

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Strong People: The Movement Never Ended

Clip 1 (video) Shirley Sherrod “For Me, It’s Never Ended”

Shirley Sherrod: I guess for me. When I made the commitment to work back in 1965, when we discussed the Civil Rights Movement, most of the time, you’re discussing certain periods of time. For me, it’s never ended, so I usually say to young people. See, where I am, we suffer from brain drain. Young people want to get away. Everybody in Georgia. All the young people in Georgia seem to want to live up around Atlanta. Have them in Atlanta. That’s where they want to go. And I say all the time that your skills are needed in, like the area that I’m located. You have a base there. You have people who own land. It’s been in the family for years. They need to figure out how to derive some income from that land, so that they can continue to hold on to it. There are things that we did back in the sixties. Sending people to Israel to study the kibbutz and coming back and creating an organization that became the first community land trust in the country, and now there are 800 or so, so I hear, all using the model that we developed right there in Southwest Georgia. We’ve gotten our hands on a plantation. We didn’t know it was a slave plantation when the land was purchased. There’s so many things that can happen from there. There are so many things that are needed...And then in the midst of all of this, things are happening. You know, every time I went to try to register to vote in Baker County, the Gator was pushing me out of the courthouse, and I couldn’t actually register to vote until after the voting rights act was passed. You fast forward to now. In Baker County, the Board of Registrars is trying close four of the five voting precincts. Some people will have to drive twenty-five miles one way to register to vote. Then you have a school board, a tea party school board, that has taken over the school system, and the community is fighting. I can take you to a mass meeting every Monday night in that county, so I guess, my mind is still, I haven’t been able to separate from Movement to now because it’s continuing, and some of the things we fought for, we have to go back and fight again.

Clip 2 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “As Women, We Multitask and Figure Out How to Do It”

Shirley Sherrod: The—when you make a commitment to an area, to a community, yeah I needed to get more education – that was the other thing. Working at New Communities, I realized there were so many other things I needed to know. So what could I do? I had two kids, but I worked out there on that property every day and I went to school at Albany State at night to get more—I decided I had to have an MBA, I needed that. So you—as women, we multitask all the time and we have to figure out how to do it and we have to drag these men along. Here’s something else that I experienced too through the years: every organization I was a part of had had black men leading it and every organization I was part of had black men who didn’t really listen to black women. Now one of them was my husband and I could tell you some stories around that. Oh my goodness. I’m out there beating the bushes every day and he’s not listening and I’m trying to push my ideas through him because I know who’s going to—.My point is you can’t—women working in this movement, and you would know what I’m talking about too—

Faith Holsaert: Yes ma’am.

Shirley Sherrod: —it was hard. It hasn't totally eased up because you want to support the black men and the black men don't always listen. They don't see what you bring to the table in doing this work, but you can't give up. You can't give up on—I haven't given up.

Clip 3 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “You Have to Keep Working at It”

Shirley Sherrod: You know I find myself working with a lot of young people that—I didn't look at it as mentoring, but I know that that's part of what it is while we do the work. I have to continually caution them about going into an area with their own agenda. That's one of the mistakes they—you know you going in there for a reason, but know you can't do it that way because they—there are people there who have been there working and know kind of what they—so you have to do a little of theirs while you push yours in to get it done. But the other thing that I say to folks is that it's not going to happen overnight. It's just not going to happen overnight. As hard as you work, you'll have some things that you'll accomplish, but so many more that you didn't accomplish, but you can't give up on it. You have to keep working at it.

Clip 4 (audio) Shirley Sherrod “Getting Down to the Nitty-Gritty of Actually Building Something”

Shirley Sherrod: I would use an example of something we actually did with black women in creating a southern rural black women's initiative. Now, there were—you have—there were women from Mississippi: three women from Mississippi, one from Alabama and I was from Georgia. We had all been active through the years and we could have sat down and we could have written this whole thing ourselves and developed this whole plan because we had been out there long enough to kind of know what people wanted to do. But no, that was the way to go about it. We decided to have listening sessions to let the women in those communities that we targeted, those counties that we targeted in Mississippi, those counties we targeted in Alabama and Georgia, help say what it is that was needed in their communities. You'd be amazed at what came out of it and out of it we developed—that's how the worker-owned soy co-op got started, 'cause they needed jobs in these rural areas. So when you talk about transfer of power, transfer of power for what? What is that leading to? What is it going to do? How is that going to help me down here at this local level? What can Black Lives Matter be doing that would make a difference at those levels that would build the movement to be even stronger, because I've got to see how it—I can sit back forever and watch you all march out there, but it what is it going to do for me where I am? That's how a lot of people will look at it.

Charlie Cobb: Exactly, I agree.

Shirley Sherrod: So actually getting down to the nitty-gritty of actually building something and helping something, rebuilding some of those things that the black community used to have. So it's more, yeah well you can't give up that fight for trying to make a difference at the national level, but you got to be doing the local stuff, which is what I do all the time. You got that economic development part of it that is very important. That's what we didn't push enough in the—we were fighting for rights, so you get them and now what?

Charlie Cobb: So what from the movement experience is useful?

Shirley Sherrod: That's one of the lessons and if you want to keep this going, you've got to put this stuff in place locally, regionally, that can work for everyone.

Clip 5 (video) Annette Jones White “Early Childhood Education”

Annette Jones White: My favorite group of children to teach were kindergartners. I would get in, if it were me asking that question, I would get into education. I've always thought you have to start at the bottom because that's what I did with my kids. My kids, when they got out, they were readying. They could tell you all you wanted to know about Rosa Parks. They could talk about Dr. King. We did math, counting how many slaves did Harriet Tubman free. We talked about Cesar Chavez. And they learned the South African national anthem in three languages. We had a refugee from South Africa who taught it to me, and I put it on recordings. And they could do the dance that the children of Soweto did before they were mowed down. And they knew, we had a little boy from Nigeria and he dressed as Mandela when he came out of prison in a gray suit. And he would do his “Amandla!” Awe...and whatever they said afterwards. I can't remember. I just say all of that to show what can be done, and these children grow up with these things in mind. We never taught hate; we just said that some people didn't have love in their hearts. We gave them all the things. We stressed voting. They voted on everything. They even voted on who would count the votes, and I felt like this is gonna stay with them. Their parents would cry sometimes when their parents would tell them things they learned, and at that time, it's not that--our kindergartners were the only ones who went directly to first grade. The other schools whose children went to kindergarten, the children had to go back to kindergarten when they got to public schools, but ours didn't. And they did so many, many things, and if you get them young, I still hear from them. The parents see me in the grocery store, and they still talk to me. It was great, and I felt like, in a small way, other than the civil rights movement, that I made a contribution that changed some of their lives. It even changed some of the parents' lives because they didn't know a lot of things that we taught. [1:39:50] And I had a great 4-year-old teacher. That's the thing with kindergartners, the 4-year-old teacher has to be great. We had this teacher. Beverly Harvard was police chief of Atlanta. This teacher would dress up as Beverly Harvard. She would go out and rent a police chief's outfit, and all that day, she'd wear it and talk about the police office and what they did, and have police officers come in. It wasn't like when I grew up with Dick and Jane and where Officer Friendly was helping the little old ladies to cross the street, and then they would show criminals, and they were dark, and you knew who they were. And one day, I was, after I became director of the daycare center, I was sitting in the office, and she came by with her class, and they were dressed in their dress-up clothes, and they hung to the floor and head rags on and little packages. And I just raised my eyebrows, and she said, “Harriet Tubman, heading north.” And I said ok. So we made learning fun. On day you sat in a square. The next day you sat in a circle, until you knew one from the other. You know we did all kinds of things. We taught love and that people had to work together and we had projects where they had to work together and share. You know, for me, I would try to start with change at the lowest level and so hopefully children will grow up--but you have to get a school that continues. You can't do that for two years and then send them over to Trump Academy. That's simplistic, but I hope that helps.