# SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—Gathers 50 Years After It Started: A Report on the Reunion

by Mike Miller

Held April 15-18, 2010, at Shaw University, the nation's oldest historically Black institution of higher education, SNCC's 50th Anniversary Reunion Program notes on its cover page, "This conference was planned in strict accordance with SNCC's principles of decision-making. Therefore, we don't really know what will happen when until it does. An attitude of flexibility mixed with humor will help a lot." In fact, the reunion was tightly organized, and ran on time. That was all the more remarkable because more than 1,000 attended an event that many of its planners originally anticipated to be attended by a maximum of 500. Indeed, it was an earlier myth about SNCC that it was disorganized...though it became that in its later years.

## SNCC's History

For those who don't remember, or don't know, SNCC was born in April, 1960 when leaders of the sit-in movement convened at Shaw University at the invitation of legendary African-American organizer Ella Baker, then the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's acting Executive Director. SCLC hoped the student movement would become its youth arm. Baker advised the students to form an independent organization. They did, and wrote a major chapter of the Deep South Civil Rights Movement history from 1960–1965, then opened the debate over black power when SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael made the slogan popular beginning in 1966.

## More than 1,000 attended.

In 1961, after the Southern Black student movement exploded with sit-ins and Freedom Rides, a small group left their college campuses to become full-time "Field Secretaries," using community organizing tools to attempt registration of Black voters in places where racist power depended on its exclusion. When SNCC threatened to self-destruct in an internal debate over direct action versus voter registration, Ella Baker's wisdom came to the rescue, and the organization decided to do both.

Working with the most marginalized low-income Black people in counties where they were as much as 85% of the population, SNCC's patient door-to-door canvassing led to the formation of grassroots organizations across the "Black Belt." In Albany and rural Southwest Georgia; Selma and Lowndes County, Alabama; Cambridge, Maryland; Danville, Virginia; the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, and more, SNCC organizers built or strengthened local movements for racial and economic justice and voting rights. The best known of these efforts resulted in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and its 1964 challenge to the seating of the all-white delegation at the Democratic Party National Convention, and rejection of a so-called "compromise" that offered MFDP two at-large delegates. While the rest of the Civil Rights Movement urged acceptance of the compromise, MFDP's delegation, with SNCC support, overwhelmingly rejected it.

Mississippi's 1964 visibility resulted from a Summer Project that invited 800+ Northern volunteers into the state, and the state murder of two of them along with a young local Black. Within SNCC, the Project was controversial because it threatened to overwhelm the still-fragile grassroots relationships SNCC had been cultivating, and because the mostly white volunteers would replicate historic patterns of deference to whites. CO-INTELPRO infiltration, and bitter internal debates on black power and

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## Some Big Losses....

We dedicate this issue of *P&R* to the lives and fulsome careers of:

**Benjamin Hooks,** long-time head of the NAACP from 1977-93 and the first black FCC Commissioner, who passed away in March; **Wilma Mankiller**, the first woman to lead a major Native American tribe (the Cherokee), who passed away in April; **Dorothy Height**, the legendary president (for 40 years) of the National Council of Negro Women, who fought hard and successfully for racial and gender human rights, also an April passing; and our close colleague **Bill Taylor,** who passed away in June (see p. 5).

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its meaning, the role of whites in the organization, the nature of the U.S. government, and more all combined to unravel SNCC; it disbanded in 1970.

## The Reunion

The reunion held within it all the elements of SNCC's history: deep feelings of comradeship ("a band of brothers ['and sisters' was later added], a circle of trust,"), humor, rich music of the gospel tradition, creative singing and song-writing of SNCC's Freedom Singers, bonds between Black and white SNCC workers that remain strong today, militant nationalism, Pan African Marxism, anger at what remains undone in the struggle for racial and economic justice. And there are people who don't talk to one another because of struggles 50 years ago or conflicts in planning this gathering. The SNCC experience was an intense one. As I reflect on it, it was an extraordinary privilege to work for five years in a Black-led organization dedicated to racial and economic justice and democratic participation by poor and illiterate Southern African Americans.

SNCC's accomplishments were celebrated in speeches and panels. Former SNCC Field Secretaries, who are now nationally and internationally recognized leaders, spoke, as did other notables—the best-known of them: John Lewis, Member of Congress and a Majority Party Whip.

Rev. James Lawson, nonviolence teacher of the Nashville Movement; Julian Bond, past Chairman of the NAACP Board; Bob Moses, initiator of the Algebra Project, which uses experiential learning methods to teach math to low-performing middle- and high-school students; Bernice Johnson Reagon, scholar and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock. Each was greeted with thundering applause.

***An internal debate was over direct action vs. voter registration.***

The 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Voting Rights Acts resulted from the combination of earlier NAACP legal and local action, and CORE (Congress Of Racial Equality), SCLC and SNCC direct action and voting rights work in the South. SNCC added two crucial ingredients: When others were willing to compromise or were intimidated by violence, SNCC was not. CORE stopped Freedom Rides because of violence in Alabama; SNCC picked up the banner and continued the Rides into Jackson, MS where the Riders were all jailed. SCLC did short-term mobilizations designed to arouse white support in the North and put pressure on Congress and the President. SNCC dug deep roots in the Black Belt counties, and stayed over the long haul. During the 1960s, SNCC was denounced by the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, and by many liberals and mainstream media (including the *New York Times*). At the reunion, Attorney General Eric Holder, representing the Obama Administration, paid homage to SNCC's courage and intelligence, saying, "There is a direct line between the sit-ins and President Obama in The White House." The City of Raleigh, State of North Carolina and President of Shaw University all gave greetings, and Shaw donated its facilities for the reunion.

One of the purposes of the reunion was to pass on experience to a younger generation. Student leaders and activists from Black and other colleges and universities in the South were present, as were the children of SNCC activists. The Young People's Project, an outgrowth of the Algebra Project, had a strong presence. A number of children of SNCC veterans spoke, expressed respect and love for their parents' generation, and demonstrated their own commitment to activism.

More than 20 panels and other sessions examined a multitude of questions, including: nonviolent philosophy; the shift from campus activism to full-time fieldwork; organization-building; national response to SNCC; Northern support work; the larger vision beyond civil rights; black power; Pan African Marxism; the role of whites; the role of women; SNCC's political impact; how SNCC evolved; the role of MFDP in reshaping the Democratic Party; why SNCC ceased to exist; organizing poor whites; SNCC's influence on Black art; current imprisonment of substantial numbers of young Black men; and more.

Additional plenary and general sessions included Harry Belafonte, Dick Gregory, Danny Glover, SNCC photography and SNCC music. A book party included 35 authors, most of them former SNCC staff. And a film festival featured documentaries and docudramas telling SNCC's story.

## Reviving SNCC?

Harry Belafonte's lunch talk, 45 minutes without a single note, took SNCC to task for indulging in self-congratulation. His remarks were well received, and he got several standing ovations. But conference planners rejected any idea of reviving SNCC and decided young activists in attendance would draw whatever they found useful from the reflections on the past. Some informal talk in the hallways and hotel bar expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of focused attention on past mistakes, why they were made and how today's activists

### New on PRRAC's website

Proceedings of the 4th National Conference on Assisted Housing Mobility, June 10-11, 2010 (papers, powerpoints, and a new annotated bibliography on housing mobility).

"A Prescription for a New Neighborhood? Housing Vouchers as a Public Health Intervention," by Kami Kruckenberg and Philip Tegeler.

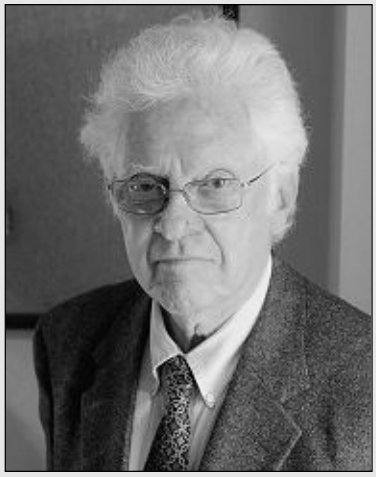
and organizers might avoid them. SNCC's veteran field secretary Charlie Cobb once said to me, "We never figured out how to be an organization of organizers." Two clear and competing views might have been resolved had SNCC remained rooted in the communities where it worked. By 1965, that rootedness began to erode. An early 1967 Executive Committee meeting debated what organizing was and could not resolve the question.

My view is that with the first group to drop out of school to become full-time workers in the Black Belt, SNCC's core mission became building Black people's power guided by justice values. It lost sight of that mission, and lost its rootedness in local people. The two losses are deeply intertwined; I think they were a result of deepening despair at the pace of change in the South, and the murders of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and dozens of lesser-known Black leaders.

**Conference planners rejected any idea of reviving SNCC.**

For me, the SNCC experience was one of the most meaningful of my life. It, and my subsequent work directing an organizing project for Saul Alinsky, infused my subsequent 45 years as a community organizer. As it was a privilege to be part of SNCC, so it was a privilege to be part of the reunion. One would have to travel far and wide to be in the presence of such a smart, joyful, committed and talented group of people. ❑

## William Taylor, 1931-2010



What a truly major civil rights force we have all lost with Bill Taylor's death. As a new Yale Law graduate in the fall of 1954, Bill began his legal career working directly with Thurgood Marshall, Robert Carter and Jack Greenberg at the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund in the days immediately following the *Brown* decision. Bill played an important role in many early LDF cases, especially the Little Rock litigation in 1957, where he had key drafting responsibilities in the briefs that led to the Supreme Court's decision in *Cooper v. Aaron*. After working with Americans for Democratic Action and some of Joseph Rauh's efforts, Bill joined the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960s and collaborated closely with key members of the Kennedy White House staff on civil rights issues. He eventually became general counsel and staff director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, and directed research that undergirded much of the Kerner Commission Report's findings on the devastating effects of racially isolated schools. Bill also litigated many key school desegregation cases, including the Wilmington (DE), Cincinnati and Ft. Wayne cases, and notably, the long-running St. Louis case that sent tens of thousands of central-city students into St. Louis's suburbs and white students into St. Louis schools. He was, for many decades, a key and trusted counselor to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, where he helped lead the legislative struggle to enlarge the Voting Rights Act in its 1982 reauthorization. He also helped form the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights and became a principal influence on the Congressional shaping and reshaping of Title I and No Child Left Behind. More recently, Bill was an active member of the National Coalition on School Diversity. Bill's reports and writings graced the nation's preeminent law journals but also found their way into advocacy journals, and he taught law for years at Catholic University and Georgetown University Law School. His 2004 book *The Passion of My Times*, told much of his life's story with candor but essential modesty.

And of course, Bill was one of PRRAC's founding parents—a constant, faithful, fair but critical guide for all the rest of us, and a wonderful friend. Bill was a great spirit who never relinquished his quest for equal rights, present, as always, at our most recent, Spring 2010 board meeting, where he listened with interest to others' accounts of their initiatives, readily shared his own Washington insider's take on the unfolding Obama Administration, and asked for copies of new articles and reports on civil rights issues. He was a lover of jazz and tennis, and of his wife Harriett, his life's companion, who died in 1997. We will miss him greatly.

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