

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

ELLA BAKER

✶ Ella Baker, a veteran of five decades of work in the freedom movement, is one of the foremost organizers of our time. A woman of dynamic strength, quiet persistence and great conviction, she works out of the limelight, providing the essential skill and experience which sustain dynamic mass movements.

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, she grew up in a small town in North Carolina, and received her formal education, through the college level, in that state. Upon graduation from Shaw University in Raleigh, she came to New York just before the Depression of 1929. In the 1930's she identified with movements in the area of workers' education, consumer cooperatives, consumer protection and community organizing.

Early in the 1940's she began to work with the NAACP as an assistant field secretary. Later she became the national director of branches of the NAACP. As President of the New York Branch NAACP, she helped to initiate com-

munity action against de facto segregation in the New York public schools.

Following her two years of work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) she was a founder, advisor and active participant of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) through its lifetime. In 1964, Miss Baker helped to found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), gave the keynote address at its founding convention and helped organize its challenge to the National Democratic Party in Atlantic City.

Through the years, there has been a procession of men and women whose commitments were deepened because they knew Miss Baker at a crucial point in their development. Among these are Mrs. Rosa Parks, who started the Montgomery bus protest in 1955, but who long before that worked with Miss Baker in the NAACP in Alabama; James Forman, who led SNCC through its most crucial years; Stokely Carmichael; H. Rap Brown; and many more, both black and white.

Miss Baker now serves as a consultant to a number of human rights groups in both the South and other parts of the country.

In my organizational work, I have never thought in terms of my "making a contribution." I just thought of myself as functioning where there was a need. And if I have made a contribution I think it may be that I had some influence on a large number of people.

As assistant field secretary of the branches of the NAACP, much of my work was in the South. At that time the NAACP was the leader on the cutting edge of social change. I remember when NAACP membership in the South was the basis for getting beaten up or even killed.

I used to leave New York about the 15th of February and travel through the South for four to five months. I would go to, say, Birmingham, Alabama and help to organize mem-

bership campaigns. And in the process of helping to organize membership campaigns, there was opportunity for developing community reaction. You would go into areas where people were not yet organized in the NAACP and try to get them more involved. Maybe you would start with some simple thing like the fact that they had no street lights, or the fact that in the given area somebody had been arrested or had been jailed in a manner that was considered illegal and unfair, and the like. You would deal with whatever the local problem was, and on the basis of the needs of the people you would try to organize them in the NAACP.

Black people who were living in the South were constantly living with violence. Part of the job was to help them to understand what that violence was and how they in an organized fashion could help to stem it. The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence even when it was perpetrated by the police or, in some instances, the state. My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice. If they only had ten members in the NAACP at a given point, those ten members could be in touch with twenty-five members in the next little town, with fifty in the next and throughout the state as a result of the organization of state conferences, and they, of course, could be linked up with the national. People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.

I left the NAACP and then worked at fund-raising with the National Urban League Service Fund and with several national health organizations. However, I continued my work with the NAACP on the local level. I became the advisor for the Youth Council. Then I served as President of the New York branch at a point where it had sunk to a low level in membership and otherwise. And in the process of serving as

President we tried to bring the NAACP back, as I called it, to the people. We moved the branch out of an office building and located it where it would be more visible to the Harlem community. We started developing an active branch. It became one of the largest branches. I was President for a couple of years. It was strictly volunteer work which lasted until four o'clock in the morning, sometimes.

When the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation came, I was serving as chairman of the Educational Committee of the New York branch. We began to deal with the problems of *de facto* segregation, and the results of the *de facto* segregation which were evidenced largely in the achievement levels of black children, going down instead of going up after they entered public school. We had called the first committee meeting and Kenneth Clark became the chairman of that committee. During that period, I served on the Mayor's Commission on School Integration, with the subdivision on zoning. In the summer of 1957, I gave time to organizing what we called Parents in Action for Quality Education.

I've never believed that the people who control things really were willing and able to pay the price of integration. From a practical standpoint, anyone who looked at the Harlem area knew that the potential for integration *per se* was basically impossible unless there were some radically innovative things done. And those innovative things would not be acceptable to those who ran the school system, nor to communities, nor even to the people who call themselves supporters of integration. I did a good deal of speaking, and I went to Queens, I went to the upper West side, and the people very eagerly said they wanted school integration. But when you raised the question of whether they would permit or would welcome Blacks to live in the same houses with them, which was the only practical way at that stage to achieve integration, they squirmed. Integration certainly had to be pushed concurrently with changing the quality of education that the black children were getting, and changing

the attitudes of the educational establishment toward the black community.

I don't think we achieved too much with the committee except to pinpoint certain issues and to have survived some very sharp confrontations with the Superintendent and others on the board of Education. But out of it came increased fervor on the part of the black communities to make some changes. One of the gratifying things to me is the fact that even as late as this year I have met people who were in that group and who have been continuously active in the struggle for quality education in the black communities ever since.

There certainly has been progress in the direction of the capacity of people to face this issue. And to me, when people themselves know what they are looking for and recognize that they can exercise some influence by action, that's progress.

Come 1957, I went down South a couple of times in connection with the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. At the end of '57 there was the need for someone to go down to set up the office of SCLC in Atlanta and to coordinate what it considered its first South-wide project, which was the holding of simultaneous meetings on February 12th in twenty different cities. I went down with the idea of not spending more than six weeks there, giving myself a month to get the thing going, and then two weeks to clean it up. I stayed with SCLC for two and a half years, because they didn't have anybody. My official capacity was varied. When I first went down, I didn't insist on a title, which is nothing new or unusual for me; it didn't bother me. I was just there in person. And then they were looking for a minister, a man, and I helped to find a minister and a man, and he stayed a while, and when he came I decided that since I was doing what I was doing, he was the director and I became, I think, co-director. And then there was nobody, and of course there was no money in those days, so I kept on until the summer of 1960. And prior to that, of course, the sit-ins had started, and I was able to get the SCLC to at least sponsor the conference in Raleigh. We had hoped to call

together about 100 or 125 of the young leaders who had emerged in the sit-ins in the South. But of course the sit-ins had been so dynamic in the field that when we got to the meeting we had two hundred and some people, including some from the North. And out of that conference of the Easter weekend of 1960, which I coordinated and organized, we had a committee that came out of it, and out of that committee SNCC was born.

And after SNCC came into existence, of course, it opened up a new era of struggle. I felt the urge to stay close by. Because if I had done anything anywhere, it had been largely in the role of supporting things, and in the background of things that needed to be done for the organizations that were supposedly out front. So I felt if I had done it for the elders, I could do it for young people.

I had no difficulty relating to the young people. I spoke their language in terms of the meaning of what they had to say. I didn't change my speech pattern and they didn't have to change their speech pattern. But we were able to communicate.

I never had any income or paid relationship with SNCC. In order to be available to do things with SNCC, I first found a two-year project with the Southern Region of the National Student YWCA in a special Human Relations Program. Then I took up a relationship with the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). I still am on their staff in a consultative role, and I stayed in Atlanta until the summer of '64, spring and summer of '64. I was asked to come up and help organize the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic Convention. So offices were set up in Washington and I functioned there until after the convention, closed up the office, and then moved back to New York from Atlanta.

There are those, some of the young people especially, who have said to me that if I had not been a woman I would have been well known in certain places, and perhaps held certain kinds of positions.

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means he has been touted through the public media, which means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.

For myself, circumstances frequently dictated what had to be done as I saw it. For example, I had no plans to go down and set up the office of SCLC. But it seemed unless something were done whatever impetus had been gained would be lost, and nobody else was available who was willing or able to do it. So I went because to me it was more important to see what was a potential for all of us than it was to do what I might have done for myself. I knew from the beginning that as a woman, an older woman, in a group of ministers who are accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to have come into a leadership role. The competition wasn't worth it.

The movement of the '50's and '60's was carried largely by women, since it came out of church groups. It was sort of second nature to women to play a supportive role. How many made a conscious decision on the basis of the larger goals, how many on the basis of habit pattern, I don't know. But it's true that the number of women who carried the movement is much larger than that of men. Black women have had to carry this role, and I think the younger women are insisting on an equal footing.

I don't advocate anybody following the pattern I followed, unless they find themselves in a situation where they think that the larger goals will be shortchanged if they don't. From

the standpoint of the historical pattern of the society, which seems to assume that this is the best role for women, I think that certainly the young people who are challenging this ought to be challenging it, and it ought to be changed. But I also think you have to have a certain sense of your own value, and a sense of security on your part, to be able to forgo the glamor of what the leadership role offers. From the standpoint of my work and my own self-concepts, I don't think I have thought of myself largely as a woman. I thought of myself as an individual with a certain amount of sense of the need of people to participate in the movement. I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people. Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage where he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle of black people who have not had his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it.

Ella Baker, taped interview with Gerda Lerner,
December 1970. Used by permission.