Black Power Chronicles: Dorie Ladner

Dorie Ladner, born June 28, 1942, in Hattiesburg, MS discussed her early life, family background, and education. She recounted her politicization following Emmett Till's murder and her involvement with the NAACP and SNCC. Ladner detailed her work in Mississippi, including voter registration efforts and the challenges faced, such as the murder of Medgar Evans. She highlighted her experiences during the March on Washington and the impact of Black Power movements. Ladner emphasized the importance of community engagement, education, and spiritual guidance in driving her activism and encouraged young people to be active.

Jocelyn Imani: Hi, good afternoon Dr. Ladner.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: And how are you Dr. Imani?

Jocelyn Imani: I'm Jocelyn Imani. I'll be interviewing you today on behalf of the DC Black Power Chronicles.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: And thank you.

Jocelyn Imani: I'm so glad to have you here. Today is Monday, October 16, 2017. The time is 2:51[pm], it is a sunny autumn day here in Washington, DC. We're here on the campus of the University of District of Columbia. So just to get us started, if you could please –

Dr. Dorie Ladner: My name is Dorie, D-O-R-I-E, middle name, A-N-N, last name, L-A-D-N-E-R, Dorie Ann Ladner.

Jocelyn Imani: And when were you born?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: June 2, 1942.

Jocelyn Imani: So can you speak a little bit about your hometown and your family background?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, on Royal Street, if I so may indulge you, in what we call the city, part of Hattiesburg, to my mother, Annie Ruth Woolard as a maiden name and my father, Eunice Ladner. Growing up in Hattiesburg, I would say that was a life that was good and also bad. My parents divorced. My mother and my father, my natural father, divorced, so she married my stepfather, William Cody Perryman, and they had six children.

My sister Joyce Ladner was born October 12, 1943 and she and I were very close in age, and both growing up in school. She was three. I just turned five, and so her birthday was October 12, but she came just a few months earlier to school.
But I would say that growing up in Hattiesburg, we moved to Palmers Crossing, which was outside of Hattiesburg, the city of limits, where the church, Priest Creek [Missionary] Baptist Church, and the school, DePriest high school, junior high school, and then later on, went to Earl Trevilion, a new school.

I would say that my life as a child growing up was good. I had very close family ties. My maternal side, especially my mother, had 10 sisters and brothers and her parents were from Wayne County, Mississippi. My father's people were from Pearl River County, Mississippi, the home of Theodore Bilbo, that area near the Gulf Coast.[1]

My father's people came from the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian, Mississippi. But I do genealogical research, the reason I'm bringing this in. But my mother started teaching us when we were very young to not be afraid of people, white people, especially because she grew up in a very mixed community in Wayne County, Mississippi, and she told us not to be afraid of white people when we were very young.

She said she'd grown up with them and played with them, and they were just like anybody else, and don't be afraid of them. So I took it to heart, and when you're teaching a child when they're very young, these messages come into them, and we don't know what we're going to carry them with us or not.

But mine stayed with me and has served me well, if I may say, throughout my life. I was a good student in pre premier [preschool] and first grade on up through—I said pre premier, we used to use those terms—and through 12th grade, I was always interested in reading. The thing that annoyed me, I couldn't get books. The schools were segregated. We got second hand books from the white kids, and the little library downtown Hattiesburg was segregated.

We had nowhere to go but to church and the schools, I said earlier. I remember going downtown Hattiesburg to pay bills for my mother, and I would encounter whites, and in the woodwork store. I would buy candy, chocolate peanuts and peanut butter. But we couldn't sit down. I noticed the white kids sitting down, but at that time, I really wasn't interested in sitting at the counter because I had to pay my mother's bills and rush back home, and I wanted this candy.

[1] *Theodore Bilbo (1877–1947)* was a Mississippi politician known for his staunch white supremacist views, serving as Governor and U.S. Senator.

And I started writing about this kind of thing. You know, I haven't written anything, but you know how words come to your head and you start thinking about things? And I started writing some of these words down, getting on the bus coming from Palmers Crossing, and where I live and that's where a lot of night life was at Camp Shelby.[2]
We grew up in that community where you had all the music and B.B. King [referring to a renowned musician], and anybody you could think of came to that area. Going downtown for me was a mixture, because the bus driver was such a racist segregationist, and he would start yelling and call you the N-word. The adults telling him to get back. There was an invisible line of demarcation for them to get back to domestics, who were riding the bus.[3]

I'm observing this as a young child, probably 12 or 13 years old, and that was my first real bad experience as far as segregation was concerned, was with the bus driver. And I guess that happens with a lot of people. The bus driver would take us to and from but I only encountered white people when I had to go downtown.

Jocelyn Imani: Can you speak a little bit about your early politicization? What caused you to observe that segregation was incorrect? What caused you to want to do something?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I will tell you about the death of Emmett Till, Emmett Lewis Till, young Black boy who lived way up in the Mississippi Delta, over 200 miles from where I live, was murdered, and we read about it. I so identified with him, because although I had never been to the Delta—where I grew up, was the Piney Woods. There was no farming in that area. You had the water and then Piney Woods.

I felt his pain. It was just something that so weighed heavily on my heart. The description of how he was beaten and tortured and with this cotton gin around him and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Oh my God.

He was castrated, if I may recall correctly, by these two white men who were brothers, [J. W.] Milam and [Roy] Bryant. And so I would go to bed every night, pulling the covers over my head, thinking that they may come into my life. And I was tortured. I was frightened.

So much so until, I think it was like ninth grade, I went to my social studies teacher, Mr. Clark, who had attended Tougaloo College, him and his wife. Because the newspaper had begun to address the Constitution as it related to Emmett Till. The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution were printed in the Hattiesburg American newspaper, and I didn't understand it, because I'd never seen the Constitution. I didn't know what it meant.

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[2] *Camp Shelby* is a military training base in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, historically significant for training soldiers during both World Wars and the Vietnam War. It was also notable for training Black soldiers, including those in segregated units.
[3] A reference to Jim Crow-era segregation, where Black domestic workers, often commuting by bus, faced enforced racial boundaries dictating their place in public spaces.

I asked Mr. Clark, what does this mean? He said, “oh, it has something to do with the Constitution,” and he walked away. So I went and found the Constitution and committed the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, to memory, for empowerment purposes.[4] I was so terrorized in my spirit, so horrified, and it gave me a little bit of relief, but I still couldn't relate it to the bigger picture.

This young man who was a year older than I was, who had gone through all this, and I'm down there in the southern part of the state, near the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans. Feeling this torture and this pain, and this is when I realized that I had to do something about it, whatever it was, and we didn't have any demonstrations in our community. We didn't have anything.

As a matter of fact, I didn't know the bus boycott was going on in Montgomery because we didn't get any news. The newspapers were very, very uninformative. The radios were uninformative. The news – period. We didn't get information. And so I just remember reading something about some people marching in Alabama [referring to the Selma Marches], but I couldn't relate it to anything. And so when Emmett Till was murdered, I felt again that I had to do something, and that was a single experience. I didn't have a broader context at that time to relate it to.

Jocelyn Imani: In addition to memorizing the 13th through 15th amendments and doing some self education to uplift, what were the types of organizations that you began to join?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Later on, we joined the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. My sister Joyce and I joined the NAACP youth chapter. Mr. Clyde Kennard, was our NAACP Youth Council advisor, and we had meetings in a local church in Hattiesburg.

I saw Mr. Kennard a few times at the meetings, along with Dr. [Benjamin E.] Murph from Laurel [MS]. He would bring students from Laurel, Mississippi. Dr. Murph was a dentist. That was the extent of it, but I still didn't get the bigger picture. Mrs. Beard, Eileen Beard, the sister of Mr. Vernon Dahmer. Mr. Dahmer’s home was fire bombed, and he was burned to death in his home. He was taken to the hospital, but he died from smoke inhalation and third and fourth degree burns. His family did get out of the house.

The Ku Klux Klan threw the smoke bomb into his house. Mr. Dahmer was the president of NAACP there in Forrest County [MS], and he would help people to pay the poll taxes, because poll taxes at that time were being charged, and he was one who spoke up and wanted people to take charge of their lives as related to their own self-determination.

[4] A reference to the Reconstruction Amendments—the 13th (abolition of slavery), 14th (citizenship and equal protection), and 15th (voting rights for Black men)—memorized as a means of self-empowerment and legal awareness in the fight for civil rights.

So, him and Mrs. Beard would drive to Jackson, Mississippi, to state NAACP Youth Council meetings and to statewide NAACP meetings in Jackson, Mississippi. Mr. Roy Wilkins would come, and other people would come from the national office. And I would get a chance to sit and observe them and sit in the back of the car listening to the adults talk. Children then were seen and not heard. So that was the inspiration that I got at that time.

Jocelyn Imani: How old were you when you joined the NAACP youth council?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: About 14. But you couldn't let white people know that you were having these meetings. Membership was prohibited by the state as well.

Jocelyn Imani: What do you mean?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: It was a crime, more or less, to be a member of the NAACP.

Jocelyn Imani: How long were you involved with the NAACP? Or are you still involved?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I'm still involved. But at that period, a horrible thing happened to Mr. Clyde Kennard, who was our Youth Council Advisor, was arrested after he attempted to enroll in University of Southern Mississippi. It was called Mississippi Southern at the time. He was a Korean War veteran who had studied at the University of Chicago, and his stepfather died, so his mother owned a chicken farm, so he came home to help his mother with the chicken farm, and he wanted to complete his education.

It was that simple. He went to enroll at the University of Southern Mississippi with the help of Mr. Medgar Evers and some of the other local NAACP people. And two times he went on campus and he was arrested. The first time they said he brought moonshine in the trunk of his car on campus. He was arrested.

The second time he was arrested, they said he had received five sacks of stolen chicken feed, based on testimony of a young uneducated man who worked there. And he was sentenced to seven years of hard labor at Parchman Penitentiary [Mississippi State Penitentiary]. And when I went to college in 1960, he was in jail in Forest County, and he was later sent to Parchman Penitentiary. He was released in 1963, around January of 1963.

He was dying from stomach cancer at that time, Dick Gregory was the one who was able to get pressure applied through then Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to have the young man who stated that he had sold him chicken feed… they extracted a deposition from him. They took him to Chicago and extracted deposition and took him to Chicago and gave it to then Attorney

General Robert Kennedy, who applied pressure to Governor Ross Barnett, Governor Mississippi, Ross Barnett, and he was released, but Mr. Kennard was dying at that time.

The University of Southern Mississippi had already asked that he be released, and I went to Chicago to visit him. I had dropped out of school in December of 1962 after a picket at Woolworth's in Jackson, Mississippi, and got arrested with Mr. Charles Bracey in December, Christmas time, after having been up and dealt with Ms. Hamer, Fannie Lou Hamer, August of 1962 and then came back to Tougaloo campus.

James Meredith was enrolling in Ole Miss [University of Mississippi], and the whole state was on fire that time. So I came back and went to—just lost the thought—there's so much going on in my head. But I was telling you that I dropped out of college that December, went to Atlanta and started working for SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and asked Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, who became Executive Director of SNCC, to help me to get to Chicago to see Mr. Kennard, because he had moved to Chicago, he was being treated in Billings Hospital at the time.

She was able to get me there, and I stayed in the home of the Fishers, Charles and Sylvia Fisher in Chicago, and was able to see Mr. Kennard a few times before he died, and he told me a sorry story about what had happened to him in Parchman. He described to me the conditions under which he had to live, and also they forced him to work in the fields when he was unable to walk.

He would try to walk with this lone cotton sack, picking cotton, and he would fall in the mud, and the inmates would pick him up and stand him up on the guards orders and force him to continue walking. And he said that Brogan shoes that he was wearing, the mud was so thick it pulled the soles off the bottom of his shoes, and he was desperate, but there was nothing he could do.

He was a slightly built man, and his weight continues to drop, and he got sicker and sicker, but if it had not been for Mr. Dick Gregory, I don't know what would have happened to him. That was some of the work Mr. Gregory did. But this is very sorrowful and painful for me to talk about, but it also helps to let people know the conditions under which those of us who struggle live. And I'm revealing this under extreme pressure at this point in time. So bear with me.

Jocelyn Imani: No, that's perfectly okay. I want to double back a little bit, because you mentioned SNCC. But as I understand in the chronology, COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] predates SNCC.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: No, it doesn't. SNCC was formed in 1960.

Jocelyn Imani: I mean your involvement.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I became involved with NAACP first and then I joined up with SNCC, and then COFO came about as a result of the organization there in Mississippi. SNCC, CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], NAACP and SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], they became an umbrella organization. They were the umbrella organization that brought the Freedom Summer into Mississippi.

Jocelyn Imani: For the record, can you please state what COFO is?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Council of Federated Organizations.

Jocelyn Imani: And SCLC

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Southern Christian Leadership Conference and CORE is Congress of Racial Equality.

Jocelyn Imani: Now, can you speak a little bit about the campaigns and actions that you worked on in those organizations?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Working with SNCC, we worked in the Mississippi Delta, which had a predominant Black population at the time, and went up there in 1961, [19]62 to attempt to register Black people to vote, and encountered a great deal of hostility and abuse from the local white population.

The Black population had to be about maybe 70 percent, 80 percent. You had attorney Wylie Branton, who worked with the Little Rock Nine, who was there with the Southern Regional Council, Randy Blackwell, who also worked at Southern Regional Council, Jack Minnis, who also worked with the Southern Regional Council. And they were the ones who had gotten money to help us to work in that area.

I remember going up to the Mississippi Delta, in a car driven by Dave [J.] Dennis and my cousin Maddie Biggers were in the car. Colia Liddell, who was from Jackson, Mississippi, a Tougaloo student who worked with Medgar Evers and she later joined up with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

There were three women and two black men. Lester McKinney, a kid also known as Baba Zulu [Dr. El Senzengakulu Zulu], was in the car. There were two males. We went to a meeting in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Dr. Aaron Henry convened the meeting to form the Council of Federated Organizations COFO. As we got there, the firemen came and said, there was a fire and

there was no fire. And they pulled the hose out and came in, but they retreated after. They looked so bizarre.

That night, we stayed beyond the curfew. I didn't know they had these sundown laws, and we passed the curfew, which was 12 midnight, back off the streets at 12. So as Dave Dennis was driving, we were trying to get back to Jackson. We stopped on the highway, Dave and Lester McKinney, Baba Zulu were the males in the car. The white officer in the back of us told us —we were near Mount Bayou, Mississippi—to Dave to come and sit in his car.

He questioned Dave's paternity, asked him if his daddy was a white man, and all kinds of crazy questions. He was in the car for about an hour. So Dave came back to the car and told us, this man is crazy. He's asking me about my blue eyes. And so he said he's gonna take me to jail and arrest me. Will you all follow me? We said, "yeah."

So we followed him back to the Clarksdale jail, and Colia and I walked out, and we were masquerading as lawyers. We were real spunky if I may use that term. So they looked at us and told us if we didn't get the hell out of the building that they were in… And so we ran and got into the car, and Lester took off, and we drove around the Delta all night long.

The Delta is black. It's midnight. Nothing shining, but the stars. We were lost, round, around in circles. And so we finally got to Ruleville [MS], where Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer was from, and we had been told that the night watchman in Ruleville was being watched by Milam, who killed Emmett Till. When we saw the sign and we saw the speed limit saying something like 20 miles an hour I said, "Lester, don't go over 20." I was paralyzed with fear on the floor of the car.

And so we finally made it to Cleveland, Mississippi, Baltimore County, where Amzie Moore lived. He was local NAACP president, and Amzie had been very gracious and hosted Bob Moses, Robert Moses, who was the director of the project, and Miss Ella Baker, had sent Bob Moses to Amzie Moore. Things sort of go [by] referrals during that period, and there's more to it than that.

We found the Moore's house, and Diane Nash and James Bevel were staying there at the time. Their first child, an infant, had been born, and we all moved into the house. Charlie Cobb, he had just come to Mississippi, we persuaded him to stay in Mississippi. He was on his way to Texas, to a NAACP meeting and stopped in Jackson.

Lawrence Guyot, Jesse Harrison, and myself were in the office when he came. So we persuaded him to stay in Mississippi. That's how he got there. You know, like Booker T. [Washington] said to cast your bucket down where you are? Well, that's what we did in Cleveland, Mississippi, and started working in the fields and with the sharecroppers to get enough people to take them to the

courthouse and Indianola [MS] where we took Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer and the other people, and the rest is history.

The story speaks for itself, but we stayed there all day, waiting for them to attempt to register to vote, to no avail. In the meantime, we were going around knocking on doors in the community of Indianola, and didn't get anyone to come out and went back to Ruleville that evening, and I'm leaving part out about the bus.[5] That's part of history, too.

The thing that struck me was that we were coming back—Colia and I, Tim Jenkins, Attorney Timothy Jenkins, who lives here, who's at that time, a Yale Law student volunteering in Jackson. Ms. Hamer came on the road walking, and she was crying. And so we asked her what was wrong. She said [B.D] Marlow, the owner of the [Marlow] plantation had told her to take her name off [voter registration] or she would have to leave.

So she left. We embraced her immediately and took her to a little church. And we had one of those, I would imagine, Harriet Tubman type meetings when someone had been able to free themselves and huddle and got into this huddle and started singing and praying and embracing.

And then she went to live with the Sissons in Ruleville, husband, and wife, they were older people.[6] A few days later, the house was shot up, and people thought that Colia and I were in the house, but two young women from Cleveland, Mississippi were visiting, and they sustained gunshot wounds to the head and to the body.

Jocelyn Imani: Did they survive?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Yeah, they survived, but they were trying to shoot Ms. Hamer. We went to Jackson for that weekend. But the whole work in the Delta, you know, was a challenge. But you know what? I was not scared, because I felt that this had to be done, and who else was going to do it? I was one of the ones to do it.

My ancestors had done as much as they could. Then those who were living, they had worked, and my uncles and aunts had been on this earth, and I was the next generation. So the burden was up on us. You know, we had to carry it forward. So I felt that I had to do something. So I went on up into the Delta and came back that fall, James Meredith was enrolled in Ole Miss. We'd been up in Delta, and all kinds of things were happening in Mississippi, so we were facing some turbulent times.

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[5] In the summer of 1962, SNCC workers and several residents of Ruleville, Mississippi boarded an old yellow school bus after attempting to register to vote at the county courthouse in Indianola. They were now heading back to Ruleville, twenty-six miles away. But the bus was stopped by local police, and the driver was charged with driving a bus of the wrong color.

[6] Herman and Hattie Sisson were residents of Ruleville, Mississippi, known for their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. On September 10, 1962, their home was targeted by night riders who fired multiple gunshots into the residence. At the time, their granddaughter, Vivian Hillet, and her friend, Marylene Burks, were visiting on their way to Jackson State University.

That was [19]62 and then I came back to Tougaloo in that fall, that December. I stayed at Tougaloo on campus and picketed Woolworth's with Charles Bracey, a college classmate.[7] I didn't go home. I stayed there and stayed at the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Salter. Mr. Salter was a professor at Tougaloo, and him and his wife had gotten locked up picketing Woolworth's, and so I went and picketed and got locked up there in Jackson.

Mr. Medgar Evers took Bracey and I to Woolworth's, put us out, got locked up, stayed in jail, and the jailer tried to [indistinct] me, came up from behind the cell, I'm in the cell by myself, and heard jailer Miller came up and say, "Dorie, in that Civil Rights Movement, do they teach you all to go with white men?"

I said, "No sir, they teach us that we're sister and brother and we should love each other." He said, "Okay Dorie, Medgar is going to come and get you out." I said, "yes sir." Medgar Evers, I was not prepared. I had no idea that I was that vulnerable. No idea. So Mr. Evers did come and get us out. Took us back to Tougaloo.

And two nights later, I think someone shot at Mr. Salter's house, and a press release went out from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee saying that it was a good thing I hadn't been in that bed because I was going to share Mr. Salter's infant baby's room, and it was an extra bed that the bullet hit, the bed where I was supposed to sleep.

When I stayed up later talking with Betty Pool, I didn't get into bed. But you know, those kind of things that happened. So we went on to Atlanta and [indistinct] farm for a retreat for SNCC, and that's when I joined SNCC.

Jocelyn Imani: What year was this?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: 1962.

Jocelyn Imani: And what about the COFO period?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: [19]62. August of '62.

Jocelyn Imani: I just want to jump back just a little bit earlier. You said you weren't explaining the bus part of the story. Is it because it's well documented elsewhere?

[7] Woolworth's was a national chain of department stores, infamous for its segregated lunch counters in the Jim Crow South. It became a major target of the Civil Rights Movement, with protests and sit-ins demanding racial integration.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: The bus that Ms. Hamer and the people who went to the courthouse, they said the bus was a yellow bus. It was the wrong color bus. And so they had to take up a collection on the bus to pay the fine before they could move, because the bus driver had been arrested.

Jocelyn Imani: I want to dig more into your movement, kind of influences. But before we do that, because you've made reference to Tougaloo, can we just for a brief moment go into HBCU [historically black colleges and universities], which schools you've been into and comment on the HBCU.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I initially enrolled at Jackson State. There were two colleges in Hattiesburg: Mississippi Southern at the time, and William Carey College, and neither of which I could attend, because of segregation. So we went 90 miles north to Jackson State [University], and that's where I enrolled. And Jackson State was horrendous. Oh, my God. I was president of the Dorm Council at Ayer Hall.

We had a meeting. And you know, having grown up in the church, the tradition was to say a prayer right before you have a meeting, of course. I said a prayer and the next morning, Miss Rose, the matron of the dorm told me the Dean wanted to see me. Dean Gill wanted to see me. And I told my sister Jocelyn, the Dean wants to see me and she said, "you want me to go with you?" I said, "yes."

Got in there, and the Dean started asking about the prayer. The prayer? I asked God, you know, to have mercy. And, you know, I didn't have anything to say. So it got worse and that's when my militancy came out, you know, it was like, man, you are wrong. My mother would have been very upset because I started stamping my feet, and he was saying that I couldn't stay on the campus. And I said, I don't want to be on the campus. Anybody who questioned a prayer. I don't want to be here.

Then it got to the higher level, Dean Oscar Rogers, who had graduated from Tougaloo and went to Harvard. He was from Vicksburg [MS], and then he got his PhD from some divinity school, and he was the Dean of Students. I had to go to his office. And it really got down.

Jocelyn Imani: Because of the prayer. All of this is because of the prayer?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Allegedly. I thought I came from Palmers Crossing to Jackson. I didn't have anything to bring there, but me, my spirit. And so he said, "Ms. Ladner I'm going to hip you before I ship you." It got like that. When Jackson State's camp [indistinct], there were young people such as myself with the Panhellenic Council. I pledged Delta Sigma Theta and here were all kinds of Greek people.

There we sit in the little recreation hall. And James Meredith had come back from the military with his wife and their first child, and we were sitting around to talk. And my first organizing was donating to Jackson State's canned food [drive], because they would serve us pork and beans and wieners, you know, hot dogs and that's just sorry food.

I remember getting up, which I'm not an early riser, getting up at like five o'clock, six o'clock in the morning, going, putting fires on the table, saying, "aren't you tired of pork and beans" and some other kinds of things to students. If you are, why don't you say something about it and then come back and get into bed.

So we would sit around and talk about things like that. Mrs. Young, we had three Black lawyers in Mississippi, attorney Jack Young, R. Jess Brown and Carsie Hall. Three Black lawyers in Mississippi who had studied at home and taken the bar. A young man had come on campus and said there's some people coming to help us get our freedom. And he left. It was Thomas Gaither.

Medgar Evers' office was across the street, NAACP office, and so we had Wednesdays off. We'd go and talk to him. He was very engaging and very charismatic. He was also a good source for empowering you, by telling us about our rights as young people. We were young, and so I met him when I was like 14, and he engaged us.

He was one who talked about our freedom, and then Thomas Gaither was one who came on campus and said, we want to get our freedom. But he disappeared, and he was talking about the Freedom Riders. We were in the dark all the time. So after the Tougaloo Nine students were arrested, these are nine students from Tougaloo College who attempted to sit in the public library.

Mrs. Young, who was teaching at Jackson State, took my sister Joyce and me to Tougaloo College to a meeting, and Dr. [Adam Daniel] Beittel's office [in] the mansion on Tougaloo's campus, and there were several other young people there. So it was suggested we have a prayer meeting on the Jackson State's campus since it was a state school, we would get arrested. We had no one to [post] our bail and so forth.

So we did that and came back on campus. And the next two nights we had this attempt at a prayer meeting, and President [Jacob] Reddix came running from nowhere. He was president at the time. Came from nowhere and knocked the student body president—Reverend Emmett Byrne was there, he was one of the speakers—knocked them down and he started running around the campus in circles.

And my sister Joyce's roommate was standing there and [he] knocked her down to the ground and had her expelled from campus. He sent someone to her room and told her to leave that night.

Her parents had to drive from Ocean Springs, Mississippi on the Gulf Coast, to Jackson to pick up and take her home. Yes.

So the next day, we looked out the window. There were K9 dogs with the police. The police came on campus that night and looked out the window, there were the police, and so they came from Vicksburg. So we still didn't stop. We started marching towards downtown Jackson, and saw this barricade across the street, a police officer.

So we turned left and went to the Black community, and then here comes the police. [I heard] "turn the dogs on them goddamn niggas." I got tear gassed, and another young man got tear gas in his eyes. So I ran to this lady's house, and she told me, come on in. She washed tear gas out of my eyes, and she said, go and sit on the porch.

I went and sat on the porch, and police were running up and down the street and in the alley with the dogs and like Harriet Tubman days were. We watched the police, and so they didn't arrest anyone. So later on, when it got dark, I went back to campus. And next few weeks, school was out, but spring break, and then summer came, and then we went to Tougaloo.

Jocelyn Imani: Why did you switch?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I didn't want to stay on that campus. No, it was political and, you know, socially oppressive.

Jocelyn Imani: Can we speak a little bit about your later work? When did you move to Washington, DC?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I moved in August 25, 1974. I enrolled in Howard [University's] School of Social work on August 26.

Jocelyn Imani: Why did you come to DC?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Graduate school. And my husband, being Ethiopian, was living in Atlanta, and he wanted to be around more Ethiopians. He was working on his PhD in Political Science at the time. So he completed his paper, working on the Guinea Bissau and the revolution in Angola. All he had to do was finish his dissertation and I had completed my B.A. degree at Tougaloo College. I only had like nine credits when I dropped out and came to Howard and decided to get my master's in social work so I could start earning money.

Jocelyn Imani: Can you connect the dots a little bit from the SNCC years in Mississippi to the 1970s in DC?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I stayed in SNCC until 1964, 1963. I was a fundraiser and student. Even though we were students at Tougaloo, we were always actively engaged in the community, doing something with SNCC and in 1963 the March on Washington. I went to New York to do fundraising.

We were sent on a retreat to rest, but got word my sister Joyce was working the March on Washington office, and I was doing fundraising at SNCC's office in New York, and then came back to the March on Washington in Washington, DC, and then back to Tougaloo. And so I couldn't leave well enough alone. I dropped out again. I dropped out of school three times.

Jocelyn Imani: Yeah, I was gonna ask you about that. Can you say more about that?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Three times. At that time, I started working in Mississippi and probably Atlanta, just actively engaged. This was a very crucial time for freedom loving young Black people, because we were on the cutting edge of changing not only the city, but throughout the South.

You had the sit-ins, you had the marches, then you had the March on Washington, and then all of a sudden you had the bombing of the Church in Birmingham [16th Street Baptist Church bombing]. Oh, my God. I was in school when the church was bombed, so we just couldn't sit in the classroom. Plus Medgar Evers was killed June 12, 1963 and that just did it. Too much going on.

I was doing a lot of things. And when Medgar Evers was killed, we had a big boycott going on in Jackson, asking for Black police officers, asking for Blacks to be referred to as "Mr. and Ms." or Blacks to be able to try clothes on before they bought them, to be able to sit at a lunch counter.

These were very miscellaneous kinds of things. To try clothes on before you buy them. But that was such an indignity. You could buy them, but you couldn't try them on. Have you ever heard of that before?

Jocelyn Imani: I have.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: That was being done, and we were asking for that, and Mr. Evers was killed right in the middle of that. That night, we were all with him, Dave Dennis, myself, and Anne Moody, the one who wrote *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. We were all together that night and at the lounge, and we had eaten some food, and so we went out to go to our cars. Mr. Evers went to his car.

So we said, see you in the morning. We went to Dave and Maddie's house and I couldn't sleep that night. I just heard doors opening and closing, and I was very restless. And so when my cousin Maddie came knocking on my door, she said "Medgar is dead." I said, "I know it."

Jocelyn Imani: You felt it.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Oh yeah. I couldn't sleep. That's when Vivian Malone and Mr. [James] Hood were trying to enroll in the University of Alabama. [Gov.] George Wallace student schoolhouse door [referring to Gov. Wallace's Stand in the Schoolhouse Door] that was the same day, and Ms. Hamer was beaten that night up in Winona, Montgomery, County, Mississippi. She and three young ladies who were with her, and Mr. Lawrence Guyot, who was a student, was beaten when he went to try to get them out. Did you know Guyot?

Jocelyn Imani: I met him once. When [indistinct] came down. Y'all had an event at Busboys [and Poets], with Tariq, Frank and Gene's son.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I got Guyot into the movement at Tougaloo.

Jocelyn Imani: Can you tell that story? How did you?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: We would get rides into Tougaloo. At that time, Tougaloo was isolated in a wooded area. We just had one dark road going into Jackson. It was dark and lonely.One Saturday, I had this ride I was going to get. I said, "Guyot, come on, go with me." So he followed me, got in the car, we went to the Freedom Ride set up an office on Lynch Street, right next to the president of NAACP office. It was a house.

Paul Brooks and Catherine, Diane Nash, James Bevel, all had an office there. And so that's where we meet. Guyot went in there, and the rest is history. Before then Guyot had been kind of socially active and sort of uncontrolled at times. But once he got through the movement, he was fine. He was so brilliant. He was studying pre-med and so forth from Pass Christian, Mississippi.

Jocelyn Imani: Thank you for that. Thank you, because our lives have changed. So I know we don't have a ton of time left. I'm looking at where to go next, just because I want it on the record. Can you kind of do a roll call, of sorts, of all of the teachers and leaders and you know, more seasoned adults that you count as influences from your time during the movement.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Ms. Zola Jackson was my first grade teacher from Hattiesburg at DePriest school. Ms. Mercer, who was the, what do you call the teacher who was in charge? She was a 12th grade teacher. She was very influential. She was going to grad school in Indiana. There were a ton of them.

Mrs. Trevillian was another. She was my third grade teacher, Ms. Carlisle—I was telling my grandson about this moment. He's in second grade. Miss Carlisle had this long, dark skirt on, black sweater and hair black, and she was very pale looking. And she would say, I brought my strap today. She was a second grade teacher. We used to have those little spelling books I had memorized all my words, and I wrote them down. When she started calling them out, and I'd already written them, she accused me of cheating, and I got a spanking.

Mr. Todd was the principal who was very involved with us. We had Black teachers who really helped us along, very involved in our lives. Ms. Chapman, she was over the Girl Scouts club and would make sure we got to all the meetings across Mississippi. Mr. Ratliff, I used to sing first soprano, and in the league club, we'd have competitions, and would engage in all the competitions across the state. So these were early influences.

Mr. Clark, the one who told me [the newspaper] had something to do with the constitution. He had a positive influence, although he wasn't that talkative. I later found out Mr. Clark and his wife and several others had sued Forrest County because they couldn't register to vote. But you wouldn't have guessed it from the way he sort of shrugged me off.

Mr. Peterson at Jackson State was an influence, because he understood what had happened to us when we got tear gassed, and talked to me about it. Dr. Jane Ellen McAllister at Jackson State, who memorized everybody's name. When New Orleans was being integrated, she would come in the room and say, “only evil will triumph if the good do nothing.” It's longer than that, and I can't tell you who said it, but that was the essence of it. And she would tell us that we had to do something about segregation. She was a little white woman by appearance, but she would tell us that we had to engage in getting our rights. It was a big psychology class at Jackson State.

The three Black lawyers Hall, Young and R. Jess Brown. They were very involved, because when I got arrested they were handling my case. Mr. Medgar Evers had a profound impact. Lord have mercy. And many more.

Jocelyn Imani: Can you talk about Ms. Hamer?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Yes, I talked about Miss Hamer. For context, she was old enough to be my mother. Now that I think about it, we were the messengers, taking messages to these adults. We had been so inspired. But I don't know from whence it came, but when it came to us, we went to them and gave the message to them, and they took up and followed us. Isn't that something? We were teenagers.

Ms. Lula Bell Johnson from Greenwood Mississippi. Ms. Hazel Palmer [from] Jackson, Mississippi, Ms. Shirley Anderson from Hattiesburg, Mr. B.F. Barn there in Hattiesburg. Motley Drester, Willard Hayes, Margaret, Jerry Prince.

Jocelyn Imani: I saw in another interview, you mentioned something about Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.]. Did you also cross paths with Dr. Martin Luther King?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: He came to Tougaloo in 1961 when I first got on campus, but I didn't run up to him. Our Delta pyramid line was there, and there's a picture of my sister and some of the pyramids standing there talking to him, and I'm standing back here, back there, behind Baba Zulu, whom I had a little dating going on at the time.

I was looking at him from a distance, because I always check people out—leaders. And I was looking at him, trying to size him up. He was very gracious, shaking everybody's hand. But I was looking at him, like you looking at me now, trying to check him out. And he was accompanied by some other young men, and I met him in Atlanta maybe a couple times..

Jocelyn Imani: Wow. If you think of anybody else's name, feel free to throw that back in there, just for the record.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: That's why I said, [during] Freedom Rides, Diane Nash and James Bevel, they had a profound impact on me because they were young people who had started demonstrations and they helped to found SNCC number one. It also went to Nashville with CT Vivian and James Lawson. That's where we got the whole concept of nonviolence weaved into the movement.

When I met them, it was like, oh my God. I didn't miss a meeting there in Jackson from Tougaloo's campus. We always went when they were teaching and organizing nonviolent resistance in a beloved community. That was it? Because it gave me a whole perspective, a whole concept of how organizations supposedly run and how to do it. Once I went out into the community, I knew I had it.

Jocelyn Imani: This is amazing to hear you say this, because how you describe feeling is how I felt when I sat in a nonviolence training with Dr. Lawson.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Really?

Jocelyn Imani: Yes.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Wow.

Jocelyn Imani: When it came time for the Jena Six, that trial, about 2007.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Oh my God. I told people, we would still be down there because we wouldn't have left.

Jocelyn Imani: I was a student at Fisk University at the time. I don't know who called Dr. Lawson, but they called him. We were there at Fisk University Chapel, and he's how I learned about an agent provocateur, and he's how I learned about that nonviolent trade. And everything you said was exactly how I felt.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: Amen:

Jocelyn Imani: Yes, yes, ma'am.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: You have to go through those lessons. You just don't get it. You have to go through all the lessons. People think that, no, I can just go out there and demonstrate, no, it's more to it than that. I went to Highlander [Folk School] as well.[8]

Jocelyn Imani: You went to Highlander? Ok. We don't have a lot of time. Can you briefly talk about Highlander, but then can you transition into talking about the origins of Black Power and your work in The Delta?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: We went to Highlander in [19]62 to learn the whole concept of voter registration. Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins from the island and Miles Horton were all there to teach us. SNCC sent all of us to get those lessons, and from there, I went on back to Mississippi.

Jocelyn Imani: Can you talk about Black Power and the Delta and all that work?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I've been laughing because we were doing Black Power all the time, but we hadn't defined our work. Everything that we did, from the organizing and empowerment pieces, was building a whole Black Power movement, but we had not put a label on it. We had not defined it.

When the words were uttered—see Jim [James] Foreman had already talked about power, I mentioned to you that we went into the Mississippi Delta, where they call it the Black Belt where Blacks outnumber the whites by three to one. That was in building a Black Power base. And so it was called the Black Belt area.

[8] The Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market Tennessee–formerly the Highlander Folk School–and the ideas associated with it are woven throughout SNCC's history. It was founded in 1932 by Myles Horton, a native Tennessean who wanted to create an educational institution for the poor and working people of Appalachia.

Alabama was another Black Belt. You've probably seen this in literature, Lowndes County, Black Belt counties. So we had not defined it as Black Power, although we were doing the things of Black Power. When those words were uttered there in Greenwood [MS] by Stokely and [Willie] Ricks, Jim Forman had already put the word in Ricks' head, you know that we're doing this.

When they got there in Greenwood, started uttering it, it just resonated. We'd been in Greenwood during voter registration since [19]62 and people were engaged and mobilized and engaged. Dick Gregory came, and they refused to arrest him, because he was a man by the time with a lot of power and influence. They wouldn't arrest Dick Gregory and his wife came on this maiden name they arrested her, but that still didn't resonate with the people.

But when you said Black and we said power, you saw how people just started going off. And so was there Black Power. We need Black Power. And everybody was just going off because all of a sudden it just clicked. Black and power, we're being empowered.

We're being empowered. "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud." Then all of a sudden, you look around and you just look at yourself. I look new. How do you describe that feeling? They had organized Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, and when they had the March Against Fear and [James] Meredith first took over, Stokely and others brought the Black Panthers there. I have a picture of me holding a Black Panther sign, marching and that sort of took off in Alabama. You know, it scared people, [the] Black Panther.

But when we used that Black Power? It frightened the status quo and Black people wanted to hear it because we had been working all of our lives, and we knew that we'd been working. How do you say it? It was a feeling, a feeling. Young children, young people. You see young people just jumping up and down. Old people started kicking their feet up. And people who couldn't walk got up and started moving. People who couldn't talk started uttering words.

It was just a joyful feeling and the music, James Brown came out: "say it loud, and I'm Black and I'm proud." During the march, the debate was going back and forth between Dr. King and Stokely with SNCC we were all debating. It couldn't be controlled.

At Canton [referring to the March Against Fear in Canton, MS], when they threw the tear gas on everybody and Ricks went and grabbed Dr. King and hauled him to safety, Mukasa [Dada] you called him Mukasa, also known as Ricks.

Others were taking safety and Tougaloo chapel basement was a triage area where the medical doctors were set up. That's documented in *The Good Doctors* by Dittmer. John Dittmer. In the reference I made, I think it was Forman's book *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. He talked

about Black and then the power, maybe in the same sentence at times if you go back and read that.

But Dittmer was talking about the triage system set up. I talked with Dr. Smith, who was the medical director for the doctors there in the Mississippi medical committee. He told me last year, when I went there for the fifth anniversary of March Against Fear in Tougaloo's chapel, that he had never felt so powerless.

He was happy about the march, but he also had a great deal of fear, because he knew that there was only one hospital that could take people. That was Saint Dominic's hospital.

Jocelyn Imani: I know about the hospital.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: You do?

Jocelyn Imani: I do.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: You've been there?

Jocelyn Imani: I have.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: That was the only hospital and that is how far they were. His job was to make sure Dr. King was taken care of, and that was an awesome responsibility. He was sitting there almost with tears in his eyes, and he revealed to me that he had talked to Dr. King about what to do if he did sustain injuries that may have been fatal or near fatal. All of that was discussed, and they talked about the nearest hospital, what hospital would take him and so forth, because Mr. Evers was murdered, he went to one hospital that witnessed—

Jocelyn Imani: I want to wrap up, so we need to get out of here. I've got two final questions. One, you mentioned something I think was really curious that you knew before you knew. You knew in your spirit, in your head, about Mr. Evers.

In paying attention to your career and other interviews you've done, and just how you move through the world, spirit is something that's significant. So can you make a comment about the role of spirit in shaping your decision making, in how you've moved through the world, what carries you through your activism?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I want to say, first of all, I'm grateful to God for my life, and that spirit has followed me and carried me. I've been in some very dangerous positions in my life, and I've been

spared, and I give praise, highest praise, to God first. Because it had not been for God when they attempted to bomb our office in Natchez, Mississippi I may not be here.

I just feel that the hand of God has been over me. And I can't explain it. Cannot explain it. I grew up in the church, and I grew up in a very spiritual home, and I've always felt that there was a higher power than myself, and I've always believed. That's all that I can say about that.

When I spoke about Mr. Evers murder that night, I had no idea. I was 20, and I didn't know anything about psychology, insomnia, any of that stuff. All I knew is I heard the doors opening and closing and that I couldn't sleep, and I was sitting up in the room, and when Maddie knocked on the door she said, "Dorie?" I said, "yes." She said, "Medgar is dead." I said, "I know it," and I didn't get up. I knew it. But in spite of that, nothing has stopped me. It has not stopped me, and I've kept going.

Jocelyn Imani: Last question. You are a remarkable woman, Dr. Ladner, and unfortunately, this is not nearly enough time to tease everything out. But I see a theme throughout your narrative of perseverance and determination, of being connected to a larger mission and being driven by a larger purpose.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I'm driven, yes.

Jocelyn Imani: You said earlier off camera that you were born with this passion. Years from now we're doing this interview for perpetuity. Years from now, there may be some young woman or young man that feels that things are off and doesn't know why they feel that things are off, or they just feel compelled to act.

And there's that tentative feeling that comes when you know something isn't right, but you haven't figured out exactly the means to change it. Can you give some type of encouragement or comment to the young people, both the young people of today's activist generation, as well as those that are to come?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: First of all, I want to thank the you, Dr. Imani and the Black Power Chronicles for giving me the opportunity to express myself and to share with the greater public a little of my experiences, which has been kind of painful because I'm beginning to experience some PTSD at times due to some of this trauma that I've experienced.

However, I want to say that I encourage each and every one of the young people to engage in some type of project that will enable them to uplift the race. And that's an old saying, but you don't have to do large things, big things, grandiose things, but be active in your community, active and engaged in your community, or your school or your church. Just give something.

You were telling me about Jena [Six]. I'm so inspired, so glad to hear that, because I was pulling and wanted to run down there myself. Jena, Louisiana. But everybody can't do that. Everybody can't just be where everybody else is at the time, but within your little community, be a doer. Knock on the door of an elderly person, speak to the homeless man on the street. Take them a sandwich or something. You don't ever know who you're passing by.

I was taught that charity begins at home, and for all the young people who are out there, and old people, you live lives. But if you are going to go out into the world, you have to be humble. You have to take God with you, some higher power with you, and you have to also be respectful of yourself and others and to do something.

This is very simplistic, but it's also very basic. And when you go into the ivory towers to study, you will have some ethics about you, as to how you would treat your classmates and respect for your teachers who are teaching you and very interested in making sure you get knowledge when you go to Howard University or wherever you go, that you'll be able to have respect for yourself, your teachers, and also going to library and engage in dialogue.[9]

There's nothing more provocative than a group of college students sitting down and discussing topics and also with their professors. I used to enjoy that. I miss that. I listen to the radio more than anything else, but when I hear people like Dr. [Greg] Carr and others on YouTube and so forth, and Dr. John Henry Clark and all these people talking, you know, it is so inspirational. Brother Malcolm and others talking.

It gives me more inspiration and what we're saying now is that hopefully, a few words that I have said from my past life may inspire you to do something, but I want you to be engaged.

Jocelyn Imani: Do you have anything else you want to add?

Dr. Dorie Ladner: I want to thank you. Thank you for listening to me. I just really am inspired by you, a young Black female from the South who has been able to, against all odds, continue and prevail.

Jocelyn Imani: To God be the glory.

Dr. Dorie Ladner: It's a hard road. I know you had a hard road, but in spite of that you've made it and continue to make it.

[9] "Ivory towers" is a metaphor referring to institutions of higher education, academia, and intellectual pursuits, often implying a level of detachment from everyday social struggles.

Jocelyn Imani: Yes, ma'am. I want to thank you. Thank you so much.