

## Opinion: On civil rights, then and now, it's up to the youth

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The commemorations surrounding the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington can leave one with the impression that the civil rights movement was primarily marches, speeches, demonstrations and finally one day a voting rights bill was passed by Congress and signed by President Johnson.

Young people did much more than that.

They changed the political landscape of this country with dangerous door-to-door, church to church, and hamlet-to-hamlet organizing work in the apartheid south. They risked beatings, incarceration and, all too often, murder. Out of the 1960's sit-ins came one of the first youth-led organizations in the United States – the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These young leaders made the courageous decision not to become the youth arm of the NAACP or King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Because its members had brought whole communities to their knees in the early 60's with their disciplined sit-in strategies, the SNCC did not feel the need to take counsel from ministers or lawyers who had not been on the front lines as much as they had. And standing right behind them in support of their desire to establish their own organization was Ella Jo Baker, a 5'2", fifty-seven year old black woman from North Carolina who in the 1940's and 50's had organized all over the south for the NAACP and had been an assistant to Dr. King at the SCLC.

Ms Baker did not believe in focusing on promoting charismatic leaders – she relied on young field staff. She often said, “a strong people don't need strong leaders” and mentored SNCC field staff to go into communities and really listen. Ms. Baker worked one-on-one with these young organizers to divest themselves of any sense of entitlement because of their background or education. The result was a disciplined cadre of experienced young people who went into small towns and isolated rural areas where few national civil rights leaders ever visited.

I was invited to work for SNCC in 1962 and worked in Selma from 1963 through 1964. During this time, some on the SNCC staff, along with local Mississippi leaders, floated the idea of building a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as an alternative to the segregationist Mississippi Democratic Party. White students from the north would be invited to come to Mississippi and, during this ‘freedom summer’ help organize the MFDP. The plan was to send MFDP delegates to attend the 1964 National Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City and challenge the seating of the segregationists.

I thought the idea insane: how was it possible in 2-3 months to organize in every Mississippi County and build a proper party at the state level? Miraculously, out of the chaos came the MFDP party. This was testimony to the indefatigable hope, energy and tenacity of young people who would not take ‘no’ for an answer.

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The challenge however, failed. We naively thought that if the country understood the actuality of apartheid within its borders, if proof was produced about how people were denied the vote and punished for trying, if witnesses could come forth and testify about their horrendous experiences, then surely the Democratic Party would do the right thing and seat the delegates from the MFDP. After all, the segregationist Mississippi Democratic Party was already pledged to vote for Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, and furthermore, refused to sign on to the Democratic party's national platform. President Johnson, however, would not tolerate the 'rabble' from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party derailing his convention; with carrot and the stick, he suppressed the MFDP challenge.

But the MFDP supporters in the Democratic party promised to change the rules for seating future delegates. The rules did change – but years later, in 1972. A Democratic Party commission reported guidelines to take “affirmative steps to encourage representation on the National Convention delegation of minority groups, young people and women in reasonable relationship to their presence in the population of the State.”

It took (too) many more years before Democratic Party convention delegations began to represent not just black, but Latino, Native American, Asian, women and youth. But what is important, is that today, largely because of those rules, the complexion and gender of local, state and national legislative began to grow more diverse, and there is a black President in the White House.

This is what young people, with their allies, did in the 20th century.

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Now in the 21st century we are witnessing a cycle of history all too familiar. Just like after Reconstruction the federal government pulled back and the Jim Crow Era rolled mercilessly across the South, today's political landscape is beginning to revert to voter suppression. With the Supreme Court authorizing a pull back from the monitoring of voter suppression, the virus of legislation limiting voter participation is infecting the US body politic. It almost feels like we have to start all over again in order to accomplish and secure the equitable representation envisioned by the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge.

Here's the important lesson. All the speeches, protests, large marches, and commemorations that represent the glories of the 20th century civil rights movement are but smoke and mirrors if the day-to-day, door-to-door, block-by-block, hamlet by hamlet organizing such as was done by young SNCC organizers is ignored.

To focus only on iconic leaders and their iconic speeches is to sanitize history and disenfranchise youth from their legacy as indispensable social change agents. We do this at our peril.

To turn back this new Jim Crow era, the hard, unglamorous work of community organizing must be engaged and sustained for equitable change. This includes battling the laws of 'Juan Crow

'which among other things, unjustly separate families and penalizes young people, who through no fault of their own are undocumented.

The Dreamers' innovative activism is injecting fresh blood into 21st-century youth organizing as they take the same risks as we did to restore truth to this nation's proclaimed values.

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I fully expect that 21st century youth activists will lift this lamp with their capacity, commitment, and passion to achieve the equity we only began to fight for in the 20th century.

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