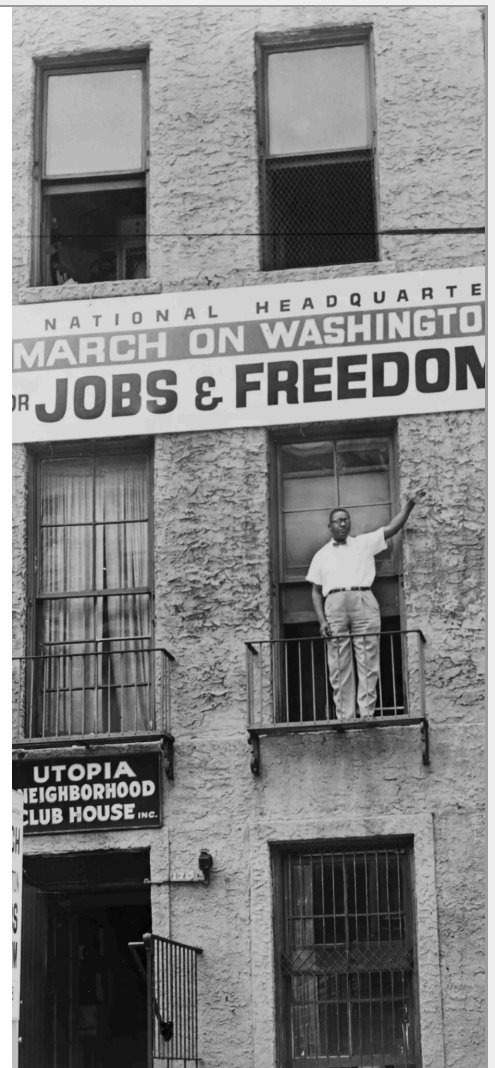




The New York Times

The 1963 March on Washington Changed America. Its Roots Were in Harlem.

Before Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech to 250,000 people, a group of civil rights activists spent a summer planning an event many didn’t want to happen.



In the summer of 1963, a four-story townhouse on West 130th Street became a hive of activity as civil rights activists planned an enormous march on Washington. Library of Congress



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By **John Leland**

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Sixty years ago, in the summer of 1963, a four-story townhouse on West 130th Street in Harlem became the headquarters for what was then the largest civil rights event in American history, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. For one summer the house, a former home for “[delinquent colored girls](#),” was a hive of activity — so frenetic that the receptionist twice hung up on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by mistake.

The march, which took place on Wednesday, Aug. 28, is now best remembered for Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and for the crowd of 250,000 filling the National Mall. But it would not have been possible without the organizing at 170 West 130th Street, led by Bayard Rustin, a brilliant tactician whose homosexuality and former communist ties made him a target both inside and outside the movement.

Under the aegis of the march's patriarch, the labor leader A. Philip Randolph, Mr. Rustin brought together the heads of the five big civil rights organizations — the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, N.A.A.C.P., National Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Together with Mr. Randolph, they became known as the Big Six.

It was a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement, following Dr. King's [tumultuous campaign to force the desegregation of Birmingham](#) and President John F. Kennedy's sending the [National Guard to enable Black students to attend the University of Alabama](#); Medgar Evers, a field secretary for the N.A.A.C.P., was [assassinated](#) in June in Mississippi. As Courtland Cox, one of the march organizers, recalled, "People were sick and tired of being sick and tired, and they wanted to make a statement to the nation."

From a bare-bones office, Mr. Rustin managed the sometimes-fractious leaders, along with labor and religious groups and a crew of young volunteers and paid staff, to create an event that still resonates 60 years later.

Below are the memories of 10 people, now aged 75 to 92, who helped plan and organize the march. Their remarks have been edited for clarity and conciseness.

[NORMAN HILL](#), national program director, Congress of Racial Equality: The march was organized in about six weeks, which was sort of amazing, to generate that many people and have an overall impact.

[ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON](#), now a U.S. congresswoman from Washington, D.C.: There had never been a truly big march in Washington. There was a 1957 march [the [Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom](#)], but that had maybe 25,000 people. That was seen as an indication that maybe we could not attract many people.



Eleanor Holmes Norton, now a member of Congress, helped connect participants to buses so that they could get to Washington for the march. André Chung for The New York Times

RACHELLE HOROWITZ, transportation director and aide to Bayard Rustin: Both Bayard and Mr. Randolph knew that progress had to be made in Washington. You could fight all these local fights, and they were important, but unless we got legislation and the support of the federal government, there was not going to be anything done, really.

VELMA HILL, East Coast field secretary, Congress of Racial Equality: I don't know whether I should talk about this, but there was not harmony among the Big Six. The N.A.A.C.P. was looked upon as only going through the courts. And the Urban League was looked upon by SNCC and CORE as being too beholden to business. And King was referred to as "De Lord," not in a nice way.

DR. JOYCE LADNER, field organizer, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: That started in SNCC. It might have been Stokely [Carmichael] that started it, and it spread.

VELMA HILL: I think that the march would not have happened unless Randolph had called it, because A. Philip Randolph was the most respected leader of the 20th century. Unfortunately, enough is not discussed about him. It's now King's march. We loved King. But he was only one-sixth of the march policy committee.



Bayard Rustin, left, brought together A. Philip Randolph, center, and the leaders of the five big civil rights organizations at the time. Everett Collection, via Alamy

NORMAN HILL: The first day was to be sit-ins in congressional offices. The second day there was to be a massive march on the nation's capital.

COURTLAND COX, program secretary, SNCC: Roy Wilkins [then executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P.] didn't want Bayard to organize the march. And not only Roy Wilkins. But the person who could overcome that, and who people could not go up against, was A. Philip Randolph. And Bayard was his deputy. There's nothing that Roy Wilkins could have said that would've made a difference, because A. Philip Randolph was there.

LYNN KILGORE HENDY, volunteer, now treasurer of [Save Harlem Now!](#): My father [[Thomas Kilgore Jr.](#)] was pastor of Friendship Baptist Church. The church owned the building on 130th Street. My father was very good friends with Martin Luther King, since Dr. King was a child.

When they needed someplace to do the planning and have a central office, they thought that Harlem would be a good place. It would probably be dangerous to put it anywhere in the South. So my father offered the building.

DR. JOYCE LADNER: A call went out from Bayard or Mr. Randolph to each civil rights organization to send two people to staff the march. That's how Courtland Cox and I were appointed by SNCC. We were the worker bees.

SNCC wasn't especially excited about a march.

COURTLAND COX: Most people in SNCC basically thought it was taking time away from the work they were doing in Mississippi, and it was only because I had a relationship with Bayard, and his

convincing me that it was going to be an important march, that we were really much involved in the March on Washington.



“People were sick and tired of being sick and tired, and they wanted to make a statement to the nation,” said Courtland Cox. André Chung for The New York Times

CLARENCE B. JONES, lawyer and speechwriter for Dr. King:

Following the success of the [Birmingham campaign](#) in April and May of 1963, on June 21, then-President Kennedy invited all of the major leaders to come to the White House to consider the next step. He and the attorney general wanted to discourage the leaders of the civil rights organizations from planning any march directly on Congress.

NORMAN HILL: Kennedy thought there was likely to be violence, and that would set back the cause of civil rights. He was geared to introduce civil rights legislation, and he felt that if there was a march with violence, it would jeopardize the passage of the legislation.

RACHELLE HOROWITZ: The Kennedy administration put a lot of pressure on people like Wilkins not to sponsor it. It became a soft pitch: We are really for your marching, but will there be enough toilets? And will there be enough water? Bayard called them the Latrine Letters. That only encouraged Bayard to be more organized and more precise. It had a negative effect.

NORMAN HILL: Randolph said to Kennedy, “If we don’t march, we’ll lose all credibility. No one will follow us.” Randolph and the other leaders, with Bayard being the chief organizer, went back to organizing the march.



President John F. Kennedy expressed concern that marching would lead to violence and hinder the passage of civil rights legislation, the march’s organizers recalled.
Library of Congress

CLARENCE B. JONES: Dr. King traditionally after some major event took his family on vacation. They’d normally go to the Bahamas or Jamaica. But he didn’t do it this time. The thought was that he clearly couldn’t be away. So my wife and I moved out of our brand-new house in Riverdale, in the Bronx, and he moved his family in, and for the next six weeks my home became the S.C.L.C. North.

His older son, Marty Jr., said to me that of all the times they can remember being with their dad, that’s the time they most remember, because they were all together.

JINI KILGORE COCKROFT, worker for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference: I was 15. My job was to type probably thousands of envelopes and stuff them and take them downtown to the central post office, so that we would notify people around the country of the march. I was also distributing leaflets on stoops in Harlem and taking them into stores.

The Nation of Islam members and the Fruit of Islam were not in favor of integration. They favored separatism and self-help. They kind of tailed me when I was putting leaflets on stoops. They’d take them off as soon as I put them on. Their strategy was different from the S.C.L.C.’s. They didn’t think the march would do any good.



Patricia Worthy was a 19-year-old student at Brooklyn College when the march was being planned. André Chung for The New York Times

PATRICIA WORTHY, receptionist at march headquarters, now a law professor at Howard University: We used to get threats all the time. And of course, since I answered the phone, I was the one who got them. People threatening to bomb the place, or telling us there was a bomb in the place, or that they were going to kill us. And I would get rattled, and I would walk into Bayard's office and he'd say three or four things, and I would get up and go back to work. He had a sense of assurance and command. He filled up a space. His eyes sparkled and he had that gray hair, and it was all fuzzy. Just bigger than life.

COURTLAND COX: There was a lot of energy in Harlem. You would walk on 125th Street and the clothing stores' doors would be open, and you would hear the Isley Brothers' "[Twist and Shout](#)"

blasting from the various stores trying to attract people. And if you went to 125th and 7th Avenue or Lenox, people were on ladders talking about their political views or religious beliefs about what was happening in America.



"There was a lot of energy in Harlem," Courtland Cox recalled. Bob Parent/Getty Images

RACHELLE HOROWITZ: I had an apartment in the [ILG \[International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union\] co-ops in Chelsea](#). Joyce Ladner and her sister [Dorie](#) — her sister Dorie was working as a volunteer for the SNCC office — and Eleanor Holmes Norton stayed at my apartment. I had two futon-type couches in the living room where the Ladners slept, and Eleanor slept in my bedroom.

DR. JOYCE LADNER: Dorie was very close to [Bobby Dylan](#). He used to come to our apartment. He hung out at the SNCC office during the day, and he would come home with Dorie. We worked long hours, sometimes till 11 o'clock at night, and we were so tired when we got home. All I wanted was for Bobby Dylan to get off the sofa that I had to sleep on and go home, go anywhere.

He was serenading. He would write songs on the typewriter at the SNCC office during the day. He gave Dorie one. He wrote three songs that were inspired by her. One — "[Outlaw Blues](#)" — the last stanza is very much dedicated to Dorie. He'd be singing, and I'm

just sitting there exhausted, wishing this boy would go home. Eventually he'd get up and leave, and Dorie and I would open up the sofa to sleep on.



"It was the first time that the movement became national," said Dr. Joyce Ladner. "The march made racism America's problem." André Chung for The New York Times

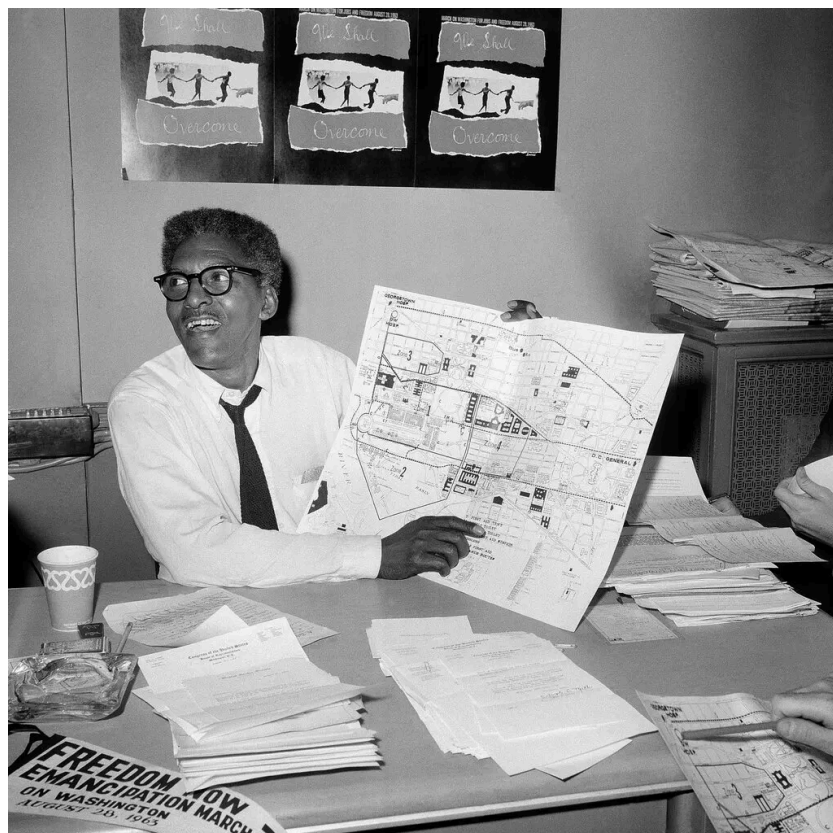
CLARENCE B. JONES: There was a meeting as to the order of the speakers, and some people didn't want Martin King to be the last speaker. Finally, I had to say, "Excuse me, have you heard Dr. King speak? Do you really want to follow him? Do any of you want to follow him?" I had to convince these ego-driven preachers and other people to let Dr. King be the last speaker. It was all out of ego.

NORMAN HILL: Early in the organizing of the march, [Strom Thurmond](#) [the segregationist Republican senator from South Carolina] spoke on the floor of the United States Senate, attacking

Bayard as a communist, pervert and draft dodger. And Randolph called a press conference in response and indicated that Bayard would continue as the chief organizer and conferred unequivocal confidence in Bayard.

ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON: Our jobs were really quite mundane. One of my jobs was to link people to buses so that they could get to Washington. That's the kind of legwork that was needed.

PATRICIA WORTHY: It was a busy place, whoa! High energy, everybody committed, everybody working late hours. I was the skinniest child when I started, and I was skinnier when I left. Wasn't much eating.



Bayard Rustin with a map showing the path of the March on Washington. Associated Press

VELMA HILL: Bayard would sing songs and we would work around the clock. He was an Elizabethan tenor.

LYNN KILGORE HENDY: He had that wonderful British accent. I have no idea where that came from, but he did have one. And I just loved to listen to him talk.

NORMAN HILL: Randolph had a deep, baritone voice, with a Shakespearean tone. He projected great dignity and a clear articulation.



Norman Hill noted that none of the march's main speakers were women. "It was male chauvinism," Velma Hill added. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

VELMA HILL: And he was a gentleman. I would get in the car with him and he would help me get into the car. And a lot of times he would say at a meeting on Sunday afternoon or evening, "I have to go home to read Shakespeare to my wife." And I remember telling Norm, "Norm, if you decide to read Shakespeare to me, I will never leave you."

COURTLAND COX: A big thing was making sure there were enough monitors and marshals and so forth to make sure paper was picked up, people were marching in line, everybody knew what the disciplines were.

RACHELLE HOROWITZ: There was an organization of Black policemen in New York called the [Guardians](#). Bayard got them to volunteer to be the internal monitors, and he actually trained them

in nonviolent crowd control, which meant encircling a crowd, not doing the policeman thing. Every day in the courtyard of the building, there would be groups of 20 policemen out there, and Bayard would be doing nonviolence training with them.



"You could fight all these local fights, and they were important," said Rachelle Horowitz, "but unless we got legislation and the support of the federal government, there was not going to be anything done, really." André Chung for The New York Times

CLARENCE B. JONES: The pied piper of the civil rights movement at that time was Harry Belafonte. He had an understanding that no matter how important an event you put on, America is a celebrity-oriented country. And he convinced Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph and Dr. King. He said, you want to make sure you get great publicity coverage, we've got to bring as many stars there as possible. So he was put in charge of the celebrity delegation.

RACHELLE HOROWITZ: Harry Belafonte gets a lot of credit for bringing the movie stars, and he deserves it. But [Ossie Davis](#) came to the office all the time, came to staff meetings, was on the phone negotiating. He was just like the most wonderful staff person.

NORMAN HILL: None of the major speakers at the march were women.

VELMA HILL: It was male chauvinism.

RACHELLE HOROWITZ: Bayard was upset by it, but he didn't know how to get around it. He proposed a compromise, which was that [Daisy Bates](#), who had led the effort to integrate the schools in Little Rock, would speak and honor three or four other women who were active in the movement. There were women who were very disaffected — [Pauli Murray](#), [Ella Baker](#).



Daisy Bates, known for her work integrating schools in Little Rock, Ark., spoke at the march. Associated Press

DR. JOYCE LADNER: There was not a spotlight in the country focused on parity for women. And race was such a dominant, overbearing issue in my life that being a woman didn't even factor into it. I lived during two lynchings in Mississippi. The last one in 1959 occurred 15 miles from where I lived. So there was little room for me to delineate women out of that larger group of oppression.

RACHELLE HOROWITZ: In retrospect, obviously they should have had [Dorothy Height](#) [president of the National Council of Negro Women] or someone speak.

DR. JOYCE LADNER: Some days before the march, John Lewis [then chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] showed his speech to us. I remember looking at it. Bayard and Rachelle looked at it. It was a communal statement; it

was not John's alone. So when the word got out that the White House and the Archbishop of Washington [[Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle](#)] wanted him to change it, we said, Oh, hell no.

NORMAN HILL: The archbishop threatened to pull out of the march unless the speech was modified. A. Philip Randolph appealed to John, saying, "Please don't ruin this event and this day for an old man like myself." John said later, how could he refuse Randolph?

VELMA HILL: We wanted to have the biggest showing, the most integrated showing. We wanted to pass the Voting Rights bill. I did not think the march would be that big.



Some people didn't want Martin Luther King Jr. to be the last speaker, Clarence B. Jones remembered. "Finally, I had to say, 'Excuse me, have you heard Dr. King speak? Do you really want to follow him?'" Marissa Leshnov for The New York Times

CLARENCE B. JONES: I thought, maybe we could get 100,000 people. Possibly a large crowd, but I didn't think 250,000. Now as I look back, if we had had cellphones and laptops, there would have been five million people there.

PATRICIA WORTHY: We came down on a bus, and we sang the whole way down. "We Shall Overcome" — we must've sang that 4,000 times. We got there at maybe 5 in the morning, and I said to Mr. Rustin, "I think I've talked to everyone as far as the eye can see."

The buses were starting to come, and he came over and he said, "Wow, they're really going to show up." That was the first time I realized that he really wasn't sure that the people were coming, either. Prior to that, he'd given us the impression that he was sure this was going to be a success.

I went around Mr. Lincoln and I sat down and fell asleep, and I missed the entire march. I missed Dr. King's speech. I missed everything.

NORMAN HILL: We thought that the march would bring national attention to the demands of the civil rights movement. The march policy committee developed 10 demands. A number of them were met by the civil rights legislation of '64 and '65. The economic demands are still relevant today.

DR. JOYCE LADNER: It was the first time that the movement became national. Before the march, everything was confined to the South or to people picketing stores in support of the South. The march made racism America's problem, and not just what's happening down South among those rednecks. It became recognized as a national problem.

VELMA HILL: The Big Six never worked together that way again. Sometimes I really long for the days of the march. In a funny way I wish I were 20 again. But you know, there are some young people out here, and I think Norman and I can help them. I think we can teach them. I think the coalition can come together again.



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John Leland, a Metro reporter, joined The Times in 2000. His most recent book is “Happiness Is a Choice You Make: Lessons From a Year Among the Oldest Old,” based on a Times series. [More about John Leland](#)

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