

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

The Black Panther: The Work

Clip 1 (audio) Jennifer Lawson “Description of Work”

Jennifer Lawson: And our work would be, we would get up in the morning, we’d go out. And we would meet with people in their homes. We would knock on doors. We’d go out in the fields. People would drop you out in the fields and you would try to be unintrusive as possible. People were working in the fields and you would walk along with them as they worked. And talk to them about what you were trying to do and what they needed and what they wanted to have happen in the county. Because it wasn’t also about us. It was about the people there were already doing. There were people who really wanted - they wanted a changed circumstance. So we then were supporting what they were doing as well. Together we would work with them. We would meet at churches. There were some pastors who were courageous enough to allow their churches to be used. And I do mean courageous because there were churches that would be burn and there were pastors and people who would be run out of town or evicted from the work that they were doing. And their families would lose their jobs and lose any income they have. So it really took courage to do these things. But we would work with them. Get people registered to vote and then we started talking about with their own political party then actually going and creating a slate of candidates; them running for office. And the potential of them then becoming the county officers.

Clip 2 (audio) Courtland Cox & Jennifer Lawson “Mechanisms in your head that would allow you to function”

Courtland Cox: And the way we got there, when we got to Mr. Hulett’s house, we had some guns in his house and as soon as they saw he had some ammunition, they backed away. You had to have mechanisms in your head that would allow you to function. And scenarios where you saw yourself always getting out alive. I mean for a lot of us, as you know - discussion with George Greene and Willie, this guy from [[unsure]], and Stokely and Cleve, and all these guys. All of them had a way of driving fast and moving. So I think in our heads the question of agility was probably the mechanism we used to probably be able to come out of these scenarios alive. That’s my sense of how we dealt with a lot of of this.

Jennifer Lawson: Although there were times when I thought that I might die with George Greene at the wheel. Over 120 miles per hour.

Courtland Cox: George would show you, he would be going down maybe 80-90 miles per hour and put on the emergency brake and spin around and go back in the other direction.

Jennifer Lawson: And that was a maneuver that he had perfected. And nowadays, I think about there was the possibility that the car could have rolled over and we could’ve all been crushed to death. But fortunately George had perfected that. He was incredible. So we did survive that. But that aura was out there. And sometimes it was - I don’t quite remember where we were when George Best who was another Tuskegee student was killed. He and another young man were in a car and we don’t know whether they were forced off the road or what. But the car overturned in a little river or something and they drowned to death. But they were killed. And so there was constantly this thing of you losing

people. You're constantly hearing about who has died, who has been killed. This sort of aura of violence was very, very prevalent to me. But I think that we - it didn't dominate our discussion though. We didn't talk about it as much. For me the discussions were for more focused on the work. With us talking about how are we going to achieve - we had concrete deadlines. We had things that we were trying to achieve by certain dates. The organizing the people; the meeting with people; the churches. That those to me were part of this sort of driving work we were doing.

Clip 3 (audio) Courtland Cox "Lillian McGill"

Courtland Cox: Tweety bird. [laughter] Bob Mants used to give her grief. She was a very, very articulate woman. Bob Mants said she used to talk a lot. But she was the kind of person that as Lyndon Johnson used to say, you always want them in the tent pissing out. As opposed to the outside of the tent, pissing in. She was able to amplify the message because she had a lot of connections. She knew a lot of people and was able to voice opinions a lot. She was very important to what we were able to do in terms of spreading the word and getting people on our side.

Clip 4 (audio) Jennifer Lawson "Accountability or you're outta here"

Jennifer Lawson: And I felt that I was working on helping to establish, within this small place, accountability. You know, I felt that it was, that if you elect the person, and this is a person of your community in a sense, the lines of accountability will be there. That you couldn't, that the white sheriff or the white tax assessor, this is not somebody you can relate to and that they definitely are sort of saying, I'm not in your interest. And that if you, though, were the person who put this person into office, that there would be this direct connection and this accountability that you would be able to remedy more easily, if then a problem like corruption or something came up down the line, that you'd be able to hold that person's feet to the fire. To say, we put you in office to do a and b, and you'd have that accountability or you're [Charlie Cobb: Outta here] outta here.