

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Roots of Organizing: Values in Organizing

### Clip 1: You Have to Consider Nothing an Asset

**Worth Long:** In '59, as you remember, I was going into Camden.

**Maria Varela:** Right, right, from Montgomery.

**Worth Long:** From Montgomery, and one of the things I was looking at was what is the vital and vibrant culture of these communities. And how they used it. I wasn't able to be there long, but I could compare what they were doing with what people were doing when I was in North Carolina and what people were doing across what my daddy called the Durham District. So I visited—my father had ten churches, and he was the coordinator for those churches. He was the presiding elder. And he held conferences at a different church each time, except for Durham, where he had three churches, so he would hold one quarterly conference in Durham and the other two churches in many cases would come to it. So he consolidated. And I saw that consolidation also. I experienced that in terms how can you organize ideas and people. I'm talking about the organizing process in anything.

**Maria Varela:** Right, right.

**Worth Long:** So once you learn that organizing process, and you had described some of it earlier, then you understand some of the necessary elements. But you understand especially these elements in terms of limited resources development. Right? So if you're starting out with nothing, then you have to consider nothing an asset and find what surroundings nothing and use it as the element. In fact, you may just join what is happening around nothing, and let it organize you, if you see what I'm saying. But as a facilitator, people called it I guess third party intervention and all of that kind of stuff—but as a facilitator, as an organizer, as a person who tries to help put various elements together within, whether it's political culture or cultural systems, then that's a very important thing to understand. And then you reflected on another thing that I thought that was very important. And that was how you study and acknowledge what systems already exist. And look for their strengths and weaknesses. And see what is acceptable to people. Because to some people, they value their weaknesses.

**Maria Varela:** There is that, yeah.

**Worth Long:** You have to have at least the sense to understand that and to try to bring together those disparate concepts. Because what you are trying to do, is to have things move together before they move forward.

**Maria Varela:** Sometimes as they move forward, they are bringing it together too. You know the thing about it is the process is that flexibility, to read it and decide to go with it or to help nudge it or to do both. Because there is no map. [...]. But so I'm interested in whether what you saw in North Carolina—I think I know the answer to this - and what you saw in Camden was pretty distinct kind of music?

**Worth Long:** It was distinct depending on what part of the community expressed it. So now we're

dealing with the elements of class. In this particular case in African American culture. So class elements, earlier, again we talked about a value elements—value elements as we talked about language and learning. That same concept, I believe, is valid as you look at cultural organizing or cultural work. So as a cultural worker, then I will always be cognizant of the fact that there is a cleavage between the culture of ordinary people at one level and the culture at the top. I didn't deal with the center, did I? I didn't say anything. Let's just deal with the bottom and the top. Especially in African American culture because it's hard to define the middle.

## Clip 2: Who Can Organize and Deliver

**Maria Varela:** We basically were mentored by Ms. Baker in terms of understanding who we wanted to work with and could build leadership among and with. As the Voter Registration Act of 1965 was signed, and there were more and more kind of getting people registered and started to run candidates. Well it wasn't started because that started earlier. But even beginning to look at running candidates, you actually had at these county level meetings of some FDP people the discussion about whether less educated people were qualified to run for sheriff. And you had people saying, "No, we need this person with this education running for county." We call them county commissioners, but I don't know what they are called in Mississippi. You know, for county level offices, running for sheriff and all the other things. I didn't expect that battle. I have stuff on tape about that. You've heard some of that stuff that went on. And I think that local people kind of raised up in MFDP were discouraged by that battle. In terms of whether middle class, more educated people were better equipped to run the politics and run the schools. So that's where our ideals ran right into reality.

**Worth Long:** Whose values were they reflecting now? Their own community values or the values of the elite or the value of—if you had to search for it and put your hands on it, whose values?

**Maria Varela:** There's no one set of values. As you know, in every community, there could be this set of values and this set and this set. Or maybe just two or whatever. And so you had to look in terms of who's the leadership. Who can organize and deliver and work closely with them and try. I mean, I wasn't an organizer, so that was not my job. But I supported organizers, and I knew that was what they felt their calling was. Was to sort of take that value set and show that it can make change. It can make a difference.

**Worth Long:** [...] I'm wondering from you, why does some people have the idea and the belief—because when we are talking about values, we are talking about attitudes and beliefs—the belief that my way is the best way because it's the dominant value, the dominant way, or because it's the normal.

**Maria Varela:** Well let me ask you a question. There appears to me that people labored under this talented tenth theory for almost a century or maybe less than century and believed that. And Martin did too. And then there were people who just—and those are the people that Ms. Baker had often worked with, not all, I'm sure there were a range of folks that she worked with. But I think the one's she ended up hooking Bob and you all up with were those who were not into the talented tenth theory of what leadership would be in the community. Now how far they would go in terms of who would lead in terms of their "qualifications," we were just testing that by '65, '66. I'm not sure we were prepared to answer that. Because that's a long, long term questions. And we had an attrition of experienced organizers leaving. And in some cases, in some counties, you had local people who could pick that up and did a good job of it. And you had other places where there wasn't really a lot of people. They would be willing

to be there, but they really needed somebody to kind of have their backs and help with the strategies and how did we solve the problem, like Courtland said. So that's a tough one.

### Clip 3: Who Can Be a Teacher?

**Maria Varela:** I think people feel the adult non-reader is really the other, do you know what I mean? Because by the time you're grown you should be reading. And if you're not, then why not? And I think for--and this kind of strain ran through a lot of the SNCC stuff. Ran through the summer project. Middle class assumptions, whether it was white or black or whatever. In terms of the communities they were serving in. We also had this—and I mentioned it yesterday—we had this battle around early Head Start. And could you not utilize the local, more low income, low to moderate income people as teachers even though they hadn't been to advanced education. But they were so good at picking up the things you could do creatively with the kids and get the kids to express themselves. And middle class teachers weren't so good about that. And so it was a huge battle to maintain our values as an organization within a theater that we cared about, which was the education of the very young. And that we helped start through the Freedom Schools. And to maintain those values. It was so tough, because you did have folks in the Black community that really did feel like the middle class teachers were better qualified. And so we didn't always win those battles. And yet when CDGM was just beginning and before that with the Freedom Schools, if the teachers called a meeting, you'd have like a hundred parents would come. Sometimes more. Because they were so interested in the education of their child. And you couldn't get many of those folks to come to voter registration, mass meetings because that's not where they wanted to go. So I'm thinking these are folks that could be organized in a sense to exert some kind of agency in the educational system in Mississippi, which so badly needed it. And I felt like people were not looking at this as an organizing opportunity and an opportunity to take control of the education with these parents mobilized. That's why—yeah. So, I spent some time on that. And I have that book, Pond, to show for it.

**Worth Long:** You agonized?

**Maria Varela:** Over it? I did because I felt like there was a, how do you call it, a disrespecting of the local people, especially low income women, who had first volunteered for Freedom Schools and then because a couple of us in SNCC were influential in CDGM, we got them hired into what became the Head Start. And then you had this big battle. Are they trainable? Well in my experience they were highly trainable and highly motivated. And really were such a great choice. Other people didn't feel that way.

**Worth Long:** As a publisher for Jane Stembridge, her paper on Fannie Lou Hamer, where she asks the question, or where she says, "Mrs. Hamer is more knowledgeable than I am." Is that kind of what we're talking about? You're saying—is that relevant, I should ask. Her assessment.

**Maria Varela:** I think in many settings that we worked, if we didn't have folks like Mrs. Hamer to guide us, we would've been dead, (a) could've been dead or maybe made some really poor decisions. In the case of these women who were working in these Head Start programs, they were attracting the really poor kids from the rural areas. This is the ones that had shoes. The ones that didn't have shoes really couldn't come to school.

**Worth Long:** Wait, all God's children have shoes.

**Maria Varela:** Yeah, except in Mississippi. And we felt that these teachers didn't look down on these rural children. Whereas we felt that middle class teachers often, not always, often would. And it was a fact that was expressed—our job in Head Start is to get these children so when they get to first grade, the teachers would not treat them differently because we taught them how to sit at a desk. And how to do all these proper things. And we're like that's not early childhood education! So, and I have evidence that people actually thought that. [Laughs].