

# THE ELLA J. BAKER BIRTHDAY COMMITTEE

C/o IFCO—The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization  
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October 5, 1978

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Dear friend,

Like us, many of you have met or heard of Ella Baker during the time you worked with SNCC, the Mississippi Summer Project, SCLC, the NAACP, YWCA, or any of the other organizations she worked with or helped to found. Or you may know of her from your activism with other groups now or in the sixties. Perhaps you have never heard of this legendary woman. But almost all of your lives were touched by her remarkable work.

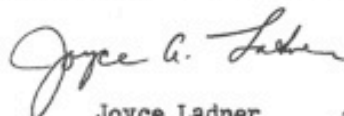
Mrs. Baker is celebrating her birthday this December. We are writing you because we think you might like to join us in using this occasion to say thank you to her. We have formed a committee to organize a 'family gathering' on Saturday, December 9 in New York. We would like you to come to her birthday party, and we'll send you more detailed correspondence giving the exact place and time.

We're writing now because we think you might want to contribute to a surprise gift for Mrs. Baker. Our goal is to present her with a substantial contribution which would help to convey our appreciation and would help her with some of her current projects. These projects include the organizing and collection of her memoirs.

To raise this money, many of us, including those listed here, have pledged to give \$50 or more by November 1. Those individuals listed as patrons have pledged to give \$100 or more; organizations listed as patrons pledged at least \$250. If you feel you can afford it, please join us in making a similar pledge. If you are able to contribute more, please accept our gratitude. Of course any amount you can give will be very appreciated, and your contribution is tax-deductible.

Please come to the celebration whether or not you are able to contribute at all. One of the things we're hoping for is a chance to get together again to reunite and discuss the future. Many people from around the country have already expressed interest in attending. A group of Mrs. Baker's friends who are planning a film about her will also be present. We'd like everyone to come who can.

We also need your help in suggesting others who would want to be included in this gathering and celebration. Please return the enclosed coupon to us as promptly as possible. Thankyou.

  
Joyce Ladner

and

  
Jennifer Lawson

## BIRTHDAY SONG OF ELLA

From Timothy Jenkins

It is one of the subtle accidents of history that the chronicles of great events focus on the bricks and stones in the many mansions of human development rather than the mortar. But, as any builder would know, a pile of bricks can never make a building, no matter how great, nor carefully laid, nor valuable their composition. A building is a result of durable units held together by equally durable binders.

During the past century of human and civil rights development, special focus has been placed on various individuals whose lives have been the building blocks toward the current struggle. In each instance they have been celebrated as though their successes were the products solely of their efforts. But, as Dr. Mordecai Johnson would say "'Tis not so."

In every instance of great leadership there are parallel instances of committed and selfless support. In every instance of great and eloquent spokesmanship there has been the necessary requirement of everyday practical translations. The binding force for the great successes of charisma has been the surrounding medium of people of powerful character. It is the irony of light that its importance can only be defined by its shadows.

Ella Baker, in her long history of public service has constituted an indispensable element in the support, the translation and the character which has made for the great civil rights revolution of this Century. Laboring in the shadows of great luminaries, she has contributed that binding force which links the present with its past, in preparation for the future.

Having spent long years in the development of social causes affecting farm workers and sharecroppers, rural refugees who became urban ghetto dwellers; having contributed mightily to the growth and development of the NAACP, SCLC and other significant organizational efforts; she played a unique role in providing roots for the newly emergent leadership group which flowered in the 60's under the banner of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. To them she lent the depth of her social convictions, the insight born of her political experience and the concern sprung from sincere personal affection.

The Romans defined Alma Mater as a foster mother. Tradition defines an alma mater as a university or a special place of learning. For the leadership and followship of SNCC, Ella Baker was both.

She stood as a nexus between what had gone before and what was happening then. She helped us to understand the common currents between our efforts and those which had flown from the Niagara Movement to the Deltas of the South. She understood the sensitive tradition of the black middle class in its best sense; she understood the mixed roles of the black ministry in its historic sense; she understood the conflicting roles of the black politicians in their transitional sense. And she patiently shared those understandings, so that they became our own. In fact, I can never remember an occasion of seeing Ella Baker in a hurry, too busy to listen, too eager to speak, or too self-satisfied to learn.



The other day when I was asked by a news reporter for The Washington Post to characterize the dynamic of Ella Baker during the days of the 60's, in addition to using the metaphor of her static role as the mortar of our movement, I also thought of her dynamic role as a lubricant among colliding and sometimes antagonistic forces and personalities within our ranks: always content to play her role off-stage rather than in the spotlight; self-camouflaged, if you will, as part of the background against which great dramas were being played.

It was Shakespeare, who told the lie through the lips of Brutus in his "Julius Ceasar" that only the evil that men do lives after them. Again as Mordecai would say, "'Tis not so." The good of Ella Baker has been felt in the lives of all of us who know her and it will continue to flourish to the extent that we half succeed in the faithful pursuit of what she taught us.

When the modern songster wrote "You light up my life, you give me hope to carry on," he could have been speaking for us all in a characterization of Ella Baker. ---Happy Birthday Ella Baker, Alma Mater, mortar in the house of our fathers and mothers and in the history of our people. And thank you for lighting up our lives.

December 13, 1978