

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

The Black Panther: From Protest to Power

Clip 1 (audio) Jennifer Lawson “To Leave School and Work Full-Time for SNCC”

Jennifer Lawson: Skip forward, I go to Tuskegee and so I'm at Tuskegee. It was Tuskegee Institute, it's now Tuskegee University. And again, I am surrounded by the same circumstances that I left in Birmingham. It's a segregated world. There is all kinds of racism, threats of violence, and actual violence around - the campus is a bubble; it's a lovely little community of a bubble. Little Black businesses and everything. Right there. You leave, you go a few blocks away and it is very, very dangerous. One of my classmates, Samuel Young Jr. was killed trying to use a restroom at a gas station. So it was an awful situation right there. We students became active in the Movement and through our activism, some of us at Tuskegee, again a small group. I keep pointing out that these were small groups because sometimes people say, well my God, you all did so much, it must've been tons of you, hundreds of you. And we said, no it wasn't. There were still far more Deltas and AKAs and Capps. Ques. Definitely not forget Ques. There were far more sororities and fraternities than there were members of SNCC or members of our student activist group on campus. So we were a small group of students but we were dedicated and that we then started first working in the county and then in Macon County immediately around the school. And then we met people from SNCC and again - now Martin Luther King is marching across the Pettus Bridge, and that we then - this is the Selma-to-Montgomery March - and we from Tuskegee decided we're going to march the other way. We'll go from Tuskegee to Montgomery. And that we, so by the time King was on the Pettus Bridge, I was in jail again. And I spent a week in jail that time in Montgomery, Alabama.

Now as a Tuskegee student. But my work in Tuskegee and meeting with SNCC people was something that changed my life. I had been a pre-med student, thinking that oh I'm going to have this wonderful career in medicine and I had great internships and things. But at that moment, I began to think about, what's happening to our people. What's the future for all of us? And what's happening in our country? And can I make more of difference being a doctor or being a civil rights activist. And there so few - many many people who are going to be doctor, and probably great doctors. Now for civil rights though, it still seems there are so few of us who are willing to take that step. And so I decided to leave school and work full time with SNCC.

Clip 2 (audio) Courtland Cox “Changing the Relationship”

Courtland Cox: I started as a 19-year-old really trying to deal with the issue of public accommodations. And one of the things that I found - we spent a lot of time dealing with sit-ins and so forth, and there was a point that if segregation existed between Washington and New York. And there was - you could not go into any of the restaurants on the road from New York to Washington. And it was a great embarrassment to the United States because African diplomats were also being segregated. And one of the things that I found out that you have to be careful what you ask for. So after a lot of demonstrations, they desegregated the restaurants going from Washington to New York. And Stokely and I both lived in New York and were on our way to New York so we decided to go into one of the restaurants. It was absolutely the worst food we ever had. And after all of that effort, what we had was bad food. So we

thought that we needed to probably begin to rethink the issues and the specifics of the relationship we try to deal with.

So we now moved on to the issue of voting. And the question of - by that time I was, by the time I moved onto the voting, I was 21 years old. And did a number of things in Mississippi in terms of trying to register people to vote and as Charlie said, basically you hear a lot about terrorism in the United States. The terrorism being talked about by the U.S. Government. Basically we had terrorism here. That's what we faced. We faced terror from both state actors - that is the police - and non-state actors. Any white male with a sheet. So we had to deal in that environment in trying to deal with the issue of the vote and moving the how we were going to get people to vote because we knew if we did not get people to vote, we could not change the boss-horse relationship. We could not change that relationship. And as we got the vote, we understood that we had to organize politically. And by that time I would've been 23. And we felt that you not only had to have the vote, you had to have ways of controlling it. So we worked with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to create a political instrument to being to challenge those who denied Black people the vote in Atlantic City in 1964. And we felt, given a number of things that happened in Atlantic City, by the time I was 24, I came to the view that we really need - Black people need to have a sense of control and power of their particular relationships. Their political and economic relationships. They needed to define and they needed to be able to decide how they were able to use the vote in order to achieve the things they wanted to. So I'm just saying between the time I was 19 and 25, 24 actually, I traveled a long way which said we had to move from protest to power.

Clip 3 (audio) Courtland Cox "Boss and the Horse"

Courtland Cox: I would love everybody in this room to use their imaginations. Because I think in order to understand us and to really put yourself in the discussion, you have to imagine me being nineteen years old. I know this is hard. You have to work with it, work with it. Because, what we're going to talk about today, while the specifics of what we're going to talk about happened in the 1960s, and you have the specifics of today, the relationship that really hovers over all of this is something that we both face. When I was nineteen and when you're nineteen. And it probably can be summed up in the saying that a good friend of mine used to say that he heard in the country. And it was a Black man who would come to work and he would say good morning boss and the boss would say get the horse. Good night boss. I'll see you in the morning. That he had a relationship that was never ending. That he had a relationship that was always subservient. He had a relationship that had a lot of factors to it, but they were always - there was a boss and he has a subservient relationship. So for us, as African people, the major issue that we all face and have faced for the past four hundred years, is how do we change a relationship that always puts us at a disadvantage.

Clip 4 (audio) Courtland Cox & Charlie Cobb "Thinking Outside of the Political Box"

Courtland Cox: I mean, I think that - again go back to '64 in Atlantic City, the bounds of this whole thinking about whether we should function within the lines of the established political system were just broken at that point. When people did everything they were said to be done; we played by the rules. We did everything that was right and then regardless of what was right and what they said the rules were, basically they sided with the people who were wrong. And we said, is this the way the game is played. Well we have to rethink how we look at this world. I think it was very clear that we started thinking outside of the political box that had been established. And we started moving out - at least I did. I'm not sure about others, but at least I did.

Charlie Cobb: Well SNCC itself, all of this is unfolding after the convention challenge of 1964. And SNCC itself is struggling with its own sense of direction and its own sense of what its mission should be given the passage of the 1964 public accommodations act and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Clip 5 (audio) Courtland Cox “We Felt the Need to Rethink What We Were Doing”

Courtland Cox: After Atlantic City, it was clear to us that we were no longer going to - I mean there was no viability in trying to move the Democratic Party to do the right thing. I mean, what we saw in Atlantic City, or at least what I saw in Atlantic City, was the use of raw power to frustrate the aims of the - the legitimate aims of Mississippians. We saw how Lyndon Johnson used his power to intimidate those who might've voted to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. We saw how Congress people who were African American betrayed us. So we felt the need to rethink what we were doing and where we were going with this. So my sense is that we - it was clear that there was high disappointment with what happened at Atlantic City. We were looking for other ways to begin to organize the Black community and as we thought about it and looked at it, the possibilities of creating entities at the county level that would make a difference, that would allow people at the county levels to begin to assume responsibility, political responsibility for their own lives, really manifested itself. So I'm not sure whether we came up with the view which said we need independent parties. I mean, clearly what we saw in Atlantic City said we have to find another direction. That is clearly the case. As we saw things in Alabama, the possibilities of going in another direction presented themselves. And I think that's kind of the way the - it began to manifest itself as opposed to us just thinking, well we need independent parties. I think it kind of more organically developed. As we were searching for a way, these things presented themselves.