



Arc of Justice

The Rise, Fall and Rebirth
of a Beloved Community

VIEWERS GUIDE

This viewers guide is designed to provide discussion leaders with additional information about *Arc of Justice* to help deepen the viewing experience. It includes:

- a film synopsis
- tips for planning a successful screening
- discussion questions
- short biographies of the main characters
- a chronology of events related to the history of New Communities.

Synopsis

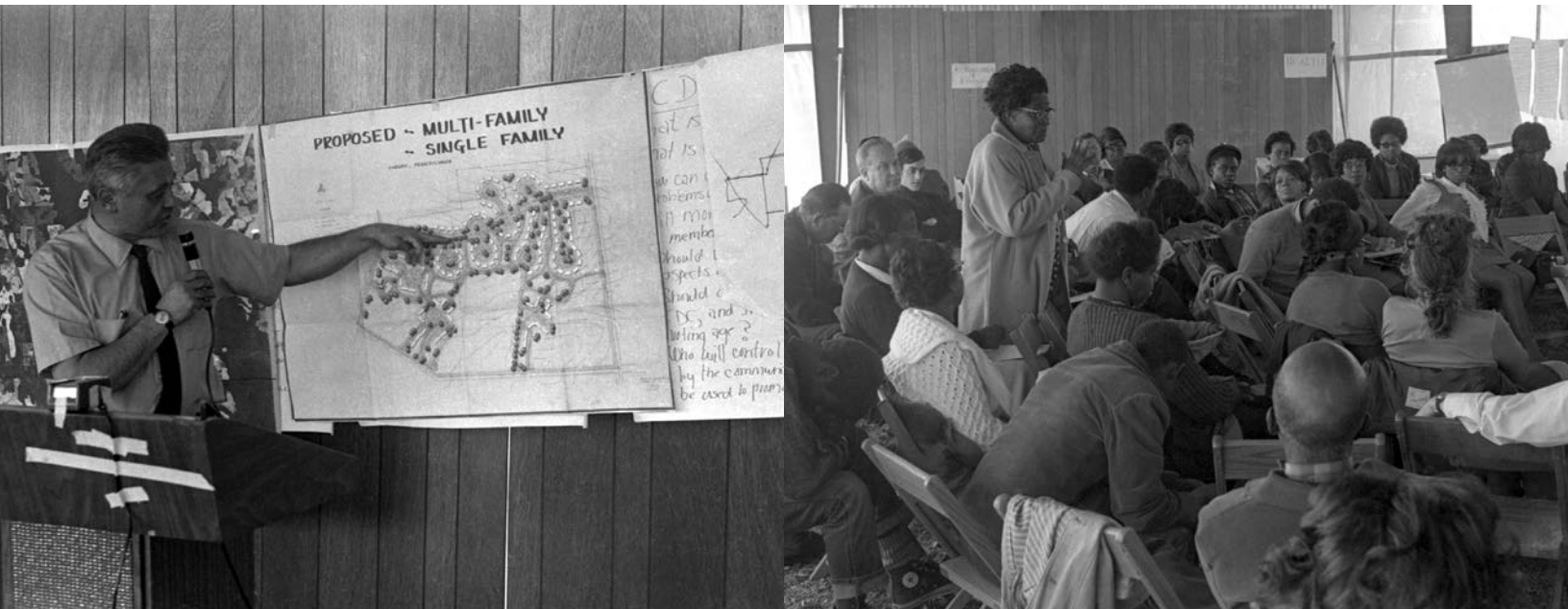
Arc of Justice is a saga of courage and resilience spanning five decades. It takes its title from a favorite saying of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Called upon to offer solace and encouragement to people weary of the slow pace of social progress, he would often quote from a sermon delivered by an Abolitionist preacher a dozen years before the Civil War: **“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”**

The film begins in the 1960s as African American protestors fill the streets and jails in Albany, Georgia, opposing racial discrimination and fighting for the right to vote. Men and women who participate in this political struggle later turn their energies to expanding economic opportunity and decent housing for people long denied of both. Doing so, they pioneer a new model of grassroots development and empowerment that has now spread across the globe: the community land trust (CLT).

In 1969, these civil rights activists establish New Communities Inc. (NCI) and the next year purchase nearly 6000 acres of land near Albany, the largest tract of land owned by African Americans at the time. But their plan for creating new enterprises and building hundreds of homes on community-owned land is blocked by Georgia's segregationist Governor, Lester Maddox. They hold onto the land by intensively farming it, raising livestock and a variety of crops. The farm thrives, despite racist attacks and the refusal of federal agencies to provide grants and loans. But in 1985, after three years of punishing drought, the land is lost to foreclosure.

New Communities is reborn when a class action lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Agriculture (*Pigford v. Glickman*), filed in federal court by 400 African American farmers, results in the largest civil rights settlement in U.S. history. With its share of the payout, NCI acquires a new piece of land in 2011, a 1,600-acre plantation once owned by the richest man in Georgia and one of the state's largest slaveholders.

The story of New Communities is still unfolding, as pecan trees are planted, irrigation pipes are installed, walking trails are cut through forests, and an antebellum mansion, cottages, and grounds are made available for retreats and special events. Meanwhile, hundreds of community land trusts across the United States and around the world have been fueled by the inspiration and activism of New Communities and many more are in development. The civil rights activists of the 1960s who fought to make this innovative model of community-led development on community-owned land a reality did not succeed in everything they hoped to do, but they persevered. They never gave up in the face of discrimination and devastating loss. That's a timeless lesson for all who are fighting today to bend the arc of development in their own communities a bit closer toward justice.



PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL SCREENING

Arc of Justice introduces a little-known chapter in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, when the struggle for political rights gave rise to a new strategy for securing the economic rights and economic independence of African Americans in the South. It is an inspirational reminder to the current generation of activists that they stand upon the shoulders of remarkable individuals who grappled courageously and creatively in their own time with many of the same challenges that low-income people and communities of color confront today.

Inspiration was not the producers' only purpose in making *Arc of Justice*, however. The film's running time was intentionally limited to 22 minutes to make it easier to use in community organizing, practitioner trainings, and classroom settings. *Arc of Justice* was designed to **stimulate discussion** about political and economic conditions that exist today and to **stimulate action** aimed at improving those conditions. It was also intended to **spark interest** in community land trusts, the model of community-led development on community-owned land that was championed by the people who created New Communities Inc.

Planning the event. It is best if you can view the film yourself before screening it and review the questions, short biographies of the main characters and historical chronology that follow this section of the Viewers Guide. Think about how you would like to structure a discussion and which questions are most relevant to your audience.

You may want to bring in someone who can offer commentary on the film and reflect on how the issues it raises might be relevant to your community. The film offers a rich opportunity for a presentation and facilitated discussion about community land trusts, racial justice issues, black land loss, affordable housing and economic development, and a host of other topics. Regardless of the way the time after a screening is structured, viewers will have a more meaningful experience if they are provided an opportunity to actively discuss what they've just seen.

Building an audience. *Arc of Justice* is the story of an organization considered to be the first community land trust, the inspiration for all the CLTs that followed. As such, the film will be used to organize and inform people about the CLT model of cooperative land ownership and permanently affordable housing. However, potential audiences extend well beyond people working with community land trusts and could include:

- Individuals with an interest in the history and legacy of the American Civil Rights Movement;
- Individuals and organizations advocating for voting rights and fighting against voter suppression;
- Individuals and organizations working for racial justice, equitable development, and political empowerment in communities of color;
- Individuals and organizations concerned about the loss of lands and homes by low-income and moderate-income people, due to redlining, predatory lending, or the gentrification of low-income neighborhoods;
- Nonprofit organizations and public officials involved in helping low-income people to find affordable housing or to start enterprises;
- Individuals and organizations involved with the preservation of farmland or the promotion of urban agriculture and food security;
- Individuals and organizations engaged in the conservation and stewardship of open space, natural areas, and wilderness;
- Members of producer cooperatives or consumer cooperatives;
- Churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious institutions that have a social justice ministry.

Consider any and all of these groups when advertising *Arc of Justice* and when sending invitations to view and/or to co-host a screening of the film.

On the *Arc of Justice* website there is a [downloadable flyer](#) that can be customized with screening information to advertise the event. Postcards are also available on request that have space to include stickers with screening information.

Introducing the film. Encourage people to stick around after the screening to discuss what they've seen and to explore connections between issues raised in *Arc of Justice* and what is happening today in your local communities.

Remind viewers that *Arc of Justice* is a small slice of a much larger and longer history of southwest Georgia. The period encompassed by the film stretches from 1961 to the present day. This is a 55-year span of time that is traversed in only 22 minutes. Obviously, a lot was left out.

For anyone interested in learning more about the organizations, people, and historical events portrayed in the film, you can find additional historical background on the film's website, www.arcofjusticefilm.com/resources. Other historical materials documenting the origins and evolution of the community land trust can be found at *Roots & Branches*, www.cltroots.org.

POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION

There are many questions that might be asked to stimulate discussion immediately after the film is shown. There are many different themes that might be explored. You should tailor the conversation to fit issues and events in your own community. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Questions to Elicit General Reactions to the Film

1. What is one word that captures your overall reaction to the film?
2. What were some of your reactions, thoughts, or feelings while watching the film?
3. What moments in the film affected you the most? Why?
4. Whose story did you find the most compelling? Why?
5. Did you identify with any of the characters in any way?
6. What questions or concerns did the film raise for you, personally and professionally?
7. What lessons or insights do you take away from New Communities' experience that might lead you to think about issues in your own community in a new way?

Questions to Spur Discussion of the Film's Key Themes

Black Land Loss

- ❖ In 1985, New Communities lost their land to foreclosure. What were the conditions, circumstances, and choices that brought NCI to this point? What lessons can we learn from their experience?
- ❖ NCI was hardly alone in losing its land. Many other African American farmers in Georgia and elsewhere experienced similar heartbreak over the course of 60 years. In 1920, there were 926,000 black farmers in the United States. They owned over 16 million acres of land. By 1997, fewer than 20,000 of the nation's farmers were black, and they owned only 2 million acres of land. Although the causes of this decline were only touched on in the film, based on your own knowledge or experience, what do you think contributed to this dramatic decline in black-owned farmland?
- ❖ During the Great Recession of 2007-2009 and the years immediately after, the mortgage meltdown in the United States caused nearly six million foreclosures. Communities of color were hit the hardest. What are the similarities—and differences—between the causes and consequences of the foreclosure experienced by NCI and the foreclosures experienced more recently by African American and Latino homeowners during the Great Recession?



The Albany Movement—From Voter Registration to Community Empowerment

- ❖ Mtamanika Youngblood says in the film, “The idea behind New Communities was to take civil rights one step further into economic independence and economic rights, using agriculture as an economic base.” How does this resonate with what is occurring in your own community? How do civil rights and economic rights intersect in community organizing work today?
- ❖ The master plan that was developed for the Featherfield Farm envisioned building hundreds of single-family and multi-family homes on land that was owned by New Communities Inc. This community-owned land was going to be leased to the owners of the housing but never sold to them. Why do you think it was important to the civil rights leaders who founded NCI for there to be community ownership of the land, instead of dividing it up and selling it off as individual parcels?
- ❖ Jim Crow laws in the southern U.S. were designed not only to ensure separation of races, but to suppress political participation and political power of African Americans. Some have called the current wave of new election laws enacted by a number of states—e.g., purging voter lists, closing polling stations, disenfranchising ex-offenders, and raising voter ID requirements—the “new Jim Crow.” Is this an issue in your community? What lessons can you glean from the New Communities story and what are the similarities—and differences—between voter suppression then and now?

New Communities, Past and Present

- ❖ One of the earliest and best-known city planners in the United States, Daniel Burnham, once advised his colleagues to “make no little plans.” Or, as we might say today, “go big or go home.” NCI certainly followed such advice in acquiring nearly 6000 acres of land and planning for the development of four villages containing 800 single-family and multi-family homes. What were some of the advantages—and disadvantages—of NCI’s bold decision to “make no little plans”?
- ❖ New Communities “failed” the first time around, losing the Featherfield Farm. But out of the seed that was planted there in 1970, hundreds of community land trusts have grown all around the world. How does NCI’s story affect your thinking about “success” and “failure” in the realm of community organizing and community development?
- ❖ What lessons are you taking away from the story of New Communities and from the people you’ve met through *Arc of Justice* that might be of help in the work you are doing or plan to do in your own community?



MAIN CHARACTERS



Shirley Sherrod met a civil rights activist named Charles Sherrod in 1965. They married a year later. Over the next 20 years, they worked side by side, leading the Southwest Georgia Project and New Communities Inc. After the loss of NCI's land in 1985, Shirley accepted a job with the Land Assistance Fund of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, helping farmers in financial distress, both black and white. She was appointed director of Rural Development for Georgia in 2009, but forced to resign when video of a speech she had given was selectively edited by a right-wing blogger, Andrew Breitbart, to make her sound like a racist. When the truth came to light, she was offered another job at USDA, but declined. She currently serves as executive director of the Southwest Georgia Project.



Rev. Charles Sherrod arrived in Albany GA in 1961 at the age of 23 to open a field office for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Under the banner of the Southwest Georgia Project, he and other SNCC organizers registered voters and staged repeated protests against segregation. He left SNCC in 1966 and entered Union Theological Seminary. Soon after his return to Albany, he traveled to Israel with Slater King and six others to learn about agricultural cooperatives on leased land. He helped to organize New Communities Inc. and assumed the presidency in 1969, leading that organization for 16 years. He was elected to Albany's City Commission in 1976, serving until 1990. He has led NCI at Cypress Pond since the plantation's purchase in 2011.



Rep. John Lewis was born into a family of Alabama sharecroppers in 1940. While attending Fisk University, he participated in sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in Nashville. He joined SNCC in 1961 and was elected chairman two years later, a post he held until 1966. He was a leader of the Freedom Rides, helped to plan the 1963 March on Washington, and was at the head of 525 marchers when they were assaulted in Selma by state troopers on "Bloody Sunday." In 1968, he participated in a meeting of half-a-dozen civil rights groups that discussed the feasibility of creating a "land trust program" in the South. He was elected to the Atlanta City Council in 1981 and to the U.S. Congress in 1986, where he continues to serve.



Mtamanika Youngblood moved to Albany, GA after graduating from NYU in 1971. She went to work at New Communities Inc. selling the farm's produce and livestock. After moving to Atlanta, she became director of the Historic District Development Corporation, revitalizing the area around "Sweet Auburn" Avenue, the childhood home of Martin Luther King, Jr. She later founded the Center for Working Families, Inc. and was Director of Neighborhood Transformation for the Atlanta Civic Site. In 2009, she helped to convene a series of meetings that led to creation of the Atlanta Land Trust Collaborative, a city-wide nonprofit aimed at preventing displacement along the Atlanta BeltLine.

CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS RELATED TO THE STORY OF NEW COMMUNITIES

1961 Charles Sherrod moves to Albany GA at the age of 23, opening the first field office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). ♣ The Albany Movement is officially launched on December 17th. William G. Anderson, a local physician, is elected president. Slater King is elected vice president.

1962 Slater King becomes president of the Albany Movement. ♣ As marches and demonstrations are held in Albany, hundreds of protestors are arrested, along with Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy who have been invited to town. ♣ Attorney C.B. King, Slater King's brother, is assaulted by a county sheriff while visiting one of his clients. A photo of the bloodied, bandaged attorney is distributed worldwide.



1963 Nine of the Albany Movement's leaders, including Slater King, are arrested and charged with conspiring to obstruct justice. ♣ John Lewis is elected chairman of SNCC.

1964 A network of civil rights groups that includes CORE and SNCC launches a massive effort to register black voters in the South, a campaign that becomes known as Freedom Summer.

1965 A 54-mile march organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and SNCC in support of voting rights is assaulted by state police in Selma Alabama on "Bloody Sunday." ♣ Shirley Miller's father is murdered in Baker County GA by a white man who is never prosecuted. She attends her first civil rights meeting a few months later, organized and led by Charles Sherrod.

1966 Stokely Carmichael is elected chairman of SNCC when John Lewis steps down. Under Carmichael's leadership, SNCC embraces a philosophy of Black Power. ♣ Charles Sherrod and Shirley Miller are married.



1967 Disagreeing with Stokely Carmichael's policy of expelling white members from SNCC, Charles Sherrod resigns and enrolls at the Union Theological Seminary. ♣ The International Independence Institute, precursor to the Institute for Community Economics, is founded in Exeter, NH. Bob Swann is hired as one of two "field directors." ♣ The Federation of Southern Cooperatives is established.

1968 Slater King, Marion King, and Charles Sherrod travel to Israel in June to study cooperative agricultural settlements established on leased land. They are joined by Fay Bennett and Leonard Smith from the National Sharecroppers Fund, Bob Swann from the International Independence Institute, Lewis Black from the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association, and Albert Turner, Alabama field director for the SCLC. ♣ Returning to the U.S., they convene a meeting of half-a-dozen civil rights organizations to present their findings. ♣ A committee is formed to create a framework for developing new settlements for African American families in the South, modeled on the moshav communities of Israel and Gramdan villages of India.

1969 New Communities Inc. (NCI) is incorporated. Its officers are Slater King, Fay Bennett, Leonard Smith, and Father Albert J. McKnight, director of the Southern Cooperative Development Fund. ♣ Slater King is killed in an automobile accident at the age of 42. Charles Sherrod is elected NCI's new president.

1970 New Communities Inc. purchases 5,735 acres of land near Leesburg



GA, the largest tract of land owned by African Americans in the U.S. ♣ Gov. Lester Maddox blocks federal funds committed to NCI by the Office of Economic Opportunity.

1971 Mtamanika Youngblood moves to southwest Georgia after graduating from NYU.

1972 International Independence Institute publishes *The Community Land Trust: A Guide to a New Model for Land Tenure in America*, drawing heavily on the example of New Communities Inc.

1976 Charles Sherrod is elected to the Albany City Commission, serving until 1990.

1982 Institute for Community Economics publishes *The Community Land Trust Handbook*, interviewing Charles Sherrod and praising NCI as “the first American institution to be shaped by the CLT concept.”

1985 New Communities Inc. loses its land and buildings to foreclosure. ♣ Shirley Sherrod accepts a job with the Land Assistance Fund of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives.

1986 John Lewis is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

1997 Timothy Pigford and 400 other African American farmers file a class action lawsuit against the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Dan Glickman, alleging discrimination by county offices of USDA's Farmers Home Administration (FmHA).

1999 A consent decree in the lawsuit of *Pigford v. Glickman* opens the floodgates for black farmers to win the largest civil rights settlement in U.S. history. ♣ NCI files a *Pigford II* claim against FmHA.

2009 New Communities Inc. is awarded a *Pigford II* settlement of \$12 million. ♣ Shirley Sherrod is named by the White House as the new director of Rural Development in Georgia.

2010 Shirley Sherrod is forced to resign from her position at Rural Development because a speech of hers is selectively edited by a right-wing blogger, Andrew Breitbart, and widely publicized by FOX News.

2011 Cypress Pond Plantation is purchased by New Communities Inc.—1638 acres, 3 ponds, 5 cottages, and a 7334 sq. ft. mansion built in 1851. ♣ Shirley Sherrod is inducted into the Cooperative Hall of Fame.

2015 Charles and Shirley Sherrod receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Federation of Southern Cooperatives.

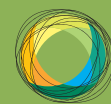
2016 The Southwest Georgia Project and NCI develop plans for a regional food hub.

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PRODUCTIONS

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