Political Mama

Joanne Grant, a former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was a close associate of Ella Baker. She began her career in civil rights as assistant to W. E. B. Du Bois. She is author of Ella Baker: Freedom Bound *and producer of* Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker.

> *The chief emphasis I tried to make was their right to make their own decision. . . . The only reason that I became relevant . . . was because I had lived through certain experiences and had had certain opportunities to gather information and organizational experience. . . . I have always felt that if there is any time in our existence that you have a right to make mistakes it should be when you're young, cause you have some time to live down some of the mistakes, or to offset them. I felt that what they [the students] were doing was certainly . . . creative [and] much more productive than anything that had happened in my life, and it shouldn't be stifled. . . . I must have sensed also that it was useless to try to put the brakes on, because it was unleashed enthusiasm . . . an overflow of a dam that had been penned up for years, and it had to run its course.*

Just as Rosa Parks decided one day that she was not going to move to the back of the bus, the four North Carolina students who sat down at a whites-only Woolworth's lunch counter on February 1, 1960, also decided not to move. Thus began the new challenge to the system of legally supported racial segregation that had been in existence for decades. To Ella Baker it was a dream come true. Here was the beginning of the civil rights revolution which she had looked forward to since the days of the 1930s when she had ventured from neighborhood to neighborhood listening to speeches that carried the promise of change.

Within days the sit-ins spread across the South—where segregation was not simply custom, but the law—through North Carolina, to Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, and South Carolina. Hundreds of students were arrested. They were taunted with racial epithets and often attacked by mobs of angry whites.

This upsurge was what Ella Baker had been waiting for. She received a call from an excited SCLC board member, Fred L. Shuttlesworth, who said that she must inform Martin of the amazing new development. Immediately grasping the momentousness of the event, she dutifully informed King and promptly set about the task of organizing this potential force into a cohesive one. She began to plan for a gathering of representatives from the protest areas, convincing the SCLC to put up $800 to cover the expenses of the meeting. She persuaded King to sign a

call to "chart new goals and achieve a more unified sense of direction for training and action in Nonviolent Resistance." To supplement the sit-in meeting that was scheduled for Easter weekend, April 15 to 17, in Raleigh, North Carolina, SCLC also planned nonviolence training for young people at three locations in the spring: Nashville, Mobile, and Shreveport.

Baker rushed out a follow-up letter to protesting students. Citing the courageous, dedicated, and thoughtful leadership manifested by the hundreds of Negro students who presented new challenges for the future, she urged that the "great potential for social change" called for a determination of the question, Where do we go from here?

In preparation for the April meeting Baker went to Raleigh and reached an agreement with Shaw University on meeting rooms, meals, and accommodations. Since Shaw could only house about forty people, Baker contacted nearby St. Augustine College, the YMCA, and local residents whom she had met as a student there and during her travels for the NAACP. Baker arranged to stay with a Shaw alumna who had been in the class behind her, Effie Yeargan, a distant cousin of Max Yergin, a radical theorist whom Baker had met during her Shaw days and whom she had encountered again during her early days in Harlem. Yeargan was one of the founders of the Raleigh Citizens Association, which was organized to host the students, cosponsor the gathering, and provide whatever subsidiary housing was necessary.

Having taken care of the logistics, Baker then went on to deal with policy. She began to press the issue of the independence of the students, which was to be the most important question at the meeting. In a memo to King and Abernathy, she eased into her agenda by remarking that on a trip to Raleigh-Durham she had had a chance meeting with Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation [FOR] and Douglas Moore, a young Durham minister. She pointed out that they "agreed that the meeting should be youth centered and that the adults attending would serve in an advisory capacity, and should mutually agree to 'speak only when asked to do so.' " This was to become the central issue at the meeting, yet Baker's concerns were broader: She wanted an organization to develop.

She wrote Anne Braden, the codirector of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), expressing the hope that "out of this meeting will come some workable machinery for maintaining affective [*sic*] communication between youth leaders in areas of recent and future protest activities, and a larger degree of coordinated strategy." She added that she hoped that "several work-teams of young persons can be financed for work in the South this summer. The need for developing more experienced young workers in the field of civil rights is obvious, I am sure. This may be only a dream of mine, but I think it can be made real."

Determined to make the meeting a success, Baker set about the task of identifying the leaders of the various demonstrations. She scanned newspaper accounts, contacted people with whom she had worked, and wrote to heads of student bodies. She dispatched Reverend Moore on a tour of North Carolina and Virginia to urge demonstrators to send a representative. Lawson and CORE also contacted activists. In the end over two hundred delegates attended the Raleigh meeting, as well as observers from such organizations as FOR, CORE, the American Friends Service Committee, the National Student Association, and the YWCA. Nineteen schools and colleges from the North were represented. Baker said that while the conference

was too large to be a leadership training workshop, it became "a mountaintop experience of enthusiasm."

Though the meeting was an exciting and productive one, there were problems. At the start a conflict arose over who would preside at the opening session. Baker suggested James Lawson, FOR's Southern regional secretary, who had recently been expelled from Vanderbilt University for his sit-in activities. Lawson was a leading advocate of nonviolence and had been training Nashville students in nonviolent techniques. King and Abernathy wanted Baker to open the conference, but she argued for Lawson, pointing out that he was closer in age to the students and that she was not "an advocate of nonviolence in the true sense." Baker prevailed. Her next contretemps was with the press, which she insisted be excluded from some sessions. She had, as she put it, "quite a run-in" with the reporters, but on this issue, too, she prevailed.

Soon thereafter, the major conflict came into play. This was the controversy that Baker had anticipated and had tried to prepare King for in her March memo. At issue was the question of the students' independence: Should the students set up a separate organization or become affiliated with an existing one? The leading contenders for the role of adult sponsor were SCLC and CORE. On Saturday morning Baker was summoned to a caucus. Present were King; his second in command, Ralph Abernathy; Wyatt Tee Walker, soon to become Baker's successor as director of the SCLC; and Lawrence Reddick, the SCLC historian.

The adult leaders did not seem to know where the conference was heading, so they asked Baker, who seemed to have more influence with the delegates than they did. She said that it was too soon to predict the outcome, but that it was more important to establish a temporary continuations committee "to permit the students to find their own sense of direction."

It soon became clear what the real purpose of the caucus was: to find out from her what the students might do—or more precisely, to figure out a way to coerce the students into becoming the youth arm of the SCLC. When the meeting participants began to divide up the delegations that each one would lobby, Baker dug in her heels, stating that she would have no part in dragooning delegations. Walker proposed in his calm, ministerial way that he could take care of Virginia. "Martin said he could talk to the Atlanta group and that he thought that Ralph [Abernathy] should take care of Alabama."

So Baker walked out of the caucus. She was furious at the temper of the discussion and outraged by the ministers' plans to manipulate the students. The sit-ins were, to her, the beginning of a new approach in the fight for equality. She did not want to see it coopted, corrupted, or changed. She felt that the students had something new to offer and to make the student movement a youth arm of an adult organization was a mistake. The adults had no understanding of the young people's vision. The young people were daring. They had something new to contribute. Up to now there had been no rebellion to match what had taken place after the first sit-in. She did not want this outpouring to be stifled.

Baker's departure signaled the beginning of a new phase for the civil rights movement. It was no longer to be controlled by a stodgy ministerial or bureaucratic presence. It was to be led by a new force.

The plenary session that followed was volatile. It became so tense that they resorted to, in Baker's words, "the old soothing syrup" of "We Shall Overcome" to cool things down. Angry as she was over the plan to manipulate the students, she

did nothing to prevent the maneuvering to secure votes in favor of affiliation—although she did speak out in the sessions for the young people's right to make their own decisions.

It could be claimed that SCLC had some grounds for seeking to adopt the young people. After all, it was SCLC money that had made the conference possible. It was the method of co-optation that aggravated Baker: She did not believe in arm-twisting. She did believe in the students, and in their promise.

It is doubtful that King exerted pressure on the students to affiliate with SCLC, but Ella Baker's stance was clear: Hope lay with the students. For her there was no illusion about what the ministers of SCLC could accomplish toward her goal of the development of a mass organization.

Charles McDew, an Orangeburg, South Carolina, student who was later to become SNCC chairman, said that Baker lobbied the students individually and advocated—at a closed meeting the students held without observers or other adults—the creation of an independent organization. At the meeting's end the students had established the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, made plans for continuations committee meetings, and adopted a statement of purpose, drafted by Lawson, that incorporated the principle of nonviolence, which "nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities."

> We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.
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> Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.
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> Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.
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> By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.

At the mass meeting on Saturday night King delivered the main address and Baker spoke on the significance of the conference, sounding the theme with which she became identified. The lunch counter sit-ins were about larger issues, she said; they were "bigger than a hamburger."

At the first meeting of the continuations committee in May 1960, Marion Barry, a Fisk University student who had participated in Lawson's nonviolent training sessions and in the Nashville sit-ins, was elected chair. By then the protest movement had spread across the South. There were hundreds of arrests, and violent confrontations had occurred in several cities. One of the reasons for the rapid spread of the demonstrations was the press attention they received, though Baker also felt that word of mouth was the strongest impetus: "A sister to a brother,

members of the same fraternity, girlfriend to boyfriend, or simply calling up contacts, friends asking, 'What is happening on your campus?' " More importantly, the actions "were getting results."

Baker felt strongly that the liberation movements in Africa and other parts of the world spurred on the U.S. civil rights movement. One of the most significant influences was the Sharpeville massacre on March 21, 1960. South African police fired into a crowd of eight thousand blacks who were staging a peaceful march; 69 people were killed and 180 were wounded. Here at home the failure to implement the 1954 *Brown* decision and the ineffectiveness of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 led to rising disappointment and "the developing climate of alienation of the young from the Establishment." She also pointed to the "additional impact on black youngsters of the rising independence of black people in Africa and other parts of the world."

Baker had arranged for office space for the coordinating committee in a spare room at SCLC headquarters at 208 Auburn Avenue, and she got Jane Stembridge, a Union Theological Seminary student, to become the administrator. (They soon had to move out of the SCLC space, but Baker cajoled the landlord into renting them a tiny office across the street at a reduced rent.) Throughout this formative period SCLC lent its support to the fledgling organization. King and Baker attended all the meetings, and SCLC gave encouragement as well as some financial aid.

During these early days some of Atlanta's "liberal" community criticized Baker for failing to keep the students sufficiently in check. Baker, however, felt that the students didn't need adult supervision, that "they had the right to make mistakes when they were young." Besides, she was exhilarated by the movement. To her it was "more productive than anything that had happened in [her] life." She felt strongly that it "shouldn't be stifled" and sensed, as others did not, that "it was useless to put the brakes on, because it was enthusiasm unleashed—an overflow of a dam that had been penned up for years and it had to run its course." Those who wanted to impose rules on the students wouldn't get anywhere because they simply could not communicate with them.

Nashville sit-in leader John Lewis noted that although Baker was much older than the students, "in terms of ideas and philosophy and commitment she was one of the youngest persons in the movement." SNCC worker Judy Richardson extended this judgment in an interview in 1993: "What was nice about Miss Baker is you never felt that she had a personal agenda that she was trying to put on. It was always about what is good for the organization, for black people, for whatever the larger issue was. [With] other adults you never really knew what else was hidden . . . what else they were trying to get through that they weren't talking about."

In May, after the founding meeting of the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Baker organized a meeting in the chapel of Morris Brown College. Kenneth Kaunda, a leader of what was then known as Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), spoke, primarily to the students but also to some adults who had participated in the student movement. Then Baker addressed a workshop at **Highlander Folk School** on "The Place of the White Southerner in the Current Struggle," speaking on "What Can Be Done That Hasn't Been Done?" This meeting was one of the few at which Baker appeared in "movement attire," abandoning her neat business suit for trousers and a sleeveless blouse.

In the midst of helping the students set up the coordinating group, she was organizing the second State-wide Institute on Non-Violent Resistance to Segregation and preparing for her departure from SCLC on August 1, 1960. And as if this was

not enough to occupy her, she was also soliciting clothing for the people of Fayette and Haywood counties in Tennessee who were being severely harassed for attempting to register to vote. Many had been evicted from plantations and were living in a tent city.

At the end of July Baker wrote to her many contacts in the South informing them of her impending departure from SCLC, saying: "My successor, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, is a young man of vision, and I am confident that with him the program of the Conference will expand to meet the challenges that we face in the months and years ahead." She credited the demonstrating students for the inclusion of civil rights planks in both the Democratic and Republican party platforms. Baker had promoted the idea that the coordinating committee should send a delegation to each of the party conventions and had helped draft their testimony. She pointed out, however, that "planks and promises are only good when they are followed by action. That is why we must increase our determination to get all of our families, friends, and neighbors registered."

Then, as she so often did, she quoted from the Bible: "Now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed. Therefore, we must cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light." She continued: "The 'works of darkness' are ignorance, doubt and fear; but armed with truth and knowledge, faith and courage, we can and must follow the light of freedom to complete and certain victory." At the end she offered a small prayer: "May God grant you good health and increased courage to continue the fight for human justice and freedom for all mankind." There were also personal touches in the letter: she wrote that she cherished the fellowship shared and the cooperation received and spoke of her need for rest and a cataract operation, gave her New York address, and invited the addressees to visit her if in New York in August or September. After that, she assured them, she expected to be back in the Southern struggle.

By this time, Robert Moses, who was to become one of the movement's most respected leaders, had arrived in Atlanta as an SCLC volunteer. A math teacher at Horace Mann High School in New York, he had been a volunteer in the Friends of SCLC office there, the brainchild of Rustin and Levison. Baker had not been apprised of Moses's impending arrival and no one had prepared work for him to do. Consequently, after a talk with Baker he began working in the SNCC office, where he became friends with Stembridge—perhaps in part because of their common bond as philosophy students. Moses credited Ella Baker and Jane Stembridge with getting him out of SCLC and into SNCC. "They knew I was disgruntled and gave me a way out," Moses said.

Baker soon sent Moses off on a tour of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama to convince demonstrators in protest areas to send delegates to the founding conference of SNCC, which was to be held at Atlanta University on October 14–15, 1960. Baker had returned to Atlanta from a trip to New York, where she had attended Jackie's [Jacqueline Brockington, Ella Baker's niece] wedding, to help the students prepare. There were few reporters present (myself among them), but the conference was a joyous occasion. When the delegates from Mississippi came in, they were greeted with a standing ovation. Mississippi was the toughest state, and the students from other areas, already battle-scarred, were paying tribute to the courage of the participants on the newest front.

The conference adopted the statement of purpose that had come out of the Raleigh meeting, dropped "temporary" from the name of the organization, formal-

ized its relationship to the protest areas (meaning the places where sit-ins had taken place), and voted to publish the *Student Voice* monthly. SNCC (pronounced "Snick") was to be made up of one representative from each of sixteen states plus the District of Columbia. In addition, there was to be a staff made up of field secretaries and an expanded office staff. The constitution proclaimed: "SNCC shall serve as a channel of coordination and communication for the student movement. By direction of its Executive Committee through its staff it shall have authority to initiate programs in areas where none presently exists, and to work closely with local protest groups in the intensification of the movement." In the formulation of the constitution it was decided to omit the phrase "in the South" from this paragraph, though SNCC remained a Southern-based movement. The constitution provided for voting members from other organizations, one representative each from the National Student Association, the National Student Christian Movement, and the National College and Youth Branch of the NAACP. There were to be observers from the American Friends Service Committee, American Civil Liberties Union, CORE, FOR, NAACP, SCLC, SCEF, National Student YWCA, the Southern Regional Council, and "any other group to be selected by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."

Drawn by the excitement the movement engendered, many of these observers soon became SNCC staffers. Almost anyone who had contact with the rebelling students wanted to join in some way. Some promptly signed on for the duration at the going salary, $10.99 a week. Others went back North and joined support groups.

In the fluid days of the early 1960s, SNCC's structure was altered often. SNCC meetings were round-the-clock discussions of the organization's shape and function. Baker would sit in silence for much of the time, more often than not wearing a cotton face mask to protect her against the cigarette smoke. Like her mother, she suffered from respiratory troubles.

In these marathon meetings Baker used her old technique of asking questions. "I was not too sure that I had the answer," she recalled later. But often, her questions directed the discussions. Her technique was much like that of Nelson Mandela, who had learned it from his mentor, a tribal chieftain. Mandela wrote in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom,* "I have always endeavored to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. Oftentimes, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in the discussion." Mandela always remembered the chieftain's axiom that a leader is like a shepherd: "He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind." This was, indeed, Baker's way.

Baker was a listener. Her practice was to hear everyone out and to accept ideas from even the youngest in the group—"if it was a good idea." She taught the young people in SNCC that everyone had something to give, thus helping them learn to respect each other. SNCC chair Charles McDew recalled that she would pick out a kernel that was a good idea. "Somebody may have spoken for 8 hours, and 7 hours and 53 minutes was utter bullshit, but 7 minutes was good. She taught us to glean out the 7 minutes."

This was a different way of working. Many adults tried telling the students how to behave, citing greater experience and knowledge, but this, Baker said, could not work for several reasons. In the first place, the young people were confident that there was something new about their movement, that it was innovative and

successful to a far greater extent, achieving results more rapidly than earlier attempts had done. Then, too, Baker felt that the students were exhilarated by the speed with which their movement had grown. In a sense, they were leading the adults. She was convinced that despite King's growing prominence as a spokesman, SNCC was providing the cutting edge.

Baker's prescience was confirmed early in 1961 by two significant events: SNCC's move into the rural areas of Mississippi and the advent of the Freedom Rides.

At the urging of Baker, Bob Moses had made a second swing through Mississippi in 1961. There, at Baker's suggestion, he met with veteran activist Amzie Moore, whom Baker had known for several years. Inspired by Moore and C. S. Bryant in McComb, Moses laid out a plan for voter registration.

Taking two field secretaries with him, he set up headquarters in McComb, one of the poorest parts of the state. The group began working on voter registration. Their efforts soon drew national attention because of the violent reactions they encountered.

In the meantime CORE had started the Freedom Rides. Integrated groups of students, ministers, and priests boarded interstate buses to ride from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans with an intent to seek service in terminals along the route. In Alabama they were met by violent mobs. In Anniston, their bus was burned. In Birmingham, a white mob gathered and they were beaten as they disembarked; there were no police in sight. In Montgomery, law enforcement officers stood by idly, looking on as the riders were brutally beaten.

Attorney General Robert Kennedy called for a "cooling-off period," pressuring the students to stop the rides and focus on voter registration for the duration of a round of negotiations with bus company officials and local government representatives. So serious was the effort that draft deferments were offered to SNCC workers in exchange for concentrating on the vote. Largely through the attorney general's efforts, the Taconic and Field foundations and the Stern Family Fund provided money to the Southern Regional Council, which set up a tax-exempt arm, the Voter Education Project (VEP). Headed by Wiley Branton, a lawyer from Greenwood, Mississippi, VEP made grants to voter registration efforts, distributing over half a million dollars. SNCC received only $24,000 in 1962 and 1963.

The voter registration work led to the first major controversy in SNCC. The disagreement was over whether the organization should devote itself exclusively to direct action or to voter registration. This was the most serious of the organization's conflicts because it nearly caused a split—averted only by Baker's intervention. She was not about to watch her baby, her pride and joy, be destroyed by a doctrinal dispute. During a heated discussion at a meeting at the Highlander Center, Baker abandoned her custom of sitting on the sidelines and took an active part. She pointed out that direct action was a necessary adjunct to voter registration because the resistance to Negro voting attempts would be so strong that it would lead to protest demonstrations. They could do both, she said, and this essentially resolved the issue. SNCC proceeded to set up two sections, with Diane Nash, a Fisk student and a devoted adherent of Gandhian nonviolence, heading up direct action and Charles Jones, a young minister from Charlotte, North Carolina, as director of voter registration. As Baker observed later, however, "it became obvious there was no irreconcilable difference between the two tactics." Soon Jones and Nash would themselves decide that there was no need for the two posts.

By now SNCC felt the need for a strong executive secretary. The field secretaries voiced a need for someone to take charge, to give direction and hold the organization together. It was clear, however, that they did not want anyone to tell them what to do, to boss them around or cramp their style. Because they were confident that she had no interest in becoming a "Supreme Leader," they asked Baker to take the job. She declined, saying that she believed the post should be held by a younger person. Diane Nash and the direct action group urged James Forman to accept. He agreed, though somewhat reluctantly; he had come South to get into the action and did not look forward to an administrative job. Forman was from Chicago, but he had spent some years and many summers on his grandmother's farm in Mississippi. He was teaching in Chicago when the movement called him first to Fayette County, Tennessee, and then, in August 1961, to Monroe, North Carolina, where the national spotlight was turned on Robert F. Williams, a proponent of desegregation and of armed self-defense. Williams had been charged with kidnapping a white couple. He maintained that he was concerned about their safety and had offered them shelter when they drove into the black part of town during a period of high tension.

Baker, too, had been drawn to the Monroe confrontation. Here was a standoff between a black militant and the white power structure. The situation would appeal to any person who thought that the individual had a right to stand up and fight. Baker, however, did not go during the height of the crisis, when Monroe was swarming with representatives of the news media. As usual, she held back, waiting until she felt she could do useful work, after the headline-makers had departed. "Usually you need people [later]," she said, "and not too many people go when the point of high focus has passed."

She did visit in August 1962, to be of comfort to a woman whose only son had drowned. The kidnapping trial had been postponed, but Baker made the overnight trip because, as she wrote to Anne Braden, "there are some other developments which bear looking into." But her primary reason for going was because she felt the woman "ought to have somebody to be concerned. That was all."

Forman arrived at SNCC at a crucial time. He was able to reconcile opposing forces by applying his gruff assessment that whatever was happening in local areas (known as "the field") was more important than whatever squabbles were taking place in the home office. He was able to maintain a sense of balance; in this he was in tune with Baker's drive to keep the organization focused.

If Baker was the mother of SNCC, Forman was the dad. Both were transplanted Northerners with Southern roots. Forman, though not close to Baker in age, was older than the other SNCC members, and both were forceful personalities. While Forman says of her in his book, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries:* "without her there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," there was a subtle undercurrent of friction between them.

Yet in an interview in 1968 Baker praised Forman as "the guy who made [SNCC] into an organization . . . a fighting force." She said that he "had a sensitivity about people that almost amounted to his playing a father role." The students "felt he was young enough for them to relate to, and yet, at the same time to combine that sense of comradeship with a father image."

Forman wielded enormous influence and did much to shape SNCC as it grew and changed. From the moment he stepped into the tiny SNCC office at 197½ Auburn Avenue until the day SNCC withered away, Forman was a formidable pres-

ence. While Baker and Forman agreed on many fundamental issues, their relationship was an ambivalent one. They agreed on the need for SNCC to be an organization with a structure; they disagreed on how to achieve this. Some of their differences stemmed from their ways of working. Baker, the elder stateswoman, would sit quietly in meetings without a word—sometimes for hours—breaking her silence with a meaningful question or pronouncement. Forman, on the other hand, would take charge immediately, making his proposals at the outset. Forman's proposals were often too grandiose for Baker's taste—like the 1965 purchase of a building for SNCC headquarters and a printing press. Baker was skeptical, too, of the ties to the Black Panthers that Forman and Stokely Carmichael pushed.

They did agree on the basic thrust of SNCC, the emphasis on developing the grass roots—although Forman did not have quite the same degree of confidence in the abilities of local leadership as Baker. But that may be too rash a judgment: perhaps Forman was just a man in a hurry. Certainly, he was less patient than Baker, who had been in the struggle so long. Baker, for her part, tried to adjust her goals to the timetable that Forman lived by. She respected his intensity, his revolutionary fervor, and his genius for organization; she simply wished that he would slow down.

They both felt that given SNCC's impetus it might be possible to build a revolutionary movement. Forman had a concept of building local organizational "cells" that would expand in concentric circles into a revolutionary force. Baker expressed somewhat the same idea to John Britton in 1968. Almost as an aside she referred to the Communist Party and "its cell groupings," commenting, "I don't think we had any more effective demonstration of organizing people for whatever purpose. . . . But the idea of getting small groups of people together, understanding what they wanted them to understand, and getting them organized for that—this is a good pattern."

Baker agreed with Forman on the need to push the federal government for more action on civil rights, yet she probably would not have gone as far as he did. She backed SNCC's sit-in at the U.S. Department of Justice in protest of its inaction, and she was amused and somewhat admiring of Forman's rebuff to the powers on high. (When told that the White House was calling, Forman invariably would say, "Tell them I'm not in.")

Many conflicts arose in SNCC. Baker calmly sat through the long and heated debates, only intervening at crucial moments to help bring about a resolution. One such issue was the extent of participation in SNCC by Northerners. It was obvious to many Southern students, even as early as the April meeting in Raleigh, that Northern students were more politically sophisticated, more skilled verbally. To the Southern students they seemed to be "taking over," so from the beginning it was decided that SNCC should be a Southern-based, Southern-run organization. Yet, the problem of Northern participation kept coming up, reaching its peak in 1964, when the question of recruiting hundreds of volunteers from around the country for Mississippi Summer was under consideration.

One other debate was almost a constant: organizational structure. As always, Baker felt that an organization should have regular procedures, a clear idea of who was responsible for what and to whom: in other words, a chain of command. On this point she and Forman were united. By September 1961, Forman was executive secretary, succeeding Ed King. Convinced that King was not up to the job, Baker had persuaded him to return to college. (There was clearly a pragmatic side to

Baker's nature, but it was tempered by her concern for the individual's well-being, as in this case: Push him out, but do it gently. Baker arranged for scholarship funds for King and maintained a correspondence with him over the next few years, cheering him on and forwarding money when it was needed. She had a genuine interest in helping him achieve his potential. By helping King further his studies, she helped him to grow.)

SNCC changed its structure often, partly in response to the growth of the movement, partly in response to changes in the movement's goals and direction. Between 1960 and 1965, SNCC's staff grew from sixteen to well over two hundred and its budget went from nearly nothing to over a million dollars. Such growth necessitated a change in structure to prevent chaos. By 1963, for instance, SNCC operated a fleet of about a hundred cars. Named the Sojourner Truth Motor Fleet, it had to be supervised; someone had to know where each car was, how long its lease would run, what its state of repair was. In sum, myriad details had to be handled. And this was only one of many items that cried out for a line of command.

In addition, since SNCC was based on local movements, it had to adapt quickly to changing conditions in each area. A wide range of issues had to be dealt with. Even as the fight for equal access to public accommodations (kneel-ins at churches, wade-ins at swimming pools, sleep-ins in hotel lobbies) was in motion, SNCC was already sponsoring a Christmas boycott of Atlanta stores and a struggle for black employment in Nashville and elsewhere. While there was some discernible progression from one phase of the movement to another, in actuality many forms of struggle were in progress simultaneously.

As the movement evolved, Baker's influence as a mentor was evident. Her professed aversion to the teaching profession did not prevent her from becoming a teacher—not in a formal sense, but there was no way that she could avoid this calling since she was intent on developing new leaders from among the local populace wherever she might find herself. Throughout her career she had seen that there were local people who were unhappy with their lot but did not know how to make changes. They had to be taught.

The designation "fundi" seemed to characterize her. *Fundi,* which I used as the film title for the documentary about her, is a Swahili word which denotes the person in a community who passes on the wisdom of the elders, the crafts, the knowledge. This is not done in an institutional way, a way which Baker would have rejected, but as an oral tradition, handed down from one generation to the next.

As SNCC developed, and the emphasis changed from civil rights to economic issues, there was always a need for education—workshops, study groups, training institutes. Many were set in motion by Baker, who felt strongly that a movement could not be based simply on oratory and action, but must be grounded in knowledge. When she worked for the NAACP, she had insisted on training, both for staff members and for local organizers, and she never let up on her drive to instill in organizers the need for facts to back up their rhetoric. She also recognized that the community needed educating, and this was the hard part. She helped to develop literature that could give the local community an understanding of the issues. Even middle-class, educated voters needed to be taught how their lives were linked with those who were less advantaged.

Baker had a profound influence on SNCC in this regard, but her impact in other areas was no less significant, as the minutes of SNCC staff meetings clearly show. For example, from the minutes of the June 9–11, 1961, meeting in Louisville,

Kentucky: "After discussion on [the Mississippi Project] by Miss Ella Baker, it was decided that the financial and personnel problems were too great for immediate summer commencement of this program. It was moved to table this matter until the July meeting."

But an even more powerful indication are the recollections of Charles McDew, the second chairman of SNCC: "I never told this to a soul. . . . Ella made me chairman. The meeting had been very long and you could tell there was this fight [for the chairmanship] going on between the forces in Atlanta and the forces in Nashville and the forces from Virginia, and Miss Baker said, 'Would you want to be chairman?' I said, no-o-o, not for love or money, and she said, 'Don't you understand [that] you're the only one here who doesn't want to be chairman?' She asked me if they were to elect me, would I be willing to be chairman, and I said, 'Well, I'll think about it.' The next day she asked if I had thought about it. She said, 'If you're interested in seeing that you all get something done, then you should be chairman. You owe it to yourself and the rest of us to be chairman.' We were clearly at an impasse because of all that maneuvering, and Miss Baker said, 'You are the only one here without a constituency. I mean if you want to help us, then you should accept being chairman.' I believe that she talked to other people, but I hadn't talked to a soul except Miss Baker, and, hell, I was convinced. I know Miss Baker made me chairman of SNCC, period." McDew served for the next two years.

McDew recalled that, as chair, he broke the tie in the vote on whether to continue with direct action or concentrate on voter registration. "That was one of the times she lobbied me. She said, 'If you go to Mississippi and see Mr. Steptoe, Mr. Turnbow, or Amzie [local leaders], you will see that you can't do voter registration without direct action.' "

Meanwhile, Harry Belafonte, an early supporter of the students, had invited sit-in leaders to meet with him in Washington in late June 1961 to discuss voter registration. Out of the meeting rose a vision of a student movement of 100,000 to 200,000, and a consensus was reached that "the voter registration project should be given top priority by SNCC while other direct action projects such as sit-ins, etc. be simultaneously steped [*sic*] up." In October a temporary executive committee was appointed at an SNCC staff meeting, consisting of Baker, Belafonte, McDew, Connie Curry, and two members each from the voter registration and direct action staffs. It was mandated to "work deliberately to expand and democratize the organization of SNCC, to seek the development of a functioning communications system which will clarify the nature of the movement to the country, and to provide students with stimulus and strategic information." This committee was given broad powers to define the functions of SNCC officers and staff, but it functioned only for a month. At the next staff meeting, in November, a pared-down executive committee was created. Forman had begun to establish order.

Baker's travel schedule for the summer of 1961 seemed as heavy as in her NAACP days. She went to Jackson, Mississippi, to work with Bob Moses for 5 days, then to Berkeley to attend a SLATE conference. At the beginning of August she went to Columbus, Ohio, to attend the NSA's fifth Southern Students Human Relations Seminar. From there she made a stop in Cincinnati to visit Fred Shuttlesworth's wife, Ruby, who was a great friend and had been ill. She also spent time in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Jackson, Tennessee, helping to organize voter registration campaigns.

In the midst of this she was asked to become the guardian of Brenda Travis, a McComb high school student who was being held in a reform school after she had participated in voter registration demonstrations. Baker took over as her temporary guardian and arranged for her to go to summer camp in Michigan, to which she took Brenda, and boarding school in North Carolina.

In 1961, Charles Sherrod and Charles Jones went to Albany, Georgia, to do voter registration; they spent some weeks talking with the local people in preparation for the drive. Then, on November 1, 1961, the first of the Albany sit-ins took place. Nine students sat in at the bus terminal, and on December 10 a group from the Atlanta SNCC office took a "freedom ride" on the train to the Albany railroad station and were arrested. This touched off mammoth demonstrations, which increased over the next few months. The Albany Movement was formed soon after, with William G. Anderson as president and Slater King as vice president. By the time that Baker went to Albany in mid-December more than seven hundred people had been arrested. In typical fashion Baker, away from the television cameras and news reporters, was busily noting down the needs of those about to demonstrate and go to jail. The questions she was asking ranged from "Do you have a toothbrush?" to "Have you informed your parents where you are?" to "Have you thought through the question of **jail-no-bail?**"

These were for her the essentials, what in those days was called the "nitty-gritty," the guts of the issue, the core of the problem. This was what she dealt with.

4.2 Howell Raines

Freedom Riders

Howell Raines is author of My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered. *He is a news correspondent in the Washington, D.C., office of the* New York Times. *Raines interviews James Farmer, Hank Thomas, and John Lewis in the following excerpt.*

Yes, we are the Freedom Riders
And we ride a long Greyhound;
White or black, we know no difference,
Lord, for we are Glory bound . . .

—Southern collegiate folk song of the sixties

James Farmer

He had left CORE to become national program director of the NAACP, and he watched from the sidelines as the sit-inners practiced the direct-action techniques he had tested twenty years earlier. But he would not miss the next great wave of confrontation to sweep the South. Rejoining CORE as national director early in 1961, he started it.

I was impressed by the fact that most of the activity thus far had been of local people working on their local problems—Greensborans sitting-in in Greens-