

SNCC alum recall need to conquer inner fear

By Chris Nisan
Special to Sentinel-Voice
ST. PAUL, Minn. (NNPA) - "We are often accused of living in the '60s. We accept that; we do; that is because the same conditions exist today," said Chuck McDew, former chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), at a recent forum.

The theme of the meeting was taken from a charge given to members of the student civil rights group by its inspirer and advisor Ella Baker: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest till it comes." The forum brought together an impressive assemblage of former leaders of the SNCC to reflect on their experience in the Civil Rights Movement in general

and their experiences in the SNCC in particular.

Other panelists were SNCC veterans Betty Fikes, Connie Curry, Reggie Robinson, Charles Johnson, Tim Jenkins, Bob Moses, Charles Sherrod and Bob Zellner. The meeting was sponsored by Metropolitan State University in conjunction with the university's African American History Month celebration.

On February 1, 1960, a group of Black college students from North Carolina A&T University refused to leave a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, where they had been denied service. This action sparked a wave of sit-in protests over the next several months in college towns

across the South. Sit-in actions took place in 54 cities in nine states.

Ella Baker, a veteran civil rights activist with decades of experience working with the all-Black Pullman Porters union, the NAACP, and Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference or SCLC, called on the sit-in organizers and other students who were attracted to the movement on the basis of these actions to gather for a conference. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss ways to coordinate their efforts and broaden the agenda of the sit-ins to include fighting all forms of segregation.

At that meeting, held at Shaw College in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April

1960, the students formed the SNCC (pronounced "snick").

The organization's original goal was simply coordinating activities to advance the sit-in movement; however, because of its members' commitment to fighting to overturn the system of Jim Crow segregation in the South, the organization rapidly developed into a civil rights organization in its own right with its own leadership, programs, and political perspectives.

The entire panel discussed their recruitment and early experiences in the struggle.

Bob Zellner, one of the early White organizers of the group, related his experience of rejecting his family's Ku Klux Klan background to be a part of the struggle. He

spoke about how he refused to be a part of the initiation process, called "nigger knocking," for young potential members of the terrorist organization. The practice consisted of finding and hitting a young Black person with a stick. "Can you imagine?" said Zellner. "This is how they recruited high-schoolers."

"I did not have to sit in a classroom, because these were my teachers," said Betty Fikes, pointing to the rest of the panel as she spoke of the real-life education she received in the movement. "The movement opened me up," Fikes continued. "I had become a shy, quiet person, but the movement gave me my confidence and I became outspoken, and I also became a problem to my family."

Through their stories, the activists imparted important lessons for the struggle today. Charles Sherrod, one of the key organizers of the campaign to desegregate Albany, Ga., talked about the need to overcome fear as an important part of the struggle. "The first thing you got to do is conquer fear. Fear for your job. Fear for your life."

Connie Curry spoke about her recruitment to the movement as well as her current work with prisoners. In addition to her service in SNCC, Curry served as director of human resources for the city of Atlanta and played an important role during the construction of the Atlanta Airport when an important fight over affirmative action

erupted in the mid-1970s.

She related a story about a young public schoolteacher that highlighted how racism in the public schools is a contributing factor to the destruction of the souls of young Black children. The teacher had been doing a wonderful job teaching her class, which had previously been considered a highly difficult class to teach. On one occasion a school administrator, seeing the progress the instructor was making with the young people, commented negatively, "You're teaching those children how to think! What about those test scores?"

A major focus of the event was celebrating the retirement of Chuck McDew from the staff of Metro State. McDew was a founding member of SNCC and served as the second chairman of the organization from 1960 to 1963. He has taught at Metro State since 1981.

At the dinner held in his honor after the forum, McDew spoke about his early life growing up the son of a steelworker in an integrated working-class community in Massillon, Ohio, and how the values he internalized in his early life made him indisposed to tolerate racism and oppression.

"I thought it was inspiring as a living testimonial of history," said Metro State student Shvonne Johnson of the program. "I was especially impressed by their movement past fear and their courage."

Mayor

(Continued from Page 6)

Landrieu said, "People need to ask the question, do they trust him (Nagin) with their future? If they do, then he'll be re-elected. If they don't, they are going to have a couple of alternatives to consider, and we'll see where it leads."

The Lt. Governor spoke of "one city, one state, one vision." He did not endorse all elements of the Bring Back New Orleans Report's recommendation to reduce the city's footprint saying, "Every neighborhood cannot come back, but it is not necessarily true that every neighborhood has to be shrunk."

In the city, there are four large and distinct voter constituencies: White conservatives, mainly inhabiting Uptown, Algiers, and evacuated Lakeview; White liberals of Bywater, to Garden District; the African-American middle-class, former residents of areas ranging from the 7th Ward to New Orleans East but with the financial resources to return and guaranteed to vote in large numbers; and the Black poor, displaced from all over the city but with at least a majority eager to participate on April 22 despite the monetary and logistical obstacles.

To win the next election, a candidate must likely win a majority of three of the four groups (along with some of the remaining Vietnamese and Hispanic voters who usually vote in relatively small numbers compared to the main four).

African-American votes, because of the large local and national attention on the race, will likely at least equal White votes in the first primary, despite the current ra-

cial breakdown of Orleans Parish. (Southern Media and Opinion polling determined that Orleans is 65.8 percent White, 31 percent Black.) In a runoff, the question remains whether African-American voters will seek out absentee election ballots with the same enthusiasm as the primary. With only a month to send out and receive runoff ballots, logically diasporal turnout will be lower.

White strength may be stronger in the runoff, but in the primary, with Black leaders comparing the April 22nd election to the passage of the Voting Rights Act, higher Black turnout is anticipated.

Possessed of no other major African-American candidate, Nagin as the incumbent likely gains that largesse with some of the minority turning to Landrieu and Rev. Watson.

The Caucasian vote remains less clear. Wilson carries strength in her former District A. Unlike other evacuees, Lakeview residents evacuated to Jefferson Parish or Baton Rouge, and can easily return for election day. Wilson has favor with many Lakeview voters because of her past critiques of City Hall Administrations and her championing of term limits. Add that group to Wilson's allies amongst the conservatives and preservationists Uptown, and she holds a strong minority position.

Ron Forman has wider appeal, both as a Democrat and as the founder of the Zoo and Aquarium. He can reach both Wilson's conservative voters, and White liberals impressed by his public activism. However, to make a runoff, Forman must break

Wilson's hold on conservatives and fend off Republican Rob Couhig's high-dollar appeals to the same. Concurrently, he must gain votes among liberal Whites and from some of the Black middle class to garner the numbers to earn a runoff spot.

It is a formidable task, especially considering that despite Forman's best efforts and his years of long advocacy of African-American causes, such as the United Negro College Fund, he has won only a few African-American converts to his cause.

The danger to Landrieu rests with Forman's and Wilson's appeals to Whites.


If they can close out Landrieu from strong majorities in the Caucasian community, even among liberals, then Landrieu would have to gain enough Black votes to make up the difference:

With an African-American population worried that their control of Orleans Parish is evaporating, even a loyal supporter like Landrieu might fall before one of their own. Nagin, for all of his problematic relations with Black leaders, is proverbially one of the family, and hence, many find protection from sources unimaginable before Katrina.

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