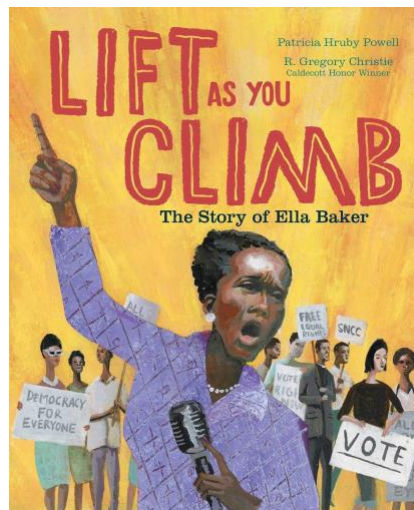


## First Opinions: The GrassRoots Organizer

Powell, Patricia Hruby and Chistie, R. Gregory. *Lift as You Climb: The Story of Ella Baker*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2020.

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The Handbook of Social Justice in Education asserts “Education invites us to know more and to be more, to see, to understand, to become more capable and more powerful, more courageous and more propulsive in the service of greater participation and more effective engagement in our work, our society, our lives” (2009). Ella Josephine Baker was just this type of human, known for leading from behind, she inspired those she encountered to deepen their education through active engagement in work, society, and in life.

Patricia Hruby Powell’s poetic children’s book brings necessary attention to a woman whose name is often understated in the stories of the Civil Rights Movement, if mentioned at all, while R. Gregory Christie provides an artistic depiction of this monumental activist as Ella Baker’s narrative builds from the grass roots.

Ella Josephine Baker's story is told as a lesson for people to learn to welcome others along their journey toward achievement. Baker grew up on her grandparents' farm in North Carolina which they had worked as slaves and after Emancipation endured the battle until they purchased and owned their land; this is where the seed of grassroots organizing was planted. The free verse explains how Ella began working as a young girl nearly 10 years old, helping the community by cleaning and dressing children without mothers as a support for their single fathers. She also worked on the farm harvesting, distributing, and serving peas. When she reached the age of 14, Baker moved to Raleigh, North Carolina to attend Shaw University where she completed high school and college at the top of her class while simultaneously working as a waitress to cover school costs. Once she earned her degree, Miss Baker relocated to New York City just before the onset of The Great Depression. Ella's earliest organizer role was in the midst of the economic downturn, which impacted all people, so she was able to convince some businesses to hire people of African descent, because regardless of the social construct called race, "they needed each other." In addition to activist, she took on the title as journalist and then assumed positions in community organizing which led to her appointment as NAACP field director. Miss Baker began giving speeches throughout the South to encourage voter registration that they hoped would result in electing leaders who fight for equal rights and fair treatment. She also partnered with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in spite of their differing views, to establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and organized as an advisor for students who developed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Miss Baker encouraged, supported, and challenged people of all ages and walks of life who were involved in the movement, constantly asking "What do you hope to accomplish?"

As one of the most notable initiatives for social justice in this country, the American Civil Rights Movement remains a pivotal point in our history, and Ella Baker is one of the most significant champions who remained vigilant in the midst of the male dominated revolutionaries for change. This is an essential text for engaging learners in problem solving issues that impact communities. Educators can use this as an opportunity to develop learners that recognize the value of being civically engaged. While students who identify with Miss Baker's cultural and racial background can use this book as a mirror, other students will find this text to offer a window through which they can gain a new perspective. As a woman of African descent, I was

personally inspired by the determination and vigilance Ella Baker possessed and also spread as she worked to “lift as you climb.” Ella Baker was empowered by her granddaddy’s preaching, and the stories of her grandmother choosing her own partner as a slave in spite of the direction from her slave master (who was also her father). She also learned the value of supporting the grassroots community early as her mother assigned the responsibility of helping fathers with their children. These values ignited a fierce spirit within this great organizer who made it her mission to strengthen others building up coalitions to evoke critical change that necessitates everyone’s effort to truly “lift as you climb” to reach freedom. Ella Baker’s driving question “What do you hope to accomplish” was one that helped reach the heart of each person she encountered to activate their individual understanding and unique perspective of what needed to change.

This book is a true call to action for any reader to recognize that once you endure through a struggle and accomplish a goal, you should encourage and support someone else along their journey toward achievement as well. “Lift as you climb!”

### **Work Cited**

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### **About the Author**

**Dr. Alicia Robinson** completed her doctoral studies at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in Education Policy, Organization & Leadership. During her graduate studies she launched her elementary teaching career as an educator at a private Christian school. Throughout her undergraduate studies at Tuskegee University Dr. Alicia established herself as a youth advocate which enhanced her passion for making a difference specifically for students of African descent. Since moving to New England from the Midwest she has been serving as an education consultant and most recently joined Southern New Hampshire University as adjunct faculty. Her experience has since advanced as a new mother of two under two, teacher educator, scholarly researcher, and now Founder of The Culture Academy.