

## Great leap forward

# SC Progressive Network re-organizes for 2022 and beyond

*Message from Cecil Cahoon and Dr. Bernie Gallman, SC Progressive Network interim directors*

Twice in the life of South Carolina's only home-grown, statewide coalition of activists has that network undergone an intentional transformation to build upon previous successes and lay groundwork for the future. The first was in 1996, when the 18-year-old Grass Roots Organizing Workshop (GROW) reconfigured to become the South Carolina Progressive Network.

The second is happening now, and we invite you to be part of it. Our members recently took the important step of ratifying bylaws changes for the Network — a 501-c(4) corporation of our individual members — and for the South Carolina Progressive Network Education Fund, a 501-c(3) tax-deductible, nonpartisan entity that since 1978 has served as GROW's and the Network's corporate parent under state and federal laws.

Among the large and small changes marked by this second evolution will be the succession of **Brett Bursey**, who has served as executive director of GROW and the Network for 43 years, and restructuring the Network's organization and boards of directors. We also are seeking to replace **Becci Robbins**, communications director since the Network's inception.

Built into the bylaw changes for both boards is a two-year transitional period. During that time, interim directors chosen



*Founding Network conference at Penn Center, May 1996.*

by executive committee members, will help develop and adopt short-range and long-range plans for the Fund and the Network designed to enhance the Network's

membership and financial stability, while expanding its influence in nurturing new activists and affecting public policy. The transitional boards will also oversee the elections of new directors, with an ongoing commitment to reflect the state's diversity.

Re-imagining the Network's future has been a work in progress for several years. The pandemic gave us time to reflect and refine what we've been discussing internally for a long time. We have also been recruiting new leadership to help with the transition and beyond.

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## Modjeska Simkins School to start 7th session

Orientation for the 2022 session of the **Modjeska Simkins School for Human Rights** will be held Feb. 20, with classes meeting Monday nights through June 27 on Zoom. Application deadline is Feb. 17.

**Dr. Robert Greene II** will again serve as lead instructor, as he's done since 2019. "The school has reminded me, time and again, why I decided to become a historian in the first place," he said. "Talking to others who share my love of history and concern about community has been enriching."

Dr. Greene is a rising star, and we are grateful that he is sharing his time and talent with us. He teaches history at Claffin University in Orangeburg, and has published

more than 350 articles. Most recently, he co-edited the just-published book *Invisible No More* documenting the experiences of African Americans at USC over its 218-year history.

*See Modjeska School on page 3*



*Proud graduates of the 2021 session.*

# Latest redistricting process makes our case that the system is rigged. We can't wait 10 years to fix it

In 2018, after watching the majority party gerrymander political districts for 30 years, guaranteeing its continued total control of state government, we came up with a plan that doesn't rely on the legislature or the courts to unrig it.

It's a grassroots ground game that can use county and municipal statutes that let citizens use legal petitions to write laws — such as one to allow citizens rather than politicians to draw political districts.

We launched our Fair Maps campaign on the first day of the legislature in 2020. We knew it wouldn't be easy or quick, but we underestimated the task, didn't reckon



on a pandemic, and the campaign was derailed. Let's not wait until 2030 to begin working on a winnable plan.

We have posted at FairMapsSC.com legislative and congressional district maps, using real numbers, that show how competitive seats could change the balance of political power in South Carolina.

This is the decade for us to focus on local organizing and make some changes at that level that can inspire bigger wins. This is a long game. But we have truth on our side, along with growing public awareness that the current system is unjust and unsustainable.

See [FairMapsSC.com](https://FairMapsSC.com) for details.

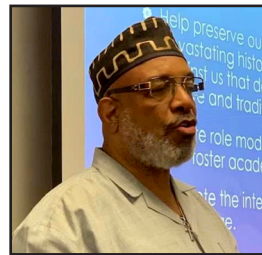
Email [fairmaps@fairmapssc.com](mailto:fairmaps@fairmapssc.com) to join the campaign

## Stay connected

Find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube

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These advisors have been part of the **Modjeska Simkins School for Human Rights**, as students and presenters, so they are well aware of the Network's history



Dr. Bernie Gallman

and purpose, and are committed to creating a solid framework to sustain it. Since 2015, the School has offered a "people's history" of South Carolina and training in effective citizen action. Last year, the first session held entirely online, we graduated 31 students, bringing the number of alumni to 157. Maintaining and expanding the reach of the School will continue to be one of the Fund's keystone projects, alongside re-packaging our public policy research work as the **South Carolina Progressive Policy Institute**.

Under Bursley's leadership, GROW was founded by veterans of the human rights, environmental and anti-war movements in 1975. In 1996, he and Robbins invited GROW members and representatives of 28 other organizations to Penn Center for a conference that founded the Network. There, they adopted a mission to build a progressive movement that connects the myriad issues affecting working people to a common problem: the lack of power to make and sustain change.

Over more than four decades, GROW and the Network have carried the challenge left by **Modjeska Simkins** to "make a way out of no way." On a shoestring budget but with an army of volunteers,

the Network has mobilized campaigns to educate, agitate, legislate, litigate, and successfully organize around a host of social and economic issues in South Carolina.

The Network's work hasn't gone unnoticed. Last fall, we received two significant and unsolicited donations: a one-time \$50,000 donation from the **State Infrastructure Fund**, and an anonymous, recurring gift of \$50,000 from a family foundation committed to returning resources to the state and the people who helped generate their wealth. We are grateful for these perfectly timed gifts.

This funding, in addition to the donations and dues paid by Network members and allies, will help us expand our reach and broaden our shared vision for years to



Cecil Cahoon

come. We hope this inspires you to help tell the Network's story, sing our collective praises, and collaborate to make and sustain

change that will serve us all for another generation.

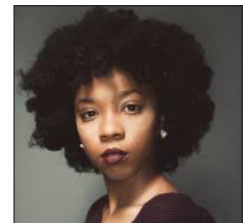
*Cecil Cahoon has served 17 years as a Southern regional organizer for the National Education Association.*

*Dr. Bernie Gallman is a physician at Columbia's VA Hospital. For 40 years, he has organized seminars and study groups on Afrikan history.*

*Gallman and Cahoon are serving as the first of five interim c3 board members for the transition period.*

## Meet our first fellow: Amber Pelham

Lancaster, SC, native **Amber Pelham** graduated last year from the Modjeska Simkins School. She earned a BA in history at Hampton University, and a masters in public history from NYU in 2020. She is research fellow at the NC African Heritage Commission, and served in 2019 as a digital projects intern for the American Social History Project of CUNY.



Pelham will conduct research and help organize the Network's and the Modjeska School's online archives.

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**Dr. Bernie Gallman**, who took the class two years in a row, said, “As the lies and the assault on truth continue, the Modjeska School is a breath of fresh air. It provides a correction of the lies that have been told in schools for generations, as well as a firewall against the lies being legislated today. Everyone should take this course.”

Other students offered comments about the school and how it strengthened their understanding of South Carolina and their capacity as advocates, citizens, and parents.

**James Deweese**, a retired pharmacist who graduated last year and has signed up for the 2022 session, said, “The Modjeska School made me a better man.”

His classmate **Michael Moton** will also repeat the course this spring. “My experience with the Modjeska School was both frustrating and exciting. Frustrating to know that we have been fighting for basic rights for too long, but exciting to know that people are there to guide the old and new alike.”

2017 graduate **Sara Williams** said, “The Modjeska School taught me things I never would have known but need to know to be a whole human. I am so glad to know about SC’s powerful women from the Grimke sisters to Harriet Hancock to Modjeska herself.”

**Debbie Billings**, who completed the course last year, said, “Thank you for coordinating a program that expanded and deepened my knowledge about where I live and who I am. Most importantly, I’ve been able to integrate a new depth of analysis into my teaching, activism, and everyday conversations.”

**LaKisha M. Wheeler** also graduated last year. “It was amazing to learn about Modjeska Simkins and the huge role she played in advocating for Black people,” she said. “I absolutely loved getting on Zoom every Monday and learning about where I was born and raised, and the issues Black people still struggle with today. Everything I learned I was able to talk to my children about. Thank you.”



Brett Burse presents Dr. Robert Greene a portrait of Modjeska Simkins that was taken at GROW in 1982.

**Kyle Criminger**, who graduated in 2015, said, “The Modjeska School took us on a haunted, enthralling trek through South Carolina’s stolen and denied history, giving me a long view and a wide perspective on the problems here. The work I am doing with fellow graduates allows us to carry out a shared commitment to the values and principles that South Carolinians like Modjeska Simkins herself have held and lived by. The school is a complete program and national model for community organizing.”

**Melanie McGehee** said, “Honestly, of the times I’ve left somewhere with a certificate, this is the one I’m most proud of.”

**Rev. Dr. Tom Summers**, a retired United Methodist minister and a 2015 graduate, said, “I’ve been involved with the SC Progressive Network since its beginning, and this school is indeed one of the best products in their 26 years of fine work. For anyone interested in the historical and current struggle for racial conciliation in our state, I strongly recommend that they attend this unique school. I also urge every congregation to sponsor a student.”

(If you or your organization wishes to sponsor a student or contribute to a scholarship fund, call 803-808-3384 or email [modjeskaschool@scpronet.com](mailto:modjeskaschool@scpronet.com). Also, the SC Progressive Network Education Fund’s annual financial reports are available at [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org).)

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**For more on the school, the class schedule, or to fill out an application, see [ModjeskaSchool.com](http://ModjeskaSchool.com). Tuition may be paid in monthly installments. Some needs-based scholarships available.**

## School offers free public seminars on Zoom

Before the pandemic, the Modjeska Simkins School held a series of Sunday Socials that were open to the public. A guest speaker or panel made a presentation or screened a film, which was followed by a group discussion. Now, we do the next best thing on Zoom. The public is still welcome to join us for some excellent speakers on compelling topics, but must provide their own snacks.

So far, three public seminars have been set. More may be added, so look for email alerts and keep checking [modjeskaschool.com](http://modjeskaschool.com) for a current schedule.

**March 13**, 4pm–6pm: **Dr. Justene Edwards** presents on her book *Unfree Markets: The Slaves’ Economy and the Rise of Capitalism in South Carolina*. Her research tracks the development of market capitalism by SC colonial slave masters.

**March 27**, 4pm–6pm: **Dr. Vernon Burton** will address *Lincoln’s Unfinished Work*, his Pulitzer nominated book, particularly as it pertains to South Carolina’s legacy of slavery and white supremacy in America. Dr Burton is a nationally recognized expert on Reconstruction.

**May 1**, 4pm–6pm: Screening of *The Uprising of ’34*, a documentary about the largest labor strike in American history with the epicenter in South Carolina. May Day is an international holiday celebrating working people—except in the USA. We’ll talk about why.

# Here's to another 26 years!

After the organization she helped establish in 1939 rebuked her radical politics, Modjeska Simkins once said of the state NAACP, "Organizations grow old just like people, and the fighting and revolutionary spirit that the NAACP had is no more."

God forbid that happens to us. At 26, the **SC Progressive Network** is pretty old, by nonprofit standards, at least in the Palmetto State. To heed Modjeska's warning, we are re-imagining the Network for a new decade, working to head off ossification, irrelevancy or, worse, becoming something our founders never intended.

When a group of grassroots activists convened at Penn Center in the spring of 1996, it was with great hope and seriousness that we crafted a mission statement and named a new coalition of progressives committed to building a movement for social justice in a state not famous for coordinated resistance.

We knew that working together and sharing resources would magnify our individual and collective power. We could also take comfort in connecting with others of like mind in a state where anyone left

of center can feel isolated and powerless.

The Network has evolved over the years to meet the changing times. What has remained constant over the decades is our members' shared belief in **Dr. Martin Luther King's** notion of creating a "beloved community." That place exists in the real world and in the imagination, a collective that dares to dream big and live our shared values. The need to rekindle that kind of connection has perhaps never been greater.

In 2022, the Network will finalize a process that's been years in the making to re-imagine the organization and recruit new leaders. With the help of trusted allies, we have revisited and restructured the Network's form and function to better reflect current reality.

Brett and I plan to stay involved through the Network's transition in supporting



*Becci and Brett at Penn Center during the Network's first conference, in 1996.*

roles. Eventually, Brett wants to focus on the Modjeska School, keeping the curriculum current and building on our already impressive roster of advisers and presenters. He also will be feeling pressure he can no longer avoid to work on his memoir.

I want to return to my neglected art studio and spend more time writing, documenting the stories of South Carolina

resisters past and present.

These are heady times. Brett and I feel really good about the Network's future, and we have every confidence in the transition team. We are grateful beyond measure to **Dr. Robert Greene, Cecil Cahoon, and Dr. Bernie Gallman**, who have been meeting regularly with us over the past year to understand where we've been, and to offer their expertise as we move forward.

See you in the trenches, friends! As Modjeska said, "This is no sitting-down time."

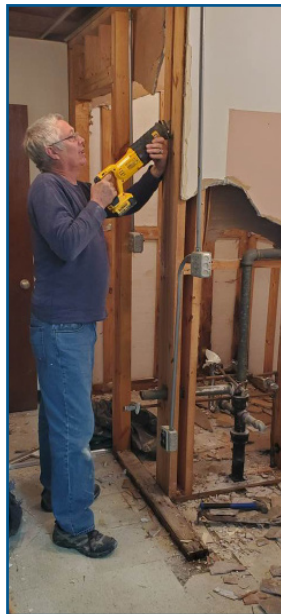
*Becci Robbins, Communications Director*

## Join us March 12 for our most important meeting of 2022

**We invite you to meet with us on Zoom for our general membership meeting on Saturday, March 12, 2–5pm. Because we will be discussing critical in-house business, to attend you must have paid annual dues or be a recurring donor since March 12, 2021.**

As there are critical decisions to consider on March 12, please review the c4 bylaws under "About" at [scpronet.com](http://scpronet.com). The dues cycle is now Jan. 1 to Dec. 31. Members will receive information before the meeting so they can meaningfully engage in the process.

To join or renew your dues, please fill out and return the enclosed envelope, or pay online at [scpronet.com](http://scpronet.com). To pay by phone or to check your membership status, call 803-661-8000. Email questions to [network@scpronet.com](mailto:network@scpronet.com).



*Michael Gooding renovates the restrooms to make them fully accessible. Fun fact: he was on the original GROW staff in the early 1980s.*

## Building back better

Renovation of our HQ at 1340 Elmwood Ave. continues. We plan to be finished this spring, but are postponing a re-opening party until it is safe to do so.

Meanwhile, we are grateful to **Michael Gooding, Daniel Deweese, and Richard Sylvester** for rolling up their sleeves and doing the dirty work. They've been on the roof and under the floor, and are making great progress. We can't wait to welcome you for a visit to the building we've named GROW, after our original incarnation.

Please consider making a donation of any amount to help support this unique and vital community

space for social and political activists in the Midlands.

Details at [scpronet.com](http://scpronet.com).

