

For a SNCC member, Aug. 28, 1963 was a day of joy, anger and hope

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Crowds pack the Mall during the March on Washington. Bruce Davidson / Magnum Photos

On August 28, 1963, I got to the Mall at around 7:30 a.m. Only a handful of people had arrived and I was a little worried about whether anyone was going to show.

I'd spent the summer in New York at the national headquarters of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, working with Bayard Rustin, the march director, and a dozen young people. I raised funds to charter buses to bring Southerners to Washington. It took us eight weeks — without social media, fax machines, email, and only limited use of the telephone — to organize the march. We routinely worked 10 to 12 hour days in the Harlem office, and many nights when Eleanor Holmes (now Congresswoman Norton), Rachele Horowitz and I would arrive at Rachele's one bedroom co-op on Eighth Avenue and West 24th Street, we'd find Bob Dylan sitting on the sofa serenading my sister, Dorie. All I could think was I wish he'd leave so I could pull out the sofa and go to sleep.

Finally, the day of the march had arrived. Washington was almost shut down. My worst fears were allayed when people started coming, first in small groups, and then in huge numbers, marching under banners announcing their labor unions, religious affiliations and hometowns. They surged toward the Washington Monument for the warm-up program of freedom songs by entertainers such as Joan Baez, Odetta, Josh White, Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary, the SNCC Freedom Singers and, of course, Dylan. The crowd swelled so quickly that the leaders of the march — A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, John Lewis, Floyd McKissick, and Whitney Young — were caught off-guard (they had been meeting with members of Congress at the Capitol) and had to be rushed to the front to lead the procession.

With my staff pass I was able to stand on the grounds of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial and look out at an unimaginable sea of people. And what a sight! The mood of the mostly black marchers — about a third of the crowd was white — was joyful, friendly and celebratory. Some people put out their picnic lunches, while others waded in the Reflecting Pool. And, the weather cooperated; it was only in the eighties.

After the warm-up program, we marched to the Lincoln Memorial for an official program of speeches. There was so much for me to see and absorb, especially if I compared it to my small town upbringing.

I was 19 years old, about to enter my senior year at Tougaloo College, in Tougaloo, Miss., and a member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Growing up in the South, racial segregation dominated every facet of our lives. And worse, racial violence: the murders of people like my mentor Medgar Evers, the firebombings of the homes of activists like Hartman Turnbow — who was arrested for the arson of his own home after he fired his gun at the nightriders who set his house ablaze — the beatings and harassment. I failed the voter registration literacy test three times while I was in college. (I am sure I was more literate than Therron Lynd, the Forest County voting registrar who passed all whites and failed most blacks.) More than anything, we wanted the Southern movement's cause to be placed front and center before the federal government, hoping it would lead to the passage of the voting rights act.

When I saw Harry Belafonte leading a group of Hollywood actors onstage I knew, for the first

time, that support for the largely Southern-based civil rights movement had expanded so much that it extended to the far reaches of the nation. Charlton Heston, Diahann Carroll, Burt Lancaster, Sidney Poitier, Marlon Brando, James Garner, Sammy Davis, Jr., Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Lena Horne, and James Baldwin stayed through the entire program.

As I moved between the stage and the marchers, I ran into Lena Horne at the base of the Lincoln Memorial. I had, met her earlier in the summer. She'd left Mississippi a few days before her host, Evers, was murdered.

When several media people asked her for interviews, she told them they should interview me because I lived in the South and could speak to how horrible the conditions were. She thrust me in front of the television camera to be interviewed by NBC's Nancy Dickerson, who, as a woman, was a pioneer in television journalism. When I returned to my home in Hattiesburg, Miss., a week later, Mother said that she and all the neighbors saw me on television.

While the 1963 March on Washington has become synonymous with King's "I have a dream" speech, my strongest recollection of that day was the attempt by some to censor the speech of John Lewis, who was our SNCC chairman. Washington Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle got a copy of the speech the night before the March, objected to some of the militant language, and threatened to pull out of giving the invocation unless some of the language was changed. O'Boyle denounced a part of the speech that we in SNCC viewed as perfectly logical and sensible:

"For those who have said, 'Be patient and wait!' We must say, 'Patience is a dirty and nasty word.' We cannot be patient, we do not want to be free gradually, we want our freedom, and we want it now."

John's fiery, uncompromising views represented those of us young civil rights activists working on the front lines in some of the most dangerous places in the South. In fact, we were called the "shock troops" or the "Green Beret" of the movement.

We met O'Boyle's attempt to censor our voices with outrage because we felt he had no moral authority to dictate what our leader had to say about the dangers we faced in our work. Children had been mowed down with fire hoses and chased with police dogs in Birmingham. Medgar Evers had just been murdered in Mississippi. Nothing short of immediate passage of the civil rights bill was acceptable to us.

John finally relented and made token changes to the speech when Randolph, the real convener of the march, told him that he had waited all his life for this opportunity. "Please don't ruin it," he told John in an almost fatherly way. "We've come this far together. Let us stay together." Nevertheless, we felt betrayed, disillusioned and angry. When King rose to speak it was for me, anti-climatic because of the censoring of John's speech. And even though King gave an eloquent and uplifting speech that moved the audience greatly, for me it was not the singular event of the day, but part of broad panoply of events.

King's speech was a benediction of sorts; a summary of how bad things were and how optimistic he was that there would be better times ahead.

At the end of the march we SNCC workers crossed arms and sang, "We shall overcome," realizing that the March would not solve the nation's racial problems, but it gave us greater resolve to fight against injustices.

Back at Washington's Statler Hilton lobby on 16th Street, I saw Malcolm X talking to reporters and onlookers about what he called the "farce on Washington." When asked by a reporter if he was there as a participant, he said he had come as an observer. He criticized black Americans for "standing between two white men—Washington and Lincoln—begging for your freedom".

As I listened, I wondered whether King's hopeful dream for the future would be realized, or if Malcolm's critical and jaundiced view foreshadowed what was to come.

Three weeks later the most horrific example of our reality occurred when the four girls were murdered while attending Sunday school in Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. There would be more difficult days to come before the dramatic changes we see today. When President Obama speaks at the March on Washington on Wednesday I hope he tells us that he will fulfill the unfinished business of the March half a century ago demanding jobs and justice, and aggressively defend voting rights for all citizens. And I hope our young people will continue to fight to make this a better nation.

Joyce Ladner served as vice president of academic affairs and as interim president of Howard University during the 1990s. She also served on the D.C. financial control board.

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