

INVITATIONS: (Lessons learned about organizing with the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee)

©Maria Varela

Speaking before a community college audience is somewhat daunting. So many of the students I know are going to school while working 25 to sometimes 40 hours a week... supporting college costs, perhaps supporting their own children and/or probably contributing to their parent family's expenses. On top of that is the stress of earning good grades to enable transfers to 4 year institution. And then there are those without citizenship documents, who because of that, are challenged in finding jobs and transferring to other institutions without financial assistance. Not to mention the overarching worry about the threat of deportation on families.

Those of my generation who accuse your generation of being selfie-centered, should walk a week in your shoes to understand the grit, work ethic, determination and courage that underwrites your reach for your dreams. Also impressive to me is how many in your generation, even with all of these challenges, actively work for a more equitable and compassionate society. The activists of your generation are 21st century counterparts to those of us active in 20th century social justice movements.

What I want to talk about today is my experiences in some of these 20th century movements and share lessons learned about movement building and leadership. While I was involved in several mid-20th century movements, I will spend time with you today on just a couple of them:

- the 1960's youth-led civil rights movement working to dismantle apartheid in the deep US South
- the *Indo-Hispanos* land grant movement working to make the US government accountable for breaking the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resulting in millions of acres of lost homelands of Native and Mexican-Americans in the southwest.

Let me start by putting us back in the mid 1960's in Mississippi. This is part of an essay I wrote for *Hands on the Freedom Plow*.

I looked down at the speedometer. It hovered at 115. My 1957 Packard hunkered down and propelled the three of us down Mississippi Interstate 55.

Glancing to the side I saw the two-toned '67 Chevy with its white occupants trying to pass us...yet again. The barrel of a long gun poked up between the two men in the front seat.

It seemed like an eternity since we had left Memphis and got on the Interstate. Earlier that day, I and my companions, an older black woman and her daughter had left a movement gathering at Highlander Center in Tennessee. We were on our way to the Mississippi Delta. Traveling in an integrated car in daylight had left us all a little tense. When we stopped for gas in Memphis that evening, I thought that the cover of darkness meant the worst of the journey was over. Then I turned from the gas pump and saw the white male occupants of the Chevy staring at us. It was the fall of 1964: open season on civil rights workers.

The Packard moved effortlessly up to 120 mph. It ran as if made for this speed: not a shake or shimmy. My companions were deathly quiet. I closed my mind to thoughts of danger: gunfire from the pursuing car, a collision, a flat-tire, a blown rod, or what would happen if the Chevy managed to pull in front and stop us. It was a moonless night and my eyes were glued to the black strip of asphalt which stretched before us. One thing I knew for sure; I would sooner risk pushing the car to the end of the speedometer than stop on this desolate stretch of road in the far northern reaches of Mississippi.

Up ahead we saw a semi-truck. The lack of any traffic since Memphis had made the pursuit lethal. If I could stay with the semi perhaps the pursuers wouldn't make their move. We were now at 125 shooting down the road trying to catch up to the tractor-trailer. As I pulled alongside the truck, the Chevy was on our tail. It was a delicate maneuver, slowing the Packard enough to allow me to slip front of the semi, yet going fast enough to shake off Chevy. Once in front, the trick was to stay close to semi so the Chevy could come in between. The truck slowed way down and so did we.



in
the
the
not

Then the trucker tried to pass us. I sped up, staying as close to his front bumper as I dared. The Chevy tried unsuccessfully to move ahead of us both, but finally fell back behind the semi.

Photo: Beloved Packard with Author. 1965

We hovered close to our 'guardian' semi for another few miles. The panic welling in my throat was held at bay by my companions' silent composure. Signs to the Batesville Mississippi exit emerged. I shot back up to 125. I made the exit with neither truck nor Chevy in sight, cut the lights and floated down the exit ramp into welcome darkness. The semi and the Chevy roared over us into the night. There was not a word spoken as we continued through Batesville on our way down to the Delta. The terror gradually subsided. Finally, in small murmurs, with a few tenuous chuckles, we dared to believe it was over. I thought that the Packard Company must have been God's chariot

maker.

Holsaert, F.S. (2010) *Hands on the freedom plow: Personal accounts by women in SNCC*.
Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

HOW DID I END UP ON THIS HIGHWAY?

did not come from a left-leaning or activist family. During the Mexican revolution, la familia de mi padre came across the border from the State of Coahuila to San Antonio, Texas. Mi abuelo Francisco thought they could wait out the revolution there with relatives, and then return home. However the revolution deepened and anti-immigrant hatred was virulent: none more dangerous than in US/ Mexico border regions. Often overlooked in the history books are the lynchings of Mexicans-both citizen and non-citizen which took place in the late 1800's through the 1940's.

While Black and White lynchings were sort of documented, lynchings of Mexicanos were hardly documented. Records were found for approximately five hundred lynchings but many scholars estimate that may be only a fraction of the actual number. Across the Southwest and West vigilantes carried out the killings as a form of "street justice." These killings became so numerous that in the 1920's the Mexican government lodged official complaints to the U.S. Counsel in Mexico City.

This was an era of Sunset Towns. People of color were to be out of town by sunset and not allowed back until sunrise. To be caught was to be jailed and/or beaten and sometimes hung. There were illegal deportations of Mexican-Americans back to Mexico, even though they were citizens. As the revolution deepened and lawlessness grew along border areas, mi abuelo Francisco decided to relocate to the Northeast, where he reasoned anti-immigrant hostility, while present, would perhaps be less lethal.

As we were growing up, my dad was constantly transferred from chemical plant to chemical plant across the mid-section of the country. With all the moving, it has always been difficult to answer the question, "Where are you from?" There was no time for us to identify with a city, neighborhood, school, or pack of friends. So our family became our tribe. Our ethnic identity came primarily from the stories told when the full tribe gathered and the Tios recounted the adventures and pranks of *Los Rodriguez-Varelas'* in Mexico. There were eight of them, seven brothers and one sister. Many of the Tio's attended college on athletic scholarships. They credited the racial slurs thrown at them before, during

and after high school games as fuel to beat the opposing team decisively. My aunt, of course, was not expected to go to college. And we, the five daughters of Manuel Andres (by that time the name was shortened to Varela) were also not expected to go to college. We were to marry, bear children and live according to Catholic values.

Francisco forbade the use of Spanish in his house because children of immigrants were punished for speaking their language in the classroom. And perhaps he was somewhat ashamed of his accent and wanted his children to speak perfect English, (not understanding how children are able to learn two or even three languages without accent). Yet when the Tios were together, even years later, phrases and songs in Spanish would still escape. The only story I remember from my mother's Irish side was that her father raised money for the IRA- the Irish Republican Army. I don't remember anyone from that side telling us other stories. Thus the Mexico stories loomed large, filling the gap and sealing the identity of my tribe.

I once volunteered in the 4th grade that I was Mexican and the angry response of the teacher frightened and shamed me. "No you are not! snapped Sister Rosita, her piercing eyes boring through me as I tried to disappear into the old wooden desk. "We're all Americans here." While her reaction silenced any further discussions of my identity, it only reinforced the allegiance to my tribe, which I learned the hard way to keep to myself.

In my high school years, Dad reconsidered the 'no college' decision. His closest friend had dropped dead in his forties and left a widow with five children and no real way to support them. If we could at least get a teaching certificate, he reasoned, we could be protected from such a fate.

Being the oldest, I chose Alverno College in Milwaukee Wisconsin primarily because it was an inexpensive college and there were four more sisters coming up behind me. It was also more comfortable than the more expensive colleges. Alverno was founded for first generation students with either one or two parents without a college education. My education for an academic year cost \$800 room, board and tuition and I worked part time to help support costs.

While at Alverno, I joined the Young Christian Students, (YCS) which believed that Catholics needed to move out of their religious ghetto and engage collaboratively in the world to build a more just society. We were trained to engage by using what is called the social inquiry method involving observation, reflection and action. It trained us to look at the reality of our

community by learning how people felt, saw, believed and acted. It started with local knowledge coupled with solid data and through reflective action, revealed the roots of social problems. I don't remember the issues we worked on, but now that I reflect on the process, I realize that YCS trained us to the fundamentals of community organizing and community-based research.

THE INVITATION

While my generation, the baby boomers, were considered rebellious, I wasn't. I didn't like taking risks and would never have involved myself in any risk-taking venture...or so I thought. Then the invitations came. I believe the essential method of building a social movement is the invitation. Someone needs you or enlists you to do something that often you thought you never could or wanted to do.

My first invitation was when I was asked to join the national staff of the Young Christian Students after college graduation. I put on hold a speech therapy fellowship at Marquette University and moved to the YCS national headquarters in Chicago. During 1961 and 62, I traveled by bus across the Midwest and Northeast to advance YCS chapters on college campuses. Part of my message to students on northern campuses was to support and raise money for the southern based Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

I had heard about (SNCC) at the annual conventions of the National Student Association (NSA) which I attended as student body president of Alverno. There I met leaders from the student sit-ins of the 1960's which had spread across the US south like wildfire. They were



astoundingly articulate and told of the carnage of the freedom rides which left us speechless. They also recounted where whole towns were brought to a stand-still by their bold actions and Freedom Ride Bus Burning. Anniston, Alabama. 1961

while many students were carted off to jail, many others took their places, often filling jails beyond their capacity.

Within a year, SNCC had evolved from a committee coordinating student sit-ins to an organization of full time organizers who had temporarily dropped out of college to respond to local leaders' requests for voter registration classes and the desegregation of public places and facilities. SNCC's young organizers went to live and work in these communities (or were

indigenous to these communities), setting it apart from the civil rights mainstream of the 60's. No other civil rights organization at that time had a large field staff across the Deep South comprised of mostly young black students indigenous to the region.

The second invitation was a letter from a friend who was working for the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee at their Atlanta headquarters. Sandra Cason (Casey) asked if I would consider working there because of my office skills. My gut reacted: **“NO WAY...they kill people down there...they beat them and put them in jail...and... they had ginormous cockroaches that flew...sometimes into your hair. There was NO WAY I am going!!!”**

The letter stayed in the bottom of my suitcase for several weeks. As I traveled from campus to campus I encountered nuns who condemned the student sit-ins as acts of terror or at the very least communistic. They represented to me the backwardness of the church...something I wanted to change. Then, I would meet one or two bright-eyed students who would ask for more stories about the southern movement and could they go down and help? The danger didn't seem to matter to them.

One afternoon, resting in between meetings in a dorm room of a Catholic college in Wisconsin, the letter's request nagged at me: “I work for an organization that believes that Catholics need to engage in struggles for justice and equity.....I'm invited to go South and be a part of a justice and equity struggle....and all I want to say is no?”

But didn't I want to stand up to those nuns? And didn't I want to model for those students what we as Catholics should do?

Not really...

But Catholic guilt wore me down. Three months later, this was in 1963, I was on my way to Atlanta Georgia by bus. After all....how dangerous could it be in the big city of Atlanta? It wasn't like rural Mississippi or Alabama!

Before formally starting work at SNCC headquarters, I was introduced to Bernard Lafayette and Frank Smith, SNCC organizers who had worked in Selma, Alabama. The film Selma notwithstanding, SNCC had had a presence there since 1961. One of the bigger supporters of the movement in Selma was a French Canadian pastor of an Afro-American Catholic parish. The movement needed him and he wanted SNCC to do voter literacy classes. When Frank

learned that I had been an organizer for the Young Christian Students, he said: “It would be really helpful if you went to Selma... we’re all Baptist and he needs some Catholic support. His bishop is against the movement, his parish is somewhat divided....but he’s really committed. We can’t afford to lose him.”

As I looked at Frank that same scream started creeping up inside me: **Are you Crazy? Me?? Go to Selma which has a nutso sheriff that would just as soon kill a movement worker as to go through the trouble of the paperwork to put them in jail. NO and NO!**

This of course was a silent scream; I didn’t want to make a fool of myself in my first days with SNCC and reveal what a chicken I was to this veteran of several dangerous campaigns. And while Catholic guilt helped grease the wheels for my reluctantly agreeing to go, it was the leadership of SNCC organizers that propelled me. They didn’t even know me, yet felt my assistance would be important to the Selma movement. (As Bernard said recently to a friend “We didn’t know what she was or what would happen when she went....but we sent her anyway” They were trusting this young woman, with no prior experience in living in the apartheid South, to act right and not put movement people in danger. And finally...most importantly...they thought I could do the job.

This was another lesson in movement building; coupled with the invitation is the trust of those who extend the invitation. When they trust that you will meet their expectations and, with support, learn how to do the job, you agree to things you never thought you could do. Off I went to Selma and ended up spending the next five years working for SNCC first in Alabama and then in Mississippi.

Somewhere along the way I went to the other side of fear and found courage. The passion of SNCC staff was contagious and passion is one of the emotions that can defeat fear. But fearlessness also required being smart enough to stay alive, hopefully un-noticed and as far as possible, out of jail. That last part....staying out of jail....didn’t work too well. I ended up going twice.

But much more than losing the fear was the transformation we all went through as we worked alongside each other with community people who mentored us in profound ways. Movement victories and defeats come and go, but authentic transformation of movement participants is enduring. A person transformed by taking risks will find themselves carried down a path illuminated by a consciousness that rips off the blinders. You never see the

same way again; ignoring injustice is not an option.

TRANSFORMATION

After the arrests and after that harrowing ride down Interstate 55, I never again asked myself “What am I doing here?” My initial indecision had disappeared. There seemed no place else to be but in this other USAmerica. In the mainstream, they believed they lived in a democracy: their heroes were mostly white and male; culture was the ballet, symphony, and art museum; religion was about attending church or synagogue. Life was the pursuit of “happiness” purchased by a college degree, a good job, a career and/or, for women: a good marriage. In the ‘other USAmerica’ was a reverse image.

Our leaders were Afro-American men AND women. heroes were local people many of whom, before we born, began the process of dismantling this country’s system of apartheid and forcing the nation to begin to live its Constitution. Their lives economic security were at daily risk. Their culture rooted in the land, folk arts,

Photo © Maria Varela. Westpoint Miss. Wood Worker. 1965



it
Our
were
and
was

ancestral medicinals, folk stories and music-making voices and hands. Their spirituality brought the Old and New Testament alive as they faced the possibility and often the reality of homelessness, torture and even death as, against tremendous odds, they stood up for their beliefs. This USAmerica transformed us all as we got down to the roots of an authentic life: learning about each other while sacrificing safety, security and even life itself for one another.

Learning to live and work in the apartheid South, with primarily Afro-American people, was not like being in a strange country; it was like being on a different planet. It was the backside of the moon, made dark by the terror, powerlessness, poverty, and grinding cruelty of segregation. It was living within a culture and a people I had little or no acquaintance with. I had the privilege of experiencing not only their rich social landscape but, as well, their articulate and immense passion in fashioning their resistance. This was a culture and a people whose history and arts were thoroughly excised from my education.

I learned about local plants used for healing; I heard fife and drum bands that played music like I never heard before or since, and oh the stories...stories showing resistance at its best... and always laced with humor. This laughter; one line jokes and insults, hilarious back backside of the moon was lit up with and forth bickering with references to one's 'mama' and time-worn stories that we never got tired of hearing.

Yet this social landscape had connections to the Mexicano lifestyle. One day in Mrs. (Fanny Lou) Hamer's kitchen, I remarked that the cracklins (pork her husband Pap Hamer was frying in the back yard Mexican chicharrónes. She asked me more about any similarities to Mexican food. I pointed out that she always put red chile flakes in her collards. For me, eye peas were similar to pinto beans, corn bread in a could stand in for tortillas, and the liberal use of red flakes (chile Caribe), while



rinds)
were
other

black
pinch,
chile

Photo ©Maria Varela Pap Hamer cooking cracklins

not salsa, brought heat to vegetables and meat. (And if that wasn't enough, there was always Tobasco Sauce.) The local herbs for cooking and plants for folk medicine may have been different, but the practices and spirituality involved in healing were similar to Mexican folk medicine.

I also felt at home with SNCC's approach to organizing. It was right out of the YCS playbook. The YCS organizing method was to observe in order to move outside our own reality and prejudices, become aware of the different realities of others and act accordingly. SNCC organizers used these same methods and it was called participatory democracy. They were mentored in this approach by Ms. Ella Baker....who we called the midwife of the southern civil rights movement. How many of you have heard of her?

Born in the early 1900's in North Carolina, Ms. Baker had a rich history of organizing by the time the 1960's came along. The explosive energy students brought to the 1960's sit-in's

inspired her. She procured a small grant to call the sit-in groups together from Nashville to Atlanta. She brought them together not to tell them what to do....but to observe, to listen and put herself in their shoes. The NAACP and Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) came to the meeting in the hopes that the students would opt to form a youth group under them. Ms. Baker heard otherwise. She picked up on the student's desire to be independent and determine their own movement strategies.

Listen to Franklin McCain, one of the four black freshmen at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College who started the 1960's sit-ins in Greensboro NC. "The person who had the most influence on us four, more than any other single individual in this country was Gandhi... we were little tots at the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and we barely heard of Martin Luther King...he was not uppermost in our minds when we started this movement..."

We were four guys who were pretty strong-willed...and who were keenly aware that (older) people would rush in and try to take over the movement. We... were very independent And so encouraged by Ms. Baker, SNCC formed its own independent organization.



David

Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, and Joseph McNeil ignite 1960's sit-ins

This may have been a historic first in the 20th century: a free-standing youth-led organization unaffiliated with more established adult-dominated groups.

LEARNING TO ORGANIZE

These students experience, maturity and desire for autonomy to pursue their own movement strategies matched the life experience of the 60 year old Baker. She was critical about the idea that a single charismatic leader should lead from the top down. She spoke often about how the people under the heel of oppression had to be the ones to

decide how they would defeat their oppression. She was often quoted as saying “a strong people don’t require a strong leader”. She cautioned SNCC organizers against imposing their educational privilege on those less book-educated: noting that they may have been book-taught but the education of the ‘life-taught’ ranked high in a leader or community’s assets. Her message to the students was to go only where they were invited...and go not for the purpose of starting a SNCC chapter. Observe what was already there...listen to how people gather themselves and build on their community history and strengths. It was Ms. Baker’s network of contacts, gleaned from her many years of supporting local movements in the Deep South that made it possible for SNCC to field a group of indigenous young organizers who would inspire local young people and work in inter-generational partnerships with older local leaders.

If you watched the film *Selma*, you could come away with the idea that successful community organizing is a massive protest event involving thousands of people, popular celebrities and celebrity leaders. And that such events cause important changes in policy.

The signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) was not only the culmination of the Selma march, but of decades of work by local people living in the apartheid South. What injected some urgency in the political consciousness about the need for this legislation was the work done the year before at the 1964 National Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City. SNCC had organized around the idea of a third party in Mississippi. This strategy was supported by SNCC’s excellent research department which found ways a third political party could challenge the seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation. At the convention, leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party presented hard evidence of systematic and brutal denial of their voting rights and asked to be seated instead.

The televised testimony of Mississippi Afro-American leaders at the convention portraying the brutality of voter suppression caused hundreds of citizens across the country to send telegrams of support to their representatives and the White House. By the time the Selma march came along, there was already ferment among some Democratic Party politicians about the issue of seating segregated party delegations and/or seating elected officials in Congress from locales where minorities were prevented the vote.

While the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and SNCC did not succeed in Atlantic City and the all-white delegation was seated, this disciplined, evidence-based, persistent

organizing led to changes in how state delegations would in the future be seated at Democratic Party Conventions. New rules stipulated that state delegations must represent the demographics of their states in reasonable proportion. While it would take more than a decade, all white male delegations would disappear from the roll-call of state delegations at future Democratic Party Conventions. At SNCC's 50th Anniversary reunion in 2010, Attorney General Eric Holder made it clear that the challenges made at the 1964 Democratic Party convention paved a path to the 2008 election of Barack Obama. He added: "Thank you for your service to our country".

The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act was a victory we *all* had been working on for years. Yet often forgotten was what happened after the bill was signed. Signing the bill did not wipe out the fear of reprisal at the hands of racist law enforcement or the Ku Klux Klan against those seeking to register to vote.

It did not wipe out the fear of losing one's job if you are seen going to the courthouse to register. After the Selma March, someone still needed to do the door to door work to encourage people to register to vote. Someone still needed to threaten legal challenges when local whites ignored the VRA.

Photo© Maria Varela-Lowndes County



1966

Someone still needed to bail out the civil rights workers who continued to be arrested, jailed and often beaten while trying to implement the VRA. Those 'someone's' were often SNCC organizers, who had suspended their college education to put boots on the ground to work with local leadership in the war against voter suppression.

Unfortunately today in the 21st century, this war needs to be fought again in many parts of this country. SNCC's accomplishments with these organizing methods are especially important because they were done largely by teenagers...many of whom were not even old enough to vote. In this era, while 18 year olds could join the military and die for their county, they were

not allowed to vote until they were 21.

The accomplishments of the youth-led civil rights movement is obscured by the historical narrative that “Rosa sat down, Martin stood up and Lyndon signed civil rights legislation.” And part of the reason why so few people know the real Rosa Parks and Ella Baker and almost everyone knows Dr. King is largely because leadership models are still based on the Patriarch.....the dominant male model. For centuries, history was largely defined by the actions of great men. For this reason it is called the ‘Great Man Theory of History’. Look it up. It’s real.

In this 21st century, we might have a chance to create enduring change for justice and equity if we can have an “ordinary men and women” theory of history. Such an outcome would empower broad swaths of people to exercise leadership styles distinct from the ‘great’ leader: In my experience, an empathetic person who can build trust among the reluctant is a leader. A person who is a natural networker is a leader. There are people who lead through their hands, those who lead with creative innovations, those who wrap up, clean up and follow through. These types of leaders often can attract others who are doers...rather than talkers. In my experience, that kind of leadership is gold. Too often we dismiss these kinds of essential leadership abilities and look for the charismatic speaker or the powerful personality. Young people today have been sold a bill of goods that social change requires a charismatic leader. When the events in Ferguson hit the headlines, it broke my heart when I read that a young resident told a reporter that Ferguson was hopeless because “we don’t have a Martin Luther King here.”

The SNCC legacy is steeped in a consciousness that mobilization is not organizing; organizing is about listening, learning, and inclusive collaboration on strategies. Equal to the goal of seeking just social change is the goal of nurturing leadership from the bottom up that will sustain efforts over decades... if not generations. And yes, the charismatic leader and the large protest event can play important roles in movement building; but they are not the primary tools in the tool box.

SNCC’s legacy isn’t all perfect. We, like any organization had our divisions....some of them deep. Hope is what stitched us together. With hope we believed that change would come once our government and U.S. citizens learned about the savage effectiveness of apartheid in the South. But after Atlantic City, when the evidence, testimony and tears of black

Mississippians were dismissed, many of us lost our hope. And when a quilt's stitches begin to fray.....over time it disintegrates. Learning how to negotiate these predictable victories AND defeats is essential in the sustainability of any future movements for social justice.

THE JOURNEY EVOLVES

My work with SNCC was to assist field organizers with training materials they needed in local campaigns. As I was also a SNCC photographer, these materials included film strips. In 1965 some SNCC staff were attempting to organize a union of plantation workers in the Mississippi Delta. They asked if I would create a filmstrip about how the United Farm Workers Farm Organizing Committee (UFWOC) organized in California. I met with UFWOC leader César Chávez in Delano, California to acquaint him with the work being done in Mississippi among farmworkers. At one point in our conversation he swung his arm in a wide arc over surrounding farm fields and said: "see all this land... this should be ours. Remember what Emiliano Zapata said: 'Those who work the land, should own the land.'" I didn't realize it, but this was a prescient moment for me as I was beginning to realize how important land ownership was in the Afro-American South. César's words would stay with me for the rest of my life.

I showed the resulting filmstrip in Louisiana at a meeting of black farm workers from all over the South. Flickering up on the walls were photographs of Mexican-American union organizers and farm workers being assaulted by white growers and hauled away to jail by white police officers. When the strip ended, there was a long silence. In the audience was an older gentleman who had worked all his life on a plantation in Tennessee and was now homeless, evicted as a result of his participation in the civil rights movement. He rose up and with tears in his eyes said "you don't know how it feels to know that we are not the only ones." It was as though his life's burden of racist oppression was now shared with other people of color. Racism was no longer only white on black.

While the black power slogan started by SNCC resonated nationally and black pride consciousness ascended, it caused me to further explore my own culture and brown pride. Remember that in the 60's there was no internet or Facebook. The news of any movement activity would rarely find its way into the daily newspaper or the nightly news unless it involved scandal or celebrity leaders. To learn about the Chicano movement we had to rely on word of mouth, movement newspapers, occasional conferences

and sometimes traveling theatre groups. Meeting César and spending a couple of weeks with the young UFWOC leaders in California while shooting the filmstrip introduced me to a movement similar to SNCC but distinct, built on Chicano cultural values, history, and leadership.

Often it is said that the Afro- American civil rights movement was a template for all other 20th century civil rights movements among people of color. This is simply not accurate. Modern Afro-American, Chicano and Native American movements were not sleeping giants that suddenly woke up in the 1960's. Where ever there is oppression, there is resistance... and it comes in many forms. For example the Chicano worker movements of the 1960's and 70's stand on the shoulders of the massive strikes in the 1920's and 30's of immigrants farm workers, miners, steelworkers, and factory workers. They laid the groundwork for union organizing in the latter 20th century.

In a similar way, the Chicano Land Grant movement simmered for decades in isolation, as heirs of these land grants attempted all sorts of actions, from filing law suits to blocking roads, cutting fences and burning signs. The existence of this movement only came to national attention in 1966 when Land Grant activists in Tierra Amarilla attempted a citizen's arrest of the district attorney who had local people rounded up and taken to jail for participating in a land grant meeting. Land Grant activists decided they were within their constitutional rights to effect a citizen's arrest of the D.A. for interfering with the right of citizens to assemble. As the arresting party ascended the Tierra Amarilla Courthouse steps, a trigger happy novice state policeman pulled his side arm and the subsequent skirmish resulted in what is called 'the courthouse raid'. Most of Chicano America found out about the land grant movement when the 'courthouse raid' was covered by national news outlets.

In 1967 I was wondering where I should go from Mississippi. SNCC was broke and the funds I had always been able to raise for my work were coming to an end. I had invitations to work at a Chicano movement radio station in the valley in Texas and to work with the farmworkers in California. Then one afternoon the phone rang. I picked up and Julian Bond was on the other end. He asked me to come to Chicago to the National New Politics conference because he had invited Reies Lopez Tijerina, the leader of the Southwest Land Grant Movement. Julian, worried that Tijerina might not feel comfortable... "I don't even know if he speaks English" he said. "Would you come and act as a sort of hostess to help

Reies navigate the conference?”

It was once more a life changing invitation. I went to the conference and spent a good deal of time with Tijerina and when several months later he asked if I would come to New Mexico and work for the Alianza del Pueblos Libres, I said yes. This choice resonated more deeply with me than offers from other movements. I learned from the black farmers in the South how owning their own land gave them more independence to participate in the civil rights movement. Black farmers were often the first to participate in voter registration campaigns and other movement activities. While there certainly was retaliation for their participation, at the very least they could feed their families from their land. And ultimately land ownership could be the foundation for building family and community assets. The persistent loss of black-owned land over the 20th century has not only deepened the poverty and accelerated the migration of black families from the South but left those remaining with few resources to build a diversified black-owned asset base.

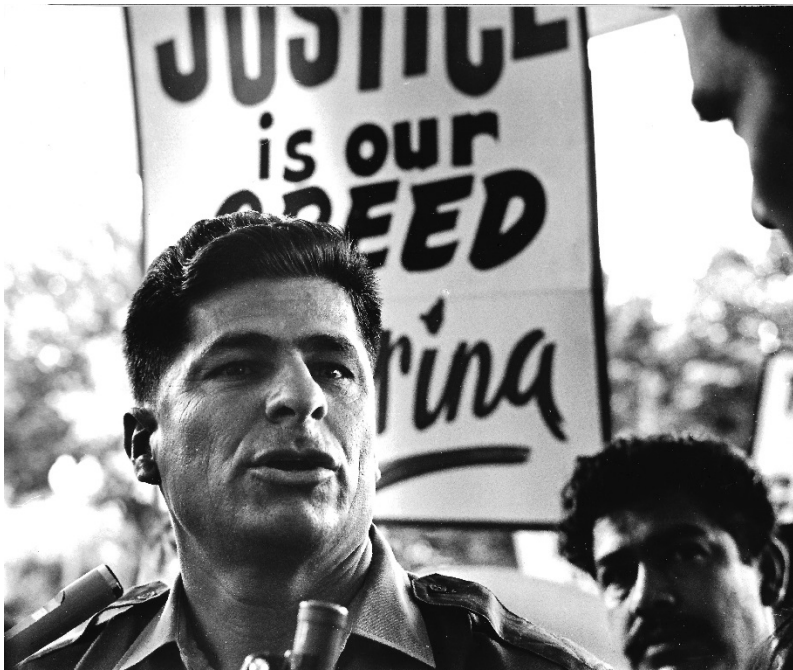
My belief was growing that if something was not done to maintain the land and water rights of Mexicanos in the Southwest, then more of our home lands would be lost just as Afro-Americans were losing theirs in the 20th century and Native Americans had lost theirs over the last three centuries. Even though the majority of African, Mexican and Native Americans live in urban areas, the small land base held by our respective peoples represents our homelands within this nation. Within these homelands are deep taproots of our cultures where the stories, medicinals, ceremonies, music, dance and art find their continuation and replenishment. Afro-Americans, Native Americans and Mexicanos are, at origin, ‘people of the land’. It is my belief that we have no future in this country or on this continent if we lose our homelands.

These beliefs resulted in my spending the next forty-five years working with land based cultures, Chicano and Native Americans in the Southwest to help families stay on the land and make those lands more productive. Together, our work to restore old livestock breeds, seeds and methods of agriculture resulted in creating the cutting edge of the ‘local and natural foods’ movement which now has a firm hold in U.S. popular culture.

I accepted Reies' invitation and moved to New Mexico in the winter of 1967-68. My job description was uncertain until I realized that Reies wanted me to be his liaison with the Afro-American Civil rights movement. His strategy was to build his and the Alianza's reputation through media coverage and by affiliating with nationally recognized movements. The theory was that building this reputation would earn him a way to present to the World Court the US Government's abrogation of land rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The Alianza was a top-down organization run by a charismatic leader. While most of the Alianza membership was in rural New Mexico, he generally held court in the Albuquerque headquarters. Similar to itinerant preachers, he supported his family and the organization with money donated from land grant heirs. I remember seeing broken down old men, with patches on their jeans and boots and battered cowboy hats come into the office and approach Tijerina humbly as they slipped him one or two \$100 bills. I was astounded at the following he had and people's commitment to support him. The financial support given Reies was any movement's dream: to be almost wholly supported by members provides financial stability and freedom from outside influences.

Tijerina was a masterful speaker. He made grown men and women cry as he validated their land grant struggles and demanded the return of common lands as a rallying cry for justice. He was a consummate researcher, traveling to Mexico City a number of times to dig through the archives at the Archivo General de la Nación.



In order to do this, he had to teach himself 16th and 17th century Spanish. Few people were as learned as he about the various types and structures of Spanish and Mexican individual and community land grants.

Reies inspired César Chávez of California, Corky Gonzales of the Denver based Crusade for Justice and Texas-based

Photo © Maria Varela 1966

Jose Angel Gutiérrez of La Raza Unida Party (among other Chicano movement leaders), who would have deferred to him as the leader of a pan-southwest movement. All felt strongly that Land Grant movement was essential to the restoration of justice and equity in the impoverished southwest and west. But there was no strategy to involve these and other important Chicano movements to create national recognition and political pressure for the return of the common lands. I offered to help as an organizer. He ignored the offer; it was unimportant to him.

Reies did appoint me as liaison between the Alianza and the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. The Poor People's Campaign represented a growth in Martin Luther King's vision from primarily working on Afro-American civil rights to working on economic equity in multi-cultural collaborations. In early meetings that SCLC convened with diverse movements' leaders, Martin struggled with the objections raised about the direction of the march and SCLC's unilateral decisions. But he did start to listen and tried to accommodate the issues. And then he was assassinated.

I honestly don't know how the SCLC staff continued the work of pulling off the Poor People's Campaign. I knew those who were closest to Dr. King and they were shattered...traumatized that he was no longer there. Through their grief, they somehow made parts of the campaign work. But when SCLC leadership was negative to or

respond to suggestions from Chicano and Native American leaders for demonstration targets, we didn't for them to lead. We organized our own events at DC government agencies representing the issues important to Chicanos and Native Americans,

In my opinion The Poor People's Campaign was Reies lost credibility with other Chicano leaders for a of reasons I will not go into here. He also failed to traction with Afro-American movement leaders.

The fault was on both sides: Other movement leaders understand the socio-cultural and historical framework of the land grant movement, especially the



slow to
waiting
where
variety
gain
didn't

Photo © Maria Varela Poor Peoples March. Department of the Interior. 1968

impact on thousands of people of losing the common lands and Native American lands.

Conversely, Reies didn't understand the socio-cultural and historic framework of the Afro-American and Puerto Rican movements' much less urban Chicano movements in the Southwest.

REFLECTIONS

***T**wentieth century movements demonstrated that when there is oppression, there is resistance. Each movement rippled and receded due to external forces and internal weaknesses. Some will say these movements accomplished some change but eventually failed. There was no failure...only experiences to teach new directions. The Navajo Origin Story includes Changing Woman (Asdz^{éé} nádleehé) who never dies. Like the four seasons, she is constantly reborn. Movements have similar lives. Nothing is ever wasted in the human experience. Resistance to oppression will gather up the shards of historic resistance efforts and form them into movements that will re-birth change.*

Each movement's impact can often be measured by how it built on socio-cultural assets, participatory democracy strategies and most of all, the development of diverse inclusive leadership styles. And, in my opinion, one of the more important legacies of these movements are those veterans transformed by their engagement who bloomed into mentors of succeeding generations. Many of us in our elder years want to be there for emerging young leaders... as Ms. Baker was for us.

***I** see the immigrant community as helping fuel 21st century movements with its tenacity, creativity and courage. I am inspired by those undocumented students who purposely sought detention where they could organize those unjustly detained to obtain releases. And then there were those who designed creative and courageous lobbying efforts for the Dream Act. One inspiring success was their organizing for the passage of the California Dream Act which helps undocumented students with college tuition costs. Creative use of the media in such actions as occupying politician's offices (Senator John McCain among them) hunger strikes and long marches may have raised the consciousness of some ordinary citizens...but more importantly these strategies welded solidarity and leadership skills within the dreamers' ranks. These students have inspired President Obama to initiate Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (**DACA**) which allows certain undocumented immigrants who entered the*

country before their 16th birthday and before June 2007 to receive a renewable two-year work permit and exemption from deportation.

Just as SNCC's history included divisions around the message and strategies, so too has this nearly a decade long campaign of undocumented youth survived divisions. There are many other parallels between these two movements including the fact that many 1960's civil rights activists, because of their age, could not vote but were working so that others could vote. Today's undocumented activist who are engaged in pushing for fair and inclusive immigration policies, also cannot vote. They have moved from strategies that would primarily benefit them as individuals brought to the US without papers, to strategies that would benefit a broad swath of undocumented people.

They have experienced transformations that will, when they are victorious, strengthen and renew this country.

In the 20th century, this country needed us to confront forces undermining democracy and make the Constitution live up to its promises. Now in the 21st century, this work remains to be done not just by immigrant youth, but all those engaged in resistance to injustice. And for those of you who are activists today, as we were yesterday, I thank you for your service to our country.

*From a speech given at Evergreen Valley Community College, San Jose California.
September 23, 2015. All Rights Reserved*