

Bernice Robinson interview excerpts. In *Refuse to Stand Silently by : An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-64*, by Eliot Wiggington. 247-54 (excerpts). New York: Doubleday, 1992.

That's the way we met at Highlander. You're Sue, I'm Bernice, you're Eliot. I don't know that you teach school. I don't know what degree you've got. You don't know whether I've got one or not. This is the way we came together at Highlander. That was Highlander's success, really, because nobody was intimidated by anybody else. You never knew what another person was really doing unless you just got in a personal conversation. [...]

Esau Jenkins said, . . . "I need to get my people registered to vote. They got to read a part of the Constitution and they don't know how to read and I'd like a school set up." He went on to tell them how he was trying to teach them in the bus going back and forth to work. [...]

He turned the whole workshop around. [*Laughs*] Everybody became interested in this, and that's all we talked about the last couple of days. What are we going to do about this situation on Johns Island? [...]

By the time they got it all set up, it was the end of 1956. That's when they approached me about being the teacher. "You know," I said, "I never been no teacher and I'm not going to be a teacher. I told you up there at Highlander that I would help you all in any way that I could, and I would even help a teacher *with* the school, but I ain't no teacher!"

Well, they just laid the law down to me. "There is nobody else to do it. We don't want a certified teacher because they are accustomed to working by a straitlaced curriculum. They wouldn't be able to bend, to give. We need a community worker to do it who cares for the people, who understands the people, who can communicate with the people, and someone who has been to Highlander who knows Highlander's philosophy, so there's nobody to do it but you. Either you do it or we don't have the school. You know a program is needed. You know there is no way you can get out of it at this point." [*Laughing*]

So I said, "Okay." [...]

I had to do all the recruiting. I went around to all the churches to explain what the adults who came would learn how to do, and to tell them that the school would be free, and all that. Luckily, I had been to NAACP meetings on the island and various workshops, so I really knew the people. I also knew that many of them had enrolled in public school adult classes every year and that they'd start filtering out in about a month and the classes would have to close because they didn't fill these people's needs—so I knew this first school would have to be different. I didn't really know exactly *how*, and I didn't really know where I was going with it because I had nobody to show me anything about how to teach a school, and so I was quite nervous. In fact, that first night I guess I was *more* nervous than the people. They came in that night and I told them, "I'm not going to be the teacher. We're going to learn together. You're going to teach me some things, and maybe there are a few things I might be able to teach you, but I don't

consider myself a teacher. I just feel that I'm here to learn with you. We'll learn things together." I think that sorta settled the folks down, you know?

I started them out with some materials I brought that two of my sisters-in-law who taught elementary school used to teach kids how to read and write. But then something hit me while I was talking, and I realized then that I had no kind of materials to deal with *adults*. I would *have* to put them on a different level. So then I asked them what *they* would like to learn. They told me that they wanted to read a newspaper, they wanted to read the Bible, they wanted to know how to fill out an application blank you had to fill out at that time to get a money order so they could order things by catalog. They didn't understand those things. I just made notes of all the things they said they wanted to learn, and I just threw out the material I had brought with me because it was too juvenile. I just had to reach them on their level. [...]

I used newspaper ads like the specials from the grocery store as arithmetic. "If two pounds of beans are forty-nine cents, and you want four pounds of beans, how much will it be?" That sort of thing. Lots of this produce they were growing themselves, so it was meeting them where they were. For the men, I used problems like, "How many gallons of gas would it take you to go from here to Charleston?" If they wanted to measure to put up a fence, we'd work out the math for that. [...]

But, like I said, they presented me with what they wanted to learn and I taught them that, and we really had a good time with it. That same curriculum went all the way through the Citizenship Schools.

At the end of five months, all fourteen of the pupils that I started with had received their registration certificates, they could read and write their own names, and they could do arithmetic.

After that, it just grew like crazy. People started registering [to vote] on the island as an outgrowth of the class. When students got their [voter] registration certificates, they would be at school ahead of me, and as soon as I walked in the door, they were waving them in my face. "*I got it! I got it!*" And their enthusiasm bubbled on out into the community to people they knew who could go and register who hadn't before. Everybody wanted to know, "What's happening? Why are the Johns Island people getting registered so fast?"

So then they wanted a class down on Wadmalaw Island.