SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Roots of Organizing: Life after the Movement

Clip 1: We Made the Market Come to Us

Maria Varela: We made the market come to us. Because when we started thinking about it—we did try things. We hauled these blankets to New York in duffel bags, up the staircase to this gallery or that gallery. People just weren't interest. And we had to learn so much. But here is where we were fortunate, this sort of Southwest, Sante Fe style was starting to hit even nationally. So we realized, you don't bring this stuff to New York, you make New York come to you. And so we, because the Smithsonian did an article on us and because the way we were able to strategically get media because of the kind of group we were; people would come to Sante Fe and say let's go up to Los Ojos. And then we opened like you did, a little hub where you could get some coffee and sandwiches; and a bookstore. So you could go visit the weaving shop. If you couldn't afford those, you could go next door and by books and coffee or whatever. That's what we did.

Worth Long: That's audacity. How you be doing that? Successful. It's still working?

Maria Varela: It is. That's still there. The little hub store isn't there. They never could get good management for that. That was tough. The flocks—the older guys have kind of let it go. And the younger ones want to do cattle because they can have a job and leave the—you don't have to worry about, sheep you have to worry about. So they can just throw their cattle up on the mountain, so that's declining

Worth Long: What about the replacement? The recruitment and replacement. What about the shepherd?

Maria Varela: That's another problem.

Worth Long: You can train the dog. But what about the shepherd and the weaver?

Maria Varela: Well, we're using really old men to be shepherds. They're really old, but they're so experienced. So that's a problem. Now the weavers, we developed a whole training program. I mean it's similar to what we did in SNCC. We put together a twelve lesson curriculum. Then I got it accredited by the local community college. Well local meaning seventy miles away. So any weaver who went through the two-part weaving program could get credits towards an A.A. in fine arts for weaving. And we had several that ended up with their certificate, well their two year certificate. S by building that in, there were many people who came to work for us because they wanted that as much as getting paid for work.

Worth Long: It legitimized them.

Maria Varela: Yes.

Clip 2: Culturally Sustainable Economic Development

Maria Varela: Well, what we were concerned about, there's an erosion of cultural practices with Extension—that's why I went off on this Extension thing. Trying to eradicate those rare sheep; those Churro sheep they were called. They're long haired sheep that didn't have a lot of grease to them. And there was an attempt to resurrect weaving, but they seemed to separate it out of village culture. What we did was, we decided we knew could've done a lot better marketing-wise. But we knew our best bet was to get those folks coming up to have the experience visiting this really pretty little village that had these two great stores in it. And then we started a third business that was taking old tires and you cut them up into strips and then you weave them into doormats. I don't know where we heard about this. And that supports a family. You know, there's three people. So we took a deserted village, because so many of these northern New Mexico villages are with closed, unoccupied buildings. So we took the old trading post, the old grocery store and butcher shop, and then the bar—I really love that bar. And the bar became the one that wove the floor mats. And the grocery store and butcher shop became the hub for a while. And you know, what I learned about that was that the proceeds of the sales from that store could support a store assistant, a clerk. But it couldn't support the manager. And so I had to do that on grant money. And that was a flaw in it. But we never figured out how to make that store support itself. So any business we started that could support itself from its own revenues exist today, as well as the clinic. And anything else that really we couldn't wean off of soft money is gone.

Worth Long: But when you said cultural as the first word of that process, what does that mean?

Maria Varela: Well, the whole practice of weaving was disappearing. The whole practice of dying with natural dyes was disappearing. And we did both. We did the natural and the commercial dyes. So people were getting jobs learning how to do this stuff.

Worth Long: Just like a cultural revival? Going back to the natural practice.

Maria Varela: Yeah it was. Using the ancestral sheep as the fiber in the weaving.

Worth Long: And then you got cultural tourism.

Maria Varela: Exactly.

Worth Long: You're combining two elements.

Maria Varela: And what we had—here was the survival element. You had environmentalists saying at this point, because we're working in the '80s, and building up to this campaign that environmentalists had at the end of the 80s. "Livestock-Free in '93." Meaning all the National Forests were to have no cows or sheep on them at all. Now, understand that these environmentalists either came from the east or west coast. Knew nothing about grazing requirements in semi-arid areas. Didn't seem to care that the average herd or flock size was like twenty or less animals. So they're going on about these ranchers—and it's like it didn't fit the profile of the people up in the mountains. They're talking about these big industrial ranchers and how they are destroying the public lands and all this stuff. Well, how are we going to fight that! Because they did have the grasp of the national media. And there were so many people who thought grazing was about the worst sin you could do in the national forests. We did it through cultural tourism. Every time somebody walked into the store, we'd just kind of get that discussion going. And of course we had these great books around. Then we talked about—they talk

about, oh those rugs are so beautiful. And we'd say, yeah, this wool—we didn't have enough of those sheep that every weaving was made out of it. But we made the weavings with that wool a little more expensive because it was more precious. So then we'd give the whole story of the sheep; how people would graze responsibly and how important grazing was. I remember one night, she came to me and said, "Oh you mean it's like, you kind of cut your hair to keep it healthy, right? She got it. So you had to be really basic in how you kind of—

Worth Long: A light went off.

Maria Varela: She said, oh! Yeah.

Clip 3: There is Always an Evolution

Maria Varela: There's always this evolution as you are learning something, you're saying, oh, well you know what, we need to do this. And it's still using the same resource base, the same cultural kinds of things. But like for example, we had growers coming to us, saying, "Well I can't sell this other wool that isn't churro wool. They're just not paying very much."

Worth Long: The wool that has oil?

Maria Varela: Yeah, right. It's a sort of—not indigenous breed, but it's kind of like a cross breed that grew up since World War II or even before. And so we started thinking about it and said, well you know, the old people used to fill mattresses with wool. They made pillows with wool. So we went and consulted somebody that understood bedding, because we were—being able to choose the right kind of technical assistance was so key to this. That's another story. So this woman suggested that we make comforters. She said in Europe, all the comforters are filled with wool. So we experimented with that for a long time, and out of that came a little sewing enterprise of women who did wool filled comforters.

Worth Long: Are they decorative?

Maria Varela: Well they are pretty but they basically are—they keep you warm. They are very warm.

Worth Long: Something to keep you warm in the winter.

Maria Varela: [...] But you know that market teaches you these lessons. And the producer teaches you these lessons And you move on it. That's what I learned you have to do. [...] So you have a land-based - because the people I really admired in Mississippi and Alabama were those farmers who owned land. Because they moved so differently. So then when I meet these little ranchers up in—I don't mean little ranchers—up in northern New Mexico, I'm like I've seen this movie before. And what they wanted was what the folks in Holmes and Lowndes and other places, what they wanted. And the weavers wanted what artisans that we met anywhere in the Black Belt wanted too. So it was just a matter of how do you make this work in this cultural ecology. And in this market, because if you're not paying attention to the market, you're going to die.

Clip 4: Land Where the Blues Began

Worth Long: I did the film, "The Land Where the Blues Began" in '80. Or we released it in '80. And I did ten years of blues research leading up to that. And then did an intern with Alan Lomax. [...] But it was helpful because I made a bridge with Lomax. We had weekend discussions. He had done all this blues

research. And of course, I was an amateur blues person. So then when I went back—and this was being done by the way on a grant from the Ford Foundation. They paid me $50,000. One year I made $50,000, and they paid me whatever my last year's salary. They picked the rights year. [...] But Bannerman said he started a Rights Festival down in Drew, Mississippi, but it wasn't working. Nobody came. He got about a hundred people. So he asked if I could get that funding for him. [...] The second thing was the find a venue to make sure we had a place where we could put it. We booked the Freedom Village as the first place. Freedom Village, that's [unsure]. Some of the people who were put of the plantations, Frank Smith and others had set up a little tent city and people built their own houses using what they called self-help housing. They do the frame and then you live in it, but you would finish it yourself. So there were ten houses out there, and this big courtyard, big enough for maybe 20,000-30,000 people. Which is what I figured we could do if we organized well. So I came in as a consultant to teach festival organization. The only festival organization that I could teach there was what I learned at the Smithsonian. Basically I'm duplicating something I've already been a part of since 1970. For seven years. I've been doing the research in the field. And I've been bringing people and presenting them on stage at the National Mall at the Smithsonian in front of the National Museum of American History. But in that huge area. Working with people like Tom Rankin for instance. So building on the field work of Dr. Bill Farris, Dr. David Evans who's from Memphis State, and others, we put together what we thought would be a fairly respectable first festival on the back of a truck bed. It's a trailer bed. And since I had brought Alan Lomax in to do the early filming for "The Land Where the Blues Began," then I thought by selecting him as one of the presenters, I was willing to present and he would present. Then we would have an authentic celebrity presenters in Lomax and someone that the community knew, in me. And I was going to get a radio station person, but that person didn't believe that the festival could succeed. And once he heard it was on the bed of a truck, he declined to participate. [...] And the people in Freedom Village, once we chose that site, they felt it was a freedom festival. You remember we organized a festival with Bob Dylan, with Theodore Bikel and Pete Seeger on the back of a pickup truck. You see what I'm building on, right? This is the pickup truck. In Greenwood, Mississippi, in the South, in Mrs. McGhee's cow pasture. [Laughter]. So I was a part of that. But I was doing more security during that time.

Clip 5: Growth of the Delta Blues Festival

Worth Long: They outgrew Freedom Village, so we had to buy 80 acres of land down Highway 1. You know Selma, but this is—now Highway 1 goes to Rosedale. Highway 1 in Greenville. Goes to Rosedale. So we're going the other way.

Maria Varela: Going west, right?

Worth Long: Going Southwest. As in going towards Vicksburg. Myersville. Vicksburg. And so we built our stage—a permanent stage out there. And we built parking for the multitudes. And it was successful for those many years. At a certain point, they had rain problems. If it rained two days before, you could get in but you might not get out. So they decided to use fairground, the public fairground facilities, which we couldn't even go to back when you were there. So we're in a facility that we can't expand beyond. It will accommodate 100,000 or more people. But the largest amount of people I know is about 50,000-60,000. And of course it's the oldest blues festival in the country now. And it's Black-owned. Black-operated.

Maria Varela: Hard money comes … it's supported by hard money, right?

Worth Long: Hard money.

Maria Varela: See, they last.

Worth Long: The gate and also the community organization that has—Delta Foundation. Mrs. Hamer was on the board of—

Maria Varela: Yeah, I remember that.

Worth Long: That's one of the things I asked for in the beginning; that it be named for or dedicated to people like Mrs. Hamer, community people like Mrs. Hamer. [...] There have been four, five directors. Five or six directors. And you don't have to do have a Ph.D. to direct the festival. You don't have to be in folklore or ethnomusicology. You have to be able organize so we'll be able to have the festival next year. So that's important. But as far as a stable, enduring model in festivals, there are at least ten other festivals that follow that basic structure now. I borrowed it from Newport and from the Smithsonian Institution because I worked in both. Worked with Julius when he was doing field work. Julius Lester didn't drive, so I was his driver. And then also showed him places where I knew people were at that time. And that's basically it. So I don't have to deal with lessons learned, but the main thing we did in terms of people doing the board of that festival, we put local people on it. We put musicians on the board. The other tier is a Black community organization, non-profit organization that has been there for over fifty years now. The festival will be forty next year. And God willing, I'll probably go back and help choose the line up for it.