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Godmother of the Student Movement

Civil rights organizer Ella Baker worked with the NAACP and the SCLC, but found her calling helping SNCC youth

At one point during the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a group of ministers of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Organization (SCLC) gathered to discuss steering the young people into becoming the youth wing of SCLC. The students had already shown their energy and courage with their sit-ins across the South. And didn't SCLC need a youth wing? Besides, it had put up the money for the meeting, and one of its most talented organizers, its executive director, was already working closely with the young people.

But that organizer, Ella Baker, wasn't going to stand for it. She didn't want a bunch of ministers, King included, trying to decide what the path for the organization would be.

She had issued the call for the conference, had urged SCLC to finance it and had made a commitment to herself to make sure the young people would dictate their own fate. They had to be able to operate without interference from adults, she argued. Baker told the ministers as much; then, just to make sure they understood how committed she was, she walked out on the meeting.

In that moment, SNCC, one of the most unique, bold and innovative civil rights organizations, was born. Its daring members would become known as the shock troops of the Civil Rights Movement, wading directly into the heart of segregation and fighting to register Black voters. And always Ella Baker, or Miss Baker as she was lovingly known, was there to help in any way she could.

Those with even the most cursory understanding of movement history have at least heard of Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers and, of course, Martin Luther King Jr. Ella Baker, however, is a different story. Movement insiders remember her as an especially gifted organizer and a wonderful mentor. But the general public hardly knows her name.

That probably would be all right with Baker. She never liked the spotlight anyway. She believed the most important aspect of organizing was nurturing ordinary people and helping them reach their potential. People, she thought, had the power to define their own problems and, more profoundly, the power to find solutions for them.

"What she was about was organizing. She was the one who was steering us as activists," says Washington-based writer Charlie Cobb, who was a SNCC field organizer in Mississippi.

"When we encountered Miss Baker all of us [were] somewhere between the ages of, say, 17 and 22. All of us almost without exception coming out of the sit-in movement, meaning in the activist tradition. And probably the furthest thing from any of our minds as young people and student activists was grass-roots organizing and [it was] Miss Baker who steered us in that direction. So Miss Baker is first and foremost an organizer, and she organized us."

That organizing didn't start with SNCC, either. By the time the young people gathered at their founding conference in 1960, Baker had been at her organizing efforts for decades.

She had a long view of political struggle, having worked as an organizer from the 1930s on. She lived her life confident it was ordinary people who changed the world. She had committed her life to helping make that happen.

One day, when Baker was about 8 and she was playing in her family's yard in Littleton, N,C., she saw a very dark-skinned man passing by. The young Ella, swinging on her a gate, asked the man if he would be her Godfather. Her grandfather, who'd called her "Lady Ella" and with whom she'd had a close relationship had recently died. And the passerby, with his rich dark skin, reminded her of Grandfather Ross. That was Ella Baker, always open and believing in the goodness of people.

Ella Josephine Baker, the second of three children, was born on Dec. 13, 1903, in Norfolk, Va., to Georgianna Ross Baker and Blake Baker. The family lived comfortably in a two-story house, where her mother took in boarders and ministered to the poor. Blake Baker was a waiter on a ferry boat from Norfolk to Washington.

The Bakers spent summers with the extended family in North Carolina, then in 1910, moved to Littleton, N.C., to be with the family.

In 1872, Grandpa Ross and four other relatives had purchased 250 acres of the plantation where he'd been a slave; he parceled the land out to family members, establishing a family enclave.

Surrounded by her aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, Baker listened intently to their stories of rebellion. Early on, those stories nurtured in her a fighting-back spirit and a profound sense of community. She has said that the family always had food, which they shared with anyone in need, Black and white alike. Indeed, it appears that the deed to her grandparents' land was often mortgaged to help sustain families in need. This emphasis on sharing was another influence that would shape Baker.

Her mother taught her children to read before they went to school. Baker attended Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., where she worked her way through secondary boarding school and college. She was valedictorian of her high school and college graduating classes. It was in school, watching the contradictions between what authorities said and what they did that helped pique her political interests. She was a champion debater and a student of Latin, French and history. By the time she graduated with her B.A. in 1927, she no longer wanted to become a teacher.

She headed to Harlem, where the Renaissance was just beginning -- as well as her real political education. The culture in Harlem was rich and so was the political activity. Street meetings were held on one corner after another, and Baker often attended, many times being the only Black person and woman present. She worked as a journalist for a time, and when the Depression hit, became a founding member of the Young Negroes Cooperative League, becoming its national director in 1931.

Later, in 1938, she applied for a job as the NAACP's youth director, but was rejected. She was denied again in 1940. But in 1941, she was finally hired as an assistant field secretary.

As an NAACP organizer, Baker traveled the country, especially the South, traversing dangerous rural areas to bolster and organize branches. In 1943, she became director of branches, but kept up her traveling schedule of six months out of each year until 1946. One of her greatest contributions was the focus and encouragement of the leadership skills of women and ordinary people in general -- continuously pushing people into leadership roles. She believed strongly in the idea, as she expressed it, that "no one is going to do for you that which you yourself are unwilling to do."

Baker would find time to write the national office during her travels. "Your letters are a delight to this office," Roy Wilkins, the assistant secretary, wrote her.

Sometimes Baker wrote about the difficulty of travel. In a letter to her friend and co-worker, Lucille Black, she wrote: "Today, I am worn to a frazzel [sic]. Train connections are not so good; and I am stopping at a home with three women of leisure whose major pastime is idle chatter. That, with being shown off this morning to residents who were too busy to attend the meeting last night, but whose curiosity was piqued by the reports from the meeting, leaves me quite frayed. At the moment, I could wish my worst enemy no greater torture than to have to be nice under such circumstances.

She proposed that in her visits to "pool rooms, boot black parlors, bars and grilles" she seek subscriptions to The Crisis. Then she decided against it: "It occurred to me that we might not [be] O.K. having memberships sent to Big Joe's Bar and Grille."

She added: "This is but another offshoot from my desire to place the N.A.A.C.P. and its program on the lips of all the people, the uncouth MASSES included." Baker was being playful, but she was deadly serious.

She had to work hard to persuade the sometimes staid Southern membership that defending the town drunk "caught in the paws of the law," which some feared would hurt the NAACP's image, was in essence a defense of the Black population in general.

The more comfortable members of the community, she instructed, had to stand up for the most vulnerable members in order to protect the rights of all.

She also encouraged branches to deal with local issues. At the annual conference held in July 1942, Baker asked, "What are the things taking place in our community which we should like to see changed?" She urged: "Take that one thing, getting a new school building; registering people to vote; getting bus transportation -- take that one thing and work on it and get it done."

Baker toiled mightily for decades, but it was in SNCC that she found the organization for which she had been searching -- one that was organized on her concept of "a group-centered leadership, rather than a leadership-centered group."

SNCC did not aim at self-perpetuation, but saw itself as a catalyst, a builder of local organizations and local movements. It stressed Baker's idea that developing leaders from among the masses was more important than building their own generation into an institution.

Their efforts opened the door and laid the groundwork for protests against the Vietnam War and inspired women's movements.

Baker had been one of the principal founders of the SCLC, along with Bayard Rustin and New York fundraiser and King supporter Stanley Levison. The three agreed that King needed a base, and they felt that an organization should develop out of the Montgomery bus boycott. In Levison's kitchen, Rustin drafted the working papers for the establishment of the SCLC and Baker edited them.

But by 1960, Baker had had enough of trying to deal with Southern Baptist ministers who she thought never seemed to grasp the idea of organizing instead of mobilizing.

She left SCLC in August 1960 and ostensibly devoted to more time to SNCC, but primarily because she believed the ministers who made up 95 percent of the SCLC would never listen to a woman or learn to organize. She objected to the emphasis that the SCLC put on promoting King as a national leader.

Baker saw SNCC through its growth, its heyday and its demise.

She was intimately involved with the struggle of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, which SNCC, CORE and the NAACP was instrumental in organizing. Baker, giving the keynote address at the MFDP's state convention in Jackson, Miss., declared: "Until the killing of Black mothers' sons becomes as important as the killing of white mothers' sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest."

But Baker wasn't a saint. She had a quick temper, which she readily acknowledged, and she lashed out at what she thought were serious faults. She was also outspoken. Juanita Abernathy, the widow of Ralph Abernathy, Dr. King's second in command, said of Baker: "If you didn't want to know what Miss Baker thought, don't ask her."

Ultimately, however, Baker led the way Nelson Mandela describes the best leaders do: from behind, like a shepherd.

"He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind," Mandela said.

As Chuck McDew, who was the second chairman of SNCC, has said: "She made us in her image."

She understood the young people of SNCC and helped them realize their potential, as she did with local leadership of the NAACP and during the Montgomery bus boycott, where she championed the role of E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks.

I first met Baker in October 1960, when SNCC was holding its second meeting and formalizing the organization. We became great friends over the years. I was compelled to tell her story, for the lessons of her life are too important to ignore.

Baker never sought the limelight, but I'm gratified to see some people recognizing her gifts today. Dissertations are being written about her. Centers are being established in her name: The Ella Baker Intern Program of the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Harvard Divinity School's Ella J. Baker and Amzie Moore Memorial Lecture, the University of Michigan's Ella Baker-Nelson Mandela Center for Anti-Racist Education, and the Children's Defense Fund's Ella Baker Child Policy and Training Institute at the former Alex Haley farm in Clinton, Tenn. and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in San Francisco.

There is also an Ella Baker public school in New York City, established by the New York City Board of Education, a board which Baker, as a member of the Board's Commission on Integration, challenged in the late 1950s and early '60s as keepers of de facto segregation in New York City Schools.

The Ella Baker School encourages interracial learning, has a nursery for children of the students and, in general, is the kind of school Ella Baker would have championed.

Baker summed up a portion of her philosophy in a speech at Vincent Harding's Institute for the Black World in Atlanta in 1969. Her topic was "The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle."

"I was a little bit amazed as to why the selection of a discussion on the role of Black women in the world. ...I have never been one to feel great needs in the direction of setting myself apart as a woman. I've always thought first and foremost of people as individuals--[but] wherever there has been a struggle, Black women have been identified with that struggle."

Baker the went on to say she would divide her remaining remarks into two aspects: the struggle to get into the society, to be a part of the American scene and the struggle for a different kind of society.

"I think the period that is most important to most of us now is the period when we began to question whether we really wanted in. In order for us as poor oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning, getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising a means by which you can change that system. But one of the guiding principles has to be that we cannot lead a struggle that involves masses of people without getting the people to understand what the potentials are, what their strengths are."

Ella Baker never put herself forward as a great leader, though she was very much aware of her skills, abilities and intelligence. She understood the special role that ordinary people

and young people especially could play in the movement. SNCC's energy and creativity, she often said, inspired her.

More than anything, though, Baker really believed in people. She really drew a lot of strength from interacting with people, and that sustained her. Her life is a lesson well worth sharing.

Ella Josephine Baker: A Life of Organizing

December 15, 1903

Born in Norfolk, Va.

1911

Moves from Norfolk to Littleton, N.C.

1918-27

Attends secondary school and college at Shaw University, Raleigh, N.C.

1927

Moves to New York and works as a waitress

1929-31

Works on the editorial staff of the American West Indian News and Negro National News

1931

Serves as executive director of the Young Negroes Cooperative League (YNCL) and is active in the consumer cooperative movement

1934

Joins staff of the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library

1935

Serves as publicity director of the Sponsoring Committee of the National Negro Congress (NNC)

1936

Works as a teacher with the Works Progress Administration (WPA)

1941

Joins the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a field secretary

1943

Becomes NAACP Director of Branches

1946

Joins the staff of the New York Urban League

1947

Joins the staff of the New York Cancer Society

1955

Helps found In Friendship, a support group for Southern school desegregation and the Montgomery, Ala. bus boycott

1957

Helps establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

1958

Moves to Atlanta, Ga. to set up the SCLC

1960

Is a prime mover in founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and serves as human relations consultant to the National Student YWCA

1963

Becomes consultant to the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF)

1964

Heads Washington, D.C. and Atlantic City, N.J. offices of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)

1965-68

Acts as consultant to the executive council of the Episcopal Church

1971

Becomes associate director of the Coalition of Concerned Black Americans

1972

Elected vice-chair of the Mass Party Organizing Committee and board member of the Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee

1974

Gives major speech for Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee, Madison Square Garden, New York City

1979

Is honored with 75th birthday celebration at the Carnegie Endowment of Peace, New York City

1981

Attends Washington, D.C. premiere of Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker, a documentary about her life

1985

Receives honorary doctorate from City College of New York

December 13, 1986 Dies in New York City

Source: Ella a Baker: Freedom Bound By Joanne Grant (John Wiley& Sons)

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): From left to right, Stokely Carmichael (at rear in hat), Fannie Lou Hamer, Eleanor Holmes Norton and Ella Baker at a rally outside the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

PHOTO (COLOR): Movement insiders remember Ella Baker as an especially gifted organizer and a wonderful mentor. But the general public hardly knows her name.

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By Joanne Grant

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Joanne Grant is the author of Ella Baker: Freedom Bound and Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analyses, 1619 to the present, and the producer/director of the documentary film, Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker.
