

## Forbes, David: The Birth of the SNCC <sup>[1]</sup>

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### Rev. David Forbes: The Birth of SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 4/9/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Forty years ago this month, young black Southerners and national black leaders gathered at Shaw University in Raleigh at a meeting that altered the arc of American history.

Two months earlier, on Feb. 1, 1960, four black students at North Carolina A&T [sat down at a "whites only" lunch counter](#) <sup>[3]</sup> at a Woolworth's Department Store in Greensboro. They politely requested to be served and refused to leave when denied service. Within five days, 1,000 students had joined them. Within two months, the sit-ins had spread to nine states and 54 cities.

At Shaw on April 16, 1960, [Ella Baker](#) <sup>[4]</sup> of Littleton, N.C., convened sit-in leaders and civil rights elders from across the country. They created the [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, whose bold tactics of "nonviolent direct action" reinvigorated a civil rights movement that had been stalemated in the late 1950s.

This afternoon, Raleigh launches a week-long celebration of SNCC's birth. The Rev. David Forbes, a former student leader at Shaw and now the minister at Christian Faith Baptist Church, recalls those momentous events and the families and schools that shaped the SNCC activists.



David Forbes. Photo by Chris Seward, 2000. To request permission for ~~David Forbes~~ to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I was born the fifth of eight children to a Pentecostal minister and a sainted mother. We grew up poor, but we didn't know it. We were trained to know that we were somebody, that we were important people.

After all eight of us were born, my father went back to college. He went to Shaw. He would be at the table doing his homework, and we would be at the table doing our homework.

My mom went to the 11th grade, but she was highly well-read. They set a tone for high achievement, and all eight of us finished college and got advanced degrees.

We went to all-Negro schools. Schools were segregated during those years. I was at J.W. Ligon High School. There were some deficits - we got the books from the white school after they wore out their books - but still the teachers worked we

We had to do recitations. You had to memorize not only Shakespeare - "Julius Caesar," "Macbeth" - but the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

My parents handled race by not handling race. They taught us to be human. They taught us to be fair, taught us the value of hard work and responsibility. We were all taught to be of service.

I went to Shaw in 1958. It was an exciting place to be. As poor as it was, Shaw was rich, because we were listening to guest speakers that were too "radical" for State or Carolina. We were listening to Martin Luther King, Benjamin Mays, Mor

Then, in February of 1960, the four students from A&T sat-in at Woolworth's. The day after A&T appeared in the newspaper, we started our mass meetings and discussions. We had a big meeting in Greenleaf Auditorium at Shaw's campus. I

We asked, what does this mean for us? What do we do? How dangerous is this? Where could this lead?

We had briefings on Gandhi and how he used "nonviolent direct action" to break the back of British imperialism. White America had never had to deal with protesters absorbing violence in the name of morality and justice. We also understood

We had heard of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. But Greensboro was close. That's where we went to play basketball. That's us. We knew that we could be hurt, that we could be arrested, that we could be killed. But this was an opportun

"There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune," Shakespeare said. We had memorized that. Now it made sense. This was such a time.

Every day, we passed lunch counters where white people were eating and black people couldn't. We passed Sir Walter Raleigh Hotel, where white people are going and coming and we don't count. We're reading W.E.B. Du Bois telling us the

We decided that they were expecting sit-ins downtown. So we decided to go to Cameron Village. There was a Woolworth's out there. The art students made up placards. The football students became the buffer. If they're going to hit somebo

Most of us wore a coat and tie. We wanted the community and the world to know that these are not vagabonds. We were serious. We went and we sat in at the lunch counter. The waitresses looked at us in shock.

I remember the sheriff coming to me, almost tearfully, imploring me that no good could come of this. He asked me, "Why don't you just take these people home?" Then they arrested me. I was the first to be arrested.

I was bailed out later that day, and the next day we continued to picket. For the next several weeks, it was a matter of picketing. There were 48 or so who were arrested. There were hecklers who tried to intimidate us, carrying chains. Pretty q

We did Woolworth's, McLellan's, Kress's, W.T. Grant. The theory was, "If you're going to live on us, you're going to be fair with us."

Pretty quickly, Kress's goes out of business. They were not going to change, so they died. Other stores began to change. Hudson Belk had the Capital Room Restaurant, which desegregated. K&W Cafeteria downtown changed.

In April, here in Raleigh, SNCC was founded. SNCC came to Shaw because the field representative for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was Ella Baker, an alumna from Shaw. Ella was a powerful intellectual whose power was

The big shots were here, too: Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall, Roy Wilkins from NAACP, James Farmer from CORE. I suspect there were many different agendas.

But very quickly, as the students talked, we decided that it was not these folks who got us there. We had gone to jail: We hadn't gotten anybody's permission. I mean, it was as if, in that process, we lost our innocence and the need for course

That weekend, students came from all across the country. You had a Clarence Mitchell, whose dad was in the legislature in Maryland. You had a John Lewis, congressman now, whose parents are tenant farmers. You had a slick-talking Mari

But no matter how different people were, there was total agreement that the United States was not going to continue like it was on the race issue. Either they were going to be prepared to kill us all or something had to give. That time had cor

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for a change](#) <sup>[6]</sup>" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) <sup>[7]</sup> at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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