

Ella Baker

by Amanda D. Clark, Kent State University Alumna and former GDP Project Manager

Ella Baker (1903-1986) was an African-American activist and a leader of the Civil Rights movement in the early 20th century. She is best known for her contributions to grassroots organizing and training young people to empower themselves in the fight for equality.

Background:

Ella Baker was born in Virginia but raised in North Carolina. She graduated from Shaw University (Raleigh, North Carolina) in 1927 and moved to New York City. There, she began her activism with stints in the Young Negroes Cooperative League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, Baker's true passion was grassroots organizing. She co-founded In Friendship in 1956, which was focused on supporting local movements.

In 1958, Baker became a part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), running the Atlanta office. Her focus on grassroots organizing and "leaderless" movements, coupled with her gender, caused friction with the (mostly male) leadership of the broader movement (Young, 1996). During the 1960 student-led sit-in movement, Baker, with Martin Luther King Jr., orchestrated a conference for young activists at Shaw University. Out of this conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was born, focused on a youth-led, nonviolent approach to achieve civil rights victories.

Significance to Civic/Political Engagement:

As biographer Barbara Ransby notes,

Baker was a strategist, organizer and mother to the movement whose political acumen, humble leadership style and razor-sharp political insights were legendary. It's a reflection of our selective amnesia that few people know her name. The S.N.C.C. leader James Forman once remarked that "many people helped to ignite or were touched by the creative fire of S.N.C.C., without appreciating the generating force of Ella Baker." (January 20, 2020)

Baker's contributions to the Civil Rights movement centered on building from the bottom up and allowing everyone to do more than just participate or follow the traditional hierarchical leadership model. Her contributions were often out of the spotlight, but she was a member of and active in, many of the civil rights organizations of her day.

Select Quotes:

“Strong people don’t need a strong leader.”

“Martin (Luther King Jr.) didn’t make the movement, the movement made Martin.”

"I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others."

Further Resources:

Websites:

Ella Baker Center for Human Rights: <https://ellabakercenter.org/>

Zinn Education Project/ Ella Josephine Baker:
<https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/baker-ella/>

SNCC Digital Gateway: <https://snccdigital.org/>

Books:

Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision, by Barbara Ransby (UNC Press, 2003)

An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America, by Andrew Young (Harper-Collins, 1996)

News Articles:

Ransby, Barbara. (20 January 2020). “Ella Baker’s Legacy Runs Deep. Know Her Name.” New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/20/opinion/martin-luther-king-ella-baker.html>

