



## Forgotten civil rights pioneers of “Bloody Lowndes” remembered

By Jamaal Bell, media relations manager, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

How did a group of African American sharecroppers and domestic workers register more than 80 percent of the African American population to vote in the “violent buckle” of Alabama’s Black Belt, “Bloody” Lowndes County, between 1965 and 1967? What’s more astounding is how did they develop their own independent political party that would totally reshape politics nationally?

Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, answered those questions last Wednesday when he spoke about his book, “Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt,” at the King Arts Center downtown. More than 110 community leaders, researchers, educators and residents were glued to their seats at the King Arts Center as he discussed his journey researching the history of the freedom rights movement in Lowndes County.

Jeffries shared the main points of his book “Bloody Lowndes.” Early in the research, he said, he looked in archives to find any information on protests, marches and petitions before 1965. He discovered that written records about civil rights protests were scarce. He described Lowndes County – historically a stronghold of white supremacy – as a protest vacuum. He said that Lowndes County’s white minority inflicted racial terrorism by killing, using intimidation and by maintaining control of the political landscape. “There were letters written to the NAACP in the 30s, 40s and 50s asking for help,” Jeffries said.

The audience was in awe as Jeffries told the story of a sharecroppers’ strike that was held in 1935 to improve the \$1 a day wage. Half a dozen people were confirmed killed, another half dozen possibly killed, and scores beaten. “The reason why there was an absence of protest in Lowndes County is because people will die,” Jeffries said. Jeffries decided the only way he was going to obtain the full story is to go to Lowndes County. He said he had to smell the air, interview the townspeople and visit the places where defining events took place, such as the murder of Jonathan Daniels, a Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist, who was shot to death by a white store-owner Tom Coleman.

Early in 1966, SNCC led by Stokely Carmichael, began helping African Americans in rural Lowndes County. Together they formed the first all-black, independent political party called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO).

Jeffries said they initially protested the barriers to black enfranchisement that had for decades kept every single African American of voting age off the county’s registration books even after the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

According to Jeffries, the LCFO also fought for education, desegregating schools and federal loans. He said “Blood Lowndes” discusses details of how the white minority resisted by chasing SNCC and LCFO members out of town, conducting shootings and even killings. Jeffries said LCFO knew that the only way they could protest and live is if they are armed and able to defend themselves.

He shared how the LCFO came up with their black panther ballot symbol, which later influenced Oakland, CA activists Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton who started the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and adopted the

LCFO ballot symbol. Jeffries explains that LCFO became a blueprint for other Black Power and grassroots black activists nationwide to fight for civil and human rights in new and more radical ways.

Jeffries closed by saying “Bloody Lowndes” gives details how the Lowndes County freedom rights movement reshaped politics as we know it today. LCFO removed exclusivity and the prerequisites that one has to be wealthy or white or have political family members in order to hold political office.

Barbara Nicholson, executive director of the King Arts Complex, thanked Jeffries for his dedication in finding the truth. “I am thankful that Dr. Jeffries was committed to digging for that history, or it would have been lost.” With a standing ovation, the audience concurred.