

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Strong People: Born Into the Movement

### Clip 1 (video) Annette Jones White “Born Into the Movement”

**Annette Jones White:** She pulled her packet up to my mother’s house at about 3 o’clock in the morning and about an hour later I was born into the Movement. That’s when it started. I was in a totally segregated city on the southside of town where Black people lived, and everything that went on in that city affected me in some way. As I grew, my parents explained what being in a segregated city meant. My father wanted me to know what was out there so I could survive in that type of that society. So at night in the winter, we’d sit about the fireplace and chew sugarcane, and they’d tell me stories about what had happened to them. And my grandmother told me how she was chased by the Ku Klux Klan because she was downtown after 6 o’clock. There were curfews. Uncle Peter went to town one Saturday and didn’t come back. They found him on the railroad track. People had followed him and placed him there. His horse and buggy were fine, but he wasn’t. He refused to sell his land to some white people, and after he was killed, his wife sold it, and she went north. So every evening there were episodes that I was told about...So I always tell people when they ask how did you become involved, I say it was inevitable. And as I grew, my parents kept telling me, you have to make things better for yourself and your, the next generation.

### Clip 2 (audio) Janie Culbreath Rambeau “This Cannot Be the Way God Intended Life to Be”

**Janie Culbreth Rambeau:** Okay, sort of like Annette, I can’t say that there was a time when I really became involved, but as far back as I can remember, I’ve heard stories and things from my parents who told us about survival in—back then what was called the world. Of course, the world was wherever you wanted it. I’ve heard so many things – I don’t know if I’ve related them before or not, but there were so many things that were in my mind and as I grew, I started to think this cannot be the way God intended life to be because we were very studious Sunday school attendants, whatever. By the time we got to our high school, Charles Sherrod, Cordell Reagon, Charlie Jones and some other students from SNCC came to Albany and they were talking to us like real human beings. You mean you can talk with me, I’m worth a conversation from you? Yeah and you don’t have to be violent, you don’t have to be this, but you do have to pay attention to your surroundings and your environment and you do need to stand for what’s right. Wouldn’t you like to go swimming? Wouldn’t you like to go to the park? Tiff Park, of course, was the park, right, that they talked about in Albany then. Tiff Park had a slide and they had swings and all of this, but you knew you weren’t going. It was white and although it was supported by the city, it was still white. Wouldn’t you like to go to the library to check out some more books, or wouldn’t you like to do this, wouldn’t you like to do that? Of course, when you start thinking about it, you really would like you do these things. Well why can’t you do them? I don’t know why we can’t do them. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be able to enjoy this or to enjoy that and we began to become more and more active in the—you know, concerned, interested in the movement. So, by the time I finished high school and we had all of our paperwork into Albany State, I was so concerned about what was going on and at this point in your life, you start to focus on more than just what you had grown up with. You start to look at it in a different vein, so to speak. Well this was wrong back then and this was wrong then and this is wrong now, then why couldn’t we do something about this and that then?

### Clip 3 (video) Shirley Sherrod “You Can Stay in the South”

**Shirley Sherrod:** Southwest Georgia and Albany is about 180 miles south of Atlanta, and it's a very different world than Atlanta and that area around Atlanta. And if you heard, I think Annette, mention Bad Baker County that's where I'm from. I grew up on a farm. My family owned land, which was unusual for a lot of Black families, and we were proud landowners, but working on the farm was hard work. Really hard work. So I wanted to get away from that. That was one thing. And then the other, we had some notorious sheriffs from Baker County...The sheriff I knew growing up, his name was L. Warren Johnson, but he wanted to be known as “The Gator” as in alligator, and he made a sound like an alligator, had murdered a number of Black people, so growing up in the county, going to segregated schools, getting the hand-me-down books. We had good teachers who really worked with us with what they had, but the combination of the farm, the system we had to live in made me realize I didn't want to live in the South. I did not intend to live my life in the South, so as I was preparing for high school graduation, I was preparing to not going to school in the South. I couldn't share that with my family. My father wanted all of us to get an education and wanted us to come right back there where he was. I was the oldest of five girls...So things were going pretty well for the farm leading up to my graduation, and my father had convinced my mother to try one more time for this boy. You know, they tried, they had five girls trying to get a boy. So it was during my high school, senior year, I learned my mother was pregnant again. And I learned that because my father, he was giving out cigars everywhere. He was so happy, telling everyone, “This is the boy.” So we were getting a new house because the boy was coming along. He was happy, and we were happy. But something happened in March, I was graduating in June. One Sunday morning, we were on our way to church. We met this white man on the side of the road, and he had a farm near ours and some of his cows had gotten in with our cows in 1963. And they rounded all but one of them up. They couldn't get it, so they just left him there. And all of a sudden, in March of '65, he said, you know he was coming to get the cow. So my father told him if you wait until in the morning, until Monday morning, I'll get some others to help to come and help round the cow up. So we went on to church, and the next morning, that's exactly what happened. They went to the pasture. There were several people there, but instead of his cow, his one cow. He was trying to claim other cows in the pasture like they were his, but they were ours. So he and my father argued, and according to the others, my father finally said, “Look. We can settle this in court,” and started going to his truck. He turned around to say something and the man shot him. He died on March 25<sup>th</sup>, and that night, you know, lots of people came to our house. We had just moved into the new home. Just one week before my father's murder, and my mother's 7 months pregnant. And as the oldest, he was our father. He had taken our breadwinner away. We didn't, you know, we worked on the farm, but my father really worked on the farm. We picked cotton and did the other work, but he was the main reason that we had an income. He took that from us. So on the night of my father's death, I went into one of the rooms. I just needed to get away from everybody. I needed to think of what I could do in answer to what had happened. So all kinds of thoughts came to my mind. Get a gun, and go kill him. I knew I couldn't do that. And I kept praying for God to give me an answer because I had to do something, and the thought came into my mind, and I feel like it was God talking to me, into my ears. “You can give up your dream of living in the North. You can stay in the South, and devote your life to working for change.” I didn't know at that moment how I could do it, but I knew I had made a commitment, and I knew I would do it, and the answer would come. I didn't need to stress over how that answer would come because I knew it would come. And it came when SNCC people came into, Baker County. I tease my husband now because he got the Movement started in Albany, in Terrell County, in Sumter County, in Lee County, in Worth County, and the Gator had, he had a really bad reputation. Now there are sheriffs in those other counties that had bad reputations but the Gator had probably the worse reputation. So I tease him and tell him that he waited a bit to deal with the Gator. But once I attended the first Movement meeting, I

knew that this was a way that I could carry out the commitment that I made on the night of my father's death. And I've lived true to that. That Movement that started in Albany in 1961 that I became a part of in 1965 has not ended.

#### Clip 4 (audio) Janie Culbreth Rambeau "Get You Ripe for the Picking"

**Janie Culbreth Rambeau:** Okay, all of these things led into what we now know as the Albany Movement. But there were so many things that were happening prior to that time that would get you ripe for the picking when you were ripe, when you're ready to be picked. That's where we were, either older people who had never caused any problems who would tell their children, I'm going to whoop you so the police don't have to whoop you and didn't want you to go to jail and this kind of thing. They even turned for the "movement" when it was going to better, when things were going to be better. So then in time for Charles Sherrod and Charlie Jones, Cordell Reagon and others started coming to Albany, we were ripe: it was time.

#### Clip 5 (audio) Annette Jones White "One Nonviolent Weapon Was the Ballot"

**Annette Jones White:** Well, I didn't meet Sherrod until after he had been with Lawson in Tennessee, but by the time in 1961 when he got to Albany State, he was totally talking nonviolence. And see, that was the thing that attracted us because he said things like, it can be a way of life and he said that one nonviolent weapon was the ballot and he was telling us how, through the ballot, you could get certain inequities changed, but you had to register to vote first and that's how we got into that canvassing and registering to vote, from his trip to Albany State. He organized high school students, we started having meetings, he would tell us how you get people to register to vote and it was not just getting them to say they'd register, you had to get their names, where they lived, when they could go, arrange transportation for them to go vote with them sometimes and hold their hands. He was saying that this was—that the ballot was sort of the precursor to getting other things that you wanted, human and civil rights. So that's what he did in Albany, he organized like mad and once the students caught on, there were more and more student meetings and they would bring their friends, and of course the girls would bring their boyfriends. Then from that the canvassing started. There would be meetings at churches and wherever you wanted them to be, but when people caught on—and then they had—there was one meeting at Bethel AME Church where a central committee was formed with certain students and it just came from there. I would look at him and I knew he was a minister and I would just marvel at his young age, but he was so wise and knowing things that we didn't really know about because nothing like this had ever happened before.

#### Clip 6 (video) Janie Culbreth Rambeau "Getting Arrested"

**Janie Culbreth Rambeau:** Then when I got to high school and we started seeing more cases of discrimination, outright discrimination, hatred, abuse. And everywhere you went you saw these signs that said "White Only" or "Colored Only." Water fountains, bathrooms. And of course, the colored bathrooms were always dirty, although they had black people cleaning them. People like Charles Sherrod, Charlie Jones, Cordell Reagon, and several other SNCC students came to Albany. They started talking to the students about equal rights, values. And we were so concerned that we became involved. And so when demonstrations started in December. We were ready to go...I remember the morning that we marched and went to jail. I'd like to share this part of my story y'all, and some of you have heard it before but I want to tell it one more time. That morning, I was getting ready to go, taking final exams at Albany State. Getting ready to go to school, my daddy told me, "I want you to go to school today and

take your tests.” And I said, “Ok,” and I really meant to do that. Then I started off walking and by the time we got downtown on Jackson Street, we heard these brothers and sisters holding hands and singing “We Shall Overcome. We Shall Overcome.” And I want you to know that that singing, the spirit, the influence that they had was so serious that you’d get goose pimples on your body, on your arms, on your head, everywhere because you really wanted to hear it. I like to tell young people from time to time, you haven’t really been to a prayer meeting until you been to a prayer meeting in Dougherty County jail, and it was something. But we were singing, we got in the line, and we were still singing, and everything was so good. All of a sudden, a caravan, I guess you could call it, with Chief Pritchett—who was chief of police at the time—drove by and at first admonished us to go on about our daily routine. And nobody moved. We continued to sing “We shall overcome.” And he said, “You’re all under arrest.” It was raining so hard that morning the umbrellas folded over. The skirts and sweaters we had on—girls were not wearing pants to school then, y’all—the little skirts and sweaters we had on were soaking wet. We were cold. It was a cold December morning, and they arrested us and took us to jail. In the jail, they had these steel like bunks that had been covered with some kind of spongy, fleecy material. I like to call them germinating bunks. They took the covers off those bunks to add to our discomfort. We were already wet and cold, and then you face this horrible, horrible steel cold bunk, and they expected us to rest here.

### Clip 7 (audio) Janie Culbreth Rambeau “The Movement Was Going Strong When Martin Came to Albany”

**Janie Culbreth Rambeau:** I stand by that until the day I die, that the movement was going strong when Martin came to Albany and continued after he left. A lot of people suffered a lot of losses, hurts, intimidations, jailings. I can’t say that Martin Luther King was responsible for this or not, or what was already going on. Students were being expelled from Albany State College. Young people were being arrested and beaten in jail. I remember we were arrested. They had these fleece-covered mats on those steel bunks in the jail and they took the pads off them to add to our discomfort. So it was cold and it was wet and it was raining in December and those cold, steel bunks against our bodies and we were wet and cold, having been arrested in the rain with nothing dry to put on. All of this contributed to what we called the Albany Movement. There were people like Dr. Hamilton who helped to start the movement. There were people like Bo Jackson and of course finally the President Dr. W. G. Anderson, who in my opinion was a very good President: he worked very hard for the people. But it was not Martin—I want to go on record saying it was not Martin Luther King’s movement.

### Clip 8 (audio) Annette Jones White “I Was Already in Jail”

**Annette Jones White:** A lot of people think that Dr. King actually started the movement in Albany, but he was invited to come by the secretary then, I think it was Goldie Jackson, because—

**Charlie Cobb:** Secretary of—?

**Annette Jones White:** The Secretary of the Albany Movement. This may sound cunning or calculating, but where Dr. King went, the cameras came. We needed publicity for the movement, we needed it to spread so that all the world watching could be a true thing and so he came just to make a speech. When he got there, it was decided that, well perhaps you might like to lead a march and he did. That’s where—how he got involved into that direct action aspect of it and there are people who say it started then. Well I was already in jail, hundreds of us were in jail when he came. So you have to take the long

view of the movement. There were certain things we were after and we eventually got them, but not right away.