Charles Jones Oral History Interview 1

Interview Conducted by
Debbie Howard
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Title: Charles Jones oral history interview 1, 2005 May 18

Description: J. Charles Jones – civil rights activist, Freedom Rider, and founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – recounts his early life growing up in the Carolinas and his involvement in the civil rights movement. A native of Chester, South Carolina, he describes the strict social divide between whites and blacks living in small southern towns and the constant threat of physical violence for African Americans. While attending Johnson C. Smith University, he was active in student government, which led to his involvement in the larger national student political movement starting in the late 1950s. Mr. Jones discusses his experiences as a delegate to the 7th World Festival of Youth and Students for Peace and Friendship in Vienna, Austria, highlighting his debate with Paul Robeson Jr. on the merits of democracy versus communism and his experiences of African American expat culture in Europe. Because the youth festival was organized by the Soviet Union, Jones' participation drew the attention of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and he describes what it was like having to testify in order to prevent being labeled as a communist by the government and by the media. Mr. Jones describes the powerful effect that reports of the Greensboro sit-in had on him while returning home from testifying in Washington, D.C., citing this as the motivating force behind his decision to start a lunch counter sit-in in Charlotte. Mr. Jones describes the first day of the Charlotte sit-ins and how students and the local media looked to him as a spokesman of the movement due to his heightened media profile. Mr. Jones, a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), continues with a discussion of his civil rights work on the national level, including his activism as one of the Rock Hill Four, who were responsible for SNCC's "Jail No Bail" policy. He also recounts his harrowing experience as a Freedom Rider, and his deep realization of extreme danger and isolation that characterized civil rights activism in Mississippi during 1961. Mr. Jones describes his role in McComb, Mississippi, where he reported on the brutal treatment of student protesters from Burglund High School to the outside world, which prompted his request for help from Robert Kennedy. Explaining that he had to go into hiding to prevent being captured by the police or the Ku Klux Klan, he recalls his first meeting with Assistant Attorney General John Doar and the horror Jones felt upon learning that Doar was also being tracked by the Klan and feared for both their lives. Finally, Mr. Jones reflects on the responsibility he feels in ensuring that history records the experiences of the students and activists who challenged the racist Southern establishment and prevailed.

Biography: Charles Jones was a 67-year-old man at the time of interview, which took place at his home in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was born in Chester, South Carolina on August 23, 1937. He was educated at Biddleville Elementary School, West Charlotte High School, Harbison Junior College, Johnson C. Smith University, and Howard University School of Law; and was employed as an attorney.

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Transcript Notes: DH: Debbie Howard
CJ: J. Charles Jones

J. Charles Jones Oral History Interview Transcript

DH: Today is May 18, 2005 I am Debbie Howard with the Before Brown Project that is part of the Oral History interviews at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. I am interviewing Charles Jones at 2014 West Trade Street in Charlotte. Mr. Jones—

CJ: Yes.

DH: If you would start by sharing a little bit about your family.

CJ: Sure.

DH: And growing up in Charlotte.

CJ: I was born at 4 o'clock in the morning August 23, 1937. With the biggest head my mother says in the world and never let me forget that as if I had anything to do with it.

DH: (laughs)

CJ: With her and Dad's choice to conceive this poor child, thank God for both of them, in Chester, South Carolina, a small town about fifty miles south of Charlotte that had a population at that point of about twenty thousand people, which stayed about twenty thousand people for about forty years.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Progress came to Chester slowly but it's expanding now quite a bit. Chester was a small southern town where the rules of life were very clear. And they were basically the following: white people had the power, the power of life and death, the power to do whatever they chose to at any given time whenever they wanted to with no consequences at all. So that I remember a friend of mine actually a relative of Debbie and Alan, the family—one of the families that evolved out of Chester—at a drugstore. She was a teacher had been for twenty some years and she asked for something and the proprietor said "You mean so and so and so." And she said, "Yes" and he slapped her and said, "You say 'yes sir' to me black—." And I remember the elders talking about that. I remember my mother who was a teacher at that point in the school system, the segregated school system. I remember the elders sitting around talking about, Do you realize what happened? and, There ain't nothing we can do. And that experience is in my spirit even now as we speak. But I was protected much more than I realized, all of us children in Chester, South Carolina because we did not know the harshness of the disrespect.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: We were protected. And I am amazed at how my father Rev. J.T. Jones who was an elder in the black community in that he was respected was a part of not only what would have been the black power structure. But he was a gentle man who got along with everybody and was part of the group that put on the Black Fair—

DH: Mm, mm.

CJ: —that had the cultural events that we were accustomed to, the fraternities and sororities bringing in notable people, actors, actresses, singers, performers as well as introducing folks locally. So I was not aware so much of the harshness of what being a little black kid in Chester, South Carolina really meant. Except two or three things still hang out in my mind. I do remember—I lived in Chester till I was ten years old. Then we moved in 1947 here to Charlotte—within this block, actually, down 2112 this is 2014—in 1947 where I then grew up in a broader segregated world.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: I remember there was a fellow, Mr. Jonesie was his name, who had an IQ of perhaps 80-90 who would come and help my father dig the garden, plant stuff and do odd jobs. He was uptown and someone said that he had said something to a white woman downtown and the Klan was looking for him.

DH: Mm-mm.

CJ: I recall as vividly as I am recalling now my father and another man, Brother Ayres, putting Jonesie in the back of—in the trunk of this car we had—this Nash Daddy had. This would have been 10:30 or 11 o'clock at night and driving him away.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: I didn't understand what that meant at that point, though I am feeling and sensing Daddy's anxiety a bit, though calm, not trying to let me pick up what obviously was happening.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: I later came to understand that they took him north to save him literally because about four or five months earlier in Aiken, South Carolina which is—would have been a couple hundred miles from Chester. There was a story that came through the grapevine very quickly that a black man had said something downtown to a white lady in Aiken, South Carolina. And the Klan that night

came to his home. He had left and his pregnant wife was there and the Klan, made up of the mayor and some of the elected officials, did what they were expected to do. They took this pregnant black woman out since they couldn't find her husband, who had dared it was said to say something or looked at and said something to a white woman. Strung her up by her legs as they cheered and the women and all egged them on. Cut her stomach, pulled the baby out and put the edge on a bayonet, dashed the mother and the baby to death.

DH: Hmm.

CJ: So we were taught very clearly that you do not challenge the absolute authority of white men in the South. Or if you did, you did at your peril. So the notion of a black man either protecting his family from harm or leaving a white woman out of the conversation—just looking at a white man directly in his eyes as an equal was not only prohibited but was rightfully considered the right of white men to do whatever they chose. So at eight or nine I wasn't quite aware of what all of that meant.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: But at sixty-seven almost sixty-eight now it is still very vivid in my mind, so it had its impact.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Otherwise in Chester there was the fair with the carousel and the competition for the biggest tomato and all of that marvelous stuff that I remember as a child of Chester having a ball with my peers. I remember also my beginning understanding of a broader theology. I loved to shoot marbles.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: I wasn't apparently as good as some of the other guys. So I started praying to God to give me three thousand marbles, "Tomorrow if it would be all right with you God." Tomorrow came and I didn't find those three thousand marbles in my toy box and I wasn't quite sure. I kept praying, "God, but I don't ask for much—please give me three thousand marbles." So one time my father heard me with this earnest supplication with spirit.

DH: (laughs)

CJ: And said, "God helps those who help themselves. You need to learn how to shoot marbles better."

DH: (laughs)

CJ: And I said, "Well, this is coming from Daddy, it must be right" right? So I did learn to shoot marbles a lot better although I never got three thousand. I did get about 253.

DH: Hmm.

CJ: By doing a little better and watching how the other guys would sometimes cheat a little bit. I did not cheat as much. If someone was leaning across the line then I guess I felt the same right. Anyway—

DH: (laughs)

CJ: At ten years old, we moved here to Charlotte. And as we grew up, rituals around holidays were the place where families and extended families gathered to give thanks to be with each other and to talk about the world as it is. My father was the youngest of 8 children. He was born in 1900. There's my father there and my mother.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: That's my grandfather Arthur Augustus who was born a slave with his wife Mary Magdalene on the left. That's Mom and Dad here.

DH: Okay.

CJ: And that's Arthur Augustus. Of my father's siblings, four men all graduated from college in the early part of the century. Daddy was born in 1900 so he graduated from Biddle University in 1927. This gentleman here who is my cousin on the same line who is 97.

DH: Hmm.

CJ: Roseberg Jones graduated in 1912 and the rest of the men graduated. The women, five of them, all graduated from Barber Scotia. And so a family that basically was conceived prior to the turn of the century all finished, went to college—finished college and became professional. There were four ministers, a dentist, his father, the oldest and teachers on the female side which was one of the few professions that were open at that point. My aunt Minnie George married Arthur George who became the dean of the Theological Seminary at Johnson C. Smith University, lived on campus.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: We would come up for a Thanksgiving meal every year. And in the South I am running around on the campus chasing squirrels which I never could catch. I didn't understand that because I thought I was fleet of foot.

DH: (laughs)

CJ: When dinnertime came, we would sit, the children would be at one table, because children were seen but not heard. And the adults would be at the larger table. The adults consisted of my Uncle Arthur, Minnie George who was a missionary through the Presbyterian Church to Pakistan and to Liberia. We had others—like the Swanns who were Vera who were the plaintiffs in the Swann vs. Board of Education here in Charlotte. They too were missionaries, one to China. Another cousin Bryant was a missionary. So we would hear the adults talk about the broader world outside of the narrow South and we would hear about different cultures and people who were not segregated but who were colonized in many ways by the same Europeans who were saying that they were God's special gift and were imbued with superior values that made them superior people.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And the fact that they enslaved people was sanctioned by God because white people of course—God of course was white. So slaves were a necessary part of the economy to make sure white males got all of the power they could handle. So it was all right to import black folks out of the continent for almost three hundred years and work them as slaves, free, so that they could embody the special gifts God gave white males. And so it was all right to do anything because black people were not human. And I am listening to my relatives talk about their meeting heads of states that were black, heads of the comparable states which were the tribes, which were the cultures that they emerged in and gave them dignity who did not act like that.

DH: Yes.

CJ: So I knew that all of these things about the superiority of white men, somehow intuitively was not only crazy but not right.

DH: Hmm.

CJ: We moved to Charlotte in 1947.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Of course, in Chester the one theater let black people in but you had to go around on the side and walk up to the balcony there to the back, separated from the white folks.

DH: Hmm.

CJ: If you went to a movie—of course the movies had all these white people who were acting like nice gentle people, sometimes. They also had white people who were acting themselves—

DH: Hmm.

CJ: —Lynching folks and all. But at any rate, in Chester you had to go up and—though I never threw popcorn downstairs.

DH: (laughs)

CJ: Anyway when we came to Chester—I mean to Charlotte, I was ten years old. There was a movie, the Grand Theatre, three blocks from where I lived and when you went to the Grand Theatre there were all black people on the same street level. And you and your friends would go in and just if you were lucky to get twenty cents, a dime got you in and then you could get popcorn and a soda for a dime or fifteen cents. The movie was owned by Mr. Neugent who was Jewish—and his wife, they were a Jewish couple. But other than making sure you didn't make noise and when you did popping you on the head with the little light that he had but it was all in fun and it wasn't really injurious. They were very sort of decent white people that you saw right up front and sold the tickets and popcorn and all that. But here in this theatre in 1947, black folk were all together on the same ground floor and that was our television, opera, fine arts, music, and soaps because Hopalong Cassidy, would come in a series that lasted about 25 minutes. And Hopalong Cassidy and Tonto would go out and save the world, right? And just as it was always Tonto who was about to be shot before Hoppy or before the Lone Ranger. (laughs)

DH: (laughs)

CJ: Anyway before they either went over the terrain and into the water or were shot, the movie would go "Dundundum, next series, previews of next Saturday's series" right?

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Didn’t tell you whether in fact they crashed but you knew that there was going to be another series or *General Hospital* or *All My Children* or whatever. So going to the theatre was the grand social event. Of course you couldn’t go downtown to the theatre because you would be arrested

or beat or worse, you would be lynched.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: But that was my introduction to Charlotte. The schools were segregated. Biddleville [Biddleville Elementary School] which was walking distance about six blocks from here. At sixth grade—no, I was in school earlier. I went to school at four, at five. We lived right across the street in Chester from Brannet [Unknown spelling] which was the black school. And at five, I just got bored and tired and I went on over to first grade Miss Cassel who was a good friend of my mother. An extraordinary teacher—never married, totally committed to all of her children she taught—of course let me come in and sit.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And I did for the whole year and I learned and all that. After that year, I am five, and I was given a piece of paper, you know she was humoring me. But then that September I had to go back to Miss Cassel's class because you had to be 6 years old in order to go to first grade.

DH: Ah yes.

CJ: I said, Wait a minute, to myself, What's wrong with this picture? I played by the rules, I was behaving when I wanted to be laughing and carrying on. So I said, All right that's the way you all are going to play. So whenever Miss Cassel would get to a particular subject I would either throw my hand up or blurt it out. "Two and two? Four!" That went on for about three or four weeks and Miss Cassel came to Mom and Dad and said, "Listen, I'm having some problems with Charles because he's disrupting the way I'm trying to teach. I love him to death but you know it's not fair to the other children. What can we do?" Mom, as she inevitably did, bless her heart, she loved this boy more than life itself and I could probably do little or no wrong. Anyway, between mom and my father they arranged to have me moved to second grade. So I started at five and was always a year ahead of myself.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: The second grade teacher—and this connects to this story about coming here to Charlotte—taught cursive writing. You had the tablets with the big lines and if you went below that line she would smack you on your knuckles with this ruler, right? Miss Mobley was her name. Miss Mobley was not a happy person and she made sure that many of us were not happy either. I just couldn't do well in Miss Mobley's class, bless her heart. She too had not been married and I don't know why this theme comes through with these teachers because there was such a difference between Miss Cassel, the first grade teacher, and Miss Mobley, it was like literally night and day.

But anyway my mother and father—my mother mainly—arranged for me to be transferred in second grade out of Miss Mobley's class to Miss Blackstalk's class, who was one of the social friends of my mother and family. And of course I flourished and did well. (laughs)

DH: (laughs)

CJ: But Chester was not an urban town like Charlotte. Charlotte was a big place several sizes of Chester. Anyway when I came November 12, 1947 to Miss Wheeler's class at Biddleville—second floor. I walk in, this little skinny looking, light-skinned kid with red hair and freckles. And Miss Wheeler stopped the class and said, "Oh, we have a new student Charlie Jones. Come up here and read so I can see where you are and I can place you in the class." Now I'm ten. All these people I've never met. I'm in front of this class everybody stopped. The whole world has stopped. And I'm beginning to read and I'm stumbling

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And the kids are laughing and I'm saying, What on earth is this? I've been able to negotiate the system of education up to this point. What's going on? I remember this so vividly again because I was so embarrassed and very insecure—new town, new folks—who start picking on me. Charles Hunt, as a matter of fact, who lives two doors down, used to just pop me upside the head, just because, after that experience because I was devalued in the eyes of all my peers who I eventually came to know better and went through Biddleville and to West Charlotte. And became a part of my whole social culture. But finally, however, after Charles Hunt consistently would just physically take advantage of me I finally said, "Wait a minute, I don't have to take this." So Charles and I wrestled for about forty minutes. I would never let him think he was getting the better of me, right? Finally I got on top of him with my knees on him and his head was next to some barbed wire and he knew it. I said, "Alright, you give?" That was the equivalent to signing the peace treaty of Versailles or whatever, right?

DH: (laughs)

CJ: I had the advantage of him not—he was bigger than me but I had the advantage of him. And he finally said, "All right, all right I give." "Are you sure?" "Yeah." Charles and I became the dearest of friends over the years and after he came back from Korea and Vietnam he came and we would sit and talk about that and laugh about it. I became one of his dearest friends. I still am on that level.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Anyway that started my exposure to Charlotte, a much larger town. But we were also told

you do not go to theaters with white people, you do not go to church with white people, you do not attempt to eat at the lunch counters with white people. Who do you think you are?

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Well, now by this time I am learning from my elders that I'm somebody. My grandma is telling me, "Boy, you are just as good as anybody else. Don't let nobody tell you you're not. You are God's child, equal to anybody don't make me have to come down to get in your face if I see you bowing down to somebody and acting like you ain't just as good as them." I'm out of Chester though, where they lynch your behind, theoretically although I ain't quite sure about Charlotte. But I then evolved through the school system. We went to Biddleville, graduated from Biddleville, walked up to West Charlotte which is now Northwest School of the Arts. At that point it was the high school. And, wow, there was a band and I got into playing alto saxophone and a choir, I would sing a bit. We had a combined band from all those schools around Second Ward and Plato Price [Plato Price School]. We got together and we performed and we were just like everybody else in the black community or better than, good as, or not as good as but we had a broader stage. Pop Miller—who was the industrial arts teacher who eventually became a principal and is well, well-respected across the board—used to, if we were to misbehave, would come up behind you and go "Boom!" on your ear with that finger.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: It didn't hurt but it was enough to get your attention and let you know you were required to behave. But for children it was a sign that he really cared enough about us to want to require us to behave ourselves and to be somebody. All of my teachers were extraordinary human beings who not only taught but cared about us as people. So the experience of Miss Wheeler, bless her heart, quickly faded into the background and I found myself right into the midst of all of the activities of the black school system at that point. I'm still meeting with the elders who are giants who keep us all in touch with what is happening in the world. What's happening in Africa—this is the forties, now fifties.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: In the eleventh grade, my grandmother lived—my mother's mother—in Irmo, South Carolina which is about twelve miles from Columbia which was a rural area at that point. And in Irmo was a little church-related high school and junior college called Harbison Junior College.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: My parents decided to send me to Harbison for my junior and senior year of high school. As

much to be there with my grandmother, whom I had spent every summer with and who taught me more than I had realized—until very key points in the movement—that I was a special child of God.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Was not necessarily better than that although my mama kept saying, "I prayed to God that if I had a child—if I had a son"—my older sister Eva is a girl—"that if he gave me a child I would give him back to God." So I remember always "You are God's answer to my prayers, so I'm going to give you to him." So I'm going, What on earth is all this? But anyway I went from a junior and senior high school years in Irmo. Was there with my grandmother in that school special, small, private—I was aware—this was '52, '53, '54, I am in this idyllic rural campus where we were taught, of course, all the proper values.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Also sang in the choir and we went around the country and raised money for the school and all that. I remember as clearly as I am remembering your face in this conversation. Nineteen fifty-four—the Supreme Court said segregation in schools based on race is inherently unconstitutional because it tells black children that they are inferior to white folks. So the schools in this country and in the South have to open up and be integrated. Open up, desegregate. And I remember us saying, Yes! We were yelling, up and down, we free, free at last. Thank God Almighty we free! And it was seared into our memories that the Supreme Court of the United States of America finally said black people were equal to white people.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: What must—we can do. Of course the South said, "Y'all got to be kidding." (laughs) "We ain't giving you up nothing. You think we going to give up the wealth, the power, the assets we've acquired working your behind. You think we just going to say we're going to be nice people like we claimed we are and now open up society and let you sit at the table which is the equivalent of recognizing you as an equal human being. You've got to be out of your mind." So the resistance evolved and even though the next year the Supreme Court said, "With all deliberate speed." The South said, "Not in our lifetime." And the whole history of the massive resistance set in. So I'm saying—now, I'm finished with high school.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Of course I enrolled at Johnson C. Smith University because that's where all of my uncles had gone.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: It was now Johnson C. Smith because Ms. Smith, bless her heart, a philanthropist out of Pittsburgh had donated a huge endowment to Smith which of course inspired the wise folks to honor Sister Smith by changing the name. And money kept coming in and we were endowed and are still endowed quite well because of the generosity of this Northern Christian white woman who was such an antithesis of the southern white men who said, "No, hell, no you are not equal and we are not ever going to agree you're equal. And if you try to act like it we'll put your behind in your place." Anyway I enrolled in Johnson C. Smith—1954. Right—same year as the Supreme Court decision come to think of it because I graduated the previous year.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And I'm enthusiastic this is a new era right. I'm at this point I was sixteen years old because I had started early.

DH: Yes.

CJ: And started matriculating at this school that I had heard about all my life. That my parents, my uncle had been dean of. Actually had another cousin who was the first English teacher of Biddle High School. This was the high school—right, who incidentally lived down here on Trade Street in the block after Five Points. So the history of Smith was a part of my family and I was of course expected to do no less than all of these other elders?

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: That I had seen as I grew up who were doctors and preachers and ministers and missionaries. And my father this giant of a gentle person. So slowly as the South said, "We ain't giving y'all nothing. If you want it, come get it."

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: "And if you do try to, of course, we're going to take care of it." So I was blessed to be a part of the student body—part of the leadership of the student body. By the time of my senior year, was vice president of student council, president of the Student Christian Association, I think editor of the "Student Voice" it was called. I, of course, went the natural path into the seminary—graduated in 1958.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And enrolled in the theological seminary. That year I should have warned you once you turn this mind on so if you need to take any kind of breaks or you tell me how you want to deal with this.

DH: No you're fine.

CJ: That year I became active in the national student politics of the country.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: There was an organization called the United States National Student Association which was made up of most of the colleges and universities, Ivy League, etc. And southern schools also—presidents and vice presidents from these various schools around the country. And I became active in it while at Smith and went to one of the Carolinas-Virginia regional meetings. There were about four of us black folk—two of us black folk up there at Sweet Briar College. And there were all these white kids from various places including Wofford [Wofford College]. As a matter of fact there was a young man running for the chairman of the region from Wofford who told us he was not only the best qualified but had been student leader in his school therefore was the only choice for chairman of the Carolinas-Virginia region. My ancestors said, "Boy get your behind up." (laughs)

DH: (laughs)

CJ: And I stood up and said, "My name is Charles Jones. I am vice chairman of the student body of Johnson C. Smith University. I have evolved through the education system up to this point and not only look forward to challenging my brother from Wofford to any level of intellectual, dialectic, philosophical, theological discussion as I have been well trained by elders and giants that he may or may not understand or appreciate. But on balance I will not only provide you as good but a much better leadership because I embrace all of you, women, black, white, men and will take—will help this region shine as an example of a southern region that will provide an example for the rest of the country on what the culture and humanity should be all about." Boy, folks just went crazy and I was elected chairman of the region. (laughs)

DH: (laughs)

CJ: This was about '57-'56 or '57 my last year. So I got to meet a number of student leaders from around the country because we had national NSA meetings. As a result of that exposure, was invited to join a group of student leaders to the Vienna Youth Festival which was a festival that was organized by Soviets—students invited—about a hundred students from ten countries and

they were concentrating on attempting to involve African students as their way of winning the Cold War.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: I went and of course found myself debating with Paul Robeson, Jr. a person whom I came to admire and respect a lot. The son of Paul Robeson, Sr. who had gone to the Soviet Union. Because among other things, Paul Jr. was saying—and the importance of this is that we were now in Vienna, Austria. There are something like 700 students from around the world, 110 countries and these delegates were going to different collections of students. These were African delegates primarily that Robeson and I were discussing or debating.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Robeson would be somewhat simplistic in that he would say that "Black people don't have the vote in the United States." And I'm saying, "Wait a minute black people been voting in the North for quite a while so it's not accurate to say they don't vote. It's clear that we don't have the same political power." And every time he would do a generality I would say, "Yes, but in the broader sense of the reality to make it real—yes, it is true that we are still segregated, yes it is true that lynchings have occurred. It is also true that we are just as good and prepared to break down these barriers and to fully take advantage of everything the country has to offer. While we still have a long way to go, we do have parts of the country that are doing certain things." So we were kind of, at the festival, engaged in these very intense debates but they were not ad hominem where you talk about someone's mama or all that crap. We were literally debating political, economic, theological, questions about life and the difference between Communism—keep in mind that I was a theological student. I had been nurtured by my father and many other ministers and was in fact at Johnson C. Smith Theological. I went to Johnson C. Smith.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: So for me at that point to say that Christianity was not an appropriate way to view life was at odds with everything I had come to understand. So I would always answer the question of the equality of man, etc. through Jesus's notion of all of us being God's children. And, therefore, looking to build something that was neither Soviet in that we were all subject to the state and the state was supreme and what white Christian people in the South had bastardized. I have not used that word in a long time. This notion that I had come to appreciate that Jesus's compassion being so moved in the marketplace at the money changer's that he went in and threw the money off and dashed and then called upon himself all of God's children to talk about this dream of the equality of all of us. So I am just going into this dream of the redeemed community as juxtaposed to Communism as the answer, too. Which was kind of a hard sell on one level because the Soviets

were recognizing black folks—black folks a whole lot more than we were for the same political interests that we were trying to do the same thing. Whether they respect black people or not is for historians or theologians and others to talk about. As a result of that experience, however, the delegates that I had gone with comprised of student leaders but also reporters. And there's a series of articles in the Charlotte Observer—"Negro Student Defends Democracy." We are now '59 front page, picture, series of articles about this dialectic going on with this colored boy, colored man, colored student, young man and the Communists. I had a ball in Vienna. I'll get back to that. As a matter of fact, I have always appreciated jazz, love jazz as an extension of the entire experience of the Negro slaves, the songs, the spirituals. Jazz was just an extension of that whole experience—a different beat.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: In many cases it was the same beat because in the House of Prayer and some of the more primitive rituals, the music was the basis for the energizing and the spontaneity that brought everybody into—so in Vienna there was a jazz club called Fatty Salon where musicians would come together and jam and just freelance with each other. I'm sitting next to Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie at the bar. Carmen McRae, the Mitchell/Roth Duo who had come from the Soviet Union. And we are just having a ball and I came to appreciate that not only were black men just as competent and bright and intelligent as others but we had many of us a spiritual kind of realm and wisdom where we did our own things. And I came to respect black men more in a public sense. And you have to appreciate that in the fifties, with the exception of Brother Brooks who was up in Massachusetts—black elected official—there were no positive black images.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: All black men—no black people had any dignity worthy of any kind of positive story in the paper. There was no television at that point in the forties—of course the radio etc. So there was no contact, except through these elders that I had come to know, with the broader black community. And I came face to face and started meeting these giants of folks who were articulate, who were politically sophisticated, who were artists, who could flow through Europe and all these other places, accepted and embraced, but when they came back here they were literally nobody. So I had images of black men, my father, his colleagues and then the broader art world of giants of people that I came to know personally.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Anyway so I'm having a good time at Fatty Salon in Vienna. So when I got back home I went downtown where—let me describe downtown Charlotte in the fifties. If you were black, young, college—downtown Charlotte was the place that folks gathered to socialize, to check on

each other, to see who had gone away to Spelman or Winston-Salem Teacher's College or A&T [North Carolina A&T State University]. And if you were courting a young lady and wanted to be your best you of course, put on your Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, a little sweet water, so you look good, comb your hair.

DH: (laughs)

CJ: And you would meet on the square. That was the gathering place downtown. And you caught up on what was going on but if you wanted to get something to eat, Kress's was right on the corner of Trade and Tryon—South Tryon. Down in the basement, in the back, you could order food.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: You couldn't eat it there, you had to take it out if you were black. The same thing was true with Belk's. Belk's did not let you eat period come to think of it. Ivey's, the more upscale stores that were also the social gathering places. None of the lunch counters, same thing at Kress. So here you were trying to be best but inherent in the whole process was the fact that, if you were black, get back. You were not recognized, particularly at the common table of food.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: So the frustration of my generation built and built so that—early 1960 I was invited by the Chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities to testify because I was a colored boy over there in Vienna, Austria defending democracy. I agreed to go for a couple of reasons. One, the house committee had systematically castrated all black leaders that had any kind of promise. Robeson, Jr., all of the artists that had emerged were singled out and labeled as Communist. Matter of fact, Adam Clayton Powell's wife, who was an artist, was designated as a Communist. I knew intuitively that if I did not go I would eventually have to deal with the notion that I was irrelevant because I was Communist and my beliefs were Communist. So the same guy who did the articles that appeared in the Observer, I hooked up and said, "I have been invited to go and I am going to go."

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: "As a so-called friendly witness. But I need for you to cover this because I know and you know if left to the PR and the House committee I'm going to be lost. I'm going to get lost in the sauce." Paul Robeson, Jr. was also subpoenaed as an unfriendly witness. So I go and the chairman—Welsh [Francis E. Walker] I think—graciously invited me to come and speak to them. And he started off with, "Don't you think Americans are superior to Communists." And I

think one of the first things out of my mouth was, "Mr. Chairman it's much easier to be anti-Communist than it is to be a positive American. Everything I've heard so far is you all are anti-Communist but you don't respect me, you don't respect black people, you are not pro-American, you are anti-Communist. So what are you asking me?" "But isn't it true that the Soviets indoctrinate their children to Communism?" I said, "Now what do you think happens in our schools? Do we not indoctrinate our children to say that we are superior to everybody because we are?" "Well another thing"—and this kind of dialectic thing went on. "I believe that we are all God's children. Communists, you, me. I believe that's the design. I believe that what we hold these truths to be self-evident Mr. Chairman that all men are created equal. Let justice roll down like water. Isn't that what you've been telling us all our lives not withstanding the fact that we are still segregated. We are still this, we are still beat, we are still not promoted, etc. So what are you saying to me Mr. Chairman?" (laughs)

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Fortunately that appeared in the Observer also—that discussion with the Chairman. That night as I was driving back about 4 o'clock in the morning, up around—right at the border of Virginia and North Carolina—I heard this newscast. "Today four young black men from A&T College went down to Woolworth's in downtown Charlotte and sat at the lunch counter and refused to leave."

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And I said, Yes, here's the handle! Nonviolently. Dr. King had emerged at that point as a leader who believed in nonviolence. "Satyagraha." The force of the soul, the body, the spirit that Gandhi had used to confront the British Empire and slowly and systematically dissemble them and forced the British to leave the country and I said, Yes. Here's my Christianity, here's my humanity, here's my grandma, here's my elders, all of this elevated sense of the dignity of all of God's children.

DH: Oh.

CJ: So, I came home and the next day we had a student council meeting and after the meeting I said, "I don't know about you all but tomorrow morning I'm going to dress up in my Sunday go-to-meetings, put on a little sweet water and go downtown to Woolworth's and sit and ain't going to stop until we open up these lunch counters." And I thought maybe one or two folks on the council would join me. The next morning outside of the Administration building there were more than 200 students.

DH: Wow.

CJ: So I said, "Let's rock and roll."

DH: Hmm.

CJ: "We will be dignified, we will not hit back, we will not talk a challenge, we will sit quietly with dignity and we will continue to do that until we open up the lunch counter." So we went down, filled up the lunch counters at Woolworth's on North Tryon. By this time the reporters had seen this little colored boy in the paper defending democracy.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: I had—after I came back from Vienna I had run into the Mayor—I believe it was Brookshire—downtown, same four hundred block of Tryon. And he said, "Oh, Charlie Jones. I read the series about you, you're a credit to your race." And I looked at him and said "And to all the rest of us." The reporters now are singling me out because there's a visibility.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: Gisele Blair and the other folks up at Greensboro had done the what, how, when, but none of the why. So they started asking me "Why are you all here?" And of course, all of the conversations of the elders flowed. Do you need to stop this?

DH: You're fine.

CJ: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. We must treat all of God's children equally. We are here to insist that Charlotte open up these lunch counters and treat us as equals at the table so we all can join together as God's children." So—

DH: They're writing that down.

CJ: They're writing all of this at this point and students were coming up to me "Charles we just spilled over, we finished all the lunch counters at Woolworth's, we're going over to Kress. Is that all right?" "Yeah." "Charles, we are at Kress now, we're going to go ahead over to Grant's and over to Belk's." So I'm emerging as this spokesperson—

DH: Hmm.

CJ: That has the language of the culture, all the words and sounds and concepts that make white

people feel good about themselves and their superiority but saying if you're all that, then let your actions speak louder than your words. Because as my grandmother always said, "What you do boy, speaks so loud, I can't hear a word you say."

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: And the press bought—the print media Observer and there was the News [The Charlotte News]—very reactionary, segregationist, this paper the News. We courted it, however. There was WSOC, CBS, ABC. All caught that. Why? Because nobody was talking about the why. And so for about 28 days running, every time we went downtown, we were singled out with the media, which then was being aired on the national media—AP, UPI, ABC, *CBS Evening News*.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: So we were, for a period, the voice of this new articulate— Its interesting about this "articulate" because one of the things that Miss Wheeler did for me when she embarrassed me by reading is forced me to form words and concepts and create pictures with words—and my mother was an English teacher anyway.

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: But to articulate in such a way that it sounded non-southern but universal and with concepts that itself embraced all of humanity and all of the cultures that had evolved and experiences and the commonality of us all and the commonality of the languages of the various religions that treated—and this was the basis of the image and the profile of these young black students, 1960.

DH: (laughs)

CJ: My father and I had to—an interesting thing happened. The same mayor formed a bi-racial committee of prominent black white people and prominent white people and asked them to try and figure out a way to resolve this problem that these students had presented the city with. And we of course we had spoken in front of the council in 1960. There were two or three sympathetic councilpersons—Martha Evans who was an elected official, Jewish, female—

DH: Uh-huh.

CJ: —very pro-,open community helped us understand the dynamics of the politics of the city council so when we went we were prepared for that. Margaret Cannon who was one of the Cannon Mills heirs' wife invited the core of us students to meet, to come to her home and have dinner and she invited some white folks including Harry Golden who she was kind of hanging

out with and that's historically accurate. And Harry Golden was a Jewish writer of the that used humor and satire to make fun of this whole notion of segregation.

DH: Hmm.

CJ: So we got to know a broader group of white folks who were not racist folks trying to maintain these myths about the superiority of white people, particularly white men and helped understand how to stroke the system. Harry Golden fell in love with it, because he would write humorous things about some of the nonsense that was going on. At that point, the Observer was a much more enlightened media, enlightened meaning the night editor, though Southern-born had, through seminars, etc. learned to write stories involving race without racial overtones that had the stereotypical language that fed the needs of white folks who still believed they were and so would give a balanced view of what went on that day and Harry Golden of course loved to call L.M. Wright who was the night editor [of the Charlotte Observer] and give his quotes about what was happening. L.M. would call me and say, "Charles, just want to let you know that Harry is at it again!" Right? “Here's what he's saying, do you have a comment?” And of course, I would give the story and Wright would basically give the students' point of view rather than Harry's or the adults'. So, though Harry was analytically brilliant and had a sense of humor that was very, very keen and to the point. For instance, there was point where we, in poking fun at the hypocrisy, had two light-skinned blacks—colored Negroes, what we called back then—to go to Ivey's, eat, and then see what happens. So, they went down and they were served, in about an hour, very graciously. They left a tip, and came out and joined the picket line and I just said "All right! Where are we going?" Harry Golden came out with the meter pigment reader?

DH: Oh!

CJ: —and said we'd programmed this machine and when you go through, if you're too dark, it will reject you. And, for a while there, everyone was laughing at it, of course. There were dark-skinned Arabs and Jewish folks and all, and it just got to be hilarious and folks at the restaurant were all looking at us, looking at each other, at the people who were coming in, taking a look if people were black or white, I mean? So, through the process of explaining what was happening from the perspective of the students to this broad audience, a majority of whom had gone through the university system, the North Carolina system, who were not openly radical liberals, but who were thinking people. The evolution of the story you hear, and what we were doing here, basically gave support to the recommendation of the bi-racial committee that said if the students wanted to quietly go the lunch counters on a particular day, that they would be served. This was in June, of that same year? '60.

DH: Umm.

CJ: So, ministers, an integrated group of ministers, my father and I, went to Kress.

Pause in Recording

DH: —No this is fine.

CJ: (laughs)

DH: This is wonderful.

CJ: My father who was a Christian minister, who was we called a missionary, he would service churches that were off the beaten path in rural areas of the South. Northern Presbyterian churches would send clothes, gifts, during the season and he would distribute them to rural people, and sometimes to churches, and he would take me with him. Boy, I think about my father and I realize the rich lessons that he taught me, compassion for others, to whom much is given, much is required. It wasn't a question of going ahead, you had to give back for them.

DH: Umm-mm

CJ: But I remember very distinctly a time, Clarion County, cars full of all those clothes, boxes, that we were carrying to sharecroppers. We had to stop at the plantation sharecrop, kind of the same thing, dignified job. We had to stop at the plantation house, with large white columns, to get permission to go back and to see the people on the sharecrop. And, I remember this person that I always looked up to who was always admired and respected and self-effacing and didn't present himself as all that, but was given the community's—as an elder—support and loyalty. I saw my father, with his head kind of like this, his head in his hand, saying "Yes sir, we, I have ( ) called Reverend Jones, and we want to take some clothes back to some of your sharecroppers if that's all right." "It's all right, boy. You can go on back there now, but let me know when you're finished and don't be stirring those people up." And we drove up, and I said, "Dad! Why did you bow your head?" And he said, "Son, you, in life will learn that you gotta know when to hold 'em, you gotta learn when to fold 'em, gotta when to stand, you gotta learn when to walk away, and this was not a time to stand. There will be a time. But if you're gonna survive, you've got to understand these lessons. I will make sure you appreciate" Now, I'm about eight or nine years old—we were still in Chester. And, Dad and I went to Kress which is on the square now where Blumenthal is and Daddy ordered a tuna fish, I think or a hot dog—I imagine it was a hot dog—coffee, coke. They had the worst coffee in the world come to think of it. (pause) I looked at my father, he looked at me and said, "You've learned one of the lessons. This is a time to stand and I'm proud of you." (pause) And his generation passed onto me, not only the approval and acceptance, but that praise, and we sat quietly and ate and the lunch counter slowly opened up from that point, but I was learning when to hold 'em, when to fold 'em, when to stand, and when

to walk away. Which is why I'm still here. Because where you are, starting with the next couple of years, put me right in the bowels of the South.

DH: Um-hm

CJ: Oh God, let me stop for a second

DH: It’s—

CJ: Hi. Good morning—

DH: (speaks simultaneously) —I can pause. You want me to pause?

CJ: Can we stop for a second?

DH: Sure. Let me stop—

Pause in Recording

DH: This is Debbie Howard, resuming with Charles Jones.

CJ: My father and I had sat at the lunch counter in downtown Charlotte in June, 1960, had had a meal, and I had felt the joy of meeting the expectations of a generation that was embodied in my father. The next involvement, I was enrolled in the theological seminary at Johnson C. Smith. Stokely Carmichael, among others came through here, ending of my second year, in '61, on their way throughout the South to eat in the white establishments and the lunch counters because the Interstate Commerce had ruled that seating would come on a first-come, first-serve basis. John Lewis, the crew came through, I was still in school. They went on through—John, in Rock Hill was beaten along with his friend, a white friend. I joined the group. I finished my last test at twelve o'clock. At two o'clock I was on a bus with another student, going to join the Freedom Riders going to Montgomery. Got to the, Atlanta—the first group had gone on through Anniston where the bus had been stopped and the Freedom Riders were beaten severely, bloody bones, teeth, busted, broken. The bus had been able to get out. At that point, the Klan shot the tires out, the bus slowly stopped on the side of the road where they got on the bus again, beat the Freedom Riders, and set the bus on fire. They had been picked up by Fred Shuttlesworth, minister out of Montgomery and taken on down to Montgomery and were planning, and did, the next phase from Montgomery. They had finally gotten into Montgomery. I was joining that group. Got to Atlanta, realized we had, I was on the phone with Dr. King, and realized we had to fly in to Montgomery. Because the young man next to me, white, who was talking to Bobby Kennedy and he was going down to talk to Dr. King and I'm talking to Dr. King, saying "We're coming down

to join you," and he's looking at me and I'm looking at him and he's saying, "Well, I'm going to be talking to Dr. King in a minute and I understand John was now wanting us to continue to pressure, but we gotta do that, so I'll get back to you." Turns out that he was a minister, white, dean of the theological seminary at Yale, Bill Coffin, who together with two other white professors, actually deans of theological seminaries, and a black law student from Yale were going to join Dr. King in Montgomery. They knew the Kennedys, so Bill Coffin and the crew were negotiating with the Kennedys and Martin. We just met and decided rather than flying, we would ride together from Atlanta into Montgomery which we did the next morning.

DH: Um, mm.

CJ: We all stayed at the Y there, and as we began to go farther south, the crowds—knowing we were coming—were getting larger and larger and we are now well into Alabama. After coming to Anniston where the bus had been stopped and folks beaten and burned, and I am saying, "Oh, my, what am I doing here?" We all were quiet and scared. My grandma's voice came to me, saying, "Boy, don't you ever let anybody tell you that you're not as good as anybody else and don't make me have to get into your face if I see you bowing down to anybody. You are God's child and God's going to help you walk through this!" And all of a sudden, there was this calmness that settled in as we got ready to be assaulted. The crew coming on this bus at that point had decided that rather than stop at Anniston they were going to express us right on into Montgomery. And so, we went past Anniston saw the smog where the bus had been burned—

DH: Oh!

CJ: —and we moved on, bypassed every little town and came into Montgomery. As we came in, the bus station was surrounded by at least three thousand local people who had just been present to see the first group of Freedom Riders leave, going to Jackson. As we drove through the crowd, bottles and bricks were coming over and a thin line of young National Guardsmen were keeping the crowd from us. Now, many of these young folks—teens, early twenties—were not that much different from the crowd, but for whatever reason they did not attack us. Fred Shuttlesworth again picked us up and took us with a caravan with the National Guard, took us to Dr. King's house and that night we all talked about whether we were gonna join the group that had already gone to Jackson and had all been arrested.

DH: Mmm.

CJ: We decided that we had to, so this integrated group, the next morning went down and bought tickets to Jackson, went to sit at the white lunch counter and were promptly arrested and charged with inciting the white men outside to riot. That's literally what we were charged with. Went into jail, waited three or four days, I then got out. Another group with John Lewis and some other

students from Nashville had picked up the second wave that we were going to and from Montgomery and all that, and the rest of that whole Freedom Ride is history. I then came back and eventually went on into law school. In the meantime, however, in February '61, about a year after this lunch counter was opened up in Charlotte, seven students from Friendship College had gone down to the lunch counter in Rock Hill, sat, were arrested, charged, convicted, fined $100 or 30 days. They chose the thirty days to dramatize the facts of what was happening. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee at that point had organized and had an office in Atlanta. We decided to join those students. And four us, Charles Sherrod, myself, Diane Nash, and Rupert R. Smith, in February '61, went down to the lunch counter, the same lunch counter, sat, got arrested, spent a night in jail, were charged, were convicted, wanted to have a trial then and were given $100 or 30 days. We chose the thirty days. So, Sherrod and I joined them it, the women of course were segregated and went to separate facilities. Sherrod and I joined the other students at Friendship for thirty days on a chain gang. So, I spent thirty days at hard labor with the other students about ten miles from where my grandfather, Arthur Augustus Jones, had come to—after he married Mary Magdalene—to McCartersville and set up a church, two churches actually, and eventually nine parochial schools because South Carolina did not provide public education for black folks. It was ten miles from the church my grandfather had established, Bethany, where my father had pastored, where I as a student pastor for almost a year had first and third Sundays, pastored. People who knew my grand—a woman who knew my grandfather, 102 years old, who didn't come to church much cause but I would sit and I would listen to her tell me about my grandfather who would come over in his horse and buggy about twenty miles for church services and all. So, I'm ten miles from where my grandfather bore and sired nine children, where my father had been a pastor, where I had been a student pastor, and I'm on a chain gang thirty days and several of the deacons would periodically and systematically come in the shadows and watch and make sure we were okay.

DH: Mmm.

CJ: Anyway, we went through that whole experience which was fascinating because the guards couldn't do anything with us. When we would have services and we would sing spirituals, it got to the point where some of the white—cells were segregated of course, one big cell here, big cell there, and a space for both about the size of this room. There came a point where some of the white prisoners would join us and the guards would say, "Shut up that damn fuss! And of course Sherrod and I would continue singing. They took us out and put us in solitary confinement for singing "that damn fuss" which were Negro spirituals that we have been—(sings) " Woke up this morning with my mind, save our freedom!" Sherrod and I, of course came back out, we boycotted in the "hole", we wouldn't eat, pushed the food back out. We sat there on that concrete floor and realized we can't try to be back like that man. There's very little of anything that is compassion to a human or that embodies any of theology that we believe, he was a pastor himself. So we sittin' on the cold floor said we gotta build the redeemed community, we gotta

build the beloved community in this country. That's what we are about, that’s what we must do. So, we committed ourselves to doing that. That became the whole framework of what all of us students then had been working to do: to build a beloved community. We still do that. Sherrod and I did the thirty days, came out, and the church welcome us as heroes, we had survived all of the nonsense. He and I then went down to McComb, Mississippi to join students who had gone to the lunch counter there, been arrested, been expelled, and we were going to join them there. In the meantime, Harry Belafonte called a group of us, five of us, Sherrod, Chuck McDew, Tim Jenkins, myself, and Diane Nash, to Washington to talk about what the next move was going to be after this.

DH: Hm-mm.

CJ: After a couple of days, he said, "Well, it's been a great experience but what are we doing to do now? Because we had been talking about voter registration to solidify the gains that we had been making. We were gonna take time out—we were all in school—I remember saying, "Well, I'm in." Sherrod said, "I'm in." McDew said, "Hey, I'm in", and Jenkins said, "Listen I have a scholarship to Yale Law School. I will continue to provide logistics and I will join later, but I need to go ahead and finish this.” Dion Diamond said, "I'm in" so, we got, Harry agreed to give us some money so we could start the process, about $10,000, and we took thirty days to get ourselves ready to go to Mississippi. I went to Mexico, Acapulco, among others, other people went different places and we met back in New York and drove down to McComb, Mississippi. En route, we were driving having fun singing, we'd been together been through jail amongst other things, so we’re fine. We go through Anniston, Alabama and this little dog runs out, and I swerve to try to miss him but we hit the dog and this white lady came out and said, "You killed my dog! You purposely killed my dog!" Called the police. The police came and met us there. Our mission is to get to Mississippi but we had now had killed this white woman’s dog. So, a white neighbor, male, came out and said—after she's ranting and raving to the patrolman—"The dog ran out in front of the car. He did everything he could to try to miss it, including, you see these skid marks going to the other side, and he just couldn't help it." We all looked at him and the officer said, "Well, there doesn't seem that there was any purposeful conduct here?" "What do you mean, you not gonna protect me, I’ma white lady.” We got on and went on down, got in the vehicle. We're singing we're happy we made it so far! We get to the state line, and it said—big sign—"The Ku Klux Klan welcome you to the sovereign state of Mississippi." We went through the line and all of a sudden, total silence. This was Mississippi, this was the land of the infamous lynchings, of Emmitt Till, I mean people went missing you didn't ever see them again, and we are now these young radicals, going into the bowels. For about a half hour, there was total silence. Nothing. We all individually realizing that this could be the last time. All of a sudden Chuck McDew (sings) "Ain't gonna let Mississippi turn me around, oh no, turn me around—oh join in—turn me around, ain't gonna let Mississippi, turn me around, we goin' to keep on walkin', yeah, keep on a-talkin', yeah, marching up to freedom land. Ain't gonna let the

Ku Klux Klan—" And for the next hour, we sang, rejoiced, drove carefully, into Jackson and then on down to McComb, realizing, oh my God, here we are.

DH: Mmm.

CJ: To shorten this part of the story, the students, there were five, six who had been arrested and were expelled or in jail. We came in, had a meeting, a mass meeting, in the Masonic Hall, all black of course, and the spirit was there. I mean, the spirit was moving and we were going to go down the next day. The next morning, apparently there had been a meeting of students at the high school, and the majority of students confronted superintendent, the school principal about why they expelled Brenda [Brenda Travis] and the rest of them, and were told to mind their business. They walked out and started down to the courthouse. Of course, we knew at that point, what was going to happen. I was designated to be—one of the strategies we had was to leave one person out in order to communicated with the rest of the world. Everybody else joined the students who went on down. Everybody was arrested.

DH: Um-mm.

CJ: The one white student, Bob Zellner. Members of the Klan grabbed them, gouging at his eyes, and Chuck McDew put his body on him, took him out. I'm, in the meantime, out and had to communicate with—called Harry Belafonte who gave me Bobby Kennedy's number who was at Hollywood at a party—I talked to Bobby Kennedy and said, "We are in McComb"—we had already spoken to Bobby Kennedy about this whole experience we were going to get into—"we need some help. I'm the only one out. Who can I call?" He gave me the number of John Doar who was head of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department at that point, who said he was going to come down and eventually he did. There was a warrant issued for my arrest for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I am staying at the back of this grocery store where we had the meeting up top. Police came in, looking for Charles Jones. I had my back to them at that point. I'd put on this apron and I'm cutting meat. "We're looking for that nigger Charles Jones." "No sir, I don't know no Charles, no Charles Jones." "Yeah, we got a warrant for his arrest, contributing to the delinquency of minors." "Oh no sir, no, we wouldn't know, wouldn't do nothin' like that, that's your business. I don't know about it, but if I hear about it, I'll tell him, I'll tell him." "Well, you tell him, we got a warrant for his arrest." "Yes, sir." I waited until they left and I turned around and went whew! The lady said, "Mr. Jones, you just messed up about $20 worth of beef." (laughs)

DH: (laughs)

CJ: John Doar finally came in, and this is one of the reasons I went into this part of this discussion. Head of the Civil Rights Division of the United States of America, the so-called most

powerful nation in the world. He calls me and says, "I'm coming over." I hear this knock on the door. "Yes, this is John Doar, Charles Jones?" "Yes, sir." So I opened the door and said hi. He says, "Close the door." He said, “The Klansmen have been following me since I got into Jackson, Mississippi. They know where I was living. I'm just kind of scared, like you Mr. Jones." And I said, Oh my, to myself. Oh my god, here is the head of the Civil Rights Division in the most powerful country in the world, just as scared as we are, and I realized, oh my, we are on our own. We had been on our own, but it really hit me at that point that we had to be our own best friends and protectors. Of the agreements that we made amongst ourselves, with John, he eventually went back and informed the Kennedys that we were telling him the truth about FBI members who were Klan members who were working at cross-purposes, the whole point, and finally agreed that they would have to something about it. Of the things we agreed upon about at that point in Mississippi—the students—was if one of us didn't make it, the others would tell the story. To make sure. So the reason I'm talking to you is a solemn commitment to Steptoes [E.W. Steptoe] who was killed and to several other people whom I know who were shot and beat and killed, to tell the story. And that's why, I will of course help edit what comes out of this, but that's why I have a duty to make sure that the University of North Carolina library has a part of the story coming out of our own experiences, our own issues, our own recollections of challenging the Southern political and military Klan establishment, that eventually forced Congress to enact the fair housing laws, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which then sent in federal registrars to allow registration, which has now led to the election of more than 5,000 black officials throughout the South, and the rest of that story. I’ve been very blessed to have been invited back to the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

DH: Um-mm.

CJ: There are some pictures of that over there, where we got together, on that top one there. I was also invited by John [Congressman John Lewis] to join the fortieth anniversary of the Freedom Rides. We met in Atlanta, this time with the CEO of the Greyhound bus station and six buses, and staff of about fifteen. We tracked the route of the Freedom Rides right through Anniston where this time, when the bus stopped, we were met by the major, highway patrolmen, who then escorted us down through Montgomery with the buses, and police escorts, right down to Montgomery, where some of us had been arrested and beaten, and to the mass meeting at the church that was Martin's point of reference in Martin's political supports, and many of the folks who were there when we were there back in the sixties, forty years earlier, were there who were thanking us as we thanked them. I was blessed to also be invited to be a part of the anniversary of the Southern Mississippi Student Movement which went on into Mississippi and the South and registered and where we lost Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner [James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner] to the Klan. I also was invited to join with the fortieth anniversary of the signing of the Voting Rights Act in Selma, Alabama at the Pettus Bridge

where John Lewis and about fifty congresspersons, bi-partisan, including Frist [Senator Bill Frist] and others, to reenact the walking across the bridge which for me closed the loop. I was in law school in '65 when the first group had started out of Selma, walked across the bridge, were met by armed highway patrolmen, state troopers and beaten literally and on horseback, and beaten literally, John—and that film is seared into the history now, back when over forty people were injured. About a week later, Dr. King, ministers, and several thousand people came and reenacted, walked past the bridge, and at this time there was no armed opposition. As a matter of fact, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund had gotten an injunction against Wallace [Governor George Wallace] prohibiting any disruption of the Freedom Rides so we, they left out I joined them and my father, Reverend J.T. Jones and about ten ministers, about five miles out of Montgomery, and walked in with the crowd, which—twenty-five, fifty thousand, whichever the numbers are, for that gathering at the capitol, of Alabama, at Montgomery, where Martin gave one of the many of his orations and speeches, which eventually led to the signing by Johnson of the Voting Rights Act. So when I went back this time, last February or March, and walked across the bridge, a circle for me had come fully around. It was embracing Lewis and the sisters and brothers who had braved the horses, the billy clubs and all them. Gracing them and walking across, that circle was closed and the lessons that the others had taught had been reinforced and my generation had passed on to another the lessons of my elders and I felt whole, like I did rocking my mother as she passed on cross onto Jordan and sitting with my father at the lunch counter. I knew to whom much is given, there is much required, but there comes a point where you have made a small contribution and God is good. And that's my little story, my summation of the sixties.

DH: I thank you for sharing, so much.

CJ: My pleasure.

End of Interview.