
True. Talk more about your high school experience because it sounds like you have a lot of stories from there.

Mike
Yes. In high school, I was an athlete so I was on the track, tennis, and soccer teams. And I was a good student, I got mostly A's. So I had a circle of friends, mostly Italian-American. The Excelsior neighborhood, which is where Balboa High School is, was then heavily Italian-American. And there was a scattering in those

days of Mexican-American people at Balboa but I think they were probably second and even third-generation Mexican-American because they were pretty integrated into the life of the school. I had a pretty good high school experience, generally. I enjoyed Balboa, I got good grades, I got scholarships to Berkeley. So that was a good experience.

Makana
Do you feel like when you were there, you could feel a sense of separation race, or was it pretty integrated socially, as well?

Mike
No, not socially at all. The few Black kids who were there, at lunchtime, they hung out with one another. When they came to a high school dance, if they did, I don't actually remember any coming, I'm sure they danced with one another. It wasn't a large number of Black kids. There were more Mexican-American kids. In those days they were Mexican-American, not Chicano. I don't think there were... I don't remember anybody being of Nicaraguan or Salvadoran background. Now, San Francisco has a lot of people from El Salvador and Nicaraguan backgrounds, a scattering of other South and Central American countries. And there was a Barbara Kohler, I remember, she was a friend, she was a Native American. She lived in Sunnydale. She was a friend of mine. Most people weren't conscious of the racism of the time, I don't think. It was just part of the way the world is. The '54 Brown vs Board school desegregation decision came when I was entering Cal. So that, of course, was big news.

Jean-Luc
Was there ever a time in high school, like a time of segregation that stood out to you or impacted you in any way? Going on through the rest of your life, was there something that stuck with you?

Mike
Not really. This little story I told you about dancing with this African American girl, that was in junior high. And that's the first time that there was an actual incident, where people talked to me about, like, something was the matter with me for dancing with this girl. There was a girl named Jewel – what was her last name – and she lived in what had been wartime public housing in Crocker-Amazon. And I used to go over to her place after school because we liked each other a lot. And it was all Black, as far as I remember. So I was like, this White kid over at this all-Black public housing project. San Francisco public housing was segregated. But it was without incident, people were friendly to me. Nobody ever treated me badly or anything like that.

Jean-Luc
Right. And so when you were dancing with that girl, how did it make you feel when these people were saying, "Well, that's kind of weird. Why is that going on?"

Mike
I realized that they had been brought up... I think the way I thought of it was, they'd been brought up badly, that there wasn't anything wrong with me, there's something wrong with them.

Simona
What did you want to be when you were in high school?

Mike
Then I was thinking I was going to be a lawyer. When I went to Berkeley, I thought I was going to be a lawyer. I took pre-law – in the speech department there were pre-law classes, so I took pre-law classes, I thought I was going to be a lawyer who's going to defend labor and minority people and civil liberties cases. Yeah, that's what I thought. I thought that pretty much all up to probably when I was a junior. And then I started shifting to "I'm going to be a college professor." I was going to teach sociology.

Simona
Talk more about your experience at Berkeley.

Mike
When I went to Berkeley, it was the tail end of what was known as the McCarthy Era. We had a period that began at the end of World War Two where communists were boogeymen and the Soviet Union was an empire that was threatening the United States. So we had a period of anti-communist hysteria, really, in the country. There was a great deal of fear of speaking up on issues like the First Amendment, racial justice, even economic justice. In junior high school, I gave a report that was favorable to the Milk Wagon Drivers Union, which was on strike, and my civics teacher said, "Michael, are you a communist?" Like that. Luckily, I was fast on my feet and so I said, "Yes, I'm the [Denman] president, and Mike [Peas] is the is the Vice President," because he had supported my report. So the class all laughed, and that kind of took care of that. But people were afraid of their shadow. And when I went to Berkeley, there was still at the tail end of that. And so the university YMCA was a little enclave of liberal opinion. We got involved at the YMCA, we got involved in ending a rule – at Berkeley, there was a rule that you couldn't have a controversial speaker unless you had a speaker from the opposite point of view on the same platform. The people who wanted to hear a socialist or communist weren't going to invite a Nazi. So it pretty much meant there wasn't free speech on the campus. So we worked to change that rule. And we succeeded. This is when I was still a freshman or sophomore.

We had Martin Luther King come to the YMCA. In 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott started and there was a Quaker guy on the staff of the University YMCA, named Cecil Thomas, whose wife had gone to college with Martin Luther King's wife. And so Cecil had access to King and through their wives we got Martin Luther King to come to the University YMCA, Stiles Hall. And we had what was called a coffee hour that came right after most classes ended at three or four o'clock in the afternoon. And there were maybe 30 or 40 people there, that's all. He was still, at Berkeley, relatively unknown. If we'd done it a year or two later, we would've had 3000 people, not 30 or 40. And so we got involved in housing. The housing office at the university accepted listings from private landlords who would put on their listing, "No negros can apply," or something like that. And so we took action to get the housing office to reject discriminatory housing listings. So we were doing little things like that. And then in '57, –maybe it was the fall semester '56 – I got elected to the student government. I ran on a platform that included civil rights and economic justice issues. By then we had connected with farmworker union organizing in the Central Valley. And we were for what we called the "Fair Bear Wage." The bear is the mascot of the Berkeley teams, Oski, the bear, we had a platform for fair bear wages for student employees. And we had something about ending discrimination in barbershops around the campus because Black students couldn't go to a barbershop, they had to go to the Black community barber to get a haircut. So there were things like that, that we were taking on.

And I got elected to the student government and I was one of two, what were then liberal voices, the graduate rep was the other one. In '57, some people started a campus political party, Fritjof Thygeson, who was a graduate rep, was a key person to that. And they ran candidates on a platform similar to what I believed – I got elected chairman then of that political party that was called Toward an Active Student Community. But our candidates didn't do well. So the organization decided the next semester not to run candidates. And I really was frustrated by that decision. So I asked some friends to run as a slate with me. And I resigned in protest of what I called "sandbox politics," the refusal of student government to take stands on issues like Apartheid in South Africa, or justice locally in the United States and Berkeley, and on the campus, and so on. So we doubled the electorate. We didn't win any seats, but we doubled the electorate and we thought that was a pretty good sign. So we formed the campus political party that was called SLATE, we had run as a slate. And so everybody knew us as "The SLATE." And so we just called the organization SLATE. It wasn't an acronym, but that's the name that everybody knew. We got thrown off campus by the administration, so we turned the SLATE word into Student Leave Accused of Trying to Exist, which, of course, people got a kick out of. And then the protest on campus was so broad that we got reinstated. So anyway, SLATE was really a precursor to the Northern Student Movement. And it was founded in 1958. So I've been rambling.

Jean-Luc
What specific time period were you in when you're part of these like unions? What year is this?

Mike
It's '54 to '58 that I'm in Berkeley as an undergraduate. And this student government activity is mostly '57 and '58. In my first two years at Berkeley, I lived in a co-op. You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you but my whole academic semester, room and board – I worked five hours a week in the house called Cloyne Court – room and board, – we didn't even have tuition then, it was called a something fee – was $67. My whole academic year was under $1,000 at Berkeley. I knew you wouldn't believe it. When I was in student government, because these jobs on the campus as a gardener, whatever, I got one of those because people in student government and athletes got those jobs. So I worked full time in the summer and I think maybe about 16 hours or 12 hours a week, during the semester. So, at the end of my junior and senior years, I'd actually saved money. So I mean, what's going on with student tuition now is outrageous. I mean, it's absolutely outrageous. The cost of going to college, so-called public universities, it's outrageous. Anyway, so '54 to '58, I'm an undergraduate at Berkeley. Then I got a Woodrow Wilson scholarship to Columbia. So, I started Columbia in September '58.

Simona
Did you know at this point that you wanted to work in civil rights or did you still want to be a college professor or a lawyer, like you said?

Mike
The Woodrow Wilson was a was a scholarship for people who were who thought they were going to be teachers or professors. So when I went to Columbia, I still thought I was going to be a professor and I thought that for a few more years, actually. Columbia was a horrible academic experience. They had a heavily, what's called quantitative analysis, orientation. And statistics was a really weak area for me so I didn't do well, at Columbia. I took incompletes, actually, in several of my classes. As the end of my first year was coming around, I thought, "now what am I going to do next?" And just about then, a woman student by the name of Suzanne Louchard, who was also from Berkeley, so we knew each other, she told me "Mike, my co-worker in this job I have as a tenant organizer in a public housing project down on the Lower East Side," [audio breaks up]. Interesting I went to gather my kind of my organizing, by then I knew... [audio breaks up].

Mike
So this job I was offered… I went down to be interviewed and the guy at the end of the interview, his name was Jose Vegas, he said at the end of the interview, he said, "You're hired. Can you start tomorrow?" I still had exams at Colombia, but I was so taken aback by this I said yes. That's what led to the incompletes, three incompletes. And I started this job which brought together all in one place a bunch of things about me. The public housing project – I grew up in a housing project. This was organizing people for economic justice where they live. So I thought it was perfect. So after six months, I got fired for being too militant. And I was called "a little Alinsky." So I said, "Who's this guy Alinsky?" He cost me my job. So that's how I discovered Saul Alinsky, who comes later in my life, but that was my first exposure to him. I was only 23 years old. So I went applying at other jobs in New York City, this huge city, 7 million people. Wherever I applied, they'd heard of me, and they wouldn't hire me. So I thought, "Whoa, I really stirred up something here." I later learned why, which is a long story we don't need to go into. So then I got a call from Berkeley. "Mike, can you come back and run a statewide anti-capital punishment campaign?" So I thought, well, I can't find anything here in New York, I might as well go back to California. So I came back to California and worked on that job for six months.

We were trying to put the issue on the ballot, we didn't get enough signatures, so we couldn't put it on the ballot. So I was hanging around at Stiles Hall and a guy I knew there said, "Hey, Mike, Ernest Greenwood, in the School of Social Work is looking for a teaching assistant. Why don't you go talk to him?" So I did, and he hired me. And so I went back to graduate school, and I was a teaching assistant in the School of Social Work. And then the next year, I was what's called the teaching associate, which is a step up in social science – it was an integrated social science class. So I did that. And I was active back again in SLATE. So SLATE had a conference in '61 I think, maybe '62, called The Negro in America. And Chuck McDew, who was then the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, came and spoke. And he asked me to be the rep for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was called SNCC. So I became the SNCC rep in the Bay Area. So Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee emerged from the sit-ins, the sit-ins across the South, mostly the mid-South, led by Black students at historically Black colleges, universities, and seminaries, in places like Morehouse, and Howard, and schools like that. I did that. So in '62 – maybe it was the end of '62 – I became a full-time representative for SNCC in the Bay Area. That's when I left becoming a professor behind because I had gotten hooked on organizing. I did that for about – let's see, '63, four, five – four-plus years.

Now, I told you I'd been fired as a "the little Alinsky" so when I was back at Cal before I got the SNCC job, somehow or other I learned about him coming to the Bay Area. So I met him. Oh, I know what happened. We had a SLATE summer conference in '62. And the head of the research department at the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, Hank Anderson, was at this conference and he was leading the campgrounds, we were up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. And I said to him, "Hank, where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to meet this guy, Saul Alinsky. He knows about the Mexican Americans in California." So I say "Do you mind if I tag along?" So I went, and we arrived at Alinsky's summer home, which is in Santa Cruz – actually, Carmel – and Alinsky says to Hank, he had a very brusque manner, he says to Hank, "Who's this guy? Why'd you bring him?" So Hank was kind of taken aback. So I said, "Well, Mr. Alinsky, I was fired for being a *little Alinsky* and I wanted to meet the big one." So that tickled his ego, he had a pretty big ego. And so he started telling us stories about what had happened in New York City and why he got run out of New York City, and so on and so on. That's how I met Saul Alinsky.

So while I was on the SNCC staff. I was also in touch with Alinsky. And there were people out here in the Bay Area who wanted to bring Alinsky to the Bay Area to do one of his community organizing projects in the largely Latino Mission District, and one in East Oakland, which then was pretty overwhelmingly Black, later it became more Latino. So I was involved with that kind of on the side. I was doing my SNCC work and I was working with these clergy people who wanted to bring Alinsky to the Bay Area. In late '66 we had a meeting with Alinsky and Alinsky pointed to me, there were about three or four clergy people, me and Alinsky. So, Alinsky says, "Mike, if you want to come to work with us, you got to come now because I need a guy in Kansas City, Missouri. My guy there is not doing well and he's going to resign." And he said, "I need to know right now." And he said, "You think about it, I'm going to take a piss." That's the way he was. So he leaves and I say to these other guys, Jim [Gainen], and Bill Grace and Dave Knots, I said, "What am I going to do? I can't leave right away. I'm now married. I've got this SNCC job. They said, "Negotiate for time." So when he came back I said, "I can't do this, Saul, until the beginning of the year. He said, "Okay, in December I want you to go to Rochester. You're going to be briefed there by my guy who's directing the Rochester project, who knows Kansas City because he's supervising that project. And then we'll start you in Kansas City, Missouri, January 1, 1967." So I told the SNCC people I was going to resign.

By then SNCC was in a lot of internal turmoil. And I went to the December 1966 SNCC staff retreat. And ironically, at that meeting, they voted the remaining Whites out of the organization. There were only a handful of White people left, I was one of them. SNCC was in a downward spiral of internal difficulties. But in the summer of '63, I had gone to Mississippi for SNCC. SNCC was then at the height of its influence. There were about 225 full-time people on the staff. And it was a staff organization, the members were the full-time people. SNCC imagined itself... [audio break up momentarily] That's a very interesting idea. Most organizations are not like that. They have members, they elect an executive board. The members are volunteers. They have other jobs and so on. So SNCC imagined itself as an organization of full-time organizers, and support staff, the people who supported the organizers: fundraisers, photographers, media, people, etc. And SNCC made a big difference in the country. It was among the forces responsible for the Voting Rights Act which was passed in 1965 and implemented before implementation was ended by the Roberts Republicans Supreme Court in the Shelby versus Alabama case, which I think was about, maybe five, six years ago. A very bad decision by the Supreme Court. Anyway, I went to Kansas City, Missouri. Just a moment you want to say something?

Simona

Yeah, I was just thinking about if we could go back to where you said you went to Mississippi to work for

SNCC. Could you talk more about that experience like working in Mississippi?

Mike
Yeah. We were in Greenwood, and Bob Moses, who was the Mississippi project director, he's one of the biggest influences in my life. He, Herb Mills, who's a dear friend of mine who died two years ago and Saul Alinsky are the major three influences in my organizing life. So Bob was the director of Mississippi, Jim Foreman was the national director. And Sam Block was the project director in Greenwood. These are all Black guys. And Sam had come to California on a fundraising trip and we met because I organized his trip and we'd become friendly. So Sam invited me to come to Greenwood to work there. Bob Moses said, "No, we don't want any White people here. It's too dangerous."

So Sam, Bob, and Jim Foreman, who was the executive director, had a little meeting, the three of them, while we were in Greenwood. I'd gone from Atlanta, which was the national headquarters, to Greenwood for a concert. There was going to be what they called Freedom Concert (July 4th weekend, 1963). It was on the farm of a woman named Laura McGee, an African American woman who owned her own farm. And the place was surrounded, literally surrounded by county sheriff's cars, state police cars, and Greenwood police cars. And there were about 60 to 70 of us on Laura McGee's farmland with this concert of the SNCC Freedom Singers, a Black quartet of SNCC people, whose songs – you guys ought to get a hold of a Freedom Singers album, the music is fantastic. Anyway! So they're singing. Pete Seeger, who was a nationally, internationally known folk singer, Theodore Bikel, also an internationally known folk singer, and Bob Dylan. So you probably know those names. And this was called the Freedom Concert.

And right there after the concert adjourned, there's this meeting of Foreman, Moses, and Block. And so Bob relents in his opposition and says, "Okay, but they have to stay close to the office." The reason for his fear was that earlier in that year, two White people had done a trip up in the Delta, this is the Delta area of Mississippi, counties that are 80%, Black, and maybe in some of them, zero percent registered to vote. The highest registration rate of Black people was in the Jackson area, it was 5%. There's a systematic denial of the right to vote. And that was SNCC's focus in Mississippi, the right to vote. So the agreement was that we would stay close to the office because when these two White people had traveled to the Delta, violence against local Black people had increased. So the presence of Whites who were supporters of the Civil Rights Movement increased the resistance of White people and increased violence. So we were staying pretty close to the office.

We were there about a week and we were walking one block to a little local corner grocery store, and we get picked up by a cop and taken into the little jailhouse, a two-story brick jailhouse. There were prisoners looking out with the cell bars looking out over the front as we're brought into the jail and the cop yells out to the guys upstairs, "Boys got me some nigga lovers here." And so we thought, "Ooh, we are in for a bad beating." And we were really scared. So this other guy, Dick Fry and I were standing at the booking desk and the cop who picked us up, goes into the chief's office, the chief is named Chief Larry. And we can hear the buzz, buzz, buzz of the conversation. But we can't hear a word that's being said. And so after about, I don't know, minutes go by, and we're getting more and more fearful about what's going on, because Emmett Till had been brutally beaten in this area only a few years earlier, really, eight years earlier. And we're really scared. So about 10 minutes go by and the cop comes out, he says, "Boys come with me. We're going back to the car." And now we think, "Oh my God, they're gonna dump us in a river. What are they going to do?" So this cop is driving us, we don't know exactly where. and all of a sudden, he says, "Now you boy see that school over there?" He points out the window. "We built that school for our nigras." He's not saying the N-word now, he's saying a kind of compromise word between negros and the N-word is nigras. And then he does the same thing. "See that recreation park over there?" Same thing. And then he drops us back at the office. We can't figure out what is going on here.

So we walk into the office, and there are about 20-30 people there, all Black. And there's a huge cheer, and laughter and hands clapping and we say, "What's so funny?" So he says, "Well, Sam Black called the chief" – and this is a peculiarity of the deep South in those days, even though there's this rigid segregation and racism, there were relationships at a personal level that didn't exist in the North. And so Sam Block was kind of known to the chief, it's a relatively small town, 40,000 people, I think. Sam Black called the chief and he said, "Chief, don't mess with those White boys, they know the governor of California." It's a total bluff, a total bluff. But I learned later that the chief called the Governor, and the Governor said, "Let 'em go." So that's how we got saved from a really bad beating.

Anyway, so at the end of the summer, I went back to Berkeley, and then Bob Moses called – actually, Joan Bowman called me and said, "Bob would like you to come back, we need someone." They're running now a statewide Freedom Vote, which was a parallel election. Black people can't register to vote so they're going to have their own election, a parallel election, not official – the voting places are barbershops and restaurants and churches in the Black community and so on – to demonstrate that Black people in Mississippi want to vote. And Bob wanted me to come back to do media work. So I did. And the very first night I was there, we got run off the road. There were three of us in my car, we got run off the road. I think it was an accident, just a coincidental accident. But Gene D'Allessi and I both had ruptured spleens, and they took us to a hospital in Tchula, which is a little town in Holmes County. And the doctors there wouldn't treat us. We were dying. So the Black undertaker put us in his hearse and drove us to the state university... [audio breaks up momentarily]. The doctor saved my life. They cut me open, boom, like that, and took out my spleen. And I had a broken, fractured arm. So I was in the hospital for three weeks and then I came home. And then recovered and was back doing my SNCC work until this story in December '66 when Alinsky offers me the job and says, "Come East."

So I went to the December '66 SNCC staff meeting to say goodbye to my friends, tell them what I was going to do. And as it turned out, that's the meeting where the Whites were voted out. So I would have been off the staff anyway. So, Alinsky and I went to Kansas City, the week between Christmas and New Years'. He introduced me to the leadership of this Black community organization in Kansas City, which had a big Black community. It was about a 20% Black population in Kansas City, which I think then was a city of maybe half a million people. And I organized there for a year and a half. I didn't do too well. Complicated reasons. The organization was already in trouble when I got there. We had some nice victories. But the key job of an organizer is to build an organization that lasts after she or he leaves. And I didn't succeed in doing that. So while I was in Kansas City, I was in touch with people in the Mission District who knew me because of my work with the clergy people in the Bay Area who were trying to bring Alinsky to the Bay Area. I'd been involved with them in defeating an urban renewal program. In those days, there was a federal program called Urban Renewal and Urban Renewal money was supposed to be used to rehabilitate and restore slum neighborhoods. But it was also supposed to be used to improve the tax base of cities. And these were really contradictory aims because to restore the tax base, like in San Francisco, as you probably know, the Hyatt Regency was built on Urban Renewal land where lots of low-income people had lived. So the Mission District was slated for Urban Renewal and people thought it was going to mean a bulldozer would destroy their neighborhood and fancy apartments and other buildings would replace it because the Mission is so close to downtown and BART was going to be built etc. So we had beaten Urban Renewal, very few neighborhoods in the country, were able to do that. So I was known to the people in the Mission.

And when my last six months – all of the time I was in Kansas City, Missouri I was on the phone with them, kind of talking through strategy and tactics. They wanted me to come to work for them when I came back. The Kansas City experience had created a lot of doubt in my mind about whether I was cut out for this work. So I said, "No, it's too early and I don't know if I'm an organizer." So they pleaded with me. They'd say, "Okay, just help us organize our first convention, our founding convention." So the convention was an organization that tried to bring together all the groups and new groups that were newly created to form what we called a "people power organization." It was very successful, a very successful founding convention. So I decided, "Yeah, maybe I am an organizer" and I got hired permanently to work there. So that started my organizing career really in the Mission District of San Francisco.

Simona
Going back to Mississippi, you said in your profile, you said you attended the Peg Leg Bates meeting.

Mike

Yeah.

Simona
Can you talk more about your experience and what all of that was about? Explain it.

Mike
Yes. So SNCC, maybe three times, maybe sometimes four times a year, there would be a staff meeting. And all the full-time people would gather for several days. They would evaluate what had happened in the past, discuss what's going to be in the future, the strategy for the future, kind of celebrate together, the Freedom Singers would sing. They were wonderful, deeply moving gatherings. But as SNCC began to fall into disarray... Let me digress for a minute. In 1964, SNCC's organizing came to fruition really, in the formation of a thing called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was a result of that parallel election that I told you, that was pretty successful. 80,000 people voted in it. So it clearly demonstrated Black people want to vote. So the strategy was to form a separate Democratic Party, which would be open to all people, Black, White, anybody else. And that this party was going to go to the National Convention of the Democratic Party and challenge the seating of the racist so-called "regulars," and say they're not a Democratic Party, they're a racist party, and they don't vote for the national ticket anyway. So we thought that we were going to succeed in that challenge. It's a long story. I'm kind of co-author of a little book about it, The Politics of Change. If you guys want to read about this story, you can get it at – who's the big company now?

Jean-Luc
Amazon?

Mike
Amazon, Amazon, I don't much like Amazon. But anyway, so you can get it Amazon, it's called [The Politics of Change](). Anyway, we thought we were going to win that challenge, that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party would replace the racist regulars. Lyndon Johnson turned the screws on the Credentials Committee, individual members, he threatened them with loss of jobs, not getting a dam built in their state, blah, blah, blah, blah. And the votes that we needed slowly got peeled off. So by the time of the actual vote, we did not have a sufficient number of Credential Committee members to vote for the MFDP challenge, which meant we couldn't get a report to the full Convention. We only wanted a minority report from the Committee, because we thought once it went to the full Convention, in the glare of national TV cameras and so on, we would win. Well, we lost. And people didn't know what to do with that loss, it was tremendously demoralizing and it led to internal division. Big losses do not help build people-power. So by the time of this December meeting, SNCC was kind of in a downward spiral. It was losing influence, it was losing members, its fundraising was declining, and so on.

Mike
So I went to Peg Leg Bates to say goodbye to my friends, that I was going to go to work for Saul Alinsky. And that's when they voted the Whites out. And I remember Fannie Lou Hamer – who you probably know, wonderful, wonderful woman who I'd become friends with – Fannie Lou Hamer came up to me in tears. And she said, "Mack," that's how she said my name, Mike, "Mack, I just don't know what they're doing." She really didn't understand this exclusion of White people. So friends of mine stopped talking with me, White people were not being talked with by some of the militant Black people. So that was a painful, painful experience. We've all reconnected over the years and reunions and they've been wonderful get-togethers. So I went to work for Saul Alinsky, and then in the Mission District, that was a wonderful experience for me because we put together a very, very powerful organization. It was very rewarding. We did things nobody thought we were going to be capable of doing. And out of the Mission District experience, I started becoming known – really far beyond San Francisco in California – I was getting known as a skilled organizer. So I did a couple of others in Visitation Valley, I did another organization. I had an interesting experience there. There was an idea that White people were supposed to educate White people against racism. And I didn't believe that that was doable, other than with fairly middle-class, White people. I didn't think you could talk with White working-class or low-income people about someone else's issue, Black people's issues, you have to talk to them about their

issues first, and then find a way of creating relationships that would cross lines of race and ethnicity.

I'll tell you a story to illustrate. In this Visitation Valley organization, which became All Peoples Coalition, it was a very diverse neighborhood, then: White, Latino, Black. And there was a mostly White homeowners association that I wanted to get into the organization. And it was headed by a guy who was either the Northern California campaign coordinator for George Wallace. George Wallace was then the racist governor of Alabama. And when I'd go talk to this guy, he would spew the most vile, racist bile. And I would listen to him. And I didn't respond, I had a bite my tongue. But at the end of it I'd say, "Well, yeah, that's okay. But are you getting from the mayor's office what you want for your homeowners?" Well, I knew he wasn't so I said, "If we can build a people-power organization out here in Visitation Valley, we can make the mayor listen." So he said, "Well, you come and talk to my association and if they vote to join, then I'll go along with it." I said, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'll come and answer questions, but I want you to recommend to your association that they join." He grumbled-grumble, but he finally agreed to do that. So they joined. And it turned out what my kind of theoretical approach to this really worked, that people in this organization that was a member of All Peoples Coalition, met and worked with Black people, Latino people, and their views changed. One guy showed up, I'll never forget this conversation, Eddie Wofford showed up at a demonstration that the tenants of Geneva Towers were having, almost all Black people. So I was kind of surprised when I saw him. "Eddie," I said, "what are you doing here?" And he said, "What do you mean, Mike?" And I said, "Well, you used to talk badly about these people." "Oh," he said, "that's before I got to know them." And they came and supported us on our issue with the garbage companies so how can I not support them.

And I had a lot of experiences like that in my life, that you find something that brings people together, and they find out the humanity that they share rather than the racial or religious or ethnic differences that they have. And then when they say what Eddie said to me, then there's what people call a "teachable moment." So I said to Eddie, "Whose interests were served by your view of Black people that you had before?" And he thought about it and he said, "Yeah, downtown." I said, "Yeah, that's right, Eddie." So that's how I'd have conversations without divide-and-conquer. And in my experiences, they worked. There's not a lot of that going on now, that's why we're in trouble in the country, I think, Despite Biden's win, if you look across the board in the elections, Republicans did better than Democrats, by and large, especially in state elections. In California we defeated affirmative action again, it was not a good election, other than the defeat of Trump. And maybe, maybe in Georgia, we're going to have good results for the Senate. I don't think the count is in yet. But statehouses, local congressional races, and so on, the results are not good. So anyway, I went on to run a city-wide school board election in San Francisco. That was successful, too. We had a Chicano candidate, an African-American woman, a labor guy who was White, a Chinese-American guy, and a woman who was Jewish. And we elected four out of five of our candidates, which nobody thought we were going to do because it was combined with the first court-ordered busing. So there was a... [audio breaks momentarily] against us. It was anti-busing. And busing has never been popular really, except where it's negotiated. When it's court-ordered, it's very unpopular, even in the Black community. So we thought we were going to lose, but we won four out of five seats. And I learned a lot in that campaign, too. Then in '72, I started Organize Training Center, which has been my base of operation ever since. It's a small nonprofit that I direct, and from it, I've launched organizing projects in San Francisco, San Mateo, rural Nebraska, Omaha, Nebraska. I helped start Tucson, Arizona, Denver, Colorado, Portland, Oregon. And I've consulted around the country. For many years, I ran a four-day intensive workshop on organizing. Like I tell people, I'm fairly good at what I do, I believe in it, and I get paid to do it. That's a nice combination. A nice combination.

Jean-Luc
Mike, I'm so sorry to cut you off. Is it okay if we can go back a little bit? You talked about that you knew Fannie Lou Hamer and Bob Moses. Could you explain what your relationship was like with them and what they were like to be with?

Mike
As you may know, Fannie Lou Hamer was a sharecropper. She was actually a timekeeper on a plantation. And

when the SNCC people came around trying to get people to register to vote, she went to register to vote. And her plantation owner told her that "Either you withdraw your name, or I'm gonna fire you." And she said, "Well, I did this for me, not for you." And so he fired her. And in '63, when I was in the Delta in Greenwood, she was living in Ruleville, which is not very far away. And so I met her on a couple of occasions and we became friendly. When I went to Atlanta for a staff meeting, while I was in Atlanta, Ebony Magazine, a historically African-American magazine, had published in 1963 a special issue on the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. So I bought it. And it was for me, I mean I was making $10 a week then, it was pretty expensive. I think it was $4 or something like that. So, on my way back to Greenwood, I thought I'm going to stop off and Ruleville and see Mrs. Hamer, we all called her Mrs. Hamer. So I did and I brought the magazine in with me, and she just wanted... she poured over it. We went page by page, slowly through this magazine. She just loved it. So at the end of it, I was going to leave, I said, "Mrs. Hammer, I bought this for you in Atlanta." I thought she needed to have that magazine more than I did. She was just so appreciative of that. So that kind of cemented our little bond. She was a very warm, really loving person, deeply, deeply religious. So her justice commitment was born in her religious faith. She's an extraordinary person. I don't know what else to say about her She later started – after SNCC had kind of fallen apart – she started a pig farm. Both Black and White people came to get free piglets. So when her pig would give birth to piglets, she'd give a male and a female piglet to whoever came and asked for them. And all she'd ask is that when your mother pig has a litter, that you offer piglets to others who could use them, would raise them. That's what she was like, a warm-hearted, generous person who she didn't care what color you were. She's an extraordinary human being.

Bob Moses is another extraordinary human being. Very soft-spoken. So he's the opposite of what all the stereotypes of a charismatic figure are. There are lots of videotapes of him so if you haven't seen him, you can Google him and see him. A deeply thoughtful guy. We highly, SNCC people regarded him very highly, me among them. We've stayed in touch, more or less over the years. He came to my 80th birthday party, he made a wonderful statement there about me, which I'll email to you, Simona. He kind of burned out in Mississippi. So he and his wife Janet went to Africa. They taught in Guinea, I think they taught and Guinea. Sékou Touré was the President and I think they got to know him. Then they came back. And Bob launched this thing called the Algebra Project, which is a separate story. Bob asked me to come to Broward County, Florida, where we hoped to do something together. Two of the key people had to drop out for personal reasons. The woman who is the head of the School of Education at Florida International University got breast cancer. And a guy who was another key person to starting this, his wife got Alzheimer's so he had to drop out. So the project kind of collapsed. I really regret it because I had looked forward to working with Bob again.

Simona
Since we're running out of time, I know you met a lot of influential people. But in your opinion, who was the most influential to you, and what did you learn from that person that you met during the Movement?

Mike
Earlier I mentioned the three names: Herb Mills, Bob Moses, and Saul Alinsky. Herb is the person who I was closest to, we were best friends for 60 years. I just a few days ago, finished a book about Herb that we're going to publish on Amazon. Herb was a brilliant Ph.D. candidate at Berkeley in sociology, and he dropped out. He became a Longshoreman and a leader in the Longshoreman's Union. We were living together, we shared a house in Berkeley until he got married. And I was the best man and his wedding and he was the best man at my weddings, of which there's more than one. He died two years ago. But we were co-conspirators on a lot of things over the years, and I learned a great deal from him. He was about, I think, seven or eight years older than I. Then the other person, of course, is Saul Alinsky, whose work I read, and I've re-read. I've co-edited a book called People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky. So Saul was another big influence. And then Bob, Bob Moses in both his thinking, but even more so in his way of being this calm level-headed, not seeking public glory or recognition. Deeply thoughtful. I think those are the three people I would say most influenced me.

Simona
And what did you learn from your experience during the Movement? From what you did, everything you've done, you've done a lot, what did you learn from that?

Mike
Well, the basic lesson of my work is that if you give everyday people who are considered apathetic or ignorant or whatever – bigoted, racist – if you work with them to construct organizations in which they can have an effective voice in the world, they will surprise you. They will surprise you with their ability to toss out old prejudices, to be very wise in the decisions they make, and to act as real democratic citizens. That's the common theme, have confidence in the capacities of everyday people. They have to have a vehicle, that's what organizers teach them to build. Otherwise, they're susceptible to demagogues and divide-and-conquer strategies by corporate elites and political elites. That's my basic list.

Simona
My final question is, what advice would you give to people who are trying to make a change and the system like you did?

Mike
You face very powerful interests and structures that are obstacles to the kinds of changes I think probably all of you would like to see. So it's not going to happen overnight. The requirement is what I call "radical patience." Those seem like contradictory ideas. By radical, I mean, get to the root of the matter. The root of the matter, in my mind, is the tremendous concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a very small number of people who now basically define the parameters of what's acceptable in politics. And those parameters have to be extended, widened if we're going to have a really democratic society. Breaking up their power is not an easy thing. Understanding their power, that's the radical part, to really recognize what the real structure of the country is. Voting, that's good, I'm all for it. But without independent social movements and people power organizations, we're not going to achieve the kind of society we want to see. So the patience is the long haul, be a long-distance runner. One demonstration, two demonstrations, six months of demonstrations, not going to do it, not sufficient.

Makana
Great, thank you.

Simona
Thank you

Jean-Luc
Thank you so much for sharing your story, Mike, we really appreciate it.

Mike
Nice meeting you all.

Makana
Thank you so much.

Mike
Maybe I'll come out to your school one of these days when COVID is over.

Jean-Luc
Yes, yes. That would be great.

Howard Levin
We're hoping to bring together, either physically or virtually the various people that we've interviewed the last couple of years. Thank you so much. And I love your final message. Good question. Simona. We will send you a link to the raw video. There's a lot of editing that we will be doing in the next few days. But thank you so

much for letting us capture it.

Mike
All right. All right. Good meeting you all. Bye, bye. We can sign off now. Huh?

Howard Levin
Yeah. Much, Mike. Thank you. Bye. Bye.

Mike
All right. Bye.