

**HANDS ON THE
FREEDOM
PLOW**

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HANDS ON THE FREEDOM PLOW

PERSONAL
ACCOUNTS
BY WOMEN

IN SNCC

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MARTHA PRESCOD NORMAN NOONAN remained a community organizer, developing and directing various programs including an anti-hunger project, a large inner-city food-buying club, and a supplemental education program for young people with sickle cell disease. She also retained her interest in history, completing most of the course work for the doctorate at the University of Michigan and teaching various courses in African American history there and at the University of Toledo and Wayne State University. She has helped organize several major retrospective conferences on the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and presented papers on this topic at many others. Two of these papers were published: "Shining in the Dark," in *Black Women and the Vote* (1997), and "How We Stood," in *A Circle of Trust* (1998). All three sons took their grandmother's advice, followed their father's example, and completed a professional education—one is a lawyer in Atlanta, two are doctors employed at the University of Michigan Medical School. She is now married to her high school sweetheart, Allan Noonan, a public health physician.

"Captured by the Movement" © 2010 by Martha Prescod Norman Noonan

We'll Never Turn Back

Gloria House

An African American graduate student from UC Berkeley joins the Alabama Movement, witnesses the murder of a fellow civil rights worker, and stays on to help build independent political parties.

Berkeley Free Speech Movement

In 1964 I was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. One morning as I neared the campus, I turned the corner onto Telegraph Avenue and was shocked to see city police and National Guardsmen lined up for blocks. Approaching the mall outside the administration building, Sproul Hall, I was stunned to find policemen dragging fellow students down the marble staircase and into wagons. Close to a thousand students had sat in at Sproul Hall the day before, demanding to meet with university officials to negotiate a more reasonable policy on student political activism. Instead of negotiating, the university administration called in hundreds of policemen and National Guardsmen to remove the students and to police the campus. Walking through those police forces that morning, I could no longer see the university as an ivory tower sheltered from the politics of the outside world.

This was the turning point in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and for me. Outraged at the brutality of the city and state "law and order" forces, I joined other teaching assistants in organizing the campus-wide strike. We shut down classes, won the support of the major labor unions represented on campus, and pressured the administration to negotiate with us. We demanded seats for students on the board of regents, thereby ensuring a role for students in university policy making. We secured our right to be politically active and to fund-raise in support of political causes. Moreover, we organized the first union for university teaching assistants in American labor history.

The issue at the root of the Free Speech Movement was whether students would have the freedom to exercise their political convictions within the university community. The university administration had outlawed students' soliciting of funds on campus to support the Civil Rights Movement. Under the leadership of Mario Savio, who had just returned from the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, and other graduate students, radical students maintained that we had every right to aid the fight and that, moreover, it was our responsibility to do so.

Those of us who participated in the Free Speech Movement learned the exhilaration of striving together to protect our human rights. During that time student solidarity was high, and we saw that with this unity we could demand that powerful institutions change. This victory empowered us as activists; however, we also felt sadness, for we discovered that once one takes a position and fights for it, nothing remains the same. Friendships may be broken, jobs lost, and other valuables placed at risk. The lightheartedness of college days was set aside—for some of us, definitively.

I had come to Berkeley as an undergraduate familiar with racial oppression. In Tampa, Florida, where I was born, the schools were still segregated. Though there were many disadvantages we faced as children in a neglected school system, we were fortunate to have a learning environment staffed by people who knew us and our families well, took an interest in our progress, and celebrated our achievements. Black teachers, principals, maintenance workers, nurses, children, and parents were all part of a single community. The schools up north, where my mother and I moved with my stepfather, a U.S. Air Force career man, presented a very different experience. In Salina, Kansas, my first home outside the South, white children were hostile to their black schoolmates, and white teachers assumed a condescending missionary attitude toward us. When I was an eight-year-old third-grader, Kansas introduced me to the meanness of racism in America.

At a very early age I had understood, as I believe most black children do, that we are an oppressed people in the country of our birth. I think this understanding comes to us as an unconscious absorption of the strain we see

our parents suffering as they meet daily hardships. As children we are deeply aware of the unfocused misery that engulfs our folks' lives. My childhood memory of this feeling of oppression is associated with the church, where it seemed particularly tangible in the low, moaning, magnificent raising of old hymns, and in the Sunday evening communion circle, where we joined hands and sang "We Shall Overcome."

As an undergraduate I was active in several groups and campaigns concerned with social justice. After graduating in 1961 I traveled to England and France, remaining in Paris for nine months. During my stay in Paris in 1962 I met Congolese and Algerian students who helped make the idea of revolution real for me and convinced me that the hope of revolution is the only one black people and all other oppressed peoples have. At Berkeley we had studied Marxism, so I was familiar with socialist theory, but here my new friends were not engaging in theoretical discussions per se. They were attempting to use the theory to advance very real liberation struggles. I remember many conversations at the cafés along Boulevard St. Michel, where my friends' intense engagement with ideological and strategic issues related to their struggles on the African continent inspired me deeply.

Tattered Angels of Hope: The Selma Freedom School

Back home, events reinforced my politicization. First, in 1963, a church in Birmingham was bombed and four little girls murdered. That atrocity obsessed me for months, leaving me convinced that the whites who held power in this country clearly endorsed genocide against black people. Then, in 1964, three civil rights workers were murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. On my way home from the library one evening, I bought a newspaper that featured a photograph of several policemen dragging the young men's dead bodies from the mud and putting them in large black sacks. My work as a graduate student of comparative literature paled in light of this horror.

A little more than a year after the Mississippi murders and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, I met a group of students from San Francisco State College who were conducting a book drive for Freedom Schools in the South. They were also planning to go to Selma, Alabama, in June 1965 to set up a Freedom School. I happily joined them, agreeing to spend the summer teaching English and French, though I doubted that the kids would have any interest in learning French. As it turned out, French became the most popular subject at the school because of the children's fascination with things foreign.

That summer Selma was still a center of movement activity. Movement culture was thriving; attendance at mass meetings in Brown's Chapel

was high. The children were bright, spunky muses of revolution, and the church-rocking music of the Movement took my breath away! The round of murders of Jimmie Lee Jackson, Rev. James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo had not killed the people's spirit. Voter registration work was ongoing. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and SNCC both had state headquarters in Selma. SNCC had begun organizing projects with sharecroppers in a dozen Alabama counties.

Inspired by the children attending our Freedom School, I wrote a poem entitled "Selma 1965":

Amid the ghosts of civil rights marchers
in Selma
in the summer so hot,
the children sang in the paths
of the afternoon showers,
"Before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave . . ."
From the freedom school window
We watched them come
across the lawns of the housing projects
down the rain-rutted dirt roads,
through the puddles waiting cool for bare feet.
(Touch the dripping bush, break a leaf and smell
the pungency of green.)
They were tattered angels of hope,
plaits caught at odd angles
and standing indignantly,
a ripped hem hanging like a train,
grey knees poking through denim frames.
Dancing the whole trip,
they performed their historic drama
against the set of their
wet brick project homes.

Murder in Lowndes

On the night of my arrival in Selma, a fellow teacher introduced me to Stokely Carmichael (who later changed his name to Kwame Turé). Then he was a SNCC project director in Lowndes County, some twenty miles away from Selma. At Stokely's invitation I visited Lowndes County, made a tour

with him of the families involved, and started to attend the weekly mass meetings held in the rural churches around the county. Stokely had also introduced a white seminarian, Jonathan Daniels, to the Lowndes County community. I became friends with Jonathan and with the West family, Selma Movement activists who had sheltered many other civil rights workers and that summer had offered Jonathan a room in their project home near Brown's Chapel. When Jonathan discovered that I was a member of the Episcopal Church, he asked me to accompany him and a group of local children to the segregated Episcopal church in Selma. The priest and parishioners were hostile to us on several Sunday mornings, and I believe their rejection caused Jon a good deal of pain.

By the end of the summer, I had become a part of the Lowndes County SNCC group and was jailed in Hayneville, the county seat, for picketing a grocery store to demand hiring of black people. Approximately thirty demonstrators, including Jonathan, were arrested, some of them teenagers. We were herded onto a garbage truck and taken to the small two-storied Hayneville jail, the men put into cells upstairs, the three women—Ruby Sales, Joyce Stokes, and myself—put into a cell on the ground floor. Filthy water covered the floor, the mattresses on the bunks were lice-ridden, and an overwhelming stench enveloped everything.

We three women sang freedom songs so loudly that the men upstairs heard us and joined in. In this way we passed the time in a fairly good frame of mind while we waited for the SNCC staff to raise our bail. After two weeks, on August 20 a guard came to open our cell and tell us we were being released on our own recognizance. We hadn't had any word from the SNCC office in Selma and didn't believe what we were being told. We refused to leave the jail, suspecting there might be foul play. The guards then forced us out at gunpoint, off the county property, and out onto the road.

We walked about half a block to the main street of Hayneville and turned toward a little store only a few feet away. As we approached the store, we heard gunfire. All of us were horrified to think we were being fired upon. The youngsters, who knew the area, scattered hysterically, seeking shelter. Not knowing what else to do, we older ones hit the pavement where we had been standing. Jonathan was shot down immediately, murdered before our very eyes.

We were terrified, thinking we would all be killed. The only other white member of our group, Father Richard Morrisroe, a Catholic priest from Chicago, was shot in the back, wounded and unable to move. When the shooting stopped, we went up and down the street pounding on the doors, begging for someone to call an ambulance. No one in that white community would

open the door or respond. Eventually someone from the SNCC office came to pick us up and care for Father Morrisroe, who had been injured so badly that he required years of physical therapy before he was able to walk again.

At the trial the man who killed Jonathan revealed that he was a marksman who had been deputized for the occasion of our release from jail and that his assignment had been to kill Jonathan and Father Morrisroe. Nevertheless, he was acquitted. The white community of Lowndes had been alerted to this murderous plan and collaborated in silence, because they viewed whites like Jonathan as threats to their illusions of superiority and the very real privileges they derived from racism and segregation.

After Jonathan's murder and the brutality of my short jail experience, I could not see how nonviolence would be effective in the African American struggle for liberation. Over the years, my memory of Jon lying dead and Father Morrisroe moaning in pain a few feet away from me on a curiously deserted main street in Lowndes County has served to reinforce this belief. I came to know Jonathan as a man of extraordinary warmth of spirit and commitment to justice. His murder represented a great loss to the Movement, his family, and friends.

Staying in the Movement: The Party of the Black Panther

Intending to complete my master's thesis and resume my job as a teaching assistant in the French department, I returned to Berkeley after attending Jonathan's funeral. However, once I was on the Berkeley campus I knew I no longer wanted to be there. Within a week I was back in Alabama, ready to work, and in September 1965 Silas Norman, then head of Alabama SNCC, hired me as a field secretary to be assigned to Lowndes County. During my two years in Lowndes, the SNCC staff consisted of Stokely Carmichael (before his election to SNCC chair), Bob Mants, George Greene, Janet Jemmott, Courtland Cox (off and on), myself and occasional volunteers.

In the 1960s we SNCC workers found black sharecropping families eking out a living, in perpetual debt to the white landowners. Many black areas lacked essential services such as indoor plumbing and electricity. We lived among the folks with whom we worked, our housing often provided by local activists. In Lowndes County the Jackson family, one of the few families who owned their own property, allowed the SNCC staff to live in one of their houses. At the back of the house was a pump for water and a bit farther away an outhouse.

The political and social bond forged between SNCC workers and the local communities was extraordinary. College-age students, some of whom

were urban and northern, formed respectful, enduring working partnerships with local rural people of their parents' generation and older. Meeting in churches, where the Movement was based, these partners prayed together, reflected, strategized, resolved, and inspired each other to transform southern politics. Our relationship thrived on the courage and wisdom of our elders as well as our vision and determination. We can never forget this phenomenal embrace in which we were loved, nurtured, and protected by the communities that received us. Some SNCC workers, like Bob Mants in Lowndes County, never "went home" again but settled and raised their own families among the folks with whom we had fought for change.

Getting people registered to vote—a priority of our work—involved workers canvassing daily along long stretches of white-owned plantations. We rose early to find the sharecroppers as they left their homes for the fields. In the small towns we did door-to-door canvassing to encourage people to register. We prepared for weekly mass meetings on Sunday and evening meetings during the week. We taught people to read and write; we conducted political education workshops for those aspiring to run for office. We maintained a Freedom School and library for the children. We helped to organize food co-ops and crafts co-ops; we distributed information on government-sponsored farm programs whose benefits had been withheld from black farmers for generations.

As SNCC field secretaries we had to make use of the meager funds made available to us from the Atlanta office. We were responsible for the maintenance of vehicles and other equipment used in our daily work. We also documented developments of the Movement in written reports and photographs. We were busy from early morning to late at night.

We were always conscious of danger. In Lowndes County we learned to hit the ground or find cover when white men drove by at night shooting at the freedom house, or at the tent city where we lived with sharecropping families who had been evicted because they registered to vote or took part in the Movement. Fortunately, no one was wounded in these terroristic assaults in Lowndes when I was there, but they happened regularly enough to keep us alert.

In Lowndes we organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which initiated the formation of an independent black political party. Influenced by the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, we chose to create a separate political party instead of seeking admission into the Democratic Party. Jack Minnis, a researcher in SNCC's Atlanta office, discovered a provision in the Alabama Administrative Code that allowed independent parties to enter county elections if certain stipulations were met.

Many potential southern black voters had concluded that there was no distinction between the Democrats and the Dixiecrats. Indeed, in Alabama the emblem of the Democratic Party was a white rooster on a banner that read "White Supremacy." In contrast, we chose as our symbol a pouncing black panther. Using this symbol ensured that even those voters who could not read would recognize their party on the ballot. I believe our effort to create an independent party reflected an overall change inside SNCC that began with the failure of the MFDP challenge. This defeat and our work in the Black Belt counties of Alabama marked the demise of a generally integrationist orientation and the emergence of a new spirit of nationalism.

The creation of a political party meant additional tasks for the SNCC staff in Lowndes. Voter registration took on a new intensity. We had to explain the legal requirements for party organization to the community and teach the political history of the South. In short, we were helping to equip the people with the information and skills essential to running the county government. In the independent freedom parties, people hoped to prepare themselves not just as new voters but also as political leaders. We found that a review of African American and African history, giving a strong sense of historical identity, was of immeasurable significance in this process.

There was tremendous political potential in our efforts. At that time black people made up 85 percent of the county population, but white residents had held all the political offices and had kept black people from voting for generations. If black people were elected to county offices, the local political structure would be radically altered and black residents could share more equitably in the resources of the county.

SNCC workers spread the idea of independent black political parties from Lowndes County to other Alabama counties where black people constituted sizable majorities. Later I moved into Selma to help other SNCC organizers establish the freedom party of Dallas County. The fruits of our labor in the Alabama independent parties were not immediately reaped in the 1966 elections, but rather in 1970, when black people in a handful of counties won positions in local governments. These officials subsequently organized a statewide coalition of independent parties, determined to win representation for black voters on a state level.

The Vietnam War, Race, and Gender

By 1965 there was a faction in SNCC to which I belonged that called for a stronger international orientation and self-determination for oppressed nations around the world, including our own nation of thirty million black

people in the United States. This new direction grew out of our deepening knowledge of our history as a people in Africa and the diaspora as well as our identification with liberation movements of the period in Asia, South America, and Africa.

Our subsequent demonstrations of solidarity with the Vietnamese people were part of this internationalization of consciousness. SNCC's statement against the war, which I drafted, was a close documentation of the thoughts and arguments that were articulated primarily by the nationalist faction within SNCC. Our objection to the war was debated heatedly and finally adopted at a national staff meeting in Atlanta.

This statement was written sometime after the voting rights bill had passed and shortly after yet another murder of a civil rights activist who worked closely with us in Alabama. Sammy Younge, a Tuskegee student and resident, was killed by a gas station owner in his hometown for attempting to use the white restroom. The statement tied our opposition to the war to Younge's murder and questioned our country's commitment to the rule of law. We contended that:

Samuel Younge was murdered because U.S. law is not being enforced. Vietnamese are being murdered because the United States is pursuing an aggressive policy in violation of international law. The U.S. is no respecter of persons or law when such persons or laws run counter to its needs and desires. We recall the indifference, suspicion, and outright hostility with which our reports of violence have been met in the past by government officials.

Throughout, we pointed out the hypocrisy of the country's stated dedication to freedom and democracy, again tying the country's actions abroad to our experiences as civil rights workers at home, stating:

The United States government has been deceptive in claims of concern for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, just as the government has been deceptive in claiming concern for the freedom of the colored people in such other countries as the Dominican Republic, the Congo, South Africa, Rhodesia, and in the United States itself. . . . [SNCC's] work, particularly in the South, taught us that the United States government has never guaranteed the freedom of oppressed citizens and is not yet truly determined to end the rule of terror and oppression within its own borders. . . . We recall the numerous persons who have been murdered in the South because of their efforts to secure their civil and human rights, and whose murderers have been allowed to escape penalty for their crimes.

The statement ended by urging opposition to the draft, suggesting instead that “those Americans who prefer to use their energy in building democratic forms within the country . . . work in the civil rights movement and other human relations organizations [although we know] full well that it may cost them their lives, as painfully as in Vietnam.”

Later, at a national SNCC staff meeting at Peg Leg Bates Resort in New York, the same group that pushed for release of the Vietnam statement urged that we vote to require white SNCC workers, of whom there were still a handful, to work only in white communities or in our offices. We did not vote to expel white staff members from the organization, as was widely reported in the media. The insistence that only black field secretaries should work in black communities reflected our evolving black consciousness. How could we send white organizers to black sharecroppers to convince them we could be self-determining as a race? We thought this was an obvious contradiction that had to be corrected, but our position cost us a serious loss of support from liberals in the North. Before SNCC took these positions, our fund-raisers had done fairly well, and we field secretaries had received our ten-dollar weekly paychecks intermittently. Afterward we received them very rarely, if at all.

There has also been an ongoing debate concerning the roles and status of SNCC women. I did not experience male domination in SNCC. I felt my ideas were respected, and I felt free to take on any aspects of the projects in which we were involved; neither my work as a field secretary nor my personhood was ever diminished or disrespected by SNCC men. Moreover, during the years I was in SNCC, I witnessed women playing key leadership roles. Ruby Doris Robinson commanded genuine respect from everyone in her role as SNCC program secretary; the women of the Atlanta Project were instrumental in the anti-war work, in arguing for release of the statement against the war, and in pushing for the strong nationalist orientation that emerged in 1966. And of course there were individual women, like Annie Pearl Avery, whose strength and charisma everyone respected—not to mention the powerful leadership of local women like Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer in Mississippi. On an interpersonal level, women were supportive of each other and respectful of one another’s relationships with men. In addition, we were concerned and protective of each other, especially where illness or emotional distress was involved.

The SNCC Legacy

The social environment that SNCC engendered was one of equality in many spheres. There was equality across class lines, and North-South background lines. There was equality across levels of formal education. SNCC's concept of leadership was also egalitarian. We didn't think of ourselves as the "talented tenth," for example, a concept of elite leadership that was still prevalent in black communities. Ours was a much more progressive way of recognizing and encouraging people's skills and abilities, no matter their social status outside SNCC.

Another aspect of SNCC's culture was its legitimization of political organizing as full-time work—the organizer as worker. In our work we shouldered exceptional responsibilities for twenty-year-olds. We tried new things and became good at them. We left with a sense of competency and discipline that most of us have put to good use in our subsequent endeavors. SNCC's approaches to organizing gave us a culture, a way of being, a way of resolving social, political, and personal problems.

In 1966 I married another SNCC worker, Stuart House, at the Episcopal church on the campus of Tuskegee University in Alabama. The reception, our rather modest get-together at the Selma freedom house, was an occasion for a reunion of SNCC staff from various projects. As we sat on the porch after dinner, Rap Brown (now Jamil-Al-Amin) lifted our spirits with his keen political analysis and brilliant wit. When I became pregnant, I was so malnourished that a movement doctor advised me to go somewhere where I could get three meals a day or I would not carry the baby to term. Stuart and I left Alabama to ensure the health of our child.

My experience in SNCC and in Lowndes County had an enormous impact on my development as a human rights advocate. I can see the effects of that experience when I compare my attitudes, expectations, perspectives, and aspirations with those of my peers who did not spend those years in the southern movement. The SNCC experience disciplined me for a lifetime commitment to struggle. In the end, one is never a "retired" civil rights worker.

Forty years have passed since our stay in the Hayneville jail and the trauma of witnessing Jonathan's murder and hearing Morrisroe's pain-stricken cries for help. No one turns back to a life of indifference to human rights after experiences like these. Interacting with others who were engaged daily in the effort to change a repressive system, I learned from close encounters how the mechanisms of power and oppression work and also saw firsthand the enormous human capacity to resist and transcend them.

At the end of SNCC staff meetings, we used to form a circle and sing freedom songs. The one that I have kept close all these years, "We'll Never Turn Back," was written by Bertha Gober, an Albany State student active in one of SNCC's first community organizing efforts. Her song is an affirmation of our commitment to struggle. The lines that moved me most deeply are: "We have walked through the valley of death. We had to walk all by ourselves. But we'll never turn back. No, we'll never turn back. Until we've all been freed. And we have equality."

GLORIA HOUSE did complete her master's degree at Berkeley and went on to earn a doctorate in American cultural history at the University of Michigan. Since leaving SNCC, she has been actively engaged in community issues and international solidarity causes and has written poems and essays that have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. She has published three poetry collections—*Blood River* (1983), *Rain Rituals* (1990), and *Shrines* (2004)—as well as a study of the political uses of public spaces, *Tower and Dungeon* (1991). She has been an editor at Broadside Press for many years. House is professor of humanities and director of the African and African American Studies Program at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, as well as professor emerita in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Wayne State University, where she taught for twenty-seven years. From 1992 to 1996 she was a visiting professor in the English department and director of the Partnership with Township High Schools at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. She and Stuart House have one son.

"We'll Never Turn Back" © 2010 by Gloria House

Letter to My Adolescent Son

Jean Wiley

A mother explains to her son how her SNCC experience influenced the rest of her life.

Dear Cabral,

I am writing this letter to answer the question I sometimes see in your adolescent eyes. Usually your youthful amusement shines through, but the silent question is no less intense: "Who are you, Mom?" You wonder why all these books everywhere and what's with