

Charles Sherrod, civil rights activist with SNCC, dies at 85

He helped spearhead the Albany Movement, a campaign to desegregate an entire Georgia community without a caption

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2022/10/13/charles-sherrod-albany-movement-dead/>

By Harrison Smith, October 13, 2022

Charles Sherrod, right, with fellow student leader Frank Pinkston at Virginia Union University in Richmond in 1960. (Afro American Newspapers/Gado/Getty Images)

The Rev. Charles Sherrod, a front-line warrior for civil rights who became the first field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, braving beatings and death threats in the early 1960s while trying to desegregate a Southern stronghold of white supremacy, died Oct. 11 at his home in Albany, Ga., where he had worked for more than six decades. He was 85.

His death was announced in a statement by his family, which did not cite a cause.

A founding member of SNCC, the leading student group of the 1960s civil rights movement, Rev. Sherrod collaborated with prominent organizers including Ella Baker — who helped him pay off his college loans — and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who joined him for about eight months in Albany as part of a campaign to end racial segregation in the region, which was notorious for its police brutality, Ku Klux Klan violence and Whites-only voter rolls.

While King left Albany in disappointment, believing that the movement had failed to accomplish any of its major goals, Rev. Sherrod stayed behind, campaigning for desegregation and voter registration as head of the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education. He later went into politics, serving as one of Albany's first Black city commissioners, and co-founded a farm collective called New Communities, which was often described as the country's largest Black-owned farm and first community land trust.

"Sherrod is an exemplar of those people who didn't leave the movement," said Clayborne Carson, a historian of the civil rights movement, in a 2010 interview with the news website Salon. "They stayed, and they're still fighting, to this day."

Raised in Virginia by his maternal grandmother, who encouraged him to become a Baptist minister, Rev. Sherrod earned a master's degree in sacred theology and quoted from scripture at rallies and marches. By the time he became the first full-time field secretary for SNCC in 1961, he had acquired a reputation as something of a "country mystic, deeply religious with a stubborn streak," according to civil rights historian Taylor Branch's book "Parting the Waters: American in the King Years 1954-63" (1988).



Although he was often warm and gentle, even soft-spoken, Rev. Sherrod could quickly change into a fiery, confrontational organizer — as when he spoke with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in June 1961, joining other SNCC organizers in pleading for help on behalf of the Freedom Riders.

Meeting with Rev. Sherrod and several other activists in his office, Kennedy said they should stop worrying about the riders, who were being jailed and attacked by white mobs while riding buses across the South. They should focus instead on voter registration, he said.

Rev. Sherrod, who was then 24, erupted in anger, stepping toward Kennedy until another activist coaxed him back to his seat, according to Branch's account. "You," he said, "are a public official, sir. It's not your responsibility before God or under the law to tell us how to honor our constitutional rights. It's your job to protect us when we do." (Kennedy was unswayed by his argument.)

That fall, Rev. Sherrod was dispatched by SNCC to Albany, where he slowly began to win over members of the Black community while teaching workshops on nonviolent resistance. "Albany was the kind of town where everybody knew their place," he told *The Washington Post* decades later. "Black people were afraid to talk to me. Some were even so fearful that if I was walking on one side of the street, they would go on the other side."

Working with fellow SNCC organizer Cordell Reagon, he started to gain their trust. In November, the organizers sent nine college students to conduct a sit-in at the local bus terminal, an action that helped kick off the Albany Movement, as the campaign became known. King arrived in December, and over the coming months they organized song-filled demonstrations, seeking to end legally sanctioned racial discrimination in the city and surrounding counties.

The reaction from the white establishment was swift. Black churches were burned in retaliation, and more than 1,000 African Americans were jailed, many by Albany police officers overseen by Chief Laurie Pritchett. The chief maintained a peaceful image, seeking to avoid violent clashes and thus minimize news coverage of the protests. Privately, he told the reverend, "Sherrod, it's just a matter of mind over matter. I don't mind and you don't matter."

Rev. Sherrod witnessed multiple attacks by law enforcement, and said he was nearly beaten to death in the nearby town of Newton, where he was attacked outside the courthouse by a group of young White men wielding ax handles. He was saved by an older woman who wrapped herself around him, using her body as a shield — a technique that he had taught in his workshops on protest tactics.

As the months went by, the arrests and attacks took a toll on the activists. King announced an end to his demonstrations in August 1962, later saying he made a mistake in protesting segregation as a whole rather than focusing on a single institution like the bus system.

Yet the protests in Albany were later credited with laying the groundwork for subsequent civil rights demonstrations, including in Birmingham, Ala. And to Rev. Sherrod, the movement was far from a defeat: Segregation statutes were taken off the books the next year, and African Americans increasingly gained political power.

"They don't talk about the unity we had. About the strength we had for the first time," he said in a 1985 interview for "Eyes on the Prize," a television documentary about the movement. "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.”

Charles Sherrod wasn't a big name, but his life has a lot to tell us about the civil rights movement

Charles Melvin Sherrod was born in rural Surry, Va., on Jan. 2, 1937. His mother was 14, so and he and his younger siblings grew up with extended family in nearby Petersburg, where his maternal grandmother was a domestic and his mother found work at a tobacco factory, according to historian Ansley L. Quiros's book “God With Us” (2018).

Rev. Sherrod studied sociology at Virginia Union University, a historically Black school in Richmond, and stayed to study theology after graduating in 1958. By then he was also involved in civil rights activism, participating in a “kneel-in” at a Whites-only church and a sit-in at a downtown restaurant.

In 1960, he traveled to Shaw University in North Carolina for a civil rights conference that led to the creation of SNCC. The next year, he joined fellow organizers in protesting segregation in Rock Hill, S.C., where he was arrested and refused bail, serving 30 days of hard labor on a chain gang. It was there, he said in a 2011 interview for the Civil Rights History Project, that he steeled himself for future attacks, deciding that “nothing but death could stop me from the mission that I had.”

Rev. Sherrod took a break from SNCC to study for his master's degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He graduated in 1966 and left the civil rights organization around that same time, dismayed by the more militant stance the group was adopting under new leader Stokely Carmichael, who moved to expel White members.

That same year, he married Shirley Miller, who had turned toward activism as a teenager after her father was fatally shot by a White man who was never indicted. She joined Rev. Sherrod and several others in co-founding the agricultural group New Communities, purchasing a 5,735-acre farm and developing plans to turn it into a haven for displaced Black families to live and work.

The project was modeled after cooperative farming communities in Israel but never took off as planned. Key government funding arrived late or not at all, and New Communities lost the property in 1985, following a severe drought and inability to obtain emergency loans. The farm was foreclosed and sold at auction, but Rev. Sherrod and his wife went on to win compensation as part of a class-action lawsuit against the Agriculture Department, which had discriminated against Black farmers for decades.

With the proceeds, New Communities bought a farm at the site of a former plantation near Albany, which now serves as the home of a nonprofit organization named for Rev. Sherrod.

His wife, Shirley Sherrod, was appointed a state director of rural development in the Agriculture Department in 2009, only to be forced to resign the next year after conservative activist and blogger Andrew Breitbart posted a selectively edited video from a speech she gave, portraying her as a racist when the full video showed she was speaking out against personal prejudice. Obama administration officials apologized to her days later, and she was offered a new position in the department, which she declined.

In addition to his wife, of Albany, survivors include two children, Russia Sherrod of Albany and Kenyatta Sherrod of Marietta, Ga.; three brothers; a sister; and five grandchildren.

With his political career over by the early 1990s, Rev. Sherrod had started leading an anti-drug program and working as a chaplain at the state prison in Homerville. Most of the inmates were Black, which he viewed as part of the nation's long legacy of racial discrimination.

"Racism is still boss in this society," he told The Post in 1996. "Segregation was one part of it. In the old days, if you talked to 10 people, they would diagnose 10 problems plus segregation in our community. Now, segregation is gone but the other 10 problems remain."

Made by History

A vital civil rights activist you never heard of has died

Charles Sherrod wasn't a big name, but his life has a lot to tell us about the civil rights movement

Perspective by Ansley L. Quiros

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Charles M. Sherrod, center, takes part in a brief strategy meeting in a courtroom after the conviction of four out-of-town pickets in Rock Hill, S.C., in 1961. (Afro Newspaper/Gado/Getty Images)

Charles Melvin Sherrod died on Tuesday at the age of 85 in Albany, Ga., a place he went to in 1961 and never left. If you are not from southwest Georgia, his name might not be familiar. But Charles Sherrod is the most important civil rights figure you've never heard of. Recovering his story offers us a chance not only to honor a civil rights hero, but also to better understand the struggle for freedom to which he committed himself for so long.

Sherrod was born on Jan. 2, 1937, in Surry, Va., a place he described as a "speck." He never knew his father and was raised primarily by his grandmother within a broad community of friends and cousins. Even as a young child, Sherrod possessed a deep faith in God and a precocious theological imagination. Probably inspired by the sermons he heard at Mount Olive Baptist Church, he would often play church, preaching to other children and soon sensing a real call to the ministry. "I was preaching when I was about 6 years old," Sherrod told me, adding, "I was born a preacher." He would carry that preacher's zeal and deep moral vision with him for the rest of his life.

Despite the racism and suffocating poverty he experienced in childhood, Sherrod excelled in school. He attended the all-Black Peabody High School where he played sports, acted in plays and served as student body president and school chaplain. Sherrod then attended Virginia Union University where he earned his undergraduate degree in sociology, and then an M.A. in theology, fulfilling his ambition to become a minister.

During this time, Sherrod's Christian commitments first led him to challenge the dehumanization of Jim Crow. He participated in a "kneel-in" at a segregated church in 1954 and later joined a picket in front of Thalheimer's department store. "I saw the [lynching] rope in my mind," he confessed, but he also felt a sense of responsibility since people were "coming to me, asking me for leadership."

Sherrod was a natural leader: smart and calm with a ready, broad smile.

In April 1960, his civil rights activities took Sherrod to a meeting at Shaw University, where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded. SNCC's vision — nonviolence, collective action and the pursuit of a beloved community in which all people are afforded dignity, respect and care — appealed to Sherrod's calling, both to Christianity and racial justice. After the meeting, Sherrod told Ella Baker, the veteran activist who was then the executive secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference who convened the students, that "I'd be willing to be placed anywhere." She sent him to southwest Georgia, a place W.E.B. Du Bois had once called the "Egypt of the Confederacy," where he would spend the next six decades working for freedom.

Sherrod arrived in Albany as SNCC's first field secretary, "full of zeal and empty of almost everything else." But soon, he and the men and women of Albany launched a full-scale assault on Jim Crow unlike anything that had been seen before. The Albany Movement, as it became known, was a dramatic mobilization of people against racial violence and segregation.

In traditional accounts of the civil rights movement, Albany is depicted as a failure, a place where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was outmaneuvered by Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, who unlike so many other Southern lawmen, avoided the spectacle of publicly attacking protesters, and simply locked them up. This is why Sherrod's story is crucial. The Albany Movement was only a failure when considered from the perspective of King. The movement continued after King left, making important, if slow, gains. "Nothing could stop the people," Sherrod said, "certainly not jail or the threat of jail, not [even] death."

Sherrod stayed, organizing in the rural counties, though he did take a “Movement sabbatical” in 1964, heading to Union Theological Seminary in New York. He earned a Master’s of Divinity and then returned to southwest Georgia, bringing White seminarians with him as part of an exchange program called the Student Interracial Ministry. For Sherrod, this was a continuation of his civil rights work. He insisted, always, that the end was not simply political but moral: a society where Black and White Americans, all created in the image of God, could live and work together in unity and peace.

In 1966, this philosophy led to a breach with SNCC, which was moving away from interracialism and Christian nonviolence and toward a more militant stance of Black Power. As Sherrod put it: “I didn’t leave SNCC, SNCC left me.” But he stayed with the work of racial justice — voter registration and community organizing — under the auspices of the Southwest Georgia Freedom Project.

In the late 1960s, Sherrod, along with his wife, Shirley Miller Sherrod, a Baker County native whom he married in 1966, helped found New Communities, a farming collective that was, at one point, the largest Black-owned plot of land in the United States. For decades, New Communities was the fulfillment of a dream for the Sherrods, a place where they could work the land and care for others.

But in the 1980s, when a devastating drought afflicted southwest Georgia, they were repeatedly denied relief and the farm was foreclosed on. In asking for a loan, Sherrod heard from White loan officials the same message he’d heard from segregationists decades earlier when trying to vote: “Over my dead body.”

Though devastated by the loss of New Communities, the Sherrods kept working faithfully in southwest Georgia. Charles Sherrod had been elected to the Albany City Council in 1976, a post he held until 1990, and also served as a prison chaplain, while Shirley worked for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives before being named the U.S. Department of Agriculture Georgia Director of Rural Development in 2009. Shirley was fired after conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart posted selectively edited, misleading video clips from a speech she gave. The White House and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack apologized to Sherrod two days after her firing.

After seeing her name dragged through the mud, Shirley got better news. She heard about a class-action lawsuit, *Pigford v. Glickman II*, alleging systemic racial discrimination toward Black farmers by the USDA. The Sherrods filed a claim and were awarded a settlement for the wrongful dispossession of New Communities. They used the money to purchase a new farm. It was a bittersweet moment.

And one that reveals how long the Black freedom struggle has been. Charles Sherrod embodied this enduring struggle over the long haul, in all of its breadth and character. From marching in the Albany Movement, being beaten and jailed in Americus, Ga., registering rural folks to vote, founding New Communities, to serving in local politics, Sherrod stayed with the cause of freedom and beloved community until his death.

His story reminds us that the work of racial justice is ongoing, that it occurs in rural spaces as well as urban ones and that it can look like political organizing, preaching, farming or just the ordinary miracle of Black love in America.