

## Time to Get Ready

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*Once Zuni (my husband, Lorenzo Zuniga Jr.) and I lived in a different country than our young daughter, Sabina. Zuni enlisted in the Marines in the mid 60's and did two tours in Vietnam. I served as a field worker for SNCC between 1963 and 1968, working first in Alabama and then in Mississippi. When I moved to New Mexico in 1968, there were few people with whom I could share my movement experiences. The exception was Vietnam veterans, especially those of color. We had each faced death. We had seen racism in its most lethal forms and felt let down by this nation's complicity. For many of us, our respective experiences in the 1960's separated us from this nation. The Star Spangled Banner brings no hand to heart. Our view is from the vantage-point of a country within a country. This other USAmerica is made up of people who recognize that assumptions of privilege bestowed by skin color or wealth belong to a few at the expense of the world's many. And that we live in this world to do something about it.*

*Sabina, a brown-skinned, brown-eyed, long-limbed woman, was 'bi-national' during her teen years. While she saw the chasm that exists between the few and the many, she was a tolerant and trusting soul who seemed color blind. Now in her late 20's, while still much more tolerant than her parents, her feet are planted firmly in this 'other country'. Part of the reason, she tells me, is what she learned from us, her parents and 'the incredible people I met growing up...the SNCC veterans as well as Latino and Native American activists and artists.' But I think what sealed her citizenship in this other country was when she acted on what she learned from all of us. She has used her artistic talents to work with 'at risk' youth, immigrant women, low income and sometimes homeless middle school students to bring their anger at injustice into powerful performance pieces that give voice to those at the margins.*

*Our journey to this 'other country' is different, but also the same. It involves moving beyond one's comfort zone and taking risks. I hate taking risks. But, the richness of my life and whatever contributions I have made to the world are, at root, because of taking risks. I write this to better understand for myself why I took this journey. And I write to share these insights with the generations coming up. Like Charlie Cobb (SNCC veteran) once said in a poem:*

*“Ever danced out on a limb?  
it doesn't always break  
and sometimes when it does  
you fall  
into a grassy meadow”*

## **Swing Down Sweet Chariot and Let Me Ride**

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, my companions, an older black woman and her daughter and I had left a SNCC 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 in front of the semi, yet going fast enough to shake off the Chevy. Once in front, the trick was to stay close to the semi so the Chevy could not come in between. The truck slowed way down and so did we.

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. 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 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.

My "chariot" got me into more trouble after the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March. Fourteen year old June Johnson, from Greenwood had slipped out of Mississippi to participate in the Selma march. Her mother wanted her back home, NOW! Stokely asked me if I would take her. I gave him the 'Is this a good idea?' look, which usually made him at least stop and think. But Stokely was more afraid of Mrs. Johnson's wrath than my look. He said he'd be in real trouble with her if he didn't get June back home. Never mind the trouble that June and I could get into.

And trouble we did. Right over the Mississippi state line, driving well under the speed limit, we were pulled over by a state patrol officer. The Packard's automatic load-leveler was broken, leaving its trunk riding low. The officer ordered: "Open the trunk". It was empty. It didn't matter. I was arrested for "speeding" and spent the next three days in the Meridian, Mississippi jail staring at the graffiti on the cell walls. (*"Billy left me and that's why I'm here"*.) Resourceful June found her way back to Greenwood.

Terrifying encounters such as these became 'normal' to those of us working in the movement who were new to the South. They had been 'normal' for generations for those born and raised under southern US apartheid. As civil rights workers, we had to be prepared anytime, anywhere to walk the killing fields. We learned a variety of responses to danger: sometimes to fade into the background, assuming local accent and dress, sometimes to emotionally play dead in hopes the stalker would lose interest or sometimes to do something so bold as to catch him off balance, enabling flight. We learned how to overcome the paralysis of fear and developed finely tuned survival senses we never knew we had.

For example, one Sunday afternoon in the fall of 1965, Willie Ricks, Stokely Carmichael and I were coming back from a meeting in the Delta in my 'new' chariot...a 1959 Buick roadster. I was trying to get them to the Jackson airport to catch an evening flight back to Atlanta. All of a sudden, the Buick lost power and began sputtering down the highway. We agreed that I would try to find someone to fix the car and they would look for a safe place to stay (this being shortly after Ricks and Carmichael had been propelled into the headlines as architects of "black power"). I was in my usual SNCC guise....an unremarkable dress with 'going to

church' shoes. My approach to survival was always to attempt to be un-noticed. But the highly noticeable sputtering, punctuated with back-fires down the main highway in Sunflower County called for a survival strategy that would have to be created 'on the fly'. Ahead I noticed some young white men working on their cars at an otherwise closed gas station. I drove up and putting on my best southern accent, breathlessly explained how I was "just rushin' to pick mah Daddy up from the airport and how he would be just SO upset if ah didn't get there on time."

With patronizing, knowing grins, the young men popped the hood, clustered around the engine, found and replaced a cracked spark plug. Gushing gratitude (which at this point was heartfelt) I went looking for Ricks and Carmichael who, not having found a place out of sight, were grimly walking down a dirt road back towards the highway. They quickly jumped in the car and we sped to the airport, almost unwilling to believe in our luck.

### **The Roots of Resistance**

How did this young, naive, middle class woman end up working in the Civil Rights movement and living in the South for nearly 6 years? My roots of resistance ran deep into the rich soil made up of family, spirituality and personal identity. Growing up, we moved so often, (five times by the time I was nine), that I would joke I was from a '52 Pontiac station wagon. Our family became our tribe, nation and state. My father was a Mexican national born in the state of Zacatecas. During the Mexican revolution his father brought the family across the border to San Antonio, Texas to wait out the war. But the revolution persisted and because of severe anti-Mexican sentiment he moved the family to New Jersey where my father met my mother (of Irish-German descent) in high school. My mother's mother worked in an embroidery factory in New York before she married and was eventually to die of tuberculosis when mom was eleven years old. When in her 80's, my mother told me that she had only recently remembered how, after her mother died, her childhood memories were laced with hunger.

Ethnic identity came primarily from the stories told when our tribe gathered and uncles recounted the adventures and pranks of *Los Rodriguez-Varelas'* childhood in Mexico. Grandfather forbade the use of Spanish in the house because children of immigrants were punished for speaking their language in the classroom. Yet even years later, phrases and songs in Spanish would still escape. I don't remember anyone from my mom's side of the family telling us stories. Thus the Mexico stories loomed large, filling the gap and sealing the identity of my tribe.

I once volunteered in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade that I was Mexican and the angry response of the

teacher frightened and shamed me. “No you are not! We’re **all** Americans here,” snapped Sister Rosita, her piercing eyes boring through me as I tried to disappear into the old wooden desk. While her reaction silenced any further discussions of identity, it only reinforced my allegiance to my tribe. It was an internal identity that, along with other personal information and feelings, I had learned to keep to myself.

While we were a traditional Catholic family, my spiritual growth came largely from participating in the Young Christian Students organization in both high school and college. The Young Christian Students(YCS) had its roots in the Belgium worker-priest movement of the 1930’s and the European Nazi resistance in the 40’s. By the 1960’s YCS was a world-wide student movement especially concentrated in Africa, Latin America and Europe. Many YCS leaders were involved in independence movements and resistance efforts in the Third world. Several were disappeared or killed. We were shaped by liberation theology which holds that as Christians our vocation is to be actively engaged in dismantling racism, economic injustice, anti-democratic forces and unjust wars.

After graduating from Alverno College, I joined the national staff of the Young Christian Students in Chicago. We made \$7 a week and the organization took care of housing and expenses. My job was to organize YCS chapters on college and university campuses. I also represented YCS at summer conventions of the National Student Association. There I met the founders of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In late 1961, SDS founders Al Haber and Tom Hayden invited me to meet with them in NY to discuss the interest of SDS in creating an ecumenical effort to write a student manifesto critiquing US social and foreign policy and lay out a vision of participatory democracy to achieve new policy directions. Looking for more diverse views, Hayden and Haber wanted to involve progressive religious groups and thus invited me to represent YCS at the Port Huron conference in June of 1962. Among the leaders I was drawn to was Sandra Cason (Casey) Hayden who had worked for the Young Women’s Christian Association in Texas and was married to Tom Hayden.

Several months later, I was lying in the bottom bunk of a dormitory at a Catholic college in Green Bay Wisconsin, taking a break between meetings with student leaders. I was agonizing over a decision that needed to be made. In my suitcase was a letter from Casey that was several weeks old. She asked if I would consider leaving YCS to work with her at the Student Non

Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) headquarters in Atlanta. I couldn't make up my mind. This request to join the SNCC came at a time when I was organizing Catholic students in the North to support freedom rides and sit-ins in the South. These demonstrations were real life illustrations of how Christians should apply the gospel. Yet, when called, I just could not bring myself to answer. It was too scary. Stories of people beaten, jailed bombed, pursued by the KKK and sometimes killed were vivid in my mind. Stories of flying cockroaches (that got into your hair) were equally as terrifying. I don't know what I was more afraid of: bugs or beatings. For weeks I struggled with the decision. My gut said no. My mind was undecided. My conscience prevailed: How could I, an YCS staff member, continue to exhort students to support fellow students in the South if I refused to go? In the summer of 1963, I boarded the bus to Atlanta.

Plans to work with Casey in the Atlanta SNCC office were detoured, however, when I was asked by Connie Curry and Paul Potter of the National Student Association (NSA) to help staff a leadership summer school in Atlanta for black youth across the south. These high school students had spontaneously organized sit-ins in their rural communities in response to demonstrations organized by college students in urban areas. SNCC and NSA helped fund and organize the summer school because of their concern about the students 'safety. Many were targeted for beatings and jailing almost weekly. The leadership program included black history, non violent resistance and organizing principles to enhance leadership skills and provide students with effective organizing strategies. SNCC leaders were brought in as role models.

SNCC Field Secretary Frank Smith , complete with a battered straw cowboy hat, arrived at the leadership school from Selma, Alabama in a beat up brown station wagon with hay caught in its side trim. As he questioned me about myself, he suddenly focused in on descriptions of my YCS work. At the time, I wondered why he was so interested. Frank spoke of the Selma movement and how the terrorism of the white power structure was extremely successful in preventing the black community from organizing voter registration. One key community leader was a young French Canadian, Father Maurice Ouellet who was the pastor of a black Catholic parish. Bernard Lafayette, director of SNCC's Central Alabama Project had been unsuccessful in persuading black ministers to open their churches for voter registration meetings. He was finally introduced to Father Ouellet, who because of his support of the civil rights movement, agreed to

open St. Elizabeth for voter education meetings and adult literacy classes. SNCC wanted to find ways to support Fr. Ouellet's commitment. When Bernard showed up at the summer school later that week, he and Frank hatched the idea of my going to Selma to work with the pastor. They assured me that I would be underground the whole time. The people in Selma were used to missionary types working out of St. Elisabeth's. Up 'til then, the plans were for me to work in Atlanta. Going into the field had never been presented as an option. It was too dangerous. I had been willing to put my toe in the water...but didn't want to jump in all the way. However both Frank and Bernard were compelling in their belief that this was an essential move to strengthen the Selma movement. Bernard commented: "none of us are Catholic. His bishop and some in his parish have doubts about his involvement. He needs support from his own." Once again, my conscience reluctantly made the decision. They handled the discussion with the Atlanta SNCC office and made calls to Father Ouellet.

In October 1963, I found myself, with great trepidation, on a Delta DC 3 to Selma. Coming towards me on the tarmac was a tall, charismatic priest whose belief in the movement came as much from his heart and soul as from his head. *(He paid for the heart he put into the Selma movement. Throughout 1964-5, Lowndes County Sheriff Jim Clark escalated the violence and retaliation on the black community. The internally conflicted, the black community tried, not always successfully, to pull together in the face of this deepening repression. Ouellet was unable to affect either the white or black community leadership. He ended up in the hospital seriously ill from bleeding ulcers. But the dearest payment of all was his removal in 1965 from St. Elizabeth's by Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen because of Ouellet's involvement in the Selma civil rights movement.)*

Saint Elizabeth's became the meeting place for me to connect with SNCC staff. That fall, Worth Long, SNCC field secretary from North Carolina, had taken Bernard Lafayette's place. Our first meeting is etched in my memory. Worth came to the back door by way of a sidewalk edged with riotously colorful flowers surrounded by a deep green lawn with 100-year-old shade trees. But the look on his face was in grim contrast to the surroundings on that beautiful fall day. His body was tense and his face frozen like an infantryman walking through a minefield. I opened the door for him. As he stepped into the room, the mask splintered. His face lit up in a warm smile. He didn't know me from Adam. But the parish hall was sanctuary.

Worth and I devised a literacy project geared toward the twenty-one-question voter registration test required by the State of Alabama. The project would recruit and train African American college students to come to Selma and teach literacy in black churches and homes. The summer of 1964 was our target date. It was understood that the literacy test for voter registration was not the main barrier to black people voting. Literate people including African American teachers were flunking the test. We believed that if enough people could read well enough to take the test and all were flunked by the county clerk, it could lead to a successful class action suit.

Part of my research on literacy programming included tutoring Mrs. Caffee, an older woman referred to me by Father Ouellet. Twice a week at Mrs. Caffee's house, we began reading lessons with *The Bible*. It was her favorite and only book. However since she had memorized most of it, it was hard to distinguish what she was reciting from memory and what she was reading as a result of our lessons. While she did want to learn to read, she really wanted someone to go fishing. And she found a fishing partner in me. We would sneak away to a small pond west of Selma, her favorite place to catch bream. Sometimes Mrs. Caffee would point out what looked like a weed to me. She would tell how it could be used as a medicine or maybe as a tonic that could conquer that lazy feeling that came with spring. I learned a lot more from Mrs. Caffee that I think she ever learned from me. Through teaching, fishing, and visiting, I began to get small insights into this rich culture of the Deep South with its persistent traditional African practices.

In preparation for the Selma project, I spent the fall of 1963 researching existing literacy materials. Within a very short time, I realized those materials would only make the problem worse. Written by whites about white life, they were framed in simplistic, childish wording. During the NSA-SNCC summer leadership program, I had seen African American students eyes shine with heads lifted proudly when they read stories of accomplishments of African civilizations and African American heroes. If SNCC was going to develop a literacy program that would not just teach reading but build pride and hope, materials rooted in black culture and history would have to be created from scratch.

At the same time the Selma Literacy Project was in the planning stages, Bob Moses and others in the SNCC leadership were planning a volunteer project in Mississippi for the summer

of 1964. It would target students from the top schools in the nation and bring ‘the influential US’ into the feudal South. To some in SNCC, it didn’t matter what the volunteers did. Their presence would open the jaws of segregation. If white kids were beaten, jailed or even killed, then perhaps the United States would finally notice its apartheid.

I was among those in SNCC who did not support the Mississippi summer project. As I struggled with the logistics of the Selma Summer Literacy Project, where only four black volunteers would be involved, it seemed madness to think about managing and protecting nearly 1000 white volunteers *and* the local people endangered by their presence. But most of all, I feared the impact of volunteers on the emerging black leadership within the communities where SNCC worked. SNCC’s philosophy of organizing was, in a nutshell, “let the people decide” We believed that the best solutions to mobilizing people and solving local problems would come from those whose voices were not usually heard. People were used to preachers and teachers speaking for them. It often took intensive work before ordinary people began to raise their voices and speak for themselves.

Could we expect this nascent local leadership to oversee or work in a peer relationship with the more articulate and affluent northern volunteer, whether white or black? And while a local project might be able to absorb one volunteer without disruption, what would be the impact of several volunteers? By the time race, class, ethnicity, and urbanity were factored in, the summer project seemed like chaos looking for a place to self-destruct. From my point of view, common sense dictated that the project be scaled down and tested on a smaller basis.

But logic yields to the inexorable forces of history. 1964 was a presidential election year. Dismantling segregation required more than fielding volunteers to focus national attention on southern apartheid. New civil rights laws and federal interventions were needed to protect voter registration efforts. Utilizing summer volunteers, SNCC proposed founding the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), a majority black party open to whites in direct challenge to the all white Mississippi Democratic Party delegation at the national convention in Atlantic City. The idea quickly found support both among local communities and northern supporters. It would bring the struggle north, providing an opportunity, (we thought) for our liberal allies to overcome the Dixiecrats ability to maintain apartheid at the congressional level. While we weren’t staffed

up or adequately funded to handle the project, clearly this was an idea couldn't wait another 4 years.

The Mississippi Summer Project went forward at the same time that the Selma summer project hit the ground. What was remarkable about this era was how young people with little or no experience could materialize raw ideas into concrete projects. Equally remarkable was that women in SNCC were supported in taking leadership roles. When initially I was destined for a traditional woman's role in the Atlanta office, that destiny changed when Frank and Bernard had the idea that working in Selma was more important. I had many doubts, but drew my strength from their belief that I could do this. When I developed a proposal to fund the Selma project, I had to bring it to Jim Forman, SNCC executive director and his assistant director Ruby Doris Robinson for approval. Ruby Doris scared me. She was a tough, brusque and non-nonsense African American woman. To my surprise, when I presented the proposal, she championed it through the approval process and continued to support my work in SNCC. In these early years, the support of SNCC leaders for men and women to translate ideas into action resulted in the piloting of innovative programs that would influence the fields of policy, education and the community development all over the country for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>.

By early spring of 1964, I had raised funds for the project, recruited four black students Silas Norman, from August Georgia, Karen House, from Washington D.C., James Wiley from Gary Indiana and Carol Lawson from New York. With some help from innovative adult educators in the North a literacy training program was drafted for us to test. We held two week-end training sessions in the North and one week-long session in Tuskegee, Alabama to prepare teaching methods and materials. By the time the four students arrived in the middle of June, we were ready to schedule test classes.

Two weeks into the program, Lyndon Johnson signed 1964 Civil Rights Bill which included the desegregation of facilities serving the public. Unbeknownst to me, the staff decided to celebrate by going to the local white-owned Thirsty Boy for ice cream. After they were refused service, Sheriff Jim Clark strode in with cattle prod in hand. They were immediately arrested and put in jail. Since there wasn't anyone in the SNCC office, I was going to have to drop my cover to get them out. Screwing up my courage, I put on my most feminine summer dress and went down to the jail. If I hadn't been so afraid, it would have been almost enjoyable

to watch the expressions on the guards' faces as they tried to figure out who this light skinned girl was and why she was there. Getting nowhere, I left. The next couple of days were spent coordinating release efforts with the Atlantic SNCC office. SNCC bailed out the staff days later, but the literacy work ground to a halt. Because of their arrests, the staff and I had become targets of the sheriff Jim Clark and his posse. We could no longer hope to test the literacy program without endangering participants.

Angry about how they were treated in jail, the students began spending most of their time at the SNCC office working on demonstrations and mass meetings. James Forman, executive director of SNCC, invited Silas to join SNCC staff. In the minds of the students, the literacy work became irrelevant as they faced the outlaw sheriff Jim Clark. (Silas Norman eventually became Alabama Project Director for SNCC.) Testing the literacy program blew up because it didn't matter to the racists whether we stood in their face in demonstrations or quietly tutored someone to read. All of our actions were assaults on apartheid. Our attempts to create an orderly, sequential way of challenging the literacy tests disintegrated. But it almost didn't matter. Direct action and the violent responses by segregationists resulted in the passage of the 1965. Voter Rights Bill which included provisions to outlaw literacy tests.

### **Radicals to the Roots**

The radicalization of SNCC was foreseen by our god mother, Ella Baker, who once said: *"We are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause."* While she was godmother, the midwife of this radicalization was the Democratic Party and liberals who put politics above the law. As we mobilized during 1964, most of us working in the black belt south still believed that the United States Constitution would require the Federal Government to intervene quickly and massively to end segregation in the South. I, for one, looked up to the political leaders of this country and believed that once they understood the situation, they would not leave us defenseless as we labored to bring the rule of law to the feudal South.

But 1964 irrevocably broke the faith between many in my generation and mainstream USAmerica. The complicity of the FBI in shielding the murderers of summer volunteers Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner broke the faith. The federal government's refusal to protect voter registration workers organizing to form a *legal*, integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to

challenge the illegal all white Democratic Party, broke the faith. The 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City broke the faith; lawfully elected delegates from the MFDP were unlawfully refused delegate status. And the gatekeepers withholding these seats were not the racist Dixiecrats. They were liberal democrats, union leaders and the old guard 'Negro' politicians who couldn't or wouldn't grasp the amount of blood and daily terror that had gone into this magnificent expression of grass roots democracy. Heroes were toppled; trust in the system was shattered. Reforming moribund, corrupt institutions would not get to the roots of the problem of racism and poverty in this country. Going to the roots brought many of us to a radical perspective.

My 'citizenship' in the other USAmerica was sealed. I don't remember ever asking myself after Atlantic City, or the chase down the Interstate, or the jailing in Meridian "What am I doing here?" My initial indecision had disappeared. There seemed no place else to be but in this other country. In the mainstream they believed they lived in a democracy: heroes were 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 career or, for women, a good marriage.

In the 'other USAmerica' it was a reverse image. Our leaders were African American men AND women. Our heroes were local people who began the process of dismantling this country's system of apartheid and forced the nation to begin to live its Constitution. Their lives and economic security were at daily risk. Their spirituality brought the Old and New Testament alive as they faced the possibility and reality of homelessness, torture and even death because they stood up for their beliefs. In this USAmerica, we got down to the roots of an authentic life: sacrificing safety, security and even life itself for one another.

By the end of 1964, the stakes had been raised: the beatings, bombings and spilled blood equally fed the blood lust of the segregationists and roots of resistance. In February 1965 in Marion, Alabama State Police 'rioted' attacking a crowd that had peacefully assembled to hear a SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) minister speak. Twenty-six year-old Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot and killed while attempting to protect his mother from being clubbed by the State Police. A march was called for from Selma to Montgomery. Local youth along with some civil rights workers assembled at Pettus Bridge on March 7<sup>th</sup> preparing to make the 50-mile trek to Montgomery. Blocking the bridge was Sheriff Clark's posse and a contingent of heavily

armed, mounted State Police who gassed and beat marchers mercilessly. CC chairman John Lewis sustained a fractured skull. Fifty others were hospitalized. Although expected, Martin Luther King had not shown up.

Outraged at the carnage of 'Bloody Sunday', SNCC staff came in from all over the region. Pressure mounted to initiate a second march to Montgomery. SCLC returned to Selma. On the morning of the second march, as I stood at the door of Brown's Chapel, I was struck by the fact that coming up the steps were mostly middle aged and elderly black men and women. Listening to them, it became apparent that they were angry and ashamed that the children had taken the beatings for protesting the denial of the vote to adults. I remember one woman in particular. No bigger than 5 feet tall, she appeared to be in her 70's. She wore a black overcoat with flimsy 'going to town' shoes and brought a thin cotton bedroll tied up with her toothbrush and umbrella. That was all she brought for a march that, if we made it across the bridge, would go on for days. I don't remember ever seeing her before at any of the mass meetings in Selma. My guess was that this was her first time coming out for anything. She came for the children. And she seemed to really believe that she was going to survive that wall of mounted police and walk the 50 miles to Montgomery.

While people sat in church, prayerfully preparing themselves to march, the SCLC leadership was huddling around how NOT to march. . A federal injunction had been handed down against the second march. Martin King would not disobey a federal injunction. The Johnson administration did not want to march to go forward. They appeared to believe that another blood bath would create more militant public opinion and jeopardize a voter registration bill that Congress could buy into. SCLC was proposing that the injunction be lifted and federal protection provided for the march to avoid a blood bath. None of this was resolved the morning the second march was scheduled. The church was packed and hundreds of people were outside, expectantly awaiting the start of the march.

Then King took the pulpit. He exhorted the crowd to rise up and march, prayed to God for protection and led us out the door toward the bridge. Once at the bridge, he stopped and told us all to kneel and pray. SCLC staff then ordered us to turn around and return to the church. None of us knew that this was the plan. None of us knew why we were being turned back. Stunned by this arrogant manipulation, I stood outside the church watching angry locals confront

SCLC leadership about turning the march around. One man finally said in disgust, “I’m going to get my gun” and disappeared into the crowd.

Angry as we were with SCLC, two weeks later many of us from SNCC went on the “approved” march to Montgomery. There was no other place to put all the simmering rage, frustration and powerlessness that begun with the murders in Mississippi of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, hardened in Atlantic City, left us despairing with the murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson, and enraged us at the Pettus Bridge in Selma.

Two days after Bloody Sunday, three white clergymen who came to Selma to demonstrate were attacked and beaten by local whites. One, Reverend James Reeb, died two days later. Viola Liuzzo, another white protester from the North, was shot and killed while driving to Selma from Montgomery at the end of the march. Finally, **finally**, USAmerica noticed. Yet we watched cynically as the President sent a plane to bring Mrs. Reeb home to Boston and sent flowers to the family of Mrs. Liuzo. The mother of Jimmy Lee Jackson, the black victim of racist violence, was ignored. If the MFDP experience in Atlantic City was the Baptism of our radical ness, Selma was our Confirmation.

### **Mississippi: “We’re Not the Only Ones”**

By 1965, SNCC projects expanded across a four-state region, as did my work. The Selma literacy project evolved to one of providing organizing materials for movement staff in the region. As Mississippi was the center of the region, I moved to Tougaloo in the winter of 1965. While I had seen poverty and violence in Selma, I was unprepared for the extremes of violence and poverty in Mississippi. Or maybe I was finally immersed in the reality of this place.... this other country. To keep sane, I wrote poetry:

***“mississippi winter.....***

*is*

*black-body choked rivers*

*that fertilize each spring*

*thick lynching trees*

*reaching with stark fingers*

*into cold brilliant dawns.”*

***“mississippi winter***

*is*

*like last night where*

*two were found  
dead  
in a bed where damp,  
50-year-old cotton quilts  
refused to get warm  
and instead became  
a frozen-cotton death sheet.  
born in a cotton field,  
worked 70 years in cotton fields,  
and, finally,  
to die under cotton.*

In addition to the political organizing, SNCC and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) staffs were also organizing co-operatives and farm workers' unions. I helped staff in Holmes County put together a manual on organizing local elections and worked with organizers in Batesville to develop a filmstrip and booklet on an okra farmers' co-op they had organized. Because some SNCC staff were attempting to organize a union of plantation workers in the Delta, I created a filmstrip in consultation with Caesar Chavez and other farm worker leaders on how they organized the United Farm Workers Union in California. Continuing my interest in developing reading materials portraying African American heroes, I persuaded Fannie Lou Hamer to tape several conversations for her autobiography "To Praise Our Bridges".

These materials all required photographs. I could find nothing in the published world that showed black people taking leadership to change their communities. In pursuit of strong and appealing photos, I nagged SNCC photographer Bob Fletcher endlessly about accompanying me to the communities where I was working. Finally he asked, "Why don't you take your own photos?" Dumbfounded, I replied, "But I don't know how." "Well, learn!" he said. "Matt Herron in New Orleans trains photographers for SNCC."

Matt Herron was a student of photographer Minor White, who had been mentored by Ansel Adams. All around Matt's studio were photography books about Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and other photographers who in the 1930's and 40's had captured dust bowl refugees, migrant workers and the rural poor in Appalachia, the Deep South and California. I never thought of myself as capable of creating such compelling images. All I wanted, I thought, were pictures showing "how to" for the organizing materials. But in the dark room, these ghostly

silvery images challenged me to see differently. The end result was a body of photographs: some were immediately useful in books and filmstrips and others years later, would be included in national and international photo exhibits documenting these times.

The photographs did more than help communities to act. They opened up a view on the world to many who had never traveled outside the region. Father A. J. McKnight, an African American priest who founded several southern cooperatives invited me to a meeting in Louisiana of black farm workers from all over the region. I showed my Batesville Okra Co-op filmstrip and the one about the unionizing efforts of farm workers in California. Flickering up on the parish hall walls were photographs of Mexican American union organizers and field 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 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 racism was now shared with other people of color. Racism was no longer only white vs. black.

### **Black Power Through My Lens**

My experiences teaching literacy and supporting SNCC staff’s organizing efforts in local communities laid the groundwork for my eventual support of SNCC’s transformation from an integrationist to a black power movement. In Selma, I came face to face with the terrorism of Southern segregation. I also witnessed the social customs southern segregation required in black-white relationships. Black people much older than me could not look me in the eye or call me by my first name. “Yes ma’am, no ma’am,” was said with eyes on their feet. I wondered: how could integration result in black people defeating the mental and physical violence of racism? Every assumption and institution in southern society was founded on the belief of the ‘inferiority’ of the African American race. My doubts about integration as *the* solution were beginning to grow.

Many chroniclers of the movement ascribe the origin of the black power phenomenon in SNCC primarily to northern, urban-raised African Americans. But SNCC’s growing insistence on black self-determination and power was seeded by the persistent resistance found in the

southern black experience, fertilized by encounters with overt racism in the South and, equally important, by the covert racism exhibited by some of our ‘allies’. In late 1965, Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer shared with me the conclusions she had reached:

*When we elected our (Freedom Democratic Party) representatives to go to the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, we learned the hard way that even though we had all the law and all the righteousness on our side—the white man is not going to give up his power to us. We have to build our own power. . . .*

*The question for black people is not, when is the white man going to give us our rights, or when is he going to give us good education for our children, or when is he going to give us jobs. If the white man gives you anything, just remember, when he gets ready he will take it right back. We have to take for ourselves. (from To Praise Our Bridges © 1967)*

By the winter of 1965 as pressure built towards the “Black Power” ideology, I believe we were emotionally running on empty. Marches, beatings, protests, murders and counter demonstrations began to suck the life out of the organization. Local work was suffering and some local leaders felt abandoned by the organization. Funds were beginning to dry up, as SNCC was perceived as more militant than the other civil rights groups. Internally SNCC was conflicted. In addition to Black Nationalism vs. integration, the organization’s leadership was divided about supporting local programs, the role of those whites who decided not to go home after the summer of ’64, instilling more discipline, and prioritizing the issues we would speak to nationally.

The transformation of SNCC was set in motion at a December 1966 staff retreat in upper New York State where a discussion was forced on whether white staffers should vote or not. While contradictory to the ‘one man, one vote’ ideology of SNCC, the proposal resonated. Empowerment meant not having to ask for a vote from a white person to make a decision. The ensuing strife over the rest of the weekend began a fundamental transformation from an organization which valued participatory democracy and was driven by local community work to

one driven by the ideology. The programmatic creativity that had connected SNCC to its rural grass roots was virtually abandoned.

Coming to terms with my Mexican American identity, I wasn't going to ask permission or seek approval from either blacks or whites of what I knew I was inside. As my work was determined by local organizers and supported by my own fundraising, it would go on no matter how anyone voted in SNCC. I remember passing a note to Stokely saying that I felt SNCC was a part of Third World resistance movements which I had felt a part of before even joining SNCC. Since SNCC was already a black controlled organization it would come full circle with limiting the vote to black staff. I envisioned those of us who were not black remaining in technical assistance roles where, at least to me, voting was not essential. He looked over at me and nodded.

As the meeting wound down, veteran SNCC staff left or withdrew from the debate which was then taken over by a small minority of cultural nationalists new to the organization. The discussion had gone beyond who could vote to a demand for white expulsion. A minority of the staff passed the exclusion policy. White staff members left the meeting. I stayed, as did Phyllis Cunningham, a nurse who I had known since YCS days. In my view, many of the cultural nationalist who had pushed the issue were notorious in the organization for their inability to do anything... but talk. Back in the Mississippi, the work would not radically change because of this decision.

After the 1966 staff retreat, I returned to the South to continue my work. Some in SNCC didn't consider Mexican Americans white and therefore didn't exclude me. Others working with me at the local level ignored the apparent new direction. Still others, whether aware of my identity or not, stopped speaking to me. In the darkroom, the hurt and anger was pushed to the edges and work went on.

In addition to creating educational materials, as a SNCC photographer I also had the responsibility to attend marches on the theory that the presence of cameras might protect marchers. I photographed the 1966 "James Meredith's March against Fear" in Mississippi and witnessed first hand the impact of "Black Power" on the march. Many young people who previously would not march under the non-violent ideology joined the march after "Black Power" became the mantra. The media implied that 'Black Power' was imposed on the march

by urban-raised black militants. Through the lens, I saw it differently. Mirrored in the eyes of these youth was a strength and pride that had been freed from within. For many on that march and many who followed it in the media, “Black Power” would bolster a quest for black empowerment that would eventually materialize in building alternative institutions rather than begging for integration into existing failing institutions. While SNCC’s hands-on leadership in local communities would wane, “black power” influenced many local leaders over the next decades to build alternative health care centers, schools, businesses and financial institutions. At the same time, the synergy of these ideas of empowerment influenced the direction of many Latino, Native American and Asian organizations which developed innovative social, educational and economic programs rooted in cultural values and practices. And while many of these programs failed, they still stand as models, creating a legacy from this era where people took their identity and their community back into their own hands.

### **Passport to the Homelands**

My identity strengthened as SNCC, under the ideology of black empowerment, networked internationally with other movements in the Third World. During this period, groups of SNCC workers traveled to Africa. Stokely Carmichael and others went to Cuba and Charlie Cobb and Julius Lester visited North Vietnam. As they recounted for us their experiences, we were made to feel welcomed by and connected to other revolutions across the globe. Between 1965 and 1967, SNCC also reached out to other movements of color in the United States. For example, two SNCC staff Marshall Gans and George Ballis, were financially supported to work with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Worker’s in California. SNCC also lent cars and citizen band radios to the predominantly Mexican American farm workers’ union.

In 1967, the leader of the Southwestern Hispano Land Grant movement, Reies Lopez Tijerina, was invited by SNCC to the New Politics Conference in Chicago. Julian Bond called me in Mississippi to ask if I would come to Chicago to hostess Reies, “So he would feel more at home among us.” Meeting this charismatic land grant leader was the beginning of my education about Spanish and Mexican land grants and how the US Government and land speculators had stolen the grants from the *Mestizo* (mixed-blood Indian and Hispanics) Mexicans who had lived for hundreds of years in the region.

Impressed with SNCC leadership, in the fall of 1967, Reies invited the organization to send a delegation to *Convencion Nacional de la Alianza Federal de los Pueblos Libres* a ‘treaty-signing’ summit of Native American, Mexican American and African American leaders to be held in Albuquerque, NM. This historic meeting also included black activist Ron Karenga from Los Angeles, Thomas Banyaca, a Hopi Indian leader and other Mexican American leaders from the Southwest. The SNCC delegation was made up of Ralph Featherstone, Willie Ricks, Freddie Green, Ethel Minor and I. After the convention, the SNCC delegation traveled three hours north to the Tierra Amarilla Land Grant in the northern New Mexico mountains. Willie Ricks and Ralph Featherstone posed on horseback as I snapped a photo of them with borrowed gun belts criss-crossing their chests and rifles held high in the air.

The visit to New Mexico intensified my thinking about where I wanted to go next. My work was finishing up in Mississippi. Even if I wanted to continue, many key funders discontinued their support because I did not renounce the decisions of the New York staff retreat. While considering alternatives, I received a letter from Reies Tijerina inviting me to come to New Mexico to work with him. He remained deeply interested in maintaining connections with the black civil rights movement and wrote about how minorities divided and fighting among themselves “helped the Anglo maintain his power structure.” He ended the letter, “It would be very nice if you could come . . . and spend some time with your people.”

There were also invitations from a Mexican American organization in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and from the United Farm Workers in California. But Mexican Americans in Texas and California had been stripped of most of their land and now worked for those who owned it. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my years helping improve working conditions while the land stayed concentrated in the hands of the wealthy. Certainly a worthy cause, but I was tired of piecemeal solutions to economic inequity.

The New Mexico struggle was and is, about land. In Mississippi toward the end of SNCC’s work in rural communities, we were beginning to realize that loss of black-owned land would economically disfranchise black people in the region. I observed how ownership of land affected the way a people organized and defended themselves. Land owning black farmers in Holmes County took firm control of County politics and elected the first African American Mississippi legislator in 1967. Farmers in Lowndes County, Alabama were among the founders of

the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, also known as the Black Panther Party. It was the first African American third party in the black belt south. The Klan didn't ride as freely in these counties as they did in areas where people didn't own the land. Churches and homes were well guarded by armed farmers determined to protect what they owned. I began to feel that owning land was a key requirement for defeating poverty, taking control of community and reclaiming culture.

My belief was growing that if something was not done to maintain the land and water rights of *Mexicanos* in the Southwest, then our home lands would be lost just as Native Americans had lost theirs in the last century and African Americans were losing theirs in this century. 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 the taproots of our cultures where the stories, medicinals, ceremonies, music, dance and art find their continuation and replenishment. African Americans, Native Americans and *Mexicanos* are, at origin, 'people of the land'. We have no future in this country or on this continent if we lose our homelands.

In 1968, I closed up my house in Mississippi and moved to New Mexico to work with Reies Tijerina. At the same time, I began to join writing with my photography. Several stories with photographs were published in Chicano newspapers in the southwest, the Liberation News Service and La Revista Por Que, a magazine headquartered in Mexico City. In 1969, I photographed the start up of an agricultural co-op and clinic in the Tierra Amarilla Land grant for the northern NM newspaper El Grito. Leaders of the co-op asked me to help them raise funds for these efforts. I agreed, but only if I could to stay in Albuquerque to continue the journalism. At five AM one September morning the phone rang with the news that their recently purchased clinic had been torched by hirelings of Anglo ranchers and businessmen who were threatened by the land grant movement=s success at obtaining the clinic. It was a flashback to the South. I decided to move to this community high in the mountains of northern New Mexico and work full time for the La Cooperativa Agricola and La Clinica del Pueblo.

Over the last 30 years, together with my neighbors, we have founded three non-profits that have created health care, social services and economic development programs which help keep families healthy and on their land. While some programs struggled and failed, some leaders burned out and internal divisiveness at times seemed to prevail, the outcomes over these

last 3 decades speaks to the resistance and resilience of the community. We changed the way health care was planned, delivered and staffed in this isolated region. We created economic development ventures that reconnect traditional cultural and agricultural practices with modern marketing strategies. New, year- round jobs with opportunity have been created. Some residents have been able to secure college degrees as a result of their on-the-job training and work experience in these non-profits.

These efforts were not accomplished without constant struggles with the public and private sectors that still treat rural communities of color as colonial outposts in a conquered land. We have had to confront federal and state agencies, global mining and timber corporations, real estate agents, resort developers and environmentalists whose practices, policies and development strategies threaten the land, water and culture of Mexicano and Native American people in the region.

I do not view this work as repairing capitalism. Many of us in rural communities of color who have been in this work for several decades believe we are creating hybrid models that demonstrate how land based cultures can fuse traditional and modern methods of business, education and health to take care of our own, protect indigenous culture and resources and create economic security for family and community.

### **Tides of Liberation**

In my family and professional life, I'm privileged to be involved with many members of the 'Generation Y' (17-28 years old). I'm a firm believer that in the liberation movements to come, they have the potential to do better and take the movement farther down the road. This is the faith that Ella Baker had in us. This is my faith in Sabina's generation and those coming up. When she read this, Sabina commented: "You need to write more specifically about what you expect from future generations." I asked her what she thought I should expect. She said: "We need to care about future generations like you did. We need to give honor to the struggle that went before us. We need to understand that we are privileged and we owe for that privilege. And that when we do give back, a great gift is given: It is not the 'help' we give others; It is that they teach us about the real world and about ourselves in ways that could never happen if we didn't give back". My generation learned this *as a result* of our movement experience. If the

generations coming up enter the next liberation movement with this consciousness up front, they will go far beyond us.

Liberation movements are like the tides. Tides can't be forced to come in. When they do come in, they can't be stopped. Just as there will always be tides, there will always be movements. There are signs now, in the new millennium that the tides are gathering. Like nature's tides, the impending movements will both destroy and create: wound and heal. They will rise up heroes, and sometimes destroy them. They will be full of dysfunction, soaring creativity, violent rage and profound love. They will be imperfect, like family, imperfect, like life.

Time to get ready.