

The Highlander Center Field Recording Collection (1930s-1980s)

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Essay by Kim Ruehl (guest post)*



Zilphia Horton

Today, nearly a century into its existence, Highlander Research and Education Center (formerly Highlander Folk School) has a long-standing reputation for educating Southerners toward social justice. This is due to generations of leadership in labor and civil rights education that have cycled through the rural Tennessee school throughout the decades. But their mission, and the school's vision of a better world, was set in motion by the school's founder, Myles Horton, and his wife, Zilphia.

Zilphia Mae Johnson arrived in Monteagle, Tennessee, in February of 1935 to attend a five-week workshop at the fledgling folk school. A long-stewing series of disagreements with her father had come to a head a month earlier, when he learned she had been seen smoking in public.

The eldest of four sisters, Zilphia was expected to do great things, but her father saw her behaving like a lost teenager well into her 20s. He was afraid her wanderings would inspire her younger sisters down the same path. He'd slipped a note under her breakfast plate telling her to shape up or ship out. She was happy to have a reason to leave.

In those days, young women of great ambition didn't just pick up their small-town, rural Arkansan lives and move to Chicago or New York to "make it." The very idea would have seemed impossible. Zilphia's only hope in her tiny Arkansas small town was to find a man to marry, who might take her away to a more interesting place. But there weren't such men, so the fallout with her father must have felt like the opening of a magic door.

Highlander was meant to be something she did on the way to figuring out what was next in her life. But, shortly after arriving, she fell into a deep and whirlwind love affair with its founder, Myles Horton. They married three weeks after that.

Myles had only moved onto the land that became Highlander in November of 1932. In just barely two years, he had run into all the hurdles that exist when someone wants to bring something from their imagination into reality. There were logistics and money issues and the very practical matter of finding students who wanted to learn from him and his staff.

Highlander would soon become known nationwide as the “singing labor school,” but it was not the first adult education center in the US dedicated to training people for the labor movement. (The Brookwood Labor Academy in upstate New York had opened to students in 1919.)

Horton had the idea that popular education would be an interesting way to educate working class adults at the same time as connecting them across differences--vital to creating lasting change, especially in the fractious South. In popular education, students come together to talk about their problems and brainstorm solutions. For the first few years of Highlander’s existence, those problems included everything from generations-old family feuds to troubled youth in the community, to how to make a fair wage for a day’s work or how to organize a union.

Numerous cooperatives sprung up, as people started to share their experiences and brainstorm across their differences. The academic life of the school was ramping up, even if its student population remained somewhat small. One of the major factors keeping him from fully realizing his vision about holistic education was that Myles wanted people who attended Highlander to learn as much outside of the classroom as they did inside it. He knew that some kind of cultural program was going to be necessary in order for his vision to truly come to fruition, but he had no idea what that would look like or even how to get it started.

Enter Zilphia Johnson: a college-educated, spirited, incredibly talented musician. Zilphia had a great sense of humor and an amplified sense of empathy. Many people who knew them both have said that Myles was the brain behind Highlander and Zilphia was its heart.

When they met, there must have been a sense that both had met their match. He was as intellectually astute as she was emotionally intelligent. They began talking about this holistic education he wanted to offer. It was a radical idea at the time, to ask people who had been engaged in family feuds, who lived in deep poverty during the Great Depression, to change their entire understanding of what people are capable of achieving by working together. After all, Grundy County, where Highlander was located, was the 11th poorest county in the nation at the time. There were real barriers to self- and community-actualization.

If Myles and Zilphia were going to ask people to trust them about this immersive popular education program, they needed to prove themselves trustworthy. They entered into their marriage with this understanding and intention about the importance of modeling a sort of radical trust. They were in love, by all means. They were also hoping to build a better world through trust and education and culture and the arts.

Zilphia became the first Culture Director at Highlander, and exactly what that meant is something she created entirely. This included using folk music, improvisational theater, and recreational games to teach people about the gumption that helped their ancestors survive hard times, at the same time as she was teaching them how to entertain themselves.

Entertainment requires people to relax together. In order to relax together, people must first trust one another. Zilphia knew that getting people to sing, laugh, dance, and write plays together would get them to understand each other in the process. It would get them listening to one another, letting their guards down, opening up to the possibility that someone they'd judged yesterday might become a friend tomorrow.

She also worked on making people feel welcome, as though they had entered a world where they had always belonged. They didn't have to carve their way at Highlander. They didn't have to prove themselves. By virtue of showing up, they were welcome. Rosa Parks noted that one of the things that made her feel welcome at Highlander when she attended in the summer of 1955 was waking up in the morning, smelling the coffee and bacon, and knowing that it was white people cooking for her.

Zilphia was somewhat of a radical caretaker. Naturally inclined toward the role of hostess, she understood that the specific way she welcomed people to this strange place was a bit more important than it might be to welcome guests for dinner in a suburb. People came to Highlander to do the work of personal and societal change. They must feel taken care of. Zilphia was a lot of fun. She understood the relaxing, connective power of laughter. She understood the importance of a good meal, of using her intense musical training to lead a room in singalongs on showtunes and pop songs. She was the yin to Myles's yang.

Myles took people apart and Zilphia put them back together.

Over the course of her 21 years at Highlander, Zilphia Horton created a culture that made it make sense for Septima Clark to move into a room at the school and live there full-time as the new Educational Director and the first Black resident of Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1954. Clark felt welcome there because Zilphia and Myles had meticulously, mindfully built a legacy of allyship over the course of many years. They had welcomed Black speakers and students alike. Their neighbors in this Jim Crow town might not be comfortable with it, but by the time Clark moved in, they were no longer surprised.

In the years after Zilphia's untimely death from accidental poisoning, largely because of Clark's leadership, Highlander would become a meeting place for the organizers of the Civil Rights Movement. It became an education center for people doing the everyday work of justice in the areas of race, immigration, the environment, land rights, and beyond.

But in its first two decades, Highlander was a small staff of white idealists, many of whom were highly educated, most of whom were from the South. They envisioned a world where equity and equality had become commonplace, and they worked to make it so. That work was due to the ideas of Myles Horton and the creative, cultural, heart-centered curriculum of Zilphia Horton.

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