

We Were Not Alone – Cole Bridgeforth –

The question I want to address is Were You Ever Scared For Your Life in Mississippi? I went to Mississippi in 1964. I was 19 years old – I had a couple of years of college. I had not done very well but I had been there. And I had no idea what Mississippi really was. I knew about segregation, but I didn't know or understand how far the white supremacists would go to maintain their power. We learned very quickly. The week before I went to Mississippi three civil rights workers disappeared – Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner. They were murdered. They were buried about 50 miles from where I worked in Mississippi, a place called Starkville.

When I saw what happened on January 6, I know that must have been frightening for a lot of you, it was frightening for me. It took me back to Mississippi. One Saturday night in February of 1965 I looked into the face of a mob. And when a mob is focusing on you, you need to be afraid, because it has no conscience, it has no logic other than to consume what is in front of it. It is like a forest fire, burning out of control.

So Mary Anderson and I, she was a young lady from Los Angeles who had just come down south to work on a project, and we went to a movie theater. The movie theater, the one movie theater in town was segregated of course. Black people sat up on the top and the white people sat down on the bottom. Well we sat down on the bottom. We kinda thought that it would be all right because the high school and middle school kids had been to that same theater that previous Wednesday and they had sat down on the bottom and there was no repercussions. But this was not a Wednesday. We were there on a Saturday night. And all the farm boys that come into town and all the college boys that come off the campus. And when we came out of that theater there was a mob as far as the eye could see in both directions on that street. And they were yelling and screaming and threatening. But we were cool you know, we had to be cool you know. Because I truly believe that you cannot let the mob see fear in your eyes. There was no place to run to. There was no place to hide. We had to find a way to get home and that was about a mile away walking.

Three things that are important to know in how we got home that night. There was a sheriff, Harpo was his name, who decided to do

his job. Now why he decided to do his job, why he didn't let us just get pummeled, and maybe killed, I think that he had some pride in what he was doing and he wasn't going to have that in his town. So he got his car wedged between us and the mob. So as Mary and I walked down the sidewalk he rode besides us. And he's going on a bull-horn from his car yelling at the mob "Stay back, stay back". And some of them he knew by name so he'd call them by name and all of that stuff and keep them in check since all it'd take is one spark. And the mob, it'll consume you.

We got out of town maybe about six blocks down on the highway, highway 82 that separated the Black community from the rest of town. And we're walking down into the highway and he's beside us in his car and cars and trucks are going back and forth on the highway and folks are yelling, and you know. Yeah, we were scared. But another thing happened. We could see about a half-mile away, maybe closer, there was a cut-off that went down into the bottoms, as they call it. Bottoms is where the Black people lived. And up out of the Bottoms comes a group of about 15 young Black men. And they're carrying bricks and clubs and whatever else they had picked up. And they were coming

for us. In that moment we realized we were not alone. And that gave us strength.

The sheriff kinda freaked out and started screaming and he called out the name of the guy kinda leading that group, Eddie Macky. He said, “Macky drop them brickbats” cause all that sheriff could see was race riot and he just really did not want all that blood on his streets. The white kids, and most of them were kids, I think, they weren’t there to fight, they were there to beat and when they saw that they might have to fight gave them a pause. And then finally there was another civil rights worker, a freedom worker, social justice warrior as we like to think of ourselves now, named Ron Carver, an 18 year old. 18 years old from Boston, Massachusetts. And he pulls up besides us in a pick-up truck. And he yells “Get In”. And we head for the Bottoms.

When I saw that mob on January 6th in Washington, DC, it took me back. When you are facing a mob you need to be afraid just like those congress-people were. They were running for their lives.