

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

The Black Panther: Political Education

Clip 1 (audio) Jennifer Lawson “Lowndes County Freedom Organization”

Jennifer Lawson: They chose the name of the organization, the political organization, was the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. The political party, the Lowndes County Freedom Party. And because the education was so awful in this state and in those places, there was a high rate of illiteracy, both in white and Black communities. So people had political symbols. The symbol for the white party was a white rooster. The symbol that the people, when they created the Lowndes County Freedom Party, then they said, “we need a mean Black cat to run that old rooster out of this county.” And that we asked our colleagues at the SNCC headquarters, which was in Atlanta - we got on the phone and called and said we need a symbol for a Black cat for the ballots and everything. She went in search of things. And one of the places that she looked, HBCU right there in Atlanta, Clark College. Their football mascot. Running Black panther. She sent us an image of their football mascot and that I used the draw things, so I would copy things and reproduce it for the ballots and stuff in Lowndes County. Posters, and I even made some billboards to tell people where to go and vote. And again using whatever we could find there. So people started referring to the party as the Black Panther Party. And that people from other parts of the country heard about these courageous Black people who are running for sheriff, running for office in this scary part of America and they too wanted to identify with the Black Panther Party.

Clip 2 (audio) Courtland Cox “You’re saying, take over the county”

Courtland Cox: But you now are not just saying register to vote; you’re not just saying engage in the political process. You’re saying, take over the county. So most people, knowing that, most people who are illiterate and probably not highly education, will be much afraid of that discussion. One. Two, getting people who have never run for political office or never even voted to say we can be sheriff or tax assessor or tax collector or probate judge or so forth - you need to tell them that this is not something that’s really, really difficult. You need to get them to say, here’s what it says in plain English that you can understand and begin to do two things. Not only put the panther on the pamphlet, but put their picture on the pamphlet so that they begin to believe and community begins to associate their picture with this position. And begin to have, in comic book style, information that is really complicated in law, but broken down in simple English, illustrated. So I mean basically, so the first set of attachments to the panther, is really around the education materials which were designed to two things. First to get the people who are running for office to see that this is something that can be done; get them to believe it; get the to be able to get their community to believe it; and to get both them and their community to see their picture and begin to reinforce and create an imagery that allows people to think this is real.

Clip 3 (audio) Jennifer Lawson “The message we were trying to convey”

Jennifer Lawson: I was a self-taught, amateur artists, so I would do these drawings and things. And when it came time - we would talk about, wouldn’t be great if we could. And I felt that oh I don’t have the kind of skills to be able to do something at that level, but I can do this. And we would then proceed and we would make these things. So we would create these booklets, these pamphlets. And create posters and other materials. And they took the place, at that time we’re talking pre-internet. I don’t know if we even had a decent typewriter back then. But we, from posters to get information out throughout the county,

then we would create this material. I would illustrate these books and then we would print them and then we would distribute them. And the largest works I did were billboards.

Charlie Cobb Billboards for like the roadside.

Jennifer Lawson: Yup. Roadside billboards.

Courtland Cox There's a picture of one.

Jennifer Lawson: There's a photograph, I have forgotten who took it, but there's a photograph of - a couple of them had been photograph and immortalized in photographs. One has a young man from I think Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, standing next to it with a gun to guard the billboard. And these were the "Pull the Lever for the Black Panther and Go Home!" And the go home was the message - we were trying in terms of safety, because we were very concerned about violence on election day. And we were trying to get people not to hang out down around the courthouse or anything but to really go home. Vote and go home. So that to avoid any undue violence. So that was the message that we were trying to convey with that

Clip 4 (audio) Jennifer Lawson & Courtland Cox "We just made that up"

Jennifer Lawson: There were discussions that we would have. I think that we worked very collegially and collaboratively to sort of say, it would be useful if we had something that could talk about the process, and could talk about all of the process beginning to end. We would then talk about, Courtland would then outline, like well what if we then described it this way, and we would then try to sort of just think through how then to shape it into the kind of dialogue that we had heard. So we were trying to reflect what we heard people saying and the way that people there talked and articulated these same issues and topics, and so we were trying to reflect back what we were hearing from them. And the illustrations were ones where I would just try to just highlight the main points of that discussion and that Courtland would weigh in on, well what if we made this the main point here on this particular page to really strengthen that. So it was that kind of process, but we were really trying to reflect in many ways, even with the things that were based on Minnis' research, reflect what we were also hearing around us everyday. Because remember that we were at that point out in the fields constantly, and we're talking with the people. Or even there, next door to the Jacksons, we're interacting with the people around us, so we really wanted it to be materials that would communicate easily with the people with whom it was intended.

Courtland Cox: Yeah, I agree with that. I think that was for the stuff, the information around the various offices, but the book "Us Colored People," Jennifer and I made that up totally out of whole cloth. [Laughter] Really, I forgot about that. I said the only thing that we had at, to start with, the only thing that we had to start with was the statement of this woman in Mississippi: you know, "us colored people," and that's what we called it. But basically, again, that reflected totally what we thought should be said, but using Jennifer view saying how would we, how should that book reflect the way that people think and talk about stuff. So I mean, and fortunately, you had a woman who was a sharecropper in Mississippi making that statement, so it was translatable, but even in Alabama, we had to make the changes. So we had, and notice, back to this whole radical speech discussion, it wasn't until the end--no, no, the way we did it, in terms of trying to bring in the whole concept thing, is that we named the guy Mr. Blackman. You know, so we wanted to talk about race, but we didn't want to, you know, so we named the hero of it Mr. Blackman. So I mean, there were a lot of things. Now I'm beginning to think about it a little more, but that one, we made out of whole cloth. We just made that up. [Laughter]

Clip 5 (audio) Courtland Cox “We’re just solving a problem”

Courtland Cox: We just thought we needed to have something that had the least amount of words. And most, and you know had a lot of white space, and you know, people could deal with that. [Laughs] Trying to solve a problem. That's it. Solve a problem. Solve a problem. That's what we're doing. I mean, I think, I think when you, and it's really interesting, even today in my whole, my whole life. When you're looking from the inside out and moving forward, this is just the stuff you do. People looking from the outside in, and when I take the time to look from the outside in, you say, Wow! But looking from the inside out, Ok, we're just solving a problem. We're moving on. What's the next issue. Move on. Next issue. And I try not to look from the outside in a lot because it inhibits my moving on.

Clip 6 (audio) Courtland Cox “It was an operation”

Courtland Cox: My sense is that you had people who had areas of expertise that were important. As we said, Jennifer in terms of illustrating. Jack in terms of research. Wilson Brown in terms of getting the printing done. Stokely was a much more charismatic, relating to the people and so forth. Bob Mants was much more as we said the local people discussion. Willie Ricks was in there. Ralph Featherstone. So you had a combination of a lot of people who could do research, put materials together, communicate with people on an ongoing basis, get the production of the things done. So I mean it was an operation. Without Wilson Brown, we wouldn't have been able to do it. And my sense is that there was a level of sophistication and cooperation that didn't just center with the people in Lowndes. There were a number of other people outside of Lowndes who were important to the process. Including the chicken shack.