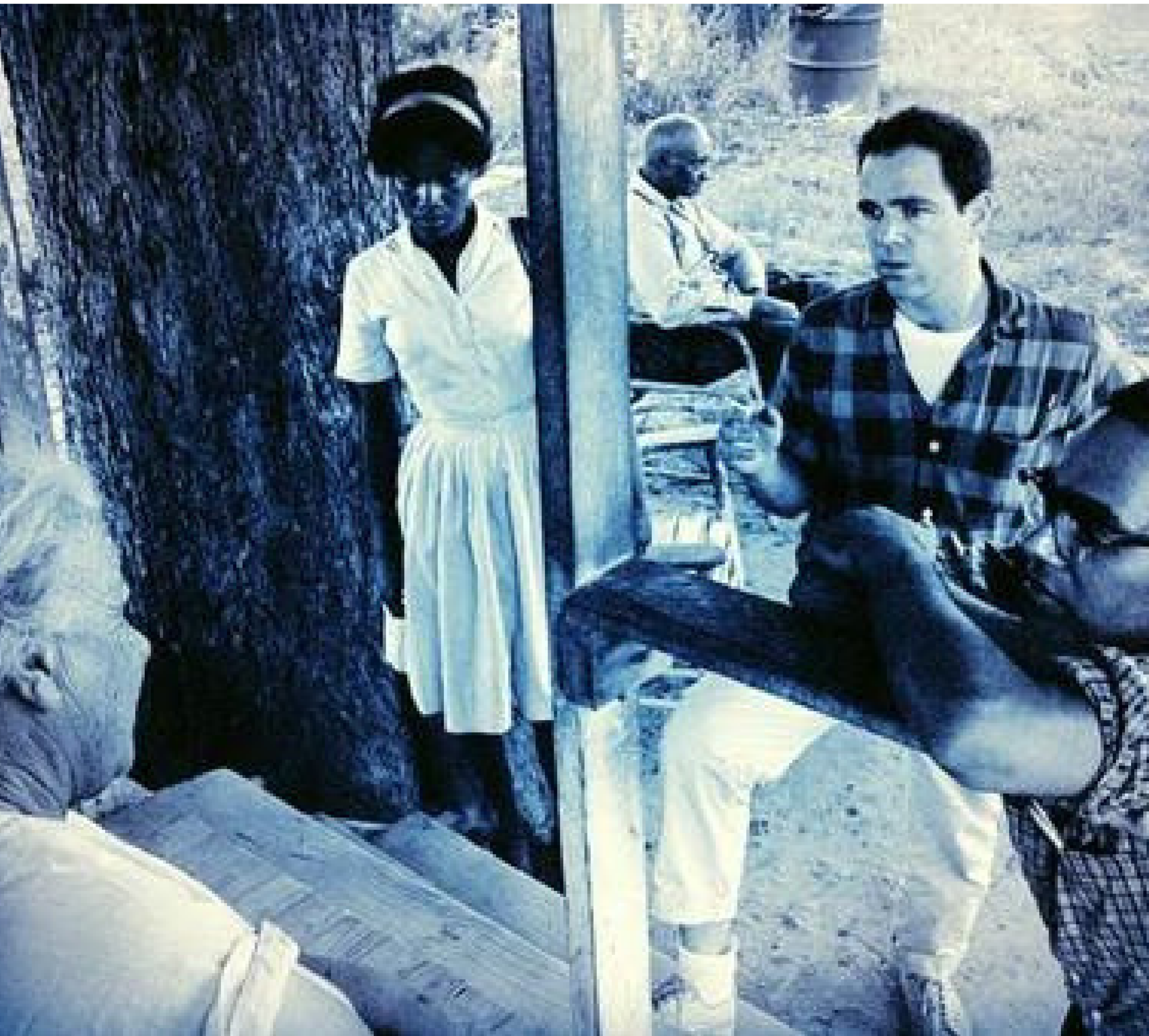


Mike Miller

ORAL HISTORY/INTERVIEW

Volume I: Childhood through 1967



WITH BRUCE HARTFORD

of the Civil Rights Movement Veterans

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CHAPTER 1

ORIGINS

Bruce: So, you were on SNCC staff from ...?

Mike: Mid '62 to the end of '66.

Bruce: OK. Well, why don't you start, with how you got involved in politics. What you did before you joined SNCC, and how you joined SNCC.

Mike: Well, it was in my mother's milk. My folks were both left-wingers. My dad was, I suppose you'd say some kind of a Monthly Review magazine Marxist. He did some labor education work with the fisherman's union out here which is one of the unions that was expelled from the CIO as "Communist-dominated." So I grew up with values about justice and equality.

Bruce: And that was here? The Bay Area?

Mike: Yeah, San Francisco. I was born in San Francisco, 1937. So then, as all kids do, I rebelled against my parents and thought I was going to be a businessman. So that lasted about six months. I then went to U.C. Berkeley, and still the McCarthy Era is pretty pervasive, that Silent

Generation label.

Bruce: What year did you go to Berkeley?

Mike: I went to Berkeley in '54.

Bruce: Right in the heart of the McCarthy period.

Mike: Yeah, so the University YMCA — Stiles Hall — was a little island of political discussion and more openness; free speech was a value there, Civil Rights. We did an initial testing at a barbershop about whether they would take Black students. They wouldn't.

Bruce: In Berkeley.

Mike: Yeah. There on the campus. We did some stuff to make the university's housing office stop accepting discriminatory listings. We got involved in the beginnings of rule changes on the Berkeley campus about who could speak in campus. But it was all very quiet and polite. The testing came later — the barbershop testing came later.

Bruce: Had you been active going to church as a child?

Mike: No. Well, there was a girl in high school, and she went to St. James Presbyterian Church which had a basketball team. So I tried out for the St. James basketball team, and that led me to going to youth group there, so a couple of years, I went to St. James Presbyterian Church, but I grew up without any religious education or orientation.

Bruce: So you became active with the YMCA because of its political rather than its religious —

Mike: Yeah, and it was open to all students, and it had a wonderful staff, a cautious but — the older I got, the more I respected the

Executive Director by the name of Bill Davis, a wonderful Quaker by the name of Cecil Thomas, and a Presbyterian — a maverick, liberal left Presbyterian by the name of Pierre Delattre. And later a guy named John Martin who subsequently became Executive Director. There was another guy too — Bob. Anyway, it was a lively place.

CHAPTER 2

STUDENT GOVERNMENT & SLATE

Mike: Then I met some people involved in student government. A guy named Hank Di Suvero encouraged me to run for rep at large, which was one of maybe 15 seats on the student government body.

Bruce: This was Associated Students of the University of California?

Mike: Yeah, ASUC. And I won. So I was one of two liberals — the graduate rep and I were two dissenting voices on all kinds of things, ranging from increasing the pay in the campus bookstore to anti-apartheid stuff in South Africa. So after my first semester in that, the guy who was the graduate rep was involved in starting a thing called Toward an Active Student Community. And it was to be a campus political party. It ran candidates. They did very poorly, and the general disinterest on the campus remained the same. So the next semester, they decided not to run candidates again, and I said — I was antsy about that. So finally, just before the deadline for filing, I decided I'm gonna resign. I'm gonna run with a slate, and we're gonna see if we can stir things up.

Bruce: Why did you resign?

Mike: Because I wanted to dramatically break with the incumbent

student government and run to defeat the whole crowd, not just elect myself.

Bruce: Let me ask you a question before — you're about to talk about SLATE, I assume...

Mike: Yeah.

Bruce: OK. So this is '55?

Mike: No, '57.

Bruce: All right, '57. The Berkeley campus at that time — how would you characterize it politically and culturally?

Mike: Well, it's still very quiet. I mean, the heavy air of McCarthyism is still very low over that campus, but people used to speak of being a graduate student at Berkeley as a way of life. People would go like 10, 12, 15 years as graduate students, take a couple of classes, even one class each year, maybe be a T.A. [teaching assistant] and hang around, so we still had World War II vets, GI Bill vets.

Bruce: But culturally, it was still — students still wore sports coats and maybe ties?

Mike: No. No, no. Maybe graduate students did, but no, undergraduates wore a sport shirt and either khakis or — I don't think too many people wore Levis. So it was like khakis and a sport shirt. If it was a colder day, you wore a sweater, a nice sweater.

Bruce: And the fraternities/sorority stuff was very —

Mike: It was still very — that was the dominant —

Bruce: The elite.

Mike: — culture of the undergraduate student government, student activities life.

Bruce: So when you were breaking with student government, it was that crowd you were breaking with.

Mike: Yes.

Bruce: So go ahead with SLATE. [SLATE was not an acronym, but it was always spelled in all capital letters.]

Mike: So, I asked some people — they ranged from Pat Hallinan who is one of the sons of the famous Hallinan family.

Bruce: Wonderful Irish rogues.

Mike: Yeah. And so Pat was kind of the left end of our spectrum, and then we had a couple of mainstream liberal people who were on this slate. I think there were five us; three guys and two women. And we doubled the electorate.

Bruce: What do you mean, you doubled the electorate?

Mike: There was twice the turnout as had typically participated.

Bruce: But everybody was eligible to vote. It wasn't —

Mike: Yeah, yeah. So that was a big deal, and because I was the most known of the candidates, I think I got 45% — our votes ran from 35% to 45%. Nobody won. But we thought: We've struck a spark here. So that winter after the election, it might have been the end of '57 or it might have been January '58, we had a founding convention. And what had been a slate of candidates became SLATE, an organization, not an acronym one though. It was just — we took that slate —

Bruce: Let me just step back. During the campaign, I assume you campaigned on issues.

Mike: Yeah, yeah, ranging from H-bomb testing to anti-apartheid to civil rights stuff. Bruce:

But all those are national issues. Were there any —

Mike: Fair employee wages, bookstore prices, free speech on campus. It was the whole range. Bread and butter.

Bruce: You campaigned with leaflets and articles in the paper?

Mike: We were the first group — other than what was considered radical fringe — to stand at the edge of the campus and hand out flyers. And believe it or not, we were a little frightened to do that, because it was so beyond the norm. Luckily, the guy who owned the Potluck restaurant then — I can't remember his name — he had a hand letterpress in his basement which he let us use. You fed one sheet of paper at a time, and you had a foot pedal, so we would stay up all night. We had a different crew, and all night we would print the flyer for the next day, and we would print about 15 to 20,000 of them, so that's a lot of work. And every day, we had a new flyer. They were very attractively done. We had a guy who did the layout, who became a very well known architect. And so we had these attractive flyers, as opposed to the kind of shoddy mimeograph which was the usual left organization format. So people read them, and then on the final day, on our flyer, we had a mock ballot. It was an IBM ballot, so we made a picture of it. We put it on the flyer and showed people how you could vote for our candidates. So anyway, it was a dramatic campaign. We spoke at Sather Gate [a central location on campus]. Carey McWilliams was then a graduate student. He wasn't a candidate but a brilliant orator. So at noon we pull up with this station wagon, put down the back of the gate and stand on it and address students as they were coming out. And Carey

literally — it just stopped people in their tracks. You know, they were off, going to get a hamburger or whatever, and they just stopped to listen to him.

Bruce: And at this time, it's still forbidden, even in a student government election, to hand out political flyers on campus?

Mike: Well, we were leafleting on the edge of the campus.

[Question: You were on the public city-owned sidewalk just off campus, right?]

Mike: And there were about — there were like three major gates and then a number of smaller entry points onto the campus, and we covered them all. I mean, we covered them all. It was quite a campaign. So we formalized that organization in '58. We ran again. We might have elected one person. But soon SLATE elected the student body president and a majority of the ASUC. In the late 1950s, we lit a spark that spread across the country. We got letters and phone calls from dozens of campuses asking us what we were doing and how we did it. People came to Berkeley to see what we were doing. Among them was Tom Hayden, who subsequently started POLIT at UMichigan. TOCSIN was at Harvard; TASC at San Jose State; etc, etc.

CHAPTER 3

NEW YORK

Mike: Then I went off to Columbia. I had a graduate fellowship.

Bruce: What was your major?

Mike: I had a double, sociology/political science. So I had a Woodrow Wilson fellowship to go to Columbia for a year. I went there because C. Wright Mills and Robert K. Merton taught there. Mills was the radical sociologist, and Merton was the Dean of American sociological theory. I thought I'd be able to take both. As it turned out, Mills only taught in the undergraduate college, and taking a class with him was not part of the graduate program. And Merton was on sabbatical. Well, who was left? Paul Lazarsfeld who was an important person in the field of quantitative analysis. I wasn't very interested in that. So I lasted a year. I didn't even complete most of my classes. I got incompletes. It was a very statistically quantitative analysis oriented department. Anyway, so I stumbled on a job. The summer was coming. What am I gonna do? I got to earn some money this summer. My fellowship's just one year. And the details aren't worth recounting, but I stumbled on a job working for the Henry Street Settlement on the lower east side of New York as an organizer in a public housing project. I'd grown up in public housing. I'd had these labor history things from my family. I was an activist. It's

like all these things came together in this one job.

Bruce: And this was the summer of...?

*Mike: This is the summer of '59. So I lasted about six or seven months. I was canned for being too militant, and I was called a little Alinsky. So I said: Who's this guy? I'd never heard of Saul Alinsky. [Laughing] So not only was I canned, but I discovered I couldn't find work in New York, in this huge city. I went up to the Bureau of Applied Social Research. Nathan Glazer who's a friend. I'd met him in Berkeley when he was visiting here. He said: Oh, go see this guy, David Caplovitz. He's doing a study on poverty, and it ended up being the book, *The Poor Pay More*. It was comparing prices in inner city, low income neighborhoods to suburban.*

*Bruce: Sort of a precursor to Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickle and Dimed*?*

Mike: Maybe. But anyway, it was a very carefully done quantitative study, and so I went up. And he was delighted, because the lower east side was a sample area, and here's a guy who knows the lower east side. So he hires me. He goes to a party that night. His funder is the Lavenburg Foundation. Jane — I can't remember her last name — was the Executive Director. He tells her: I found this great guy, and she says: You can't have him work on this project. Why? Helen Hall will have a fit. Helen Hall is the Executive Director of the settlement. And Lavenburg also funded her for the project that I had been canned from. So I show up at work the next day — Caplovitz has this long face. What's going on? I asked. Sorry, Mike, I can't have you working on this project. I can help you get another job here at the Bureau.

*So they offered me a position studying how people respond to disasters. It was about post-flood, spontaneous coming together of communities. I wasn't so interested in that, so Glazer gives me a lead to Richard Cloward, Dick Cloward of *Piven and Cloward*. So I called Cloward.*

Come on over. I want to talk to you. I show up in his office. I think he was at the School of Social Work. I walk in the door, and he says: Now, I want to tell you right away I can't hire you, but I didn't want to tell you on the phone, 'cause I want to tell you what I'm up to.

So he outlines the whole strategy of Mobilization for Youth, which I'll come back to in a minute. And he says: But it's very early in the game, and if I hire you, it'll tell Helen Hall that, you know, I want this kind of organizer on my staff, and I can't afford to make an enemy of her yet. So I said: Well, OK. Thanks for telling me the story! [Laughing] And he and Fran Piven and I became friendly after that.

Now, Mobilization and another thing called Harlem Act — HarYOU — Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited — HarYOU Act. These were both Ford Foundation funded and designed prototypes for what was to become the War on Poverty, Maximum Feasible Participation, if Kennedy won the '60 election. So this is how the government in waiting works. You know, you get a foundation grant. You set up a program, and then you have — some work on the ground, presumably. Anyway, so right about that time, I think by then it's February, maybe March. Let's say February. I get a call from back here, and I'm asked to come back and run a statewide campaign against capital punishment.

Bruce: All right. Before you go there, let me jump back. So you were working at the Henry Street Settlement House, and you get fired for being too militant. And apparently whatever you did was such that you couldn't get these other jobs, and people had heard about you in that context. So why don't you explain what it was you did that created this wrath.

Mike: It was pretty tame! Well, we shut down a street, for example. There was a street that ran through La Guardia Housing Project. The La Guardia Housing Project was in the middle of a mixed — it's kind of like your neighborhood, mixed use, residential, commercial, industrial.

So there were big trucks rumbling through this — I think it was Clinton Street, actually, that ran through the middle of the project, and kids would get hit by these trucks. So the La Guardia Tenant Association, which was the group I worked with, wanted to get a traffic control device. The city wasn't responsive. The decision was made: We're gonna keep a continuous picket line going round and round so that trucks can't go through. And I wanted to march with the tenants. And I was told that as the organizer, it was not appropriate for me to be doing that. So it was that kind of thing.

Bruce: And this is Helen what's-her-name telling you that —

Mike: No, the guy who was the boss of this project is a guy named Jose Villegas, who I think was very uncomfortable telling me that, truth be told.

Bruce: Right, but it's coming down from the top of the —

Mike: At least his understanding of what the top thinks. And there's also a guy, Ralph Tefferteller. But — you see, you have to know the context. A year or so earlier, Alinsky had been invited by the Hudson Guild Settlement House which is in Chelsea, which is across Manhattan and uptown a little bit. It's on the west side. Alinsky was to consult with a project that Hudson Guild and some Catholic parishes were doing in the Chelsea neighborhood. And there was a huge, huge fight. They ended the contract with Alinsky — Alinsky wrote a very famous document called, "Memo to Father Dunn." Dunn was the pastor of a Catholic parish that wanted to keep Alinsky so the Catholic parishes of the Puerto Ricans were in a fight with Hudson Guild and the Ladies Garment Worker's Union and the older Jews and Irish who still lived in the neighborhood. Mostly Irish, I think. And so the union wanted to use urban renewal to do some moderate priced housing. Well, as now, "moderate price" is beyond what poor people can afford, so it would've evicted a number of the new immigrants, Puerto Rican, low

income people. And there was a big battle around this, and Alinsky got booted. But in this "Memo to Father Dunn," he was blistering in his criticism of the New York social welfare establishment.

Bruce: It was attacking Dunn?

Mike: No, no, no. Dunn was his ally.

Bruce: All right, but so you're working with the La Guardia Tenant's Association, as the organizer. They want to stop the trucks. They decide to do a picket line. You're not allowed to picket with them. What was the conception of Henry Street Settlement of what an organizer was supposed to do?

Mike: Well, you facilitate. You facilitate. You motivate. You encourage. But you are clearly not a participant.

Bruce: Why?

Mike: It probably has to do with some notion in social work that I don't know of. I don't know why. I can't answer that question. Well, for one thing, there was probably the risk of arrest, and maybe they didn't want their staff people getting arrested for this kind of thing.

CHAPTER 4

BACK TO BERKELEY

Bruce: All right, so you said you came back to California on capital punishment.

Mike: Yeah, Caryl Chessman was on death row at San Quentin. [Caryl Chessman was convicted of robbery, rape, and kidnapping in 1948. He was condemned to death on the kidnapping charges which were based on the accusation that he dragged two of his victims a few yards from their cars. Chessman defended himself without an attorney. He consistently claimed his innocence and argued that statements attributed to him during his police interrogation were coerced through torture. While on death row he continued to vigorously assert his innocence through letters, essays and four books. His case became a rallying cause for those opposed to the death penalty. Despite a massive international effort to save him, he was executed in 1960.]

Mike: The capital punishment issue was big, hot and heavy. And I was to coordinate a statewide initiative to put capital punishment on the ballot. Well, I think the number of petition signatures we needed so that it would safe, because a lot of them are always tossed out because they're incorrect. I think we needed 500,000 or 400,000, and as the due date was approaching, I think maybe we had 50,000, so it was not a very successful operation. And again, I didn't know what I was gonna do. I

show up in Stiles Hall that summer. I ask Bill Davis, the Executive Director.

Bruce: What is Stiles Hall?

Mike: University YMCA, Stiles Hall. So Stiles connected me with a professor, Ernest Greenwood, in the Social Work School, and he offered me a position as a T.A., and I also was able to get back on the grounds and building crew. Now, in my undergraduate days, when I was in the student government, I worked as a gardener on the campus. These were plum jobs. They were for student government people and athletes. So I worked 12 hours (per week) during the semester, three afternoons a week of four hours, and in the summer, either 20 or maybe even full-time in the summer, I can't remember. And it was union wage, so it was a terrific job. And I got friendly with the guy who was the foreman, Tony — I can't remember his last name now. So when I came back in the summer of '60, I got my old gardener job; I got this T.A. job. And I enrolled back in graduate school. Then, the second year, I got a job as a teaching associate, not a teaching assistant. Teaching associate, which meant you get paid 12 months instead of 9 or 10. I kept my gardening job, and I thought: This is great. I'm gonna fall in with this graduate student as a way of life very easily. Well, I was called in by the department and told: You're not showing a steady progression toward your Ph.D. orals.

Bruce: You already had a Master's?

Mike: No, I was on a straight through program. So, they wanted me to take — you know, I wasn't ready for a language exam, and I wasn't taking the statistics that would've been required, because I had not completed it at Columbia. So I thought: Oh, God. I didn't want to do that. So as frequently happens — well, I'll come to that in a minute — so now, I'm back in SLATE. We're planning, I think, it's the '62 summer conference. SLATE would always have an issues conference in the

summer. And the theme was the Negro in America. I was living with a guy by the name of Herb Mills.

Bruce: The longshoreman?

Mike: Yeah. Who was a brilliant graduate Ph.D. candidate at Berkeley in Political Science. A very, very dear friend of mine. So Herb and I are living together. This Negro in America conference is being planned. The sit-ins have taken place. [Betty Garman](#) was at Berkeley as the NSA rep, and Friends of SNCC work then was being done through NSA, National Student Association. So Betty ended up living next door to us, to where Herb and I were living. So that's how we first got involved, started learning more about SNCC than you'd just learn reading the newspapers. And then —

Bruce: Had you though — the sit-ins started in February of '60, and you had mentioned something about CORE and sit-ins...

Mike: Well, I don't know. What was CORE doing? CORE was doing something in '59, because I remember picketing in Harlem. I picketed Woolworth's.

Bruce: No, that was '60.

Mike: Well, maybe. Could it have been very early in '60?

Bruce: Yeah, immediately after February 1st.

Mike: OK, so I was still in New York, and I picketed in Harlem with CORE. It was before I returned to Berkeley. So I came back here in March.

Bruce: OK, so you were talking about the Harlem CORE, I guess it was New York CORE at that time.

Mike: Yeah, yeah. Right. So Herb and I are living together. We invite Chuck McDew, who is Chairman of SNCC, to come and speak to our conference. Maybe that was '61? I'm fuzzy on which year it is. In any case — the reason I think it's '62 is that I became — he asked me while he was out here to be SNCC rep, and that didn't happen until '62. Anyway, he stayed in this place that Herb Mills and I were renting together. I got to know him pretty well. At the end of his stay, he said: Will you be the SNCC rep out here? I said: I'm honored, you know.

Now, at the same time, or it's conceivable the year before. It might've been the summer conference of SLATE the year before. We'd had farm workers on the agenda. Hank Anderson, who was the Research Director of the old Agricultural Worker's Organizing Committee, which was the AFL thing, not the [Cesar] Chavez thing. He spoke at that conference. He was leaving the conference grounds: "Where you going, Hank?" I asked. "Oh, I'm going to meet this guy, Saul Alinsky, who knows something about the Mexican-Americans in California." So I said: "You mind if I tag along?" "No."

So, I think that's '61.

So I met Alinsky. Hank and I arrive at his door. Alinsky had a very gruff manner. He said: "What's this guy doing here?" So Hank is taken aback. And I said: "Well, Mr. Alinsky, I was fired for being a little Alinsky, and I wanted to meet the big one." This tickled his ego. So he spent an hour regaling us with New York organizing stories, with Hank getting more and more fidgety and Alinsky saying: "Don't worry, we're gonna talk about the farm workers." So I now know who Alinsky is. SLATE had him come and speak at Berkeley as a guest speaker. And I'm beginning to correspond with him.

CHAPTER 5
FRIENDS OF SNCC
1962-1963

Mike: So then '62, I'm SNCC rep.

Bruce: That would be SNCC rep in the Bay Area, mostly fundraising.

Mike: Yes, fundraising, education, political pressure, screening and recruiting people to go South. So it's those main things.

Bruce: Right. At this point, summer of '62, they've just started the [McComb project](#).

Mike: Right. So then as fall is coming, I'm under this pressure to take statistics, blah-blah. I don't know what the hell I'm gonna do. Another good friend of mine, Carl Werthman — sadly died at a very young age, graduate sociology student, very interested in juvenile delinquency stuff. He's working with Youth for Service, which is a delinquency prevention agency in San Francisco that has street workers, guys who are on the street developing relationships with the gangs and trying to, in effect, keep the gangs intact, not break them up, but redirect their activity. So Carl says to me —

Bruce: Just to insert for the record here, this was before drug-gangs. These are social gangs that may be involved in some crime, maybe deal

a little dope, but they're not what we think of today as gangs.

Mike: Yes, it's not Crips and Bloods or anything remotely of that scale. There's violence, fighting, there's theft, there's turf — juvenile delinquents. Though there were — there might have been occasional shooting incidents.

Bruce: Yeah, but not machine gunning people in drive-bys or drug wars.

Mike: No. So I get a job at Youth for Service, and now it's fall '62.

Bruce: Wait a minute. So you had now dropped out of Berkeley?

Mike: I didn't register for the fall '62 semester. And at the same time, I'm SNCC's volunteer rep out here. So I organized a conference called: How Things Look to Us, and this was members of these gangs, young delinquent people, speaking about what their lives looked like — in education, in jobs. It was a terrific conference, but I'm also doing all this SNCC stuff, while I'm at work. So after the conference, Orville says — Orville Luster's the Executive Director, terrific guy, big Black guy.

Bruce: OK. Are these gangs multi-racial?

Mike: No, no, no, no. They're Black.

Bruce: Day Street Gang? Visitacion Valley Gang?

Mike: They're mostly Western Addition, Bayview/Hunter's Point. There might've been a Mexican — was there a Mission Street — was there a Latino...?

Bruce: Well the Day Street Gang in the Lower Mission was pretty much mostly white.

Mike: I don't remember that.

Bruce: OK, you probably didn't work with them. Visitacion, that housing project —

Mike: Sunnydale, that's where I grew up.

Bruce: Sunnydale, yeah. All right, so anyway, the guy who is — big, Black guy running the —

Mike: Orville Luster.

Bruce: Yeah.

Mike: Executive Director of the agency, former probation — no, he'd been a parole officer, I think. He worked at the juvenile center. Wonderful guy. He calls me in. It's a small budget agency then. They later got a big Manpower grant and totally changed the nature of the place. So he says: "Look, Mike. I love what you're doing for SNCC, and I support it. But this agency is too small to subsidize it. So you've got to decide: Are you gonna do Youth for Service work? Or are you gonna do SNCC work? And if you're gonna do SNCC work, you can't do it out of this office. You've got to do it on your own time." So I tell SNCC: I'd like to go on full-time staff, and they say: Yeah, we want you on full-time! So I become, I think it was \$40 a week that SNCC people in the North — I think it was \$50, and it was \$42.89 per week after taxes, take home (equal to \$326 in 2012).

Bruce: Let me ask you a question. You're running Friends of SNCC in the Bay Area. You're on staff to some extent. The other people active in Bay Area Friends of SNCC are volunteers. Were there other active Friends of SNCC groups in other parts of the country that had a SNCC staff running them? Or was the Bay Area pretty much unique in that?

Mike: Now, I don't know the timing of this, but I think, when I came on

full-time to be the Field Secretary for Northern California, there were people like me in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles. Boston. Maybe Detroit. But at least in those five metropolitan areas. My L.A. counterpart was [Jimmy Garrett](#) or [Cliff Vaughs](#), but that might have been a little later.

So that December, Sam Block, and I thought it was [Wazir Peacock](#), but he doesn't think so. So Sam Block and somebody came out here on a speaking tour, and I said to Sam — Sam's the director of the Greenwood office — I said to Sam: You know, I can't do this work anymore without coming South myself and having that experience of it. So he says: "Well, come on down. Come on down this summer. Come on down." So in late June I took off in my little — I then had a little Volkswagen. I headed down to Atlanta, checked in with Forman (Jim Forman was SNCC's Executive Secretary) and [Casey Hayden](#). And I think Casey was then coordinating Friends of SNCC.

CHAPTER 6
MISSISSIPPI DELTA
SUMMER '63

Mike: So I go to Atlanta [and then on to Mississippi], and it happens that on the July 4th weekend, there was the Delta Jubilee concert (in Mississippi). This is on Laura Magee's farm. Laura Magee's farm is on a triangular piece of land with two state highways here, and the boundary of her property there. So there's state troopers lined up on one of these roads — city, county, whatever, police, sheriffs on the other — and about maybe 100 of us, almost all Black, standing on Laura Magee's property, listening to Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Theodore Bikel, and the SNCC Freedom Singers. I mean, it was a stellar cast.

Bruce: All Black, except for — I mean, all of them white singers except for the Freedom Singers?

Mike: Yes.

Bruce: And this is in Leflore County Mississippi. And the other three singers are all Communists — at least in the minds of white Mississippi authorities.

Mike: Yes. And in the case of Seeger, that may in fact have been the case. In the case of Dylan, I doubt it. And in the case of Bikel, clearly not the case. He's a Social Democrat.

Bruce: Right. But those subtle distinctions were lost to Mississippi segregationists. To them anyone who favored integration or Black voting rights was a Communist.

Mike: Yeah. So it was a wonderful, wonderful concert. Well, I digress a minute. Bikel stayed, thinking that he could talk to the synagogue in Greenwood and maybe make a dent. And I mean, he was stunned by that experience.

Bruce: I bet he was.

Mike: Because I remember him coming back to the Freedom House after he'd met the rabbi, and I don't know exactly what Bikel said, but it was something to the effect that: He's (the rabbi) is just like the other Southerners, in that he was unwilling to challenge racism in any way.

Bruce: I know, they were all terrified. I mean, people forget, or never understood, that Klan terror was as strong to keep whites in line as it was to control Blacks.

Mike: Yeah, right. I agree with you.

So it turns out that [Mississippi Project Director] Bob Moses didn't know anything about Sam Block's invitation to me to come to Greenwood. And not only that, there was another white guy from San Jose, Dick Fry, who also wanted to stay. So there was a conference: Sam, Bob and Jim Forman. Bob is saying the violence against Blacks increases when there is a presence of whites as happened when Carl and Anne Braden came up here. I don't want that to happen again. Sam Block is insistent that he wants to have us present. And Forman is, you know, is trying to stop this from becoming a too heated fight. So there's finally an agreement that OK, these two guys can be here for the summer, but we've got to be very careful.

Well, so, Dick and I stay. I think it was — we might've been there two weeks, and we get picked up by the cops. And we're taken to the jailhouse. It's a little two-story, brick jailhouse. And the cop, as he's walking us into the door, yells to the white prisoners upstairs: "Got me some nigger-lovers here, boys." So we were petrified. We thought we were gonna really get a bad beating in this jail. We go into the booking desk, and the arresting cop goes into Chief Larry's office, and we hear: Pss-pss- pss. We can't make out what's being said. It goes on longer and longer. What the hell are they talking about?

The cop comes out and says: You boys get back in the car. So we go back in his car. What? Are they gonna dump us in the river? I mean, we were really, really scared. We drive back into the Black section of town. "You boys see that recreation park over there? We built that for our Nigrahs." Now he's saying "Nigrahs," not "Niggers" anymore. Points out a new school, saying the little routine, and drops us back at the Freedom House. So we have no idea what's going on. We walk in the Freedom House. Everybody from the staff and community people are there. And there's this huge round of applause and laughter. What is so funny?! Well, Sam Block called Chief Larry, and this is this peculiar Black/white relationship of the South. You know, you're bitter antagonists, but Sam Block —

Bruce: You know each other, yeah.

Mike: Sam Block can call up Chief Larry. So he calls Chief Larry, and he said: "Don't mess with those white boys. They know the Governor of California." It's a total bluff. A total, total bluff. But, it worked. So we were told when we were put out of the car: You're guilty of cohabitation of the races, and we want you out of town in a week. Well, we didn't leave, but we're now — not only do we work in the office and not do much field — we had done a little door-to-door stuff before that, but now, not only are we mostly to work in the office, but we live in the office upstairs. It's a two-story place. We sleep upstairs. Already meals are served there for the staff, so we eat there.

Bruce: Now that's the office that eventually got fire-bombed, right?

Mike: It's 708 Avenue N, I think. Yes, when I went back in '94, it was, you know, gutted out. So that's how I spent the rest of the summer.

Bruce: And what were you doing? I mean, what kind of work?

Mike: I was doing some news release stuff. I was trying to teach people how to write press releases. You know, I was generally —

Bruce: Organizational as opposed to canvassing or —

Mike: Once in awhile I'd get out and do canvassing, but not much. Not much. I was mostly in the office, and I was trying to transmit whatever little bit I, by then, knew about organizing. By then, I think I'd read Reveille (Reveille for Radicals by Saul Alinsky). I had this job. I had a whole lot of campus political experience, so I knew something about organizing. And I'd have conversations — I was older than everybody else there except for Bob Moses.

Bruce: You were in Greenwood around the time of the [food blockade](#)?

Mike: I was there when they were bringing food down from the North. As a matter of fact, that's one of the things I got involved in. There was a big discussion about who would get the food. And it was, you know, initially, people were just giving it to their friends, so there was like a revolt in the staff: We've got to stop this. So we had a big staff meeting. It was very dramatic and a lot of heat. And finally, light was shed, that the people — the first priority in food was the people who not only had gone to register to vote but who had been fired, evicted, or you know otherwise were under economic pressure. And then the next priority was people who tried to register but maybe they weren't fired; they were just poor. And then only after that, first come, first serve. There was no after that.

Bruce: You know, that happened so many places. That issue almost shattered the Selma Movement after the March to Montgomery, because there was a huge amount of food and clothing and books, all kinds of stuff. And the ministers wanted to give it to the good churchgoers who voted to keep them as ministers. The people who had been active in the Movement and had gotten arrested and had marched and said: Well, we are the ones who suffered. We deserve these bennies. And the people who were very poor and starving, who might not have had that much to do with the Movement, said: We need it the most.

Mike: Right.

Bruce: And it ended up with people pulling guns on each other in the basement of First Baptist Church. It sounds like you guys handled it better than they did in Selma.

Mike: It does sound that way, but we probably were not inundated with as much as Selma.

Bruce: That's true.

Mike: Although Ivanhoe [Donaldson] was responsible — some huge truck arrived from Michigan. I mean, it was a vast, huge truck.

Bruce: Yeah, and he got arrested for running drugs, because it contained aspirin.

Mike: Well, not only that — the other funny thing is that someone had given petit foie gras. Little tiny hors d'oeuvre cans. So we had stuff that nobody knew — what do you do with this? But luckily we got — early we recognized we've got to have a meeting about this. It was a typical SNCC meeting, you know, going on into the night, but it finally resolved itself pretty well. And we got bricks and boards, and the office was pretty big, and we made these big shelves all around the office and stacked the food stuffs in a fairly orderly way, and we had a procedure.

Bruce: Well, that's much better than what happened in Selma.

Mike: So then, in September I guess, it was time for me to go home. Dick Fry, I think, stayed. I think he stayed, because he went on the SNCC staff. He went on full-time on the staff. So I go back to Atlanta in my little Volkswagen and up to Cambridge Massachusetts. I came home that way because I had friends on the East Coast I wanted to visit and say hello.

So I'm in a Cambridge cafe having coffee with Howard Zinn, and we're talking somehow about Berkeley, and there's a young woman at the next table. I can tell she's kind of eavesdropping. She finally says: Are you from Berkeley? I said: Yeah. She said: Are you going there? Yeah. Are you driving? Yeah. Can I bum a lift?

Mike: I'll return to her in a bit. So this woman's from Idaho, Mormon background, knows absolutely nothing about the Movement. So I regale her with stories across the country. We get back to Berkeley, and by now, she and I are friendly. She has a boyfriend in Berkeley.

CHAPTER 7

FREEDOM BALLOT IN MISSISSIPPI, FALL '63

Mike: So maybe a week or so later, I get a call from Joanne Bowman, SNCC Field Secretary in Jackson. Bob Moses would like you to come back and work on the Aaron Henry campaign (Freedom Ballot campaign). Aaron Henry — who's the white minister?

Bruce: Ed King. [See [Freedom Ballot](#) for background information.]

Mike: Ed King. They're running as Governor & Lieutenant Governor in the Fall of '63. So I said: Sure, and is there anything else you guys need down there? Well, if you can bring someone who has secretarial experience, that would be great.

So this young woman who'd come across the country with me, she had a lot of that. So I go over to her house, and I say: "Come with me." I remember she still had her hair up in curlers. She said: "I can't. I'm not dressed." I said: "I'll give you five minutes. Come on. I want you to see a movie." So I was showing the Harvey Richards' movie on Mississippi at Berkeley High. And she comes with me, and at the end of the movie, you know, it's very moving. Plus she had my stories. So she said: "Why did you want me to see that?" I said: "I want you to come to Mississippi with me. So she agreed.

Bruce: Are you gonna tell us her name?

Mike: I'm trying to remember it! Lee Hill (or Marsh). She married a guy named Lincoln Taiz, whose sister is a leader in the California Federation of Teachers, but I cannot remember her first name.

So, we arrive in Jackson. Bob already has an assignment. There's a guy there by the name of Gene [D'Allessi] who's a volunteer. He's a sound engineer who worked for KSFO radio here. He did the sound engineering work for Giants baseball games. No, was it the Giants yet? Or the Seals? Whoever the top baseball team was here. I think it was the Giants. So it's the Giants. So, he's got fancy equipment. So we pile in my car. We go up to Clarksdale to interview Aaron Henry.

Bruce: Oh, this is for the radio spots.

Mike: Yeah, because the FCC has somehow ordered a Jackson station to give Aaron Henry time. Free. So, to get four 30-second radio spots, we must've spent six hours, because [D'Allessi] is a perfectionist. And everybody's scared (of white racists). Aaron Henry has a guy with a gun across his lap on the front and back doors to his house. There's Klan types driving by, honking their horns. So we leave there late at night, Gene [D'Allessi], Lee Hill/Marsh, and myself. On the way back to Jackson, I get in this auto accident, very bad. I tend not to think it was deliberate. Other people think it was deliberate, but in any case, we get run off the road. I mean, we go off the road. You know, there are these big ravines on either side of these Mississippi state highways. The car goes off into one of those ravines. I had a ruptured spleen and broke two bones of my forearm. D'Allessi had a ruptured spleen. I don't know how he got to the Jackson —

Bruce: No seatbelts in those days.

Mike: No, no. Well, they might've had them, but we didn't wear them.

So the young woman, Lee Hill/Marsh, sitting in the passenger front seat, uninjured. Miraculous. Maybe she had the seatbelt on. I don't know why. But she was responsible for saving my life, because in Tchula where they first took us, they wouldn't treat us, because I had all these papers in the back of my car. They immediately knew who we were. So she somehow got connected with the Black undertaker, and the Black undertaker put, I guess, Gene and me in his hearse and sped us down to the university hospital in Jackson.

So I'm in the university hospital. I think it's October. Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's October. I think I was there about three weeks. [Miriam Glickman](#) visited me there. She and Bob Moses and Joanne Bowman and I can't remember who else.

But that was an interesting experience. The surgeon came by. It's a teaching hospital, so you know, they come by with their students and you're spoken of as an object. This patient, he tells his student, is an example of the objectivity of our performance of medicine. We may not agree with why he's here in Mississippi, but we give him the absolute best medical care which we're capable — blah, blah, blah. But I also had people come in at two in the morning who are on the staff say: I just want to let you know, we support what you're doing. It was a really interesting three weeks in that hospital.

Bruce: How was it paid for?

Mike: There was a big fundraising campaign out here.

Bruce: Because there was no medical insurance in those days.

Mike: No, and probably I left a debt there, but there was a big — both blood donating. There were a whole bunch of people around who say: Mike, you have my blood! And there was a lot of fundraising. So, I came back.

Bruce: What about the woman, Lee Marsh? Did she come back at the same time you did?

Mike: No, she came back quickly, because she had been unhurt. Yes, because Lincoln, the guy who's her boyfriend, is living in Berkeley. She comes back. And I actually got to repay her the favor, because Lincoln had some legal problem, and I got a lawyer friend of mine to donate his services. And because the cops had made a procedural mistake, Lincoln was not prosecuted. But she and I lost touch. I tried once to reconnect with her, and I didn't succeed. I discovered when I heard this name — I saw the name Taiz, it's a very unusual name — I wrote the woman, and I said: Are you related to Lincoln Taiz? And she said: Yeah, that's my brother. I said: Is he still married to Lee Marsh? And yes. And I think he was then teaching at UC Santa Cruz.

CHAPTER 8
FRIENDS OF SNCC
1963-64

Mike: I recuperated at the home of Bob and Naomi Lauter. Now, Naomi Lauder should have a paragraph or so here. Naomi is the daughter of a very important Jewish family in the Bay Area, in San Francisco. Very highly regarded in the Jewish community. She's married to Bob Lauter. Bob Lauter is also a very respected guy. He runs Ets-Hokin and Galvan. This is the family company that Naomi's father had built. It's a huge electrical contracting company. They had the Cape Canaveral space contract. And Bob is also the Chairman of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, appointed by Mayor Shelley, I'm pretty sure. They're both very, very highly respected.

Naomi came to hear one of the SNCC people. I met her. We liked each other. I asked her to organize San Francisco Friends of SNCC, and she agreed. And we got this really impressive letterhead organization in San Francisco with a world of connections, reaching up to Leo McCarthy who later became the Speaker of the Assembly and Lieutenant Governor. He's on it. The guy who's the Attorney General of California, can't remember. He's on it. Congressman Phil Burton, Assemblymen John Burton and Willie Brown. And then religious and labor leaders. Walter Johnson was part of it, Labor Council Secretary. And Naomi is still a very dear friend.

So I resumed Friends of SNCC stuff in the winter, and by then, we had a quite distinct character to Bay Area Friends of SNCC. We had this letterhead in San Francisco that gave us tremendous respectability. And then we had — I think at the peak, there were 21 or 22 or so Friends of SNCC groups, ranging from — San Jose was one; UC Santa Cruz was another. In the south, all the way up to Sacramento State in the north. And like Santa Rosa JC had a Friends of SNCC. Diablo Valley College had a Friends of SNCC. There was an East Bay Friends of SNCC, Marin Friends of SNCC, San Mateo. And they were all totally volunteer operations, and we were one of the best fundraisers in the country.

Bruce: So there were geographical groups, San Francisco and so on. But probably the most of them were campus-based on a particular campus?

Mike: Whether most of them, I'm not sure. I don't know that I would say that. Well, let's see about the geographies. There was a San Jose, a Santa Clara County. There was a San Mateo. There was a San Francisco. There was a Marin. There was a Sonoma, Sonoma/Napa County. There was a Sacramento. There was an East Bay. There was a Contra Costa County. So there's eight. So the rest are from campus.

Bruce: And at a lot of those campuses, would you say that in a sense the Friends of SNCC — at least at this period — '63, '64 — one of the main radical, political groups on campus. In other words, they played a role beyond simply supporting SNCC in the South.

Mike: Mostly yes, I would say that's right. But mostly around Civil Rights stuff. Not, for example, peace and disarmament stuff. They would also turn people out for local CORE things. And they included a lot of people who were just — you would say uninitiated politically but who were stirred by the courage and tenacity of the SNCC people in the South. I mean, who could not be stirred by what they were doing then. It's before all of the controversies about Black Power rhetoric, blah-

blah-blah. I mean, SNCC is still pretty pure, from center all the way to the left.

Bruce: Well, left center maybe. I mean, remember —

Mike: These people in San Francisco — liberal, let's say liberal. Liberal to left.

Bruce: All right, but remember San Francisco, even then, was not typical America. And it wasn't even typical of California. [Laughing]

Mike: No, the Bay Area is distinctive, because the Longshoreman's Union has a pretty strong presence. It had resisted McCarthyism.

Bruce: And it was an interracial union.

Mike: There's a big Black membership. Some key people from it are in the San Francisco Friends of SNCC. Leroy King and Curtis McClain, both Black business agents in Local 6. Zuretti Goosby, first African-American on the San Francisco School Board. He's part of Friends of SNCC. And the interesting thing was, we also had ADA liberals, not just CDC liberals. Naomi Lauter, who I mentioned before, she's an ADA liberal. She's a Zionist.

Bruce: Explain the difference between ADA liberal and CDC liberal.

Mike: So, the CDC liberals, the California Democratic Council, are more of a Democratic Club movement. There are a whole lot of former Communists and fellow travelers who were in CDC. CDC people probably on foreign policy in the Cold War would say the balance of blame was with the West, though they'd be critical of the Soviet Union, but they would've said the balance of blame was the West. Whereas, ADA, Americans for Democratic Action, were more part of the liberal Cold War consensus — Arthur Schlesinger, Walter Reuther. The Communist bloc was the major antagonist of the Cold War, and they

were very anti-Communist in domestic matters. ADA liberals had played a role in the expulsion of the so-called Communist-dominated unions from the CIO. So we had both of those kinds of liberals working together in San Francisco Friends of SNCC. And we had Paul and Ruth Jabobs. Paul was part of the ADA crowd, but he came to think the expulsion of the so-called "Communist dominated" unions was a mistake — that people should have out-debated and out-organized them, not expelled them.

Bruce: the CDC and ADA were antagonistic to each other in general California politics.

Mike: Oh, you better believe it. Although, again, at least in Northern California, those antagonisms that in places like New York were bitter, were more friendly. They were rivals. They would argue, but they worked together on things.

Bruce: It was a lot more bitter in L.A.

Mike: Yeah, but you had Nancy Swadesh who was the head of — if not California ADA, at least Northern California ADA. And she worked with the CDC liberals. And you had people like Phil Burton who worked with everybody. And he was a very smart politician, and so you couldn't really attack Phil Burton. I mean, CDC liberals sort of did actually. They thought Burton was a machine, too much of a machine politician, but I mean, Phil Burton had a very liberal voting record.

Bruce: Yeah, he did.

Mike: So anyway, Friends of SNCC had a pretty strong presence around here. There was some big drive to get lawyers down [to Mississippi to take depositions regarding denial of voting rights]. So here is where having someone like Naomi was very critical. Naomi knew Ed [Stern]. I don't think Ed was yet a judge, but he's a highly regarded liberal

lawyer who's able to work with all these camps. He may have been a member of the Guild, but whether he was a member or not —

Bruce: Explain about the Guild.

Mike: The National Lawyers Guild. He would have been able to work with Guild lawyers and mainstream liberal lawyers. So because Naomi knew Ed, and because Naomi asked Ed to do this, we sent 40 lawyers to whatever it was. It was the biggest bloc from any one geographic area in the country. That was Naomi and Ed. Now, in Mississippi, ADA was among those putting heat on SNCC not to work with Guild lawyers because of this whole Cold War liberal vs. not thing. Out here in the Bay Area, that was not — you couldn't do that. I mean, the Guild was more respected here. It wasn't so isolated here. And if you took that line, you would be the one getting isolated, not the Guild.

Bruce: Right, it was not quite as good in L.A., but yeah.

Mike: Well, and you had an ACLU down there. Eason Monroe had built a very strong ACLU that didn't buy into this Cold War liberalism, etc.

Bruce: That's true.

CHAPTER 9

FREEDOM SUMMER, 1964

Mike: So then in [January of 1964] this famous [Hattiesburg MS meeting](#) that argues about the Summer Project, and were they going to bring whites down there? And the decision is to do it, and so the Northern offices are supposed to screen applicants who want to go to the [Mississippi Summer Project](#). So we set up a pretty elaborate operation. I mean, I still run across people who say: Yeah, you interviewed me. I don't remember it, but yeah, you interviewed me to go to Mississippi. There was one guy who told me: "You interviewed me and rejected me, because you thought I had a paternalistic attitude." And he said: "And you were right!" So, we sent a pretty good number of people.

Now, here's another place where this ADA other liberal thing comes into play. Allard Lowenstein, big ADA guy, and a very early Northern liberal engaged with the Southern Movement. So he, earlier in '63, had been on the faculty or was the Dean at the Stanford Law School and at Yale. And from both places, he got law students to go to Mississippi.

Bruce: For the Freedom Vote in October or November of '63.

Mike: Yeah. And so when this Summer Project idea is growing, he's also

very concerned about what he perceives to be a Communist influence, and he wants to set up a national screening mechanism that's going to screen the students who are wanting to go to Mississippi. And the Mississippi people told him: No way.

Bruce: But he wanted to screen them to make sure they were not Communist [or fellow travelers, or whatever].

Mike: Yes, exactly.

Bruce: Not whether they would work well with the Blacks.

Mike: Well, I'm sure he would've taken the other factors into account as well, but he had a political litmus test. I remember putting out — Allard Lowenstein was causing brush fires. He'd go on a national speaking tour, and if he was somewhere in the West — the Northwest really — all over the Northwest, campus people were being told to call me. So I'd get a call from Idaho State or from Oregon State where the campus Friends of SNCC group was in disarray over a Lowenstein presentation about Communist infiltration of SNCC. And I would try to put out the fire. And one of the ways was to say: "Well, the ADA people in San Francisco are still involved in Friends of SNCC. Ask Lowenstein what he makes of that." So this Cold Warrior mentality that he had we were able to neutralize.

Bruce: Well, that sounds like he was making presentations saying: Don't go to Mississippi, or anti-SNCC by that time, as opposed to: We want to support SNCC and send people there, but we don't want the volunteers to be...

Mike: I would suspect it was the latter. But when you raise the question among people who may be relatively naive politically — it's not the Bay Area, remember. This is, you know, at the University of Idaho or somewhere that hasn't seen a Communist since the Mine, Mill and

Smelter Workers Union in the 1950s.

Bruce: Well, I remember that his role became very controversial, not just in the Bay Area.

Mike: No, I know. All over. So anyway, we did a very good job recruiting people to go South. I was getting involved in local stuff. I'm still in touch with Alinsky.

CHAPTER 10

MFDP CHALLENGE TO
THE DEMOCRATIC
CONVENTION

Bruce: Well, did you go South? Were you —

Mike: No, I didn't go. I was there in '63, and I thought: You know, it's more important that I stay out here and do support stuff because by then, the whole idea of the [Convention Challenge](#) is emerging. [In Mississippi, SNCC was instrumental in organizing the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coordinating body that included SNCC, SCLC (Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference), CORE (Congress on Racial Equality) and the State Conference of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). COFO was the sponsor of "Freedom Summer" as well as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) which it hoped would replace the "regular" Democratic Party as the national recognized Democratic Party in Mississippi. To accomplish this goal, MFDP challenged the seating of the "regulars" at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention.] So, as you know, most SNCC people, me included, thought: You know, we're gonna get the — I think it was eight votes needed in the [Convention's] Credentials Committee to get a minority report on the floor, and if it gets to the floor, under the TV camera visibility that this issue will get, they won't be able to turn down MFDP. I think I had started out a little skeptical, but Frank Smith was doing a

lot of — I remember we saw Mervyn Dymally walking into a meeting in the State California Democratic Party. Frank Smith is out here trying to get them to endorse the Challenge. So I know who Dymally is. "Frank, this is Mervyn Dymally, Assemblyman, blah-blah-blah. This is Frank Smith from SNCC." They have a conversation that is five minutes. Dymally says: "I'll get the vote." He goes in, and I think it was unanimous. It was probably unanimous to support the Freedom Democratic Party Challenge.

Well, of course as we all know, at the Convention itself, Lyndon Johnson started unraveling those votes with a combination of persuasion and a big club. You want this dam up in Idaho on whatever river? You ain't gonna get it if you vote for those folks. You want your husband appointed judge whatever? So later, Joe Rauh was the attorney, and he was an ADA guy, and he was Walter Reuther's attorney at the UAW. And a lot of SNCC people believe Rauh was in on the sellout. I spent an hour with Rauh talking about that. I'm persuaded that Rauh did not know what was being cooked up behind his back.

Bruce: Well, my understanding is that Rauh might personally have supported the so-called two seat "compromise," but the MFDP said: We don't support it, and he continued to fight for the full —

Mike: Yes. Well, I think that there are people — I think there were SNCC people who believed he was in on the concoction of the compromise. I think he had nothing to do with it and that he opposed it [after MFDP] voted against it.

Bruce: My understanding is that at one point he argued to the MFDP that they should accept the "compromise."

Mike: That might be the case, but when they decided not to —

Bruce: He represented them.

Mike: Yes. Which, I think, is also what King did. Do you know?

Bruce: My recollection is that King was under a lot of pressure from Johnson & company to get the MFDP to accept the two-seat compromise. That's when he spoke in the church to the MFDP delegates, he basically said: You should accept it. And then he said: On the other hand, this is your movement, and if you don't want to accept it, you have to decide. And you're the ones. And basically, almost walked everything back. So he basically straddled the fence.

Mike: Yeah. But when they voted not to accept it, I think he supported them.

Bruce: That's my understanding, yes.

Mike: Whereas, I don't think CORE or the NAACP did.

Bruce: I believe CORE did.

Mike: Oh, maybe CORE did as well.

Bruce: Yeah, I'm pretty sure. The NAACP was — they wanted acceptance of the two-seat compromise all the way through.

Mike: National NAACP (as opposed to the Mississippi NAACP).

Bruce: Nationally, and I think Aaron Henry too.

Mike: No, I don't think Aaron...

Bruce: He eventually voted with the other MFDP delegates to reject the "compromise" — he saw which way the wind was blowing. But from that time forward, he steadily moved away from COFO, away from MFDP and more and more into the Democratic Party establishment. That's my impression.

Mike: Yeah, I think that sounds right to me.

Bruce: Because remember, the NAACP withdrew from COFO within a couple of months after that.

Mike: I didn't remember that. Now, [the Challenge] is a very important thing, because I think the history of the country might've been different had Johnson said: "All right, we're not gonna unseat the whites, and we're not gonna seat MFDP, but we're gonna split the delegations and each of you will get half the seats." The whites would not have accepted it.

Bruce: The whites didn't even accept the two seat compromise.

Mike: Exactly. And certainly the whites would not have accepted that. And Johnson would have built a unity that ran from the center of the party all the way to the left liberal elements that were mostly pro-SNCC and CORE. Instead, he fractured that, and the militant Civil Rights Movement and left-liberal people were deeply alienated by that decision and went on a path, from my point of view, that increasingly isolated them from American politics.

Bruce: I would generally agree with that. And I would add that from the evidence I've heard the reason Johnson did not do that and the reason Johnson took the line he took was his hope that they could somehow hold the South in the Electoral College for the Democratic Party, which they totally failed to do.

Mike: Well, they had an illusion that there was something called the Southern Moderate, who would somehow rise to the fore.

Bruce: To ally with Black voters when they became voters. Which was a complete illusion and a total failure.

Mike: And for reasons that, in a way, baffle me, they really were

frightened that Goldwater was gonna win.

Bruce: Yes. They were frightened, and they were afraid he would win — and in the South, he did win.

Mike: Yes, only in the South.

Bruce: And Arizona. But I think also, not only would it have had a different effect in history in the terms you described, but I believe that even as early as August of 1964, Johnson already had Vietnam on his mind, was already planning to send American combat troops, and had he made that other alliance, that would've been much more difficult.

Mike: Yes, I was coming exactly to that point. The other major thing he would've had to decide differently was the Vietnam question. So had those two decisions been different, I think the history of the country might have been different. Now, who knows, you know? Hindsight is always a little clearer than foresight.

Anyway — by this time, we had a fairly — Terry Cannon had come on the staff, and we were publishing this monthly — that started out as a little 8x14 foldover newsletter, Bay Area Friends of SNCC newsletter, and it expanded into The Movement newspaper, a monthly that was devoted to covering what was going on in the South, the Farm Workers Union, Economic Research & Action Project (ERAP)—the Students for a Democratic Society organizing in the North; we'd cover some of those stories. Community organizing stuff in the North. It was trying to become the newspaper of the Movement really. So we had Terry on staff. Gail Brown had come full-time, I'm almost sure. She was our office administrator and held everything together. So the staff. And then we hired Roy Ballard who was a leader in the [San Francisco Ad Hoc Committee To End Racial Discrimination. It led sit-ins to end job discrimination at the Sheraton Palace Hotel and Mel's Drive-In]. We hired Tom Ramsey who'd been the SF State Student Government President and a volunteer in Mississippi.

Bruce: Now when you say "hired," do you mean hired for Friends of SNCC or hired on the Movement newspaper staff?

Mike: These were all on SNCC payroll.

Bruce: SNCC had money then.

CHAPTER 11

BRANCHING OUT

Mike: Anyway, so we were raising money. We were doing well on everything, and I am still kind of off-and-on in correspondence with Alinsky. And because of the Youth for Service stuff, I had gotten involved in some local Black community things in San Francisco. So I say to SNCC: I want to use my SNCC Field Secretary title and get active in some anti-urban renewal organizing stuff in San Francisco.

So I got involved — already in '62 I'd been involved in anti-urban renewal stuff in Bayview/Hunter's Point, so in '63 or early '64, I started getting involved in anti-urban renewal in the Western Addition. [Bayview/Hunter's Point and the Western Addition were the main Black neighborhoods in San Francisco.] As you know, in those days, urban renewal was called Negro Removal. And in San Francisco, it was most definitely that. The Executive Director, as a matter of fact, Justin Herman, actually said San Francisco is not a city most Negroes can live in. I mean, it was a horrendous statement.

Bruce: And the Western Addition is another name for the Fillmore —

Mike: The Fillmore, which was the main Black community of San Francisco.

Bruce: Starting in World War II. But not before. Before that, it was the Japanese ghetto. Blacks were brought in to replace the Japanese who'd been sent to concentration camps.

Mike: Well, and because of war work. And before World War II, the Fillmore was also a Jewish community.

Bruce: Right, Blacks were recruited to come to San Francisco for work in the shipyards, but they were housed in the Fillmore because so many of the buildings were empty after the Japanese were sent to concentration camps.

Mike: In the camps, yes. So that Western Addition stuff led to a thing called Freedom House, and by fall of '64, Freedom House had a pretty good sized operation, and a lot of returning summer volunteers, among them Mario Savio, were organizers in Freedom House.

Mike: Yes. And now we had a local organizer. In our name, after Freedom House and the anti-urban renewal stuff in the Western Addition, we then did a project in the Western Addition/Haight Ashbury with two full-time — maybe actually three full-time: Tom Ramsey, Roy Ballard, and a young African-American guy from USF by the name of Danny Brown. So there were the three of them on that project staff. There was Terry full-time on The Movement. Gail Brown full-time administering the office. I was the regional kind of rep, coordinator, Field Secretary. So is that six? Maybe even another person on the staff at that time. Joe Blum?

We were housed by then in an old Presbyterian church at 449-14th Street between Guerrero and Valencia that no longer had a congregation. It was the office for the Department of Urban Work of the Presbyterian Church, which was engaging with Alinsky to bring him out to the Bay Area. And they gave us space. So we had this big spacious office, and there are these two guys, Bill Grace who is the Director of

the Department of Urban Work for the Presbyterians. He has what's called a detached minister, David [Knotts], who doesn't have a congregation and is meant to just be working in the Mission District. And they're engaged with Alinsky, and so I get involved with them. The idea being that somehow down the road there might be an Alinsky project in the Mission District, in a largely Latino neighborhood of San Francisco.

And SNCC, after that Challenge, is more militant in its rhetoric. It's losing a fair amount of Northern support. But here in the Bay Area, we retained a broad base of support for quite a long time into '66. The peak of the money was '64, I think, but in terms of support, political support, we retained a pretty broad base. And I knew — I was arguing with people like Stokely and Forman that, you know, it's your decision. You guys want to go in this direction, this kind of fiery language, we cannot retain the funding support that we have here.

Bruce: Did you attend SNCC staff meetings?

Mike: Oh yeah. Not all of them, but I went to Gammon Theological Seminary [in the later part of 1964]. I might even have been to two at Gammon, if there were two. I went to one at Highlander. I went to a couple I think at Waveland. I was probably at four or five national staff meetings. At one of those staff meetings I proposed a relationship with the Farm Workers Union, and there was agreement on that. So Marshall Ganz, who'd been a volunteer in McComb, was placed — he remained on SNCC payroll — and Dickie Flowers who was a Black guy who'd been working in Mississippi, he was also placed with the Farm Workers. And they were both on SNCC payroll. Marshall became a major leader figure in the Farm Workers Union.

Bruce: And they were in Delano. Mike: Yes. Bruce: That was '66?

Mike: No, '65-'66, because I was co-coordinator of the first Farm

Worker boycott, the Schenley Liquor boycott. Which I'm pretty sure is '65. And the original nucleus of the national Farm Worker boycott structure was Friends of SNCC on campuses around the country, and Students for a Democratic Society chapters around, because I quickly contacted Paul Booth who was the National Secretary of SDS, and Paul — he and I were friendly. And he was an enthusiastic supporter of SDS chapters getting involved with the boycott. So by this time, really, I'd say at least half if not more of my time is on farm worker and anti-urban renewal and supervising our Haight/Ashbury project. You know, local stuff.

Bruce: What about Selma/Montgomery, all of that stuff? Was there...?

Mike: Oh, it's funny. I don't have a lot of memory about that. I wasn't in Alabama. I don't know that we had anybody who was in Alabama come out here on a speaking tour. Now, Stokely later, when he was in Lowndes County, he came out, but that's not until — that's '65, right?

Bruce: Well, SNCC's Lowndes organizing really started during the March to Montgomery, so by the beginning of April '65 they were digging in.

*Mike: So I think it was Lowndes that more captured us out here. Terry Cannon who was editor of *The Movement* went down there and did a terrific [article](#) on the Lowndes County Freedom Organization.*

Bruce: Well, it wasn't called that then, but yes. But also, there were huge support demonstrations for Selma in the Bay Area after Bloody Sunday, so you must have been involved in those. You may not remember them, but San Francisco was one of the larger centers of action and civil disobedience.

Mike: Yes, yes, not organized by us, I don't think.

Bruce: Interesting.

Mike: We probably participated. I'm sure we participated, but I don't think we were —

Bruce: I guess that was because SNCC had a very ambivalent attitude towards that whole thing. And that was no doubt reflected in Friends of SNCC. But I know that there were huge support demonstrations in the Bay Area.

Mike: Exactly. So I guess '65 — I'm involved with the Farm Workers, urban renewal stuff. We're doing our support work for SNCC.

CHAPTER 12

RESISTING
URBAN RENEWAL

Mike: In the Mission District, there's a threat of urban renewal.

Bruce: Describe what you mean by urban renewal.

Mike: OK, urban renewal is a process by which an urban renewal agency, an arm of government; it's a mixed city/state/federal agency. It has peculiarly independent powers. So if a city — it has to get approval from a city to do what is called a feasibility study or a planning study, to see if a neighborhood should be designated as an urban renewal neighborhood. If that neighborhood is so designated, the urban renewal agency can then go to the federal government and seek money to acquire land and sites in that area, demolish or restore property, and prepare land, that is, build infrastructures, sewers, and all that kind of stuff, and sell the land at below market price to developers.

Now, that development could be used to build moderate or affordable housing, or it could be used for skyscrapers, you know, fancy commercial sites, convention centers, symphony halls. So the legislative mandate, the national legislative mandate, is a mixed purpose. It's slum clearance and providing affordable housing for low- and moderate-income people. It's also supposed to help the tax base of cities. Well, when the

clout is on the side of helping the tax base, you end up with stuff that poor people can't afford. And that's what's happened in most places, because the sites that are designated for urban renewal are inner city, right adjacent to downtown, so if you want to build a sports arena or a convention center — like The South of Market Moscone Center, all those — that's built on land prepared by the urban renewal agency.

And these agencies — once they got their implementation money, there's nothing city government could do.

Bruce: So from an organizing perspective, there was the — first of all, the neighborhoods that were designated, these are poverty areas; the housing is run down. In other words, this is where poor people live.

Mike: They had to demonstrate dilapidated and deteriorating housing stock. That was the main criteria.

Bruce: So from an organizing point of view then, the struggle to resist this poor-people-removal, or Negro-removal, would have been around: Don't designate our area. If it was designated, to resist seizing the land and having the land bought, and then if that was lost, then to resist the demolishment and rebuilding, right?

Mike: Well, not quite that sequence. The first step would be: Don't designate us. Second step: If we're gonna be designated, we want veto power. That was the position we took in the Mission. Veto power over what goes on. If we don't — the urban renewal legislation provided that there should be citizen participation in the planning, and secondly, there had to be adequate relocation. So if it's gonna be designated, and if there's gonna be demolition, then we want the replacement housing to be housing that people can afford to move back into. And we want the interim relocation to be implemented. Now, urban renewal agencies systematically ignored all this citizen participation and relocation requirements, and went on their merry way doing whatever the hell

they wanted. Only a few neighborhoods in the country successfully fought off urban renewal. The Mission later became one of them. But Western Addition didn't. Bayview/Hunter's Point didn't. What they did win was a substantive redirection of what was built. So you have in the Western Addition now a lot of low to moderate income new developments, many of them sponsored by churches. Same in Bayview/Hunter's Point. But all the storefronts, the character of a neighborhood was destroyed.

So I'm sharing offices with Bill Grace and Dave Knotts, and we've become friendly. SNCC is operating out of their building. And Dave Knotts is now in touch with people in the Mission: We've got to fight urban renewal. Now, there are some major Chicano leaders in the Mission who are veterans of Community Service Organization (CSO). Community Service Organization is in the post-World War II period, maybe from '47 all the way up until through the '50s — I think it began to wane in the late '50s — but it had been a major Mexican- American Civil Rights organization really. And Fred Ross was the organizer of it. He had gotten Cesar Chavez involved.

Fred Ross is a character in Grapes of Wrath. Remember there's a Farm Security Administration camp, whose director organizes the residents to have a democratic council? That's Fred Ross. So he's on Alinsky's staff. So Alinsky and Ross hooked up in probably '47, '48, '49, somewhere around in there. Alinsky puts Ross on his staff. Ross full-time is organizing CSO, recruits Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Gil Padilla. And I get to know Ross through Alinsky. So Herman Gallegos is a major leader of CSO, and he's based in San Francisco. And he gets to know Dave Knotts.

Well, I got to know Herman as well, so I was invited to a meeting probably in '65 with Herman, Alex Zermeno, another CSO veteran who either was or was about to become the Director of the Mission Area Poverty Program. Lee Soto who's the Director of a thing called Arriba

Juntos, which is a community-based agency in the Mission. Joan Boardman, who's a Sioux Indian, active in the American — what's it called? The American Indian Center or something like that in the Mission. I'm there. I think Harry Brill might've been there. He's a graduate student at Berkeley. Sharon — then Gold now Martinas — Judith Dunlap.

Anyway, small meeting, talking about urban renewal. I probably had more experience with it than anybody in the room except maybe Herman, because CSO had been involved in some anti-urban renewal fights. And so they asked me to come work with them, and so you know, SNCC had given me this license to be involved in local stuff, so I started working with the Mission people, and Dave Knotts is there.

So now the idea's beginning to get circulated around that maybe we're gonna have Mission organizing, and it's going to lead to a formal Alinsky organizing project. This is all going on in '65. So Alinsky in '65 and in '66, he had 10-day workshops at Asilomar. Asilomar is this lovely campgrounds down in Monterey County. The people going to these workshops are mostly clergy. By then, Alinsky's base is churches. Unions are no longer involved with him. So I went to both of these 10-day seminars, and I was getting more and more involved in the Mission District stuff as we get into late '65, early '66.

Mike: Right. So in the Mission, we started putting together a coalition around this program to stop the planning grant. What I had learned from the South of Market and Western Addition and Bayview fights was that if you don't get control of this thing before it gets its planning grant, you're gonna lose. Because the planning grant gave the agency enough money to hire staff who could go into the neighborhood and make deals with people. Other people would see that this neighborhood has been designated for urban renewal; they'd move out. The city inspection would decline. So it would create a self-fulfilling prophecy of being a neighborhood that required urban renewal.

So in the Mission, by then, we had learned all those lessons. We got in early, and we fought. If there was going to be a planning grant, we want veto power. And we used — the urban renewal agency had a little sketch plan of what they were gonna do on the Mission corridor between the 16th and 24th Street Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) stations. So we'd just take this little sketch plan, and we'd show it to people and say: Where are you in this picture? They weren't there.

Bruce: That being the point of, in this case, Latino-removal.

Mike: So we didn't have trouble enlisting support from people the agency might have thought it would be able to win to its side. And they made a big mistake. They set up a phony citizen participation group, headed by a guy who was the Executive Director of Mission Neighborhood Centers which, you know, was an Anglo-run kind of settlement house, paternalistic kind of agency. And the Catholic Church, which was the dominant religious institution of the neighborhood, wasn't really part of it. And Herman Gallegos, who I earlier mentioned, was a highly regarded lay Catholic leader. He had a relationship with the Bishop.

So this is all boiling in '65 into '66. Alinsky is coming out here. He's doing his seminars. I'm in touch with him. He flies out here to visit his wife who lives in Carmel. She has multiple sclerosis, so she lives there full-time, and he comes out to visit. He still has an apartment in Chicago where he's headquartered, and his plane comes into the San Francisco Airport, and then he takes a little commute plane to Monterey. So there'd be a layover. I'd go meet him at the airport. Or sometimes I'd actually drive him down to Monterey, so I had this tutorial, ongoing tutorial, with Alinsky about organizing.

CHAPTER 13

SNCC IN DECLINE

Mike: [Meanwhile] the financial base of SNCC in the Bay Area is shrinking.

Bruce: Why do think the financial base in the Bay Area was shrinking? What caused that?

Mike: Numerous things. I think the [anti-Vietnam War statement](#) [in January of 1966] was one of them. Not that people disagreed with it, but they thought — in those days, there was a lot of: Well, this isn't something SNCC should be getting into. So there's that. And I'm going to staff meetings, and I see the organization is really in disarray. You know, I mean staff meetings were really pretty chaotic. Bob Moses had left. When did Bob leave, after Atlantic City? Then there's the beginnings of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. People are drinking. SNCC is unraveling, I think.

And then the [Black Power](#) thing explodes and our SNCC base really starts shrinking [in mid-1966]. So that then becomes a huge controversy. And this letterhead organization [Friends of SNCC] pretty much hung together. We were able to hold onto people, because depending on how you interpreted Black Power, it was not really all

that radical an idea. It was American ethnic pluralism now applied to Black people.

Bruce: Right.

Mike: And Stokely — sometimes — would write about it that way. In the New York Review of Books he wrote about it that way and in his book [[Black Power: The Politics of Liberation \(in America\)](#)] some of what he says can be read that way. So I would sit down with people from whatever, a union leader, an ADA leader, a CDC leader, a religious person, and say: "Look, this is a restatement of American tradition, blah-blah-blah."

But when we do a direct mail, the rates of response that we had been getting were not what they once had been. We'd have a cocktail party, you know, where we used to get maybe 60, 80 people who would write \$100 or so checks. The numbers of people would be smaller. I don't think the size of their donations declined. And the romance of SNCC is now no longer there, because there are attacks in the media; the so-called authoritative New York Times, unless it was one of — I think there might've been two reporters at the Times who were pretty good on SNCC stuff. But I mean, they had really inaccurate stuff. It was just difficult.

CHAPTER 14
GOING TO WORK
FOR ALINSKY

And I was becoming increasingly alienated from this, because I found that Alinsky was making more sense to me. So then — and the Mission work was going pretty well.

So I think it's October '66. Alinsky is coming out, and we'd have these airport meetings. Now sometimes, I told you about him coming through San Francisco to go to Monterey. Sometimes the meeting would be me; Dave Knotts, the detached Presbyterian minister working in the Mission; Bill Grace, the Director of the Presbyterian Department of Urban Work; and Jim Guinan, his counterpart in the Episcopalian church, called the Diocese of California. It's really north of San Jose. San Jose and north. And so we're, by now, strategizing how do we get a Mission community organizing project with Alinsky?

Naomi Lauter, who I told you about, the Friends of SNCC San Francisco Chair, and her husband host a meeting for Alinsky at their fancy home on Presidio Terrace, this very affluent little circular street in San Francisco. I think Dianne Feinstein was her next door neighbor. Mayor Alioto lived there. Nancy Pelosi lived across the street. So Naomi and Bob host a meeting for Alinsky. Herman Gallegos chairs it. And there's certain momentum kind of unfolding. So there's this October

meeting, and Alinsky says to me: "I want you to go to work for me in Kansas City. I need you there in two weeks." And he says: "You think about it. I'm gonna take a piss." Typical Alinsky.

So I say to Grace, Knotts and Guinan: I can't leave here in two weeks. I've got all these SNCC responsibilities. Negotiate for time. So I said to him: "I can't do it until the end of the year." So he said: "All right. I want you in Rochester, New York on December 15th" or something like that. "You're gonna be briefed by Ed Chambers (Alinsky's number two guy) "on Kansas City, you're gonna meet me at the Newark Airport. December 27th, we're gonna fly into Kansas City, and I'm gonna introduce you to leadership there. My guy there wants out. The project's a year old. This is gonna be your school for what we do, and you'll come back for the Mission District."

And by then, there's also a conversation about a training institute to train organizers, Alinsky training. So I went to Rochester. I told SNCC. I officially resigned. I gave notice. I went to Rochester.

CHAPTER 15

LEAVING SNCC

Mike: Then on the way to Newark to meet Alinsky, I went to the Peg Leg Bates [SNCC] staff meeting to say good-bye to people and tell them what I was gonna be doing. So I was there when the vote to exclude whites from the staff took place. I remember Fanny Lou Hamer crying.

There were only — there were a relative handful of whites remaining. And they said: "You know, this is your decision. We're abstaining," and they abstained from the vote.

Now, you know, Forman argued that the vote really never was official because he subsequently moved to reconsider. The motion to reconsider passed. And then the reconsideration was taking place, and there was a move to table that. And so the matter was left on the table. But that's a technicality.

CHAPTER 16
ALINSKY-SNCC
RELATIONS

Mike: So I went to Kansas City. So I'm in Kansas City, and I stayed in touch with Stokely. Now, Stokely continued to connect with FIGHT, which was the Rochester Alinsky project. Stokely spoke at a FIGHT mass meeting on the boycott of Kodak, the threatened boycott of Kodak. And Stokely said a very famous line: "When Minister Florence (who's the President of FIGHT) says to Kodak: 'Jump', Kodak will ask: 'How high?'" Classic Stokely. So when I was in Kansas City, we were trying to get support action for the Rochester thing. We didn't do very well at it.

I was very fond of Stokely. And I think Alinsky was nervous about that, because I remember there was some huge ruckus going on in Chicago with Alinsky's project there. And Stokely was maybe scheduled to speak. And so Alinsky called me and said: "Look, I'm about to get on a plane." The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) (Alinsky's Black community organization in Chicago) is in a big fight with Mayor Daley about poverty program funding that involves the Blackstone Rangers." (It may be the Disciples and the Rangers, the two big Black gangs there.) "And there's a story about that Stokely is coming to speak, and I'd like to ask him to stay out of Chicago until this thing with Daley is resolved. Would you call him and get his agreement on that? We've been unable to get through." So I called Stokely. He said: "Actually, I don't have any

plans to be there, but yes, I will go along with what Alinsky asks." So I communicated that back to Alinsky.

And then I had the idea that I wanted to try to hook them up, that I thought — it was clear that Alinsky was not able to recruit from within the Movement. He was trying. He made overtures to SCLC. He had gotten — Abernathy was on his board. There'd been overtures to maybe the NAACP and ... The NAACP wanted nothing to do with Alinsky. There's the SCLC overture. I suspect there was a CORE overture. CORE in Kansas City, where I was going to work for him, was a member of the Council for United Action. And I was trying to get a SNCC/Alinsky relationship, so that in my idea Alinsky would do some training with SNCC people to become more effective organizers. That was discussed in '66-'67.

So now in '67, in early '67 there is a SNCC — Coordinating Committee or Executive Committee — I'm not sure who met. I think it's the February '67 meeting where the question of Alinsky relationship is actually discussed. So there are different arguments against Alinsky. I think the only one who really was interested in doing it was Cleve Sellers. Cleve Sellers was the only one who really said: Look, this guy seems to know what he's doing. Let's see what we can learn from him. Charlie Cobb, I think, was critical. Forman, I'm sure, was critical, because by and large Marxists were hostile to Alinsky. Not all of them, but Forman certainly was. And Anne — Jesse and Ann Prosten, who's a key person in the Chicago area Friends of SNCC, is bitterly hostile to Alinsky. And she and Forman are pretty close. So the thing dies there.

I subsequently read the [January, 1967, SNCC minutes](#) where the relationship with Alinsky was discussed, and wrote some notes on that.

CHAPTER 17

ALINSKY & MARXISTS

Bruce: As you said, Marxists in general were fairly hostile to Alinsky.

Mike: Yeah, but what I've discovered, Herb March, who's a leading Communist in Chicago and a legendary figure in the Packinghouse Workers Union, worked with Alinsky in Back of the Yards organizing, and ends up being supportive of Alinsky. So it's not uniform. I mean, because of this book I'm now working on, I'm trying to figure some of this stuff out, and it's hard.

The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, which is Alinsky's first big successful project, brings together the Catholic Church, the Packinghouse Workers Union which is heavily influenced by the Communists. Herb March, this legendary organizer and highly respected guy who I got to know a little bit and I like very much. So there's March, an open member of the Communist Party, and so is Jesse Prosten, Ann Prosten's husband. By the time of Taft-Hartley, Jesse Prosten may have quit the Party. He may have done it for only tactical reasons so that he could sign the Taft-Hartley affidavit. But according to Herb March, he and Alinsky had a positive working relationship. So I was perplexed. I still don't quite fully understand it, but my theory is this. There were certain people within the Communist Party who were

so highly regarded in the labor movement that they could fight back with the Party bureaucrats and win. And I think March was one of those people.

Bruce: I think that's true. I think Harry Bridges [of the ILWU] was another.

Mike: Bridges, a guy by the name of William Sentner in the UE in St. Louis in District 8. So when I asked March: "What is this anti-Alinsky thing from Communists?" March said to me — I was stunned when he said it — he said, "Saul and I had no strategic differences over Back of the Yards." I said: "Well, what were your differences? Were there differences?" He said: "Yeah, we had political differences." So I thought: Oh, now, I'm gonna discover what was going on. So I said: "Well, what were those?" He said: "The Hitler/Stalin Pact." So I laughed. I mean, because he was a loyal Party guy, Herb March supported the Hitler/Stalin Pact. Alinsky was not a Party guy, and he bitterly opposed it because —

Bruce: He was Jewish.

Mike: And the defeat of Hitler was the central task of that era. People like March and Sentner were Communists and they were small "d" democrats. When they were given directives by the Party that didn't make sense, and that weren't supported by the rank-and-file of their union, they wouldn't go along—especially when those were about things in their experience. They would fight back. And the Party would back off. Sentner is quoted as saying to someone from the Party, "You run your organization, and I'll run mine." He worked with socialists, Catholics and others. Same with March.

Bruce: I think there was always, within the Party, and in fact within all of the Marxist-led organizations, this unresolvable contradiction between having a Socialist/Communist revolution and reforming abuses

people were suffering from by making positive changes. And you could see that all through the labor movement that the labor movement was fighting hard to make reforms. Some people thought it would lead to the revolution. Some of the Party ideologists were constantly a little worried about that. And I think that that's why a lot of the ideologues would be opposed to Alinsky, because Alinsky was clearly organizing for reform not revolution.

Mike: No, I don't accept that formulation. Alinsky was about qualitative change in the country. Not simply tinkering at the edges. See, this is what — reform is tinkering at the edges. That's how it got characterized. It's not an attack on the central distribution of wealth and power. You want to add benefits; you want to regulate it.

Bruce: I don't agree that reform is just tinkering at the edges. But by your definition, is what the Civil Rights Movement accomplished in the South in the '60s a reform?

Mike: It's reform.

Bruce: I agree. But that's not just tinkering at the edges.

Mike: Sure it is. It didn't challenge corporate power. It didn't challenge the distribution of wealth in the country. It reconfigured who were the participants. It's important that blacks, Latinos, women, gays and other excluded and marginalized people gain equality. But it's equality within a structure, a system, that isn't itself being challenged.

Bruce: All right, you consider that reform. Give me some examples of revolution in this country then.

Mike: There are none.

Bruce: There are none. Exactly. And the Marxist ideologues who

wanted revolution were — on one hand, they wanted the reform movement to build the mass movement from which they could build the revolution, but they couldn't let those mass movements — if those mass movements succeeded in ameliorating the anger and pressure, there would be no revolution.

Mike: Well, and that's where you get into these discussions among Marxists and other theorists of what you mean by revolution. See, if by revolution you mean a very brief period of rapid and typically violent upheaval, then yes, they were not for this kind of revolution.

Bruce: Who is they?

Mike: These Marxists I'm now talking about, and others like Alinsky. On the other hand, if what you were about was the democratization of the society, so that there would be no great concentrations of wealth and power on the one hand, nor would there be an poverty and racism and later sexism and anti-gay or whatever on the other, you would have a relatively equal society in terms of wealth, income, social status, widespread and distributed power, broad participation, strong voluntary associations with formal democratic institutions. To me, that's a revolutionary picture, but it's not this violent, abrupt ...

Bruce: But the Marxist ideologues would say that what you described is impossible with private ownership of the major economic components.

Mike: Yeah, so you might break them up. You might turn them into worker-owned enterprises. You might nationalize or make municipal some of them. There's a whole variety. You could return them to competitive capitalism. I don't want the neighborhood shops and restaurants where I live operated by anybody but their present owners, though I'd also like their workers to be unionized and there to be a decent living wage.

Bruce: And are you saying that those were Alinsky's goals? Or expectations? Or that his organizations were headed in those directions?

Mike: Let's separate the things. Whether the organizations were headed in those directions — pretty clearly they were not.

Bruce: Quite so.

Mike: But whether those ideas were in his head — if you read, as I am now doing — I'm re-reading the Alinsky books. I just read the introduction to the paperback edition of the John L. Lewis biography that he wrote. He talks about the '30s as a revolutionary period, when ideas of the common good, of mutual responsibility, blah-blah-blah, are now successfully challenging rugged individualism, corporate wealth and power. So he is willing to be in that conversation. Now, he did not have any particular policy preference for which he was an advocate. From his point of view, and mine as well, when you have the broad-based power to meaningfully struggle for those kinds of things is when you talk about them. Otherwise, it's coffee shop chatter or seminars at universities.

Bruce: Intellectual masturbation.

Mike: [Laughing] Yeah. So no, he was not an advocate of any of those things. On the other hand, as far as I know, neither was he an antagonist of ideas like worker ownership or cooperatives or any of that kind of stuff.

Bruce: Well, I think another reason that a lot of Party leadership opposed Alinsky is that they saw him as a potential rival to Party leadership.

Mike: Yeah, you bet. That's the heart in it. He was successful.

Bruce: And they were not.

Mike: And they thought they were the only ones who would be able to do it. That was their business to organize. And here comes this guy who doesn't need a vanguard party. He doesn't need democratic centralism.

Bruce: He doesn't worship at the altar of ComIntern or Stalin or Mao.

Mike: Exactly. And yet he is successfully organizing. So that's what I think is the heart of their antagonism is. So in the popular front period where the American Communists are seeking broad alliances with liberals, progressives, blah-blah-blah —

Bruce: The very shortly lived popular front.

*Mike: Yes, yes. Then Alinsky is a positive force. So— I'm just reading this stuff—in February 1946, Howard Fast, who's the major American novelist, Communist Party member, writes in *New Masses*, a cultural journal that has people in it who Communists or are close to the Communist Party (and others as well), very positive stuff about the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council and its support of the 1946 Packing House Workers Strike. Two months later, same journal, different author, a review of Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals*, and this author dismisses Alinsky as a petty bourgeois reformist. So here you have two months apart, three months apart, differing views. Now, this is also when this famous Jacques Duclos letter which transmits the Comintern line to the American CP and says: You've got to abandon this Popular Front stuff and return to a more ideologically pure, correct, revolutionary position.*

Bruce: That's the way they worked. Did I ever tell you the story — my father told me this story. This must have been early summer — May, June — 1941. He was out picketing something to do with the war effort, scrap steel. We weren't at war then, but building up the U.S. military.

This was before Pearl Harbor. The Party line they were picketing on was "The Yanks are not coming! We want nothing to do with Imperialist war, etc, etc, etc." So he's picketing on June 22nd. And a pickup truck drives up with a whole new set of signs that now read: "All out for the war effort!" That was just hours after Hitler had invaded the Soviet Union. So my father says: "Yeah, well, we were good Party people. We put down the old signs and picked up the new ones!"

Mike: And this is the problem. Had the Party said: Look, we've been trying for years to get collective security pacts in Europe. Nobody has been willing to enter into those, and so the Soviet Union entered in, made a strategic decision [to make a pact with Hitler].

Bruce: Well, they did say that.

Mike: No, they said far more than that. Molotov said: "Fascism is a matter of taste."

Bruce: What they should have said — What they should've been able to say is what you said: All right. We're threatened by Nazi Germany. They got an army on our borders. We had to do this. But you guys over in America are free to do — to support, continue to do what you want to do. It was forcing everyone else to toe the lines to the needs of the Soviet Union as opposed to —

Mike: Exactly. So there's that, number one. And number two, the intemperate —and that's a mild word really — rhetoric that they used to characterize those with whom they disagreed.

So now, all of a sudden, Alinsky was in that very period — Alinsky, prior to the attack on the Soviet Union, is a "social fascist." All that stuff. So when you treat people with whom you have relationships, you're all in the same unions, etc, etc, and when you treat them that way, they tend not to like it! So when they can get you later they do. So

there's a psychological dimension to the '47-48 purges of the Communists [from the labor movement] that is ignored in most of the discussions. The political discussions of it. Now, the person who I came to think had the best position on all this was Paul Jacobs. Paul Jacobs had been part of this booting the Communists out, and he subsequently said: "That was wrong. We should've kept them in, debated with them, and out-organized them."

Bruce: He's right. But of course, in my family, he was an arch-fiend from hell! [Laughing]

Mike: I'm sure. And Monsignor Owen Rice [a very well known Catholic "labor priest"] who was part of the destruction of UE, he publicly apologized to the UE. He went to a UE convention and apologized.

Bruce: That showed guts.

Mike: And he had more or less the same position. You know, we should've argued with them within UE.

CHAPTER 18

COMPARING SNCC
TO ALINSKY

Bruce: All right, but we've drifted somewhat afield.

Mike: Yeah, I know. But it's relevant, really.

Bruce: Well, maybe to a degree. If you look at SNCC, the heyday of SNCC —SNCC starts as a student campus organization. In '62, they begin shifting to being an organizing organization, primarily organizing in the rural South. And that period really defines SNCC and runs from '62 to '66 or '67. How would you contrast the kind of organizing that SNCC did in that period with the Alinsky style organizing?

Mike: Well, except that he knew better how to do it, I don't think there was a lot of difference between what SNCC was trying to do in those rural areas and what Fred Ross was doing in California with CSO. I don't think there was much difference between what [Charles] Sherrod was doing with the [Albany Movement](#) and what Alinsky was doing with TWO in Chicago. The Albany movement was a federation. Sherrod — I can't remember which book this is in, but Sherrod said to these various contending groups of the Black community of Albany: Look, everybody's gonna have to give up a little of their autonomy if

we're gonna have the power to take on the city and take on racism. Well, that's exactly what TWO or FIGHT represented, all the churches and Civil Rights organizations. We're gonna have to give up a little autonomy and create a united voice. Pretty much the same thing. The rural groups are direct membership. Other than Albany, I don't know any place where SNCC put together a federation.

Bruce: Maybe COFO to an extent in Mississippi.

Mike: But COFO is more a coordinating body, not an action body. So you have to separate what's form from substance. In form, CSO was a direct membership organization. It was not a federation. You joined as an individual or family in a chapter. Well, what SNCC did in these rural counties was form individual membership organizations.

Bruce: Like MFDP or —

Mike: No, no, no. The pre-political party. The Leflore County Citizens League or — Now, they were not consciously multi-issue and multi-tactic organizations.

Bruce: Were Alinsky's?

Mike: Yes, they were. They are all multi-issue, and they're multi-tactic. So they might engage in a boycott. They might be opposing an urban renewal project. They might be fighting police brutality. They might be engaged in a massive voter registration campaign. The issues emerged from the bottom up, and the tactics fit the circumstance. Now, SNCC, I

Bruce: I'm not sure I agree entirely that SNCC, in places like Greenwood or McComb, was just solely focused on voter registration.

Mike: Now the Summer Projects were the beginning of something different, because you have the Freedom Schools; you had community

centers. A little later you have the *Mississippi Freedom Labor Union*. You have the *Poor People's Corporation*. So you have this diversification into different forms. But holding them together under a common umbrella that would accrue power with each of these things — that we didn't know how to do.

Bruce: But I think even before the Summer Project there was voter registration but that was seen as the essential foundation, the precursor, to all sorts of other issues. And it was in the context of confronting and defying the whole web of white-supremacy social oppression so it was about more than just voting. And there was also the segregation issues that the students, the young people, and even older like the McGees in Greenwood —

Mike: The kids raised those.

Bruce: But SNCC was involved in it.

Mike: Yeah, but when the kids walked out, for example, of the McComb High — [the local Black leader] C.C. Bryant welcomed Bob [Moses] but afterwards he said to Bob: "Had we known you were gonna do this [sit-ins & marches], we would not have invited you here."

Bruce: Yes, that's true. But so what? I don't think that proves anything.

Mike: Well, I think it says that when Bob went into Mississippi he was persuaded by Amzie Moore that the vote is our strategic objective.

Bruce: That's right. He said that. But in practice, in reality, what happened is that there were also other issues that came up, and SNCC was involved in them, and the organizations and mass meetings were involved in them. The same mass meeting that voted to continue voter registration after Bob was so badly beaten at the Amite County Courthouse also voted to support the students who had been arrested sitting-in. Which is pretty much the same as what you're describing

from Alinsky. What came up from below is what they worked on.

Mike: I think you're right about that. So, what am I saying here? I don't think [that at first] there was a consciousness about building a vehicle, an organization, that would grow in power, in people power, broaden its base, recruit new members, use whatever issue was on folks minds. But I gave a speech to the People's World, in February of 1964. Stokely saw that '66, after Black Power, and he read it, and he said: "We've got to get this printed in The Movement, 'cause here's this white Field Secretary who says we've been about building power all along." And so he gets that printed in The Movement. So yes, I think they thought they were about building power, so I revise that. But they didn't know exactly how to do it.

Bruce: As opposed to all those other folks who knew exactly what they were doing and succeeded so wonderfully? [Laughing]

Mike: Well, I think Alinsky's problem is a different one. He knew how to build it. I think he didn't know how to avoid its absorption. See, Back of the Yards, I don't know whether you'd say Back of the Yards — I don't know that if you are successful in lifting a whole 200,000 people in a community from pretty desperate poverty into stable working class home ownership. You can call that cooptation if you want to.

Bruce: No, I'd say that's a successful reform. Providing real benefits to real people as opposed to the dream of some far-off revolution that never comes.

Mike: But what he couldn't do, what he never was able to do was be able to get leadership from Back of the Yards, leadership of Woodlawn, leadership of FIGHT into some national organizing committee in which they said to one another: "We're about promoting these organizations all over the country, and when we reach a critical mass of them, beginning to look at policy and power at regional, state and national

levels." While Alinsky was around, he was unable to make that happen.

I know when I was in Kansas City, Ed Chambers, who's my supervisor and number two in IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation), he says to me about the FIGHT boycott of Kodak: "If we're gonna build a national movement, Mike, we've got to get the other IAF projects rallying around FIGHT." Well, I had no idea in the world how to make that happen in an organization where there were no continuing relationships with Rochester people, where there was no national organizing committee or anything like the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) structures.

So Alinsky didn't have a parallel to the EU case. UE was told by the CIO, when you have 22 locals, you'll get a charter as an international. So, that meant that you had a national organizing committee. In Packing House, before you had the United Packing House Workers of America, you had the Packing House Workers Organizing Committee. It's organizing locals. Their objective is a national union that's powerful enough to — With Cesar Chavez, George Meany, head of the AFL-CIO, told him when he had a certain number of contracts, the Organizing Committee would get a charter as an international union.

Bruce: Right. That was the CIO thing steel, rubber, auto, maritime they all took that path.

Mike: Exactly. Now, there was no — Alinsky would say — he said: "I don't need to be told that the source of things like unemployment or whatever is national. You can't fight those things from a local organization alone." And his idea — I'm paraphrasing it — is when you organize, just like you organize locals to form an international union, we're organizing locals, and at some point they'll come together as a national force. It never happened.

Now, after his death, the so-called organizing networks that followed in his tradition tried and continue now to try in various ways to make

that happen. Just this year, I think the first one to succeed is PICO. PICO this year (2012) had a national coordinated voter education, registration, get out the vote drive that focused on different campaigns in different states, but they coordinated that nationally. So in California, they were focused on the passage of Prop. 30. In Florida, they were focused on the defeat of Proposition 3. I don't even know what it was about. But they used the sophistication of these new voter registration and get out the vote technologies in a coordinated fashion. They have done it in some statewide campaigns.

IAF did it in Texas at a statewide level on education reform stuff. But for whatever reasons, the state leadership body that they built to do that campaign was disbanded afterwards. So I don't know now what's going on. I'm not close enough to any of these organizing groups to know how they're thinking about this. I know that the IAF affiliates in the mid-Atlantic coast area — I think from Boston south maybe down to Atlanta — they're doing a common campaign, anti-usury campaign whose slogan is: 10% is enough. So they want a maximum interest rate of 10% on banks, savings, anybody, all lenders.

CHAPTER 19

SUMMING UP

Bruce: Well, again we're digressing. Is there anything more you want to say about SNCC? The Southern Freedom Movement? Because that's really the subject of this interview.

Mike: Well, I mean, that whole experience was a deeply moving experience for me. I would say Bob Moses is one of the people who has most influenced how I think about organizing. I'd say he's one of maybe half a dozen, eight people who I had a personal relationship with. I mean, I read about others, but who I had a relationship with, who influenced how I think about organizing. I mean, it's an experience I treasure. It made a profound difference for Black people in the South on many levels.

On the other hand, it could not get a handle on poverty. It could not get a handle on a lot of education issues. It still doesn't quite know how to do that. Nobody has figured out how to generate ideas of economic alternatives. I mean, the Poor People's Corporation was a little bit, trying to do that with co-ops. Fannie Lou Hamer had a little pig co-op she tried to get off the ground. You had the Freedom Labor Union that was very short-lived. I think SNCC changed the country, played a role in changing the country for the good. That's pretty much how I'd sum it up!