

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Lowndes County: Unfinished Business

### 5.1 Catherine Flowers: Finished & Unfinished Business

**Catherine Flowers:** What the Movement did for Lowndes County was help people obtain their right to vote. I think that people do not understand the significance of Lowndes County to the Voting Rights Act. Because it's one thing to pass an act, and it's another thing to make it work. And Lowndes County was the voting rights in action. It was more than a march. A march is symbolic, but this was an opportunity where young people, from around the United States, came to Lowndes County to help local people give voice to their, to what they wanted all the time. Helped them put it into action through the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and actually educated them—it was like multi-layered—educated people about the importance of local government, what the roles of all these elected offices were. And then it also helped people to do what they hadn't done since Reconstruction, which is run for office and put them in a position to actually win those offices. So what happened in the sixties with SNCC gave rise to what's happening in the courthouse right now—is that everybody that's over there, that's in any elected position in Lowndes County, have to give credit to the fact that if it wasn't for SNCC, they wouldn't be there. SNCC's involvement with local people who set the stage for them to eventually get the political gains in terms of holding the office. I think what is—the unfinished part of it, not just here in Lowndes County but across the U.S. is the access to the economics, the economic engines that churn things because you've got to have more than policy. We also know that sometimes if you have the economic where-with-all, you can influence the policy too, and that's what's happening right now. And we don't have that yet. We also don't have—there was not the type of investment-I think do benign neglect—the type of investment in terms of infrastructure here in the county to make sure that the people could be able to recruit and be able to have the kinds of services and businesses here that can create a thriving community where folk won't be dependent still on the old power structures that were in place. Or replace those power structures back in the 1960s, so I think that that's the part where I'm working, is to make sure that we get that infrastructure in place.

### 5.2 Lillian McGill: Water Lines & Phone Lines

**Lillian McGill:** Ok. When we started, people were drinking out of cattle ponds and hauling water from whomever to drink. If you didn't have a dollar for a barrel of water, then people come and bring it, set it out in the tree in this great big thing and put these dirty sheets over it. This was to keep the birds from dumping down in it. Wiggle worms and everything else was down in there. And even to Mr. Kelley and Mrs. Moore, they were using that water to take baths and they were using that water to wash and do dishes. But they would get their water from up to, Mr. Ellie Favor's house. And so many times after we started registering to vote, some of them were getting water from Hayneville. They stopped them from getting water from there. So they couldn't go and get the barrel of water, even though they were paying for it. You don't get no water here. You messing with that mess. We decided then that we would try to get some water, and no water was out there in those areas. And so nobody had a pump. Nobody had a

well. Nobody. And Ms. Annie Queen Miller was the first person to pay her hundred dollars down to get her water. Ms. Annie Queen, over at Black Belt. And down to Mosses, we sold, I helped, I helped Mr. Jordan Gilham and Mr. Logan and them were spearheading that, but we sold fish sandwiches and ice cream and pig ear sandwiches to get that property and get that water line going through there. But Ms. Mattie Lee Moorner went door to door to get people to sign up for that water line. And some of them were scared to sign up because they didn't want their name on the sheet of paper. And they did an area map for the area of houses, and I sat up—very pregnant—til two o'clock in the morning finding everybody's house on that. We also fought to get a phone because there were no telephones over there. And when we went to Hayneville, the phone company's seat because they had to right away—they had the contract for the area. And the right away. They said, "We don't have the money for it." So we decided that we would sue 'em. "Oh yeah. We would be glad to put it in. We just don't have the money." So they were able to get the money because of that potential suit coming up on them, and then they let 'em have it.

### 5.3 Wendell Paris: C.J. Jones: Staying in the South and Working

**Wendell Paris:** But when he came down and he fell in love with the South, so he stayed basically in the South from then on. He may have gone back to New Jersey for one semester, but then he came to work in Lowndes County and was here for, I guess that was the election in November of '66. And stayed on after that. He worked for us for an organization we established in '67 that grew out of the TICEP, Tuskegee Institute Community Education Program, was called the Southern Cooperative Development Movement. There were four states—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee—that were engaged in doing cooperative economic development, which was also a SNCC concept, you know, largely from SNCC's promoting ASCS, Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service, organizing. ASCS had money right on hand, and they could hand you money in a day. Government money to do your, let's see, whatever you—not whatever you wanted, but whatever they had decided that they were going to fund for that year. If they were going to fund say building catfish ponds, then you could get 85 percent of the cost of building a catfish pond. They always had money for cotton. You having your grain crops, but you could do other stuff, like erosion control. Fencing. If you see a five-strand barbed wire fence, even today, that's probably one that's been subsidized by the federal government. So SNCC was organizing around that, and we found that through TICEP, which led us to, C.J., he was involved in what was called the establishment of the SEASHA, Southeast Alabama Self Help Association, which was a twelve county cooperative that went from Lowndes County east to the Georgia line, and then SWAFCA, Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association, went from Lowndes County west to the Mississippi line, so we were actively engaged in that largely because of the work in Lowndes and Macon and the surrounding counties, so C.J. and I have been working together off and on ever since then. So whenever I'm out of work, I'll call C.J. and he'll find me a job. And sometimes I found him a job here and there, but we kind of stayed in close contact through the years. But the Lowndes County experience was what really convinced C.J. Jones to stay in the South and work. That there was plenty potential here and wanted to—he said one of the greatest mistakes SNCC ever made was to leave off organizing in the rural South because there's so much. The land basis here is the main thing. You've got land here that Black people owned.

## 5.4 Catherine Flowers: Use My Access to Help Open Doors for Lowndes County

**Catherine Flowers:** And I came back home in 2000, and I decided—one of the persons that was my advisor at the time was Bob Mants. And Bob said, "Catherine, you can't work for anybody." He said, "You're going to have to work for yourself." And he said, "Because if you want to understand this county," he said, "Go to the courthouse and look at who's holding the mortgages on the property." So I knew what he meant was that I had to be independent, so I could remain independent and make independent decisions. So I started out—I started off first, I did get a job in the NAACP. It was a short-term job, the voter empowerment project, where we elected the first Black mayor of Selma, Perkins. So I did that, and after that I started my own, I started my own company doing economic development, and my first client was Lowndes County, the county. And my role was to use the access to people I had met going all around the place to help them open doors for Lowndes County. And in that process, I had met this gentleman named Bob Woodson. Bob Woodson is a Black political conservative, but personally, politically I'm independent because I feel that we have, we may not agree on everything but we have permanent interests. And Bob had worked in urban communities. And I said, "You need to come and see what's going on here." So he did, and he came, and through his first visit, we were taken to a home of a family, the MacLeans, who had been arrested because they had raw sewage on the ground. And Mr. Woodson got in touch with Bill Raspberry, who wrote a column about it, and that was the beginning of my getting involved in the environmental justice side, because it was real clear that there was not going to be any sustainable economic development until we addressed these issues. And poor people should not be harassed and arrested simply for being poor and not being able to afford the remedy, which the state was saying that they had to have these onsite systems. And they had an onsite system, but it wasn't working properly. And some of the people that were involved with the state had helped to design it. So we were able to, at that particular time because of all the publicity around that, to get Senator Shelby to sponsor a congressional appropriation that the EPA held up for eight years. But in the meantime, we were able to stop people from being arrested in the county who could not afford onsite sanitation. And initially we were listening to the people at the health department about the narrative. The narrative was they just need to be able to afford the systems, and then that's going to take care of the problem. But eight years later, they were trying to arrest a woman here in Lowndes County who was pregnant who could not afford onsite sanitation. And when I went to her home, I was bitten by mosquitoes and broke out in a rash, and asked my doctor to test to see if I had caught something. The mosquitoes were on top of the raw sewage, so I wear boots now. Because I had on a dress that day, and so anyway, the test came back negative. There was nothing wrong. So I read this op-ed piece in the New York Times where this guy had written about how tropical diseases were now in the United States. So I wrote him about my experience, and he was in Atlanta the next week, and we met, and he said I'm going to send my parasitologist there because it sounds like hookworm. And he said, "I want you to remember that anytime you find poverty in the world, you're going to find some of these diseases." Or some of these parasites, which led to the hookworm study that we just released. They didn't find just hookworm. They found several tropical parasites here, which shows the intersection between climate change and environmental justice. But at the same time, what was very helpful was that the appropriation that Senator Shelby sponsored, ended up allowing us to do a house-to-house survey of

Lowndes County. We went to 2,800 homes, which is over half the homes here in Lowndes County. And we realized there were three different issues with sanitation. One, people that were straight piping and could not afford onsite sanitation. And we found two people that had bought, had actually purchased their septic systems, and they were certified, approved by the state, and when it rains, the grounds becomes saturated with water and it's backing up into their homes. And the third problem that we found was that these municipalities like Hayneville, where people live along the lagoon, they build a lagoon along where people live, and it overflows into their yards, and it's also forcing sewage back into their homes, usually through their bathtubs. So as a result, my work now has been around working with people like Senator Corey Booker who has been here. It's almost like it was before. There's all these people from the outside. The outside agitators. But the people that are coming here from the outside helping us to change the policies.

## 5.5 Catherine Flowers: Working on Finding Solutions Ourselves

**Catherine Flowers:** So what we're doing is not waiting on them to help us with solutions because Sidney Logan, Jr., whose father Sidney Logan was on the—who was one of the candidates on the Black Panther Party ticket—helped create a device to propel the space shuttle. So people in Lowndes County have the wherewithal to do whatever they allow us to do, but we're not waiting on them to find solutions. So we're working on finding solutions ourselves because the narrative that unfortunately the elected officials have fallen into now, is a narrative that would allow them to get whatever crumbs they give the county. And they don't want to speak out against these things that they know are simply not working because they feel like it will jeopardize what little funds they do get. But we're not bound by that. So what I'm doing is working directly with the community. I'm not working with elected officials. I'm working with the unofficial leaders in the community. One of the persons working with us—Jonathan Daniels stayed at her family's home—they have a library in Hayneville where, on their property, and Mary MacDonald talks about how people shot in their home during that particular time. Her mother's in her nineties. It would be great if you could interview her. But her mother's in her nineties and still has clear memories of the stuff that happened at that particular time. It was those kinds of people that we identified throughout the community that helped us do that house-to-house survey.

## 5.6 Catherine Flowers: Every Time I Hear Black Panther, I Get Pride

**Catherine Flowers:** I think one of the things about the Movement here that I learned the word Pan Africanism here in Lowndes County because of Stokely, you know! And the All-African People's Revolutionary Party. These are things that I never would have been exposed to had I been from somewhere else and not from here. So every time I hear Black Panther, I get pride. I get pride, and I feel a connection to the people in Oakland because of that. And when I went to D.C., and especially Detroit, I met people when I was in Detroit who told me they were part of the Black Panther Party in Detroit. And I said, "Well, I'm from Lowndes County." And that was like an automatic instant connection. It was like we're cousins. So yes, anytime I hear Black Panther I feel pride.