

Women's History Month Spotlight

Did You Know?

Ella Baker (1903 – 1986)

Ella Baker was a foundational leader of the Civil Rights Movement and her contributions to it were immeasurable. Born on December 13, 1903, in Norfolk, Virginia, Ella grew up amidst racial tension and inequality. However, her commitment to justice in organizing and empowering marginalized communities propelled her to become one of the most significant American leaders of the twentieth century.

Graduating as valedictorian from Shaw University in 1927, Ella relocated to New York City, where she engaged in various social justice causes. She joined the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, advocating for economic empowerment within Black communities. Additionally, Ella participated in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1957, she played a pivotal role in establishing the SCLC, collaborating closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent civil rights leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and A. Phillip Randolph. However, she recognized the necessity for a decentralized, grassroots approach to organizing, setting her apart within the movement.

In 1960, Ella catalyzed one of the Civil Rights Movement's iconic moments: the sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Inspired by four young Black students' actions, she urged young people to spearhead their freedom struggle, famously stating, "Strong people don't need strong leaders," downplaying the reliance on charismatic leadership for progressive social change. Ella's revolutionary emphasis on empowering ordinary individuals to effect change permeated her work. She believed in collective action and community organizing, seeing every person as a potential change agent. Her involvement with SNCC showcased this belief as she mentored young activists and nurtured their leadership skills.

Throughout the 1960s, Ella worked tirelessly behind the scenes, providing guidance and support to various civil rights organizations. She orchestrated the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's challenge to the Democratic National Convention in 1964, amplifying disenfranchised Black voters' voices. Her efforts laid the groundwork for the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, aimed at dismantling discriminatory voting practices.

Despite encountering sexism and marginalization within the male-dominated Civil Rights Movement, Ella remained steadfast in her dedication to the cause. She challenged traditional power structures and advocated for greater inclusivity and grassroots participation. Her legacy underscores that progress demands the engagement of all members of society, particularly those most impacted by injustice. In her later years, Ella continued to inspire new generations of activists through her work with organizations like the Southern Conference Education Fund and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

Sources:

Grant, Joanne. 1998. *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*. New York, NY: Wiley.

“Who was Ella Baker?” *Ella Baker Center for Human Rights*. Retrieved February 14, 2024
(<https://ellabakercenter.org/who-was-ella-baker/>)