Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Ms. Dorothy Cotton
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Interviewer:	Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer:	John Bishop
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Joe Mosnier: You want to stop at any point just say –

Dorothy Cotton: Sure.

JM: Today is Monday July 25, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with our project videographer John Bishop in Ithaca, New York to do an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress, and we're delighted this morning to be with you Ms. Cotton, Ms. Dorothy Cotton, here in Ithaca to, uh, spend some time talking about civil rights history.

Dorothy Cotton: Um-hmm, thank you.

JM: Let me, um, let me ask a very broad first question for some reflections. I have read where you wrote, that um, you wrote the following, kind of thinking about the

world that you came up in. You wrote, "From a very early age I had felt like I was in the wrong place."

DC: Yes. Isn't that interesting? It is to me that, that the sense that I was in the wrong place, um, was very, uh, sort of pervasive in my being. It was uh, it was, I couldn't put words on it at the time that I was feeling that as a youngster. But of course as the years have [clear throat] moved on and I've moved on I, I still reflect on it and have learned to have come clear, um, on just that fact that I was supposed to be somewhere else. This is not my, this is not my home community even. It was, it was alien, alien to something in my very being. I don't know if you know something about that [laughs] neighborhood. Nine-seventeen North Greenleaf Street in Goldsboro, North Carolina where I was born. And uh, you know, outhouse in the back yard. And uh, people, um, fighting and doing horrible things to each other, and um, that must have had something to do with it. Uh, just the behavior, uh, of the people, not just the behavior, just I don't know, the way they were, the people in that neighborhood felt alien to me even as a child.

JM: Yeah um, and I think you, you had lost your mother um at when you were –

DC: My mother died when I was three years old.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, and of course that was the Depression and segregated southern town, um, what can you say to kind of frame the circumstances of your father's life after having lost his wife and he had four children to raise and –

DC: What do I say about my father now and in these days and incidentally my feeling about my father, my understanding of my father, uh, has evolved. When we were, um, children, he was just, you know, the big guy, and he really wasn't big – tall skinny guy, actually. But he was this big man, um, you know raising four girls, and I know a lot

and I understand a great deal about him in retrospect. I know now that, um, well, he went to, I think he said the third grade. And uh that, that's what stands out for me that he went to the third grade. Not only did he just get to the third grade, they lived way out somewhere. I must research that place – on somebody's farm, kind of a plantation kind of place. And his mother, um, his mother worked for a white family. I, it's interesting I, I sort of choke on that kind of language now. I really don't even – one day if I get, if I'm on the planet long enough, I'm going to create, uh, a whole new, uh, genre of language with which to describe people because, uh, I'm really – I've jumped forward here – but it seems so just silly, ridiculous to me to continue to refer to people based on *a color*. As I said to a friend, uh, recently, well, she wasn't even a friend, I was doing a speech. And I pointed to a woman sitting down front with a white blouse on, and I said, "They call you a white woman, but you're not white. If you were the color of your blouse, I would call the ambulance and get you to a hospital." And my, uh, [5:00] my dress that I was wearing was black. My skin, Andrew Young calls, said I was a "pecan tan." [laughing] And uh, so there's nothing, uh, oh dear, uh, you know it's not literal.

But anyway I sort of, uh, digressed here, but I think about my father with a great deal of, um, sadness now and, but also some anger. I can forgive to some degree the things that I, well, the part of him, the part of his behavior that makes me angry and that is still hurtful because I'm wise enough now to accept the fact that he didn't know any better. For example the way he would, uh, discipline us – these four little girls. I'm three. We were one, two – less than one year old – three, four and five, uh, three and four, uh, the four of us when my mother died. His, uh, notion of how you teach children and punish them was to take a strap and uh, and they were not soft blows.

So I, I can still feel anger about that but, I have very mixed feelings about him because again, that's what was done to him, and I learned that very late in life that his mother would come home from taking care of, back to the color thing again, this white family and their children. His mother would come home late at night, having left her children all alone, and when she'd get home – and my dad's oldest sister Aunt Penny said this to me. Um, Aunt Penny, I said, "Aunt Penny, how were you all punished?" Now this is after I'm now reflecting on sort of the ridiculousness and the pain of the way he punished us. And, Aunt Penny, his sister, said, "Well, when Mama would get home she would find a reason to whip all of us with a switch," and sometimes they had to go get the switch. And there's even more horrible things than that. So I have such mixed feelings.

Fast forward to the, the mixture now as I look back at my dad and as I do things that would be just, oh just beyond his imagination. I was in South Africa and I thought, "Oh, if my dad could have had the experience of traveling to South Africa." If my dad – I mean I've been in – I've been in a lot of countries. If he could, my dad never even had an airplane ride. And uh, even going to an airport was very special for him because that was not a part of his world. Even when we were all out of the house and, uh, one of my mother's sisters passed by and my dad was sitting on the porch and, you know, by himself, and my aunt said, "Claude, get in the car and come go with me up to Buffalo, New York." My dad, sitting on the porch in Goldsboro, North Carolina, jumped in my aunt's car, got him – had no plans to do that – got up to Buffalo, New York and set up his housekeeping function there.

So my, the sadness that I feel now is, uh, I'll give you a little anecdote, and then I'll stop talking about him [laughs]. Um, we went, I flew there and, and to see him at some point, and after he'd been there a few years. And my dad, um, I said, "Can you, do you want to go to the airport with us?" And a cousin who was living there, uh, drove us to the airport. And it was oh maybe five or six of us, and my dad was, he was working at the Bethlehem Steel Mill, Mills there. And when we finished eating in the airport, my dad pulled out his wallet and paid something like forty-two dollars for the five or six of us to eat. You can imagine that was some years ago. [laughs] You wouldn't, you wouldn't eat for five or six people for that amount of – one dinner would cost that now. And, and I remember much later, but that was very special for him. First of all to be in the airport and, and to, and to pay that, because my dad would've paid, would've had less than that amount of money for a week's work when we were children in Goldsboro, North Carolina, working in this tobacco factory.

Back to Goldsboro now, in the tobacco factory his job was to put tops on barrels where, um, he'd have to use a hammer. And, I'm not sure what it's called – a hammer on one side and an axe – because he chopped a part of his finger off with that hammer, um, with that axe one day – axe, hammer, again, I'm not again sure what it's called. But, uh, so he had, they did let him come home from work. They and he got into the hospital first, and they sort of sewed it back on, well they did. But you could tell he'd been injured.

But back to the, now, having made his way [10:00] to Buffalo, New York. Being in the airport was very special. Another time when I had flown there, a cousin who lives there took me to the airport to get my ticket, and I was there to see him. When I got back home he was sullen and quiet, back to his house, and he was hurt because he didn't get to

go to the airport. That was so special for him. Before I cry, I'm going to stop talking about him.

It's a weird uh, it's uh, it's just very painful, the deprivation and the what, what was so special to him but, well, one way to speak of my dad is it was a real mixture, my own feelings first of all, a real mixture of feelings. First, I can still be angry, feel angry. I feel the anger about the beatings when you for the – you break a dish you know he's got his belt off. And, uh, but I can also remember at Christmas time he had a smile on his face when he could get all four of us a doll, and a tea set, and our own box of fruit, and a shoebox. And he was so proud that he was able to do that. So, you can see it was such a, um, oh, there must be a word for this, such a mixture both in terms of my own feelings and my own assessment of him.

JM : Absolutely.

DC: And his own, his own feelings about his life and his work. But right now in the year 2011, most of my feeling just about my dad revolves around the deprivation of his life, his treatment. My dad was really nervous in front of white folks. [laughs] So that's, it's a real mixture of my feeling about him. There's a kind of love for him, uh, an understanding of the sort of mixed, uh, there must be a word for this as well, feeling about his life and his relationship to us.

JM: Absolutely. Absolutely. Let's pause for just a sec here.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JM: We are back on after a short break. Um, Ms. Cotton, let me ask you about um, I think there's uh, I think in your life as sometimes happens as folks come up there was a teacher, a high school teacher in your case –

DC: Oh, yes.

JM: Who was a, who would be a very tremendous influence and, and help you take a big step forward towards, um, college in Raleigh.

DC: Um, um. I thought you were going to ask me what made me, there's a little story I want to tell you.

JM: Please, please do tell.

DC: About being – I think I was around ten years old, back on –

JM: Yes.

DC: Greenleaf Street on north Goldsboro when a little white boy was riding his bicycle down my block.

JM: Um-hmm. Yeah.

DC: Kicking up dust because the pavement stopped after he got through the white section. And he was singing, you may be familiar with the song, "Deep in the Heart of Texas." Well, he was singing, "deep in the heart of niggertown." I wanted to tell you that because I have never, ever forgotten that that made me angry that that little white boy was riding down my street singing *that*. Now want to go back to high school?

Okay. Fast forward to my high school days. Yes. Um, I wish I could thank her in person, but Miss Rosa Gray was my English teacher. Miss Rosa Gray, um, was not only the English teacher. She was responsible for, um, the annual play for the high school, and, uh, I got the leading role in the high school play every single year. Of course, uh, and I felt such a connection to her, but even before [clears throat] probably more than being aware and conscious of how special it was that she would name me, this poor little girl from Greenleaf Street. But I think teachers were poor, too, probably

compared to today. [laughs] But um, we had to, in the English classes, uh, one day we had been required to memorize some poetry, and, uh, I don't remember what the poem was, but I do remember that as I stood before the class and recited the poem, and as I headed back to my seat, she said very audibly, "There's your ready girl." Till this day that, that phrase, that description, uh, just goes around and around in my consciousness. Uh, "there's your ready girl." But I knew that – I think I'm going to cry – I knew [15:00] that I never wanted to disappoint her.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm. Yeah. Was she something – I mean not to, not to probe too much into these deep personal things necessarily – but was she something of a surrogate mother, since you had lost your mother? Did she extend to that role?

DC: It's interesting that you say that. [clears throat] I never thought of her as a surrogate mother, but maybe, maybe, maybe she was a surrogate mother because I had no mother. Um –

JM: Yeah.

DC: She would, this is –

JM: It is yeah. Should we take a little minute. Yeah. Let's just take a little break, John.

[Recording stops and then continues]

JM: Thank you John. We're back after a short break. Yeah, we were talking about Miss Gray.

DC: [pause] I was, uh, [clears throat] of course my sister would tease me a little bit when I'd talk about my fondness for her and my memories of her and my [clears throat], excuse me, relationship with my English teacher. She said, "Are you sure you

didn't know Miss Gray because she was going to make sure you got lunch?" [laughter] But she was, we all have a little laugh about that because I was, I was a feeling, anyway, I had just some other feelings, uh, and my sister made me laugh. [clears throat] Um, but another example, um, oh it's the notion of Miss Gray being a surrogate mother is what really got to me because I never thought of it that way, but I think that's true.

She, um, [clears throat] there's the junior-senior prom in high school, and, um, when it was time to go to the junior-senior prom, my dad was not going to let me go [clears throat]. Miss Gray came to my house, sat on the porch, and those little houses on, along there, those little, three little row houses and they're all torn down now. But the porch was high so one could get under the porch. I got [note: under the porch is implied], and Miss, my dad was sitting on the front porch, and my teacher Miss Rosa Gray was sat there, he offered her a chair, and she was pleading with him to let me go to the junior-senior prom. She said she would, uh, chaperone me. I don't know if dad knew what the word chaperone meant, bless his soul, but, but I think he sensed she would take care of me. And but she was pleading with him to let me go. I mean I am her star pupil, and I can't go to the junior-senior prom? And I remember that I, under the house, under the porch, listening, that I was really upset. And fast forward believe it or not thirty or forty years later it became clear to me why my dad said I could not go. I'm sure my dad, as poor as he was, was a very proud man. He would not let me go to the junior-senior prom unless I could be as dressed up as any other child.

JM: Yeah.

DC: He had no money for that.

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DC: He couldn't, um, he couldn't tell her that.

JM: Yeah.

DC: He said, he said, "I just isn't ready for my girls to go to dances." That's what he said. He said he was going to talk proper for the teacher. I told you he went to the third grade living out on that farm.

JM: Sure, yeah. Did you, did you come up in the church?

DC: Not really. [clears throat] My dad had a, um, brief marriage to someone who was, I guess they married. Um, it's interesting that I never knew but she was there as the stepmother, Miss Susie Mae, and I don't know what her name was before. Yeah, I'm pretty sure they married, but I don't know anything about the ceremony or anything like that. But it, I don't know how many years, but it didn't last long. And fast forward to a time when we were all grown and married and living our various lives, my three sisters and I, and uh, and my dad confessing to us that "I wasn't loving Susie Mae." Those were his exact words. "I just brought her in there to help take care of you young'uns." So that's why we had the stepmother for a while, and the stepmother – back to church [20:00] – was very much a churchgoing woman. I remember once she was taking all four of us to church, and, uh, there was a, there's a very threatening, um, storm was pending, thunder and lightning, and we were walking to the church and all four of us in tow with Miss Susie Mae. And, we always called her Miss Susie Mae, and, uh, when she turned, she decided she needed to go back to the house because the storm, the lightening was so strong and fierce, and we turned around and went back to the house. And she got to the house she said, "That warn't nothing but the devil." And, uh, so she was very much into church. She would put this on the devil, and, uh, to keep her from

going to church! [laughter] So that was uh, that's a memory I have of Miss Susie Mae. I don't know when she left or how she left, um, but it wasn't long.

Fast forward we reconnected with her like forty or fifty years later and, um, uh, she died now. We reconnected with her.

JM: Nice, yeah.

DC: She married, uh, and she married someone she called him bishop somebody and was living in Florida and, uh, and I saw her –

JM: Interesting.

DC: Yeah. Miss Susie Mae.

John Bishop: Joe, can we pause for just a minute?

JM: Excuse me. Yep.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. Yeah, let me--

DC: I want to tell you—

JM: Yes, please.

DC: My dad, I never knew my dad to set foot in a church except when his mother died. As a matter of fact I think he was, I think my dad was anti-church, because I remember his saying, um, we were I guess late teenagers, he said, then somebody who was calling himself a preacher said, uh, my dad said, "That ain't nothing but his racket." [laughing] That may be truthful – some of the folk who call themselves reverend as well – it's an easy way to make sure you have an income was my daddy's thought. Nothing but a racket. But when he, I remember his going of course when his mother died. We

were all there of course. And I remember his crying in the church, bending over with his handkerchief to his face, but other than that my dad uh –. But, um, my mother, my actual blood mother, um, I knew her father; he was a preacher. And uh, an itinerant preacher, he went from small town to small town, and I think he and my dad actually hated each other. And my dad did confess, uh, I'm not sure in what context, but he used the word, "stole." In other words they eloped. Maggie – my mother's name – she, um, she was quite young. I'm not sure how old but quite young when my daddy married her, but they ran off and got married, and I think that Grandpa, her father, Mr. Reverend Seymour Pelham, um, and um, Reverend Seymour Pelham was a, would come by the house. We did call him Grandpa, but he would, uh, I could just tell that the energy wasn't right in the house when Grandpa stopped by.

JM: Yeah. Let me take you back to, to Miss Gray for just a moment. Because as I understand she would be, she was the part of, she's in the story, um, regarding your transition to Raleigh to attend Shaw.

DC: Yes. Miss Gray, um, boy, um, we used to sing a song, *they* used to sing. People, churchgoing people in those days used to sing a song, "I Know the Lord Laid His Hands on Me." Meaning that as a metaphor you, I'm sure you know, she laid her hands on me in a very special way. In other words, uh, [she] sort of took control of just really special events or control of me in a special way. Um, but Miss Gray knew that college was not in the offing for me.

But she called over to Shaw University when I was about to graduate from high school and, um, talked to I don't know who, how one got to go, who you talk to to get to go to college. But Miss Gray talked to someone there at Shaw, and I ended up, uh, being

accepted, uh, as a student at Shaw University. She had gotten two jobs for me. One job was, uh, working in the dining hall. The other job was cleaning the teacher's dormitory on the campus at Shaw University.

Um, eventually, um, well eventually makes it sound like a long time, but it wasn't very long before, um, I was offered a job to, uh, be – they didn't use the term but – a housekeeper in the president's residence. For a very short time I had three jobs working my way through college. My dad never gave me a dime. I don't blame him for that. He didn't have any money to and probably didn't know what college was, not really. But, uh, so I was cleaning the teacher's dormitory. Eventually, um, I was able to give up one of the jobs. I think that was the one that I gave up and still worked in the [25:00] dining hall for a little while. But when I, I must've been a good worker and a good cleaner in the teacher's dormitory because I was invited to come and be housekeeper for the president, uh, Dr. Robert Prentiss Daniel and, uh, and his wife Blanche Daniel. They had me coming over to, instead of the teacher's dormitory, to help take care of the president's residence.

Dr. and Mrs. Daniel had no children, and, uh, I had a sense that ultimately I was, uh, in a way I was part daughter and part housekeeper, and, um, I think that, uh, I worked very hard in that house, though, and it was a three-story house. And, uh, two other girls and I stayed, I really stayed, uh, through graduation and even, uh, getting married. Um, I sort of became, well I felt like I was part daughter and part, part housekeeper. And the housekeeping part, um, or even being with them, the Daniels, the president of Shaw University, I didn't, it was not a happy relationship. And so I'm taking care of the house and, uh, and sometimes I'd get a feeling that they wanted me to act like a daughter. I'm

not sure, that too is a very complicated relationship because they weren't really nice to me. I remember once I had the flu and Dr. Daniel said, "You can't just go to bed because you don't feel well." He even said that to me. I remember once I got a check for, uh well, fast-forward, a job in the library. I'm, that's really quite far ahead, but I'm still living there. And uh, and Mrs. Daniel opened the check – the envelope – she wanted to see how much I was making.

And, uh, I have to tell you a little anecdote about my dad. He came, my dad came from Goldsboro while I'm a student there at Shaw, and I'm now in the president's home, and my dad had never seen floors like the floors in the president's residence and he said, "What in the world does anybody want their floors shining like this for?" And I was the one who polished those floors and put the wax on the floors or whatever for a while. Then they had another fellow, uh, Robinson was this, all I remember is Robinson – never knew his first name – uh, would come and do some things in the house. But I became sort of a, I think in a way they loved having me there, having no children of their own. But at the same time, um, I don't have happy memories of being there, but it was helpful because, uh, they saw that, you know, I went to class. It took me, uh, at least six years to get my college degree I think it was. [clears throat]

I was in a class with a fellow, um, I'll think of his name was, Horace Simms was a classmate of mine in a class, a Shakespearian class. Uh, we both loved Shakespeare. I remember the poem I sat in her class; I loved reciting Shakespearian poetry. This fellow Horace Simms sat next to me in this Shakespearian class studying Shakespeare, and we used to walk down the hill, um, Horace Simms and I to have a beverage. We didn't have a campus center as they do on campuses now. But there was a fellow who had a, a place

for students to hang out and have refreshments just down the hill from Virginia State College. And uh sitting there one day, he, uh, Simms said to me, "I have a fellow I'd like you to meet. And, uh, his name is George Cotton." Fast forward, you can imagine. So George Cotton this uh, quite uh, must've been George was at least, uh, ten years older than I. But that was not an issue then. And I remember he had this great big Buick. And I had the sense that, um, anyway, George Cotton took a liking to me. And, uh, I've read somewhere that people say I met George Cotton in college, suggesting that he was a student as well. But he was not; George never went to college. I don't know how far George Cotton went to school but even. But, but, but courting got to be quite heavy.

Fast forward to a time when I actually said, actually I didn't say yes. He didn't ask me to marry him. He showed up one day with a ring and, uh, very correctly wanted to speak to Dr. Daniel, and I, I knew at that point what he was going to do. I didn't know he had a ring, but he wanted to ask for my hand. I wonder where George learned that. Um, but I stood at [30:00] the top of the stairs, holding on to the banister and I heard George saying to Dr. Daniel that he wanted to marry me, and he wanted their blessing. Um and I remember that Dr. Daniel said to George, um, "Dorothy is very ambitious. You sure you want this marriage?" And um, George said, "Yes sir." George Cotton and I got married *in* the president's residence. This place that I had, where I had scrubbed floors – not scrubbed – polished floors and cooked and served meals and, uh, again I was part housekeeper and, and part, part daughter I used to say. But very sort of mixed, I could say a lot about the mixture of my energy.

JM: One last question on that point and maybe this will illustrate that, that tension. When the, when, uh, Dr. Daniel made the transition from Shaw to Virginia State in 1950 and you moved and –

DC: That's right.

JM: And shifted your college enrollment up there.

DC: Yeah, right.

JM: Were you –

DC: Yeah, I was –

JM: What were your feelings about that shift?

DC: I'm at still at Shaw, and what I was saying was at Virginia State College at that point.

JM: Were you?

DC: I moved, when Dr. Daniel was offered the presidency at Virginia State College, they, I guess I was a really good housecleaner because they wanted me to go with them. Yeah, I was ahead of the story because all this, what I was just talking about happened at Virginia State College. I was at Shaw probably no more than one year, one school year. And went to, uh, Virginia State College because Dr. Daniel became president of Virginia State College. And, uh, this is where, uh, and this is where I mentioned the classmate uh, uh –

JM: Simms. Mr. Simms.

DC: Yeah, Simms. And anyway I –

JM: Sure. Yeah, no, no I was just curious.

DC: Yeah but that was, that was interesting because I was thinking about being on the campus, but I need to, uh, which campus am I talking about now. When Dr. Daniel got the offer –

JM: Right, of course it would be in Petersburg where you would be drawn after college more directly into, into early Movement activities.

DC: Well, I got to, I got to Virginia State College and at Virginia State College um, again that's where this, uh, Simms, uh, and I were in the Shakespearian class. That was not at Shaw; that was at Virginia State College. And uh, and George Cotton lived there in Petersburg. And, uh, when I said yes, I would marry him. He even had the ring, I think he gave me the ring that, later on that evening. And uh, and there was a little wedding right there in the house. [phone rings] I meant to –

JM: Let's pause for just a second.

DC: Do you know how to turn that – I can –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Okay, we're back on after a little break for the telephone.

DC: So, did we get married here?

JM: Yes, you were married in Petersburg, and we talked about how you would be drawn into Movement activities.

DC: I want to, I want to tell you about a little boy because this, I consider this the beginning. Um, not so much drawn into the Movement but I, a particular consciousness was evolving in me. Back to my childhood when, did I tell you about the little boy driving down the sidewalk?

JM: Yes.

JM: On his bicycle.

DC: Singing deep in the heart of niggertown.

JM: Yes.

DC: Okay, I know that a consciousness about the wrongness of the system, was, that opened it up for me. Okay fast forward to, um, Virginia State College, and um, when, um, I became active in a church in Petersburg, Virginia. Get the cities right here. And, uh, Reverend Wyatt T. Walker was pastor of this church, and [clears throat] I'm not sure why I started going there except that Wyatt T. Walker was also the regional head of the NAACP, um, and also the other CORE – I think almost, it seems like all of the organizations really related were very, uh, close. The Congress of Racial Equality and, uh, at the time, and I think I was drawn to that church because of his, he also was a really good preacher, and he also was a very handsome guy. [laughing]

We used to, uh, I don't know, tease each other because we would, my house became the house after getting really involved with all of his extracurricular activities and also very active in the church, uh, even on programs sometimes, still doing poetry. I remember reading poetry from the balcony in the church and, uh, it was just really fun hanging out with Reverend Walker. And, um, so being active, his running the NAACP [35:00] and, um, and becoming concerned that black folk could not use the public library, uh, he took a real initiative there around that library discrimination and the library. Um, and uh, and I thought just imagine we can't use the public library, and yet *they* – white folks – call us ignorant and, and, uh, I felt that very strongly now, uh, as uh, I'm not sure exactly what year it was that, um, but that will be easy to find. I may remember it in just a moment here.

But um, Reverend Walker, um, asked me to – he saw my interest – if I would help the, in this organizing and training of children, especially younger people, because he wanted us to put a picket line in front of the library and ultimately in front of the Woolworth's store downtown. But we started with the library, and I found a letter as a matter of fact, because I became secretary to him – secretary of the um, uh NAACP – and, uh, I had to therefore, um, you know, just really kind of be with him, uh, regularly in, in that work and handling the communication.

So I ended up training youngsters in the church to walk with picket signs and how – and I heard something of nonviolence – and we invited this young preacher from Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King, to come up to Petersburg, Virginia to speak for one because we now started having what we called mass meetings as well in Petersburg. Reverend Walker had met Martin, um, at a conference at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. He, I remember his telling me that he had met him, and, uh, Reverend Walker is very much interested in what was going on in Montgomery Alabama – the Montgomery bus boycott – and, uh, invited this little preacher from Montgomery to come up and speak for us.

Uh, so Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King did just that. Because in cities where there was protest activity – and, and it seemed to be just springing up all over the place this, uh, protest activity, and, uh so we – now everybody had a mass meeting. We called them mass meetings for some reason. Well, I think maybe it's obvious. The mass meeting, um, uh, interested, the meetings in all those cities and definitely in Petersburg but everywhere people were interested in coming to the mass meetings because they wanted to hear what was going on in town. So they started coming to the mass meetings.

And when uh, and everybody now massive numbers of people were hearing about the Montgomery bus boycott and Rosa Parks, and when he came up to speak for us uh, Dr. King, I was on the program.

You know when black folk have programs, we've got music and dancing and poetry and singing and, uh, everybody's involved. I used to try to tell the students at Cornell University when we'd we pay all this money for a speaker to come and they'd just have the speaker walk up and very coldly give his speech and walk off with ten thousand dollars and, uh, I thought, put some flowers on the table! Let's have some music; let's do something. So maybe that's a cultural difference. I don't know. But I did poetry, back to my love of poetry again.

I remember um, uh, that we had dinner at the parsonage, at Reverend Walker's house, and, uh, the Young Women's Parish Club was the organized group of women in the church that, um, was hosting, planned the dinner and we were serving the dinner. And I was moving around the table from the kitchen to the table. And, um, Dr. King wanted to know, I can see him now sitting at the head, at the end of this not quite long table in the parsonage, at Reverend Walker's house, and he wanted to, uh, meet that young lady who said the poem on the, on the program, uh, earlier that night. Somehow the meal, I think, was after the program. And so I was identified. It was Dorothy Cotton who said the poem on the program. And, uh, he wanted to meet me, and I stood by the head of the table where he was sitting or maybe it was the foot of the table, one end of the table, and uh and I told him about the poem and uh and we, and we had a nice little chat.

He was easy to meet, very unassuming little guy. You know, uh, rather [40:00] short of stature as Coretta used to say. She was not impressed when she saw him in terms

of stature or anything like that, but there was still something very impressive about him. I enjoyed standing there chatting with him at the table. We were the Young Women's Parish Club; we were serving the meal.

Um, while he was there in Petersburg, he was very much interested in what we were, our protest activities, picketing in front of the library, and I had run the workshops, knew nothing substantive about nonviolence, but I knew that you were not supposed to fight or hit anybody back. Very simplistic at that time. And uh, so, but I'm helping the youngsters prepare to walk in front of the dime store, Woolworth's Store, and in front of the library. But apparently before Dr. King left Petersburg, he asked Reverend Walker to move to Atlanta. And Wyatt T. Walker, Reverend Walker said, "I will move to Atlanta to work with you as you are developing this organization – the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I'll move, uh, there and, uh, and work with you if I can take the two people who helped me here. There was a fellow named Jim Wood and me. If he could take us and so, Wyatt Walker, uh, raised the subject with me and, would I be interested in going, and I said to my husband George Cotton, I told him the story and I said, "I'd like to go down and help them out for about three months." And, uh, George was very quiet, didn't say very much. I'm not sure what he felt. I can surmise now many, many, many years later, uh, the pain it must've been for him because I went. George Cotton, my husband, drove me to Atlanta and, uh, and Reverend Walker was in the process of moving. And I got to Atlanta and um, to stay my three months that I promised my husband, and George, as I said, drove me there and would come down once or twice he came down in the early months. But I stayed twenty-three years. The Movement became my life once I, but that's how I got there. His coming up to visit, Dr.

King coming to visit us in Petersburg, and then my going, uh, going with, uh, to work with Reverend Walker and ultimately becoming, uh, I ended up, uh, being a director of education for SCLC.

JM: Exactly and we'll turn to that in just one second. One quick little question about the timing of Petersburg, and it's not crucial. We could look this up easily enough, but you were, I believe the protest activity that you and, um, Reverend Walker and other folks carried forward out of the church in the Petersburg Improvement Association. That began in '59, I think. Do you remember –

DC: I think –

JM: Was it even prior to the Greensboro sit-in in February of 1960?

DC: Oh I'd, I'd have to look that up. The dates, uh, leave me at the moment.

JM: Oh that's okay. That's okay, but I think you guys were even, you know, picketing in front of the Greensboro sit-ins, and then of course after that things really exploded.

DC: Uh, I was not picketing in Greensboro.

JM: No, no, no.

DC: Oh you mean the Movement, some Movement people.

JM: In Petersburg.

DC: Oh yeah.

JM: No, your pickets in front of the library and in front of Woolworths in Petersburg –

DC: Okay.

JM: Were those before the Greensboro –

DC: Oh I see what you're, I see what you are saying. I'd have to, I'd have to research that.

JM: Not sure. It's not a crucial thing. We can look that up.

DC: Yeah. I'd have to look that up.

JM: Okay.

DC: But interesting question that you raised. Now I'm curious about it.

JM: Tell me about, um, tell me about uh what you found when you arrived in Atlanta to join this organization called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which had only a very, very small staff.

DC: Well, it was just aborning as they say. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was, uh, had not yet come into the big important organization that we know it, uh, as we know it or came to know it. I don't want to talk about today; that's another story. Um, but when I arrived, I remember, um, first I had to find a place to live. And George Cotton having driven me down, my husband, uh, we stayed at a motel, I'm not sure which one, for several days and then George headed back to Petersburg, Virginia where we were living, and I remember focusing on a place to live and I can talk about that. Ended up, um, well, and I'm not sure which should come first, but maybe it doesn't matter. Um your question specifically was what I found when I got there. I found –

JM: It's a very small group of people.

DC: Three or four people in an office on Auburn Avenue and the, uh, at [45:00] least three people, and I only remember three people being there that I talk about. Um, a young woman Lillie Hunter, um, oh I can't believe I'm blocking on a name, Ella Baker. Um, and a girl, a woman named, um, Ernestine Brown. Um, those were the three people

in the office, um, as I remember. Uh, I'm not sure when Ernestine came on, but I think I found her there, that she was working there. But definitely Ella Baker, and Lillie Hunter had moved up from, uh, Montgomery as I understand. Um, I don't know where she is. I'm told she's in Tuskegee. Do you, are you familiar with her name? Okay. Um, Lillie Hunter, uh, those were the three people there. Very, and of course I'm just sort of wide-eyed youngster never having traveled much or lived in another city, and I feel like I was exploring possibilities for my life. I feel like I was on, uh, on a track to something different and new but didn't know what it was. I didn't know what the organization was.

So I had a lot to learn, but I have to include in my transitioning into Atlanta, uh, looking for a place to live and ended up, uh, staying for a few months with Dora McDonald who became, uh well, Dora, um, oh where was Dora working for him. I have to, uh, just to get the chronology, uh, straight here. I lived with Dora's, with Dora for a few months. I lived with, and I got a room in a house. Uh, I will think of the woman's name – we called her, everybody called her elderly but I had a, got a room in her house, um, in an elderly woman's house. And uh, I'll think of the name. I may have to call you up and give you the name.

JM: That's okay. No trouble.

DC: So anyway, so it was a room there and ultimately a room in Dora's house. Um, I need to remember when Dora came on board. Dora must've already been there. But I met her, and she had, Dora had a house, and I ended up staying with Dora, um, for a short time, I think just several months. And uh, yeah, change that to stayed with Dora McDonald, who became Dr. King's secretary. And then staying with the elderly woman. I hate saying elderly woman. I'll tell you her name in a minute.

JM: Mrs. Mosely, I think.

DC: Thank you. My goodness. Oh dear. Now I'll have to take you to the White House, too. [laughing] Yeah, Miss Mosely, that's right. I stayed with Miss Mosely longer. Gee whiz, how could I forget that? Do people, does anybody else forget?

JM: Oh we all forget. I just, I just have read the--

DC: Pull parts of the story. Yeah, Miss Mosely.

JM: Very recently. So it's fresh in my mind.

DC: And I became, uh, quite at home there. But I just, I had a room, but she made me feel very welcome. There were no children there, her son and his wife lived there. So I lived with Miss Mosley until I, uh, again see me just entering into life in Atlanta, and, uh, eventually, uh, not too long, uh, maybe I stayed with Miss Mosley – I'm not sure how long – maybe a year, I got myself an apartment and was shopping around for quite awhile and found this apartment. And by that time of course I'm enmeshing myself now in the, uh, in the, this growing organization, SCLC, and just kind of learning the ropes. Another thing I remember moving into Atlanta was during these weeks when I'm looking for a place, a place to live, I remember that first as soon as George left, I was walking through an area, and I remember a fellow snatching my pocketbook, which I never got back incidentally. Um, and now here I'm this new, never traveled much at all and uh, having this happen, exploring, staying at these two or three different places, you know, rooming with people but, uh, but Dora became, was Dr. King's secretary. I'm not sure when she became, uh, his secretary, but uh but I did have a room at her house for a while.

JM: Would she have been at Morehouse?

DC: Uh, I'm not sure. Hold on. Would she have been, she might have worked there.

JM: Yeah, I thought she had come over from –

DC: Morehouse.

JM : Maybe from Morehouse and was a very accomplished professional secretary with deep connections to the community.

DC: She was. She was. As a matter of fact I have written that Dora, Dr. King said Dora could be president, could be secretary to the President of the United States, and I wrote in my book manuscript that I'm doing that I wish that, I hope that Dr. King told her that, that she could've been.

JM: Now one thing that we haven't mentioned as we're kind of coming through the late fifties into the early sixties that you had also just earned a master's degree.

DC: Yeah.

JM: So you arrived with a master's degree.

DC: Yeah, I was doing kind of a number of things kind of simultaneously here. What happened was now this is [50:00] after the marriage, my marriage to George Cotton. This was uh, and this was before, uh, going to –

JM: Atlanta.

DC: SCLC but yes, I went up to, I just again I knew that I was hungry for something and that something was on the horizon for me. I can only put that into words now. But I said to my husband I wanted to work on a master's degree, and then I, so I went up to uh, Boston to, um, to Boston University for one summer I think it was first. And, uh, and I came back home. Then I realized I wanted to go back and really seriously

pursue the degree, which I did. I came home for a semester and then went back, decided to stay and finish it. So I did get the master's degree. As a matter of fact that's one date I'm very clear about because it was in the summer of 1960. And I knew that I, I was questioning whether I would stay and march, uh, in cap and gown in the commencement exercise to get this master's degree and decided that I would indeed do that because it had been quite a struggle and working it into my uh, into my, working it into my schedule of things that were kind of cooking for me, things that were on my mind. And in the summer of 1960 I, that's when I said to my husband, I want to go, I want to accept this invitation from Reverend Walker to go with him and invitation from Dr. King to go to Atlanta. So I went to Atlanta a few days after I got the degree at Boston University.

JM: Sure. In an organization that as you say aborning in those, in those months early sixties, um, such a small group of people, your original title on arrival, I think, was director of education.

DC: Not originally.

JM: No, it wasn't.

DC: I was working as administrative assistant to Reverend Walker.

JM: Okay. Okay.

DC: I went down there and that was because we didn't know what we were going to be. We didn't even know that we were going to need, that we were going to have this education program.

JM: That's right.

DC: So I was working as Reverend Walker, I remember saying to him one day, he was piling so much stuff on my desk and how do, I'm a good typist, a fast typist and

we didn't have computers in those days. So I'm sitting there typing and one day I said, "Gah, you expect me to finish this? There's so much, Reverend Walker, on my desk." But I was his administrative assistant.

One uh, one story that stands out in my mind or one event, that stands out for me is, um, one day Dr. King pulled a chair up in front of my desk as I'm sitting there with stuff all piled around my desk, and it was almost like he was interviewing me. And asking me a lot of questions about my life and family and school and, uh, whatever, just chatting. And, uh, shortly after that, uh, he asked me if I would go over to a place called Highlander Folk School, shortly after that. And that's when I really kind of put two and two together and realized that I was really sort of being interviewed as I surmised.

Um, and uh I'd have to tell you the whole story of Highlander, but I don't really need to do that except that Highlander was in the throes of being closed down because they had all sorts of, um, phony charges leveled at them. This communist school and there was a, you may have heard of this, uh, billboard on the side of the road with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Dr. King, uh, on the same, uh, roadside sign, and somewhere in the caption was, "These have been to that communist school." Interestingly one woman at – Myles Horton founded the Highlander, uh, Folk School – at Myles' memorial service, after he died, one woman said, uh, told this story. And she said, "We owe a big laugh at Myles' funeral. They wouldn't have known communism from rheumatism." And because they're calling the school a communist school and then because, um, well you know, Myles Horton had black folk and white folk meeting together when that was just not the thing to do, uh, in those days.

But I was asked to go over to Highlander and because Dr. King and company must've seen the handwriting on the wall. The state was uh, just, uh, they were just taunted all the time, um, and charged, just had many, uh, charges leveled against them, including selling whiskey. And um, I understand that they had served beer at an event there at the Highlander Folk School, and the Highlander Folk School is another, you know, whole story, but when Dr. King asked me if I would go over there to just meet the people and check out the school to get to know something of the school, I did just that.

So now I'm moving away from being administrative person to Reverend Wyatt T. Walker. I went to Highlander and I met this woman [55:00] uh, uh and, Septima Clark, and, uh, because Septima was working there at the Highlander Folk School. It's an interesting story about how she, uh, got to work there. I'll see if I can summarize this, but, uh, Septima had met Esau Jenkins. Esau Jenkins was a man who lived on John's Island, the sea islands off the coast of Charleston. Um and uh Esau had I think I've been told more than one but he used to drive a school, an old school bus that he had acquired from the islands to the mainland of Charleston. And uh taking people back and forth to work, he was a very enterprising man. And uh, he would uh – [phone rings]

JM: We'll take a little break for the telephone.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Okay we're back after a short break. We're talking about Esau Jenkins and –

DC: Yes, um, I, when I did go over to Highlander, and I met Septima Clark there. Septima Clark had met, uh, Esau Jenkins who had, uh, a little transportation service bringing people, taking people back and forth to work from John's Island to Charleston, back and forth. And uh, John's Island stands out in my mind. Uh some, some of the

other islands uh Wadmalow, Edisto, other islands, uh, off the coast of Charleston ultimately were involved. But uh, I really wanted to tell you about, um, I'd like to share the fact that Esau Jenkins, um, experienced an event. He didn't see it. Let me tell you what the event was. A white man shot a black young boy, and the white man shot the boy because the boy accidentally ran over the man's dog. So he just killed the boy. And uh I understand the dog really ran out in front of the truck, I think it was. And so the white man killed the boy, this black boy. And the people, predominantly African American, and literally African American there, you could still hear the Gullah language they called it spoken around the islands there in those days. And Esau realized that something was wrong with that picture because the people of John's Island didn't rise up in righteous indignation when this man decided to just shoot the boy and nothing happened. And Esau was smart enough to know that they didn't, didn't protest this killing because the boy, um, because the people of – they didn't protest the killing because the people on the island had no political power.

What I just said really is the germ of the Citizenship Education Program that ultimately became my job because what happened was Esau started helping people – on his bus as he drove them back and forth to work – understand why it was important for them to register to vote and talking to them about their political power. And it's amazing that Esau, well, sensed this, knew this, understood this and its relationship to an event like that. And Septima Clark said, um, Esau Jenkins had a third grade education but a PhD mind. And um, I like to, uh, quote that because it must be true. He could see that the people having no political power, and the people on the island also were

predominately functionally illiterate, uh, on the island there and uh, but Esau met Septima Clark.

Her story also relates to my going to SCLC in the sense that, uh, Septima had been fired from the Charleston school system. She had been a teacher, but she was fired because she would not say whether or not she was a member of the NAACP or not. And uh, they met, Esau Jenkins and Septima met actually at a conference at uh, at the Highlander Folk School.

Uh, let's we can uh just sort of actually I guess is a fast forward a little bit here to a time when the Citizenship Education Program, that is helping functionally illiterate black folk, African American people, uh, understand their political power. Uh, it just grew like topsy when Septima and Esau met each other there at the Highlander Folk School. Esau was wanting people to discover their political power and literacy training was a major part of that. And then meeting, meeting this teacher who loved to, there's a photo of Septima Clark holding an elderly gentleman's hand helping him learn to do cursive writing because in those days one had to do cursive writing to sign your name and, uh, which probably was a trick too just to [1:00:00] keep black folk from, uh, registering to vote.

So my being there, uh, meeting Septima who'd now moved, came over from Charleston to work there at the Highlander Folk School and Esau and her, and Septima working together now. Um, I just want to tell you that Highlander was fighting for its very life in the courts at this time. And they lost that battle. In other words the state confiscated their property, beautiful property, uh, there in the Cumberland Mountains. And uh, because they lost that property, so Highlander in terms of location was kind of in

limbo for a while. Maybe one way to speak about that, but ultimately they got uh, uh a new property, and uh, which is just beautiful in the mountains in that area. I should be able to describe it more directly and, uh, can't. I've written about it in my book manuscript.

But now that uh they were in the time from, between the time from actually losing the Highlander Folk School, the people who were funding these workshops now that Septima and Esau were – so Septima could help them learn to read and write and Esau was talking the political aspect of it. Um, everybody wanted to make sure this training continued. SCLC, now my organization, Dr. King's organization inherited the organization.

The Marshall Field Foundation who gave the major funds to the, the Highlander School to run, do this training helping these black folk to read and write enough so they could register and vote. Uh, they were interested in keeping the, this training program going for these people. And, eventually uh, not eventually um, it didn't take them long to decide they would give those funds to SCLC to run this Citizenship Education Program. And I was asked to become the director of Citizenship Education Program. Thanks to Andrew Young who, Andrew Young, um, had secured, um, through the good offices of his church, the Congregational Church, a facility there in, uh, McIntosh, Georgia and we would, uh, hold workshops there.

And now Andy, uh Septima and I would travel the South recruiting people to come into the five-day residential workshop. Because, so what happened, uh, after, we could probably point to a number of horrible events now around the South, but we knew that we could do more with this training program than just help people learn to read and

write. We could expand it to helping them understand their political rights; they could understand, uh, their rights as citizen, what that all meant and, um, because Andy had a connection with the Congregational Church being a Congregationalist minister. Uh, we found this, the Dorchester Center at McIntosh, Georgia and a property that the church, the national church owned. So we, we started having workshops there. But now envision Septima Clark, Andrew Young and I traveling the South, and we would target places where protest activity was springing up everywhere. Uh protest activity was springing up in a lot of places. And we would go into places that were just kind of hotbeds of activity now, and we would tell people we had this five-day residential workshop. And we would, uh, invite them to come to Dorchester Center and uh, and they would have a wonderful experience because we know you're fighting for your rights here, and we will help you discover ways to do that.

Uh, I remember sitting in someone's living room, actually in Norfolk, Virginia and um, and my friend Eunice Minnis, uh, and Albert Minnis, the husband, uh, hosted me because I had met Eunice Minnis, a teacher, when I was doing my student teaching before I graduated from college. And Eunice invited me to her house, and her husband sat there, uh, and uh, so, Al said uh, "You made a wonderful talk Dorothy, um, but if you're going to tell these, invite these people to come to uh your five-day workshop, you –" Because when I finished telling them then I said, "And we'll pay your way." He said, "You did that backwards," and, uh, now uh, Albert Minnis, uh, described himself as a junk man because he really did sell old parts of old cars. His wife was a teacher. But he, he would, uh –. And it was interesting, I think he had a lot of fun calling himself a junkman. This junkman told me how to do my, my selling of the notion of, uh, the

invitation to come away with us to Dorchester Center. And uh, so, tell them first that you're going to pay their way because, while you're talking, they're sitting [1:05:00] there thinking, "I can't afford to go anywhere. I can't take a trip." If they know you're going to pay their way up front. So I thought here is this junk man telling me with a, with a master's degree, how to recruit people and how to make my little speech [laughs] to invite them to come. So anyway, I have a lot of fun with that.

JM: Tell me about, tell me about Andrew Young. Tell me about Septima Clark. Tell me about Bernice Robinson.

DC: Oh yeah.

JM: Your colleagues there.

DC: Well, Septima was um, well incidentally Septima and, especially Septima, Andy and I used to, uh, well we would, the three of us in a car and uh, and I think people would sometimes think we were mother, son and daughter, Septima being the, the elder in you know the car. But we would go from city to city, but we would target one place and we would go. Septima because, uh, there was a spirit about her that was, uh, just so warm and she was sort of the grandmotherly type. Um, I have an image of what that is. I don't know if people, uh, hearing, hearing that coming from me now would, uh, necessarily know. But people know, grandmotherly in the sense of what grandmothers used to look like. But now when I see somebody and they tell me that they have grandchildren, I think they look like they're twenty-nine. You're a grandmother? But anyway uh, the grandmotherly type had a different connotation in those days. You know, you were older, you walked slower, and you didn't dance and you – but, uh,

grandmothers I know now – I have a friend who's a grandmother and she lays down a mean jitterbug [laughs] even now. Still, she's a grandmother.

But uh, so we were being, we were in the car and Septima still focused on, this is her part of the teaching that we would do. Septima focused on, uh, the handwriting because in a lot of places you have to do, one had to know cursive writing in order to register. I think it was just a trick to actually to exclude black folk. And there were massive numbers of African American people across the southland especially and other places too uh, but uh, we were focusing across the South. But if they could do, make block letters, that wouldn't do. You had to do cursive writing. Septima was very good at that. There's a photograph of Septima holding an elderly gentleman's hand helping him learn to do cursive writing.

JM: Um-hmm.

Um, Andrew and I, uh, also had a particular, uh, focus or we came to play a particular role in the five-day residential workshops. Now inviting folk to come to the Dorchester Center at McIntosh, Georgia, and uh, I would plan the five-day, uh, sessions and Andy would get into the, the politics. I remember one session, the main session Andy did was, actually pushing people to understand – as we all did that but – why voting was important. And even, uh, I used to name the session when I would write out the outline of the week's work, "why one vote matters." And Andy would tell the story I'm forgetting which president won because one vote made a difference. And so you're vote counts. Andy wanted to emphasize the fact that one vote matters. And I remember so vividly Andy's doing, uh, that session.

Uh, Bernice Robinson also was in, was urging people to understand the politics as I was as well. But I laid out the five-day, uh, sessions. And, uh, we would, I got people to work with the people who came with – it has to be understand that these were sometimes functionally illiterate people but who were very active in their communities. That's why they got invited to come. And uh, but we also had people who were, you know, sort of itinerant preachers or preachers like, uh, anyway, my dad has an interesting description I think I mentioned earlier about who some of these preachers were. [laughter] But uh, they also would come to workshops and I had to in the workshop, help them understand what it meant to have a dialogue going between all the people and not just beat up on people because you were the preacher. Because especially the black communities from which a lot of the people came were, um, if you call yourself a preacher, people felt they had to be quiet if *the preacher spoke*. But sometimes they knew more than *the preacher*. I don't mean to, to denigrate, you know, but the preachers had to learn what it meant, the ways people learn for example and that people needed to feel encouraged, and they didn't feel that they had to shut up because somebody who called themselves a preacher was speaking.

JM: Sure, sure. Exactly.

DC: But also there were, there were also good men of the cloth.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask you a couple of questions about the, for more detail about the five-day training. Um –

DC: Yeah.

JM: I've read that, that [1:10:00] you made a very careful point to rather than say to lecture from the front of the room a set of specific lessons we want—

DC: Sure.

JM: You to understand, rather we want to start conversations.

DC: Of course.

JM: So out of the group's conversation would develop a more focused understanding of the things that the attendees wanted to know.

DC: I have a very interesting, still is interesting to me. Uh, I don't know if this would be maybe included in what people call the Socratic method of teaching. But there was one incident that I, or anecdote that I've written about, something that happened in a session, uh, with me. Um, in this discussion, um, I was, uh, having people, uh, share some of what was going on in their communities. And I remember one woman, like, "Why were, why were they there? What were you concerned about?" And one woman told me that, uh, every time she went down to – no, these were all African American folk, black folk if one wants to use that term –. Uh, "Every time I go down to the, to the courthouse the clerk, the city clerk would just be so insulting, and I was trying to tell her that they would uh, the people who would test the well water would test all the white folk's water but would not test the water in my well." And uh I remember the second day she again was so energized and just stirred about the fact that they would test everybody's well water but the water for black folk. The third day she's ready to tell me that same story again and I said, "Well, why aren't you the city clerk?" And I love telling that story because it really makes the point of, uh, how there was this, there is no such thing as an audible silence, but there are other ways to describe, uh, the energy in the room at that moment. And the transformation obviously that was happening with not only her but because that's why they were there to decide that they were not going to be

victims anymore. But uh incidentally that's um, I'm using a part of that, uh, language in the title of the book that I'm doing and um –

JM: Which is –

DC: Dr. King uh yeah, uh, Dr. King came to close out one of the workshops for me. I called him and said, "Would you please come" –. Um, the uh, *If Your Back's Not Bent: the Movement from Victim to Victory*. Now I called him over in Atlanta and said, "Could you come over to Savannah to the Dorchester Center and close out. We've had about sixty people here for the five days and they have been just a wonderful powerful group. And we need you; we would like you to come and just do the closing." Because we'd have a little banquet on the last day, a banquet put together about people who go out and get green stuff off of the trees and the bushes and the food was a little fancier and we would fancy up the room. And the people in the workshop would do that. But anyway, Dr. King came over, and I remember his telling the people, and he has used the terminology or had used it more than once, but he said to the now about-to-be graduates of our citizenship education workshop, "Nobody can ride your back if your back's not bent." A metaphor, I hope people will get that as they see my book. But I decided that was what we were doing. The woman who was complaining that the city clerk treated her so badly. You know, you can be, feel sorry for yourself or spend the rest of your life angry or you can *become* the city clerk and um, nobody can ride your back if your back's not bent. And, um, the subtitle, "the Movement from Victim to Victory."

JM: Yeah.

DC: So –

JM: What would you say among – you had what five or six-thousand people trained in these workshops?

DC: Yeah, maybe more.

JM: Maybe more.

DC: I've heard Andy use the term eight thousand. I don't know how, I don't know how we kept –

JM: Yeah.

DC: I, but at least between five and eight. I say between five and six; Andy thinks it was about eight thousand who came through the years. Uh, because every – And then we would, uh, we would recruit people and people would go back to their home communities and tell others about the training workshop which we held every, convened every month and uh, and then other people would come.

JM: Yep.

DC: And it was very, um, it was a very um, powerful, experience and had, I remember once, uh, you know singing was so important in the Civil Rights Movement. And uh –

JM: You were quite a singer I understand.

DC: I remember, uh, I loved to sing even though I, you know, don't really know the music. People ask what key do you want and I start looking in my pocket. I don't know what they mean. What do you mean what key? But uh, I want to tell you that one busload was going back. I think we had recruited a lot [1:15:00] of people from, uh, the Delta area, Mississippi, uh, Fannie Lou Hamer living in, lived in Ruleville, Mississippi. And she came more than once, and once Fannie Lou Hamer had come to a workshop, uh,

she would, um, we could just tell her, give her the dates of the next workshop and, she would do the recruiting there, and she became really quite a regular. But I do remember that a busload was going back to, I think it was the Delta of Mississippi and, and I remember that Andy Young and I stood on the grounds because they had come by bus. It was mostly a group from the Delta of Mississippi at this point, so, therefore the bus. And we stood there as the bus was rolling out and, Andy and I started singing, [singing] "This may be the last hour" I'm going to cry, so I'm going to stop. "This may be the last time children, this may be the last time, it may be the last time, I don't know." Because it may be the last time because people may get killed.

JM: We're getting back to very difficult –

DC: A lot of people did. But I remember standing on the ground as the bus was pulling off, singing, "It maybe the last time we work together. It may be the last time, I don't know." And we both cried as the bus pulled off.

JM: Mmm.

DC: Oooh. Mmm.

JM: Let me ask a question about these years, early sixties, uh, coming at all this work taking a slightly different angle of perspective because you were, you were, um, a woman right at the center of the SCLC world. Um, probably with more I think fair to say more status and, and institutional authority inside SCLC than any other woman as your work would emerge and evolve. Um, how did you, *did* you think in those years about the question of gender and the roles of women in the Movement compared to the roles of men and the opportunities available to women compared to the opportunities, etcetera.

DC: I don't believe I thought about the [coughs] gender issues, uh, initially, and I'm not sure that that ever became the overriding factor for me early on. I think that I evolved as we all did and perhaps I'm sure as many women did and perhaps a few men. We were all growing, uh, and evolving into new definitions of ourselves and our role. I think that, uh, since the women's rights movement didn't happen until the seventies, um, and uh, it was, it's very interesting [someone coughs] that, uh, you know, in a large measure we would sort of first go along with the, the uh, you know, the paradigm of the time, the pattern of the time, I think.

Um, for example I could be and, and almost always was the only woman at the table in an executive staff meeting [laughs]. And um, if they needed coffee, guess who they would ask to get the coffee? If they needed somebody to take notes, you know women were secretaries. And, uh, and I did that until a *man* on the staff, Jack O'Dell, I'll never forget, it was Jack O'Dell who said, "Dr. King, Dorothy needs to stay at this table because we're talking about," whatever we were talking about at that time um, and uh, Jack O'Dell just sent me a book he has just written. And um, but, and I'm just recently back in touch with him. We're going to do a program together I think it's in New Orleans, um, soon. But Jack O'Dell said I needed to stay at the table. He was smart, he was, uh, was more attuned to the changing time than I was.

But uh, but I felt I had power even though some of the men maybe didn't recognize it or maybe saw me as a uh, you know just *the* woman at *the* table. And uh, well I don't know if I even felt that. I felt that, um, I felt that I had, I knew I had an important job. I had an important role to play, and I knew that I was smarter than some of those guys at the table. But it's not something that you talk about. You just sort of

know it, and somewhere along the way I developed a real confidence in who I was, and I just let them be who they thought they needed to be.

And, uh, because, uh, Dr. King of course being at the table, he's the head guy in charge of the whole organization but not very um, not [1:20:00] very um, I don't want to say articulate, but verbose. Like, we could have a big debate going on at the table uh, in our senior staff meetings. And, uh, I describe Dr. King as being very, um, focused on listening to the debate as to whether we should go this place or that place or whatever the discussion was at the table at a given, uh, time. Uh, Dr. King was a great *listener* to all these, he called us, I'm not sure I was included in that, his "team of wild horses." And uh, so this team of wild horses. For example, I remember sitting next to Dr. King as, uh, Hosea Williams on our staff walks into the executive staff meeting late, and Dr. King hunched me and said, "Watch this meeting turn into a fight now that Hosea is here." He didn't say it so that they could hear, but I heard it. It's like, we were just so on the same kind of wavelength here. And Hosea, a very rambunctious guy, *did* come in, and he was arguing for more budget because he was in charge of the field staff. And he needed most of the money, and whatever it was he was a, Hosea would bring a special kind of, uh, fighting energy to the table. And uh, and there were other guys at the table, you know, sort of suit and tie kind of guys who were, uh, there were, you know, uh, C.T. Vivian and uh well, I don't need to call, you know, all their names but James Bevel who wore, who wore overalls and a little, uh, beanie of a hat.

JM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

DC: And, uh, and a bunch of guys at the table who were arguing, you know, debating things like, shall we respond to an invitation to go to this place or that place or whatever you know was on the agenda.

Uh, this doesn't necessarily, an incident I'd like to mention. I remember the James Meredith march when, uh, when we heard about it. The phone rang and someone said, we knew James Meredith was going to do the, he had let people know, us know, a lot of people, that he was going to start his March Against Fear across Mississippi. Well, we got that message sitting in a staff meeting, and, um, I remember that, um, that when someone came in to give us that message, um, I remember Dr. King fairly taking charge. He was more often silent until he needed to speak, interestingly, as I really reflect on it. But we stopped that meeting and we headed to Mississippi to continue the march after Meredith was shot. Now this was after some of the folk on our team had talked about the silliness of going over, starting a march by yourself in Mississippi, and you know he was threatened, and he was, he was shot. But there was, there was no debate, when Dr. King said we're going to Mississippi, and uh, to support his effort.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Tell me more, if you would, as you think back. Oh.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: I'd love to have you reflect a little more about your relationship with Dr. King just that – because you would be, you would be close professional associates across that whole span, and I would imagine, um, that there was far more spirit and connection among that group of persons who built and made SCLC obviously than just the, just coming to the office. Obviously it was so much more than all of that.

DC: Well, I'm not sure what you mean, but maybe I do, you said than just coming to the office.

JM: Obviously this wasn't just a regular, this is something so different than some regular job where you would have just a –

DC: Well, yeah, I think a movement, a movement –. I know what you're getting at but uh –. A movement is not like going into an official office on the thirteenth floor off elevator whatever and going into your formal meeting. A movement, as I understand it, as I know it, had to be different. If you, if you were formal um, to me, I mean it wouldn't work. I don't know how one could have a *movement.* Yeah, I know people think and whisper about a personal relationship but, is that – oh, you raised your eyebrows?

JM: Oh, no. No. Yeah.

DC: But I know there are people who suspect. I felt, hey I think he was my best friend, and I felt such a rapport with him. And I think he with me as well. He felt, well, you know, being a woman I guess it would be a little bit different because he didn't go anywhere without Andy either. He felt so close. It was almost like Martin, Andy, uh Bernard [1:25:00] Lee, um, it was almost like he didn't want to go anywhere without us. So I was always with him. I was most all the time with him as Andy was and, uh, and Bernard, what else can I say? But your your question is right on because I, your question makes me feel and realize that, as I could, as I compare with being, running a bunch of programs under the, in Atlanta with, uh, you know, some federal agency which –

JM: Action with John Lewis.

DC: Right. Action, right. Going into an office like that which, which I did, was quite different than being in the throes of a social change movement. I remember for example in um, oh where were we, in Birmingham I think, I remember running across the street barefoot to take some food to people because they had put people in a fenced-in area because there was no more space in the jails. And uh it was not, it was not a coat and tie situation unless we needed to do that for a particular reason. So I did feel a very special closeness and relationship with him. I felt like he was friend, and I could be friends or I could tell you something I really don't want on tape but uh—

JM: Well, we are on the tape so –

DC: Huh? Yeah.

JM: We are on the tape.

DC: I know you are. I know you are. I know you are, and I think it might be all right even if I say this.

JM: Okay.

DC: Because I remember one night that we were having a gin and tonic for example [laughter] – that's all I'm talking about, and I mean the four or five of us. And I remember that he tasted my gin and tonic and said, "That is good. Dorothy, would you make me another one of these gin and tonic?" [laughs] But you know the, well, almost the phoniness of some preachers. I imagine, God rest his soul my grandfather, I don't know if he ever, you know alcoholic beverages were, that was, you know sinful and all that foolishness. Some of them who preached that enjoyed even moonshine probably [laughing] because didn't have any money to –. But uh, but I mean we had that kind of time together. I remember even being in, we were very close.

I remember being in, we were in Paris, France a stopover having gone to Oslo, Norway for the Nobel, uh, Prize. And, and I remember our being in gathered in a hotel with somebody I guess Dr. King must've had a suite, because we were all gathered in a room at once and he had heard there was an African American person who had a soul food restaurant. Do you know what Southern soul food is like? And uh, he wanted some. I said, "You come all the way to Paris, France and you want some collard greens and pork chops and when you're in Paris?" And I, so and we just had a big laugh, and I still, to me that's, I don't know the ridiculousness of it. But I mean I felt that close to him. We were friends. And you know Andy was, we were all, we were friends and we were, um, we were like, we had to be like a little family outside of you know, blood relatives. I'm sure wives must've, must've, well, of course on a trip like that everybody's, if you had a wife, your wife was there or husband, um.

But that, except that sometimes, um, when we were flying together, there were like I don't know, maybe eighteen, nineteen or twenty people. I'm looking at a photograph there of our going, uh, heading to Oslo and Dr. King's wife Coretta was on one plane and Dr. King was on another plane. In other words the group was divided. They never flew on the same plane on a trip like that. They had four children to raise and if anything should happen at least one parent there.

And uh but I was on the plane with Dr. King and also his mother was on the same plane as I was, and uh, I remember Mrs. Alberta King, Dr. King's mother, uh, started singing, she touched me on the shoulder and said, "Dorothy, look over there and the sun's coming up." And uh, and there's a song, we have a song, gosh we have a song about everything. [singing] "Oh day yonder come day; oh day yonder come day; oh day

yonder come day, day done broke in a my soul; yonder come day; yonder come day." Now, now Mama, Mrs. King is singing that. I didn't call her Mama King. We called Daddy King, Daddy King. So she stood up in the aisle and started singing, "Dorothy." I was sitting next to her. "Look out the window the sun's coming up," and that brought the song to mind for her. Before we sat down, uh, Dr. King was up in the aisle singing the song. I'm just saying, [1:30:00] we had a lot of foolishness and a lot of fun. You know we were friends together; we were people together; we were, uh, and he loved to sing, too. I have a picture of him with his hands in his pockets and his head thrown back and he, I don't know what we were singing at that point. But he was really, he enjoyed singing. He enjoyed, uh, music, and he thought I was a pretty good singer. [laughter]

Um, but that was, but just the way we were together, um, was, when he would go, he loved to go to Jamaica to some warm climate to write. I remember, uh, we were in, he loved to go, he went to Bimini once, and uh, I think we were in Jamaica and when this happened. When he got word that um, the, you know, guess who called him a notorious liar. Head of the FBI.

JM: Hoover.

DC: When he heard that J. Edgar Hoover had called him a most notorious liar, that was the first time I saw him cry. I saw tears run down his cheek when J. Edgar Hoover called him a notorious liar. We were down there, Andy was there and Bernard Lee. I'm trying to think if there was anybody else. I think Coretta came later. Uh, but we were sitting around eating. I'm not sure how we got the message except probably the newspaper or somebody had handed us wherever we were staying there. But we would go with him when he, he loved to go to the islands to write. And um, and, Andy and I

had to comfort him because it was just so painful for him. I mean but he didn't hang in there long at that moment, but that was very painful for him and all of us. Um, so I'm just thinking of how we were together. We couldn't have had a better friendship or uh, couldn't have been closer.

Another time, speaking of friendship, there was a staff meeting going on in Atlanta, and I had flu I think it was, the reason I was home and had not gone down to Ebenezer Church for the meeting. And they were debating, um, whether this was going to be about his making the speech against the Vietnam War. In that meeting, um, the staff – boy talk about a bunch of rambunctious guys who were, "you should do this, you shouldn't do that" and telling him. And he would sit there very often and just listen to all the energetic, uh, conversation. But when Dr. King would open his mouth to speak, everybody would shut up. And I, I'm very conscious of that, that what a listener he was and just, you know, pulling whatever he could pull from the various, uh, you know, parts of conversations. And when he was ready to say something, yeah, there was a kind of a quiet.

But in that particular meeting, I want to tell you, um, he left the meeting. At one point he became a little, I'm not sure how to describe it but guess where he got, I'm not in the meeting. He came up to my apartment. And it was almost, he was giggly like a child. He said, he told me they were arguing about whether he should speak out against the, whether he should make that speech that he'd planned. And he was sort of laughing, it was really, that's why I say it was sort of giggly like a child, he came over and just sat there and I'm not sure how he left or how much we talked. We didn't go into any detail, but he just told me what was going on. And I remember he sat in that chair. I remember

every time, I still think of him sometimes when I think of, I've written about it. He sat at this gold rocking chair in my living room. And, uh, and talked to me.

But another time he sat in that chair, um, was behind some criticism. It wasn't the Hoover. It may have been during this same period. It may have been after. I wish I could remember the exact time that he sat there because at *that* point – another time that I'm remembering him sitting in my apartment – he was, he was thinking about or pondering what he should do. You may have, a lot of people have heard that he was really distressed and tired in the end, towards the end of his life. That he was just, we didn't know it was the end of his life, but that he was really weary.

Um, many people have spoken about his, um, being almost in a state of depression, uh, and I don't use the word depression [1:35:00], but I know that he was weary. Probably just weary of the battle, just weary, and I remember his, uh, telling me again sitting in this chair – I don't think it was the same time – that, "maybe I should take a sabbatical." "Maybe I should," um, somebody had offered him a position at a university, I think somewhere in England. "Maybe I should take, should accept a position. In other words maybe I should just stop for a while." I wish I knew the date because then we could, uh, you know I could see how close it was to the date when he really did go on to the great beyond. Uh, but he was, uh, he was pondering whether he should continue. In other words the exhaustion, the distress about the increasing criticism coming at him, even from Movement people.

Uh, and you know we could surmise a lot of reasons that people were criticizing him. Even the youngsters, as I called them – Stokely Carmichael and company – who were really talking about the, um, the uselessness of the nonviolent approach to bringing

about social change. And I remember sitting at a table in his kitchen with, um, some of the people from SNCC – Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – sitting around the table but especially Stokely. I'm not sure who else with Stokely were sitting there, but I was at the table. And this was like in his kitchen, uh, around his kitchen table and um, and Dr. King loved this kind of dialogue and Stokely was sharing with him, um, you know his thoughts that maybe we should try some other approaches. Uh, this wasn't said at that table, but Dr. King loved dialoguing about, uh, people. I remember Stokely, they liked talking about Franz Fanon and, um, some other writers that they would quote and trying to prove to Dr. King that we should try some other approaches.

But I remember ultimately Dr. King said, and I think this was in a speech and not at the table – that was a more informal, uh, dialogue around the kitchen table. But it is recorded, Dr. King said, "If I am the last lone voice speaking for nonviolence, that I will do" and uh, even if he couldn't get other people to really understand that, um, you know, "the end we seek is pre-existent in the means we use, the end we seek is pre-existent in the means we use." He *really* believed that. And I know he believed that and he lived that. And uh, I think that many people – well, I don't know how many – but people were weary. Black folk were tired of struggling even though there had been some victories, and civil rights bill and others. But I think that maybe the culture, the people, *en masse* were transitioning to another, uh, way of thinking about our fight for desegregation, for working to break down what I call our American-style apartheid, that people were weary as well as Dr. King, but he, he never gave up on the fact that nonviolence was the way.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

DC: "The end we seek is pre-existent in the means we use." He really believed that.

JM: Um-hmm. Did you have an opinion, a strong opinion one way or the other at the time about his decision, say, to speak out on Vietnam knowing what all the ramifications of that public position would be?

DC: The same thing, I don't remember a lot of debate, but I do know that, uh, he didn't, it never occurred to him not to do it. And what I just shared, [someone coughs] even on the heels of this, uh, discussion because there were people on the board of directors that was a family friend uh, Marian Logan, signed a letter, which we don't think she wrote, um, the letter urging him not to do that. And, you know, my sense was and, and maybe his too, you know, what does she know? Uh, how come she thinks she knows more, whether he should speak out against the war or not? Uh, but he never, what I just quoted in terms of, uh, his saying, "if I am the last lone voice," actually that was sort of at the end of all this dialogue about, as to whether he should speak out against the war or not. If, and um, when the letter came [1:40:00] and I think he was more committed to, to saying what *he* really felt. He was more committed than maybe than before because once the criticism and the advice not to do so, I think that strengthened him in his belief. He would just be quiet going to the silence as is often said and, uh, and come really clear what his response would be and it was just what I said.

JM: Yeah. Did you have, did you ever have, in the close circle around Dr. King and you personally, did you ever have specific intimations that that, um, you know, threats were pressing in very close to him that could, excuse me. Yeah, did you ever have knowledge of specific fears and worries about attempts on his life?

DC: Yeah but, but I think that, uh, we knew the threats were coming. Fast and furiously the threats, um, on his life but they were not so overt, I guess is the term. The threats were not so overt that we would, um, even consider stopping our work or creating a different plan. I remember that I could feel more anxious if somebody was running up to him in an airport, for example, as we were always going somewhere. And I remember that I was more nervous about the person running towards him than he – I don't think was nervous at all. But those of us around him, um, I have a sense that Dr. King had accepted that he might go out, uh, in a violent way because there was that kind of hatred abroad in the land. But I can't believe that it was an operating, um, consciousness with him because I would, I would step closer to him when somebody was running in an airport to shake his hand than he's ready, he's got his hand out, and he's ready to shake hands with the person. It didn't control his behavior at all. I think it was, those of us around him, I remember once – Andy can tell you this if you're going talk with him that um – Andy, we were having a big march I'm not thinking of which one it was at this moment. But Andy surrounded him with a lot of guys that Andy thought looks like Martin that looks like him because the people that they shot, you know, they won't get our leader, but Andy was conscious of that, we were more than Dr. King was. Um, but Andy got all these guys that looked, and Andy chuckles when he talks about, "They don't know why I put them up around Dr. King. It wasn't because they were important; it was because they would take the bullet and not Martin would take –." You know, it was that sort of thing so it didn't, the threats didn't control our lives. So uh, nor his. Sorry.

JM: Yeah. Let's pause for just a second.

DC: Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. Um, Ms. Cotton, I want to ask about your reflections on the very, very, uh, challenging transition after Dr. King's assassination, and um, it's very difficult obviously for me to imagine what that loss must've been and, but I wonder how, looking back from this long distance now, what, how you, how you made your way forward?

DC: How did I make my way forward? Um, I'm conscious of a statement that one young man who was on our team at some point, um, after three years. I remember this young guy who worked with us kind of late in the SCLC movement. I remember his observing, "You all are coming out of mourning now." And this was after three years, and I didn't know that, uh, he saw us as in mourning, but clearly, you know, there were not a lot of words around that. There are some things that are so, feelings so deep, and have such an impact that words just don't seem to, the right words don't seem to come easily to describe, to describe it. But it was like we not only lost our leader, [1:45:00] we lost our inspiration; we lost our, um, best friend, some of us who knew him as a best friend.

Um, so I remember, oh I could talk about a lot of things, some of which, um, are very painful to talk about in the sense that, for example, Reverend Abernathy became, was vice president and Reverend Abernathy, um, the vice president walks into the seat of the presidency, right? And um, I remember just feeling, just sort of staring into space almost. I couldn't relate to even that change. Not to cast any aspersion necessarily but then, but maybe so too I think it was almost unfair to Reverend Abernathy to, to tell him

he is now president. Uh, I may have shared with you that Dr. King sometimes called us this team of wild horses in a loving kind of way but, you know, just arguing and really into our part of the work. And we were just really giving all of our lives and our energy to the part of the work. You know, one guy – you know if you talk to C.T. Vivian – when one guy organizing preachers all over the South, and, you know, Hosea and his voter education and even, even though I might have wanted to put him in a trunk and sit on it sometimes, but I also loved Hosea. You know, in a special kind of way like your naughty or your rambunctious brother.

Um, but, but so having all of that, uh, energy now, uh, well, I think nobody knew what to do with that, with what we were left with, and what we were left with was an incredible void that nobody could fill. What, what is clear to me is that, you know, you know I could look out among the team, the SCLC staff, and I could eventually, for example, hear, um, Andy saying he's going to run for mayor.

Um, I look out, I can reflect back and think that, um, the reason, actually it was Andrew Young, my young friend Andy, till this day, um, you know I really honor him for being incisive enough to know that I needed to do something else. And one day the, he got word that the people in Birmingham, Alabama needed a Head Start director, and this is three years after Dr. King's death. And Andy said, uh, "They need a temporary director. Why don't you go over and work with them for it?" And I did it so readily, so easily.

So Andy saw something that I'm walking around like a, trying to do my work, but I needed to do something else and Andy saw that, I think, and suggested I go over and fill this – the Head Start director had left seemingly under some kind of cloud or something –

in Birmingham and, but so I went to Birmingham. I just left and one reason it was easy to leave, um, I didn't, it wasn't SCLC as I had known it. It wasn't, there wasn't the same, uh, energy.

And I hate to say this about Reverend Abernathy, but I do think it was unfair of him because I think he, too, was in over his head in terms of leading this, quote unquote, "team of wild horses." There wasn't, Reverend Abernathy was a wonderful preacher and a loving, caring minister to his flock. I remember a story, and I write about it in my book how the, we were, there was a, I don't know if it was a march. But there was some blockade, and we were not supposed to go past the blockade, but the police managing that blockade saw that this was Reverend Ralph Abernathy, now president of SCLC, so they were going to let him through but nobody else. I think we were going to a meeting at the church and Reverend Abernathy said, um, "Well, I won't go unless you let the people behind me go because they are the members of my choir. They are the members of my church and they need to get –" And he negotiated so that the police would not just let *him* through, but he was just so caring and was very sensitive to that. But I don't think Reverend Abernathy could have lead that team of wild horses – I keep using that term because [laughs] as Dr. King called us in a very loving kind of way. It wasn't, he was like thrown in, you know, 'water above his head,' as the saying goes. Something like that. [1:50:00]

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

DC: So um, Andy was talking about running for [mayor] – this is after I don't know, maybe three years, Andy will remember the exact date. But um, and I'm going over to Birmingham. And not only did I go over to be the, uh, Head Start director for

Jefferson County, um, I took an apartment over there. And uh, it was like, it felt good to be out of that office, and the reason it felt good and my office was right –. I could hear conversation if the doors were open between the president's office where Dr. King sat and my office running the citizen education program. And, and I heard Ralph say through the doors one day – I hate to say this but I think I'm going to say it – I heard him say to someone on the phone, "Well, I would do whatever he was talking about, but I don't have anybody to help me."

And I remember that I had tears in my eyes because he didn't have anybody to help him because you can't help somebody if you don't know what they're doing or what they want to do. It's not a put down. It's just that I think that, you know, I remember Jesse [Jackson], I don't, I hardly want to mention, uh, Jesse in the midst of all of this. But I was going to say a staff member came to have a talk with the president of SCLC and uh, and, and Ralph, well, make that somebody else because this is what he – oh dear, you can't unsay something. [laughs] And Ralph would uh, sort of in a giggly, silly kind of way, make the person wait when they weren't waiting for anything because he was in over his head is my sense. Oh gosh – where are you going to play this?

JM: Let me ask a, let me ask a, uh –

DC: Do you hear what I'm just saying, what I'm trying to say and trying not to say? [laughs]

JM: Sure. Sure, sure. Um, you you've written that nonviolence and really coming into an understanding of the philosophy of nonviolence had changed you. It had given a place, a means to reposition what had been anger into a different kind of feeling. Um, and you wrote that, I've read that, you're right that it really changed you. Did, did a

violent death of Dr. King, did that change you in any fundamental way, absorbing that kind of a blow and watching, having watched from such a close vantage point all the violence that was just visited upon so many Movement participants? Did it change you in any way?

DC: I still believe in the philosophy and way of nonviolence. I still believe it is the way, um, at many levels. Um, I don't believe that having, um, um, or having the violence intensify or spread, I don't think it would have changed the society. We broke down a vicious system in this country. I call it American-style apartheid. I don't think we could've, I think we would've had many, many more deaths – and maybe there are those who would argue, I wonder what Mahatma Gandhi would say – there would've been many more deaths had we decided that we were going to fight it out violently. I don't believe that that would've, uh, moved us to the end that we were seeking. The thing is we were very clear about the *end* we were seeking. We were very clear about our *goal*, which was to change this vicious system in this country.

And uh, this isn't original with me, but uh, but as someone has observed, um, racists – the deep kind of racism that we faced is a sickness. And uh, Andy says this a lot – I've heard Andy say it more than once. But uh, it's a sickness and when people are sick, you work to heal them. I still believe that. If they are sick, you need to heal them. And uh, just a quick little reference back to my dad. I think the times that he would like take off a strap to beat us, he didn't know any better. But today, I beg, I wish I had a chance now, I could change his behavior if I related to him and approached him from a loving understanding of what he was about.

Now the racism, as we faced it, was vicious; it was horrid. But I can't think of a way that would've changed the system, that would've saved, [1:55:00] uh, massive numbers of lives, even we could almost count the folk who were killed on, you know, a couple of hands, two or three hands perhaps. Um, that might be slightly exaggerated, but I think there would've been many, many more deaths and there are those who would argue that that would be okay.

Uh, I think some of the people, um I used to uh hear Stokely say, "Well, I'll try nonviolence, but if nonviolence doesn't work, take up the gun." That was a refrain, and he would keep saying, "Take up the gun." I had a chance to, uh, talk with Stokely. He came here to speak not long before he died. And uh, and, and I challenged him around some things that he'd said, one thing, uh, being, "the only way for women in the Movement was prone." And uh, and, and of course a lot of women hold that against him even now and he says, "Well, I was joking." But his refrain, "take up the gun" – here speaking at Cornell he said, uh, he said it again and I had a chance to say, "Stokely, tell me who you gonna shoot?" And I don't remember an answer from him. "Who would you shoot?" And if he had answered, it's like, so if you shoot, [laughs] you know, name somebody.

So that's going to bring you the goal, towards the goal that you have set, but if your goal isn't clear you could do anything. Okay shoot. But have you, have you, uh, moved closer to your purpose, to your goal. I mean that's one of the ways I like to talk about it, and I think one understands loving a, developing a loving, caring feeling, uh, in oneself. Uh, if one pays attention and gives some energy to that, and that it just feels

better to win the, uh, violent one, the unloving one to one's cause. It feels better to bring about that kind of transformation than to just beat them up in, in return.

I think it's not simplistic; it's not easy even really to talk about it, uh, I don't think. But I do try to talk about it and I do believe that it would, uh, that it does – nonviolence – it does create, it moves me closer towards the kind of world I want to live in. And I'm willing now to even explore with someone who is mean and wants to be violent and vicious, I'm willing to explore with them what their goal is in life and even if they hold to it, if they would dialogue, I would like, still like to be in dialogue with them.

Now you know somebody, some people want to ask about, um, what's the bad guy who just, our president just ordered folk to go forward and, and kill the quote unquote bad guy. I guess they want to hear those of us who espouse, want to talk about nonviolence saying are you saying that you, you would, you would not have taken out Osama bin Laden and uh, and I thought about that a lot, and I don't argue against that when I look at what the fall out would've been. This probably is not relevant to what you want to talk about but –.

JM: Go ahead. I understand what you're saying.

DC: But I did think about the fact that it was discovered that he apparently had plans to derail trains and kill many more people. That he had –. I think and I never knew that I could say that, but I find myself reflecting on that now. If he was going to derail some trains and bring down some more planes, maybe he needed to be taken out.

JM: Um-hmm.

DC: In other words I don't criticize Obama, our President, for giving the order to let it go forward.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm. Sure, sure.

DC: That doesn't take away my general basic belief in nonviolence.

JM: Tell me about, maybe you've been so generous with your time, and I don't want to just completely exhaust you even though in a perfect world we could talk for days because this is such interesting, such interesting history and you were right in the middle of so much of it. Um, tell me about the Dorothy Cotton Institute.

DC: Well –

JM: And your vision for what you'd really like to see happen.

DC: Well, first of all, know that I didn't start it. It wasn't my idea.

JM: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

DC: Um, but when someone came to me, uh and uh, and this is exactly how it happens. Two friends came up, Anke Wessels who teaches over at, um, Cornell, runs a wonderful program there, um, the Center for Transformative Action. Uh Anke Wessels and uh and another person, colleague of mine, came to my house and said [2:00:00], Anke says she got the idea of starting a Dorothy Cotton Institute. She had, the number of programs under her organization as the kind of umbrella organization. And she's based at Cornell but runs a special program there, uh, sort of housing for uh, a number of programs.

They came to me and since Anke came to me and said she got this idea in the shower one day [laughs] and uh and said to her husband or, or to people, "I have this idea that we could use Dorothy Cotton's legacy." Um and after, and so I sat listening to them around my kitchen table and I said, "Well, okay, I, I'm, I'm not going to do it. Um, I mean I can't see myself doing it." But it was like an answer to prayer. If I showed you

my upstairs office, uh, which you can look at if you want to. But I have a full office all set up and another room, that room, full of books and a lot of stuff and people giving me, uh, you see all those stack of uh, I just got an honorary doctorate degree from Ithaca College, which you see there in the corner and that's the fourth one that I've gotten. And a lot of stuff was coming at me, and I found myself, not having children of my own, I found myself wondering what's going to happen to all of this stuff agathering, not just here, walk upstairs if you want to. Um and um, so it was like an answer to a prayer because I, we started having meetings and looking at what would it be.

Part of the rationale for it is that there are all of these museums, not all these, but, you know, in Birmingham and even Selma has the Rosa Parks and in Memphis, a museum and museums around the place, and one person on our team said, "We have nothing in the Northeast." And so other people started coming to me; we were just sitting around here in my living room. And now we meet in places uh, a couple of places uh, around town, two places mostly, we meet, envisioning what it would be. And actually there are some programs that they, my colleagues, and the group has grown now, um it has grown to about, um, the steering committee we're calling it, um seven, six or seven people who meet, uh, regularly, at least once or twice a month, envisioning what it could be. We need something in the Northeast.

And I'm honored that they chose me and, because, well, it was after I got an award at the Memphis museum, which was, uh, quite an honor – it was like being at the Oscars. I had the presidential suite. [laughs] Anyway, it was just wonderful. So it just, it's, it's just an evolving entity that somebody else had this idea. And I'm so grateful, as I said, because I wondered what would happen to all this stuff, [laughs] not a nice, good

way to speak of it. But all the, all the photographs and, and statues and things around. You could just look at a wall as you walk up my stairs of plaques and what am I going to do with it? I have, I have one sister who would probably take it to a dumpster. [laughs]

But uh but I have uh this group of friends who are putting it together. Well, we're all working on it, and I'm about to finish my book manuscript, and I will have more input and uh, you know, if something happens that or if there's an idea that doesn't relate to my theory, my philosophy, my spirit – which is something I've tried to push the group towards. I don't want you to develop something in my name if it doesn't, if we don't see a spiritual quality. And I don't mean anybody's religion; I just mean the spiritual quality I think that we don't have good definitions for *spirit*. But uh, but I want, because that was so much a part of the Civil Rights Movement – a certain, a certain spirit and uh, and you know it emanated from, you know, Martin Luther King, Junior, and just even Esau Jenkins who wanted to help these people on the bus. Uh, he wasn't a preacher, but there was a certain spirit about him and a certain spirit about, uh, Septima Clark, a certain spirit. I know, well, years ago I got into meditation, and uh, and knew and I accept the fact that there is a spiritual aspect to life. And I, and because it was so much a part of the Movement, a spiritual quality, I want to make sure that my friends are not so on a head trip that they leave out the spiritual quality if it's going to, if it's in my name. And I've had just these kinds of conversations with them. But we are, they've done some training with teachers and looking at, uh, you know we have a whole plan, which we can share with you. It's all on paper. Kirby could give you that on a flash if you – Kirby Edmonds – to could send you our business, our, our not business plan but our, you know, uh –

JM: Vision statement, yeah?

DC: And there's a lot of stuff on paper. I wish you would ask Kirby [2:05:00] if you took down his phone number.

JM: Yep. Yeah.

DC: If he would send it to you and so you could get some more background.

JM: Absolutely.

DC: But we are developing it, and the vision is that somewhere down the road that we would actually have a building, and there is a lot of stuff here, it's like there is somewhere for it to go now. And that they wanted to honor me and uh, as well, and also create a place where we would do, have people do, uh, you'd probably be surprised at the number of people who have nowhere to tell their story. Even people in the North who um, have, have an experience who went south and participated in a march, but I certainly want people to know, and I've said this a lot, that um I, um, I want people to know that we did something other than march. That's the reason uh, that I, I highlight the Citizenship Education Program in the book that I've done, just about finished.

JM: Right. Because it's, on this note to finish the um, it's hard to imagine the Movement taking the form that it did without all of those persons who came to Dorchester and all of the persons they then went and –

DC: Yes. Oh, absolutely. But yeah, those, those are the people, um, who made the Movement in a real sense, and I, I have been troubled by the fact that three or four people, um, are lifted up as the people who made the Civil Rights Movement. And even the fact that people just talk about, they say things like, "I marched with Dr. King." And, and I say this when I do lectures or speeches that, uh, we didn't just march. It was ah, it was a whole just big operation, you know, going on. And I tell them of course about the

citizenship workshops, which was my responsibility and Andy's. I don't know if I even mentioned the fact that, yeah, when Andy started to move away into, uh, uh, political life, uh, a number of people moved into other aspects of working to make this a, in other venues, to make this a better country. Uh, I don't know how much we said about what happened after Dr. King's death, but people, things well, you know I went to be Head Start director, but I came back and worked for Maynard Jackson –

JM: That's right.

DC: But even now when people talk about, um, for example we all know, I love John Lewis. But people talk as though John Lewis was the only one on the Edmond Pettis Bridge because he got this concussion. And then Mrs., uh, uh, oh her name went, eluded me. You probably in the, in Alabama, oh gosh, shame on me for uh I, I'll tell you her name in a minute. She was knocked down by one of those horses on the uh, on the bridge. And uh and, and, and a lot of folk, it's like the, one person gets lifted up as the, uh, either the leader or the key person and uh, I mean there are a lot of things I'd like to say, but I'm not even sure I want to say them on tape.

But it's every time that uh you know people talk as though Jesse Jackson and two or three other folk were the intimates of Dr. King and they were *not*. And uh, I shouldn't have said that on tape, but I've said it now; can't unsay it. But it's not to take anything away from them, but some people are able to, I don't know, capture a certain spot, and the media looks for someone who would make it not just, not only controversial, um, but who would be more media-worthy might be one way of of looking at it. Gosh, I don't know what's going to happen, uh, Dr. King was, um, boy, he was really troubled, almost kind of choking, and this was the week, the week that he died.

We were there for a meeting. That's why, Jesse happened to have been there, the day Dr. King was killed. So he is shown on the balcony, and that gets interpreted as though Jesse was, you know, just a real intimate, but he flew down from Chicago for meetings you know once in a while and uh and some, and so you know was a worker a worker in his own right. But uh, uh I wish I could be on tape. I don't want anybody to think I made this up but for Dr. King to say, "Jesse pushed me," and he pushed him because, uh, he was a tall guy, Dr. King was a short fellow. But the fact that Jesse would push him, um, to get, and it was easy for Jesse to get [2:10:00] uh first dibs on the, the cameras but, but to this day when I hear people, um, talk as though three or four people made the Movement, I find that really, really troubling. Um, and I'm not the only –Dr. King said that too. Maybe nobody else would, uh, you know would say it.

Something else I was going to tell you about that. But that's um, I'm really glad you all are doing this because it's not that I'm after, you know, publicity, but it's just that, I don't want the history to go down as though three or four people made it when they didn't and weren't even on a daily basis there. Um, but were doing their own thing and some wanted their own thing and you know I need not call any names and they wanted to pull whatever they could just to themselves. But it's a distortion that troubles me.

JM: Well, it's, it's, it's the reason, one of the reasons, many reasons I'm so grateful for this interview and also to know too that you are so far along on your manuscript and we can look forward to that as well.

DC: It's all spread out on my dining room table there. A woman comes over to help me. We are doing a little editing. I got, I sent the whole thing off to my publisher, Simon and Schuster, but uh, and she sends back little notes, "Can you say a little more

about this? Can you say a little more about that?" So, uh, and the woman who comes over, she's more technically competent than I am and uh, and, and I can write and say I do want to say this or input this, and I just hand it over to her and she inputs it into existing chapters and that's too tedious for me. I don't know if I'd get it finished if I didn't have that kind of help.

JM: No, it's a, it's a great help to to push right through the end. Um, any final thoughts?

DC: Well, I guess what I just said are my final thoughts. I'll say it another way or maybe it's, my thought is I'm glad for the, this opportunity to talk with you all uh just to to hopefully bring forth the notion of uh, the real story in a sense not because CNN wanted to to have a big media blitz but or any, or any, uh, the media. Because they want what will sell, if uh, and so they pick two or three people. It's like well, I think I'll stop.

JM: What a great pleasure and privilege to be with you. Thank you so much.

DC: Well, thank you.

[Recording ends at 2:12:39]

END OF INTERVIEW