

"Nobody Knows My Name": On The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

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"We knew we were subjected to being killed. This did not matter to us. There was so much at stake, we couldn't allow the segregationists to stop us."

-- Lucretia Collins

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional in Brown vs Board of Education. The High Court's decision led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, overturned the 1896 ruling in Plessy vs Ferguson. The Brown decision involved a consolidation of test cases argued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP's Legal Defense Fund selected test cases to tackle de jure segregation in the United States. The Brown decision helped usher in a new era of protest during the 1960s. The NAACP was one of several organizations dedicated to fighting for the civil rights of black people. The NAACP is the oldest and still one of the most active civil rights organizations. Almost everyone has at least heard of the NAACP or knows something about it. However, the NAACP was not the only organization that worked during the civil rights movement. One organization that is almost always forgotten is the *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* (SNCC). The organization called "SNICK" has not been given credit for its role in the struggle for civil rights and black equality.

SNCC is often overlooked in history because it was not as established as the four other civil rights organizations. Most people remember the other four because they were led by famous black people who aroused tremendous public support. All of these organizations had chapters across the country and developed their own tactic for social change. The other four organizations, like SNCC, were instrumental in helping to lead the struggle for black equality.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was started in 1909 by black intellectual W.E.B. Dubois. The NAACP believed firmly that litigation was the key to obtaining equality. Eventually, a Legal Defense Fund was started to select test cases to fight against de jure segregation. During the movement, black journalist Roy Wilkins served as its executive director. A second organization, the National Urban League (NUL) was started in 1910 to address the socioeconomic problems faced by blacks and poor whites in urban areas. The NUL was very concerned that inner city blacks

were overlooked in the struggle for equality. During the movement, Whitney Young served as NUL's executive director. A third organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was started in 1942 to address the economic, social and political needs of black people. CORE was mainly an interracial organization that believed firmly in the use of nonviolent direct action to achieve change. James Farmer served as executive director of CORE for much of the civil rights movement. Lastly, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SCLC, was started in 1957 to coordinate the efforts of black ministers. Of course, SCLC's was led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Black ministers became increasingly important to the movement because they could coordinate large numbers of people in their churches. SCLC was dedicated to nonviolent direct action by the masses in order to achieve change.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was organized in response to the growing involvement of students in the movement. Across the country, students began to participate in the struggle in a variety of ways. Jobs and family obligations deterred many older adults from becoming involved in protest. Older adults also lacked the mobility because of their other responsibilities. Students were prime civil rights activists because they did not have family responsibilities or permanent jobs. Students could basically go wherever needed in the struggle for black equality.

In 1960, the sit-in became a chief tactic used by students during the movement. The sit-in would serve as a guiding point in the formation of SNCC. A major sit-in occurred in Greensboro, N.C., at a Woolworth lunch counter. The sit-in was led by Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Franklin McCain and David Richmond, four freshmen at N.C. A&T State University. After this, students began to defy segregation across North Carolina, as lunch counters were rocked in Durham, Winston-Salem, High Point, Charlotte and Raleigh. The Greensboro sit-ins also inspired student movement across the South. Students sat down at counters in many states, including Tennessee, Florida, Virginia, South Carolina and Alabama. The sit-in became such a viable tactic that CORE decided to train students how to protect themselves from violence while participating in nonviolent protest. Jim Lawson, a Vanderbilt theology student and activist, led many of the nonviolent workshops. The training was necessary so that students could provide some protection against possible brutality at the hands of racists and the

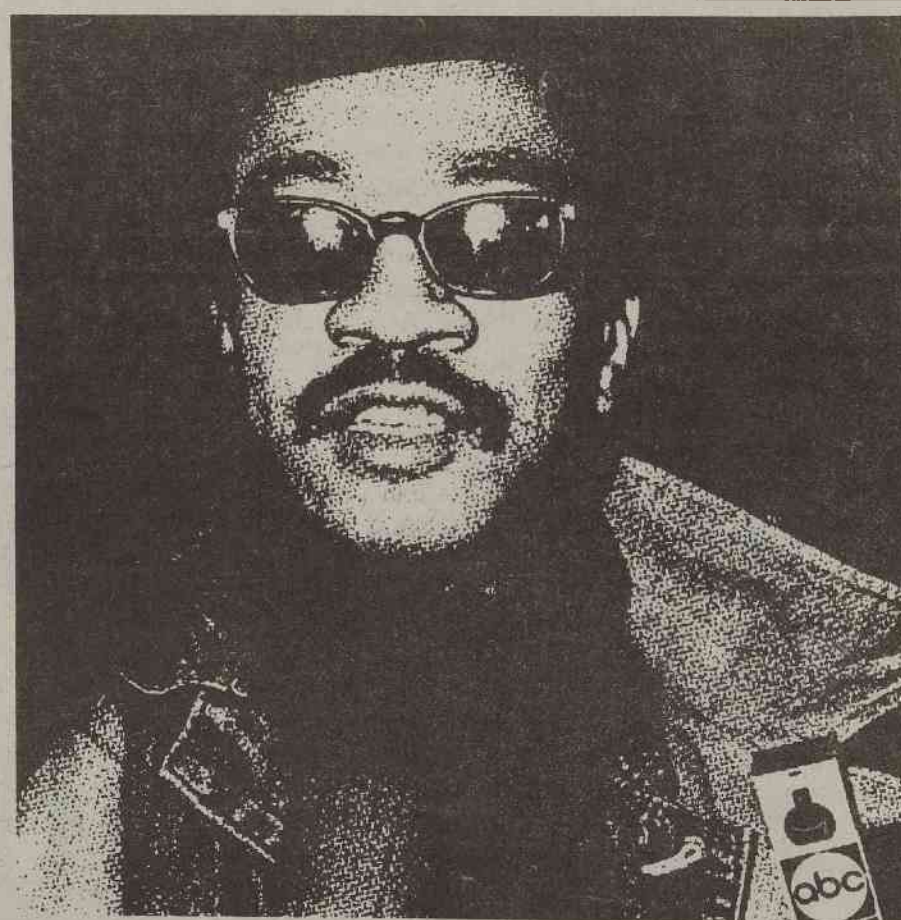
police.

SCLC executive director Ella Jo Baker saw the need to coordinate student efforts. She envisioned a movement spearheaded by young, bold African-Americans willing to provide leadership in the struggle for black equality. Ella Baker called a meeting of sit-in leaders on April 15, 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. After two days of workshops, the students agreed to form a Temporary Coordinating Committee dedicated to the goals of nonviolent direct action. In May of 1960, the committee selected Marion Barry, a Fisk graduate student, as its first chairman. The group met again in October of 1960 in Atlanta, Ga. At that meeting, the committee became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with Charles McDew, a sit-in leader from Orangeburg, S.C., as its new chairman.

SNCC was an organization dedicated to uplifting the masses of black people. SNCC rejected litigation as a sufficient means to achieve social change. SNCC believed grass roots civil rights efforts would lead to a change in the status quo. Grass roots civil rights involved confronting racism and segregation head on by going into areas where blacks had been mistreated the most.

Consequently, SNCC employed field secretaries who went into the cities in order to organize local movements among people. Field secretaries were civil rights "social workers" who went out among the people in order to combat racial injustices. SNCC's belief in a people's movement grew from its ideology of *participatory democracy*. Participatory democracy involved SNCC mobilizing local blacks to empower themselves so they could fight against racial oppression. SNCC members served as pioneers because they went into cities to organize movements long before other organizations did. While the NAACP was in court, SNCC workers risked their lives to help their people.

SNCC leadership is also important to look at when examining the organization's history. SNCC elected an executive board that did not have much power. The executive board members found it difficult to stay in touch with the field staff. SNCC was headed by a chairman and an executive secretary. John Lewis, a leader of the Nashville sit-ins, became one of the organization's most influential chairman. James Forman, a Chicago teacher, quit his job to become the executive secretary for SNCC. Forman worked out of a small office in



H. Rap Brown, successor of Stokely Carmichael as head of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee.