Interviewee: Dorris Derby

Interviewer: Max Krochmal

Interview date: April 16, 2010

Location: SNCC 50th Reunion, Raleigh, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 75 minutes

Max Krochmal: We just kind of threw together all of the different questions we had. Okay, so –

Dorris Derby: [Probably a lot of what] I talked about yesterday.

MK: I didn't hear your session, no. What was the topic? Which one was it?

DD: It was the women's panel, the women leaders and organizers.

MK: Okay. Well, we'll get the comprehensive version today. Are we ready?

VIDEOGRAPHER: Yep, we're on.

MK: Great. So, let's –

[Sound drops out for 7-8 seconds at 0:30]

DD: My name is Dorris Derby, Dorris A. Derby, and I was born in November 1939, and so I'm seventy years old.

MK: And where were you born?

DD: I was born in the Bronx, New York City.

MK: Okay. You grew up there also?

DD: I grew up there, yes. And I also, contrary to what John Lewis said, we raised chickens.

MK: [Laughs] You did?

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DD: In the Bronx.

MK: I believe that. You had like a place with a yard in the back?

DD: Yes, we had a great big yard. We raised chickens, ducks, and vegetables, and fruits and fruit trees.

MK: Did you ever preach to them?

DD: No.

MK: [Laughs] Okay. So, what was your impression of race growing up?

DD: My impression was that, and my reality was that there was discrimination. My father and my grandparents talked about discrimination that they faced in economics. And my father was a student in civil engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. And something that stayed in my mind was when he told us, among other things, that he won some gymnastics athletic awards and was asked to come to the ceremony to receive his award. And when he got to the place where the ceremony was taking place, they told him he had to use the service elevator. And so he left. He did not receive his awards in the ceremony.

And my grandparents, my grandfather and my father, when he was in college and in high school, they used to catch a ride in the summer on the trains and then go to some other places to find work, because work for black people was hard to come by. So, he was working his way through college, through the university. When he received his degree, the only job that he could get in civil engineering was in firms that he would not be able to put his name on his engineering drawings. Somebody else put their name on his drawings.



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So, eventually he left that and he took a position in the New York state civil service, and that was good. However, when he went to apply for assistant manager position, he passed all the tests with flying colors, but they said that he didn't pass the oral exam, which was just he and the potential other manager. And so, he took classes at NYU, New York University, and then he still didn't make it. Well, he started to talk to a number of people and found out that other blacks that tried for the assistant manager or managerial position were also discriminated in the same way. And so, they eventually formed an organization. And so, I knew about organizing from my father, and I also was a member of the NAACP when I was a teenager.

MK: What was the organization that he formed?

DD: He formed a group called the New York State Careerists Society. It started in his office, but it spread to other offices within the state for all civil service workers that faced discrimination, and it was successful. They had Judge Constance Baker Motley, who was a well-known NAACP civil rights lawyer, took the case. They eventually won it, but my father passed away before he was able to see that.

MK: When was that? When did he pass?

DD: In 1960. It was a lot of stress and everything.

MK: And, of course, they had a state anti-discrimination committee in New York, kind of like the EOC, but earlier. Well, that's – so, you were in the youth chapter of the NAACP?

DD: Yes. Now, one of your questions has to do with religion.

MK: Um-hmm.



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DD: And so, my church was – well, actually there were a couple of churches in the neighborhood, but the main one that I went to was the Episcopal Church that I was christened at and got confirmed at. And our church had kind of a community building. We had a lot of things that happened in that building. The youth could have dances and concerts, we had fashion shows and dinners, and the NAACP met there. And so, I used to go to NAACP meetings right there.

MK: Were your parents members, too?

DD: My father was a member of the NAACP. My mother's side – she wasn't active, she was basically a homebody, a homemaker. However, my mother was from Bangor, Maine. Eleven children in the family, and her father was a very prosperous businessman. And his son, my mother's oldest brother, and my grandmother on my mother's side, were charter members of the NAACP that started in Bangor, Maine, around 1920. And there's a book written, entitled *Black Bangor*, and it has information about our family and photographs of our family, and it has a copy of the original charter of the NAACP with its members.

MK: Okay. So, you inherited it on both sides?

DD: I did.

MK: Well, who were your other influences, besides your parents? Were there important teachers or other people in your life?

DD: Well, I would say that another thing that I was very aware of as I was growing up was the lack of images of black people from all walks of life being portrayed in magazines, posters, signs, artwork, et cetera. The community that I was brought up in was predominately white, although it had some diversity, being in New York. And so,



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our particular community in Williamsbridge was largely Italian. Italians had been there for a long time. And so, I used to go to a couple of the churches and looking at – I would say that our pastor was an influence in terms of seeing the things that he did.

But I was very interested in the arts. I started taking dancing, tap and ballet, when I was in elementary school. Then in junior high school, I learned that there was an African dance class in Harlem, and that they were looking for auditions to give scholarships. So, I auditioned for that and I won, so I started taking African dance classes. That was on 135th Street in New York, in Harlem. And so, right on the same street was the Schomburg Collection, and that was the major research library that had black books and what not.

Now, my aunt and her husband lived on 135th Street, and they always used to talk about issues, because my Aunt Julia was one of the original ten secretaries that were recruited to work in Washington, DC, for the government when they were just integrating the secretarial staff. So, I would say that my Aunt Julia and my Uncle Chester were influences in that regard.

And then, as I would go to Harlem to study African dance, one of the persons who was overseeing the dance class was tied into African cultural movement, Pan-Africanism, and he would have our dance group dance at a ceremony every year to celebrate African Liberation Day. So, I had that kind of influence.

And so, I was participating in the arts. Well, in Harlem you had black bookstores, a very well known one, Michaux's Bookstore. So, I was able to go there and read a number of the books and kind of be exposed to information about Africa, about the Caribbean, and so on.



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MK: So, were you always kind of politically minded, or did that come as a big revelation to you at some point?

DD: No, I mean I was getting that political awareness, but it was not just political. It was cultural political.

MK: Right. Cultural, too.

DD: But the other thing I want to say is a big influence was my great-aunt, my grandmother's aunt, and she was a missionary in Liberia in the '40s and the '50s. She used to write my grandparents and talk about what they were doing, what she was doing, and they would read the letters to me or let me see the letters. So, she made me aware of the continent of Africa, Liberia specifically – she sent some pictures – and that here's a place where black people live and are in control of the country, yet we don't see very much of that.

So, I knew about that in sixth grade, so in junior high school, I started – every time I needed to do a report or something in social studies, I would do a report and try to find some information on Africa, which, of course, all of those countries were colonized. But they might have something about the culture, the people, and the animals, and that kind of thing. But as I got into high school, I started looking around and going to the Schomburg Collection, you see, I was able to get more information. And [being privy] to the Liberation Bookstore, I was able to get more information.

And then I branched out in the arts to paint. My father did carpentry, wood cabinets and other things, on the side, and I would go. And he used masonite a lot, so I started using masonite boards to paint pictures on. So, my interest in culture and education has always been consistent, and I continue to do that today.



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MK: So, did you go to college next?

DD: After high school I went to college. I did want to be a dancer. However, my father said, "It's not practical. If you break your leg, how are you going to be employed?" Et cetera, et cetera. So, I [ ] dance on the side, and I continued to study dance while I was in college. And I said, "Well, teaching – I'll teach and I'll have my summers off and I'll be able to do the other things that I want to do at the same time."

I went to Hunter College in the Bronx, but at Hunter College, you couldn't major in education. You had to major in another subject and minor in education, which were more credits as a minor than a major, so it really is a double major. So, my field was cultural anthropology and elementary education. After that, during that time, I was involved with student organizations. I was the vice-president of the anthropology department and I became involved with the Northern student movement, which was supporting the Southern students.

Now, I need to say that, like in terms of my cultural interests, broad cultural interests, New York is a place that is very, very diverse, as you know, and my neighborhood was quite diverse, even though it was predominately Italian. It had a strong knit black community, but we also had Jewish people, Italian, Puerto Rican, Chinese, black from the South, black from the North, Caribbean people, people from South America. So, I would always be sort of in the mix of that, either from a school perspective or the church – our church had people from all the different Caribbean countries – so that's how I decided to major in anthropology.

So, after my sophomore year – and here's the church coming into the picture again – I wanted to travel and I wanted to do work. I was always a church volunteer, so I



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worked in a Navajo Indian mission school and hospital in New Mexico. And then, that year, I ran into a friend of mine who said that he had won a scholarship to go with a group to Africa, to Nigeria. So, I said, "Well, when you get back, let me know. I want to know because I want to go." So, he did, and I won the scholarship the next year. And so, I went with the Experiment in International Living to Nigeria. So, by the time I was a junior in college – I was twenty – I had already been to Africa.

MK: So, we're talking 1959 or so?

DD: '60. I went the summer of '60, and my father died that October.

MK: So, what brought you into doing the movement stuff? What recruited you, or who?

DD: Well, I was very aware of things happening from the influences that I already told you about. I was very aware of the influence of colonialism in Africa and other places and seeing what was happening in the way that African-American people had been colonized, or facing segregation, in the United States. So, I was reading and talking to people. I associated with a lot of people that were older than I was and artists who were politically minded and so on.

So, I was a student, and we had the Northern student movement reaching into our school. We had the Kennedys coming on campus, campaigning. Kennedy came there. Malcolm X was around; he came on campus. And so, I became a part of the group of students that supported the Southern civil rights movement in 1961.

MK: What kind of activities did you engage in? And what were you doing with this organization on a daily basis?



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DD: Well, it wasn't a daily basis, but it was just – well, we had speakers and we were trying to inform the rest of the student body, letting them know that there were some activities to support the movement, and to raise money to send, and to encourage students to participate in demonstrations and things like that.

MK: Do you remember any particular demonstrations or meetings or anything that stand out?

DD: Not really.

MK: Okay. [Laughs]

DD: Well, one thing I do remember is this. I was part of a Christian organization, Student Christian Association or something like that, and what we decided to do was to go to – have our own kind of Freedom Ride – in an integrated group, to go to North Carolina, here, Raleigh, Durham, and Greensboro and talk to people to find out what was going on and what we could do to help and so on. So, we met with Floyd McKissick, who was the head of CORE at the time, Robert Williams, students, and so on. And then when we came back we wrote about it in the student campus newsletter and talked to students and so on.

And so, Peggy Dammond came to school at that time; in '61 she came to Hunter and she was involved with that. And later I graduated in December of '61 – I was supposed to graduate in June, but I didn't in order to have more time to be active. And then, that following spring of '62, I started teaching elementary school, third grade. The summer of '62 I decided to – I was in contact with Peggy and in contact with her mother, seeing how she was doing, because she had gone to Albany. She was recruited, and she was getting very, very active, and she went to Albany, Georgia. And I heard that she was



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in jail and she was sick. Being an elementary school teacher, I was out of school at the end of June, so I decided that I was going to do some traveling. And part of it I would take the time to go to Albany, Georgia, for a few days, a week, and see how things were going there and then go where else I was going. And I was told to be in contact with CORE and SNCC in Atlanta, and that SNCC would take me to Albany, Georgia, see that I got there and get me situated.

MK: Had you ever been to the –?

DD: And that's how I came to the SNCC office and then ended up staying longer than I expected. I stayed there about a week.

MK: In Atlanta?

DD: Yeah, waiting for somebody to drive to Albany, Georgia. And then I started learning more and more about what was happening with SNCC on a daily basis and who was there, who was doing what, and so on. And then, basically, Jim Forman recruited me when I got to Albany to do some political things, such as helping out knocking on doors to help people to get registered to vote. They found a place for me to stay, and they would come by and pick me up and take me to the Albany movement office, and then they found things for me to do.

So, it just – when I was getting ready to – well, Peggy was no longer in Albany. She was in Americus and she was in jail, and it was very dangerous there. So, I never did go to Americus, I didn't see her, but I ended up staying in Albany, Georgia, for the entire summer. Forman got me involved in doing things, and then Charles Sherrod also got me involved in doing things. And I basically became a SNCC person at that point.



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When I left at the end of the summer, Charles Sherrod asked me to do fundraising and to get supplies, food, and clothing for people who were losing their jobs because they tried to vote or any of that stuff. So, when I went back, I did that.

MK: Just to pause for a moment, had you been to the South before, or was it your first time?

DD: I went to North Carolina.

MK: Okay.

DD: And I had been to New Mexico.

MK: Right.

DD: I hadn't been –

MK: [Laughing] Hadn't been Deep?

DD: No.

MK: What were your impressions of the people that you encountered and the conditions here when you came?

DD: You mean in North Carolina?

MK: In Georgia.

DD: You mean in Mississippi.

MK: In Albany.

DD: Oh, in Albany.

MK: Yeah.

DD: Well, it was shocking, in the sense that here it was right there in front of me, and now I'm involved in confronting that. It was shocking to see the role of the



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policeman enforcing segregation and violence and using that against people who were just trying to register to vote, to vote, to integrate facilities, to walk down the street.

I was told – one of the jobs that I was given was to go to the jailhouse downtown and to talk to the students who were in jail to see how they were doing and give them some information. They would look out the window on the second floor, and I would look up and talk with them. But I was told to make sure that I had identification and to make sure that I did not jaywalk, because you could be stopped and arrested for jaywalking or for walking without – vagrancy – if you didn't have identification. So, quite naturally, there were a lot of photographs that I saw from some of the things that were happening with the police, and that was terrible.

MK: So, when you were in Albany, were you in the office most of the time, or were you out in the field, or what were your duties?

DD: Well, as I mentioned, going downtown to the jail. I did canvassing to get people to register to vote and to ask people to come to mass meetings. I participated in mass meetings and got involved with the singing and talking to people about registering to vote at the mass meetings. I did office work.

I also integrated the Episcopal Church. There were integrations of different churches, the First Baptist Church, this church, that church. But there were hardly ever any black people in the South, not that much, that were in the Episcopal Church. So, the call went out to say, "Well, we've tried the Methodist and the Baptist Church; we'd like to have someone to integrate the Episcopal Church." But they said, "We can't find anybody who is Episcopal." So, I said, "Well, here I am."



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And so, we arranged what the routine was going to be, and they would drop me off, and then if I got arrested, they told me what they would do, and so on and so forth. So, I went to the church. They dropped me off, and I walked up the steps. They didn't know what to do. They were taken completely by surprise, because I'm sure that they didn't think that there were any black Episcopalians around. So, I went in and I sat there, and nothing happened, and after, my ride came and picked me back up. But it made the headlines. It made the *New York Times* that a black person had integrated the Episcopal Church. And when I went to go the next Sunday, they wouldn't let me in. But there weren't any police, so then just – my ride was nearby, and they came and got me. So, those are some of the things.

MK: So, what were your – there's been a lot written about the relationship between men and women within SNCC. What were your impressions of that in the time you were there?

DD: Well, the relationship was just as it was in other things that I did or anywhere else that I was. I'm a very productive, organized person, and creative, and I accomplish a lot. And so, when I set my mind out to do something, I don't look for someone else to say, "I can do it." I chat with people, we talk about something that we're interested in or we think that we have common interests, common goals. We think this needs to be done, that needs to be done, who can do it, who wants to do it, and we set about doing it. And so, that's basically how I operated.

And after I left Albany in the summer of '62, I went back to teaching and I was taking graduate school courses at night. So, there was activity that I got involved in to –



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we started to organize for the march on Washington. And so, that again, was whoever was there and what was needed to be done to support what was happening in the South.

After the march on Washington – well, let me see. I did fundraising for Charles Sherrod in Albany, Georgia, and my main speaker for the big fundraiser that I raised lots of money for was Bob Moses. And he started talking to me about going to Mississippi to work in the Literacy Project that he had gotten a proposal funded for. And I initially told him, "No. I really hadn't planned on doing that." But he wore me down. And basically I saw images on the TV on the news in May of what was happening in Birmingham, Alabama, with hoses and the dogs and the violence, and then I decided that I would go. So, that was the beginning of my being in Mississippi working as a civil rights worker from 1963 to '72, with the exception of about nine months.

MK: Oh, wow.

DD: So, during that time, I worked hand-in-hand with the men on various projects. I was a leader sometimes, and sometimes I was part of what had to be done. And there were two or three different projects that I worked on where there were two guys and myself. Like, I'm a cofounder of the Free Southern Theater; that was with John O'Neal, Gilbert Moses, and myself. And I worked in Southern Media later on, which was a documentary film and photography group. And, again, a lot of times I was the only female that went out with the group, and then sometimes there were females, but a lot of times mostly guys. So, I really didn't have a problem in terms of my particular focus. I worked in education, the arts, economic development and political action.



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MK: So, I guess that's a long time that you were in Mississippi. For you, what were some of the most memorable campaigns or projects that you worked on there? What really stands out?

DD: Well, I'd say that the longest one that I worked on was – and I worked on other projects at the same time – but the longest one was the Liberty House, the Poor People's Corporation, Productive Coop, cooperatives, and the Liberty House Marketing Cooperatives, and I worked with that from '65 to '72. And this was a response to people losing their jobs when they tried to register to vote – they'd get kicked off their land; they'd lose their job; they couldn't do sharecropping; intimidation, and so on – and to give people tools to be able to provide sustenance for themselves, to give them the courage and the confidence that they could start a business.

And so, we recruited for that. We worked with SNCC. The Poor People's Corporation and Liberty House was started by a SNCC field organizer, and it was like a spin-off, a project, which SNCC had a lot of projects. It wasn't called SNCC, but we were SNCC recruited and we worked hand-in-hand. They referred people. We –

MK: Where was it located?

DD: It was located in Jackson, Mississippi. So, I worked with that. And then, after I left, I went off to graduate school to work on my Masters and PhD at the University of Illinois Champagne-Urbana, and the professor – there was a professor there who was in anthropology who was a part of the Southern Media. He had come down there for a period of time and worked with Southern Media, and then he went back to the University of Illinois.



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And I ran into him one day and I said, “You know, I’m thinking of going to grad school.” And he said, “Why don’t you apply to the University of Illinois?” And I did, and I got a scholarship. But I continued to be in touch with people. I had gotten a house in Mississippi, and I continued to see that as my home and to be in contact with what was happening there and doing what I could do to help.

MK: So, to back up just for a minute, were you involved with the Freedom Vote and the building of the party and all of that stuff?

DD: Yes, I was. I was involved in it, doing whatever I could. When I went in 1963, I was a field secretary for SNCC. And part of – the Literacy Project was not set up at that time, so I reported to the COFO office and I did things in the COFO office. They were preparing for the mock election.

MK: This is the office in Jackson.

DD: Yes, on Lynch Street. We were preparing for the mock election to run Aaron Henry for governor and Ed King for lieutenant governor, a black and a white candidate, and I did things related to that. I did things related to preparing for the Freedom Summer, and I did things related to getting things in order to start the Literacy Project, which was going to take place at Tougaloo College, which was like outside of Jackson.

And I continued to be involved with the Mississippi Democratic Party, all of that, throughout the time that I was there. And in ’68, ’67-’68, we started the Southern Media documentary photography and film group. I took a lot of photographs of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. I did go to Chicago to the 1968 Challenge, and I took a lot of photographs there.



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MK: Tell me a little more about that challenge, because we hear a lot about the ’64 Atlantic City controversy, but what happened in ’68?

DD: Well, Fannie – you know, I’m not an expert, in terms of remembering, because I was taking a lot of photographs. I was with a team that we had.

MK: Well, just whatever your recollections are.

DD: Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the leaders, and she not only wanted to see blacks be involved in the Democratic Challenge, but women, and putting forth that platform. There was a lot of violence outside of the convention. Fortunately, we didn’t get anything happen to us, but there were a lot of things going on that I really don’t recall so much.

MK: That’s fine.

DD: I know that – when I read up on things, I’m like, “Oh, yeah, I remember that.”

MK: Yeah. Right.

DD: But I haven’t really talked about it in a long time, so I would say some others who were directly involved in the Challenge part would be better.

MK: So, let’s go back to Freedom Summer quickly. You’d been there for a while, a year or several months anyway, and you had this small group of people, and suddenly there’s this flood of mostly Northern, mostly white students that came and joined you. What were your impressions of the whole project and maybe the most important things that happened that summer?

DD: Well, you know, I was from the North. I kind of knew how a lot of people were coming from all over. I think you have to look at – well, I was involved in



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preparing with others to prepare for all of this – training, getting counties set up and places for people to go, places set up, the freedom schools, and all that – logistics. I did a lot of logistics. And also when people were coming in, to see about accommodating them for a short period of time before they'd leave to go out, and to work on the training part. It's always a lot of confusion, in one sense, when it's a big flood. As people were trickling in, that was one thing, and then with a lot of people – and then you always had the racial thing.

When blacks and whites were together, that meant that the spotlight was on people. So, from the perspective that whites who were against this were aware that this group, "Okay, that's an integrated group. That means they're freedom fighters or civil rights workers. Do we want to get them?" So, there's always that danger part, the violence part that you have to be careful of. So, all of those things were happening at the same time, trying to let them be aware of things that they shouldn't do. Walking down the street, be careful, be aware of what's happening, be aware of your environment. So, there were so many different things that had to be done to try to make them feel secure at the beginning.

And as people went out into these areas, then you had other SNCC people who were trying to protect them and seeing it was a whole new lay of the land. So, a lot of things were being developed in the local area, depending on what the resources were. A lot of people just opened their homes and took a lot of chances to accommodate everyone.

I think there was so much that was learned. When people went back, when the volunteers went back to their hometowns, they did a lot to raise money or to make people



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aware in their community about really what was happening. I think that for a number of people who were there, that made a big change in their life and they went on to do things. It was a ripple effect, whether it was freedom schools establishment in their own community or knowing more about the educational system in their community and how it affected minorities or black people. I think a lot of things were done as a result and continued to be done after that Freedom Summer. Some people stayed. Some people stayed for another semester, a year, more than that.

WK: Did you have any observations about the interactions or relationship between some of these visiting people and some of the local people, the people they were trying to organize?

DD: Well, I think that there were good relationships that were established, and then sometimes there were conflicts, because of lack of understanding of both parties or a lack of understanding of the whole new situation. Because when you had whites coming in, that made it obvious that people were civil rights workers, and that brought on that whole other dynamic.

WK: So, did you go to the meeting at Waveland?

DD: No, I didn't. I remember when – I did meet Schwerner and Goodman when they came in. So, you had that kind of a situation, whites and blacks going out, and they were spotted right away. So, that happened. People were beaten up, stopped, harassed, all kinds of things.

WK: How about you personally? Did you run into violence?

DD: Yes, I did. I remember, for example, one time we were on the road and we stopped at a gas station to go to the bathroom. And I went into the gas station and said I



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wanted to use the bathroom. And the gas station attendant came over to me, and he did like that, and he showed his gun, and he said, "You better not go in there." So, I turned around, and I didn't go to the bathroom. I left and went out. Sammy Young, for example, went into a bathroom, or he attempted to go to the bathroom, and he was shot in the back. So, that was scary because he was a big white guy and he had that gun, and there was just a couple of us outside.

MK: How did you sustain yourself during the movement, you know, dealing with the fear and all the other emotions that run through you?

DD: Well, I was a spiritual, religious person, and my Christian upbringing helped to sustain me. The solidarity of the people, the music, the freedom songs, helped to sustain, and the work that I was doing – I felt that it was the right thing to do, and that's what I was going to do. I thought that there was a certain amount of protection within our group, tried to make sure that things were coordinated, used good sense, had people's phone numbers, didn't stay out so late. There were a lot of precautions that I took, as well as the other things that I just told you about, and the conviction that this is the right thing and that I just need to do this.

MK: So, what were the goals of the movement, and did they change over time?

DD: Well, of course they did. And the goals, you know, I think – that's such a broad question. So, I have to say the goals – I mean, I was there for a long period of time, and the goals when I first went there and the goals later on, and really, depending on what it was that we were working with, everything was always evolving. We were agents of change, and then change that was going on the whole time.



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MK: Okay, but then more broadly, in your mind, what did the movement stand for? What was the goal, the big goal, not that daily one? [Laughs]

DD: Well, the goal – part of the big goal was to fight discrimination and segregation, get voting rights, organize communities to help themselves, to get rid of a system that was just horrible and a life that had such a negative effect on both communities, both the black and the white. But it's a systemic – racism is a systemic problem. And so, to try to make some type of headway with getting rid of racism and all of its effects, all of its challenges that were so far-reaching, to understand what was going on and what kind of solutions could be brought to bear to help the black community immediately, but really to help America, to improve – to change America, basically.

MK: It's a bold goal.

DD: Yes. One – what is it? One [match] at a time.

MK: What was your take on the sort of rising influence of black power within the civil rights movement?

DD: What was my take on it?

MK: Yeah, what did you think about it, black power during those movement years?

DD: Well, you know, black power was a slogan. But what did it mean and where was it along in the spectrum of the development of the movement? It was a part that was necessary to talk about black power, because people in Mississippi, Georgia, and other places were powerless. And so, in order to accomplish change, the idea that black people could have power on different levels had to be there. Black power meant economic power, cultural power, educational power, health care power, all of those areas. It was



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just saying black people need to be able to develop their own destiny, to accomplish for themselves and put their goals out, and we have to be at the table talking and developing solutions to the problems.

MK: What about the debate about nonviolence? What was the importance of nonviolence, or what does it mean to you personally?

DD: Well, I saw it in two ways: a commitment and a tactic. I used it as a tactic, and I also thought that, if necessary, I would defend myself, not that I ever used a gun or anything.

But you asked about violence. One of the things that I was a part of was the Head Start program. The first Head Start program in the country took place in Mississippi. And I was asked to go to a Head Start Center in Durant, Mississippi, which was the people in the community donated the land, and then the people in the community built the building brick by brick. And the whites in the community didn't like that. Now, I was put up in the home of the director, and at night her husband and her sons had to sit up with rifles because her home had been shot into. There were also rifles in the corners of the Head Start Center, because they had been shot into or threatened and so on.

Now, another thing that happened was when the director and I had gone into town to get some supplies, and we were coming back on the road, I was sitting in the passenger's seat. And I looked out, and I saw that there was a fuse going from outside in the yard, up the steps, and it was a rope, and it was lit, and it was going in, moving. And so, we stopped, and when the rope was going into the church, and they were about to blow up the church, we stepped on it and got rid of it.



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So, in that kind of a case, nonviolence would not be the tactic that I would use. I would hope that if there were men around or women who had rifles or whatever it was to defend ourselves if we needed it, personally, I would be happy.

As a demonstration technique, [I was all for it]; you couldn't win any other way. And I think that, as much as possible, that nonviolence is something that – the spirit of it and everything is good. It's important.

MK: So, you were there you said, well, '62, and then you went back in '63 and you were there until –

DD: I was in Albany in '62.

MK: Right, and then Mississippi '63 to –

DD: '72, with the exception of about nine months.

MK: What were you doing then?

DD: Well, the Literacy Project lost – it had funding for a year, but they were trying to secure funding for another year. The director was from New York, and he said, "We need to take the Literacy Project back on a smaller scale, try to continue it there," developing this method of programmed instruction with migrants from South Carolina. There was a [sort of population] there. And he wanted to have a few people from the group to go back, while we would have a much smaller budget, and then try to get the proposal funded again. So, I did that. And by the end of the fall, I saw that it didn't look like it was going to get funded, so then I returned to the South in January.

MK: Okay. So, most histories of SNCC kind of have it disappear somewhere in '65, '66, just depending on – sometimes a little later. You stayed in Mississippi and you were in all these different community organizations. What happened to SNCC? Was it



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still relevant? Was it still around for what you were doing? Did you still call yourselves SNCC? Or was it gone, and what did you think about where it went? [Laughs]

DD: Well, maybe the Atlanta office or the structure went somewhere. But on the grassroots level, people who had been working in SNCC, a lot of them were still there, Hollis Watkins and different ones that were working with SNCC, but had autonomy in developing the projects in a community. And we had started with the community and we had talked to people about doing this and that, and you can't just leave them like that.

And so, SNCC had, as I said, a lot of spin-off projects. So, a lot of times it was called something that the people in the community needed to have ownership. So, it was their project even though it was a SNCC-initiated project and it was SNCC people still working with it. And so, Liberty House and the Poor People's Corporation was a SNCC spin-off, as was the Southern Media. When it first started it was like an independent thing, but when the people who started it couldn't stay any longer, they came to the Poor Peoples [sound drops out for 7-8 seconds at 57:30] by the Poor People's Corporation and had resources from the Poor People's Corporation. So, again, SNCC as the parent sort of adopted this. So, again, it was another spin-off project.

So, SNCC was there, whether it was connected to an Atlanta office or not. The people made up SNCC – the SNCC field secretaries who were still there, the people who had left were still doing things, tying in and supporting what was being done. We had Liberty House was the marketing coop for all the handcraft cooperatives. So, one of the things that was done was, in order to market the products – leather goods, dolls, black dolls, candles, quilts, all of that – we saw that we needed to have Liberty House stores in different cities. So, again, we went to that pipeline, the SNCC spin-off, the Freedom



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Summer School spin-off, all these different projects that people had worked in, and then you let them know about what you were doing, and so they supported it. Liberty House stores were set up in several cities. And so, it was still going on in terms of the support mechanism and people who were still working on the grassroots level.

VIDEOGRAPHER: We're just about out of tape. I'm going to pause it. [Pause of 3-4 seconds at 59:25]

MK: Okay, so when we cut off you were talking about how the grassroots networks continued to function even after SNCC dissolved or moved away or whatever words you want to use for it. Do you have anything to add?

DD: Well, as I was saying, people continued to do things. SNCC people continued to be in touch with each other and to assist each other if they were having different projects or to assist in terms of people having problems. Medical problems – sometimes we have a call that goes out because somebody is sick, and there were people who didn't make a change to be able to get a job that paid decent money. They stayed. So, a lot of times we give aid, financial aid, to somebody. If somebody dies, we rally around that person. And there are people who worked with SNCC, and that was the basic, and they're still doing things, and they send out newsletters or letters of appeal, and you're still supporting them.

MK: So, some of those community efforts are better known, like the Liberty House. Are there any that have never been noticed, some projects that you did in the late '60s or early '70s that should be recognized or are worth commenting upon?

DD: Well, Southern Media isn't so well known, I don't think, and that took place late '60s, '67-'68. They were photographers. Some of us were working with the group



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on a regular basis, covering events, providing photographs for local people who could use those photographs in their own political campaigns, running for an office. I think I have pictures of Bennie Thompson, for example, now he's a congressman, and other people. We provided photographs sometimes for legal purposes. We provided photographs to newspapers and magazines. So, that's a group that –

MK: Where did it come from, the Southern Media? How did it originate?

DD: Well, it originated with two guys, two white guys who came. And they came to – they were taking pictures and they were filming some of the things that were happening in Mississippi. I think it was like in '67. And then they thought that what was really needed was when they left they needed to train some people, some young people, before they left – to train some young people to do what they were doing, to learn how to use cameras and develop film, edit, and so on and so forth. And so, they were looking around to find some people, and then they came to the Poor People's Corporation to see how we could help.

And so, one of the things that it seemed that I always ended up doing was when they needed somebody to do something new, I'm like a troubleshooter, to go and learn how to do it and then see about training other people to do whatever is needed and to see how to organize and set it up. And so, that's what we did, but I continued to work with Southern Media as well. We had – some photographers who were coming to Mississippi just to take photographs would come by, and they'd be able to develop their pictures and they could kind of be alongside with us and with the trainees, young people that were local. So, that's how we continued. And so, when those guys left, we continued it on.



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MK: What about people? Are there unsung heroes or unrecognized either local people or organizers that the world doesn't know about?

DD: Well, as a matter of fact, there are. Some of them – I mean a lot of them I have in my photographs. And some of them I have to identify, because I don't recall their names.

MK: Right. [Laughs]

DD: However, that theme is something that I present in my photographs in a PowerPoint, and I talk about the women who were agents of change and how you have women that are nationally known that worked on behalf of the civil rights movement, and those who became known after they left, those who are known regionally, those who are known throughout the state, and then those who are unknown, just those who are known locally in their own neighborhood, and then those who are unknown. The unknown – maybe people in their own community know them, but now, looking back, I don't know who they are, and other people may not know who they are. But visually you can see that they symbolize a certain level of people, or a certain contribution of people, and so I always have that presentation visually so people can see how all that came together. There are a lot of unsung heroes or heroines. And there are so many people whose names I do have, but I can't really –

MK: Who were some of your closest collaborators and confidants within the movement, personally?

DD: Well, that evolved over time, depending on the projects that I worked with. I mean, it's really too numerous. When I was in the Literacy Project, my roommates, who were also part of the Literacy Project, Casey Hayden and Hellen O'Neal, and then



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John O'Neal, so we worked together there. And then John O'Neal and Gilbert Moses and I worked on the Free Southern Theater, developing the Free Southern Theater. Then Jimmy Travis and Worth Long and I organized folk festivals and brought the arts in. I was the one who was in charge of bringing the visual arts. And we had folk festivals each year at the Holmes County Community Center. And so, the Head Start Program, you had different people involved in that. Polly Greenberg was the director. There's a book written about the Head Start Program called *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes*. So, I mean, it's so many people, but that's just a few that I told you about.

MK: You mentioned before people running for office. Of course, there's the early mock election, but then later people who are running and winning. Who are some of those pioneers of local electoral victories? What were some of those campaigns? Were you involved with any of that?

DD: To a certain extent, but I was based in Jackson, and a lot of the people who ran, some were in Jackson, some were out of Jackson. You had Bennie Thompson, and he became a congressman eventually. You had [Robert Walker], I believe his name was. I have a lot of photographs of him. He became a state representative, I believe. You had Charles Evers, who became the mayor of Fayette. You had Unita Blackwell, who became the mayor of Myersville, I believe. So, those are some examples.

MK: Okay. So, one of the questions we have here is: What are your assessments of the effects of the movement over time? What are the legacies or the impact?

DD: Well, again, that's such a multi-layered type of answer.

MK: Well, I've got time. [Laughs]



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DD: I'd say – I'm going to go back to different projects that I worked with. In terms of the Literacy Project, we didn't work on it long enough to really develop the kind of materials that we wanted to. However, we made a start. And so, the idea that we were just there trying to help people, in terms of learning to read and write, to show that people could think that things can be done. Even though they were adults, they can't read and can't write, there's that possibility. I know that around Mound Bayou, the Tufts Delta Health Clinic – it was health care reform, and part of that – it was literacy as a component of that in the later '60s, like '67, '68. And I have photographs of women or people teaching math, teaching English, and so on and so forth.

So, there was a whole push for literacy in the black community, whereas in the past, with the segregated schools segregated and unequal, one of the [sound drops out for 7-8 seconds at 70:59]. In the counties, how much money was spent on the black school children per head as opposed to the white. It was terrible. And the school children had to – the black school children, a lot of times they didn't go to school until October or November after the planting, and then they dropped out of school early in the spring because of the harvesting, or vice versa.

So, I think that the push for education, there was adult literacy, the push for Head Start Programs. With the Head Start Programs, children, little kids, were able to do so many new things – tell stories, learn to make books. We had children tell stories, for example, and we wrote it down [sound drops out for 6-7 seconds at 72:08]. Let the children do pictures, make pictures and put the pictures with the stories, and then turn around and give them the book to look at, see their words and their pictures, and so on and so forth. So, I think the Head Start Programs, even though they were problems



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economically and otherwise later on, again, the whole point is to show people that you can make change. You can accomplish things for your family and so on.

The same with the economic development, the Liberty House – several cooperatives were established: vegetable cooperatives, handcraft cooperatives, housing cooperatives, and so on and so forth. So, I think that a lot – even though some things didn't work, or they didn't last forever, but I think that they gave people the idea that things *could* change, things *could* be done. There's always a push-pull kind of effect. You do something positive, you try to do something to help yourself, and then the people who don't want to see that happen, they come back and push the other way and then maybe make it go astray, change the effect.

MK: That's a great answer! I guess one other question is: What do you think remains undone? What were you not able to get to that you either wish you did at the time or that still needs to be done now?

DD: Well, we have to continue the struggle. We have to support Obama. We have to continue in all these different areas. There's so much that has to be done. What I do is I work with students, and I try to see that they know the history of what happened in the past in order to try to make sure that certain things don't continue to happen that were negative and detrimental to our community and to the nation as a whole, and to push to do things that are positive and uplifting and that will enable us to see our children be here tomorrow.

MK: Well, I think that's all I have to ask. Do you have any other things you want to add?

DD: No, I don't.



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MK: Thanks so much for your time and your great stories.

DD: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Sally Council

December 31, 2010



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