

Dr. James “Jimmy” Garrett

SUMMARY

Dr. James Garrett was born December 31st, 1942 in Dallas, Texas. He grew up in Texas and Louisiana until age 12 when his family moved to Los Angeles, California in 1956. While in high school he became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and has been involved in progressive movements all his life. He joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as staff, serving as director of the Los Angeles office for a year. He rode on one of the final Freedom Rider buses in 1961, participated in multiple civil rights actions in Los Angeles and throughout the South. Dr. Garrett holds dual Ph.Ds in Political Philosophy and Sociology of Education. He has taught at Howard University, Harvard University and American University. He also worked for the United Nations on various projects. He is currently working with the Land Trust Movement the San Francisco Bay Area as well as continuing international work with the Sam Nujoma Foundation to build a world-class medical facility in Namibia.

This is part of two Zoom interviews with Dr. Garrett conducted by students.

LOCATION

Recorded via Zoom teleconferencing system. Dr. Garrett was at his home in Oakland, CA. The interview Team was in their separate homes throughout the San Francisco Bay Area during the “shelter in place” order due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTERVIEW TEAM

Lead: **Diego DeLa’O**, Stuart Hall High School, Class of 2020

Support: **Jade Despanie**, Convent High School, Class of 2020

Instructor: **Howard Levin**, Director of Educational Innovation

TRANSCRIPT PROCESSING

Transcript and video content represent the interview in its entirety with minor edits due to breaks and occasional language. Initial automatic transcription via Otter.ai. Diego DeLa’O completed the initial edit phase (5/20/2020). Howard Levin completed the secondary edit phase (5/30/2020). Please report additional suggested edits to: howard.levin@sacredsfs.org

Recorded over two sessions:

April 27, 2020

Diego DeLa'O

Dr. Garret, as you may already know, we're here to record our conversation about your experiences with the intention of publishing your story as part of our school's Oral History Production class. We are recording this video, and we intend to publish this to our school website and other nonprofit educational websites including a written transcript with it. This means that your stories and experiences and ideas will be available once published to anyone via the internet connection. If you agree with this, could you please say your name the day and if you agree allowing us to publish your story.

James

My name is Garret, James Garrett. The date is the 27th, April 27, or is it the 28th?

Diego

Yeah, it's 27th.

James

27th, 2020. And I do agree, it's no problem.

Diego

Just a quick, early, early childhood from when you were born, all the way up to high school, Teenage to young adult years, a quick introduction of that time period.

James

I was born Jimmy Paul Garret, Dallas, Texas, December 31st, 1942. I was born in a Freedmen's Clinic. I lived under Apartheid in the south, mainly in Texas and Louisiana up to the time I was 12. I was with my mother, my parents and my two older brothers. All of the family, except my older brother, who was in the military, moved to Los Angeles, California in 1956. I went to Jefferson High School and graduated from Jefferson High School. During that time, I became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and in left or progressive movements. In groups, I was involved in a lot of demonstrations. In 1964-65, I joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as staff. I was the director of the Los Angeles office for a period of about a year. From there I moved up to San Francisco where I became active in the student movement there. That's up to about '66, '67.

Howard Levin

And then just in about a minute, take us from '67 to today.

James

In '67 I was involved in developing the Black Student Union. I wrote the documents called The Justification of Black Studies which became the framework for the ethnic studies – the inclusion of ethnic studies in the college curriculum. From there to avoid going to prison I was on my way to Harvard, stopped off in Washington DC to meet with some of the people, my comrades from SNCC and I ended up spending 13 years there. That was my base and I lived all over the world. I was involved in international support movements and radical movements. I taught at Howard University. I've taught at Harvard University. I've taught at American University. I have a Ph.D. in Political Philosophy. I have a second Ph.D. in Sociology of Education. I have spent the last 20 something odd years as either administrator or teacher, but I've also served as an attorney doing international work. I spent many, many years in Vietnam from 1992 until really the present. I worked for the United Nations as a consultant, as a repertoire for their various projects that the United Nations were involved in. And at present, I'm based doing two blocks of work. My domestic work is with the Land Trust Movement here in the Bay Area and with cooperative housing. And my international work is in Namibia, Southwest Africa, where I'm working with the Sam Nujoma Foundation to build a world-class medical facility in Namibia.

Diego

What is the earliest memory you have of growing up in Dallas, Texas? This could be with your family, yourself, or an early memory, just in general.

James

I think that a pivotal memory – my family lived in what was called a shotgun house – shack. Outside toilet, no inside plumbing. We used wood coal, meaning wood that was chopped small, and then the outside was burned. And sometimes fluids were put on the coal. And a stark memory when I was maybe seven or eight years old, was our house burned down because some of the sparkles from the coal fire escaped, and the house caught on fire. Our house was about five or six minutes across the tracks from the nearest fire station, but the fire station didn't come to the black community. So it was people from that community who brought their buckets and their cans trying to put out the fire. I remember that because I remember being hugged by more people than I'd ever been hugged by outside of my family and I felt very comfortable in that circumstance of great tragedy. The roof of the house burned and one or two rooms burned. About nine people lived in that house. And we were scattered from that time. That is a stark memory for me.

Diego

And those nine people that lived in that house, was that family or was that family and friends?

James

Extended family. My grandmother, a couple of my aunts, my father, another being my

brothers, one of my cousins. There were three generations in the house, and sometimes four and five generations who stayed in the house at various times. So the family was extended, I didn't know of a nuclear family until later when I moved to California, I didn't know such a thing. I always had a lot of mothers, a lot of people looking after me, a lot of aunts. I was made to feel safe.

Diego

Family is a really big theme in your childhood, but did you have any close friends or friends that you almost thought of as family, from school or from community centers or anything like that?

James

I attended H.S. Thompson Elementary School, which was the half-day school for blacks. It was the only school in South Dallas where we lived. School was structured – as schools maybe structured when this present plague begins to die out. Normally we would go from seven o'clock to 11:30 and then the second group would come in from 1:30 to 4:30. We had to split time. I did have very, very close friends and males – boys – during the early times. As I reached the seventh and eighth grade, I didn't discover females, they discovered me, they stayed as far away from me as they could. Yes, I had very close friends. I did sports. I did track. I did lots of sports. I played baseball because the city opened up Little League to blacks when I was in seventh grade, I believe. I met a great football player by the name of Doak Walker who was a quarterback and in the pros and he was one of those whites who supported sports for everyone. But I had good friends and I hated to leave them when my family left. Very, very close friends.

Diego

Did you and your friends as a group have the same intention? I know you mentioned before that you didn't really have an idea of what you were going to do in life at this point. But did you guys ever talk about the future and what would it held for you guys?

James

I think that I was curious. I was one of those young people who was curious about everything. I was curious about the sun in the sky and how people related to each other. The women in my family were kind of rotated being present. And I wondered why they worked as housemaids in white people's homes. For example, my mother was home on Thursdays and Sundays. And I used to wonder about that. But she always brought books because the Jewish family that she worked for collected encyclopedias and dictionaries. And when they expired, they would give them to my mother who brought them home and they taught me many things during that time. But those were the kinds of dynamics that were going on. I don't think that we were

generally encouraged to think about a future beyond, number one, surviving where we were, and number two, trying to escape from where we were. But there was no ambition in life that I understood during the time I lived in Dallas, Texas. There was no encouragement. My uncles, I admired and feared them. My father who was very quiet, I didn't know much about him because he didn't talk very much. But I learned a lot from my mother and from the women around me. And I learned how to move in the streets and move with whatever kind of youth rituals that we go through as pre-adolescents, all the games, the little fights or arguments, and this and that. I did all that.

Diego

And when you talk about surviving and being able to escape, what kind of things came with that? You talked about the fighting and stuff like that. Could you give us more in-depth on what you mean by surviving where you grew up?

James

What I mean by surviving in the boys world at that time, you had to assert your physical presence. I was very small. But I grew up with heart, I had heart. So I could handle myself in that regard. But the main thing I'm talking about, survival, in the late fall, winter, and early spring, my family was based in Dallas, in the city. And basically, black males did construction work or they did hustling, and a lot of times they were arrested and went to jail, The thing was to survive that, because they weren't other options for what a black male could do. You could go to the military, you did construction work or odd jobs, or you survived by your wits. So that's what I mean, I think my family instilled that in me, first survive, that is you have to be strong enough and be cunning or careful enough to survive that circumstance because there's a ceiling, a very low ceiling beyond below, above which you cannot go. That was a tight ceiling. It wasn't talked about a lot. But it was real. It was tactile.

Diego

Do you think that idea of education and pursuing education, taught by or not taught by your your family, gave you the idea that education is the way out? Is that where you get your inspiration from?

James

Yeah. But that's later. Growing up, I lived in a community that nurtured and succored me. I was considered to be the child of a country-woman, that is my grandmother was the person that people came around to do potions and this and that. My grandmother who was part Native American, part black, was very much into that level of spirituality. And she had designated me as a child as a gift. And so the community looked after me, and I didn't know that at the time but they kept me safe. I knew outside that ring, outside that circle was the white world. And that was a world that people in my family avoided or they took blows so that they could shield me from that world. Yes,

education, reading – I did a lot of reading, I was very curious. As I said, I tore up a lot of clocks and a lot of radios. I took things apart and put them back together, and I was encouraged to do that by everybody. Not only in my extended family but everybody in the community. “There's Jimmy, let's have him do this or that.” So they helped me. I was nurtured. I'm very, very fortunate.

But in terms of formal education, the smartest of my siblings was my older brother, who had a photographic memory, who was incredible in fragmented thinking in math, etc. But he was dark-skinned. He was my mother's first child, and she wasn't married to the father. And so he was excluded in some ways within my family. But he was clearly the brilliant one. Aside from my mother, this is a guy who... My mother helped me read books, learn how to read encyclopedias and dictionaries. My oldest brother could read a 10 volume Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary in a week and come back and tell you about each thing that he had read. But he was dark-skinned, he was black, and he was poor. I looked up to him for a long time. I would emulate him in certain kinds of ways. But he wasn't educated, he dropped out of school at a very early age. It wasn't schooling, that's not what it was about. It was about, he knew how to live by his wits. He was a boxer, and he was a scholar, an intellectual. So I imitated that perhaps, specifically more than anything.

Diego

Is that what helped pursue the idea of “conquering the white world” and, breaking out of the stereotype of not being able to conquer the rest of the world? Can you talk more about conquering the world?

James

It's been conquered. [laughter] It would have to be bifurcated. It would have to be broken into two parts, one part as one part of my life under Apartheid. The other part of my life was discovering there was a white world. And I didn't know that until that four or five day trip on the Southern Pacific Railway to Los Angeles where I discovered there were actually... I mean, I had never seen so many white people around. In my elementary school, all teachers were, of course, black. The only people who weren't black were the Latinos who happened to land in my neighborhood, and they were called black because there was only black and white schools. So if you were Latino, if you were Mexican, then you'd be black or white based on where you lived. When I get to LA, that's mostly white folks. And then I went to junior high and high school, and it was in high school... I wanted to belong, I felt alienated. That's why I joined the gangs, the street gangs, The Rollin 20s and then the Businessmen, those gangs, their thing was turf, space. They occupied space on the high school campus or junior high school campus, they occupied space and I began to understand space. I also came in contact with whites in a way that I had not ever – I mean, there was no contemplation of it, and

it took me a while to adjust to that. In the midst of adjusting to that, it was the street gangs and my mother, that combination because the street gangs in those days encouraged you. If they said, "Jimmy can read, he needs to go to class." The Buchanan brother family that ran the street gang, declared that I should go to class. I wasn't afraid of anybody else, but that family I was afraid of. Between them and my mother, that's why I went to class. I enjoyed going to class. I was taken out of the dumb group and put into the high group because my cousin was in the high group and it was who you know, and he knew Mrs. Campbell, who was a black teacher, who discovered who was smart, who wasn't at Jefferson High School.

So all these things benefited me. People were taking care of me. I didn't have an idea about conquering the world, but I was always into a mode of discovery. I became very active in sports. I played football until I got hurt. I ran track. I was in gymnastics. I did all those things. I did some things in music, I wasn't a good musician, but I did some stuff with music. I did all kinds of stuff, just exploring. But I didn't have any goals. Goals didn't happen for me until by accident I got involved in a fight with a teacher and ended up being exiled in the fall of '59, to spring of '60 to this bookstore. I was sent to the bookstore rather than being sent to Juvenile Hall because I made good – and teachers protected me, other teachers at the school. And I discovered my love of reading at this bookstore on Central Avenue in South LA, and I began to be woke.

Diego

At this point your life kind of hit a switch where you realized there was something bigger out there while you experienced this bookstore. Could you tell us a little bit more, continue that story about the bookstore?

James

This guy Frank Widley, he was a black man. I had known people in the south who own businesses. I had not met very many people in Los Angeles who were entrepreneurs. This guy owned a bookstore, and I was sent to his bookstore by the settlement house that I was sent to rather than going to Juvenile Hall, which we call "Europe," because in Europe, you build your body, the whole idea was, you go to Juvenile Hall, you go and do bodybuilding. This guy, Frank Widley, a very, very grumpy curmudgeon guy, introduced me to W.E.B. Du Bois. He introduced me to The Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James. He introduced me to things that I hadn't. I learned about Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. I began to learn. I would sit on the floor and read and when people would come in, I would act as a clerk, terrible clerk, but I acted as a clerk, and he had patience with me, but he said I had to read. If I was going to be in his bookstore, I either had to work or I had to read. I preferred to read. So I read. In order to keep me out of the gangs, after school ended that spring my parents sent me to Texas to keep me out of jail. And that's where the praxis, the connection, hit. Because many of the young people that I knew from my H.S. Thompson Elementary School are now in high school, Lincoln High. There were two black schools, Lincoln High School was that high

school and Booker T. Washington High School. And then later on they had a third High School for blacks called James Madison. But they were in high school now. Many of them were involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Color People's Youth League. And I'm hanging with them. Besides the fact that the black students from Prarie View and Wiley College had come to Dallas to lead demonstrations, and the person who was put in charge of the Youth Council, the college student, was the most beautiful woman I had ever met or seen in my life. Me and all the guys were smitten with her. So that's what it was. It wasn't idealism. We were young, we were adolescent males, who she wouldn't look at for more than five seconds unless she was explaining something to us. We were all lapping around like lap dogs. And it wouldn't have mattered what she told us to do, we would have done it.

So I get involved in the sit-in movement. And my parents who had tried to keep me from going to jail, found out that I was arrested seven times that summer. But by the time I've been arrested seven times, Bertha Nolls, who I will never forget, the young woman who was maybe 19 years old, at the time she was a grown woman to me. But I was hooked because young people my age were engaging in activities, discussions, and actions that were far different from what the Businessmen and the Slausons and the Pueblos, the street gangs were doing. And so I found something else. See, it wasn't my genius. It was somebody else taking care of me, helping to create a context, and being patient with me while I learned to take, as James Baldwin says, "My first stumbling steps toward humanity." When that summer was over, I knew, I'm locked in. Like some people discover religion, they say they've been saved or whatever the case is, and they dedicate themselves to the Lord or this or that. I dedicated myself – because of that set of experiences – to The Movement, and I have not grown out of it since.

Diego

And that's when you truly knew what you wanted to do, that's when you built up the courage to go and pursue more of those movements. Was that the point?

James

I think the first thing you said was more correct, truly, I was an absolutist, unqualified, I knew all the answers. I went from knowing all the answers from dealing – we used to call it "fighting in the streets," I now knew another set of answers. Because I was a young person. Maybe you guys don't do it this way. We tried to get away with whatever we could get away with because we know all the answers, we already know most of the answers. So we think we're smarter than everybody else. And I did. I thought I was smarter than everybody else. But I was smarter than everybody else about the Movement now, so I now become a teacher. Yeah, I'm dedicated. I'm absolutely enthralled, but it was all emotion. I was a teenager. You guys are in a different world.

From my world, teenagers engaged in absolutist behavior, whether they are absolutely not going to do what their parents tell them to do, they absolutely love this girl so that they will die if she isn't with them, or absolutely must have this dress. I was an absolutist. I was wrong but I was an absolutist.

Howard

Diego let's see if you can pull some actual stories out of those early sit-ins and protests that he's talking about. All he's really said is that he was arrested maybe seven times during this time period. But let's see if we can get some details of these actual events back in the Dallas area, is that right?

Diego

This was the sit-in movement?

James

Yes, that's the sit-in, that's 1960. The sit-ins had started in February. Actually, they started in 1959 in Oklahoma, but they didn't catch on. When the people from Shaw University and from North Carolina A&T, young people, mainly people who were veterans, the males, we're all military veterans, and so they went to the sit-ins. But that spread west and finally hit Dallas. By the time I arrived in early June, there were people that already been involved in.

The sit-ins were this: the idea was to break down segregation in accommodations by intentionally insisting that one has a right as a citizen to sit at a lunch counter or to sit in a restaurant. And that went against the dominant culture of the deep south. And the population was profoundly hostile – the white population was profoundly hostile to it. In fact, a lot of black people were against it because first they were afraid that we will get hurt. And the second that whatever we did, the blowback on that community would manifest itself tenfold. What would happen is that Bertha or one of the other college students, would break us up into teams. We would either take cars or buses riding – still in the back of the bus even though the Montgomery Bus Boycott is already over and you have a right to sit on the bus wherever you want – we still sat in the back of the bus, continuing segregation on the buses on our way to break down segregation in accommodations. That's the dialectic.

Usually, we'd be in groups of seven to 10. I can't remember, sometimes more, sometimes less. Usually, there were somewhere between 15 and 25 of us, young people, led by these college students, and we would go in and some of us didn't have a quarter or 50 cents ourselves. But we already knew we weren't going to be able to buy anything. And we would go in and we would sit down. Sometimes we were expected and sometimes we weren't. And if we were lucky, the police would come in and arrest us, slam us up against the wall or knock us down. But their thing was perfunctory. A couple of times, at Liberty, we would go into S. S. Kresge, which is a

department store that barely exists anywhere in the world. Or Skillerns. These were department stores that had these kind of sock-hop joints where you could get ice cream cones and sundaes and hamburgers and terrible tasting hot dogs and coffee. Fast food joints before fast food joints. And so we would go in and sit down. But a couple of times young whites, high school students, football players, sometimes they'd come with their girlfriends, and they would come in, and they wouldn't just knock us down. But we had already been instructed in nonviolence, which was something that I had a hard time dealing with, but I did it, really to impress Bertha, and then my friends, and then neither Bertha nor my friends could see whether or not I could deal with it. We were then arrested, put in jail. A lot of times they never took a picture of us. Dallas did not want to have a reputation, the city fathers did not want Dallas to have a reputation as a place with a lot of turmoil. So a lot of times they didn't keep records, but they would keep us in jail or a police car would drive up to our parent's house or Sheriff's to our family's house and tell them, "We got your boy down here, a little skinny boy down there who says his name is Jimmy. Come get him." And they'd come get me and they'd be mad at me. Three or four days later I'd go back down. Sometimes we'd be arrested. Sometimes we'd get run out. And sometimes they'd just shut down the lunch counters. That's basically what took place.

Diego

During these arrests, was there ever a time where things got really serious and almost life-threatening or was it always just a quick arrest or a shutdown?

James

No, we were beaten too. That's what I was saying, a couple of times before the police arrived, young white males, many times they'd be with their white girlfriends, high school kids like us, would come in. And sometimes they'd be egged on by older whites. And they'd give us a good going over, you'd get knocked down, you'd get kicked, you'd get stopped, you'd have to protect yourself. Protect your face, and your spine, that's what they said. Protect your face and when you're lying on your back, protect your spine. Take the blows on your shoulders and your hands and don't fight back. Passive resistance. A couple of times during that summer, it was rough going. But what it did was it hardened me. I had been in fights before. I had won some and lost some. That wasn't going to stop me. I ran track against whites in LA. I played football. Engaged in gymnastics, I was in what they used to call tumbling, now they call it Free X or whatever. But I already competed against them. And my basic thing was, is that all you can do? Is that all you got?

Diego

So it basically fueled you in a way to just keep going, keep going.

James

Yeah, I was a madman. I was a teenager. Not a teenager of the modern era. I thought I could do whatever you know.

Howard

Dr. Garrett, will you just digress for a second and talk about who trained you in non-violence? Who are these folks? What organization? Say a little bit about that.

James

Okay. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was started in upstate New York in 1909. One of the leaders was W. E. B. Du Bois and Joel Spingarn, the Spingarm family, which was a wealthy Jewish family that underwrote its development. By 1960 it was clearly the leading and most popular membership, social organization. The leaders of that organization did not want demonstrations to take place. They thought that gradual incremental change was the way to go. But there were Youth Councils, each chapter of the NAACP – and they were membership organizations – had a Youth Council. And the Youth Councils sold cookies, they did Girl Scout/Boy Scout stuff. But when they began the sit-in movement, their position transferred. The NAACP was into cotillions and advancing black, Negro upward mobility this or that. But these youth wings, they had been approached by people from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC]. From then the very new organization called the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, by the Congress of Racial Equality, people were campus traveling, going around, trying to encourage young blacks on his Historically Black College campuses to get involved in this new movement. And some did. They were trained in non-violence, they were trained in organizing by agents and organizers from the Youth Council, from the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE] and from SNCC, and from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, they came down and trained them. They then came down and trained us. And they would spend two or three hours a day for two or three days taking us through it. They would test us out. They would see if we could take insults, spit in our face, and not respond in kind. And as I said, it was a very tough thing for me at that time. But I did it. But that's how, those people trained us. They did a very good job of preparing us for what we would face.

Diego

How often did you guys have this practice for?

James

When I arrived, which was early June of 1960, people were already involved in the demonstrations because school is out in early May in Texas because it's hot when you go out. The demonstrations had already started. But new people as they came in had to go through this ritual of training. And they would space it out so that you would have these training sessions for a couple of hours and then you might eat. And you'd sit

around and talk about why you were doing... what you were doing. And they would talk about strategy and tactics and why they are doing passive resistance and what the goals and objectives will be. So they would talk you through to try to give you that internal capacity to deal with the issue. And then the next day you'd go through it again. And on the third day they would do this OJT – the On-the-Job thing where they would put you in circumstances where you would be exposed to people pushing you or hitting you or spitting at you, who are your friends playing these role plays. After three days, you would decide whether or not you could handle it or not. And everybody didn't, everybody couldn't handle it. I did, I could, I thought I could. And I did. By the time the summer was over, I was training. The leadership development that was taking place, one may not know that they're being trained in how to train, but you are, you're learning, grudgingly sometimes, and then you find yourself in that role. So by the time that summer was over, I was a teacher, I was a good trainer, I was learning how to do things in a social way that did not begin with violence. So that's what I did.

Diego

And so did this carry over to when you were jailed in New Orleans? I think this is the next year during the civil rights, the freedom rights, in October and September of 1961?

James

Yes, in the spring of '61, doing what people would call "Spring Break." SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, actually, the Congress of Racial Equality started the sit-in movement, taking bus loads of people to test... What I mentioned was that we would get on the local buses and sit in the back of the bus in a segregated, Apartheid manner in Dallas while we were on our way downtown to demonstrate against Apartheid. The natural thing was, people wake up and say, "Why are we sitting in the back of the bus?" Right? So they decided to test interstate commerce, or use the Interstate Commerce Clause of the Constitution to test whether or not blacks had a right to sit wherever they wanted to sit on a bus that was going from one state to another. Now we're going from the local, the internal state of the State of Texas, all the way over to the next state, which was interstate commerce. And by that time I had already gone back to high school. I had become a proselytizer for The Movement. My cousin, we were like joined at the hip, Larry Johnson and me, I convinced him, I converted him. Then my girlfriend Laverne, we converted her. And then we wanted to stage a walkout, or I wanted to stage a walkout on the campus, I don't know why, but it turned out that our principal, Mr. Hammerman, Sam Hammerman – I keep laying out these ethnic groups, he was Jewish. The reason for that was because there was a social dynamic going on at that time, where people saw an interlocking set of interests and understanding that didn't have to be spoken about. Anyway, Sam Hammerman said, "If you are going to walk out, I'm gonna walk out with you." That's the principal of the high school and we're going to protest against this guy. And he says he's gonna

join the protest. Well, that's going to blow your whole piece right there. But he encouraged us, Hammerman. I was already involved with the Avalon Community Center, that was my settlement house, a place where people could congregate to discuss this new dynamic. So we discussed Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. My girlfriend knew Nancy Wilson, so we would discuss that. We would discuss sex. And then we discussed civil rights. I graduated from high school in June of 1961. But I had to have a job at the time because I had to take care of my family. I didn't go on the Freedom Ride until the last set of rides in early September of '61. But I was a committed activist and saw my goals, as I mentioned to you before, my central goal in life was to learn how to teach others, to teach others how to do this. So I wanted to learn as much as I could. That experience helped me a lot.

Diego

Going back to your involvement in CORE, in 1962 you did spend time in Africa with the American Friends Service Community. Did you also bring along these ideas of teaching others? Could you give us your experience in Africa with the whole Civil Rights Movement?

James

We're culture carriers. I became involved with a number of social activist or social groups. My next wave of true believing was I had become, by that time, a committed pacifist. I was reading all the pacifist thinkers, Reinhold Niebuhr and all these... I was a reader so I read everything I could get my hands on. I was beginning to follow Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi and all these others. And so in the area – Pasadena was where the main office, headquarters, of the American Friends Service Committee was located – and I became involved with that. So I was demonstrating with CORE around housing issues and employment issues in Los Angeles. And also, while at the same time becoming closer to the American Friends Service Committee. I was chosen to go as a part of a delegation of young people to spend six weeks or eight weeks in Africa in '62. Now it's called Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou. We went over there with the notion – like the Peace Corps did a couple of years later – that we were going to teach Africans all kinds of skills. First of all, the first thing I learned in 1962 is that, for the most part, Africans were Black. That was number one. And I didn't look much different from them except for the fact that they could speak by the time they were 12 or 13 they spoke their own patois, their own dialect. They also spoke French and they spoke English. That was one thing. The second thing, they would do more without tools, building bridges and building dikes, etc, than we could do with tools. We brought the tools, so we were technologically more advanced. We've been taught to help them build houses and latrines and this and that and the other. But we came to work together and I became very much... I wasn't a leader there. I was a learner who had gone over to lead but who spent a lot of time sitting in the mud, learning this and learning that and, and natural foods, the same kinds of training my grandmother had brought: natural foods, herbs, spices, vegetables, and all this other stuff. That was it.

That was all I had to eat. So I learned a lot from them, from the American Friends Service Committee.

After I think about four weeks or five weeks, a group of us went over, we traveled by bus, by boat by this and that, into Europe. And we traveled through Europe. Again, we're very young people now, like 19 or something, 18. And we ended up going up to Finland for the World Youth Festival. By 1962, I became involved with the International Students' Union, which was an organization that its leadership was dominated by the Communist Party of the USA and it was through them that – there were three of us who traveled to Togo and Dahomey and then broke away. And we wanted to see some of the world so we traveled and we ended up in the late fall – I believe it was November – October, November at the World Youth Festival that was held in Helsinki, Finland. So I'm traveling now – that's an opportunity a lot of young people don't have – I was traveling, and I don't know what trouble we just missed, or how close to death we might have come? Because you're intentional. You are doing what you are doing.

Diego

Was this the same time that you traveled throughout Asia?

James

No, this was early. This was the year after the Freedom Rides. It was a time when I was really reading and studying. I don't know how to explain it. In our day, as The Movement built on itself, one of the things you had to do was read. It was almost like a competition, if one was reading Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Marx, then you had to read it too because you didn't want to be out of the conversation. We also wanted to experience, so traveling through Europe during those times – the lucky thing, I guess, was that we had U.S. passports because this is all still the period of intense colonialism where Africans were considered to be colonized people and all three of us look like Africans. So we got through it and I don't mean any kind of hassles that we had until we got to the World Youth Festival. But no, that's '62. And that was really hairy, we learned a lot. I found out later that a woman who I became very close to, Angela Davis, had attended. But that was Angela Davis before she became "Angela Davis." I don't remember her, she keeps saying that she remembers me. We traveled through that and came back. And then that next spring, I became much more active, much more involved, and that was full-time. I was working for Tom Newsome, who was a black attorney. But most of my time was spent either learning how to organize, or organizing, or doing both.

Diego

Those were like your two main occupations?

James

Yeah. That's what I did. Tom Newsom [Thomas Newsom] through the people at the Avalon Community Center that hired me, he led me. I worked for two hours. Right. But then I'm out on the picket line. I'm out doing this and that. During that time we recruited Brando [Marlo Brando], Pernell Roberts, and a number of people into civil rights activities that we were engaged in in Los Angeles around housing and employment discrimination. I really didn't know Brando, but Pernell Roberts was in this television series that ran forever, Bonanza, one of the first color TV programs. But he was a good guy. And these guys became active too and I came to know them. During that period, I came to meet Martin Luther King, and he stayed with my mother during that period. I met Malcolm X, I think I mentioned that before. So I was being exposed to a lot of things. I met people from the United Auto Workers who taught me about union organizing and people in the Communist Party who taught me about party organizing. I was reading this and reading that and studying this and learning my craft. I was intentional at that point.

Diego

And this carried over to the fall in Mississippi the next year where you were, again with CORE and you were again arrested. Can you tell us about that experience?

James Garrett

In the fall of '63 I was arrested. I'd gone down to Mississippi for what they called The Freedom Vote. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had invited white college students to come down as a way to protect the local people from harm because, in America, the most valuable people are young white people. That's objective reality. So they were brought down. I went down with a delegation from CORE. I think there was one other black male, and the rest were whites, and I ended up being arrested and was put in Parchman Prison. After getting out of prison later that fall, then I went back. I met people from SNCC, so I was connected. I was on staff, I was being a paid staff person with CORE during that Freedom Vote period. And they kept my money until I got out of jail and they gave it to me so I had a burst of like 200 to \$250. That was huge money in those days. I got a place to stay. I had been on my own, really since I was 16 or 17. But I rolled right back into The Movement. So that's '63. But '63 includes the March on Washington. All of those things were just kind of giving incidents or just little points. But that whole spring of '64 I became really deeply involved in study, in reading, and meeting with people who were doing the same kinds of things. I was kind of an ad hoc student at UCLA by that time. I was studying filmmaking under Otto Preminger and thought I was hot stuff but I was really studying. Whatever tools I could get, I was after. That's basically it. And then the Summer Project, I decided to go as a volunteer in the Mississippi Summer Project, and when I got to Mississippi, that's when I was asked to go on staff with SNCC.

Diego

Was that the same year you were a co-founder, director for the Jones County Project?

James

No, we became project directors because we, Gwendolyn Simmons and me shared project director. The Mississippi Summer Project was a project that was specifically designed to break open up Mississippi by bringing 1000, mainly young whites, into Mississippi, again, because they were the most valued people. And if so it would bring everybody else. And we went into Mississippi just after we learned that Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and Jimmy Cheney were missing, the so-called “three civil rights workers” in Neshoba County, Mississippi. So we drove down and drove through Neshoba County on our way down to the Project and we got down to Jones County, Laurel, Mississippi. A few days after that, our project director, Lester McKinney, was put in jail, he spent a whole summer in jail. And then I became co-project director and went on staff for SNCC from that time on. So that's from, I guess, June of '64.

{Break - redirection back to the summer of 1961}

Diego

Could you give us another example or another detail during the summer?

James

Actually, I think your teacher is doing a very good job by the way, and he doesn't know me but if he did, he knows I don't flatter. It's not something I do but I think he's doing a very good job to get you to dig. 1961. The Freedom Rides, 1961, were an attempt to break down the Apartheid South by testing the right of American citizens to sit wherever they wanted to sit while traveling from one state to the other. They begin in the spring of '61 under the auspices of the Congress of Racial Equality. The first set of buses, Greyhound buses were the first group of buses that I recall, and they went through the deep south and the buses were burned. People were beaten. Some people never recovered from the brutality of the local people.

Howard

And we want to hear the story of your ride.

James

The reason I didn't go on the earlier rides was because I was busy with other demonstrations locally. I finally was asked by Robert Farrell, who became a city councilman in Los Angeles, to get to do this ride. He had just gotten out of jail. There were 22 of us on this bus. Most of the people had come from San Francisco, or the Bay Area, college students from San Francisco State and from UC Berkeley. We were

one of the last buses to go through before the rides were suspended by CORE and SNCC. My experience was this. I got on the bus in Los Angeles. We rode back through my neighborhood into Texas, into Houston, Texas, where some of my family lived. The notion was you ride down – I think there were 22 people, 7 of whom were black so that's 15 whites – we get off the bus and we hook arms two-by-two and we walk into these bus stations, and we go into the bus stations and the expectation is that you're going to be arrested. In Houston that's not what happened. What happened was that the local police and whoever the authorities were, decided to teach us a lesson. As soon as we walked in, we started being beat. And they were beating this young white girl so badly that I jumped on top of her and that made them even more angry. I was beaten up very badly. There were a couple of broken bones in my shoulder and the back of my head was beaten up. They took us to the city jail, we were finally dragged off to jail. And then a number of people from the black Houston black community came out and went downtown, something that had never happened in Houston, Texas, and surrounded the jail. And somebody led them in freedom songs. That's another thing that hooked me up to The Movement, that was people singing to me because I was in bad shape. But that young white girl was in worse shape. We got back on the bus and we rode into Baton Rouge, I think, Louisiana where we were given medical attention. And we decided, except for the people who were so injured that they couldn't go – the young white woman had been beaten in her crotch and her coccyx bone had been broken. She never did have children, she was crippled from that.

Howard

And the people that were doing the beating, were these cops?

James

Those were the police. We decided to go on in memory the people who were hurt. I think the group was now down to a half. We went into New Orleans, and we were immediately arrested. And then I spent the next 22 days in New Orleans Parish Jail, and 17 of those I was in solitary confinement. We weren't beaten, we weren't attacked, but I was left alone in this cell. And again, I created chess boards and chess pieces on the walls. I was in a six-by-six-by-six cell with a little hole in the side for excrement. Nasty food. But every day – I didn't know whether it was day or night – I was more and more committed. That's basically what happened. We were finally released from jail and then we went to the hospital. I went to the hospital and I spent 4-5 days in this all-black hospital in New Orleans – I don't remember how long I stayed – and then came back to, I guess, convalesce. So that's what happened with my trip to the south.

Howard

Before we leave, I imagine you have many more of these kinds of stories. As you are telling that story, what's it like to recollect that and say it out loud to us?

James

It's hard, its tears. You know what I mean?

Howard

I'm tearing, and I'm just listening.

James

You have to understand, we were young people. "We're going to come out of this, we're going to live forever." We were indestructible. We did things that we believed in, and some of us were permanently injured. Some people think you're crazy. If they said, "Why would you jump on that girl?" I remember when The Movement became more nationalistic. I stopped telling this story. I didn't tell it that often, but once in a while as I said it, people would get on me, "Why would you cover her?" It seemed like the thing to do, she was being [beaten]. The thing was that she was a "Nigger fucking, Nigger loving bitch." That's what I heard. I don't know whether or not she slept with black men or boys or whether she slept with anybody. I didn't care. What I saw was that she was being beaten. The rest of it, going to jail and this and that, I had already been to jail. I had already been hit with billy-sticks. I had already walked all this. But I thought it was – I did my duty at that moment and helped with what I could do. So what I would feel I remembered was that I could sleep. It was important for me to be able to say to myself, "I did the best I could to protect her or to stop the pain." That's it.

Diego

I guess we'll end it here. Thank you for that. It was really deep, I really felt that. I want to take the time out of this interview and thank you for giving us more time and information about your experiences. And I hope that we can get the rest of these stories next time.

James

Okay, no problem. You guys, be safe.

Diego

Yeah, of course.

James

There's a plague out there.

Diego

It's bad.

May 12, 2020

James Garrett

1961 is a long time ago for this group of people but we were around the same age, I would gather. I was 17 at the time and I wasn't really eligible to go on the Freedom Rides, I wasn't supposed to go, you weren't supposed to be able to go until you're 18. That's the legal age in California. In any case, it was requested of me that I go and I went and we traveled through the south as I mentioned last time we met. There were 22 of us on the bus, 17 whites, 5 blacks. Although 20 years later there were 200 people on that bus because a lot of people were claiming to have been on it. And my thing was good, that's a good thing. So people were hurt in Houston and so as I, I got a couple of broken ribs in Houston. And then I ended up in the downtown lockup in the city jail. A number of people were put in jail, and I mentioned the young woman who was sorely injured, her coccyx bone was broken from being stamped on by Houston city police. But there were others who were injured, and I wanted to just say this, that there were people, young whites, a group of young white males four or five were taken to the county jail, and the jails was segregated. Had they been put in with the black prisoners, they would have been safe, but they were placed with the white prisoners. And three of them were segregated into a small kind of dorm, and they were beaten, these three white guys who have been very badly. And one of them, one of the guys, I don't think he ever recovered. I think he was also raped in jail, but I'm not sure. It wasn't his physical piece, he was like 20-years-old, he was a student at I believe San Francisco State. He never recovered mentally from that beating, I met them all back in San Francisco, they all came from San Francisco, so I met them four or five years later, several of them, and I remained close to them then. And I remain close to those who are still alive now, I communicate with them now. So we're talking, what, 60 years, nearly 60 years.

So I came back. We went from Houston to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Baton Rouge was a very dangerous place, but nothing happened. I was being treated in Houston for my injuries and joined with the group after they had gotten to Baton Rouge. But the Baton Rouge police decided not to arrest the people from that group. Maybe another 12, maybe 15, 16 of us left, and we went to New Orleans, and then we went to jail in New Orleans. That's basically what happened. When we got off the bus in New Orleans, Louisiana and we went into the Greyhound bus station, if I recall, Continental Trailways and Greyhound were the two major bus lines and they both use the station. Greyhound was 10 times, 15 times the size of Continental Trailways. It was a place where everybody went to so we went there. I was there for 22 days and 17 of those were in solitary confinement.

I returned then by bus, first by car, back to Dallas where I was born. My people, my family came down to New Orleans to pick me up. And then I went back by train to Los Angeles. I came back to Los Angeles that September, just as school was starting but it was too late for me to attend UCLA. I was enrolled in both UCLA, but I could get into

community college a little bit later, almost at any time, it only costs \$6 to register at a community college in those days. So my total fees for East Los Angeles Community College was about for that first year maybe \$20, \$22 for the year to attend school. And I immediately came back and became active with the two groups, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the International Union of Students, which was just being formed. And that second group was a group that was formed by a number of groups that were more progressive than the Congress of Racial Equality was at that time. It basically was formed by a front group of left oriented groups with everything from the Communist Party to anarchists to people who ascribed to Trotsky and sort of a lot of groups. So I became involved with both groups because I didn't know, I mean, I wasn't a highly developed political person by any means. But after that time I was in prison, I mean in jail – it wasn't the beating in Houston that got me, it was the jail – and after I came back from jail, I was dedicated. I was finished, that was it. I had already been pretty dedicated after the sit-ins but after the Freedom Rides – the question was, what could I do to sustain myself and help my family while pursuing my life's work? And that's basically where we are in the beginning that fall through the end of the year, 1961.

Diego DeLa'O

Did the role of jail and the role of being detained and kept from what you were doing, did that play a big role in your activism and what you did in the future?

James

Yes, that's a good way of putting it. Yes, that played a major role. I think that when I read about people who are in jail for 40 years, I mean in solitary confinement for 40 years, people who were in the Black Panther Party and other organizations, I really understand what kind of strength it takes to sustain your sanity and keep your mind balanced. And I was a kid. I really was a kid. In a lot of ways I was like 12 or 13-years-old, I was a teenage male. Now, I'm sure you guys are much more mature at your age and I was at mine, but I was a teenage male. I was into Smokey Robinson and Miracles. I was into jazz. I was into fun. I was into girls, believe it or not. And so my life was a little bit different from where you guys might operate. It was a growth situation. So I'm down in jail. The one thing that I did have was mental chess. I started creating chess pieces and putting them on the wall. I was in a six-by-six-by-six cell with a hole in the wall and running water on one end of that cell and a hole for "evacuation," I'll say, on the other end. And that was my life. And they slid my food those 17 days through a slot at about two or three feet above my situation. So that was basically what I had. So I had to get myself together. I had to fix my mind, and I managed to do that, I'm not quite sure how I managed to do it, but I did manage to do it. And so it did lock in. And the thing that I thought about was, "Why am I in this? How did I get to this place? What am I going to do next?" while playing these chess boards on walls? So

that's what I did. I did the best I could under the circumstance. My mind was made up when I came back.

Diego

When you were thinking, "What am I going to do next?" and whatever you're talking about right there about what you wanted to do right after, did you think after that second time of being jailed, you were like, "Yeah, I don't want to do this again." What kind of feelings did you go through right after you got out that second time? Did you want to keep doing this? Did you want to keep endangering yourself because that's what it was, right?

James

Yeah, there is this battle that you waged with yourself about – and this battle I think goes on with anybody who does public activism – there's a risk factor. And to this day I live with that same risk factor. I think I was pretty settled for a young person that whatever the consequences, I'm in this. And the basic thing was that I knew that I could have been killed in Houston. I knew that they could have dragged me out of jail and in New Orleans. Any of those things could have happened, and those things went through my mind. And then I said, "Well, I'm in this." It was their actions that helped lock me into a lifetime of what I've been up to since. So when I got out of jail the question wasn't whether or not I was going to continue, but in what ways could I engage in this in this work? Because I didn't view it as a phase that I had to go through, you know, it wasn't like the last period of my adolescence. I was locked in. I wanted to be a writer, good writing and an honest man. But The Movement pulled me in and it took first place. My basic thing was whatever they could do to me, they were just going to have to do that, because I'm gonna do this.

Diego

Right after that, what was the first thing you got into right after that?

James

I think that I went back to the Avalon Community Center, which is where I first got involved in this stuff, which is located in South Los Angeles. And I began to work with young people. I began to try to build, to help develop – I guess you would now call them study groups. We called them current issues clubs on high school campuses around LA. And so I visited various schools. I had some station because I had some visibility coming out of the Freedom Rides. I had been put in the newspaper and this and that. I'd also, as I said, had been in the street gang and so the main question was whether or not I had space to operate on these campuses because I had been a member. Once you're in the club as they used to call it, that's life, you know you're in it for life. So the question was whether or not where were my loyalties and I passed the word around, "you're a Businessman for life, baby Businessman, and I was going to try to build these groups across territories, and they're just going to have to do what they

have to do. And basically, they gave me props. So I went from school to school, working through the Congress of Racial Equality mainly to try to recruit young people to become active. And that's basically that period to the end of the year is what I did.

Howard Levin

Just to clarify, especially for Elsa, Sam and Zion, when you refer to the Businessmen's group, you're referring to a street gang. I was pushing Diego to save this for later, but I think it makes sense to ask this now. Can you say more about this transition that you made from a street gang member to an activist? And why you? Why did you make that transition? What was unique about you that allowed you to make that shift? Because to a great degree, that's a big part of what the uniqueness of your story is.

James

The story might be unique, but I wasn't unique. I think what happened was that in those times the cultural dynamic at that time was that you join the gang. I can join the gangs because I felt alienated and isolated. I had just come from the deep south, from Texas, where everybody looks after everybody. There were no gangs where I grew up, there were people who had differences, and they fought one day and hugged the next. This was a territorial structure. And so joining the gangs in the first place was to build in a sense of belonging. And what I think what The Movement did was create an alternative place to belong. The Civil Rights Movement became a new place to belong, where my energies could be directed in a way that almost every day had a positive – had some kind of consequence. So this transition was nurtured by adults and by gang members. The Buchanans family were the shot callers. I know that again, you guys are high school students in a Catholic school so you might not know, shot callers were people who – this was a family of like 12 kids, nine boys, who were all tough and the parents had been coming out of the deep south so they were second generation. And they ran a park, South Park, they were the shot callers. And the shots they called for me was that I had to go to class because I seemed to be smart. That didn't mean I didn't participate in fights, because I did. It did mean that in those days, the encouragement was the way you got to [????] was not to stay out of school, the way you got your [????] was to do what the shot caller told you to do and what the shot caller said is “Jimmy you're going to class.” That was the end of that. So that meant that I would have to prove something to them and what I have to prove to them was that if they gave me these kinds of bars to hop over, I was going to do that.

Second thing is I was lucky because at my high school, there were teachers who really went out of their way to nurture me. They sent me to the Avalon Community Center, which was a settlement house, and in that settlement house, the director, old Jones, was the person who said, “We're going to raise this one.” And so they chose me and they had placed me in situations that helped to nurture me. Almost everything that I did

in those days in the transition from high school and going more into The Movement of the next couple of years, there was almost always someone who was catching me and pulling me back in so that I could do this. My parents did it, my mother and father did it and helped in that regard, encouraging me. The people who were involved with the – what was becoming kind of a black, a little core of people – Mervyn Dymally, who became the Lieutenant Governor of the State of California, he was an Assemblyman and a State Senator – this was a guy I met as he was running for the first time in office, and he was more or less progressive and he helped me. Tom Bradley, who was a police officer, one of the few black people who had status in the LA police force under Parker, under the chief of police Parker, he was connected to the Avalon Community Center and so he helped. People helped me out, nurtured me. The reality is that much of what I ended up doing was nurtured and in some ways sustained as much by people coming to build me and build these kinds of things around me so that I could move forward, and probably saved my life in situations where I put my life in danger, and maybe risk their lives. So that's what I mean by I wasn't unique, but the people around me were unique and they wanted me to do something. And out of loyalty to them and to this kind of curmudgeon arrogance, willfulness that I had, I was going to contribute to this Movement. I can do thi, this I can do. And so however I was allowed to do it or they helped me to do it, that's what I mean. I'm sorry to be so long winded about.

Diego

How long was that time period when you were in that community where they were building around you? How long was that for?

James

When I came back after the sit-ins, fall of '60 until the uprising in 1965. Five years. That whole transition from adolescence to early adulthood. The people that I would name, some of them were Hollywood stars. Some of them were people who were heads of the Communist Party. Some of them were gang members. Some of them were gangsters. Some of them were entertainers. Nancy Wilson. People who were around before they became what they became, or as they were becoming what they became, they helped nurture me to become what I became. That whole five years, there was never a time that I can think of that there wasn't someone helping me – that I could feed off of, that I could talk to, that I could bounce off of, who would cuss me out, call me out. And those things, believe it or not, although you don't like it at the moment, are very good things. You know, if you're a thinking person, somebody who says Look, "I'm going to take the time to tell you your stuff is, you know, you ain't all that." Fine. I can handle that. I might not have been able to handle it at that moment, but later, as I thought about it, I could handle it.

Diego

Was there ever a point during those 5 years of growing up that you were breaking down like mentally or physically. Did you ever think you couldn't handle it? And how did

you push from that?

James

I think that there were times, a lot of stuff went on during that period, if I just deal with from '61, and in '62 demonstrations begin to break out in Los Angeles around housing, employment discrimination, police abuse, there were many issues, and I I tried to be a part of all of them. And you have young energy, I had a lot of energy, maybe slept four or five hours. Maybe. But I always had this kind of energy. And then sometimes you'd just break down. Your body was a little tilt, you would disappear. I developed a strategy that I would get up early in the morning. Take care of whatever I need to take care of, my ablutions. If I had a chance I would write for an hour and then I would go out and do whatever I had to do, whether that was school or or work. I did labor. I worked ironing pants in a pants manufacturing company downtown LA. I did all kinds of stuff to try to keep going. But the issue of stamina, physical stamina, I didn't have a problem. Sometimes emotionally, I had breakdowns. I was not a drinker. I was not a smoker. I was not into drugs. It just never occurred to me. But I had girlfriends. I'll stop with that.

Diego

So these people that that kind of helped you grow, like I mentioned before, would you call them family? How would you be with them because you've given a lot of characteristics like family and close relationships? How would you describe those people?

James

I think that what happened is that over time, I began to redefine my concept of family. I grew up with an extended family in the deep south. Over the years during that period, there was another set of extended family relationships that developed that I would call family to this day. And when I began to study Marxism, I grasped this notion of the bourgeois family, which is a family built around production to build the system up. Survival at the family level, pushing wealth upward to what I over time began to see as first a radical and then a revolutionary family and that is a horizontal family that includes your nuclear family, but extends to people who, at least generally agree or accept or are prepared to join with you in struggle. That took years, that's not something that developed in a couple of days, it was no epiphany, that took years. That's almost a contradiction to this day. With personal relationships I'm much better at extending outward at the general level than I am at this more specific personal, romantic level. I'm not a person who can consolidate his life simply around a love affair with an individual or with a small group. My love affair is with the people. Now that's something that took years for me to even recognize, but I got to a point where I would tell anyone that I had a personal single seriodic relationship with that the Movement was my life and all else is secondary. That took a long time to get to. It's not the typical

push for the consolidated nuclear family. I had to get myself up out of that or from my position, it would have slowed me down on one hand, driven me crazy on the other.

Diego

From that point did you have a specific person that you weren't biologically related to who you saw them as family that came along with you throughout this process throughout your activist years?

James

Yeah. My mother. My mother opposed my going on Freedom Rides. And my father, who I didn't know very well, he was a very quiet man. Let me just be clear. He was never someone who's going to hurt you. But he was closer to my older brother Earl. I was closer to my mother. I'm the baby. So that fixes you in life in the deep south. You're locked in. I was her baby until she died. So I was never not going to be her baby. But she wanted me to be protected. I found out while preparing myself to go on the Freedom Rides that my father had been involved in left movements in the late 1930s in the Southern Negro Youth Congress. I didn't know it until that time, until I heard something very weird that my father said while I was arguing with my mother about going on this trip. He said, "Louise, let that boy go." That's probably the most positive thing that he had said to me, about me and to me, and that meant that he felt that I had the character and stamina to take this on. And it was only then that I began to learn of his history. In any case, from that time, my mother decided with her first slice of gray hair that came into her head from worry while I was gone, she became dedicated. And so that's the blood person who rode with me. Wherever I went, my mother was with me, backing me 100 percent. Nobody in my nuclear family, like my older brother, my two older brothers, or my father ever opposed my being involved in The Movement. But the most assertive, the most aggressive person to say, as my father had said, "Let that boy go, let him do," my mother took on that role and she ran with that. I mean up to the point where she was one of the people who was one of the founders of the Gray Panthers. My mother became more Movement than me in some ways because that's her baby. And she had to have some relationship. And then it became her own life.

Diego

You mentioned what characteristics some people have that obviously what role you took on wasn't something that everyone could do, not everyone had it in them. What would you say are some characteristics or some traits that people had to have in order to \ fill your footsteps and do what you did?

James

Amílcar Cabral, who was a great revolutionary, the head of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and The Cape Verde Islands, at one of the African liberation movements made this statement, "I'm a simple black man, doing my duty in my own

country, in the context of our time.” I think that growing into this as a life experience, as a continuous life experience, means the renewing of that fairly often. I don't see myself in any special way. I think that perhaps other people helped me to discover my duty. And once I understood that duty, I tried to live up to it as best I could. I really don't think that that is remarkable. I really believe that. Because I knew Stokely Carmichael, I knew Martin Luther King and I knew Malcolm X. I actually knew these people. And I think that they were basically simple dudes who discovered what their duty was, and they said, “Well, what the hell? I'm going to do this.” I can do this. It's almost like a set of tasks. I can do this. And then this has to be renewed by the people around you, by yourself if you're in isolation, and you say, “I can. I'm going to do this.” I knew King not long after he had been dragged kicking and screaming into The Movement in Montgomery. I knew him. I knew Stokely Carmichael when he was yelling at me trying to keep me into the nonviolence. And he became the guy who said “Black Power.” So I knew these guys when they weren't. You know, I knew Malcolm X when he was with The Nation of Islam, preaching very narrow sensibility about the humankind, just out of prison. I knew him. These were just – my thing is these were everyday people. Almost all the women in The Movement who I was more respectful to and more afraid of, almost all the women that I knew were probably much smarter than most of the men that I came in contact with. But the opportunities weren't there. But they were not great. They were placed in the circumstances that allowed for them to express themselves in the most positive way. So I will never copt to this notion that I'm some kind of special. No, I've had fun, you know, believe me, it's been sweet. The sweet meats have been sweeter to me than probably most people. So the bitter bullshit parts I can leave alone. So I'm okay with this. I'm okay with this life. If you understand it, and how deep and rich it is, being in service to humanity is a normal form of behavior. It is greed and backwardness and retrograde negativeness that to me takes work.

Diego

Going back to your relationships or the way we're talking about the relationships with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, how exactly did you meet these people?

James

The first time I met Malcolm X, I was a part of what was forming into the United Civil Rights Committee, which was a consolidation of various organizations, civic organizations, foundations, religious organizations, and civil rights organizations in Los Angeles. I was one youth who was appointed to this kind of steering committee. Malcolm X came to town to speak at one of the churches or one of the places he spoke at the mosque, this is 1962, spring of '62. And he came to speak and people asked me to sit in the front of the audience. So some people from the United Civil Rights Committees, these were ministers who were afraid of him, really. And I wanted to ask him a couple of questions because I thought his stuff was nonsense, I was deep into

nonviolence and this and that and the other. And I knew, I mean, at 19, I really knew, or 18, I really knew more. I knew a lot. I was brilliant, arrogant, and that was an opportunity that was very useful to me, because Malcolm X taught me that I was not all that. He invited me to come up on the stage where he was at the church because I raised my hand and raised a question. And he said, "That little young brother down there, come on up here on this on this platform and ask your question in front of all the people." And I tramped up there to try to straighten out Malcolm X. And he gave me a new behind right there. He didn't beat me so badly. He just let me know. Well, I shouldn't say that. He did not beat me up. I said that I thought that his hateful behavior was nonsense, that everybody loves everybody. So he took my question as an example and he beat me up with it. And then after the thing was over, he asked the guys from The Fruit of Islam to ask the people with me if he could take me to dinner. And we went to some black people's house and we had dinner. And we sat and talked and he began to talk to me about his life before the Nation of Islam. That's how I met him. And I had communication with him from that time on up until the time that he died, but I didn't have contact with him so much as Malcolm X. I had contact with him as whoever he would have been had he not been Malcolm X.

With regard to King – this also happened in '62 – Martin Luther King came to speak at Wrigley Field late that spring, Wrigley Field in Los Angeles, which is just down the street from the Avalon Community Center. And again, I was a part of the group. Do you see how people were nurturing me, people are taking me and putting me in these places that I wasn't quite ready for. So after he spoke, he and some of his entourage, Fred Shuttlesworth and a couple of others, they were going to go to a cafe, to a restaurant, a black restaurant to eat. However, I had somehow asked my mother if this guy is interested in coming to have dinner, could he have dinner? So he said 'I'd like to eat it at young brother's house.' And so he and five or six others came over to my house. People from the neighborhood – in my neighborhood there were blacks, and Latinos – and they put together a meal as people just did in those days, they just put together a meal. It was a combination of Mexican dinner, and southern fried chicken. And so for like six or seven hours, these guys sat around talking. That's how I met Martin Luther King. I didn't meet Martin Luther King, as we used to call him in SNCC, "De Lawd," I met him as a person at dinner, and my relationship with him continued.

And with Stokely, same thing, I knew Stokely from SNCC. I was in SNCC, he was in SNCC. We were comrades. He was a part of my family until the day he died. He's a part of my heart. I just knew him as I knew him.

I knew Rap Brown, I knew his brother. I knew these people as human beings, just like I knew Marlon Brando and I knew Pernell Roberts and others who were active in The Movement. I didn't know them as movie stars. Jim Garner, Sidney Poitier. I know all these people. Harry Belafonte, I knew these people from The Movement. That's what I'm saying, that those relationships were organic relationships. They were natural

relationships that came out of the opportunities that were provided for me, and that I didn't have enough sense not to deal with it. I was such a sponge. Anybody who came to me with anything, I would take it in. And it just so happens that later on these people became something else.

Diego

And you say it was like an organic relationship, they weren't like "celebrities."

James

Yeah. There you go. That's better. That's a better way to put it.

Diego

They had an impact on you but not like a crazy crazy impact on how they had people now.

James

I wasn't a fan. I was not a fan of any of those people. I was not a fan. I didn't know how to be a fan. My thing was I met a lot of people who ended up being prominent, because there was space being made for more people like them to become prominent. But I did not know. The first time I met Marlon Brando, we're on the picket line around housing discrimination, and we both got arrested together. We were both in the same little police wagon, and he had been in police wagons in New York, and he was describing the difference between the police... I didn't know who the hell he was. Didn't care really. My thing was we finished this demonstration and we're going to jail. They're going to sign us up. We'll be there overnight or a couple of days. That's my thought. And I'm thinking about my next body of work. When I got out of jail, there was a picture of me and Brando being put in this wagon together in the newspaper. That's how I discovered who Marlon Brando was.

James

It sounds insane but the picture's available. I can send it to you if you want it.

Diego

Looking back, though from today's standpoint, what kind of an impact did these people have on you as being kind of a young kid and still learning a lot? What kind of impact did that have on your work?

James

No question about it, they raised me, all of these people that I just named and the others earlier, those are the people – along with my parents, my family – those are the people that raised me. They kept saying, "Yes, you can do better than this." You could

be a better writer, James Baldwin said, "Jimmy, you could be a better writer. You just need to write." He was very critical of my writing. And that was in 1965. But that's why I'm very stripped down in my writing because he said, "First write it. Just put a little meat on the bones. And then come back and edit the meat off the bones." That's Jimmy Baldwin. I knew these people in a different way, that's all I'm saying. I'm not bragging. That helped. It wasn't like, "Well, I need to be a fan of James Baldwin," although I was, I read everything he wrote. But I read him as a writer, right. I studied playwriting. I've learned some stuff from Brando and from Sinatra and some of these people. It helped me with my writing. So I wrote a play. One of the plays I wrote has been done all over the world. Those are the people who shaped my craft, right. And those are people who helped me to figure it out. It's like people who deal with coming into rap, and they think that they have all of the rap, all of this in place. And they don't deal with some of the people who are another generation in rap, right? Or rhythm and blues or whatever. And they find themselves four or five years later, going back, all the way back to that in order to get their stuff together. That's what I happen to be in a situation where those people were present at the moment. So it wasn't stuff that I had to get together. It was just a positive thing that they were there at the time. That's all I'm trying to say. And so they nurtured me and helped me to grow. I'm forever grateful to them.

Diego

I think that was, Dr. Garrett, a lot of from '61 to like '63'ish.

James

Yes, late '62, '63.

Diego

Could we start moving from '63 to '64?

James

The last big thing in '63 was The March on Washington. And I was on the plane with all these movie stars. That's because Thomas Newsome, who was an attorney who was the counsel for the Hollywood NAACP. I worked in his office, and I got to do the listing out who was going to go. I was trying to help mobilize all these movie people to get on this plane. Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Sidney Poitier and all these people. Some of the people didn't show or they didn't show, like Marilyn Monroe was late, Elizabeth Taylor was late. So they had to get this plane off out of Hollywood, Pasadena. There was no LAX. There was no Los Angeles International Airport in those days. It was Hollywood, Pasadena airport, and there was a small Los Angeles airport, kind of a national airport. So we flew out of there, we're flying to Chicago and into Washington, DC. So I was given a seat on that plane. It was there – that was in August – I connected with people in SNCC at the March on Washington, and really got close to them. I went back to LA, active in this movement in LA. In the fall of '63 there was a

Freedom Vote and I went down for the Freedom Vote, went to Mississippi for the Freedom Vote that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was organizing. And then I ended up spending some months in jail. I was arrested and went to Parchman Prison. I came out of Parchman Prison around the end of the year, I guess. And then in '64 – I spent the entire year of '64 working in Watts, what's called Watts, in South LA, Watts, Compton, South LA. I went back to working in the Community, what I call Community work, organizing around everything from employment, opening up the unions, all kinds of things. I'm just learning how to organize various groupings of people around various issues. And I connected with the United Auto Workers, and with people at UCLA who were organizing through their labor resources group. I was with CORE. I was basically a member of the Communist Party, although if there's no card carrying member, they pull you into the discipline, and I was never disciplined and I was never going to be disciplined by the Communist Party or anybody else's. That's probably, if you ever want to whip my head, I'm undisciplined, I'm not good at discipline. I'm not good at somebody saying, "You can't move to the next step," because, you know, I don't have any ambition to rule anybody. So when I finish what I'm doing, I'm gone. So in '64 I'm involved with this down in Watts. In the spring of '64 I was asked to go on the staff, work as a paid staff, \$15 a week, with Congress of Racial Equality. I remained on staff with them until late May when I quit to go on the Mississippi Summer Project. And I went with two friends of mine on the bus, two white women in 1964, across the south, going to Ohio. Madness, total madness. Lionel Barrett and Candy or Cindy Bronowski. These are two of my closest friends. We rode across the south and we went to Ohio where they were holding the workshops for the people in the south. I was in the second wave of people who went into Mississippi. I went to Laurel, Mississippi, just after the three civil rights workers were killed, about two to three days after that, and we drove through Neshoba County where they were killed. They were still looking for them. I remained in The Movement. SNCC recruited me to be on staff and I worked organizing in Mississippi until the fall. Then I got hurt, I got beaten very badly. Went back to California in '64, fall of '64. And then SNCC people came and asked me to set up and run the Los Angeles SNCC fundraising office. And I did that until fall of '65 until after the uprising. But basically I didn't do a good job. I didn't do as good a job raising money as I did organizing people because I had some visibility and used that to organize young people for around the Selma to Montgomery March, around many, many activities. I became kind of a key person in organizing. So that's trying to sum that up. In those two years, that's what I was doing for those two years. A quick TripTik.

Diego

That was a lot for two years!

Howard

So I just think for the for the sake of time, just so that we're I know that there's a couple people that have have to go to an AP test in a few minutes.

Diego

So that this is just,

Howard

we should all just all just treat this as part one of probably three or four parts of interview with Dr. Garrett. So this is not over, it's the end of part one. So at the end of part one, Diego, what of final question, what's one more thing you'd like to get him to talk about?

Diego

By this point, what are you expecting out of the future? Do you think you're done or do you think there's so much more to be done?

James

I'm in this. I've just learned, I just got my skills base together. So I know how to organize. And I'm only, I'm in my 70's. So I'm gonna keep doing what I do. My main work, I work in, I might have mentioned this, I'm working with what used to be called Southwest Africa. I work in Namibia in nation building. I spent years working in Vietnam. I worked organizing and after Katrina. I mean, I know how to do this. I've learned how to do this stuff. Failed miserably in New Orleans trying to organize around Katrina. I went to the Congo, trying to build a hospital that failed miserably. Did pretty well in Vietnam. Doing pretty well in Namibia. So positives and negatives. So I think that the thing that's happened is between our present President and his arena, and this plague that we have, it's going to take probably another generation or two to get at the national level, get the U.S. back to the kind of "BS" place that it was. This setbacks, these two plagues, the Trump era and the plague itself, the virus. You guys won't be bored. This country, much of this world has to reconstruct itself from the ashes of these authoritarian personalities, and this aggressive and authoritarian virus. These two. It doesn't matter at this point, white, black poor, middle class, Catholic, it doesn't matter, there's going to be a tremendous amount of work to do just to get back to zero, get back to Black Lives Matter. To get back to a debate around Medicare For All. To get back around a Green New Deal. To get back to that it may take two generations. What I'm talking about is 25 or 30 years because of the ground that's been lost. But that's just work to do. And my thing is that I can eat barbecue and drink red soda water and keep on doing what I'm doing. I'll be doing this running next to you for the next 30 years. What the hell.

Diego

For sure. thank you for that. Thank you for this part of the interview.

Howard

And part part of the purpose of this interview is to push Diego, Sam, Jade, Elsa, and Zion to play part of that role of what you're talking about. Thank you all.

James

I had a question, but I guess you're ending.

Howard

Well, I don't want to end but I know I got some people that have to leave.

James

It's fine. I mean, you can tell them that you're my rabbi. They can contact me separately to talk to me. I'm not a dealer. I don't mind. I don't know.

Howard

Thank you so much. That was phenomenal. Anything else you guys want to say?

James

Take care, be well. All of you.