

Civil rights comrades remember Marion Barry

By Mike DeBonis December 5, 2014 The Washington Post

While Marion Barry's legacy serving Washington was being celebrated in a church across town, a smaller gathering was focused on an earlier part of Barry's life: Veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee gathered Friday night near U Street to remember Barry, who was the storied civil rights group's first chairman.

The attendees included legendary organizer Bob Moses, former SNCC Chairman Charles McDew, former Barry aide Courtland Cox and former D.C. Council member Frank Smith, whose African American Civil War Museum hosted the event.

Many alumni were in town for a previously scheduled meeting of the SNCC Legacy Project, Smith said. "The stars sometime align for you," said Smith.

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), perhaps SNCC's best-known leader, was not in attendance. But he paid his respects to Barry Thursday at the John A. Wilson Building. Barry's association with "snick" was later subsumed in large part by his ups and downs as D.C. mayor. But his time as a civil rights activist from 1960 through 1965 is what led him to Washington, and it explains how he came to power and, once he had it, how he wielded it.

Barry, Smith said, will be remembered as "the most productive of all our leaders in terms of producing jobs and housing."

SNCC's most enduring work was done in Mississippi, the state of Barry's birth and earliest years, home of the Freedom Rides and the Freedom Summer of 1964. Barry was involved in all of that, recalled Moses, but he was — like virtually all of SNCC — not of Mississippi. Barry had left as a young boy, moving to Memphis with his mother, Mattie Cummings, and he spent his formative years in Tennessee.

But among a group that was dominated by northerners — like Moses, a New Yorker, and a fair number of liberal whites — Barry's Mississippi roots, helped foment the first direct civil rights action by Mississippi blacks, among high school students in the fall of 1961. "It wouldn't have happened like that without the catalytic agency of Marion Barry," Moses said. Once in power, Moses said, Barry put the movement's ethos into action. "What he picked up from SNCC is the idea of 'We the people.' You really have to make common cause with the grass roots and actually work to help them have a voice. You're not just advocating on their behalf. You're helping them find their voice."

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, SNCC began to unravel and its members went off to follow their destinies. Speaking at Friday's event, Larry Rubin recalled how he and Barry decided to come to Washington: SNCC's expertise was in voter registration and voting rights, he said, "who needs it most, but Washington, D.C.?"

Barry was never very successful personally in expanding the city's voting rights and self-determination. The home rule advances in the early 1970s can mainly be credited to other figures, and no real advance in congressional voting rights took place by Barry's death. He made his mark on D.C. in other ways.

Several Barry aides — Cox, who ran his minority business program; Jim Hudson, a lawyer, businessman and former federal official; and Pauline Schneider, a public finance attorney — described how Barry opened the doors of District government to a generation of African Americans, women and others previously denied opportunities — from the lowest rungs of the ladder to the highest.

From bus drivers and garbage men to, as Cox noted, black tycoons like Franklin Raines and Robert L. Johnson. "He did that," Cox said of Barry. "He made the difference. ... When he had the chance, when he had the power, he tried to help somebody."

Timothy Jenkins, a SNCC veteran and former president of the University of the District of Columbia, said Barry was one of many "spared martyrs" of the movement who went on to improve people's lives. Jenkins made an allusion to a new civil rights cause against police violence, invoking the choking death of Eric Garner in New York City earlier this year. Barry "was one of the first ... to tell the people of the world that the people of Washington can't breathe," Jenkins said, to murmurs of recognition in the crowd.

So is there a Marion Barry for the injustices of the current age?

Hudson, for one, was skeptical. "His era has probably passed," he said. Marion Barry "would be difficult to duplicate."