

Women of the Civil Rights Movement Student Worksheet 2.2

Women and Community Leadership Ella Baker

Ella Baker (1903-1986) was a central—though as a woman, often slighted—figure in African American politics. She worked as a Harlem organizer during the Depression, as an NAACP organizer in the 1940s, and as interim director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For a biography, see Joanne Grant, Ella Baker (1998).

Interviewer Gerda Lerner, emeritus professor of history at the University of Wisconsin and past president of the Organization of American Historians (1981-1982), is the author of many works, including The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels against Slavery (1976), The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History (1979), and The Creation of Patriarchy (1986).

The following selection is an interview of Baker taped by Gerda Lerner and reproduced by permission from Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 346-52.

“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 the 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 membership 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 light, or the fact that in a 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.

I left the NAACP and then worked at fundraising 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 one point where it had sunk to a low level in membership 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.

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 a 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 the 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 the 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 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.

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 numbers 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.”

Source: Baker, Ella, “Women and Community Leadership”. *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle*. Ed. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor. New York: New York University Press, 2000. pp. 467-471.