

Transcription of “Interview with Dan Lynn Watt

Interviewer: Rob Widell

Length: 36:55

Abstract

On Monday, September 29, 2014, fifteen veterans of the Freedom Summer Project residing in New England arrived at the University of Rhode Island to commemorate the 50th year anniversary of the Freedom Summer Project and record interviews about their historic social activism for posterity. This is a video recording of an interview conducted with Dan Lynn Watt, a poet, folk singer, and professional performing artist, Cambridge, MA.

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D: Dan Lyn Watt

W: Rob Widell

W – Alright, we’re here for another series of interviews we’re doing with, uh, folks that were involved with the Civil Rights Movement and civil rights activity and in the 1960s, and, uh, and, and beyond. And I’m Professor Rob Widell in the History Department at the University of Rhode Island. Uhm, and I’ll let Dan introduce himself and then we’ll just have some, some conversation about, uh, uhm, his experience and uh, uh, and the likes.

D – So I’m Dan Lynn Watt. I’m a retired educator. I was educator primarily in mathematics and science education and I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

W- And, uh, so tell us, you know I guess, uh, uh, a little bit about, about where you grew up and, and, and what your experience was that brought you to where you were going to be going to do movement activities and, uh, uh, in the 1960s.

D – So, I grew up in New York City and I grew up in a family that was involved in the communist movement. And there’s a whole history of, uh, the kind of experiences I had because I grew up as a child, I was born in 1940, and I lived through the fifties in, for my teenage years and had a lot of, uhm, experience with what’s called “McCarthyism.” Anyway the period of the Red Scare is a time that it was very important to me but basically I grew up in a family that was very idealistic. My family believed in international brotherhood, they believed in worker’s rights they believe in, uh, that everyone that was equal. And, we were, I lived in an interracial community in New York City, uhm, neighborhood I mean. And my parents had a lot of, uh, friends of African-American primarily. And so I grew up feeling that was completely normal, to be equal, uhm, you know sort of friends with everybody, so to speak, regardless of race. When I was 6 years living in Freeport, New York before we moved to New York City, I’m just gonna tell this one little story, there was this little incident in Freeport, New York, where uhm, a group of four African-American brothers, who were servicemen, were denied, they were in the, this was 1946 this was just after World War II, and they were denied service in a restaurant in Freeport. And they started complaining. The police were called. The policeman lined these men

up and shot them. Uhm, two of them were killed, one wounded, the third one was arrested and sent to prison. Uhm, so this was, I became aware of this because my parents got very involved in protesting against the police action. And that was called “The Lynching” in Freeport, New York 1946. So, I became aware in a very young age that African-Americans were not being treated fairly. I mean, the word we used at the time was “negroes,” were not being treated very fairly in this country. And that understanding stayed with me. And uhm, when I was 16 I had this amazing experience; I decided to go to a church service at a cathedral near where I was living. I was living in the west side of Manhattan. I went to Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, which is the Episcopal cathedral of New York City. And the speaker was a young man, from the South, a civil rights leader from the South. Uhm, he was, I, I knew his name but didn’t know anything about him. He was Martin Luther King Jr. Uhm, I was 16, he was 27 and I heard him speak from the pulpit to a packed crowd of largely African-American, but mixed racially-mixed group and he was so inspiring. I, I, we all know those words, and that rhetoric and the way he could use language in the way he could inspire people, and his message of brotherhood. And he felt in this, the inevitability and the successive, the movement, was one of the things he was preaching about that day. And uhm, this was a few months after the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

W – Right, I was going to say it’s 1956, you know, when you were, were –

D – January, this was May 1956. So, uhm, that just, really kind of totally inspired me in terms of the struggle for civil rights that I knew that, that was where one of the places I was going to put my energy as I got older. And, uhm, in that was before the country, as a whole knew about Martin Luther King except, you know, those who were particularly following the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery. Uhm, so that was, that sort of background and kind of lead you in, in political activity was natural in my family and I grew up being involved in political activities of different kinds as a teenager being involved in different kinds of protests and marches in New York City. Uhm, I would go on buses to Washington for civil rights marches in, in the fifties. Uhm, in 1960, I went to Cornell University for graduate school and I got involved with a very free-form, uhm, political movement at Cornell that was basically confronting, I would say the American, established American policy, not in a violent way, but just in intellectual way primarily and through protests. We were confronting the nuclear arm race, we were confronting, uhm, the whole issue of segregation, we had an organization Cornell called the “Cornell Committee Against Segregation” that had been, that was operating before I got there, but it was really activated at the time of the sit-ins in 1960, which coincided with my going to Cornell. So, uhm, it was a very active group, we would go and picket the Woolworth’s in downtown Ithaca. Uhm, people thought we were really peculiar because Woolworth’s didn’t discriminate in Ithaca. But, uhm, actually, I think it was that kind of picketing all over the country that led many national chains to order their local store to desegregate. Uhm, it was they didn’t want the publicity. In 1961, several of my friends went and joined the Freedom Rides. I thought about that a long time and decided not to go for reasons I don’t have time to go into here. Personally interesting, personally, personally reasons. Uhm, but uhm, in 1963 one of my friends from Cornell spent the summer in Fayette County, Tennessee. I have to say something about Fayette County, Tennessee; Fayette County had been, uhm, in the news in the early 1960s because for the first time in 80 years, there became a voting rights campaign, a local voting rights campaign in Fayette County. Fayette County is in the southwestern corner of Tennessee, it’s adjacent to Mississippi, uhm, its uhm, economy was cotton farming and sharecropping. So the vast majority

of the land was owned by white landowners and worked by tenant farmers, who own nothing and who lived in very primitive, uh, housing. Uhm, and who did not have the right to vote, they didn't have the right to eat in restaurants in the county, in the county towns. Uhm, they were, it was a, it had been a, uhm, a segregated for years and years. But in the early 1960s a local organization in Fayette County started, uhm, working for the right to vote and when people registered to vote, went down to the county registrar, the registrar tried to delay in all that sort of thing. But when someone went to the registrar to vote, they were evicted from their lands and sharecroppers and a bunch of them moved in to, uh, what was called a "ten city" and this was on the lands owned by, uhm, some African-American landowners owned some land, and donated it for people to get up tense, and this got a lot of publicity, they received a lot of assistance from, especially from religious organizations in the north: Quakers, Unitarians. Other, uhm, other religious groups sent food, sent clothing, sent tenting supplies, and things to and got a lot publicity that these people were living in tents, called "Tents City." I mean later that same kind of thing happened in other places, but that's the first one that made the national news. Uh, a couple friends of mine, little older than me, spent the summer of 1963 in Fayette County working with the local leaders. And, uhm, they spent the summer working with teenagers on doing marches in the county seat or doing protests in helping people register to vote. They came back to Cornell, they said, "Look, next year there's going to be an election in Fayette County, Tennessee. The majority of the voters are black, most of them had never voted, a number of them are now registered but they never had anything to vote for." Uhm, the, there'd been a federal injunction to against the county officials, and county businesspeople, and landowners not to interfere with people's right to vote so that they were. There were, was registration of African-Americans in Fayette County. He said, "If we could get about 15 people to come down to Fayette County next summer, we could uh, we could make a difference. We can help the people to register, we can, we can educate them about voting, teach them about voting, we can encourage them to vote, we can build some enthusiasm, we might actually be able to win an election for County Sheriff." Uhm, and this would be revolutionary, quote-unquote revolutionary at the time for African-Americans, actually the candidates for was a white man who was, had been already sympathetic to the blacks in Fayette County. And there was also on the ticket a African-American man, who was running for County Tax Assessor, those were two offices that they were contesting that summer. So the idea was if a buncha people would, uh, go there and work, work throughout the county and help organize, and this is what the local leader's requested this. They, they said "Look, if you can get some people to come down and help us, uhm, that we can, uh, may be able to win this election." And uhm, the idea caught on among folks at Cornell. We said "Yes we're gonna do this" and we spent a year organizing in training ourselves and uhm, created our own organization, our own fundraising campaigns. Mississippi Freedom Summer had not yet been announced as something that was happening –

W – Right, right, cause you were doing this from '63 in to '64.

D – Yeah. So this was form the summer of '63, I'd say September of '63, through '64, we organized, we got a group, we got people who are willing to make commitments, we, we've formed partnerships, we were going to work in pairs. In the end we had 40 people that went down from Cornell primarily, some were graduates of Cornell, and some were relatives of Cornell. But basically, it's a group of 40 people, graduate and undergraduate students from Cornell University, who spent the summer '64 in Fayette County, Tennessee.

W – And how, uhm, that initial, those initial folks that had been down there and came back to Cornell, does that, do you know how they ended up in, in Fayette County?

D – Yeah, actually I do. Uhm, they were, they were wanting to, to do something in the South, they wanted to get involved with something in the South. And they, they asked some people involved in the Civil Rights Movement, you know, where might they go, where the people needed some help, or would be willing to welcome some help and they were directed to Fayette County. And the uhm –

W – This folks in SNCC? Or uh –

D – I don't think it was SNCC. I'm not sure. I, I can look that up but I don't, it was not SNCC. SNCC was not active in Fayette County. The NAACP was not active in Fayette County. They had their own organization called the "Fayette County Civic and Welfare League." Uhm, they had ties to the NAACP in Memphis. They had some, uhm, but they were strictly local organization and maybe that's why these people said, "Well you could go there. They don't have civil rights workers helping them out there." Uhm, and the leaders, uh, there were two African-American families who were basically the civil rights, were spearheading the civil rights efforts and started it in Fayette County, John and Viola McFerrin and Harpman and Mini Jameson. And, uhm, John and Harpman, the men in these, in these two couples had been in the service in World War II and they came back to Fayette County and they found out they could not serve on juries because they were not registered to vote. They've, so no black had served on a jury in Fayette County, at least since "Reconstruction." Uhm, and no one had voted. So they really set out to change that themselves and that's what led to the "Tent City" episode that I mentioned earlier. Uh, so when my two friends, a couple, a married couple, came back and uhm, they had been there for the summer, they had a lot of experience being chased by, uh, by white truckloads, people in pickup trucks by trying to phone the Justice Department by, they actually made contact with the Justice Department a number of times. The Justice Department assured them that they would enforce the injunction in Fayette; there was existing injunction in Fayette County against interfering with the right to vote. Uhm, so I obviously could talk at length, I am talking at length, uhm –

W – Which is what, what we brought you here to do –

D – Okay, that's great, so thank you. Uhm, so I'll say a few things about the preparation. One of the things was fundraising. And we, uhm, we fundraised throughout the Cornell University community, as well as through the community of Ithaca and surrounding towns. We formed an organization called the "Tompkins County Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Fayette County Tennessee." People from Fayette County came up and gave talks at the university, and so that we tried to involve more than just the university, especially in terms of fundraising. We actually had a campaign, uh, to get the Student Union to donate money. Cornell Student Union, which is funds that the undergraduate had to pay, you know to, part of their fees for going there. And, uhm, the Student Union governing body wanted to, uhm, donate a thousand dollars to the campaign. And, uh, it resulted in a, in a referendum essentially a campus-wide referendum among the undergraduates, the graduate students were not part of this, the student body. And uh,

to everyone's surprise, the referendum passed the grant of a thousand dollars to the committee. Uh, so the student body had gotten energize the Cornell, it was.

So one of the things was that we were doing was, we're educating our home community about what was going on in the South and that was one of our goals to do that. Uhm, we also spent the summer in educating and training ourselves, we learned about the economy in Fayette County, we learned about the legal system, we learned the history of the Civil Rights Movement, we uh, we gave our, we, we were, we had some nonviolence training, we, we discussed as a group were we going to defend ourselves if we were attacked, we decided no, we would not defend ourselves, we would be entirely nonviolent. Some people said they wanted to carry a baseball bat in their car; no, we, we ruled that out as a group. So that we had decided we were going to be nonviolent, that we, uhm, with that many people in the county and with the kind of tensions that were going to be present in Fayette County during this election campaign and during this time that, uh, the nonviolence was the only, uhm, practical strategy. It's not that everyone was nonviolent, we were not all Martin Luther King, uh, you know, advocates and nonviolence but we took it as a strategy we adopted it and we kept it. So, the way it worked out, since we had so many people, we had teams in every part Fayette County and we were like twelve, I think twelve districts in Fayette County, uhm, regions. And we had a team in each region, two people, we each had a car. We uhm, we, one of the first things we had to do, uhm, was go to Memphis and register our car because someone had bought a bunch of old clunkers, donated some money. And somebody in Nashville actually had raised money for cars. And uhm, had a bunch of clunkers and we had to go to Nashville, that's uh, not to Nashville to Memphis to get driver's licenses. We all got Tennessee driver's licenses and we had Tennessee plates on the cars. So, we, we wanted to, wanted –

W – Was that deliberate strategy to have?

D – Yes. We wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. If we were stopped while driving, we would have a valid Tennessee driver's license. Uhm, we stayed with, with black families throughout the country and these families were given a very small amount of money every week to, to feed us. And they put us up you know. In that situation, the circumstances vary, but we lived with, with, with black families in the county. And, uhm, my partner and I, uhm, lived with two different black families during our time there because we had an interesting incident that I'll tell you about. Uhm, our first home was with a fairly comfortable home of very well to do black family. Landowners who owned 900 acres of land and even had, had their own sharecroppers. Uhm, and they were, you know, they had a very nice home, they had a normal "American home" of the 1960s, they had a television set, they had hot and cold running water, uhm, showers, good things like that. Most homes in Fayette County, African-American homes, did not have that. They were mostly shacks with outhouses and, and uhm, much less comfortable facilities. Well one day, uhm, one Saturday, uh, I think it was a Saturday afternoon, my partner and I were, were there staying at the house for a while and the woman, the woman of the house came to the room we were staying in and said "You have a visitor." We came out and there was the sheriff of Fayette County, the white sheriff of Fayette County sitting at the table. Uhm, he did not fit my stereotype of a southern sheriff. He was a small, bespectacled man, very polite; he said, "I just wanna check in with you boys. You wasn't from around here are you?" "Uhm, no sir we're from New York." "Well, I just want you to know, you don't get yourselves into no trouble, there'll be no trouble here, we don't want no trouble here in Fayette County. Uhm, you stay off other

peoples' land, you don't trespass on peoples' land and you stay outta trouble and you won't have no trouble. Uhm, just want you all to know that. I know you ain't down here for no vacation." And then he just got up and left. And the next day our host told us that we would have to move to another house. That they didn't think it was safe for us is what they said and probably they felt it wasn't safe for them as well.

Uhm, so let's see, what did we do? I'm gonna come to the work now because I think that's really the important part of it. Uhm, I could say more about the living conditions and that, but uhm, that was very similar to what was found in Mississippi. So our job was to, for the first half of the summer, to get as many people as possible to register to vote who were not yet registered. So we worked with a local district leader African-American man, we would go around to people's houses during the day and ask if they were registered. Uhm, if they said they were not registered then we would try to arrange with this man, the local man, to get them rides into. I mean, you, it's, you can only register in the county seat, Somerville, which is about 20 miles away, and so you had to get a ride there. You could only register on Wednesday's that was the only day the registration was open. And so, uhm, our idea was to flood the courthouse every Wednesday with people wanting to register because this had caused a lot of headlines before in the papers. Lines around the block, 1961, the tent city days waiting to register. Uhm, so we also found, when we did this, that uh, the uh, registrar had set up a system where by only districts of the county could register on any given Wednesday. So, really it meant there was only maybe one Wednesday in that summer when people from our district could register, but didn't know what it was, so we kept sending people, going to register. The other thing we did was, uhm, the main, the other main way reaching people was by speaking in churches on Sundays and I thought when I came here today, I thought I would wear a suit because believe it or not, when we packed to go to Fayette County, we all took suits. And mine was something like this, it was probably the same color, similar material, lightweight summer suit and uhm, we were gonna go to church every Sunday and we were going to speak in the churches. People wanted us to speak in the churches. So the churches were the only place where African-Americans could gather on land and property that was their own property, so if we had meetings, we sometimes had meetings during the week, which were not nearly as well attended, but they would also be in the churches. The churches were the core of the, of the African-American community in Fayette County. Uhm, I grew up in a, in a secular family. I grew up in a family, I did not grow up going to church, I'd hardly ever been in a church, uhm at age 24. When I went to Fayette County, I'd been to some friends' weddings, I'd, you know, heard Martin Luther King, and been to church in a few special occasions but I had not experienced, uhm, what I was to experience in those churches because what I'd experienced was a kind of, uhm, community solidarity that was beyond words. It was, it was an intense experience of music and preaching that everyone participated in and, uhm, to say that I was sorta unprepared for it in, I mean, we had studied this, I knew something about it, but I was totally emotionally unprepared for how uhm, how completely engrossing this would be to be. Uhm, first day we went to church I was shocked because at the end of the service they said, "Now we'd like all of you to say something." I hadn't prepared for that, silly as that may sound. I, I wasn't ready and I got up and I stammered something about, you know, we're happy to be here, we're here to help them register, uhm, we're uh, we're happy to meet you all. They applauded. Outside the church they all shook my partner and my hands. They said we are, you're the first white people that've ever come to this church. We're so glad you're here; you are going to help us. They were extremely, uh, at least in, wherever we were in public, or wherever we met

people, they were very enthusiastic about our presence. Uhm, what they felt privately, what some people felt privately, I wasn't so sure. I, I got a sense later that, not all the African-Americans were happy about us being there. So one of the things that happened to me was, uhm, I describe it as I learned to be a freedom preacher. I learned to talk in the, something like the style and rhetoric of the preacher's. Uhm, it's a little embarrassing me now to think of doing that, but I'd like to read you something I wrote in a letter home, if you don't mind, that's why I brought this along. And uh, you know, this is, this is what I wrote in a letter, so this probably what I said, I said this kind of speech we're giving in churches: "You know, God didn't make but one race, the human race. God did not mean for some people to be slaves, to be bought and sold by other people. God didn't mean for white folks to have all the power and colored folks to have none. Now we all know how Moses led the children of Israel out of slavery, but he could not have done that if no one had followed him. We came down here from the north to help you register and vote, but now you need to stand up for your own freedom if you're not registered, get yourself down to Somerville next Wednesday. If you are registered take your father, your mother, your wife, your husband, your sons and daughters. This is the time. This is the place to stand up for freedom." And all of this was punctuated by "Amen" and "You say right," and things like that. It was interactive in that way uhm, and uhm, it was a very, just an incredible experience for me to be able to do that. Now was I speaking for myself in my own way? Yes I was. I was bringing them the message we wanted to bring them and I was trying to adopt their idiom. Uhm, the reason I say it embarrasses me is because I didn't believe in that God had done this and that, but I knew that, that was the way the story went. They believed it. They called us Freedom Writers actually, this was interesting, in Fayette County they called us Freedom Writers. Uhm, not making the distinction between what was known as the "Freedom Rides." Uhm, and they said, "You were come and God has sent you to help us, to help us take our rightful place." And uhm, so I don't know if I was being exploitive, I was certainly trying to adapt to a culture that I, that was not my natural culture and trying to be effective. And I think it was effective. So I have you know, looking back I have some embarrassment about it, but I feel like, uh, this is what I'm, I'm trying to get at is how thoroughly we tried to absorb the culture and the way of speaking and to meet the people on their own ground so to speak.

W – So how long were you, were you there for then?

D – We were there for about two and a half months. We came in early June and we left in mid-August. I guess a little less than two and a half months. We spent the month of June, the month of July, half way through July the registration stopped. It ended because the election was on I think August 6th, I think that was the date. And so a month before the election registration starts, it was really important for us to be there as early as we could and for the rest of the summer we, we did what we called, we, we did the same kind of talks in churches to get, encourage people to vote. And uhm, and we uhm, we got some sample ballots from the county office, the voting office in the election department, and we made copies and brought them around the county and showed people where they could mark, how they could vote, what the ballots looked like, what voting was like, we also had a right to a secret ballot, nobody could watch them mark their ballots, to had to have a private place. Uhm, some people were trained as poll watchers; I was not involved in that. But uhm, so, so there was that, uhm, kind of campaigning and it really was an election campaign. It was more than just "free and fair elections" in Fayette County. We were really at that time pushing for these candidates who had the support of the black civil rights

leaders. And uhm, so we knew something about the registration rolls, we believe we had more blacks on the registration rolls than whites by this time. The whites, uh, blacks outnumbered whites in Fayette County by 2-1 in the general population. Uhm, the registration was not that ratio, but uh, a small number more. And on election day, uhm, the vote did not go our way, the vote, the vote counting did not go our way. It, uhm, we documented a bunch of irregularities at the polls, more votes being listed for the incumbent sheriff than the total number then the total number of people who got in according to the polls according to the people we had outside watching the polls. Poll watchers were not allowed to come in to the polls to observe. Uhm, voters who said they had not been given private spaces to vote, etc., etc. So we made a long list of, of uhm, irregularities and reported them all to the FBI in Memphis. Couple of things more that I think that were significant; one of our strategies in the summer was since we had a lot of from the north, we were going to use our contacts in the north to get as much publicity as possible. This was true of Mississippi Freedom Summer as well, that uhm, we would use people's home, media, and uhm, and home, home families and friends at home, to kind of bring, bring, shine the light of public interest on Fayette County. We did succeed in getting a New York Times reporter to come to Fayette County. We did succeed in getting a, an NBC reporter to come to Fayette County. Uhm, but we did not get the Justice Department support that we felt we were going to get, we did not get the FBI support we thought we were going to get because of Mississippi. All the attention was focused on Mississippi, and rightly so. So that it was uhm, uhm, we had felt that if we had gotten enough publicity that the Justice Department would, would send observers to the elections and make sure that they were carried out properly, they did not do that. They didn't, they didn't have enough, they were all in Mississippi. So the election was lost and we discouraged of course. Uhm, something I didn't learn until much more recently, that two years later they elected two African-Americans to two statewide, to countrywide office in 1966. Uhm, so that uh, and from that time on, after that, I was no longer involved with Fayette County, but the uhm, the African-American community was mobilized for elections, they were mobilized for school integration, they were mobilized for, for anti-poverty programs under the Johnson administration, they, they were able to get funding for different things that did not go through the county officials but through some other agency that could get it directly to the community. Uhm, so that they had made a lot of gains. And that summer was part of it. Not the whole thing, there were other outside people coming in, some of our people came back to Fayette County the following year, uh eight or ten. Other people from other colleges came to Fayette County another year. So it became a place that uh, while it was not in the news for civil rights, it was a place that was making progress.

W – So when, uh, uh –

D – I'll take a breather here.

W – So uhm, uh, uhm, so when you uhm you were there up into August of '64 uhm, when you left and I assume that most of the folks, you know, that had been there that summer left in August –

D – Yep.

W – Were there, were there any folks that stayed there permanently or uh, uh was it just till the following summer when the students came back?

D – I think there were one or two people that stayed on. Uhm, and they would send reports back to the rest of us from time to time.

W – Now did you get any sense that, that uhm, that there were uh, there were folks in, in the black community that were there just sort of waiting for you to leave, you know?

D – Well, this is an, I'm glad you asked that because when I was uhm, there was a group within the black community that was opposed to the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League. And I think this had to do with a kind of political rivalry within the county. It's been documented elsewhere, very interesting story that I can't go into, but at the time we were there we were told these other people were, were "Uncle Tom's." They were working with the sheriff, they were working against our project and there was one local leader who had originally been part of the civil rights coalition there, who had formed his own group and you know they were rivals. And uh, they were rivals for funding, they were rivals for publicity, etc., etc. So, one of the meetings, this was a, this was something that I remember very vividly. One of the meetings we had, a man came to the meeting, who was part of this other faction, uhm, and he said to us, my partner and myself, "You know, you know, these folks, they're gonna listen to because you are white. We've been telling them the same thing about voting for the last five years and they don't listen to us. And then you're gonna go home and where will they be?" Uhm, so you know at the time I kinda dismissed that because it wasn't something I needed to pay attention to I thought. I thought it was not the representative of the community and I don't know how representative it was. But, uhm, afterwards I thought, okay he's right we did go home. And the people who stuck their neck out the vote we left with the situation. Now by this time Fayette County was already moving in a lot of different way towards, towards what it became years later. Uhm, the cotton farmers decided they were going to mechanize the cotton farming. This took a period of years, but gradually the African-American population was, was reduced because they mechanized the farming, they needed far fewer works.

D – Did they move to Memphis and farther places?

W – They had to move off to Memphis and other, other places and find other ways to make a living and some people stayed and uh, and they did get you know, some people got elected to the school board, got elected to county office, uh, I think they did have an African-American sheriff at some point in the county. Uhm, they had integrated schools, although they had a white academy that was started, private school for white kids only. Uhm, but uh, but the movement had kinda like built its own confidence in there, where were they getting support then, they did get a lot of support from the government in the Johnson years. Uhm, one of the, uh, members, on of the women in Fayette County, when leaders Viola McFerrin, a very amazing and wonderful person, uhm, became part of uh, the, I don't exactly call it, I would say the advisory board, I don't know what it's called for the anti-poverty program. And so she would go up to Washington and meet with Hubert Humphrey, he was vice president and his deputies, you know. So she became a person who could organize legal challenges when necessary, like they had to do legal challenges to get schools integrated. She could organize, uhm, the disbursement of funds through

legitimate county organizations rather than the county authorities that were the main way that the federal government disburses funds is to give to the states, who give it to the counties, who supposedly disburse it to the people. So, uhm, so they became influential in they, they had some, some uh, some political clout in an odd sort of way and they were able to build, build some confidence and be part, become part of the political in, in, in the system. So uhm, so that uh, this was all part of it. It was one art of it. It was one summer out of many years of, of work and struggle and this has been documented. Uhm, actually one of the college students who went to Fayette County, uhm, did an oral history project; you'd be interested in this, this book called "Our Portion of Hell." And it's an oral history of the civil rights struggle in Fayette County and it goes from back in the fifties all the way up to the seventies. And he interviewed people and there collected in transcripts in a book. And I'll give you the reference later. But it was a, it's an excellent, uhm, sourcebook you know it's not a book that's written about Fayette County, it's the people telling you their stories. It's quite, uh, quite remarkable. Uhm -

W – So, so when you and, and uhm, uhm, unfortunately, you know, I this is in every interview, we do have to think about ways of, of concluding in five or ten minutes or so, I think. Uh, but, but I, but for you when you left in '64, you didn't go then after that. So where did, where did you go back? Did you finish graduate studies uhm, at Cornell? And one of the things they always say is, you know, when you're doing all that work, did you actually go to class and you know, and then, then do the work? graduate school is always uh fun –

D – I did. Not everyone did, but I did.

W – Uhm, so you went back to finish uh, finish at Cornell.

D – Yup. I finished a degree, a Ph. D. in engineering. Uhm, but while I was in Fayette County, sort of an odd coincidence, one of the fellow, one of my fellow civil rights workers from Cornell told me about an education project in science education that her father, who was an electrical engineering professor at Cornell was involved in. So when I got back to Cornell I went and talked to this man and he said, "Yes we are trying to engage people like you in doing education for kids. So we got a project we want you to come work on. You have to get your degree because we're funded by the National Science Foundation and they want Ph. D.'s in science to be involved in this. So you can get your degree and we will have a place for you if you want." I mean I went through an interview process and the rest of it, but I did. So following my Ph. D., I went and came to Boston to work with a curriculum developing project, developing science curriculum for elementary schools and that's where I found my vocation, was in science and mathematics education. Uhm, and I've worked in that, both as a classroom teacher and as a teacher of teachers, as a curriculum writer, as a researcher, many different aspects of educational work, uh, for my career. And uh, so I uh, that's, that's sort of, it, it happened by coincidence that it was a conversation, an odd side conversation in Fayette County that led me to this, I don't know –

W – Now that, but you know that, you know that in and of itself is, is you know, as any teacher will tell you, is part of being and activist, and part of your work. But were you, did you stay involved in other, you know, more sort of explicit, I guess, ways that we think about ways, that you know, organizing activities in the like?

D – Well, I think as an historian you know very well what was coming on in our country after 1964 was the Vietnam War and that, uhm, became the main concern of the political activists on campus. Uhm, so you know, what can I say it was, uh, we felt that was where our energy was most needed. To try and stop that war and to educate people about it and we also sent out a process of campus wide education. Uh, and we had teach-ins, and we had a lot of events where we educated people. We had scholars who knew the history of Vietnam who came and talked about it. We had soldiers who were on campus who returned from Vietnam tell about their experiences, which was very interesting for those of us who had not been in the military and avoided military service, let's say, chose not to, had not been in the military, which was definitely me to start becoming friends with people in the military and understand their experience in Vietnam. And uhm, they became part of that movement. I mean they came to see that, that what they had been doing in Vietnam was part of something that, uh, that was, it was wrong and should be ended. So they, they became part of that. Uhm, so that was where my, for the next few years, a lot of, where most of my political effort went into that movement.

W – And, and, what about anything, you know, later on that, that you were involved in?

D – I guess, uhm, I guess I've always been uhm, wanting to live in an integrated community, always wanting to uh, uhm, to work for, to work against inequities in society, whether it through working in education, which I saw as part of that, or through being part of other community organizations. Uhm, right now I live in a cohousing community in Cambridge, which is a kind of cooperative and we're trying to live cooperatively. I mean we have a group of about forty families and individuals. Children, young children, babies, through a woman who is, whose ninety, just turned ninety in our community. And we're trying to live collaboratively and communally with each other and use that as a model for, for uh, other people to organize their lives. I'm certainly got involved in local, the movement for local agriculture and that sort of thing. It was, uhm, I don't think I was ever part of something as intense as, politically overtly intense is that I got involved in Cornell in my graduate school days because when I got a little older I had a family, I had my work became important to me and I wanted to have work that would make a difference in the world and I think it did. So, that was my, that was little bit where, where things went for me. Uhm, I do think living in cohousing is important because we want to live environmentally, an environmentally sound way, uhm, and we do when we get local food delivered to our place from a farm nearby, and uhm, so that we're sort of trying to model the different, a different lifestyle.

W – Well the one thing I've been asking you know, towards the end, I keep saying in all the other interviews as well you know, that hopefully we'll find the time to do an even more extended candid interview at some point to capture some of the other stories that you surely have and so on. Uh, but uhm, one of the things we've been trying to, to, to do in some of these interviews is also for, some of the students that are here at the University of Rhode Island, and that maybe using and watching them is to get some sense for how uhm, uh, you can take those experiences of when you are a young person, whether you're in college, graduate school and so on, and, and find ways to become an activist or find ways to do that kind of stuff yourself. So is there anything out of your own experience that you would say is, is useful or helpful, might be,

uh, something that you would want to share with the folks that are searching for those kinds of, uh, uh, things for themselves?

D – This is gonna be, this is gonna sound a little weird, but I’m going to talk about my granddaughter, uhm, who is twenty and when she was in high school she joined an organization called the “Food Project.” It’s, they call themselves the “Food Justice Social Change Organization.” It’s a group, primarily in the Boston area, there are other groups like it around the country, where they involve inner city and suburban youths in, uhm, the process of growing and food distribution and the idea of food equality that everyone could have good quality organic food and they, uhm, they train the students in leadership. Our granddaughter was very effective, became a very effective leader in this group, she’s still working for them. Uhm, they do lectures on, uh, food justice on college campuses and high schools. They uhm, they teach the students how to cook, they distribute the food, they grow the food, they distribute it through a farm share and through a farmer’s market. They, uhm, work in soup kitchens and local community kitchens to uhm, to provide food for people that need food. They work with, uhm, local chefs; many of the local chefs in Cambridge area are helping them learn to cook. So uh, so food is a, is a major problem in our society and it’s something I’m, I’m so impressed with these young people who have made this commitment to, to involve themselves in this particular way. So I would say to the students there’s something going on in your community, whether it’s about the immigrants’ rights or about the anti-poverty work or food justice or voting rights. Uhm, we uhm, I think these students should vote and they should campaign for the right to vote, they, they should make sure their relatives and their friends vote and inform themselves about politics. Uhm, I don’t think there’s any shortage of things in their local communities that they will, can look around and find something to be involved in and they’ll find it rewarding. I just raise the food project as a kind of surprising example, it was surprising to me and that I’m, uh, very strong advocate in this particular group right now.

W – Great, well I, I think we’ve heard that from a number of folks that, you know that, said that finding something in your community that, that, that as I think you get from coming out doing that through that sort of local, grassroots kind of work like you were doing I think is something that informs what a lot of people have been saying, it is the way, the path into something. So, well thank you, thank you for sitting with us and uhm, under the hot spot lights here –

D – Thank you for taking the time to do this interview. You’ve listened to a lot of them today, so –

W – Good, good.

D – I’ve enjoyed being, having a chance to talk about this experience, so thank you.

W – Great. And, and we’ll maybe get to capture even more of it at a future date.

D – Yeah if you would like to, I’d be more than happy to come and talk some more about it or talk to students.

W – Yeah.

D – I think my wife and I, she's also here being interviewed. She had a different experience, but we would be happy to come and talk to students if that's something that would be useful in the education program.

W – Yeah, think so.

D – Thank you.