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## Some Civil Rights and Student Movement Origins to Women's Liberation

This paper was presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014.

These women are my sheroes. They not only made history, but helped us all gain confidence in the movement and in ourselves so that we could make history.

We learned the lesson from SNCC and the civil rights movement, that if we organize we can change the world—but only if we organize and trust in local people (as Mary said).

Like Dorie, I was deeply impacted on seeing pictures of Emmett Till's brutalized and battered body.

In 1960 when I was 15, I started being active in the civil rights movement in support of the demonstrations against Woolworth's that wouldn't allow African Americans to sit at the lunch counters in the South.

In 1964, as an 18 year old, I went to Mississippi with the Freedom Summer Project. In that summer we tried doing voter registration—and were jailed to prevent us from doing it; so we began to register people for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and also doing

freedom school education. All the while learning from the people of Mississippi and about ourselves.

The women were a backbone of the movement. Mrs. Hamer, Ella Baker, Dorie and Joyce Ladner, Casey Hayden, Mary King and Dorothy Burlage and so many others. I lived in one house with Mary Lou and Andrew Hawkins. Their family challenged the town of Shaw in a law suit that some think is as significant as Brown v Board of Education—this one saying improvements in public services the white part of town (say adding a swimming pool) needed to reflect similar improvements in the black part of town that did not yet have connections to sewer lines or paved roads or indoor plumbing in all the houses. In likely retribution for this suit, Mrs. Hawkins was killed by a policeman at her home and their home was firebombed twice killing her son and two grandchildren. Four deaths in one family that was fighting for freedom and you probably never even heard about it. SO it is with the many unrecognized heroines and heroes of the movement.

And after that summer of 1964, even when it looked most hopeless, we won a Voting Rights Act, changed the conscience of the nation and we changed ourselves. We learned from poor Black people in Mississippi that we need to act from moral conviction. We need to act with courage. To stand up to unjust laws. We need to act so that people will be free. And we learned that if we organize we can change the world.

At the end of the summer, I returned to my campus at the University of Chicago and continued as Chair of the Friends of SNCC chapter.

A friend of mine (from the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project) had an unwanted pregnancy and was looking for an abortion. I went to the Medical Committee for Human Rights and found Dr. TRM Howard. He

had been a freedom fighter in Mississippi and came to Chicago when his name appeared on a Klan death list. The procedure was successful. I didn't think more about it. And then word spread and someone else called. And someone else called. And I set up a system we called JANE. There is now a play, a book and a movie about JANE because the women of JANE performed over 11,000 abortions between 1965 and 1973, when the Supreme Court decided in the case of Roe, legalizing abortion. There were links between the civil rights and women's movement at so many stages inspiring many of us in women's liberation.

At my school I was increasingly exploring the role of women in the movement and in society. My professor, Dick Flacks, encouraged me to attend my first SDS national conference in Champaign Urbana, Illinois in December of 1965, because they were going to discuss "The woman question." It was an exciting conference—lots of debate back and forth on issues about civil rights, the war in Vietnam, about students' rights and the movement to oppose the universities acting in lieu of parents (in loco parentis). I think one of the papers we read was the one that Mary King and Casey Hayden wrote on Sex and Caste, which suggested women meet as women. It was stunning to see experiences we had felt, but not named, written down and it helped move our awareness.

And we began discussion about The Woman Question. There seemed to be several hundred people talking about this for hours. However, when the women would be speaking, saying things like: "I didn't feel I was being listened to by the men" or "I was told just to get the coffee"--that the men would deny their reality—They would say "Oh, that's not true" or "We didn't do that." Then Jimmie Garrett, who ran the SNCC office in LA and was an extraordinary organizer, got up with two of his

friends and speaking to the women said something like, “You women aren’t going to get it together unless you talk among yourselves and not with these men.” And they left. I thought—oh, no, we are in a movement of men and women together, black and white together, and we can work it out. After about another hour, with the women still being criticized and not really listened to, I led a walk out to talk with women who wanted to talk together. And so, with others we started to define our voice as women. We agreed that we would go back to our home cities and continue to organize. Within a year, I had started about 10 discussion and consciousness raising groups and action projects. While at an SDS meeting, one of the men told me to “shut up” while I was speaking to the group. When I was done speaking, I tapped each of the women in the group on the shoulder and suggested we go upstairs, walk out from the main group and held what (I think) became the first campus women’s liberation group in the country.

All this and more was possible because we organized.

Because we trusted in women to act on their own behalf.

We knew we needed to confront illegitimate power.

That we could act with courage, even when we were afraid.

And I came to feel that all these movements are related.

Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, fights for the right to vote against voter suppression laws, for lgbt rights, for an economy that works for all for immigration reform and more.

And all of these are part of one movement, working for the beloved community. And with a debt of gratitude for the civil rights movement that taught us, that if we organize, we can change the world.