

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

Shirley Sherrod chose to stay

by Makalé Faber-Cullen

I would pick cotton, and work in the fields, and talk to the sun. I'd say, "You just wait until I get out of high school." ...But as I say to young people, you can never say what you'll never do.

She was born in Baker County, Georgia, in a town called Newton, in 1947. Her parents were Grace and Hosea Miller. Mr. Miller was a deacon at a local Baptist church, and he was a farmer. In 1964, when Shirley was seventeen, a white farmer shot and killed her father following an argument about livestock. An all-white grand jury acquitted the killer. The murder of her father had a profound impact on Shirley's life, and led to her decision to remain in the South to work for social justice. She "had a mind to stay here," as John Egerton would say.

On the night of my father's death, I made that commitment to try to work for black people. But it's while doing that work that I realized our issues are not totally about race in the South. It's about being poor.

Shirley stayed in Georgia for college, majoring in sociology at Albany State and participating in the Civil Rights Movement through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). After graduating, she married Charles Sherrod, a man of the cloth like her father. Together they collaborated to form various land trusts in southwestern Georgia, the most renowned of which was New Communities, Inc., a 6,000-acre collective farm in Lee County.

People ask the question, "Why would black people want to stay in the South?" You know, things were so hard, and they worked the land, but it was what they knew. ... I can see that they knew that owning land and getting an education were two very important things for their survival and for the survival of their children.

At the time of its founding, New Communities was the largest parcel of black-owned land in the country. They were open and experimental. New Communities later became the inspiration for community land trusts across the nation. Their work proved to be a model for farmers focused on true sustainability. And it offered new strategies to protect working lands. New Communities didn't have it easy: Agricultural suppliers sold them low-quality fertilizer; white neighbors opposed them; banks and local governments were obstructionist. And if that wasn't enough, a drought came, and New Communities ended. Shirley continued, unbowed, serving next with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to help black farmers retain their land, then with the Rural Development Leadership Network. In 2009, she became the first African American to direct the USDA's Georgia Office of Rural Development.

My message was not about hate. And it was not about division. It was about trying to get people to see that we can make the changes in our areas if we work together to do that.

Shirley now serves as volunteer director for the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education. It's a SNCC project from back in the day. Shirley's efforts are focused on farm-to-school initiatives. That's not surprising for this mother of two and grandmother of four. One of her current projects is a community kitchen incubator in Baker County, Georgia, doing business in a building that was constructed during the "separate-but-equal" days of her youth.

There's so much more we need to accomplish if we try to work together. So that's why I've put myself out there, to say, "Look at me. You know, I have every reason to hate, but I don't."

Throughout her life, Shirley Sherrod has been a long-distance runner for social justice, which makes her just the sort of rebel the SFA admires. 🍷

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