



The Activist Files Episode 52: Movement Building in the South: At 90, the Legendary Highlander Center Looks Back – and Forward

Announcer:

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Emily Early:

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Activist Files y'all. I'm Emily Early, Associate Director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, Budding Southern Regional Office.

Jessica Vosburgh:

And I'm Jessica Vosburgh, a staff attorney with CCR Southern Regional Office. Some of y'all might not know this, but CCR's roots in the South actually go back to the 1960s when the center represented community organizations and activists in Mississippi spearheading the Black Freedom Movement and putting their lives on the line for voting rights. The Center actually had an office in the Mississippi Delta through the nineties, and now we're coming back. Emily and I are part of a growing team of CCR lawyers and advocates who are rooted in the South and committed to bringing every tool in the Movement Learning toolkit to support organized communities in the region that are on the front lines of the struggles for racial, economic and environmental justice, which is, which brings us to today. So in today's episode of the Activist Files, we have the immense privilege and pleasure of sitting down with Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, and Reverend Allyn Maxfield-Steel, who are the co-executive directors of the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee Highlander and CCR go way back as we'll talk more about today. And we'll be hearing about that shared history, some of our current collaborations and Highlander's critical role in incubating Southern Freedom movements now going on

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90 years. But first, let's bring in our guests. So, welcome Ash and Allyn, thank you for Fellowship with us today.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Hey, you, Thanks for having us.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Great to be here. Yo,

Jessica Vosburgh:

So we'd like to start off with a little background about Highlander. Can you tell folks what Highlander is and how each of you became connected with it?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Sure. Allyn, do you wanna kick us off and then I'll join you?

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Yeah, yeah. So Highlander is 90 years old, and for all 90 years that we've been around, we've been a school for grassroots leaders and social movements to come together to learn how to build social transformation, economic transformation, social and economic democracy, revolution. All those words are synonymous to us in many ways. So we've been doing it in three different places. The, where, we'll talk a little bit more about that today, but we started in a little community called Summerfield, which is outside of a small town called Monteagle, which is in between two bigger towns called Chatanooga and Nashville in Tennessee, that we are relocated and forcibly displaced to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1961. And then a decade later, we moved to where we are today, our longest serving home in New Market, Tennessee. And like I said, we're a school, we're a low residency school is one way to put it. We bring people to campus, we house people, we feed people and then we get into workshops and learning experiences together. And then we also accompany people out in the field. And we've done that all across the US South in Central Appalachia and the nation and the world since 1932.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And we, ironically, both of our first times on the Hill were at the 75th Highlander Homecoming celebration. We didn't meet there, but that was, that was both of our introductions, Allyn, because he had wanted to start sort of an alternative school that was really rooted in cultural competency and social justice, and folks had the good sense to tell him there was one that already existed he might wanna learn from. And me, because I had met lots of social justice veterans members of the Black Liberation Movement of the sixties and seventies, and every time I would tell them I'm from Tennessee, they'd be like, Oh, so, you know, Highlander? And I was like, Nope, I don't. And they were like, Well, you certainly should. And so I took myself up to homecoming and, and was forever changed and found some of my forever people through going and continued to go back for programming. And Allyn and I both were participants in programming and then led programming as volunteers. We both got recruited by staff to the board of directors, and then Allyn very graciously joined me in this never-ending adventure of being

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the executive directors. So that's a little, that's the quickest and dirtiest of our stories about how we got involved at Highlander.

Jessica Vosburgh:

And Ash, we understand you're making history also as the first black woman Director of Highlander. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Yeah, I mean, you know, we started, we got announced about a couple of weeks after something like that, a week or two after Trump got elected in 2016. So by Highlander's 84th year going into 85th year, you know, they made the decision to, to give a black woman a shot. And though it came way too late what we know is that black women had been serving in leadership positions inside of Highlander. Whether they were getting credit for how incredible their work was or not, You know, people know that Rosa Parks trained at Highlander. What they don't know is that she was on the board of directors, right? They don't know that folks like Stepson McClark were on staff. They don't know that folks like Janet, you know, Jane Sap and "Roz" Pelles and Diana Marie Lee, and so many, you know, all, all sorts of really incredible black women have been in leadership positions all throughout our staff and board of directors. So that's not even to mention the program participants that make our programs as strong as they are. So it's been an incredible journey and, you know, with all of the historic perk of it, I think what's real is that it's a, it's a great responsibility to be in right relationship with a 90 year old institution with the Black Liberation Movement in particular, it's manifestations in the South. So I take that very seriously.

Emily Early:

Beautiful. Thanks for sharing that Ash, and related to some of the history that you all have already talked about, for example, Allyn, you mentioned Highlanders founding in 1932. Can you share the history more specifically behind Highlander or why it came to be? Who started it? What's the deal with with that story?

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Absolutely. I'll give you the briefest and maybe the most interesting version of that. There's more than one founder of Highlander. There's a handful of folks, most notably Miles Horton, Don West, Jim Dombrowski, Elizabeth Daz, who were four young radicals from the South, all doing some slightly different things. But they all met in different ways through some of their mentors and elders and different relationships. Cuz there was a robust social movement in the US South before Highlander existed. That's something that we should get real clear about. There were uprisings and revolts from the fields where enslaved folk enslaved African folk in particular in the South, were organizing with each other and amongst others to overthrow the planter system 150 years or a hundred years before a Highlander ever did any anything. But these four folks that I talked about were young white people who saw that social and economic democracy had an opportunity and a chance, particularly if you used education as a vehicle and education as a tool to catalyze learning around different kinds of things.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

You know, so what does it mean to bring people together to talk about what their situations are and how do you accompany people when they go back into their own home context? And so that was the idea that the founders came together and made a lot of different mistakes and learned a lot of different things over the decades. And we are still learning a lot of those different kinds of things. It started in

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Summerfield, Tennessee, in part because some of the founders caught wind of a woman named Lillian Johnson, Dr. Lillian Johnson, who was one of the first women in the US South to receive a PhD. She was president of a college in Ohio that is now Miami College, or Miami University, I think which played a role in the Freedom Rides a lot decades later. But Lillian was from Tennessee.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

She retired or was kind of in like pre-retirement, interested in some really cool stuff. Moved to the mountains of East Tennessee in this neighborhood called Summerfield. And then started an agricultural cooperative. And it was doing all kinds of really interesting alternative economics and all different kinds of projects with people in the community and the staff or the early founders learned about her. And she on a, took a little bit of a risk and said, Yeah, let's, let's entrust what might become something interesting to these young people and, and y'all can use it for a year or two. And Lillian Johnson then entrusted the, the founders with, with what became the Highlander Folk School. I guess another way of talking about the founding is that Highlander was born in the context of the Great Depression. The US South and the mountain South experienced some of the earlier economic crumbling and dismantling that was taking place well before the Wall Street bust.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

And so folks were already unemployed in droves. I mean Grundy County as the county that we lived in was arguably the, the beginning of the Southern coal extraction industry. I mean, there were a coal industry there, there was segregated coal camps. There were convict labor organizing and revolutions and re revolts happening in the area for decades prior to Highlander. So there was a lot of economic and social issues that people were organizing around and ready to organizing around. There's also profound wealth disparity in the area. So I think that there's just a lot of different factors that give way to Highlander's origins. Yeah, I could keep going, but I, I'm not really, not really sure if y'all came for like that hardcore of a history lesson, but Yeah. Yeah.

Emily Early:

No, that's awesome. I mean, you can keep going. We want you to <laugh>, but lemme ask, lemme ask more specific questions. Yeah.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Ask some specific questions. Cause I might tell you about the colored shirts they wore and stuff like that, you know?

Emily Early:

Yeah. So connecting some of that history to more recent, but still not as recent history of Highlanders role in supporting the development of groups like student non-violent Coordinating Committee and other organized groups that sought to end Jim Crow segregation. Can you explain for listeners, Allyn and Ash more about, you know, that history and, and how Highlander played a role in, in that really important part of the South's story?

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think just like today and into the future, there will be no liberation movement without a black Freedom Movement and a strong Black Liberation Movement. There will not be advances made in our all, all of our lives without that. Staff got hit with that back in the thirties and

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forties. They were like, if we're gonna build a labor movement, if we're gonna be the defacto labor training school in the South, you know, before there was an AFL CIO, Highlander was anchoring the CIO organizing schools in the South staff were pushing for this question of, if we're gonna really do this, we have to do this across racial lines and across the racialized lines that have been put up before us. And we have to do this in the Jim Crow South to really fight back against the reversals that were made, You know, at that time, 67 years ago, when reconstruction was attacked and abandoned by a whole coalition of Republican Democratic Party people in corporate interest, et cetera.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

So I think what staff 20 years into the organization's history began to recognize, even though that the first, in the first publicly integrated workshop that Highlander held was, I think in 1944. So the, again, the first formal public workshop was 10, 12 years after Highlander started by the mid fifties, the recognition that, you know, advances in economic and social democracy to really take root would have to pay real close attention between to the, to the, to the black Freedom Movement of the, of the 1950s and beyond. I mean, again, there was so many amazing examples and are so many examples of stuff that was going on before that. But Highlander became a home for a lot of really powerful educational work that was in accompaniment to the social movements at that time that were, that what we call the civil rights struggle, or what we more, more accurately referred to as a black freedom struggle.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

And I think one thing that happened even before there was a student non-violent coordinating committee, or SNCC before SNCC was ever in relationship to Highlander, was that there was an effort that became the Citizenship School Program that was really founded in the Sea Islands of South Carolina by folks like Isa Jenkins, Septima McClark, Bernice Robinson. And they brought that program to Highlander. And Highlander was really interested in helping to support and incubate that program so that it could flip black political power in the South, Right? So it was a literacy, you know, at its surface level. It was a literacy program. It was an opportunity to, to teach folks who hadn't had the same kind of educational opportunities in black rural communities or black communities across the South. It was an opportunity to, to teach them to read and write. But at its most powerful, it was an opportunity to really build black political power so that folks could pass these tests that were all across the South in prohibiting people who couldn't read the ability to, to pass tests so that they could vote.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

I think that's really where Highlander's deepest notoriety came from. I mean, there were 20 to 30 years of harassment by folks who wanted to use red baiting as a way to, to dismantle and crack open coalition work that Highlander was accompanying in those first 30 years. I think that came even more intense when you start seeing a multiracial, but particularly at that point, a black and white effort coming together. And Highlander playing a significant role in that. And you can imagine the, the sweat dripping down the back of, of, of white supremacists necks when they, when they started realizing that when you start teaching people to read, political power's gonna transform. And that's when you see Highlander get attacked, start in a, in a more intensive way. Dr. King came in 1957 to Highlander's 25th anniversary homecoming celebration. And that was, you know, if you, if you Google Highlander and you Google Dr. King you'll see these billboards that the Georgia State Board of Education and other segregationist powers had published and, you know, distributed all throughout billboards across the South that were saying, you know, "King trains at Communist training school".

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

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That was an attempt to go after, you know, perfectly reasonable communists and perfectly reasonable black freedom strugglers like Dr. King, you know, who are working together to figure out how to build a better, more liberated South and Appalachia. So I think that's where we get a lot of our notoriety. And then you have SNCC student activists who choose Highlander as a home base for, for some meetings after they had already gotten self-organized in their different context, particularly at Shaw University. But Highlander became a home place in part because of our middle location, but also because it was a school that was openly willing to say, Y'all can come here and eat and sleep and have a party and dance together, because that should be normal in these, in, in our, in our revolutionary imaginations.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

We should have the ability to do that together. And that was, that was what Highlander was about. So when you think about SNCC, when people talk about SNCC, yes SNCC definitely met at Highlander in its earliest years, but at where we were in Summerfield before we were forcibly removed by the State of Tennessee for our work. But a lot of the really dope stuff that Highlander did alongside SNCC happened out of our Knoxville base, which was a, which was a home that was leased out to Highlander by a friend of the organization after we had to move. And so there are memories of people like Stokely Carmichael that many people who were present at that time share, You know, they'll be like, Yes, I saw Stokely in one room, and then I saw Dr. King stop through to go to the bathroom when he was giving a talk in Knoxville. And, you know, so you have those kinds of places and I think what Highlander was doing in the sixties and accompaniment with SNCC and others was in a different location. That's something that we, we also liked underscore is that a lot of that was happening out Knoxville in a different part of East Tennessee. So I'll pause there in case you have any other, any other questions about that kind of stuff?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

I mean, I think I'll jump in. I think that a couple of things. One is that, you know, you talked about Ms. Clark Allyn and think that many of us would recognize her as, as one of the world's greatest teachers, that the program that she and Isa Jenkins and Bernice and other folks dreamed up was a program that reached hundreds of thousands of people before the internet, before cell phones, right? Before we could just, you know, throw up a flyer on Twitter and a and a thousand people show up. Right? And to be able to do that and really meet a need was both about allowing people to have access to resources that gave them the capacity to read, which they innately had <laugh> even before the citizenship schools existed, but also was about giving them access to resources that helped build their independent political power and self-determination so that they could be using it for all things, not just voting.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Right? and I think that's an important lesson for those of us in 21st century Democracy fights. It's inclusive of the vote, but it's not limited to it. I think the, the second thing I would say is, you know, like I mentioned, it's like people think about the Montgomery Bus Boycott sort of being sparked by this little old lady that was tired of white supremacy and all this stuff. And so she just sat down without a strategy and it just happened to spark, you know, a, a revolutionary moment in the United States when actually it was a not only a long term strategy that folks had built a lot of infrastructure around that included other folks doing that very same tactic, <laugh> with very little response. It also included, you know, an economic boycott that boycott was supported because they had built the infrastructure to be able to, you know, fund black folks that own businesses like taxi services and bus companies to continue you know, feeding those dollars that were going to a white supremacist infrastructure into black community infrastructure.

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Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

If that's not an example of solidarity economies, I don't know what is. So again, they built like a multi tactical strategy. And one part of that included political education and sent in Ms. Parks, the radical Ms. Parks up to Highlander for a little bit of, of community building and, and training. And again, she didn't stop her commitment to Highlander there, she went on to serve on the board of directors with Ms. Clark <laugh>. Which is, is no small reason why I'm able to sit in the seat that I sit in now. The other thing that I would say is, I think what's beautiful about Ms. Clark, and then I'll talk about SNCC cause I know everybody loves SNCC. I loves SNCC too, so I'll talk about SNCC a little bit too. But you know, when, when the state, and we'll talk about this, I'm sure before the podcast is over, when the state came to attack us and, and worked with white supremacist infrastructure that was civilian-oriented to try to shut us down, Ms. Clark and her relationship with Dorothy Cotton, Dorothy Cotton, one of the, you know, the, the highest ranking women in this, actually not even one of the, the highest ranking black woman in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and dear advisor to Dr. King, Ms. Clark, you know, calls up Ms. Cotton, is like, Hey, Dorothy, they're trying to shut us down.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Maybe you should take some of this money and, and this program so we can keep going while we move to Knoxville and have to deal with changing the name and all that stuff so we can conti continue the work, Let's work together. And I think, you know, it's an example of how the Black Liberation Movement folks connected to Highlander and the Black Liberation Movement were really intentional, like low ego, high impact to keep work going. And I think it shows that the capital that we've got, even when we're under attack, is our relationships. And that when we actually value, it's, it's so good to be on this <laugh> this podcast with CCR because I think it's another example of how decades and decades worth of relationship actually is a way to keep our, our struggle solid and able to be flexible and disciplined while with withstanding and, and outliving the attacks that try to stop us from doing our work.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

But I promise I talk about SNCC, that's a whole 'nother podcast to talk about, you know, Highlanders love affair with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. But I think that a couple of things that I would say is that you gotta remember, these were like young humans, right? Regular people. John Lewis had his first integrated meal at the Highlander Center, and he went on to continue his relationship with us for decades up to and including a letter that he wrote to us that was on his, his congressional website before he passed away, that was talking about his love for, for the work that we had done, his historically and the contemporary work that we were doing, and that no white supremacist attack would ever stop us. And he knew it because we had done it before, and that we had a movement that was stronger than the hate that was thrown at us.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

You know, these people and what the impossible things that they made possible because of their collaborative efforts continues to this day. Right? I think sometimes people talk about SNCC, like it was a, like, it's a past tense thing when the SNCC Legacy Project is alive and well. And I remember when, when Covid 19 became a reality for all of us, it was the year of their 60th anniversary. And I was devastated. You know, we were all planning on being in DC together. We were gonna like, just love up on our elders. Remember our ancestors learn at the feet of these brilliant humans who, in a time where people thought hope was lost, not only infused black Southern communities with a lot of hope, but really

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changed the material conditions of our people for the better and set up the playing field for what many of us have inherited and, and now are building upon in the 21st century Black Liberation Movement in Southern Freedom Movements.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And, and Covid changed that plan. And I remember being really insistent that we not let the year go by without doing something. And so we reached out to folks like Charlie Cobb and Cortland Cox and Judith Richardson, Judy Richardson, and you know, Jennifer Lewis and like, all these amazing SNCC elders, and said like, Listen, we maybe can't replicate what we were gonna do in DC perfectly, but we absolutely can host a virtual something where we bring people together from all over the world. We wanna just take a minute to like, love on y'all, but also to learn from y'all and with y'all. And they said yes. And so we were able to, you know, build up this collaborative team of folks that came together and talked about the, the mini organizing traditions in black communities over, over time. And it was super transformative. You can see it, it was a free event still on our Facebook page and on our vimeos and all that stuff.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And so, you know, I raise it to say the, the, the legacy of SNCC, the work of the contemporary work of SNCC is not something that's like over, you know, and the relationship between SNCC and Highlander is one that continues to bear really good fruit. So I, you know, in that vein, I often say that Highlander folks live in the past, present, and future all at the same time. And I think the legacy of the Black Liberation movement and it's relationship to Highlander is, is those things. It's, it's a past tense thing. It's a present thing, and it will be a future thing.

Jessica Vosburgh:

So Ash and Allyn, both of y'all have alluded to the attacks that Highlander has been subject to legal attacks, physical violence over the years for being so effective and just being who you are. I definitely wanna ask you about what happened in the sixties with getting your land taken away. But first I wanted to ask about a more recent incident, which was the arson that happened a few years ago. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Yeah, sure. You know, it, it was March 29th, 2019, and I had just been in the office the night really, really, really late the night before, and decided that I, I wanted to go home and see my bio family. So I, I drove to Chattanooga and saw my folks, and I went to bed that night. I woke up at five o'clock the next morning and I was like, Something feels off. Wonder what's going on. I checked my work phone, checked my personal phone, looked through all the, the timelines and news feeds, didn't see anything. So I laid back down and went to sleep. And at 6:00 AM on the dot, I got a call from our CFO at the time saying that I needed to get to Highlander immediately. Our office was fully engulfed in flames. And so I got in my car, I drove back to the office.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

I called Allyn probably 10 billion times. And, and some of our colleagues, folks like Stephanie and Emery at, at Project South Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide. Folks like Maggie Martin from what used to be known as Iraq Veterans Against the War that's now called About Face and other folks to just be like, Hey, man, I don't know what's going on but my office is on fire. And so I got there and I could see into the foundation, the office was totally destroyed. Law enforcement, firefighters, all those folks

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are still there. We were actually about to start the first day of the Appalachian People's Movement Assembly. So we had folks coming to the hill, We had folks already on the hill, had a conversation with our staff who were obviously were just in shock, <laugh>, you know, and in grief and, and trauma and trauma.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And you know, we talked about whether or not we should cancel our work and unanimously decided that we should continue, that this would, this shouldn't be something that stops the, the incredible work that people are trying to do to change their material conditions themselves. And, and what we are committed to. And our mission is being a catalyst for those social movements to accompany those movements and support them. And so we did. And while we were making sure that folks could do that safely I was in, you know, asked to take a little walk to the parking lot from where our office stood and, and saw a symbol of the white power movements. I didn't know it at the time what it was, but a, a symbol of the white power movements spray painted on the asphalt. And I know that that symbol was not there the night that I had left.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And so, yeah, I mean, I think the story could be framed is, you know, Highlander was attacked, It was traumatizing, was terrible. It's, you know, terrifying. All of those things. We lost a building. We lost some of the papers and, and artifacts that we were supposed to be in our archive. Not all of them, many of our papers were already not on site and other academic archives or in our library where archives are actually housed, not in our administrative offices. But the actual story, the actual frame that I think, think in the actual narrative that I think is much more interesting and more important than what white supremacy tried to stop is the story about how social movements rose to the occasion. People from literally all over the world, organizations, community groups from all over the world, funders, sister organizations, you name it, showed up and showed out collectively saying that you cannot destroy the, the heart and the mission of our institution and what this piece of infrastructure means to the whole of the movement ecosystems internationally that we've been building.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

They showed their love and support through messages of solidarity. We didn't fundraise, but people started fundraisers on our behalf. <Laugh> people literally brought us like shampoo and conditioner to wipe, you know, wash the arson, smell out of our hair, you know, in every way that people could show up and take care of us. They did. And, and even more than the care that they gave us they did exactly what we would've wanted them to do. They kept us working. They kept us committed to our mission. They kept coming and telling us how we could be throwing down in solidarity with the movements that they were building, which is exactly why we exist in the first place to create containers for lifelong learning across generational and ideological and geographic difference. You know, the story, I think the story really, and that shortest is a love story. And I think that that love story's logical conclusion was that what hate-filled people attempted to destroy. What kept us safe in that time was love and solidarity. And, and the good news that, you know, the gospel is, some of us might call it, is they were still here. And what they, you know, their attempt to break our spirit miserably failed.

Jessica Vosburgh:

Well, I was gonna ask sort of how you've resisted and recovered and repaired from those attacks, but you already perfectly answered that question. But I did wanna take us back in time to when the state

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went after Highlander and took away y'all's land, revoked the charter forced Highlander to relocate as, as Allyn explained in the early sixties. And then fast forward to this century we know that this Preservation Trust that's best known for preserving confederate memorials and battlefields acquired that land where, you know, where Highlanders original home used to sit in Grundy County and learned that they would be applying to nominate that site, the old library site to the National Register of Historic Places which would then allow this white-led trust to get all sorts of grants and tax breaks, and continue to tell Highlander's story and basically co-op Highlander's narrative as well as occupying its historic land. So, as y'all know, Highlander and CCR teamed up to challenge that nomination. We recently secured sort of a small interim victory in getting the feds to send that nomination back to the state. So I just wanted to ask you to explain a bit more why you chose to challenge that nomination and give CCR the great honor of working with you on that and what comes next in this particular battle.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Yeah, Ellen, you wanna start with the history and segue?

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Yeah, like I was saying earlier, I mean, I think it's, we, Highlander was strategically breaking the law of segregation in, in its earliest years. And I think that the successes of the black freedom struggle and civil rights movement that was a part of it in that era led to things like the Brown versus Board of Education decision in 1957 that really put on alert white segregation as white supremacist, formal and informal halls of power. You know, we have to do what we can to dismantle and exploit any kind of possible division that we could find. So, you know, the, the intersection of economic democracy at its at its most left and amazing communism, <laugh> and, and the black freedom struggle, which was embodied in people like Dr. King, I really think. And then, of course, at a, at a less popular less well known scale the Citizenship School Programs.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

I think that was, there was the dire threat to white segregationist powers in, in the US South and elsewhere. The Georgia Board of Education hired us, hired a photographer to show up at Highlander's 25th anniversary to document all those wild, illegal and dangerous activities, such as people singing together across race, eating together, going to school together, swimming in a pond together, which that pond had been dug out by Highlander staff prior to the 1950s. And so those kinds of things, I think were what led the State of Tennessee and interests in white supremacists and white segregationist interests who were elected officials in the State of Tennessee at the time, to issue a resolution in 1959, that legislative resolution that led to the more intentional cooperation at the federal, local, and state level to investigate Highlander's activities. So that, you know, on July 31st, 1959, Septima McClark, the Director of Workshops and Education at the time, was running a workshop with young people, and they're different tellings of the story, but basically, Septima and other staff were arrested.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Local sheriff department raided the facility, the old library where they were having the workshop, and young people were being terrorized by local law enforcement. And their state probably stayed in potentially even federal accomplices. So that 1959 raid was what sort of led to the charges being brought against Highlander one of which was in fact breaking segregation laws that was ultimately dropped at a certain point, that particular charge was dropped, because at that time, as you know, the law of the land theoretically, was that schools were not allowed to be segregated. So for it to really become a full issue,

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they retained the two charges that had been brought against Highlander, in addition to those segregation laws, one of which was selling booze. And what we know is that Highlander is not in the business of selling alcohol. It never has been.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

However, you know, you gotta imagine at that time if people are gonna go get a beer after a workshop and in a community where, you know, they won't even sell booze to folks of a certain skin color, somebody's gonna go get all the beer and bring it back, and people are gonna put their 50 cents or dollar in the hat. Where I grew up, we call that a beer run. And that's exactly what it was at the time. Highlander had beer runs, you know, that was just an activity. But that was something that the, the photographer and other spies and infiltrators caught wind of and said, Oh, we can exploit that. And so that was a charge that was brought against Highlander. The second charge that was brought against Highlander was an employee of the organization illegally benefiting from the organization's 501c3 status, which, you know, arguably could have, you know, been fought over in the back halls of the state attorney's office around, you know, what you can and can't do as a C3 staff person.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel

But basically what had happened is that Miles Horton, one of the founders his spouse had died Sophia Horton just a, a few years before. And the money that her family gave to Highlander, the staff at the time decided and board decided that they would build a house that Miles who had never taken a salary in his 25 years of being 27 at that point, years of being on staff could live in the house. And if you look, you know nonprofit law, you can't really do that if you don't document it properly. So ultimately those are the two charges that were both brought against Highlander, and that Highlander fought against at the local and the state level and fought it all the way to the US Supreme Court. And the US Supreme Court decided not to hear the case. And ultimately Highlander's land assets and name was confiscated and revoked.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

So we used to be called, when we talk about, you know, we're Highlander, we've been around for 90 years, we've had two names, Highlander Folk School is our first name. That name was taken from us by the State of Tennessee. And along with the, you know, different assets and buildings, and those buildings were auctioned off in 1961. In 1962, many of those buildings when they were auctioned off, were burned down by the private citizens or people, or interests who bought them. And the rest were, were remained in private ownership until roughly 2013. And I'll, I'll let Ash pick up the 2013 part of the story.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Sure. So 2013 runs rolls around Highlander, becomes you know, this is pre Allyn and I being executive directors, but we, you know, became aware that the, the land was up for sale. And at the time, Highlander, this historic, you know, movement, trust, respected by people, the world around only had a 1.5 million budget, right? Wasn't like philanthropy was dumping money in the South, particularly on organizations that had done such incredible work and were really prioritizing things like leadership development and training, right? It wasn't sexy to give money to organizations like us. And so there, there was no way that we could be stewards of a nearly 200 acre facility, build buildings that we needed on that new facility, while, while we were literally actively fundraising to build more housing for participants to, to sleep in on the hill and purchase our old stuff back.

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Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

That's not even to mention the value set question about why Highlanders should have to buy back land that was stolen, right? Multiple times stolen from us and from other folks, right? And indigenous folks, you know, all of that. So we couldn't buy it, but we would've, if we could've, you know, at least would've been a, an option on the table. So here comes this article in USA Today talking about how this thing called the Tennessee Preservation Trust was saving the historic Highlander Folk School. And you can imagine a lot of folks were like, Oh, no, Highlander's in trouble. Let me figure out how I can help. And so folks started donating, folks started giving loans to the Tennessee Preservation Trust so that they would have enough money to purchase and to, to renovate our original library. They've also bought other tracks of land, because, like Allyn said, when the land was stolen, it was parceled off not just as one big lot, but as multiple lots.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

That then people did all sorts of stuff with burning down buildings to get insurance claims, selling them to private owners, et cetera. So in one hand, you have the Tennessee Preservation Trust buying our historic library or, or old library, our original library, the library that's in the picture. If you've ever seen the picture of Rosa Parks and Ralph Abernathy and MLK and Pete Seger and, and a little white girl that actually happened to be Miles Horton's daughter. That building behind them was the library that we're talking about right now. And so they purchased it, and in one hand, they, they kept it from getting into like the, the hands of developers that would've not only manipulated that land and, you know, disgraced its history and legacy but would've also taken advantage of our family in Grundy County, right? And exploited them economically. So in one way, grateful that it didn't get into worse hands, <laugh>, right?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

But on the other hand, it's led to a dec almost a decade now of back and forth conversations with the Tennessee Preservation Trust, a white-led organization that is taking advantage of what it means to preserve black people's history, women's history, but to, to do so without any consent or conversation with the people who made the thing historic in the first place. Whether that's us as Highlander or our movement fan that's also involved in the, the making of the history in that sacred space. And so Allyn is a board member. Pamela Jim McMichael is an executive director, and now Allyn and I and our board of directors and staff contemporarily have been in conversations with particularly David Curry, who has been a board member and a staff person, a trustee of the Tennessee Preservation Trust about what it would look like to be in right relationship about what it looks like to use our name without our consent about what it means to fundraise in our name without having a conversation with us about what it would look like for them to become superheroes and restore that land back to us.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And us in conversation with many other communities of people who were impacted by the theft of that land and forcibly displaced from it. And we've gotten a lot, a lot of lip service about the desire to do that, to see it re, you know, restored to us about what it could look like programmatically about what it would look like to give us the land back. We, even as of this year, have had explicit conversations about what it would look like to sell it back to us if they can't afford to just give it back, because we understand they put a lot of effort and energy into, you know, buying it and, and getting the, the buildings you know, back up to par. And we were, we were ready to talk, have that talk, put it in paper, Let's, let's make it happen.

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Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

We'll buy you out. And we were made promises that we've just not seen kept over the last decade. So, you know, you can imagine our surprise when we got a letter not from the Tennessee Preservation Trust but from the State of Tennessee informing us that TPT was going to be applying to have our old library put on the National Historic Registry. And when asked, you know, why they thought that was important they told the Tennessee Historic Commission that they wanted to run programs telling people about Highlanders history. And we've seen over this last nine years multiple times, the history of the Highlander Center told very incorrectly people being told that things happen there that actually happened in Knoxville, and people assuming that because it was Highlander related, that we were somehow also involved. So they should be supportive of it.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And we haven't been. And so we couldn't in good conscience continue to allow not only our contemporary work to be impacted by what it means that another organization is out confusing people, making people think that they're doing programming related to our, our mission and our work. But quite frankly, we couldn't continue to allow our elders and our ancestors to continue to, to think that they were working in tandem with us through this other entity that actually has very little relationship with us, and has been really intentional about icing us out of our own story and telling us that we don't own that history. And so we said we think it's messed up. <Laugh>, we told the Tennessee Historic Commission who unanimously passed it it made its way up to the federal registry. And as you mentioned, just the, the recent victory that we know is just one battle and is not is not the whole victory yet.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

But we did learn that because of incorrect citations, their petition where they said that Highlander gave them permission to use some of our stuff in their actual petition, <laugh> using our name, violating our trademarks, they've sent it back to the Tennessee Historic Commission. So we're waiting now for that to happen. We'll, again, logged our descent. I think it's really important to say this isn't a fight about TPT being good or bad. That's not the point here. This isn't a fight between Highlander and David Curry. This is actually a, a real intentional intervention around making sure that black-led movement infrastructure gets returned to black led movement. That the Southern Freedom Movement infrastructure that is so sacred in that community actually gets restored to the Southern Freedom movement that the folks in Grundy County actually get a say about what happens in their neighborhood and in relationship with the people that they've been building community with for almost a century now. And we're excited to see that happen. And we believe that it can and that it will. And for the thousands of people who also registered their dissent to the petition, we are so grateful and we promise that we're committed to doing right, both with our, our colleagues and our family in Summerfield and in Grundy County but also by all this Southern Freedom Movement and Black Liberation Movement, all the other movements that are impacted by what it would mean to have this restored back into our rightful hands.

Emily Early:

That's such a beautiful history, Ash. We really just love hearing this. I mean, we've had so many calls together and we've heard pieces of these stories, but it's so awesome to hear everything just strung together in this continuum. So talking about victories and celebrations, we want to turn the conversation a bit to what Highlander is celebrating this year, and that's it's 90th anniversary. So we'd like to ask, what

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exactly is Highlander celebrating this year in its 90th year? And if you could also add into that what continues to make y'all's work, Highlander's work so relevant today, So important today. I'm sure you all are celebrating all that, so we'd love to, to hear more about what's happening.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Yeah, it's, we're 90 years young, and I think the theme of this year's homecoming is there's a new world coming. And that in many ways is what we're celebrating, is that we have the, the hope, the desire, the, the declaration that a new world is coming. And we are also doing that having named this named The Homecoming, and got received the blessing from Dr. Bernice Johnson Regan, who is Highlander fan for decades and decades, and an advisor to so many, many, many cultural workers and strategists in the South across the nation, across the world. And it's her song that was in many ways crying out, speaking out and in proclaiming in the, in the seventies an outcry against the war in Vietnam and, and a variety of different imperialist wars that were happening and intersecting at that time.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

And calling people into imagining the new world that that is and, and can come into being. And really asking where people will be standing when that new world is coming where people will be present when that new world is coming and calling us and challenging all of us to do that. And so that is what Highlander does. We do that through our educational work. We we bring people together to imagine that world, whether that world is a transforming world that's in someone's home place, all the way to transforming that world into someone's state or country, or really the world, you know, the future that we all deserve based on what we've been promised and also what we deserve by our dignity as human beings. And so what we'll be celebrating that weekend is our capacity to do that. Our capacity to imagine bigger and bolder things, our capacity to interrelate with one another, our ability to sing together our our ability to sing together and to engage with each other in learning spaces that are both on- site at Highlander and Virtual.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

So this is a hybrid Homecoming celebration will be really our first full on hybrid homecoming celebration in our 90 years of being. It'll be virtual with all the lessons that have been learned over the last several years with how to do that and do that really beautifully. And it'll be back on site, which it, which really is, is among the things that we'll be celebrating which hundreds of us will be back together at Highlander as well. In addition to the virtual offerings and the virtual con convening. Ash, do you have any other highlights for the weekend that you want to, you wanna surface?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Well, I mean, less about the weekend. What I think is the, the important piece for folks that'll be listening by the time that you all get to hear this podcast is that we had been, I'd been really spending a lot of time learning from people like Helen Kim, learning from people like Norma Wong about The Art of Waging Peace and the, the power of future storytelling. And, you know, sometimes when we come together and we try to collectively tell a story about the future, it's really wonky cuz we all are, you know, trying to make sure that our individual desires and wants and needs get met and the, the story beyond the apocalypse, right? So you might get everything from, you know, I just wanna sit in a rocking chair on my porch to, I wanna be naked on a beach somewhere, right? It's like literally I've, I've been in story circles where that was exactly the thing that was said, right?

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Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

And shout out to, to all those desires, if that's something that you want. There's no, I'm not yucking, nobody's yum, but it might be weird, you know, and clunky and, and some people might want some things that other people don't really think are that important or aren't needs, you know, those sorts of things. And so I really had this like, breakthrough thinking about the South and who, who were the people that I thought I would see. And through the Art of Waging Peace was also really reckoning with this idea, this value set all under heaven intact. And I recognize that when I'm thinking about the Southern Freedom movement, particularly in the context that is right now, that the people of the South aren't just the people that I like, right? It's not just the staff and the participants in our programs. It's not just our board members, it's also the people that burned my office down.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

It's also the people that were insurrectionists on January 6th. It's also Moms for Liberty chapters. It's also lots of folks that, you know, are connected to extractive industries that are destroying not only our neighborhoods and our people, but the planet itself, right? There's lots of Southerners, it's the largest geographic region in the United States, right? And what, what happens to those people in the story beyond the apocalypse? I just couldn't let it go. I was staying up all night, I was pulling my eyelashes out. I was trying to figure out, you know, then what does it mean to build a Southern Freedom Movement? And who gets to be free if it wins, right? And so I started just trying to like, answer some questions that Norma presented. Things like, you know, who were the people and beings that were embracing me? Who were the people and beings that weren't, you know, what, what was already moving, what wasn't moving?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Like what's the setting for this future story? And I kept envisioning the hundredth year of, of Highlander <laugh> and what, what homecoming might be 10 years from now. And I saw thousands of people coming from all over the world from all of the many Highlander campuses that might exist by that point. And all of the programs that we've done with our sister organizations or programs that they've done that we just supported and sent people to, majority of those thousands of people were from the South or from Appalachia, which is where I'm proudly from. And we were learning together and debating and like talking about what we'd done over the last year and remembering the last 10 years, forecasting the next 10 years and century worth of, of movement work that we were all going to do together all over the world. But the best part of the dream was we would be, you know, kicking it around the campfire on the hill, which is what we do all the time, you know, burning a fire, people maybe, you know, having a drink beverage of their choice.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

We're eating and breaking bread and fellowshiping together. It's an intergenerational space. And there's little ones like our, are eavesdropping on us while we're gossiping about work that we've done before together. And they're laughing at us. And I, I was like, I'm curious about why these kids are laughing. And what I realized was that they were laughing at us because they couldn't believe, like, like their brains could not actually conceptualize that there was ever a time where our strategies and tactical interventions were based on a story that we inherited from colonizers that centered our differences. Because the only thing that they've experienced in their lifetime was a Highlander family that had been working together to create its own story, centering its own story, making our strategies and, and our

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tactical interventions centered around a story that we wrote that was centering our, our story of interdependence, right?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

They'd only lived in a South that knew how to share. And Allyn and I spent a lot of time thinking about that story. We talked about it with staff, and what we realized was like, we have a particular role to play to make sure that the South gets to a place where that can be the story. And so the 90th years really about getting us ready not only to envision that story beyond the apocalypse and, and to debate about what our role should be towards getting us there and building the infrastructure up to see that story come to fruition, because it's not impossible, right? But also to, to invite our sister organizations, our program participants of past and present into a conversation about like, what is your also, what's your addition to the story and what is your role? What, what should you be responsible for to get us there too?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

What commitments can you make to a 10-year strategy that would get us to a Southern Freedom Movement that actually builds so well that all under heaven is intact. Whether we agree on everything or not, and where we can actually learn how to share again, so everybody's needs get met. So there is no harm in the first place, right? And so that's, that's what we are doing this 90th year. All of our programs have thought about this question and what it would mean from our Education Department to our Finance and Development team, to our Communication staff, our Community Safety team, our Radical Hospitality staff. All of us are thinking about what would our team's roles, what would our individual responsibilities be? What would our responsibilities as an organization be to see that that vision come to fruition. And what we're gonna do at homecoming and for the rest of the year is really spend time with our, with our comrades, really thinking about that, that question seriously.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

So that when we go into 2023, which in no small way will be a hard year for so many of us what might be for some of us already a fascist reality. I think about our colleagues in Florida in particular, and when I think about the, you know, not that fascism is coming, but that for some of us, it's already here. Authoritarianism is already here. And what it might mean that the last vestiges of democracy as we've known it or hoped it to be might be gone by 2024. I think this question of what is the story beyond the apocalypse becomes even more urgent and important. And so we're gonna be spending time thinking about how do we shore up our ability to be autonomous and support Southern freedom, movement and movements all over the country all over our region, all over the world, to be ready to be autonomous, to be the social safety net under our folks if the worst case scenarios happen, and to be prepared to fight like hell for the living. While we also recognize that coming together in our 90th year means there's gonna be a whole bunch of people that usually should be there that won't be, and we're gonna celebrate their lives and what their contributions to our movements have been. And then we're gonna go into 2023 ready to fight to build that future story that we know we all have always deserved, whether the state acknowledged it or not. So that's, that's what I'm most excited about for a 90 year.

Emily Early:

Woo. I feel like I just got a sermon. Amen. To all of that. That's so inspiring to hear. I mean, especially, you know, closing out this week and, and this podcast recording, and I know we, you know, Jess and myself are really looking forward to being a part of that future vision and planning with, with Highlander and

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are really excited just yeah. To just continue to have these sorts of conversations. So one, one of my last few questions is in addition to what you all have shared, inviting folks to also dream themselves about, you know, what this new world looks like. How else can people support Highlander become involved with Highlander, both in, in the short term and, and long term? What's the call to folks by Highlander?

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

There's so many ways. I mean one is like, you know, we got, we always hiring it feels like, so, you know, you could come work for us with the the other thing you can do is, you know, come to participate in our programs. You know, we have really, really incredible fellowship. We have training opportunities, we have internships, you name it. So, you know, come and learn with us. And the other thing that, that you can do is tell us how we can support you. You know, if Highlander is not anything, We're an organization that shows up for our, for our sister and that are also across front lines of struggle that are doing everything in their power to save lives and make the world a better place. So if there's any way that we can accompany that work, amplify that work, support you and your staff, your, your members, your, you know, whatever, that's what we wanna do.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

So I think, you know, really the, the way to be in relationship with Highlander is to ask us out. There's not very much that we say no to because we really, really wanna do every, we wanna know at the end of the day that we did everything we could to make the world a better place with the people that are doing that work every day. So that's, you know, that's what I would say. Follow us on the socials, we're on all the social media things. Sign up for our View from the Hill newsletter. It is amazing. Shout out to our Comms team and to continue to, you know, the same thing I think we said after the, the arson to folks that wanted to know what to do. I mean, you can give, we, we love a donation. It, it keeps the doors open and keeps the work moving, but when you put us to work, you know, and you help us actually live into our mission to be a catalyst for social movements that believe that directly impacted communities have everything they need. And if resource will do everything in their power to change their material conditions for the better themselves, when you actually let us do that, you actually get us into the room or you come to the hill and come to our rocking chairs and allow us to live to our mission. You're actually doing everything you need to do to support us. So, so yeah, that's what I would say. Allyn, what else would you add?

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

I'd say, you know, plus one to all of that with a special plus one to, we would love it if you became a supporter of Highlander directly. If you are able, or if you know someone who would be able, I mean, no gift is too small, no gift is too big. So we would love it if you would check out highlandercenter.org and go to the donate page and click on that. But also love it. If you checked out the amazing fiscal sponsoree, fiscal sponsorship program that Highlander has over the last several years, Highlanders expanded its fiscal sponsorship program to include some of the most incredible cutting edge organizing outfits across the United States. National Bailout Collective is one one that many people don't know is the Stay Together Appalachian Youth Project or the Stay Project, which is founded by many people, including one person on this call.

Emily Early:

I Didn't found it, but I certainly [inaudible] program participants

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Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

One of the earlier program participants, and it's for young folks under 30 in Central Appalachia across Central Appalachia trying to build better homes where they wanna stay. So that's an incredible project. So we have upward towards 14 fiscally sponsored projects that we are honored and blessed to support, and we have an incredible staff that accompanies them in that particular kind of way. So that is just a couple of additional ways to, to support

Emily Early:

What a great way to close this out. I recall that you said earlier, Ash, that right, the relationships are what sustain us, sustain this work. So awesome way to shout out those additional partners and supporters, Allyn. Well, with that, we're coming to a close and wanna thank you all so much, Ash and Allyn for chatting with us today. As we mentioned earlier, we're really excited to continue to partner with you all and are hoping that this partnership can be a model for our Southern Regional office's efforts across the South, to partner with radical organizations and groups like Highlander Fighting for Liberation across the South. Thanks again to our listeners for joining. And one final reminder that any materials mentioned during this podcast will be available on CCR's website, ccrjustice.org. Thanks y'all.

Allyn Maxfield-Steel:

Thank you.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

We love ccr. Thank y'all.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson:

Thank you so much, yo.

Announcer:

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