

Interview with **Charles Sherrod**

December 20, 1985

Atlanta, Georgia

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:12:00

[camera roll 186]

[sound roll 1144]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HAVE FLAGS.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: Well, the way that—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAN YOU START, START OVER AGAIN, PLEASE? OK, NOW.

Sherrod: Well, the way that SCLC organized could be described like this. A field secretary for SCLC would come in the town and talk to the leaders, the assumed leaders, in a town like the ministers, the lawyers, teachers, the professional people in the community. And would then direct them toward some goals and some ob—objectives, short-range, long-range goals and then bring in the other, the children and the high-school students and college students. The way Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee went after it was, I'd say, exactly opposite. We would go into a town and find out where the children hung out; the high school kids, the college kids. And find out what was happening, you know, what was the main issue in the various communities. In, in one town might be five or six issues. Perhaps, I believe in

Albany, Georgia there was a lot of brutality from police going on that sort of thing. So, you, you think of what is it that would upset—that, that has upset people the most in the community? And after observing that move the young people toward that and deal with it. Segregation in, anyway, in, in those days, of course, was a, an issue. So from issues we went to who was the spirited among the people, among the young people. Who talked the most? Who was the—who were the leaders among the young people? And after talking about the issues, after talking about the method, that, that we thought would achieve those goals and short-range and long-range objectives that we had, then, we made our move trying to develop some imagery of leadership. What I mean by that, is that [pause] most people don't see themselves as being leaders, although they're just natural leaders. Some people just natural leaders. There's an, an old lady on the block who has always been the one that people go to, to talk to. To solve—help them to solve their problems and so forth. We find those people out. Those are the leaders, natural leaders, been leaders for years and years and years. Helping people to get on Welfare. Helping people to get unemployment compensation, you know, Social Security. Those things are, are meaningful to them at various points in their life. And then we would move, non-violently, toward one of those objectives assuming that when we move toward one objective we would get opposition. We'd be pushed one way. We would lean a little bit and then move in another way based on what strategy should be taken.

00:03:32:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT HAVING A DIFFERENT KIND OF, OF METHOD OF ORGANIZING THAN SCLC? SEEMS LIKE BOTH ARE PERFECTLY REASONABLE WAYS TO ORGANIZE. WHY DO YOU THINK THE WAY THAT SNCC ENVISIONED BRINGING UP THOSE LOCAL LEADERS WAS A BETTER WAY?

Sherrod: I'm not saying—I don't have any problem with it which was the better, better way. Because we always worked together as far as I was concerned.

INTERVIEWER: NO—I—

Sherrod: And the strength that we had—

INTERVIEWER: I WANT YOU TO TALK TO ME ABOUT JUST THE, THE FEELING THAT THERE WAS, IT WAS, IT WAS TERRIBLY FUNDAMENTAL TO LEAVE THOSE LOCAL LEADERS THERE AS OPPOSED TO SCLC'S PERSPECTIVE WHICH WAS TO COME IN WITH YOUR LEADER AND SORT OF TAKE YOUR MOVEMENT OUT. AND I NEED FOR YOU TO TELL ME, REALLY, WHY YOU FELT THAT WAS SO IMPORTANT.

Sherrod: OK. Well, for a movement—we were trying to promote a movement. We were not trying to do a project. We were developing something we felt that would, would last even when we left. Cause we had planned to move from one place to another. So if we did not go with the leadership that was there and help to develop it from the bottom to the top, then, our feeling was that we would not have changed anything. The strength that we had was in

people. People could move mountains we'd always say, you know? People were the main ingredient for the success of any of our campaigns. Leadership comes in, in, in different ways. A minister is a leader. Parishioners are leaders. Young people are leaders. To keep a movement going, sometime pits one level of leadership against another level of leadership. That's, that's, that's just in the nature of things. Children against their elders, teachers against those who employ them, other professionals against professionals. There's always conflict. I guess, I'm trying, I'm trying to, to say that for a sustained movement, for strength, for the unity that, that we sought [pause] in an attempt to unleash all the emotions and steer, steer this movement in some particular way [pause] there was no single way of doing it. I don't know whether I've made more sense than that, but I—

INTERVIEWER: YOU DID. WOULD YOU STEP DOWN A MINUTE BOBBY?

[cut]

00:06:15:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: She schooled me well.

INTERVIEWER: SHE COULD BEAT YOU RIGHT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, WE'RE READY.

Sherrod: November 1st in '61, ICC ruled that interstate travel should be desegregated. Now we had been walking them dusty roads and talking to the young people and the old people. They had a, a very good feeling of our presence. We had become, in a sense, one with those that we had been talking with. And out of nothing came this ruling and I said to myself, you know, wow, you know, this is it. Here we go. I had anticipated moving into sit-ins or something else, you know, later on. But when this ruling came through, we were ready. So we got some students from Albany State College, although we got arrested in the process, yes from blacks—the University, got carried down to jail, before we could do what we wanted to do. But then after we got out, we, we still had time and we had already mobilized the young people and they were ready. And we picked out this nice little, innocent, but big-mouthed girl. She could talk, and she could sing. Bertha Gober, I remember her very dis— clearly. And another fellow by the name of Hall, I can't think of his first name right this minute, but we told 'em that they would be the beginning. And we had people ready to go to the station right after they would be arrested, if they were to be arrested. Actually *some of us really didn't think they would get arrested, because this was a federal mandate*. I mean, we had constitutional rights. And the Federal Government, you know, they, *they mess with us now, they're going to get the*, not just the GBI and the state people, but they're gonna get the *Federal Government on them, you know? Nobody is gonna mess with the Federal Government, we thought*. But we walked in there and we had five students. They each

understood that we would be non-violent. We'd been slapped around and kicked around and pushed around, so they, they were accustomed to what possibly might happen. And so, they went in and when they were accosted by the police, starts turns [sic] and they really wanted us to leave. They tried to scare us, you know? They tried to cajole us, you know? They tried all kinds of ways of getting us out there, aside from arresting us. But we stayed. The young people stayed. I wasn't in there, this first arrest. So they took them out and they, Bertha and the other Hall boy went limp. And so they had to drag them out. This made them mad. It all fitted together, because it, it enforced in the people who were observers, you know, what would happen to them. And so, they had a good feeling for—

00:09:09:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Sherrod: —what would happen. This was all planned, of course, you know? This was intentionally planned.

INTERVIEWER: WE JUST RAN OUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YES.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK. THAT WAS A ROLL-OUT ON CAMERA ROLL ONE-EIGHT-SIX. WE'RE GOING TO ONE-EIGHT-SEVEN.

00:09:16:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 187]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Sherrod: So the students went limp and they were arrested and taken out. But the key to this whole situation, as far as promoting the general campaign, was that they intended to stay in jail. Staying in jail is easy. It puts work on the people on the outside who have to work. It gives us a reason to, to work harder. It gives us the emotionalism to work harder. Its [sic] give the people concern to come to meetings. So when there's an arrest, the first thing we do is to call a meeting that same day that there's an arrest. And then we get a large group of

people who come to hear about the arrest. Someone gets out of jail—if they don't get out of jail we'll tell about the arrest. When the people come out of jail, they'll tell about the arrest. So everything is reinforced. And it goes wider and wider and, and wider. So that was the bus station incident.

00:10:19:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU HAD A MOMENTUM GOING THERE QUITE BY YOURSELVES, SNCC HAD—WAS WITH THE PEOPLE, YOU KNEW WHAT YOU WANTED, THE MOMENTUM WAS GOING. HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN DR. ANDERSON DECIDED TO CALL DR. KING IN?

Sherrod: When that the, the—when the decision, well, it's running so I don't have to go into that. When the decision was made by the movement to call in Dr. King, we had about five hundred to seven hundred people already in jail. And by that time I was already in jail. And Cordell was in jail. The two, two of 'em, you know, the two of us were in jail. There was only one of our group left out. So the question of how I felt when that decision was made was sort of non-existent, because there was no feeling, you know, I was in jail. And I was in jail to stay until the others and I had programmed everybody to follow me in jail. That I was not coming out of jail. That we were going to break the system down from within. You know, their, their ability—our ability to, to suffer was somehow going to overcome their ability to hurt us.

00:11:33:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT I'M GETTING AT WHEN I ASK HOW YOU FELT WHEN DR. KING CAME IN WAS, IT WAS A SNCC-INITIATED OPERATION GOING ON HERE IN ALBANY AND DR. KING IS CALLED IN ALMOST—WITHOUT YOUR INPUT ON THIS DECISION. YOU WERE RUNNING THE MOVEMENT, AT THAT POINT, SNCC THAT IS. NO FEELINGS ABOUT, THIS IS OUR TERRITORY, WHY DO WE NEED HIM?

Sherrod: See, it's, this was one of the first movements. Dr. King was only a name to us. When I say only a name [laughs], I mean, he was Dr. King, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and we all adored him from the beginning, and we all loved him, appreciated him, respected him for what he had done in, in Alabama. As time went on, see, you're talking about a time, a period of maybe a year. I'm talking about a period of two or three months. First of all or first off when we were in jail. So Dr. King, his influence in Albany was minimal. See, we had already gained the momentum. It was the frustration on the parts of the adults, who were then in charge while we were in jail, that brought, that, that made them feel like they needed Dr. King. As I said to you, when, when you're in jail, large groups of us in jail, all kinds of things are happening. Kids are being hurt. Kids without physical needs. Females that need physical needs that they had. Somebody's getting smacked. A, a pregnant woman was kicked and later lost her baby. All kinds of pressures are brought upon the leadership. And so, they're wiggling, trying to get from under that pressure. But pressure is also being brought against the opposition which is what the intention of the whole thing. But this pressure, [laughs] now

one old person said, pressure make a monkey eat pepper, *and we just pushed pressure, pressure, pressure. Damn, sometime we don't know who controls this, who controls the other. So we'd stomp around and stomp and see whose feet we'd get. And then somebody's going to holler, oh, you got me! So then, when he hollers, that's the direction we go in. And that was the general strategy. We didn't know what we were doing.* We'd never done it before. Nobody had never got that many people to go to jail. And I'm not talking about just the hoi polloi, I'm talking about the upper crust. The great people in Albany. Even some white folk went to jail with us from Albany. So we were steam-rolling. But there was a lot of pressure and the people were upset. The leadership were have—feeling all this responsibility on their shoulder. I know they had it on their shoulder and I understood it. I couldn't do nothing for 'em in jail. They wouldn't let 'em talk to me. All I could do was hold to the folk who, who were around me. 'Cause they segregated us, you know? They, they, they took some of us to one jail and they took us fifty miles away and they tried to, to break us down in jail cause they wanted us out of jail. But the young kids, sixteen years old—from, from three to sixteen years old, when we had from three to sixteen years old going to jail. When they threw them out of jail, they got back in the line, see. And that was their instruction. And that was the reason why so, why they, they went for Dr. King. And I thought it was good. It was easy. When we got out of jail, it was easy for us to call a mass meeting. Boom. Dr. King is here. Two thousand folk, hanging out of windows, hanging out of trees, you know? Kids from everywhere, coming from other counties, money coming in from other counties, you know? It had its disadvantages, because as an organization SCLC had to raise money. NAACP had to raise money. We were not fools. We understood that. See, after the fact, they come up with all these theoretical things about what happened in Albany. And, perhaps, some of them were true. Sure there were conflicts. When you get a personality, I'm soft-spoken now for the most part, till you get me riled up, you know? But when you get a soft-spoken personality, but a stout, stout personality, like myself, coming head to head with, with Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, who was the executive director at that time, I believe, of SCLC, you gonna have a few fireworks. So what? What's most important? Did they talk—they don't talk about the unity we had. About the strength we had for the first time. They talk about failure. Where's the failure? Are we not integrated in every facet? Did we stop at any time? What stopped us? Did any injunction stop us? Did any white man stop us? Did any black man stop us? Nothing stopped us in Albany, Georgia. We showed the world. We were on the front page of every newspaper in the country for longer than any, I forget now what was competing with us at the time, but, but we out competed it, whatever it was. When it, when it slowed down we were still rolling and moving. We were beginning to, to learn how to use the media. I hope I made some approach there.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] WANNA, WANNA STOP HERE BOBBY?

00:16:17:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THERE'S AN HUNDRED FEET REMAINING ON CAMERA ROLL ONE-EIGHT-SEVEN.

INTERVIEWER: NO, I'M ASKING A QUESTION. APPROACH DEFEATED THE MOVEMENT.

00:16:19:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, GO AHEAD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Sherrod: One of the most disturbing things to me is how the people who've been writing about the movement, during the '60s, could come up with a non-violent police chief in Albany, Georgia. When, in fact, he was the most violent and conniving—

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA STOP YOU AND I WANT YOU TO TELL ME WHO WAS. BECAUSE—

Sherrod: OK.

INTERVIEWER: —NOBODY HEARS MY VOICE. OK. [coughs] GO RIGHT AHEAD.

Sherrod: [pause] One of the most disturbing points that I have observed in people who either write or talk about the, the movement in, in 1960 in Albany has to do with Chief Pritchett. The then police chief. They say that he was non-violent. How could a man be non-violent who observed people being beaten with Billy clubs? One young lady was dragged up the steps of the Courthouse, after being arrested, by her hair. Another man, Reverend Samuel Wells, was dragged into the Courtroom with his—by his gonads. One person was hung in the, in the, in the jailhouse by his thumbs. All under direction and authorization and officiating of this non-violent police chief, Laurie Pritchett. I just don't understand how they could come up with this, but it has, has been the case. People who were taken out to the counties—

00:18:15:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Sherrod: —because they couldn't hold us, the jail couldn't hold us.

INTERVIEWER: WE JUST RAN OUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT WAS A ROLLOUT ON CAMERA ROLL ONE-EIGHT-SEVEN.

00:18:21:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 188]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CHANGE TO CAMERA ROLL ONE-EIGHT-EIGHT. SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: *I remember a statement that Chief Pritchett, Pritchett made to me [coughs] one time, when he says, you know, Sherrod, it's just a matter of mind over matter. I don't mind and you don't matter.* And that statement was certainly true of people that he sent to Terrell County and Baker County cause I was—I witnessed myself the deputy sheriff slapped me almost unconscious just because I said, yes and no. Those were the early days when I didn't know [laughs] that you just didn't say yes or no to these white folks. You had to say yes sir and no sir. And the same things were done a thousand times all over the country. Took the heat off us in the winter and the summertime they cut the heat on and wouldn't give us any blankets or mattresses and they stuffed forty people in cells. This, this happened all over southwest Georgia in all the counties where—in fact, one, one lady, as I said, lost her child. I think that was about the worst incident that, that we felt.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WANT TO STEP DOWN A MINUTE BOBBY?

[cut]

00:19:23:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: The reason that we called our movement the Albany movement was to make sure that no one finger did all the pointing. We wanted this to be a movement not a SCLC project, not a SNCC project. We could have easily made this the SN—SNCC Southwest Georgia project. That's what we always wrote back to our office. But you can't find in any newspaper, any magazine, or anywhere where we promoted that Albany project as a project. It was always a movement. It was an umbrella so that everybody had to come under that umbrella. And it would not have had the power, if all the authority had been into one in—with the judgment of one individual. We needed to make certain mistakes. We needed to, to draw back, to retreat, and then come back again. It was a war. Though it was a non-violent war, but it was indeed a war.

INTERVIEWER: GOT A MINUTE BOB?

[cut]

00:20:26:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: The people of Albany related to us be—because we were sensitive people. Now we were young people, but we were not babies. We were not carefree. We were not insensitive. We were thinking young adults and they respected us. And when we made judgments, and when we made mistakes, people who had come to know us felt that they could say, look, Sherrod, I think this is a mistake for us to do such and such a thing. And there was give and take, as in any movement, that's needed. [pause] My mind went, went—

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

Sherrod: Now—

[cut]

00:21:07:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: Now our youth had some disadvantages. There were older people there who had families and so forth, but they took us in as their children, as their own. They protected us

just as well as their own children. We went—there are many times that I went to sleep under the muzzle of a gun, that wasn't pointed at me, but pointed at the window. Now, I had taught non-violence and, and everything, but over in Lee County, for example, where the Ku Klux Klan shot into the house and burned down a couple of churches and so forth. But the point, the point that I'm trying to make is that the people identified with us for whatever reason. It had nothing to do with a, a look of irresponsibility or anything like that. We were their children. We—and they, they respected us, and they accepted as their children. And we could do no wrong. There might be some jealousy because of that, but it, it was in our favor. And we used everything we could use in our favor. As we learned it, we utilized it.

INTERVIEWER: STEP DOWN, BOBBY.

00:22:12:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: STOP DOWN THE ALBANY MOVEMENT—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAMERA ROLL ONE-EIGHT-EIGHT TO [sic] SIX MINUTES LEFT.

00:22:14:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HAVE FLAGS.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: Another point I'd like to make is that this injunction that's given—that's pushed all out of proportion as far as we were concerned didn't have a great immobilizing effect on us. The very day of that injunction, if, if my time is correct on this, we had a mass meeting that night. I just about know I'm right, because any time something dramatic ha—happens, I always call a mass meeting. We had a mass meeting that night and that very night, I remember it very clearly, Reverend Samuel B. Wells, got up in the mass meeting and we had talked before, cause we talked about these things before we do 'em, most of the time. So a lot of things were spontaneous, but everything wasn't spontaneous. Reverend got up there, we called him black Jesus. He was a beautiful black man. Big and—he got up there and said, he held up the petition that the judge had handed down. He said, I see Dr. King's name and I see Dr. Anderson's name and I see Charles Sherrod and I see this, but I don't see Samuel Wells. And I don't see Mrs. Sue Samples and I don't see Mrs. Rufus Grant. Now where are those names? And with that and two or three other very colorful expressions, taken out of the great tradition of our church, he marched about seventy-five folk out of that church and they went to jail that night. So the movement did not stall. We did not stop doing anything that we had,

had been doing. And this—I don't know why the historians and, and folk, they want to categorize things. So at that point, the movement stopped. At that point, we were unsuccessful. *Now, I can't help how Dr. King might have felt, or Wyatt Tee might have felt, or Bernard Lee, or any of the rest of 'em in SCLC, NAACP, or CORE any other groups were felt [sic], but as far as we were concerned, things moved on. We didn't, we didn't skip one beat.*

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU. [coughs] THE END. I HAVE ONE, ONE—

[cut]

00:24:27:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

[sync tone]

Sherrod: Let me try to say just one or two—OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUNDS THROUGH. OK, THANK YOU.

Sherrod: Let me try to say just one or two things about “De Lord.” Now this is an expression that we made from time to time to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This was not out of a sense of disrespect, but it was young people's way of rebelling against adults, you, you might say. *When Dr. King would come in, we'd get two or three thousand people without much effort, so that was in our favor. But when he left, it was more difficult for us to get people to come. So that this phenomenon of Doc flying in to places where we worked and then flying out to another place, which, which was needed, made it difficult for us to, to organize.* Not that it wasn't good that he came or that we didn't want him to come or that we tried to keep him out of somewhere, but it went with the territory. It was good and it was bad. But that's movement. And that's the reason that I never saw any diffi—I never had any difficulty with him coming in cause I know what would happen. He would, he would leave and—

[sound roll out]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:25:44:00

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