

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Roots of Organizing: Understanding a Community

### Clip 1: I Started to Get Organized

**Worth Long:** Early on in my experience before SNCC, I said I was doing this amateur collecting. And it was because my father was an evangelist singer in North Carolina. He was Reverend W.W. Long, songster, songbird of the South. That's what the billets—we called them billets back then—what the billets said. Singing his specialty: "I am on the battlefield for my Lord," that was the song. And then under it, the woman who had written it from Chicago, her name, written by such and such. I would see that and I would say, "Damn, I just thought he was a country preacher." I say, oh this is nice. Man got his picture on the paper. And it's not a poster. So, I'm kind of interested in this, not because of the singing but because of his celebrity. I have to admit that. A young person. When I go to Pittsboro, North Carolina, I meet a guy who has a machine. He had ordered it from, not Sears and Roebuck, but Montgomery Ward. And what it does, it treads, grooves out recordings. [...] This is a recording machine. It's a disc recording machine. If I remember correctly, it was a round—it actually was like a long play record. During that particular time, we're talking about the 1940s. So, he wanted me to help him. He needed a gofer and I agreed to be a gofer.

**Maria Varela:** For how long did you do that?

**Worth Long:** One of the duties of the gofer was to find people to come in and select people to come in. I got a gospel choir—no a gospel quartet. He didn't have enough room in his little cabin for a choir. So a blues guitar player with his old National acoustic guitar. A husband and wife team who sang old time spiritual songs. I find a whole lot of people because my sister had a store in front of this cabin, and as they came in I would ask them. I'd ask what do you do that I can record? And we were not selling the records to make money. We were trying to preserve the culture. [...] I was a good gofer. And you also have to appease people when they're outside and make sure they are not making noise while someone else is trying to record. And then some people sometimes too many people wanted to record. Somebody brought a choir for instance and wanted to record. And you couldn't put the choir inside the recording machine. And we're out on the highway. I had not solicited that. So finally I started to get organized. I started doing posters and stuff saying what we were willing to do. And all people had to do was pay the price of the recording. So we were doing it at a cost.

**Maria Varela:** So how old were you?

**Worth Long:** Between 12 and 15.

**Maria Varela:** See, you're already learning all these organizing things.

**Worth Long:** I'm the gofer.

**Maria Varela:** No, you're the organizer. I mean you figured out the posters. You took what could've been a chaotic kind of thing and smoothed it out so it was orderly. It sounds like to me.

**Worth Long:** Yeah, I'm learning how to sequence elements to the extent that they will bring order. Yes. [...] But I'm seeing something else because I listened to the recording. They don't just give you the recording. What he does, he checks it to be sure he did it right. If he didn't do it right, he'll do it again. He'd do a playback. We would listen to the recording. I said, "Damn, I don't hear that on the radio." There was nothing like it on the radio, but it was beautiful. I mean even in the recording. I couldn't be inside to witness it, even though I may have witnessed inside the church when the quartet sang. But that's in the context of an organized event. But I felt really good about what I would later call people's culture. Just folk culture. Just ordinary people's culture. And I realized also that it was an alternative culture. That it wasn't in the mainstream.

## Clip 2: Go Out and Ask Questions and Listen

**Maria Varela:** I never thought of myself as an organizer. I thought of myself as a person who supports organizers with what they need. I would never go presume to organize. I was way on a big learning curve. And to be calling yourself an organizer when you don't even know stuff is not very—there's a whole reason for that out of my history in terms how I learned to sort of scan a place. But that's another whole story. But yeah, my job was to support organizers. I would support the requests of what people locally felt they needed in terms of if they're going to do voter registration or whatever they want to do. In this case, I was trying to support Father Oulette's request, which I assume was not just his personal request but others, that there be a reading program there for that voter registration test. Which of course I knew nothing about how to do any of that. You make do with nothing in your mind.

**Worth Long:** But you had some conception of what might be possible to do.

**Maria Varela:** There was a method I learned in high school and college. And it came out of the Young Christian Students. And that came out of the worker-priest movement in the thirties. And it was a method where you were charged with observing your surroundings to see if there were issues that oppressed people on whatever levels. And collecting information so you're not just making guesses or assumptions. Making assumptions was a no-no in this setting. So we were taught to go out and ask questions and listen and find out. And every week, because we had weekly meetings, you'd bring it back and share the information. Well, then you'd find out, wait, we're opening some other thing. We thought it was this—it's like peeling an onion, you know? But no it's starting to look like this. Well no, we need more information. So let's go out and get it. So you had this observation, reflection, and every meeting had to end with an action, so you just couldn't be ideologues—going out and doing guess, whatever, you don't know what you're talking about. So it was, I started this when I was fourteen and you know how those years, twelve to fourteen, even ten to fourteen, when you start doing stuff independently as you're growing independent, it forms you. And I never really, really realized this. It was like lower brainstem to me to walk into a situation and like hmmm what's going on and try to really kind of find out and find the people who knew. You do make your mistakes. You do still make your assumptions, and you don't always do it correctly, but you learn. So I came to Selma with that.

## Clip 3: From the Wisdom of the People

**Worth Long:** When I did a project, no matter what it was, I did what you do. I started out by asking people what they needed, what they felt they needed, and how could I help. I do it always. Whether it's cultural organizing or political organizing. What can we deal with? The issue that is their issue. We build around that issue.

**Maria Varela:** You know, with the more experience we have with that, for me, the more I realized those assets that were already there. That it wasn't a negative space that we were filling. Is that we were learning and asking to be told what people knew and what they wanted. And what they didn't want, which is just as important. So that we learned then that there was a lot there.

**Worth Long:** No doubt about it.

**Maria Varela:** A lot.

**Worth Long:** And that's the second aspect. Well, not necessarily second. Another aspect. One of the questions based on basic logic, is how did you solve this problem before? How did you successfully approach this problem in the past?

**Maria Varela:** Yeah, or if not successful and it didn't work, what did you learn? So we didn't have to do that all over again.

**Worth Long:** Right. And if they failed, what went wrong? We used that as a basis for analysis without it being complicated or mathematical or scientific. Right? Just practical. We also noted that some people, like Mrs. Hamer, was already using a similar approach. It had to do with an everyday survival approach. It had to do with how people—I'm talking about problem-solving. But the problem-solving of an oppressed people is a little bit different, because you're looking around as you plan. [...] You realize you're dealing with serious business. Not where you are going to lose your shares in the stock market. But where you're going to lose your life and the life of your community. So then planning becomes very very important. And you've seen it with your co-ops. You see how careful people plan in conflict situations, in a conflict environment. And how they set up protective devices. Even how they short-term, mid-term, and long-term plan. And when I came into SNCC, that was one of the things that I hoped I could not only bring but better develop from the wisdom of the people.

#### Clip 4: What the People Want to Learn

**Worth Long:** How much did you learn from that literacy project that you were able to take to the next one? Did you have to retool in Jackson? Did you have to retool at Tougaloo? Did you use the same curriculum?

**Maria Varela:** I think I wrote about it and said there was a greater need of organizers. Because I was going to staff meetings and we'd have these discussion about needing materials, and some SNCC staff would be saying, "Well people are doing this here and we liked what was done there to be able to be done in this county where I'm working. It would be great if we could have some kind of booklet or pamphlet or whatever." And what I learned in the Selma literacy project was, use people's own words. I also learned that—this is a diversion—I started teaching Mrs. Caffee, who really, I was her vehicle to go fishing. [...] But Father said she wants to read. She said to me she wants to read and I think you should start with her. Because I was telling him, "I don't know how to figure this out." And I'm an experience based person. I don't do well learning other ways. So I went over there and we just talked a while the first time. And I would make notes on every session. And then I realized that she really wants to read the Bible. So we would start with her Bible. I said which part do you want and then she'd tell me verse and chapter.

**Worth Long:** She knew.

**Maria Varela:** And then I'd open it and she'd start. Okay, I never could figure out what she had memorized or what she was reading. I think she knew how to read but didn't think she knew how to read. And then she wanted to know how to write, so she could write her daughter. So we did a lot of work on letters that she could do. She had a beautiful handwriting. But I discovered—well that's when Prathia and I did—an adult reader using Bible verses to talk about social justice in the Civil Rights Movement. [...] But anyway that's what I learned was that (a) probably people had some basic reading skills that if you could develop materials that they really wanted to know about, then they would—because reading is practice, like you said. So after I did those books on the co-ops, the okra co-op, and I distributed them at mass meetings, and I watched people. And they got the book opened, and they are forming the words in their mouths and they're going—they could read. And I think for many people they took it home, probably it was a well-read kind of thing. You could say we fluffed the literacy. We avoided because we were saying we just didn't know enough. And why, I'm not going to spend my time to figure out literacy when there's this big demand on how to do ASCS elections. Because SNCC did a big thrust in that in '65 and again in '66. So we did a film strip on that, so we can take it around for people to see.

**Worth Long:** Those were super successful. People ordering these handbooks. I call them freedom handbooks. Those co-op books. The language just right.

**Maria Varela:** Right, because it was just taping Mr. Miles and the other leaders about how they did it. And there's elements of the discrimination they ran up against. It was so real. It wasn't one of these government publications where you just say, you know, you apply and do this and then you do that and then you'll get it. It was like we did this, and they thwarted us. So then we tried it around another way. And then they tried to do this, but then we beat them at that. Or we learned for next year, we better start earlier, cornering the brokers. So the mistakes were there; the victories were there; the discrimination was there. And it was how people did it themselves.