

## SNCC, fifty years later

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist  
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(NNPA) - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday every January becomes an occasion for looking back at the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. As the celebration of the King Holiday leads into February and Black History Month, it's a time to consider not only how far we've come but how far we still have to go, and to reflect on some of the milestones in movement history. This year, one of those national and personal milestones is the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

On February 1, 1960, when I was a senior at Spelman College in Atlanta, four Black freshmen from North Carolina A&T State University sat in at the Whites-only lunch counter in the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's store. It was just the spark I and so many Black youth were waiting for to stand up against the segregation that daily assaulted our dignity and lives. I and thousands of other students were galvanized to strike our blow for freedom, giving birth to the sit-in movement, the formation of SNCC, and a new era of student activism that energized the larger Civil Rights Movement. People often forget that children and youth were major frontline soldiers in the Civil Rights Movement. Little Ruby Bridges in New Orleans and the Little Rock Nine and other young Black children desegregated schools across the South, often standing up to howling mobs. They were instrumental in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Young people coordinated voter registration drives, participated in Freedom Rides testing segregation laws on interstate buses, conducted voter education and other activities during 1964's Freedom Summer in Mississippi including Freedom Schools, and more. My generation was blessed beyond measure to be in the right places at the right times to experience and help bring transforming change to the South and to America.

One key point about the student leaders from that time is that many of us continued to build on the passion and commitment unleashed as teenagers and twenty-year-olds and dedicated our entire adult lives to advocacy and service. While SNCC lasted only six years, SNCC alumni carried on.

Representative John Lewis has been a member of Congress since 1986 and continues to be one of our country's strongest advocates for equality and justice, fighting his battles nationally as he did earlier in the streets of Selma. Julian Bond served in the Georgia General Assembly over twenty years before becoming chairman of the NAACP. The quiet and brilliant Bob Moses—who we all looked up to although he was just a few years older—returned to his calling as a teacher, later founding the Algebra Project to improve math education for children of color. They and so many others followed up on the ideals we believed in and continued doing our part to make a better world for the next generations.

The adults who became advisors and colleagues to SNCC students and nurtured us were some of the most extraordinary people in the Civil Rights Movement. When the first sit-ins began there was no mechanism in place to connect us all, but Mrs. Ella Baker, who worked with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), reached out and organized the April 1960 meeting at Shaw University which brought student sit-in activists together. I took my first plane ride traveling from Spelman to Shaw on a plane chartered by SCLC to join Dr. King with about 200 other college students that Easter weekend, which led to SNCC's creation. Ella Baker insisted that we find our own voice and form our own organization and not become

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the youth arm of SCLC or an established civil rights group.

She became a trusted SNCC advisor and mentor who demanded the best of me and all the young and older adults around her. When SNCC activists began the Mississippi voter registration effort in Sunflower County, Mississippi and appealed for supporters Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was the first to raise her hand. She became a SNCC field secretary; helped organize voter registration drives at great risk to life and limb during the 1964 Freedom Summer; and was the most prominent member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that famously challenged Mississippi's all-White official delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention which led to a new Democratic Party. She remains a mighty lantern for all of us who knew, looked up to, and learned from her great spirit and courage. Every time my courage wanes I think of her.

The feisty and empowered children and youth of the 1950s and 1960s are examples for today's teenagers and college-aged young people. They need to hear that you are never too young to fight for what you believe in and they need to be empowered to stand up for themselves and their communities. They need to know their proud legacy of struggle and how SNCC and many younger children challenged the entrenched White power structure and faced daily risk of arrest, injury, or death. When Dr. King was in jail in Birmingham, trying to stop Bull Connor's brutal rule, it was the children of Birmingham who responded with the marches and withstood fire hoses and police dogs to topple segregation in that city. Nothing was more important to us than our freedom and justice. I wrote in my college diary the day after being arrested in a sit-in at Atlanta's city hall cafeteria: "SOMETHING WORTH LIVING AND DYING FOR!" Several weeks later I wrote: "These are the most exciting, rewarding, and gratifying days of my life. Change is pervading—change I'm helping bring in. I'm useful and I'm serving and I'm so grateful."

How do we give our young people today a similar sense of purpose and a cause worth dying for as they face the war zones in their cities and a cradle to prison pipeline that threatens the last 50 years of social and racial progress? How do we catalyze the next Civil Rights Movement to end the pervasive poverty, illiteracy, and racial disparities that stanch the hopes and dreams of millions of our children? It's time.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) .