

**Julian Bond Oral History Project
“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”**

Interview with Dion Diamond

**Special Collections Division
Bender University Library
American University
Washington, D.C.**

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PREFACE

This interview is part of an oral history project entitled, "The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-1968." Unless otherwise indicated, the interviewer is Gregg Ivers, Professor of Government and Director, Julian Bond Oral History Project, American University.

The reader is encouraged to remember that this transcript is a near-verbatim transcription of a recorded interview. The transcript has been edited for minor changes in grammar, clarity and style. No alteration has been made to the conversation that took place.

Notes, where and when appropriate, have been added in [brackets] to clarify people, places, locations and context for the reader. Mr. Diamond reviewed the transcript for accuracy.

Biographical Note for Dion Diamond

A native of Petersburg, Virginia, Dion Diamond (b. 1941] entered Howard University in Fall 1959. By early 1960, Mr. Diamond helped found the Nonviolent Action Group, which became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chapter at Howard. He soon became a leader of the sit in movement that, by that summer, helped desegregate public accommodations in Northern Virginia and Glen Echo, Maryland. In May 1961, Mr. Diamond joined the Freedom Rides, and later served time in various penitentiaries in Mississippi, including the Parchman Farm. After his release, Mr. Diamond became a field secretary for SNCC, working on voter registration projects throughout the Deep South. For his efforts, Mr. Diamond was arrested over thirty times by the time he left SNCC in 1966.

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American University**

**Dion Diamond (13-JBOHP)
February 26th, 2019
Washington, D.C.**

**Interviewer: Gregg Ivers
Secondary Interviewers: Cameron Burns and Lawrence Holman
Videographer: Audra Gale
Production Assistants: Gracie Brett, Lianna Bright, Colleen Vivaldi**

Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Cameron Burns [CB] Lawrence Holman [LH] Dion Diamond [DD]

Today is Tuesday, February 26th, 2019, and we are at the home of Mr. Dion Diamond in Washington, D.C. to conduct an interview for the Julian Bond Oral History Project. My name is Gregg Ivers. I am a Professor of Government at American University and Project Director. Today, I am joined by Cameron Burns and Lawrence, both seniors at American University, for today’s interview. Mr. Diamond was a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the 1960s, and before that a Freedom Rider and leader of the student movement to desegregate public accommodations in Northern Virginia and Maryland. We’ll let Mr. Diamond talk more about his involvement in the Southern freedom movement. Mr. Diamond, thank you for having us into your home this afternoon.

DD: I’m happy to be here with you. Thank you for including me in this project. I’m honored.

GI: Well, thank you. We are honored to be here. Let’s back up. When and where did you grow up and were there any particular people or events that inspired you to get involved in the freedom movement?

DD: I'm a native of Petersburg, Virginia, a totally segregated town. And I must admit I have no idea as to how I was influenced. I know I went to a segregated high school, segregated elementary school. If I recall correctly there were three "dime stores," Kresge's, Woolworth's and [Peck's], and they had lunch counters. And I must admit I was Peck's "Bad Boy." I sat in at those counters before sit ins became something of a sit in.

GI: And what year was this?

DD: 1957, 1958, 1959. '59 was the year graduated from high school. But anyway, what I'm trying to suggest is that, back then when I sat at the lunch counter, I don't know that there were any persons of color who sat down at a "white only" lunch counter. And they would

come up and say, "Hey you know you aren't supposed to be here." This is before the sit ins. They would call the manager and they would call the police. Believe it or not, I was fleet of foot! There was a back door and I ran as fast as I could when the police came. I don't really know what inspired me. But we also had a segregated library. There was a "colored entrance and then there was a white entrance. You were not allowed to go into the stacks, the stacks being where, well I guess, where you could find books. Anyway, I started doing stuff at an early age. And I don't know what inspired me.

GI: Anyone in your family supportive of you? Do they know what you were doing . . . ?

DD: No!

GI: This was completely independent, there was no . . .

DD: Yes, to all of the above! I don't know what motivated me, except I just knew something was wrong.

GI: Did you share this with any of your friends?

DD: No.

GI: They know what you were up to?

DD: No. No one knew except for the people who saw me running out of the coffee shop and they had no idea why.

GI: And there were no particular events during this period that led you to make the decisions that you did or to think about becoming an activist? This was just being tired of having to live how you lived . . .

DD: Other than the fact that, like I said, something was wrong. No, I truly don't understand now, in retrospect, why. I don't know what motivated me. I really don't. But it was just my knowing internally that something was wrong.

HOWARD UNIVERSITY THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA SIT INS

GI: You graduate from high school in 1959, and in the fall of 1959 and you enroll at Howard University in the fall of 1950 . . .

DD: That's correct.

GI: OK. And you become a founding member of the Nonviolent Action Group. Can you tell us about that?

DD: NAG! [laughs] Nonviolent Action Group. Here we are at Howard, supposedly the epitome, the zenith of black education . . . and all of a sudden, the sit ins broke out and we at Howard are doing nothing because D.C. was not a segregated town, at least in fact. But in fact, it *was* considered a segregated town in 1961. And we were doing nothing. So, I think a few of us said, "Wait a minute. If this is how it is, what can we do?"

Now, you have to understand right across the river, which was the demarcation line of Virginia and then also Maryland, the Potomac River separated Virginia and D.C. And we said, "Well, Virginia was segregated. Let's try going over there and finding out if we can do something over there." And I must admit, again using the term of youthful exuberance, we didn't know what the heck we were doing. We went over to Arlington to a Drug Fair, if I remember correctly. We sat down at the counter. And believe it or not, they refused to serve us. I think I'm laughing because we had the same thing [laughs], okay . . . yes. I guess you guys have heard of George Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party.

GI: Here are a couple of photos that are from that period. And this is you, I believe.

DD: It looks like me! [laughs]

GI: Would you mind holding that up for the camera? That's you with your eyes closed listening to George Rockwell the American Nazi Party. That's quite a way for you to break into the sit ins.

DD: Well, this one, see the Nazi symbol? [Mr. Diamond holds the picture up to the camera]

GI: We can see it.

DD: Life has been strange. I don't know what motivated me to do any of this stuff. But this one was indeed . . . this was my first foray in terms of an organized sit in. The stuff that I was telling you about a moment ago was truly personal. The Kresge's and the Woolworths, etc. that was stuff that I just did on my own. And I kept running on those previous ones; but this one was indeed organized. Because this one was, yeah, it was organized. We knew what we were going into.

GI: And in that particular picture you're by yourself . . .

DD: Yeah. [laughs].

GI: And in another picture of you in a stare down with somebody who's pointing his finger at you, a much younger white boy. Can you tell us about the picture and the people that are sitting at the lunch counter with you?

When I suggested a moment ago about being organized, these people were sitting with me [holds a different picture up to the camera]: At the time this was Joan Trumpauer. Now

she's Joan Mulholland.¹ This is Ethelene and I must admit I don't remember the last name.² But this is what frightens me when I look at this. These are kids, truly children, twelve, fourteen years of age. You have to be taught to hate. And look at that. Please look at the hate on these people's faces. Look at this child. Look at this man. I mean, I'm sorry. I don't know if he was about to hit me or spit on me. When I look at this stuff and I . . . when I look at this stuff in retrospect, I don't know how I was so . . . I just don't know. Moving right along . . .

GI: The sit ins that took place across the river lasted how long? How did they resolve?

DD: Within three weeks, I believe, we desegregated the entire Northern Virginia public accommodations. And we didn't realize how much we accomplished. Within three weeks, I don't know if it's three weeks, two weeks or whatever, but all of the public accommodations in Northern Virginia . . . we accomplished everything. So then we re-camped. Wow! If we did that in that short a period of time, what else can we do? And I think this is where we get into Maryland and Glen Echo Amusement Park.

GLEN ECHO

GI: Why Glen Echo? Why Maryland?

DD: I think because of the fact that Glen Echo was an amusement park. The Potomac River separates Maryland from Virginia. And Glen Echo was an amusement park where the D.C. government bused, or trolleyed, students from high school. Whites only. Whites only were bussed to Glen Echo. This still brings tears to my eyes when I think about it.

After Arlington, we tried to figure out, jeez, if we did that in that short a period of time, what can we do now, because that's all of Northern Virginia? Ah, Glen Echo Amusement Park. And believe me we can do something. Well, Lawrence Henry and I said, "Let's deal with Glen Echo. It's an amusement park. It's whites only and they have a sympathetic community surrounding that area, mainly because of the fact that Bannockburn is a community that is, perhaps, ideal for helping us. They are a community not only of persons of Jewish descent, but also labor oriented. American labor unions are there."

At any rate, we started our picket line with the support, truly with their support, of the community, because otherwise I'm not certain we could have survived. Aside from our picket line up and down in front of the entrance to the park, everybody said, "You know, they didn't want black people or persons of color." I'm not certain how schizoid we are now because I've been colored, I've been Negro, I've been black. The whole thing is strange. At any rate, the people from Bannockburn were all white, all Anglos. They brought food to us down on the picket line. And with all due respect, those were some wonderful people.

1. Joan Trumpauer Mulholland [JBOHP-06] was interviewed for this project.

2. Ethelene Crockett, later Ethelene Crockett Jones, was also a student at Howard University. She later went on to a prominent career as an obstetrician, becoming only the second African American woman to be board certified in obstetrics and gynecology in Michigan. After her retirement, Dr. Jones became active in civil rights and community work in South Florida, including the executive committees of Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union.

One day we concocted this scheme. We got a chauffeured limousine with a white chauffer and a white female interpreter and yours truly in an African outfit. Now, you have to understand I'm talking about a limousine. We pull up. I'm in the backseat with my white female interpreter. And we pull up in front of the picket line. Everybody on the picket line knew what was going on. Also, the photographers and the newspaper people, they knew what was going on. Anyway, we pulled up in front of the main gate and the chauffeur got out of his side of the car, opened the car for the white female interpreter. And then I get out. Here I am wearing this African outfit. Believe it or not, everything was going on according to the script that we had.

With my "pidgin French" . . . believe me I hadn't spoken any French for four years since high school . . . the chauffeur opens the door and the interpreter comes out and, here we go. I tell the white female interpreter, "[offers some unintelligible "pidgin French" I just wanted to say, "I desire to enter the park gates right now!" And here's this guard. I just kept saying the same thing. And, of course, he didn't know what the hell I was saying because I didn't either. He's flustered. I mean, this is an international event now. because I'm wearing this African garb with this turban, I suppose. I don't even what you would call the outfit I was wearing. But anyway, we knew that it was going to make next day's paper. Foreigners can enter the park but Americans can't.

GI: Did it make the paper that way?

DD: I don't think so. In fact, I don't think we even got in. I mean, we made a U-turn. We just made it out. No, we did not get into the park. And I think that did make the paper the next day. But that whole thing was so comical that I must admit that was one of our most salable experiences [laughs]. Anyway, the people in Bannockburn, I must admit, they were wonderful.

THE FREEDOM RIDES

LH: What was your motivation for getting involved with the Freedom Rides when you were in college?

DD: When the bus was bombed, I knew that the Freedom Rides were about to come to an end. And I knew that we could not allow the Freedom Rides to end. We had invested a whole bunch of sit ins and, believe it or not, lives. I think my thoughts were, if indeed the Freedom Rides were to end right there in Anniston, Alabama, anything we had invested would have been lost. And the people in Nashville, actually, Diane Nash and the Nashville group then us in D.C., said, "Hey, we can't let this end now." Actually, I must admit that I was not involved in the Freedom Ride from the beginning, but I knew I had to participate in it. Actually, I flew from D.C. to Montgomery, Alabama. We knew that we had to continue the Freedom Rides. Now, you've got to imagine this in your mind. I was on one of two buses that left Montgomery, Alabama to go on, to continue, the Freedom Rides.

Unless you have seen the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, you will not believe what occurred with continuation of the Freedom Rides from Alabama to Mississippi. Overhead, two helicopters flying over the bus. IN front of the bus there was a cavalcade of state police cars. Behind the bus state police cars. And, when we got to the Mississippi-Alabama border, once again, the changing of the guard. Now, on the bus . . . we used to think that the National Guard on the bus with bayonets were there to protect us. What we did, we were so stupid, we didn't realize the National Guard were the same people who wore Ku Klux Klan outfits when they were not on the bus. At any rate, we got to the Mississippi-Alabama border and the same thing just happened all over again – the hanging of the guard.

Anyway, we got to Jackson, Mississippi without any happenstance. And when we pulled into to the bus station, we were dutifully escorted to a paddy wagon. There's a book that's right behind me, it says, "A Breach of Peace," and I must admit we were ushered into paddy wagons. I don't know if that answers your question, but I can tell what happened for the next two months. We were segregated racially and sexually. In other words, gender and race. Although white men were put in one cell and all the black men were put in another. Yeah, that's about it. But that was only the first wave.

CB: What happens after you are put in the Hinds County jail?

DD: What's most interesting about that is that, after about three or four days they moved us to the county prison farm. And we couldn't figure out why they moved us. Again, they were white folks and black folks and they just separated us, and we didn't know why. They kept moving us from location to location. About ten or fifteen minutes later after the prison farm they sent us to the state penitentiary. And I don't know if you guys are aware of it, but the prison in Mississippi was known as being one of the most difficult and outrageous penal systems in the country. When we got to the state penitentiary, again, gender and sex and race made the difference.

All the black men were put in one part of the penitentiary and white men were put in another part of the penitentiary. And same thing about women. White women, black women. And we couldn't see what was going on, why they kept moving us? And it took us some time to figure it out. Here's what it was about! They kept moving us because of the fact we had no way of knowing. They moved us because the buses kept coming. We had no idea whatsoever the reason they kept moving us. We had no communication. And I think in retrospect the buses kept coming. If you can imagine, had we known then we would have been exuberant. That would have made us realize that, hey everything that we started had not ended.

And it kept going and the buses kept coming. In retrospect, I mean years later, we understand now. That. We started something. We started something. That it was not only forty-something of us who were on the first wave. There were four hundred and nine of us, if I recall correctly, we started a movement. I'm very, very proud to have been a part of it on the first. The first two buses to get into Jackson, Mississippi – now, let me tell you this please – when we got arrested in Jackson at that particular time, I had gotten into a situation where I had made a commitment. Now, please here this. I've already lost that

semester out of school. I didn't know what to do thereafter. I'd already lost that semester and I suggested, "Well, I'm already down here. Let's see what I can do."

With that, I thought, I said okay, SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, is now branching out using the tools of communication. I became what was ostensibly called a field secretary for SNCC. You guys can't see the protruded belly that I have now [laughs], but I had it then I wouldn't be alive [smiles]. I was in McComb, Mississippi, doing voter registration. Hinds County is behind me now. I'm out of jail. And I'm in McComb doing voter registration. Believe it or not there was the Illinois Central Railroad. Back then, the other side of the tracks. The home that I was living in was right beside the railroad tracks. At eleven o'clock every night there was this train that went up the grade.

And the people in that town knew that Freedom Riders – i.e., me, a couple of other people who were field secretaries, pulled up a grade. And a shotgun blast came through a window. And what I was alluding to a moment ago, if my stomach would have been as big as it is now, I would have been blown away. Life has been truly interesting. And I am so appreciative of my participation and how also that I'm still here.

LH: Can you discuss what you were thinking when you made some of the decisions you did to get involved with the civil rights movement?

DD: When I suggested a moment ago that, when I got out of prison, I knew that my semester, well I knew that I was gone from Howard. I spent the next two years doing voter registration in Mississippi, Louisiana and indeed the state of Maryland. I think I asked you whether or not when you applied for a job and they ask you if you've ever been arrested, I laughed at that because I've been arrested approximately thirty times. Please check with the FBI for dates and locations [laughs]! And that is to me the greatest thrill that I have with regard to that. Now, when I was doing the voter registration activity in Mississippi, I hoped that one day in Jackson, Mississippi, there will be a person of color who might be elected to the [city] council. And then I said maybe one day in life there might be a person [of color] who might be elected to the state legislature. And then I said if all goes well fifty years from now, somebody might be elected [to higher office].

Let me tell you. We had a fifty-year reunion [in Jackson] in 2011. The chief of police was a black female. The police force was thoroughly integrated. We went to the state prison. Would you believe that the superintendent was a black female? And, take it from there, we also had a black congressperson. So, I mean, what I participated in has caused a transition. And I feel good about that. I keep getting phone calls, "Dion, do you recall so-and-so?" And then there's a book published, okay? The first thing that I do – this shows you vanity – the first thing I do is look in the back of the book in the index to see if my name is in there. And that's vain [laughs]! I didn't write the book. I didn't keep any notes. And that's a shame. Because, believe it or not, I participated in the stuff that made that book, if that makes any sense!

STUDENT ACTIVISM THEN AND NOW

CB: How do you see student activism today compared to when you were active back in the 1960s?

DD: Quite frankly, I do not know. I give speeches all over the country about civil rights activity and my involvement and almost always start with the following: If you're under the age of forty you probably don't know a damn thing about what happened previously. You think that what is today always was. And if you don't know your past it is going to come back and bite you in your butt. Now, by that I merely mean that, you can't assume that this society that you're living in now always existed. Segregation can come back again. I know this is sounding political, but when you hear stuff like, "people of color" and "people across the border," it bothers me to think that people think that what is always was. I'm not certain that's making any sense to you.

CB: That makes a lot of sense. So how similar is that when we hear that rhetoric about people crossing the border and then the coded language? Is that something that you all actively dealt with, the protesters?

DD: First of all, America is becoming browner. I think what I'm trying to say is, in years past, we were crushing persons of color and that happened to be, again, call it black. Today, Hispanics are being trashed. American used to be all white until 1619 when the first slaves were imported. Actually, I truly don't know how this country can get over its race consciousness. I have hope for this country. Life has been somewhat gracious, in my estimation. I don't wish to deal with politics, but nevertheless we are reverting to a racist society. And I think it is incumbent upon the younger generation guys like you to come forward and say hey, "You know, let's vote our way out of this." I hope that's an adequate answer to your question.

CB: It makes perfect sense. Thank you so much.