

*Civil Rights History Project*  
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Interviewees: Glenda Funchess

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Location: Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 1 hour, 23 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

EMILYE CROSBY: I'm Emilye Crosby, and we're here in the Hattiesburg Public Library with Ms. Glenda Funchess on December 2, 2015, and we're here with the Civil Rights History Project, which is cosponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. And also with us is John Bishop and Guha Shankar might be joining us later. Thank you, Ms. Funchess, for doing the interview with us.

GLEND A FUNCHESS: Okay, welcome.

EC: Could you tell me when and where you were born?

GF: I was born here in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, on August 17, 1954, which I always say three months after the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. [Laughs]

EC: How long did it take you to realize that? How old did you get to be?

GF: Well, I think I probably realized that after I got in college, it was exactly three months, so.

EC: Yeah. Can you tell us about your family?

GF: Well, I come from a family of twelve children. My mother is originally from Alabama, and my father is originally from Jefferson Davis County, Mississippi; Prentiss, Mississippi.

EC: What did they do for a living?

GF: My mother ended her working career working with the Department of Human Services. She was one of the first homemakers, which was like a social worker aide. And my father, he was a chef at the University of Southern Mississippi. He likes to brag that he worked for about four or five presidents.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: They gave him a reception when he retired, so.

EC: Really, yeah. Was your mother doing that work when you were young?

GF: Well basically, she did like nursing, sitting with, I guess, ill people, she was doing that.

EC: She would sit with them?

GF: Sick people, yes.

EC: Where did you fall in the twelve children?

GF: I am a middle child. There are six under me, so I'm number six.

EC: So, you must be used to having a lot of people around?

GF: Well, actually, my oldest sister finished high school by the time I went into first grade. Then she moved to Cleveland, what they call the “great migration north,” she moved up to Cleveland, Ohio.

EC: So, was she almost like an auntie or something for you?

GF: Oh, well, she’s like a second mother, I guess you could say. [Laughter]

EC: So, what was your community like in Hattiesburg growing up?

GF: I had the opportunity to see a segregated community. And there were black businesses that were thriving. We had cafes, and cleaners, nightclubs, and we had hotels. So, I had a chance to see the separate society that basically African Americans were subjected to in the [19]50s and [19]60s.

EC: Were you aware of that as a kid? How did it seem to you then?

GF: Well, I think I became more aware after Freedom Summer, because I was nine, going to Summer, Freedom Summer. And I knew we lived in separate society. We would see whites on the bus, but I think the students with SNCC kind of opened our eyes that we had certain rights, [Laughter] that we were not exercising.

EC: Yeah.

GF: Like the public library for one, and public zoo. And those things like that.

EC: Yeah. Where did you go to school?

GF: Well I started, actually in kindergarten with Ms. Maddie Townsend’s Kiddie Nook. And Ms. Maddie Townsend was a civil rights activist. Actually, she was one of the first females that Theron Lynd, who was the circuit clerk in the [19]60s, registered to vote. I went to her kindergarten up until the age of six, and then went to Mary Bethune Elementary School, which was in my neigh--what then my neighborhood,

was then the neighborhood, I should have said. And from there I went to Lillie Burnie. That was the year that we started to dismantle the dual school system. Hattiesburg did what was called the stair-step approach level, and so, in [19]65-[19]66 [5:00] they did grade one through four. And then added four more in [19]66-[19]67. And then in [19]67-[19]68, the last four grades were added. And that's--all twelve grades were desegregated.

EC: Was that desegregated with Freedom of Choice?

GF: Freedom of Choice, compliance by--.

EC: But it was still sort of--.

GF: Yeah, different--.

EC: Separate systems?

GF: It was separate system. You had to opt out going to the African American school, and I was asked in 1967-[19]68 to go to Thames Junior High because it was somewhat distant from the African American community, and they did not have as many blacks at that school. There were about four or five that went that first year, and that would have been [19]66-[19]67. So, Ms. Earlene Boyd, who served in the Education Committee, requested from our parents that we be allowed, my sister and I, to go to Thames.

EC: Was, Ms. Boyd, was that the Education Committee with the NAACP?

GF: With the NAACP, she was.

EC: OK. And what did your parents say?

GF: Well, they agreed. I think what the NAACP was looking for students who had pretty good grades, because they knew going into a hostile education environment

that your grades had to be pretty good, because they're going to suffer some. So, my mother agreed. Actually, my mother was working for a family, the guy was paralyzed. And she was his nurse, and we went to the same school as his son. Now the wife had no problem with it, but the man who was paralyzed wanted to know what did the NAACP give her to send her kids to Thames.

EC: What did she say?

GF: She told him, "Nothing." Nothing. So, my sister, Thames was a junior high, and it also had elementary school. So, his son was in the elementary school, and my sister, two years younger than me, she was in elementary school, and I was in junior high.

EC: So, did they interact?

GF: I don't think so, no.

EC: Yeah.

GF: Because she was in the sixth grade. And I think he was maybe about third.

EC: Yeah. So, when they asked your parents, and your mother agreed, did they talk to you all about whether you wanted to, or did they just make the decision for you?

GF: Well, my next-door neighbor, Gwen Bundt, she had gone that first year to Hawkins, and every day we would wait for Gwen to get off the bus, and brief us on what happened. So, we were of the opinion that, okay, Hawkins was where the poor whites, middle-class, and we would be going to Thames where the more affluent [whites went], and from Freedom Summer, we thought that the--.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: --more affluent whites would embrace integration. So, we felt like we were not going to have the problem that Gwen had, but we found out.

EC: Then you hit reality.

GF: Reality hit, yeah.

EC: So, Freedom Summer led you to believe that you would have an easier time?

GF: With the rich whites.

EC: With the rich whites?

GF: Yeah.

EC: Was that because you associated them with the volunteers?

GF: Right, the volunteers were rich. The middle-class, rich kids coming south. So, you just figured, you hear about the poor whites.

EC: Yeah.

GF: And gravitating towards the Klansmen and all that. So, we just knew that, well, hopefully we won't have that problem with the rich whites. [Laughter]

EC: And how did that work out for you? [Laughter]

GF: It was a nightmare. [Laughter] I would pinch myself to make sure I wasn't--we were basically--it was a hostile school environment. We went the whole day without anyone talking to us. I think the administrator, the principals set the tone, and I think if he would have instructed the teachers that these children coming into the environment, I want to make sure that they feel like they're part of the school. I was going nine months and no one eating with you, I put my tray down, and they would jump

up. And quite recently, five years ago, I received a letter from Delaware from a young lady who had gone to Thames, a white lady, who was a student back then, and she was apologizing to me. She recalled me--.

EC: Really?

GF: --me putting my tray down, and she jumping up. And my response to her, I sent a letter back accepting her apology. But I don't recall who jumped up because it happened nine months--. [Laughter]

EC: It was like everybody, right? [Laughter]

GF: So, after nine months, if you don't pay attention to people, you just know you go through that scenario, putting your tray down, and they [are] going to jump up. But I think the teacher probably could have made it better if she would have come with us and said, okay, so I'm going to eat with you today. But that didn't happen.

EC: Did the woman who wrote you the apology, did she explain? [10:00] I mean, did she say why she was apologizing?

GF: She said she was not a racist, but she just didn't have the--she was just not brave enough to buck the--race system. And I'm sure she would have suffered some type of repercussion if she would have done that. She tried to say that she did it because, peer pressure, I guess.

EC: Do you know what prompted her at that particular moment to--?

GF: Well, we had done an article, it was on Martin Luther King's birthday, and Martin Luther King had visited my church two weeks before his death. And I had given a civil rights marker in 1999, I think the first one in the state, and--[laughter]--they had ran a big article on that, two-page article. And she was home visiting her mother and she

saw it. So, she said she looked me up on the internet and found my address. The letter went to my workplace, not to my home.

EC: [Laughter] On purpose, right? I mean, you--.

GF: Well I invited her next time she come, we'd get together, maybe we have lunch. I haven't heard from her, I don't know she called my home number or what, but I have not heard from her.

EC: Yeah, yeah. What was it like in the classroom?

GF: Well, in the classroom, like I said, from the first day, we were briefed by the principal, if we had any problems, to report to Mr. Manguno, who was the assistant principal. So, I was a little late getting into the class, so I walked in and took a seat. And immediately the science teacher told me, "Oh no, we don't let little girls and boys sit together," so she moved me to a table in the front of the classroom on the right-hand side, and there I sat for the entire school by myself. A table with two chairs.

EC: Yes.

GF: Right, right.

EC: And was that true? Was it only girls sitting with girls, and boys--?

GF: I think, yeah, it probably was.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

GF: Yeah.

EC: So, you sat there by yourself the whole--.

GF: Yeah, and one day she finally got the nerve to ask me why did I come.

And I told her because I had the right to. [Laughter].

EC: [Laughter].



GF: So, there was incidents all throughout the semester. I did this paper on Martin Luther King, because I was there when he spoke about the Poor People's March two weeks before his death. He was here in Hattiesburg on March 19, at Mount Zion Church. And so, we had to do a history paper. That's okay, I love history. But all the articles after his death, and with the pamphlets I had, I did it on Martin Luther King. So, one day, the history teacher said, "Glenda, I need to speak to you." Outside of class, she said, "Some of the students got ahold of your paper, and they cut it up. But you got an A on it." So, it was one incident after another.

EC: Yeah. Did you have much support? Did you talk to other students who were going through it in different grades, or schools?

GF: Well actually, we rode a van to school. My next-door neighbor had a Volkswagen van, and she picked up about, asked me how fifteen, about fifteen kids got on that van.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: It's elementary school age kids, and junior high. And so, we would confer. I guess she was our therapist.

EC: Yeah.

GF: And really truly, they should have provided some type of counseling, because Mississippi had resisted integration for so long. With the White Citizens' Council, and then the Sovereign Commission, and I think that they dropped the ball in not providing counseling for us.

I was in court with an attorney from Hattiesburg, up in Jefferson Davis County about two years ago, and he was telling me about an incident that happened with a young

man, an African American guy, who was there during the time I was there. That someone took their shoe and slapped him in the face with--and the coach said "We're going to sit here until I find out who did this." So, he was interested in knowing where this young man was, and actually we just found out two days ago that he died. He was living in Louisiana.

But it was all type of incidents that took place. I love choral music, and I took my choral music third period. And for some reason, Ms. Kelly, who was the choral music teacher, always selected the third period class to sing. And so, we had to sing at the ninth-grade class program. It's like a commencement program for them. And we were practicing on the song--we had two days to memorize this song, "To Dream the Impossible Dream." And so all of a sudden, this young lady started [15:00] crying, and everybody wanted to know, why was she crying? She said, "My parents are coming, and they're going to see me standing next to Glenda." And for her that was very--she didn't want her parents to see her standing with the second soprano next to-- [Laughter] So, she was moved, somebody was moved. We were not at the program, we were not standing next to each other.

EC: Did you have a sense that she had trouble before that? Was there--did she mess with you?

GF: No, she didn't, and not in choral music. There's guys who would say little things like, we sung a negro spiritual, "I'm Gonna Ride the Chariot." "You want us to sing like," you know, the n-word. And so, they used that quite frequently, at hymns.

EC: Was that unusual for a white choral group to be singing negro spirituals?

GF: I think it was the teacher. She was--I like--Ms. Kelly was really good, so she incorporated two, I remember, "I'm Gonna Ride the Chariot in the Morning Lord," and then, "Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones."

EC: [Laughter].

GF: Which, "Disconnect those, dem dry bones."

EC: Yeah.

GF: So, although it was unusual, but then, she did them.

EC: Well that's interesting, yeah, that she was able to--.

GF: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

EC: So, I guess it was just horrible that her parents would see her singing next to you?

GF: Right, right. She was a ninth grader, so she knew her parents were coming, and I don't know what type of repercussions she was going to suffer as a result. But I guess she knew her parents better than I. But then once--and like I said, Ms. Kelly always selected the third period. I had a friend in the fourth period, another African American, we were the only two eighth graders. But our schedules were identical--the classes--but they put her in class by herself. If I went to choral music third period, she went fourth period. If I went to home economics fifth period, she went sixth period. But they did put us in the same homeroom, twenty minutes a day. So, that's the only time I got a chance to--other than choral music, to kind of exercise my jaws. We got together for that twenty minutes a day. [Laughter]

But we had to go to a nursing home, and so I worried, "Oh boy, how am I going to get to this nursing home, with the--."

EC: With the choral?

GF: --with the choral music, and this lady, her daughter sung, and she was so nice, that I rode with her. And then once we got to performing, they said, "Walk around and shake--." [Laughter] "Shake the people's hands."

EC: Oh.

GF: And these people were born right after the Civil War.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: They probably, "Why is she here?" So, I had to go through that trauma. Okay, do I walk around shaking hands when I know they really don't want to shake my hand? So, it was one worry after another.

EC: And, did you continue?

GF: That school, I left that school because it was quite obvious that if I would have stayed, that my grade was going to drop. And my next-door neighbor got her arm broke. They met us every morning, the football player, and would charge into us like we were on the football field, little girls. And that's my story. I don't know about the four people who went there the year before. But they--so I transferred to the school on the other side of town, where the poor whites--.

EC: [Laughter] The ones that were the problem?

GF: No, I didn't have that problem, because we had a good school administrator, Mr. Rogers. And I was just amazed. And that year, I was a ninth grader, and they had an African American female to cohost with a white male, and this young lady, now, they call her "The Queen of Talk" up in Detroit, and every time I see her, I remind her of that. We ended up going to Texas Southern University together, but

Mildred Gaddis is known as “The Queen of Talk” in the Detroit area. But, I was just amazed, but I think he set the tone that he was not going to.

EC: So, the leadership made a big deal--.

GF: I think so. I think it was all with the leadership, the administrators.

EC: When, the first year or the second, or when you continued, did you talk to your parents about it, did you--at home?

GF: Well, we would get calls. I would get calls at home, and I knew it was from, when I was at Thames with the affluent whites, I would get these telephone calls, “May I speak to Glenda Faye,” nobody called me “Glenda Faye,” but the people at Thames, they do. And they would call, they would make little remarks and comments and stuff like that.

EC: But did your parents talk to you about what you were going through, and--  
?

GF: Well basically, we talked on the bus, and we talked to our younger siblings. [20:00] We educated them with what we were going through. We never let them forget what we went through! [Laughter]

EC: And then they're like, “We're not doing this!” [Laughter]

GF: [Laughter] Well then, my sister says--she left, after sixth grade. And she told me, over the Thanksgiving holiday, that we just celebrated the fifth anniversary--we had a program--that they were not going to use her as a guinea pig. [Laughter]. So, she went back to the African American school, and there she stayed. But I tried Hawkins, and then I went back to Rowan because I wanted to graduate from Rowan, it was the

African American high school. So, I went back after my ninth grade to an African American school because that's where I was.

EC: So, you were like, "Okay, I've done one school, and I've done another school, and now I'm going home." [Laughter]

GF: I went back, one year, under Freedom of Choice, back to the African American high school. The second year they came up with another plan, my eleventh-grade year called "zoning." So, we had two high schools in the city. We had Hattiesburg High School and then we had Rowan, and so the white kids on a certain side of the railroad track had to come to Rowan, but there were only five or six that came. And we had a program not too long ago, we recognized Dr. Noonkester, who was the president at William Carey College, now William Carey University. His son was the only white that went to Lillie Burney Junior High School.

And then there were a few at Rowan, maybe about five, so we did a black history program--a Martin Luther King program, and we recognized two of them. Because actually, they integrated the African American schools because lots of those kids had--opt out, not to come to a white school. So, but for them, going into the African American school, lots of them may not have gone to school. And see, my last year in high school, they came up with a third plan where they made the African American high school, all tenth grade, and all the eleventh and twelfth graders went to Hattiesburg High School. So, I was in the first fully integrated class.

EC: So, what's the--do you know what the racial makeup of the--was it a county system, or a city system?

GF: It was city. It was city.

EC: Do you know what the racial makeup was of the city at that time, like what the percentage--?

GF: Well, voting-wise I do, but I'm thinking somewhere like thirty or forty percent, about thirty-five percent African American.

EC: Okay. And when they finally consolidated the two systems--.

GF: Mm-hmm.

EC: --did most whites stay, or did they go?

GF: They stayed the first year, because it was kind of a surprise that the court decision came down that summer.

EC: Was that the Holmes County case, like, *Holmes v. Alexander*?

GF: Yeah, I think it was a group of cases that went before. And so, the news came out that summer, and so that class of 1972, I guess it was basically half and half. And then, they had setup this academy in 1965 called "Beeson Academy."

EC: How do you spell it?

GF: I think it's B-E-E-S-O-N. They set it up the first year that they started desegregating the Hattiesburg public school. And the first group of kids were elementary kids, but then they started increasing, as they increased the level approach. And so, that was the option that some of them chose to go there, as opposed to--but I think it was one of those "wait and see" that first year.

EC: Yeah, we'll see how this goes.

GF: Right, right, right, right. And see, we put the first African American homecoming queen in. [Laughter] They didn't know we had a mass meeting. And they

ran several candidates, and we said, “Oh, we’re just going to run one, and we’ll just put all our votes.”

EC: [Laughter.]

GF: The homecoming in 1971 was the first year that an African American served as homecoming queen.

EC: The administration didn’t try to manipulate it or anything, they just let it go through that she won?

GF: I think they did. I think the principal refused to crown her, but they let it go through because they knew. And we made demands, and we don’t--when we left Rowan, we had African American cheerleaders, and we wanted the same in Hattiesburg High. And then football team, I understand, understood--the African American players said they weren’t going to play unless they had some. So, we went over there with our demands, “Okay, we had cheerleaders here at Rowan, and we’re not going to give up--we’re not going to give up this, and we’re not going to give up that.”

EC: And they were receptive to that?

GF: I think they were, because they knew they had to--their money was tied into--that this was the system they came up with. And they used that for a number of years. All the tenth graders went to the African American high school, and then the eleventh and twelfth graders went to--. [25:00]

EC: And that was probably a new high school.

GF: The African--no, actually, Mr. Burger was ahead of his time.

EC: Yeah.

GF: And he had the school built in 1950.



EC: Oh, before Brown--well--.

GF: Yeah, before Brown, Brown [19]54, and when they went to Mr. Burger and a couple of other administrators to try to get them to talk about Clyde Kennard not going to USM. They were trying to get a junior college, African American junior college, and they knew something was up because every one of the black professors they talked to were saying the same thing, a black junior college, "If we had a black junior college here..." so yeah. He was ahead of his time. We just celebrated the Eureka group, and so the last class at Eureka was 1950, and the first class at Royal Street--it changed to Rowan. They named it after the President of Alcorn.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

GF: L.J. Rowan, because they had lots of alumni here.

EC: Somebody was telling me that Hattiesburg was a big feeder for Alcorn.

GF: It was. They had a big support system. I think Jackson State has given them kind of--. [Laughter]

EC: I don't want to hear. [Laughter]

GF: I went to Texas Southern, so I'm not in that fight. [Laughter] I'm not in that fight, but yeah, they being, back in the day, the--one of the doctors. Well actually, before they built Eureka, that's where they went to the high school at Alcorn. They also have family of Dr. Hammond Smith and his brother, Charles Smith, they left here after the eighth grade, and went to Alcorn, and completed their high school.

EC: So, was there any high school here at the time, or was the only option?

GF: Not--well, it was the only option until they built Eureka in the [19]20s.

EC: Okay.

GF: Nineteen-twenties, and then, people started coming to Eureka from different counties. But they went to Alcorn, and from there, they went to Meharry Medical School, four doctors in one family--three doctors and one pharmacist.

EC: That's amazing. And did they all come back to Hattiesburg?

GF: Well, three of them came back. The pharmacist, he opened up his drugstore around 1925, and that's where he allowed black men to meet. He was part of that lawsuit in 1950 for the right to vote. He was, and his brother, Charles Smith, who was a doctor. But that's where they met. And that's where I'm trying to get the historical marker stating the birthplace of the voting rights movement based on that case they filed in federal court.

EC: What year did they file that?

GF: It was in April, 1950.

EC: And so, that's even before the Civil Rights Act of [19]57, which--.

GF: Before [19]57.

EC: --which helped a little.

GF: Right. As I said, we got the civil rights lawyers here, in that *U.S. v.*

*Theron Lynd*. We had one of the top attorneys here working on that case.

EC: John Doar?

GF: John Doar. Mm-hmm.

EC: Yeah. So, I want to ask you about some of the history, but I want to ask you about your personal experiences first, too. When you were part of the Freedom of Choice and going to the different white schools, did you have a sense of that being part of the movement?

GF: Oh, yeah. I felt like it was a mission for Ms. Boyd to come to us and ask us to go. It was like going on a mission for freedom. So, that's why I didn't--I could have opt out and left mid-semester, the first semester. Because there's just so many times you want to hear the n-word, but I stayed for nine months, you know what I'm saying?

EC: Yeah.

GF: I saw it as a mission.

EC: Yeah. You talked about the harassment, and you talked about the difference in leadership in the two schools, and you said there were calls at your house. Was there any sort of systematic white effort to keep black students from going to the white schools, or was it this...?

GF: I don't think there was any systematic effort, but I did notice that lots of the teachers sent their children. And that Hattiesburg, unlike other counties, the teachers had no problem being at the forefront of the civil rights movement, especially voting rights.

EC: Do you have any sense of what made that possible?

GF: I don't know if there was a--I don't know if they had a conversation with the superintendent, preferred their kids, as if he would have more control. But the teachers were the one who testified [30:00] in the *U.S. vs. Theron Lynd* case too, lots of them. Because, according to John Doar, they were the perfect witness because they had master's degrees, and what he did, he went out and got people in Rawls Springs and Brooklyn who were illiterate, and he had to read the transcript. [Laughter] So, that's what made his argument real strong before the Fifth Circuit. We had these people here--and

see, Mississippi paid teachers to go out of state to get their master's, because they did not want to desegregate their--

EC: Because they paid African American teachers--

GF: African American teachers, not white teachers, African American because they--so they went to New York University, Columbia University, University of West Virginia. So, they came back with these degrees, and Mr. Burger recruited lots of these teachers who had these master's degrees, and he urged them to go during the summertime.

EC: Yeah, that's one of the ironies, right, that Mississippi--

GF: Right.

EC: --because they didn't have parallel professional programs, yeah. What was I just going to ask you?

GF: We had great schools here, because, I always said, we produced two major college university presidents out of a segregated system: one from Rowan High School, Dr. Walter Massey, president of Morehouse University. And actually, he didn't graduate, because he was so smart, he went on to Morehouse, I think after the eleventh grade. And then we had Dr. Joyce Ladner, Dorie Ladner's sister, who was interim president at Howard University. She was in the County school, Travillion, but all those schools evolved out of Eureka, because the principal, first principal, Earl Travillion was a teacher at Eureka High School.

EC: You just mentioned that the African American schools were very strong in the area. Can you describe your experience in those schools, or what the schools were like generally?

GF: Well, first grade, we had everything from rhythm bands to theatrical programs. We--they wrote it all into the schools, so we were--we didn't lack anything culturally, you know what I mean? It was there. And so, we had good teachers. You know, they used corporal punishment, but--.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: --you know, they exposed us to a lot--classical music. And so, we did a lot.

EC: I meant to ask, so when you saw that you were desegregating the school as a mission, were you going to mass meetings at the time?

GF: Oh, I loved to go to mass meeting.

EC: Yeah.

GF: I would go sometimes by myself if I heard a mass meeting was going to take place. But I loved mass meeting, the songs, and just seeing people get up and talk about freedom. But yeah, I loved mass meetings.

EC: So, were the students ever recognized at the mass meetings? Did you get support there?

GF: Well, I don't recall going to mass meeting during--because we had just got through with a bus boycott in [19]67, right before I went to Thames. And so, I was--and so, that's when all the mass meetings were taking place that summer. We boycotted downtown, and we boycotted the bus to get buses--black bus drivers, and to get black clerks. And so, we had just finished a very successful--completed a very successful boycott here.

EC: Was that led by the NAACP?

GF: It was, Dr. Smith, Charles Smith.

EC: Was Charles Evers in and out of town at that time?

GF: I don't recall. I think--I saw a picture, he was here with Vernon Dahmer, he led some watches, but I don't recall him being at those meetings. Because you had Reverend Killingsworth. [Laughter] He was a leader himself. Reverend Killingsworth was one of the ones at the forefront of the boycott, and then you had Reverend Grimmett, who was United Meth--well, he was a Methodist minister. And he was another one, and he wrote a letter to the *Hattiesburg American*. But you had different people. You had Dr. Smith, who was the president. He was a local physician that came--moved to Hattiesburg after he finished Meharry.

EC: One of the brothers?

GF: He wasn't--no, he was a different--.

EC: He wasn't one of the brothers?

GF: No, there was two Smiths.

EC: Two, all right.

GF: Charles Smith. He was--I don't know where he was originally from, but he was another set of Smiths.

EC: OK. Can you tell us about "Da Spirit"?

GF: Well, we knew Da Spirit when we had the boycott [35:00]. People would think they were above boycotting downtown, like a certain family. And they would go shopping. Like, at Bilts, the people would see them, they would report them, and that night, Da Spirit would visit their home. I remember one lady who went, and Da Spirit visited her home, she had this big old picture window, had a two-story house. And we

broke that. And so, it was just a way of keeping people in line just to make sure they adhered to the boycott.

EC: So, were you aware of that as a child?

GF: Well aware. I was also aware that they protected the community too. Because we were here, speeding through--I don't know if they were chasing people out the community or what, but they served as a protector of the community too.

EC: Was there protection all the way through the movement from when SNCC first came in? I mean, did people guard the churches, or help out? I know that individuals were protecting their homes.

GF: Mm-hmm.

EC: Was there an organized...?

GF: I think it was organized, even the night Dr. King came here. Before we had choir rehearsal that night at five, that we were through by six, and his visit's supposed to have started at seven, but he didn't get here until after eleven o'clock. But there were men who took position on top of the roof of the church with their rifles. They knew that the church could be targeted. And they had seen Vernon Dahmer's home was firebombed in [19]66, and then I think Dr. Smith who was over at the NAACP had experienced a problem at his home. And Ms. Boyd, who recruited me to go to Thames, somebody had placed a bomb on her porch, so. But you know, sporadic cases of violence, and we had witnessed this white man walking to the church with a rifle, looking for someone. I can't recall if we were having regular service, or mass meeting, but he came in there with a rifle.

EC: He came into the church?

GF: With a rifle.

EC: What happened?

GF: He came in to say he was looking for someone. They got him out, but you know.

EC: Yeah. What was your first awareness of race, or of prejudice?

GF: Probably, like I said, we lived in a pretty protective community. And I can't recall anything happening before Freedom Summer. So, Freedom Summer was like an awakening period for us--a turning point. Because we were okay because we had everything. [Laughter] Until they brought in--well, we had read some black books, but they brought in and established black libraries in all the churches that they used. And so-

EC: Was there a public library for African Americans?

GF: Yeah. It's still here; it's downtown. This one replaced the one, it's the culture center now. And there was an attempt during that summer to desegregate--like, integrate that, as long--also, the public zoo. And they closed the library. It was a group from Palmer's Crossing Freedom School that I guess the Freedom School teachers would get together and say, we're going to do this, and we're going to do this. And there was a group from Mount Zion church that tried to go to the zoo. And we were--of course they were older kids; they wouldn't take little small kids, because they taught us how to protect ourselves if we were attacked. Self--I guess you call "self-defense." And so, we were excited about them going to the zoo. Because it was off-limits to us. We heard about the elephant that was there, Miss Hattie and all that, but--.

EC: Miss Hattie?



GF: Right. [Laughter] We didn't get a chance to see Miss Hattie.

EC: What a good name for an elephant. [Laughter]

GF: I think we all got excited, but some animal was supposed to have escaped from the zoo.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: Probably not, by the time we got a chance to see. But yeah, and so the mayor shut down the library for inventory when they went in that day.

EC: [Laughter] That was interesting timing. What a coincidence. Was Freedom Summer your first awareness of the movement? Did you know about it before that?

GF: I think Freedom Summer was, yeah, the turning point for us. Yeah.

EC: Yeah. And you went to Freedom School?

GF: At Mount Zion Church.

EC: How did you get involved in Freedom School?

GF: My pastor. My pastor lived in Jackson, so you know, the movement, full force in Jackson. So, he urged us to get involved in--so they opened up the church doors for Freedom School, so being a member then, I went.

EC: Was that something you talked about with your parents, or you did on your own, or...?

GF: Oh no, our parents sent us.

EC: Yeah.

GF: Everybody on our block went, except one family. [40:00] But the irony of that, that one family, they didn't go. But now, one of the persons in that family has been on national board of the NAACP, very much involved.

EC: Interesting.

GF: Uh-huh. But we all went because--we all went to Mount Zion Church, and our pastor would urge us to get involved.

EC: Did the Freedom School meet at the church?

GF: It did.

EC: Yeah. And so, do you think it would have been the same kind of response if it didn't meet at the church, or was that just--was it a vehicle for communication, or was it also because it was at the church?

GF: Well I think our church was, as I like to say, Freedom, Civil Rights Church. And then our sister church was quite the opposite. It was anti-civil rights. The pastor was known to report to--more of an informant, and he kind of urged his congregation not to get involved. But we were sister churches. We had church on the first and third and fifth Sunday; they had church on the second, fourth, and fifth Sunday. So, when we were having church, and they were not, their members would come over and worship with us, but it was just our pastor. And he was from Prentiss. And Prentiss was a little bit more advanced when it came to voting registration. When we only had twelve registered here, they had about 1500.

EC: Yeah.

GF: They had that Mt. Carmel community there. Plus, they had Prentiss Institute. So, he--his roots was out of Prentiss, Mississippi, but he lived in Jackson.

EC: And you think that helped shaped his approach too?

GF: I think so, because every Sunday that we had church, he would urge us to register to vote. Now this was after the Voting Rights Act was passed, but he opened up the doors, and he had to commute from Hattiesburg to Jackson, so he could have been a sitting duck.

EC: Yeah.

GF: Yeah.

EC: Did your parents try to register to vote?

GF: I don't think so. All the documents I'd seen, I hadn't seen anything where they may have, but they may have.

EC: Did they--.

GF: But she was on the picket line, she got arrested, when we were boycotting the store.

EC: Oh yeah?

GF: Yeah.

EC: Tell us about that.

GF: Well she and my next door neighbor, Ms. Arleigh Barnes, were picketing the store in the neighborhood that was owned by the white man they call Steelman Grocery. And they were picketing, so the police picked them up, and the police got--took 'em to jail, got kind of disrespectful to Ms. Arleigh. Told her if she didn't shut up, he was going to do such-and-such to her, but she believed in the Civil Rights--all she could do--she sent us on the mission to the--.

EC: Yeah. Were you worried about her being arrested, I mean, when she was arrested?

GF: Well we didn't know until after they came back. [Laughter] And she told us they had taken them to jail, but they had people in place to get them out. Because that was quite common.

EC: Yeah. What about your father?

GF: He was kind of laid back. He wasn't a--no.

EC: I know you were a child, but did you have any sense of whether men or women were more likely to be out at the mass meetings, or picketing, or doing voter registration work?

GF: To me, when I went to the mass meeting, it was an equal number. Because you had people like Mr. B. F. Barnes and lots of people may have owned their own businesses, and Mr. B. F. Barnes was part of that lawsuit too. But you had Mr. J. C. Fairley, different people like that, so the men were very much involved just like the ladies were.

EC: Yeah.

GF: And on the night Dr. King--. They did a fundraiser. That's when he sneaked out. But to see them standing up, volunteering to give a hundred dollars towards the Poor People's Campaign, I was very much--it was very amazing to me.

EC: Tell us about--you said that you were at the church for choir practice, and you decided you were going to stay--.

GF: I think I came over to--I said, we keep our seat, then we'll be right here by the Poor People when Dr. King speaks. So, choir rehearsal was over at six o'clock, so

Mr. Redhorn said the benediction, we sat there, and that--. We figured we only had an hour. Back then--.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: --Now if you said Dr. King was coming, or anyone of that caliber was coming, people would be lined up. But they came in, drifted in around seven o'clock. But after a while, the people waited, and we saw a mass meeting where someone said he was not going to come, some left. But we stayed right there in that choir, and then he came in with his entourage, [45:00] like Hosea Williams and all those people were with him. And he gave a speech, you could tell he was tired, and he--.

EC: What did you say, it was eleven o'clock at night?

GF: It was past eleven o'clock. He got there--.

EC: You were like there for five hours--.

GF: Yeah, we were waiting, yeah. Yeah, we were going to wait to see Dr. King, and he had this young lady, she was a cousin of Vernon Dahmer. She was our church organist. Her name was Wilma Baxter. And he asked her to sing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." But he was talking about the Poor People's March, how he was going to take the plate, and I guess Mississippi had been a fertile ground since we were poor to go get up there, so it was amazing. But somehow, he got out of there, where they were raising their money.

EC: So, they were trying to--do you know if there were actual threats against him, or did people just assume that there would be a problem?

GF: Well, I heard they diverted his flight to Laurel, of all places.

EC: Really?

GF: This was when, Sam Bowers and the Klansmen came over for Mr. Dahmer, but he did make a cameo visit at a church there in Laurel before he came to Hattiesburg. But his mission was to come to Hattiesburg--I think he stopped by as this congregation was there, and that probably delayed him. And I'd heard rumors from the Catholic church, we had a Catholic priest, Father Quinn, who was very much involved in the civil rights movement. He has since died, but some people said he took a nap over there. I don't know if he did over at the church, but I don't know.

EC: So, was it exciting?

GF: It was. It was very much exciting. It was exciting not only for me, but the students at Thames, because I could hear them saying, "*The* Martin Luther King coming?" [Laughter]

EC: And they wanted to sneak over to the church?

GF: I don't know, but after he was killed, we went to school that Friday. He was killed on Thurs--we went there Friday, and I recall this guy bringing this butcher knife to school. He said, "Ms.--I'm gonna cut 'em." But we decided the next week to boycott school. And they had one of the biggest marches here, about 1,500 people. But we stayed out a whole week out of school.

EC: Yeah, how did you--what was it like to see him one week, and then--.

GF: Well I think that it was so shocking, because, we had just seen him on March 19, and then hear April 4--.

EC: A couple of weeks?

GF: And I remember that night, the news, and we couldn't believe it. My sister, the one that was in the sixth grade at Thames, wrote his daughter a letter telling her

that she had seen her father. And we were shocked when she received a letter back from Yolanda.

EC: She got a letter back?

GF: Yeah.

EC: Wow.

GF: And she was saying that she hoped to travel like her father. My mother kept that letter, and when my sister went to Tuskegee, she gave it to her. And so we still had that letter, from Yolanda, and she said she wanted to get into theater, which she did. But I guess her mother had her to write--it was typed. Her mother had her to write everybody who had written her. I thought that was a nice--.

EC: That is. That's really interesting. Do you know what made your sister think to do that?

GF: She was there that night. I guess she was in disbelief like everybody else about his death, just having seen--so she wrote--we didn't think that she would write back. But sometime in September, she got this letter back.

EC: Wow. What was Freedom School like for you?

GF: Well Freedom School, I loved Freedom School, because the Freedom songs. As you can tell, I love music.

EC: Yeah.

GF: But the Freedom songs, I love the Freedom songs. And there were a couple of people there like Dick Kelly. Dick was not my teacher, but he was everybody's teacher. He had this bubbling personality.

EC: Yeah.

GF: He came back for the first reunion, and they sent the buses back to the different cities, and he was on the bus. And when I saw it in the paper that they were coming and his name was there, I called, I think, I gathered up some of the people from the Mount Zion Freedom School. And I just did black art shows, and I had this picture called, "The Turning Point," and some people called it "The Funeral Processional", some people called it the [inaudible]. I didn't know that the theme of the conference was "The Turning Point." So, we presented him with that and a proclamation from the mayor's office, and they refused to give me a key, so my next-door neighbor--.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: --used her brother's name, and the morning of their coming, I went to the mayor's office and picked up a key to the city.

EC: [Laughter] You're kidding me.

GF: We presented him with a key to the city that [50:00] we did--this was tour Freedom School teachers, not--Lawrence Guyot was there, but Lawrence Guyot--we didn't know him like we knew Dick. Because he was in--.

EC: He wasn't from your school?

GF: Right. So, he was like a--Lawrence, I know he was one of the SNCC's workers, but we knew Dick, he went in school with us. [Laughter]. So, we gave him everything, and we sung a couple of Freedom songs, so we were the only Freedom School that really showed up. And he was--we made front-page news, you know what I mean? And I had written this; I had written an article I was going to send to *Unsolved Mysteries* that we had been chatting some of the people from our Freedom School, what happened to those people? So, I submitted it to the *Hattiesburg American* newspaper,



and they ran it that same weekend. But I was going to send it to *Unsolved Mysteries* to find out what happened to those young people who came--so it was already written, so all they had to do was shoot it over to the *Hattiesburg American* and they ran it that Sunday in the newspaper, along with that.

EC: Have you connected with more people since then?

GF: Well, Dick's family, he died, and they contacted the library here, and there was a young lady, Valmina Blackmon, Smith-Blackman, actually Valmina was one of the first twenty-six students that integrated the school. She came knocking on my door, and she said that family member, Dick always talked about Hattiesburg and how it changed his life. So, I had to gather some stuff, and I expressed it up there for his viewing, because they wanted something. He said he could never really get back on track after he left. He stayed an extra year, and he went to a meeting, I read, he went to a meeting with the White Citizens' Council, and they found out who he was, and they threw a chair in, but he stayed over. Dick had that bubbling personality, he was from Chicago. And he stayed--everybody knew him.

EC: Did he continue the Freedom School that whole year, or--.

GF: Um-mm.

EC: --was he doing different kinds of work?

GF: Voter registration, stuff like that.

EC: Yeah, yeah. I know that a few Freedom Schools continued once school started like, maybe meeting on the weekends, or the evenings, did--yours didn't do that?

GF: Mm-hmm.

EC: I don't know how many across the state, I just know that at least a few--

GF: They may have did it with the adults, getting them ready for the--to register to vote, necessary.

EC: The citizenship schools?

GF: Mm-hmm.

EC: What else do you remember about the Freedom School?

GF: Well, we had plays and debates.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

GF: I liked the debates. Now, we would sometimes go over to--I remember going over to St. Paul Church, for--I was always amazed, they had a basement. We didn't have a basement in our church. And we had the debates, and they had the plays, and stuff like that.

EC: Yeah.

GF: I remember one play, dealing with his little white girl telling a little black girl to put down the book. "You can't read. Books are made for--."

EC: [Laughter]

GF: So, you remember those things like that.

EC: Yeah. Did it change how you felt about school in any way?

GF: No, we loved school, but it changed my view that summer, decided I wanted to be a civil rights attorney.

EC: Did you?

GF: Uh-huh, because they had to bring the attorneys in to get people out of jail. And I felt like civil rights attorneys had lots of power. So, I went back to school, fifth

grade, and told everybody I wanted--I know what I want to be. I want to be a civil rights attorney.

EC: What'd they say? That it's a good thing?

GF: Mm-hmm.

EC: So, and what kind of law do you practice? Is that what you do?

GF: Well, I was blessed my first job, I didn't have to go looking for it; it came to me. I was working in the University of Tennessee graduate library, and this young man would come in, and he had gone to Howard University Law School, and I just said, "What pointers would you give a recent graduating law student?" He said, "Actually, we're looking for some people with TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority." He worked with their Equal Employment Office, and I always wanted to do EOC work, so I got on with them. I graduated in August, and I started working with them in December, writing final agency decision on discrimination for TVA.

EC: So, is that like if somebody applied to work there, or if somebody was working there and then experienced discrimination?

GF: Yeah, discrimination of any kind, and we could overturn the EOC decision too, if they went before hearing, and we didn't agree with the ju--hearing--well, hearing judge, we could overturn their decision.

EC: Was that because TVA was a federal--.

GF: It's a federal corporation. It's not an agency, though. But it had, you know. It has [55:00] nuclear power plants, fossil plants in seven states. They provide nuclear--I mean, power for seven states.

EC: Did you enjoy that work?

GF: I did. I did. It was good, until we got the Inspector General in, I guess he felt like he was in competition with us.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: And they said we could save the agency money if we found no discrimination. I said, okay, this--.

EC: What's the point of being--[Laughter]

GF: Right, right, right.

EC: --if you just--

GF: Right. We're going to save the agency money and violate these people's rights--.

EC: Yeah.

GF: --at the same time? No, no, no.

EC: I guess they're letting you know exactly what they--.

GF: Yeah, what they wanted to--yeah, EOC. Yeah, it was good. And then I only took one bar exam, so I took the Mississippi bar, so I came back.

EC: What are you doing now?

GF: I work with legal services, so it's the closest thing to civil rights work with indigent clients, providing representation to them, in eleven counties.

EC: Wow, that's a—that sounds like a challenging job.

GF: Eleven counties, yeah.

EC: Yeah, you have a lot of--do you travel to the different counties?

GF: Yeah. One day I was in court in Mendenhall. It was the Jefferson Davis County case where I had to sue a school district for expelling students, black boys for a

whole year for fighting. When the statute was saying they had the right to go to an alternative school if they didn't use a weapon of any kind.

EC: Yeah.

GF: But they were just sending the kids home to sit up at home for a whole year.

EC: That's criminal.

GF: And then yesterday, I was in Jones County, all the case dealing with a baby, custody of a baby, so it varies from time--.

EC: I was going to say, you must see a lot of different kinds of things in a day.

GF: I do, yeah, I do.

EC: Yeah. And isn't--I know that like, isn't Meridian under a justice department?

GF: They were, they had that pipeline, from school to prison.

EC: Yeah.

GF: And I was telling Jefferson Davis County, they don't want the Southern Poverty Law Center. We can't do class action, but I can bring them in, because there's four or five other kids who were impacted in the same way. The judge told them, yesterday now, if those kids come in, I'm putting them back in school, because you got to comply with the statute. Those kids have a right to have an education without it being interrupted. So, those type of cases.

EC: I imagine that must be interesting, at least some of the time.

GF: Yeah, it is, some of the time.

EC: Very interesting.

GF: But I'm ready for a career change.

EC: Are you?

GF: They're building a civil rights museum here, that old Eureka school.

Actually, it's supposed to be about Freedom School. The guy who's doing it kind of left the community out. It's like he's doing this on his own. He came to a meeting, and he said, "Well, the museum's going to be about Freedom Summer, Freedom School, because it's what you're all known for." And I raised my hand, I said, "No, that's not what we're known for. We're known for our fight for the ballot."

EC: Yeah.

GF: "That's just one chapter in a long fight."

EC: I was going to say, Hattiesburg has a very strong, rich history that's buried.

GF: Right, because--.

EC: Could cover a lot of territory.

GF: Yeah, because I think we have one of the first Freedom Day March.

EC: Yeah, I think the first one was in Mississippi; first one was in Selma, and then Hattiesburg.

GF: Because I know--well, it was not the type of brutality in McComb, and up in Greenwood.

EC: Yeah. Did you remember, were you aware of the Freedom March, I mean the Freedom Day?

GF: I don't--you kind of replace things with--.

EC: Yeah.

GF: I think, maybe the Dr. King visit, and some other things--.

EC: All things come together.

GF: Right, maybe I overshadowed that.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

GF: But I'm sure I was aware, but then I probably just, got to push that back in the back of my mind, because it went on for not one day, but almost four or five days that it went on for.

EC: Yeah. You mentioned earlier about sort of being--having your eyes opened by the SNCC people, and then you mentioned Guyot. Did you have much interaction with any of the SNCC people? I mean, there was a Freedom School and the volunteers, but any of the SNCC staff?

GF: Not with SNCC staff--I would say Victoria Gray Adams walked around the corner, her father lived around the corner from my church.

EC: OK.

GF: I would see her walk around to her father's house, but no.

EC: You didn't know her at all?

GF: Just with the volunteer--I didn't know her. I just knew she was the lady with the pretty little afro, her daddy lived around the corner.

EC: Yeah.

GF: I didn't know of her involvement.

EC: Did you--no you didn't?

GF: Um-mm. Mm-mm.

EC: OK. What was it like as a child hearing about the firebombing of Mr. Dahmer's?

GF: Well, I heard about it--I think that actually happened at night, but I heard about it after I arrived home for school. [1:00:00] My next-door neighbor, Mr. James Bowen and Mr. Dahmer were friends. Mr. Dahmer, Mr. Bowen had his own business, he did that, logging, and they were friends, and so it was kind of devastating. But, I knew he had a daughter and son about my age, I think I had seen Betty and her brother, Dennis. But I did get a chance to go to the trial, the last trial in [19]98, I did.

EC: What was that like?

GF: It was interesting. I had just started this job. I couldn't stay away from the courthouse. I think the most interesting thing about the trial was that, Mr. Bower's attorney, who has since died, he was asking the witness, Billy Joe [Roy] Pitts, who had turned state evidence, he had left his gun. He's the one who kind of--.

EC: Broke?

GF: --broke the case open. Who was there at the time that they were planning the raid on Mr. Dahmer's home, and he named some people. And then he said, "And you were there." And then he said, "Objection, your honor, objection!" "I don't know how to carry this!" Okay, it was common knowledge that there were attorneys in Jones County who were part of that. And I saw one walk through the courtroom. I have much admiration for his son, but--he didn't testify, but that was eye-opening there. Because I do practice over in Jones County sometimes, too. But--.

EC: And so, what happened with--you said you had--tell me about again, don't you live in Jones County?



GF: I practice law over in Jones County.

EC: Yeah. And you said, one of the Klansman saw--?

GF: Well, I said one of the attorneys, he was there in court, he didn't testify.

But his son is a nice person. [Laughter]

EC: So, one of the Klan attorneys was there?

GF: Well I don't know who it was, I don't know if he was subpoenaed, and he was supposed to have testified, or was he putting forward--I never opened up that jar.

[Laughter] I knew his son. His son worked with us.

EC: Oh, okay.

GF: And he's a nice guy.

EC: Oh, that's interesting, yeah, yeah.

GF: Yeah, he can walk through the courtroom, so I was wondering, what was his involvement? You know what I mean? So, yeah.

EC: What did it mean for the community to finally get a conviction of Sam Bowers?

GF: I think the community had waited on it. I was out of town when they arrested them. But I think it was a victory for the community to see justice finally.

EC: Yeah.

GF: Because Sam Bowers walked around like--he was a free man. And my understanding, we have an office over in Jones County. He was a good friend with one of the legal services attorneys there, Mr. Ford. And he would come in and out, in and out all the time. And then Mr. Ford was there at the table representing him, along with the

attorney who, Billy Joe [Roy] Pitts, older attorney, I think I can remember his name, I think it was [Travis] Buckley, or something like that.

EC: That sounds familiar. Yeah, did he--did her represents Killins too?

GF: I don't know about Killins, because this is up around Philadelphia.

EC: The name sounds familiar.

GF: He could have. He was there. He was--Mr. Ford and Mr. Buckley, I think that's his name. I have to check now, but he was an older attorney. And then there was another attorney who wanted a piece of the action, Mr. [Lawrence] Arrington, but I don't know, did he actually do any representation?

EC: Yeah, okay. What got you interested in the local--I mean, studying the Civil Rights Movement, or working on the history of the Civil Rights Movement?

GF: I tell you, I started writing my first paper at ten of Dr. King, so maybe it was that shredding and tearing up my paper--.

EC: [Laughter] You're not going to let them shred yours.

GF: But then I worked four years in the history department of Texas Southern University. That was my work-study job. So, I worked--Texas Southern University is an African American HBCU. And I worked with these historians for four years, and they were always telling a story. So, I always loved history, and so it's just a point of my life, I just love history, yeah.

EC: Yeah. So, what are some of the projects, or things that you're working on around the history?

GF: Well, I've done quite a bit. And like I told you, the historical marker. One of the first in the state, civil rights site, because I was surprised when the Freedom

Riders had theirs, that Medgar Evers's home did not get one until they had their reunion in 2002. But in 1999, we did the civil rights marker. But even before then in [19]94, when they came back to [1:05:00] organize the reunion, and donated pictures and stuff like that to Dick Kelly. But then we also hosted a reception. They did another reunion in conjunction with USM, those pictures, that the photographer gave USM--.

EC: Herbert Randall?

GF: --Herbert Randall. So, I had just gotten back from Jamaica, next day, we did a reception for all of them at Mount Zion Church. But I've done lots of projects. We did a Freedom School, for high school and junior high school kids, on the fortieth anniversary of Freedom Summer. I was actually recovering from knee surgery, and Sally Brooks, this lady had written about the civil rights movement. I said, what a good idea. Let's do that for the fortieth. So, I called some friends, and we got together. And so, we actually for eight weeks talked to them about the civil rights movement, and we took them to Memphis, to the civil rights site. And then we took them to Birmingham, Selma, Montgomery, Atlanta. They had a graduation, and then we did part of this project, we did a marker for Vernon Dahmer that sits in front of his home.

EC: Is that the--okay, we saw that.

GF: Congressman Bennie Thompson came, in February. We went, and he was the keynote speaker at Shady Grove Church, where Mr. Dahmer is buried.

EC: Yeah. That must have been a great experience for those students.

GF: It was, and I had to tell the teachers, this is their--they were going to be the one who served on the program, not the adults. This is their program. And so, they did everything from--on the program. So, we did two classes. We did another one in 2006.

These kids went up to Little Rock when we went first in the Bill Clinton Library, Presidential Library. And then we came back to Memphis, and then they did the same. But the first class had the opportunity to have a private book signing by the author of the book, one of their book[s], met us in Atlanta at the Black Holocaust Museum, and she did a personal book signing for them.

EC: Oh cool. Which book was that?

GF: Let me see. *We Shall Not Be Moved*. And it has--the author's from Atlanta. She wrote several very nice books, and she has little documents inserted in there, so they can put--.

EC: Oh yeah, I think I--.

GF: I can't remember her name right offhand, but--.

EC: Is this like a young adult book?

GF: Yeah, mm-hmm.

EC: I don't think I've seen that one.

GF: And then--.

EC: There's, I think another one with a similar name, *We Shall Not Be Moved* that's about--centered around a photograph of the Jackson sit-in.

GF: Okay.

EC: So, you when you first said it, that was what I was thinking of.

GF: But she met us when we left Birmingham. We went on to Atlanta, came back through Selma, Montgomery and Selma.

EC: How old were the children doing this?

GF: They were from seventh grade through twelfth grade.

EC: Yeah.

GF: Yup. They had a grad--.

EC: Are you going to continue that tradition?

GF: I enjoyed doing that. If I can do it in conjunction to the museum--. I did, and there were adults that traveled with us, and the first class, when we got to Selma, they got on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and they started singing, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." Now, there were no cameras there. And so, I went over for the anniversary of Blood Sunday this past year.

EC: How was it?

GF: It was nice. It was nice. I had just gone through a Black Heritage parade. I was kind of exhausted, but my sister insisted on us--I had gone twice with a student, President Obama spoke. But, I think seeing those students march across that bridge singing "Ain't Gonna Let--" on that Sunday, where there were no cameras, meant more to me than hearing President Obama speak.

EC: Yeah, yeah. It was so crowded.

GF: It was. And then at Sunday, they--.

EC: You couldn't go across.

GF: Well we did. We made it across. I think they thought they were going to wait on them to get through with the program, but the people said no, we're going on, got to go on with your program.

EC: Yeah, that's what they were doing at first, and it just was like, wall-to-wall--.

GF: It was.

EC: Yeah. It was a great, big, big crowd.

GF: It was, a big crowd.

EC: So, what are your hopes for the museum? What would you like to see?

GF: I shared with him. I certainly don't want to sugarcoat, and I don't think he's brave enough to call names like White Citizens' Council. There was an attorney here who headed up that, White Citizens' Council. And even attorney M. M. Roberts, [1:10:00] who they named the stadium, stood in the door, he was the county attorney for Forrest County during the time that the lawsuit in April 1950 was filed. He was the county attorney when John Doar came here with *U.S. v. Theron Lynd*, when they brought contempt action against him for stopping so many African Americans from voting. And so, you got to tell the true story. And I think he should step aside and let somebody who don't mind taking the hit tell the true story, because people want to know the truth.

And if you're going to sugarcoat, because see, there was another attorney here also, he has two sons that practiced law, Zachary, Francis Zachary also stood with M. M. Roberts. And, with the *U.S. v. Theron Lynd* case. But, there was lots of people who stood up, the employees, men at Hercules, they were a group that stood up. The teachers were a group that stood up. And so, for him to just ignore the African American community who was part of that, I had to bankroll Freedom Summer last year because there was a concerted effort to take the celebration from the churches that had opened their doors, there were about six churches, where they had Freedom School, and nothing was planned. Even my classmate, who's the mayor——had to get on him. We finished high school together. Everything was moved to the library down to a USM campus.

And my contention is when you take--you're taking the heart and soul out of the community when you do that, and you're telling a lie. These churches were the one that risked being firebombed. And they need to--so we--I made sure each month, we went to one of those churches, and had some type of program. And then when we celebrated Dorie Ladner, honored her, I presented plaques to each one of those churches, on the fiftieth anniversary. And including Mr. Magee's church.

So, that's the problem with saying like, if it happened, it happened in my pocketbook. [Laughter]. Just like Freedom--we just got through with the fiftieth anniversary. So, we had to do something. First, we released twenty-six balloons in honor of those twenty-six young kids. And then we had a reception where we had the older kids, and I know we're not going to go back every year. Okay, this group came in this year, so we're going to celebrate, so let's just celebrate with the first group. So, we did that quite recently. Sunday was a week ago, so this Sunday will be two weeks. November 22.

EC: Did the kids get really interested?

GF: There was not many children that should have been there, more adults that were there. And then we brought back some of the people more locally. There were a few that came from out of town to commemorate that period of time.

EC: Yeah, yeah. What are some of the things you hope people take away from the programs on the Civil Rights Movement?

GF: Well, I think the civil rights movement is history that we have to incorporate. There was supposed to have been an effort to teach civil rights history in the public schools, but I don't know how well that has advanced.

EC: I was going to ask your opinions.

GF: And, so I hope--and we were just blessed, because back then, people did not have cameras. But the lead photographer for the *Hattiesburg American* newspaper gave his negatives to Mississippi Department Archives in History. And he captured most of the marches--.

EC: Wow.

GF: --that were front-page news, so you can go up in the Mississippi Department Archives in History, in the digital collection, and his name was Moncrief, and--.

EC: Are they online?

GF: They're online, they're online, "Moncrief Collection," and you can see even the firebombing of Vernon Dahmer's home the next morning. And I took fifty of his photos and put them on exhibit at the old public library--I blew them up and put them on exhibit. Like I said, I love art, like I love music. So, for a whole week, we had that on display. But, that way we see history, even the Freedom Day March. Some people-- somebody tried to say John Lewis was not there, but in the photo, John Lewis, standing across from the courthouse, watching Fannie Lou Hamer and the others.

EC: He was there?

GF: He was there.

EC: I didn't realize John Lewis was there.

GF: He was there. You can see him in some of those photos.

EC: I'll look, I'll look, yeah. I mean, there's one of those photos that I just absolutely love. It's a group shot on the steps. You can tell it's raining, and I don't



know, [1:15:00] I just, I have it on my computer, but it's just one of those shots from the Freedom Day, and I think it's the group. And then--.

GF: Yeah. And then the police officers in their rain gear.

EC: The one I'm looking at, I can't remember. I don't remember if the police are in that one or not. But, you can definitely tell it's raining, but people are just so determined.

GF: He has about twenty or twenty-five of those pictures. Even one lady showed up with her big Bible, Dis Nelsing, she was basically against the Freedom Day March, and had on a robe, and her big bible preaching from the step, against the marchers.

EC: I'm sorry?

GF: She was there in opposition of the Freedom Day March.

EC: Was she was a white woman, or--.

GF: She's a black lady from Palmers Crossing.

EC: What was her rationale, did you know?

GF: I don't know, she had the Bible, I guess something from the scripture.

EC: She thought that was--[Laughter]

GF: She had a big Bible. She was there to denounce.

EC: Yeah, yeah. So, with all of these fifty-year anniversaries, how would you assess what the movement's accomplished, and what still remains?

GF: Oh, there's still work that remains, you don't have the Thurgood Marshall or William Brennan on the court like you had before. But you--.

EC: [Laughter] You can say that again.

GF: But you--I have attended quite a few of them, from the Freedom Riders, they had theirs up in Jackson. And then the next year, March on Washington. Then Freedom Summer, and then--so, I think the message has to get out to the younger generation, because I don't think they're connecting the dots about voter--voting, and fifty years is not a long time for people, the voting apathy that we have now. [Laughter] So, I think we need to connect the dots. We need to teach history more so people can see, just like the Holocaust. I love--I went back to Washington. I didn't complete the touring the first time I went. You can't do it in a few hours; you really need two or three days to read everything. And that's what I hope the story be told.

EC: Yeah.

GF: They say "never again," and I said, we have to keep telling.

EC: How do you think that the current Black Lives Matter movement and some of the protests on campuses, do you think that would make people more interested?

GF: I think so. I always say "All Lives Matter." We did a "Peace and Unity Healing March" on Martin Luther King's Birthday, the first one--I coordinated that, and I couldn't bring myself to just say "Black Lives," because "All Lives Matter." We just lost two police officers that was gunned down here, not too far from here, last--a couple of months back, and so, every life is precious. So, you just can't put black, red, yellow, white. It was all lives, so we have to cherish all lives. And I know that's a movement, "Black Lives Matter," and black lives do matter. Certainly, we do need to look at the disproportionate number of African Americans who are being killed by police officers, and et cetera. But we also have to keep the message that all lives matter.

EC: Common humanity, yeah. Are there things that you think are important that I haven't asked you about?

GF: I think you asked me basically--we talked about, I went to different, two schools, and the only thing I can think of at the school with the poor--more poor whites that I had one teacher who was teaching Mississippi history. And the only place that blacks were mentioned was under slavery, but she couldn't--had a problem pronouncing "negro."

EC: [Laughter]

GF: She said "nigra." And then I said, did I hear her correctly? And I raised my hand. But, I had told her that's not the way. And she said--.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: I told her, you can't--.

EC: You were spunky. [Laughter]

GF: Right. I said, "The word is not 'nigra,' it's 'negro.'" And if you can't say that, please say 'black.'" And she got real nervous; she said this friend who had gone to Thames with me, we both had tran--told her how to pronounce the words, no she didn't.

EC: [Laughter]

GF: And so, after class, this young lady said, well--.

EC: She's trying to tell you that another student--.

GF: Told her, right. And I knew that student, because she was the one who I had homeroom with at Thames, and no she didn't. [1:20:00]

EC: [Laughter]

GF: And so, after class, there were about six blacks in that class, one of my friends walked up to me and said, "Oh, I thought she was going to send you to the office." And I said, "Well, I wish she would have," because I had so much confidence in the principal being fair that he would have reprimanded her, not me.

EC: Well that's good.

GF: Yeah, he was fair; I felt like he would have--.

EC: That must have been a good feeling.

GF: Yeah, yeah, compared to the principal where I had left.

EC: Right, yeah.

GF: Right. But I guess it was hard for him, too. You got all these doctors' and lawyers' kids going to this rich, white--

EC: So, going to the wealthy school--.

GF: Right.

EC: --turned out to not be the--.

GF: Right. Yeah, how are you going to go in and say--I guess he was afraid for his job, so I guess you have to look at things from that perspective. But then--I still think, Mr. Rogers--if the poor white kids had the blueprint that they should have been--

[Laughter]

EC: Too bad, right?

GF: Right, right, yeah.

EC: It's interesting that your first example--your first perspective wasn't-- trying to think if I had any other questions. Can you think of anything else?

GF: No, I'm just trying to keep busy doing the--I guess, showcasing the history of the civil rights movement. People tend to forget, and sometimes you have to research, because it can sometimes be off. But, it's out there. It's just a matter of digging, and lots of people didn't know about these fifteen African American men. And I think they went to their grave thinking they were a failure, because out of the fifteen, only one was registered to vote. He was registered in 1954. He went in with this young man who went to my church, and for some reason, they did not do anything--he registered, the pharmacist. But he told the man, Milton Barnes, to get out of his office, because Milton had signed a petition with his full name. And Hammond Smith had signed his, "H. E. Smith."

EC: That's a little more obscure.

GF: Right, so, quite a few of them just used their first initials, and there were a few that used their full name. But some of those same petitioners, plaintiffs, testified years later in the *U.S. v. Theron Lynd*, including Hammond Smith.

EC: That's interesting. I'm sure that was probably an important part of the case to show how long-standing the--and to have evidence of people really trying to register to vote--.

GF: Right.

EC: --instead of that argument of apathy, I think. Yeah.

GF: Mm-hmm, yeah, it's interesting civil rights history here, yeah.

EC: Yeah, very interesting. Anything else?

GF: It wasn't--Hollis Watkins was one of the first SNCC workers that came here, from McComb. He didn't stay here that long, because he was surprised that

Hattiesburg, unlike the other--the professional people were at the forefront of the movement, so I think that story needs to be told. Lots of times you find doctors, lawyers, teachers kind of backing away from Civil Rights activity and that was not the case here.

EC: Yeah, that seems like there was a really strong professional community here. It actually seems like a very strong cross-section of people.

GF: It was.

EC: The professional group, and--.

GF: You're right, they worked together.

EC: --people with their small businesses, and farmers, and yeah. Yeah, I've heard Hollis talk about staying out on Mr. Dahmer's farm and working real hard.

[Laughter]

GF: Yeah, I'm sure he'll be here for the celebration, yeah, I'm sure.

EC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well thank you very much for participating in the interview project.

GF: Yeah, you're so welcome.

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

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