

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Strong People: Call to Justice

### Clip 1 (video) Larry Rubin “What We Do Is We Fight for Justice”

**Larry Rubin:** For three generations, I was taught that capitalism sucks. When the freedom movement started, Bob Moses and others explained that African Americans in the South, fighting for their own rights, just fighting for their own rights would change this country would change this country. I know this is hard to believe, but at that time, this country was run by these white racists, white supremacists—I know that’s shocking—and the reason it was because a lot of their constituents couldn’t vote, or weren’t allowed to exercise their right because they were black. And if they were allowed to exercise the right to vote and they were fighting for this, they would change the country. They would elect people who were not out to destroy the American ideal. So, I felt I had no choice. I felt that people like me, as Charlie’s said, a lot of this comes from my Jewish heritage. I was brought up, what we do is we fight for justice. That’s what a mensch does. A real human being, part of it’s fighting for justice. But I really didn’t join the Movement until I went to Southwest Georgia, and I saw people there, risking their lives, being put off the land, their land. Their houses being burnt down. Being beaten up to exercise their American rights, and I felt I could do the little bit I could do to help, and I learned that part of my job was to be white in this and to show people that blacks and whites could work together, and whites did not have to be in charge.

### Clip 2 (video) Faith Holsaert “A New York City Activist”

**Faith Holsaert:** I grew up in New York City, actually in Greenwich Village, and as with Annette and Janie, there were some givens or legacy that I received that made my going south inevitable in some ways. The first is, as in Larry’s case, I was born Jewish following the Nazi Holocaust, and I think it’s hard right now to even remember the impact of that, although in my fearful moments, I’m afraid it may be coming back. But, for instance, I was an excellent student. I applied to a number of colleges, including Oberlin College, and when I went for my interview in my nice little college interview suit, the man kind of lined up the folder with my papers, and he said, “Ms. Holsaert, you are eminently qualified to attend Oberlin, but we have a Jewish quota.” And what’s interesting looking back on it, this was 1960, ’61 somewhere in there. I was like, “Oh. Ok.” I didn’t, I wasn’t outraged. I mean I was angry, but I was like, oh right. That’s the way the world works. The other given was, like Larry, and actually everybody at the table, I came of age at the time of the McCarthy era, when I think fearfulness engendered by the government was pervasive. Especially in Greenwich Village and left-leaning circle. It was terrifying. People went to prison or lost their jobs, and so I, although a white child, entered the Movement also with the sense that the government was them and the good people were us, and we were not the government. I think this was influenced by the fact that I grew up with two mothers, so I’m at least second generation queer in my family. One of my mothers was my birth mother who was Jewish and my second mother was a music teacher, graduate of Julliard, who was African Americans. In Greenwich Village in the 1940s, that was reason for people to write ugly things on your sidewalk with chalk, slash your tires or whatever. It wasn’t like living in Birmingham or Jackson or even Albany if you were African American...I felt I was a New York City activist. I was doing tutoring, housing surveys. Well, through NCCJ, I met a number of SNCC people including Sherrod and others, Diane Nash. Those people approached some of us in NCCJ and said, “Why don’t you come South?” It was the first summer project. It was the summer of ’62. It was tiny. project. It was the summer of ’62. It was tiny, so Peggy went and some others went, and I said, “No. I’m a New York City activist. I’m going to deal with racism in New York City. I don’t need to go away to do that.”

Well, at the end of that summer, three churches were burned in Southwest Georgia, and for whatever reason, that kind of lit my fuse. I went to my mothers and said, I can't go back. I had just finished my freshman year. It was 1962. I said, I can't go back to college. I have to go South. So that's how I ended up working for SNCC in Southwest Georgia.

### Clip 3 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “White Volunteers as Protection”

**Shirley Sherrod:** Sherrod looked at it in many different ways. He would describe it as protection. Those white students had parents living in the North, they served in—there were many things he saw, you know. Just simply getting the word out and getting them working from their end calling their Senators or their Representatives was one thing, but also needing money and the connections their families had back in the places where they lived. Then, he looked at it as, you know, that form of protection on the ground there, so—and the way I see it now, he was also building a movement, preparing us – as you said – for the times when we would actually be working together. But he describes it as the protection. That protection was—something happened to one of them down there. It was different from just having a black movement. I cannot envision just a black movement in Southwest Georgia without the white people who were involved. I'm so glad he didn't do it that way. We learned a lot from them, interacting with—we didn't have any real interaction with white people even though they were all around us.

### Clip 4 (audio) Larry Rubin “Demonstrating that Whites Didn't Have to Be in Charge”

**Larry Rubin:** I worked with Jack Chatfield, another white guy, and John... three of us. We all stayed at Mama Dolly's. We attracted the police and the sheriff—we were in jail, I think, many more times than we would have been, you know, if it was a black-only operation. But, you know, we were also told – and we learned this by experience – that as a white person when you were canvassing, to not say anything, just to be there to show the person whose door you knocked at that the black person was going to talk. Charlie had it in his mind that this was like a witness, a Christian witness. He was demonstrating to black people that whites didn't have to be in charge. But I do think it slowed down the actual day-to-day work. But then Charlie never was all that connected to numbers.

### Clip 5 (audio) Faith Holsaert “Charlie Sherrod's Anti-Lynch Law”

**Faith Holsaert:** Oh, well what I remember is what I always call Charlie Sherrod's anti-lynch law, which was when I got there, he said you are not to walk in the street by yourself with a black man because it's too dangerous for that black man. And there were some other precautions, but—and that was something I abided by the year I was there and I think it was right because I think white women presented a certain—presented a danger.

### Clip 6 (audio) Annette Jones White “You Don't Go Out to Mama Dolly's in a Bermuda Shorts Set”

**Annette Jones White:** So then they had to—the white students, as I saw it, had to become a part of the community. One came down and I can't remember - and I wouldn't say the name if I could - in a Bermuda shorts set. You don't go out to Mama Dolly's in a Bermuda shorts set, so you had to dress the way they dress and you had to go into a house—even I went into a house canvassing and they say have a seat and I looked at the sofa and I was thinking oh lord will it hold me and I didn't way but ninety-eight pounds and a spring was sticking up, but I sat and smiled, you know, as if I do this every day, sit on springs sticking out of sofas. So you had to become—I think Sherrod saw that if he brought white

students in and they became like a part of the community, we as black people be—would get used to dealing with them on a different level, a more equal level and would feel more comfortable in going out opposing those other ones in the city and then that the white students would see our way of life and whatever. There were some sticky times, like the clothing and then sometimes the food because I remember when I was cooking, they used to call—I used to fix fried green tomatoes. Everything I liked I fixed for them and there was one student who called the fried green tomatoes “them.” He liked it, but he would just say “them,” and he would say “are you going to fix some more of them?” and it sounded ominous. So I think that’s what—I don’t know, I’m guessing because he never said, but that’s how I saw it, that it was like bringing them together and that way you would understand each other more if you lived in that house, you saw what they ate, how they lived. I think in some ways it was good because it helped people to become more accustomed and to know other people. But I do remember this, and this was kind of humorous, this white student was talking to this old man and he kept saying “yes sir” and “no sir” and he said you don’t have to say “yes sir” and “no sir” to me. He said I’m so and so years old or whatever and you don’t have to say it to me, okay? And the man said “yes sir” because it was just ingrained.

## Clip 7 (audio) Larry Rubin “I’ll Go to the Synagogue and I’ll Get Them Involved”

**Larry Rubin:** When I first got to Albany, well I had no experience with Jewish people who were not radicals, who were not out to change society. To me it was the same thing. So, when I went to Albany, I said to Sherrod, “Look, I’ll go to the synagogue and I’ll get them involved.”

**Faith Holsaert:** I remember that day.

**Larry Rubin:** I didn’t know!

**Faith Holsaert:** I didn’t go.

**Larry Rubin:** So, Sherrod drives me to the synagogue and he says I’ll wait outside. I said “no, you don’t have to wait, I can walk back.” But I went there, I sat through service and afterwards they had Shabbat, you go after the service and a little bit to eat. I went up to somebody and said well, you know, I work for SNCC and we need you to help us. He said wait a minute and he called somebody over who was the Shamash of the synagogue, the guy who took care of the grounds, by the name of Stonewall Cohen. I never knew there was such a thing as a Stonewall Cohen. I’m explaining to him, you know, what I’m doing and so forth—

**Lillian Rambeau:** Stop the joke, in Albany?

**Larry Rubin:** In Albany. So, he says two things. First of all, he says you know, if it wasn’t for the blacks it would be us discriminated against so we’re just one step above so we need—instead of saying therefore we will fight with blacks, he said no, it was the exact opposite, we need to be as white as possible to avoid that fate. He said, you know, we stay separate, we keep quiet, we don’t do anything, we don’t say anything, so you got to get out of here and he kicked me out. That’s why—that’s when I learned why Sherrod was smart to be waiting outside in his car. I told him don’t bother, but he said no, you’ll see, just wait. And thank God he was there.