

# Bruce Hartford

## SUMMARY

Bruce Hartford was active with several Civil Rights Movement organizations including SCLC, CORE and SNCC. He was born in Chicago, Illinois, January 15, 1944 to Communist Party activist parents, and grew up in Los Angeles, California. In Los Angeles, Bruce joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) before heading to Selma, Alabama to work with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He helped keep order during the infamous march from Selma to Montgomery. Bruce also worked on voting rights initiatives in Lowndes County Alabama and in Grenada, Mississippi. Bruce became a founding member and longtime officer in the National Writers Union while developing a career as a technical writer in Silicon Valley. He is an accomplished author and current webspinner of CRMVet.org living in San Francisco, CA. [Troublemaker: Memories of the Freedom Movement](#) is his latest book.

## LOCATION

Recorded via Zoom teleconferencing system. Bruce Hartford was at his home in San Francisco. 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: **Sam Jubb**, Stuart Hall High School, Class of 2020  
Support: **Zion DeBerry**, Stuart Hall 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. Sam Jubb 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@sacredsf.org](mailto:howard.levin@sacredsf.org)

Recorded over three sessions.

April 27, 2020

## Sam

Mr. Bruce Hartford, as you know, we're here to record our conversation with you with the intention of publishing your story as part of Convent & Stuart Hall's oral history production class. We are recording video this interview and intend to publish this on

our school website, as well as on other nonprofit educational websites including a written transcript. This means your story will be available once published to anyone via an internet connection. If you agree, please say your name, the date and if you agree allowing us to publish your story.

### **Bruce**

I'm Bruce Hartford, the date is April 27, 2020. I agree, in the expectation that you will provide me a copy of everything and then I can use it for my purposes as well.

### **Bruce**

My name is Bruce Hartford. I was born in Chicago, Illinois, January 15, 1944. I grew up and went to school in Los Angeles, California. I attended Los Angeles City College. I flunked out of UCLA. I eventually, failed to graduate San Francisco State. In 1963, I got involved with the Congress of Racial Equality in LA. I worked with them for two years. In early 1965, I went to work for Dr. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, first in Selma, Alabama, then elsewhere in Alabama, then in Grenada, Mississippi. I left them in February of 1967 and became active in the anti-Vietnam War movement. I went to San Francisco State where I was an activist in the Students for a Democratic Society, SDS. Later I went to what was known as West Pack – which was the war zone in the Pacific – to help US Marines put out anti-war underground newspapers on their bases. I returned to the US in the early 1970s. I became a founding member and longtime officer in the National Writers Union. I developed a career as a technical writer in Silicon Valley. I retired in 2010. And I'm currently active opposing Trump and the Republican Party through an organization called Indivisible.

### **Howard Levin**

That was the best summary I've ever heard.

### **Bruce**

You just need to let me go. Don't give me too many directions.

### **Sam**

I was surprised you remembered all those dates. That was impressive. Very impressive. All right, so let's, let's get into it. So on the contrary to the pre-interview, like Mr. Levin said, or Howard said, if any stories or anecdotes come to your head, just feel free to let it loose. And so I'm going to start with a little with your childhood again. And so you already said when you were born. Do you have a first childhood memory?

**Bruce**

First childhood memory? I don't know how old I was, I was probably four or five, my parents were union organizers. There was a Labor Day parade – and of course, this was in the late 40s when unions were highly controversial, now they're mostly been destroyed. And I was in the parade. I had a I pedal my tricycle in the parade. And attached to the back was a sign that said, "Mom's AFL, dad's CIO, I'm for labor unity.

**Sam**

Wow, they started you young then.

**Bruce**

My mom won a major negotiation because she was so pregnant with me – she later told me – that they were afraid she'd go into labor during the negotiation, so they signed rather than have that happen. Of course, women were very unusual in workplaces back then, particularly in the management office. So yeah, I was born to be bad to the bone.

**Sam**

I like that. Moving into sort of how you lived when you were a kid, like what kind of house did you live in? Do you remember? Or did you live in different houses continuously?

**Bruce**

What do you mean what kind of house?

**Sam**

I'm trying to get a perspective of how you lived.

**Bruce**

My parents were, as I said, union organizers until the unions were destroyed by the McCarthy repression. Then they had a very difficult time getting work because they were considered radical troublemakers. And the FBI would follow them around and tell their employers to fire them. So we didn't have money. We lived in a working-class district of Los Angeles, somewhat precariously – economically precariously, and politically precariously. And there's a lot of stories I could tell about that but I don't think that's what this oral history is primarily about. Ah, so our house was a house it had a roof. It had a porch. It had the front door, it had a back door, it had bedrooms. I mean, I

don't know.

**Sam**

I should have phrased it a little better. Then in general, were you close with your parents' condition? Did you have a good relationship?

**Bruce**

I had a mixed relationship., I loved my parents. My parents loved me. I had a good... there was nothing to write home about. Except that I had an independent and rebellious spirit that resented and did not like being told what to do. And they were trying to be good parents, and they were often conflicts that arose out of that. And it finally got to the point when I was 15, my dad got offered a job in Connecticut. And they decided, well, we're going to have to move because this is a good job, he can't pass that up. And I said, I'm gonna stay and finish high school here on my own and we fought that out. And I won. And I tell people, they abandoned me, but I would say that just to annoy them. In fact, I pushed them away. And once they were 3500 miles away our relationship improved marvelously.

**Sam**

So you you stayed in California to attend high school?

**Bruce**

To finish off my last semester to high school, yeah.

**Sam**

And so did you live by yourself at that point?

**Bruce**

No, they put me up with some friend of the family until I graduated, at which point I declared myself a free and independent human being and went out and got a job as a fry cook in the ?? Chicken Shack, which was enough for me to rent a studio apartment with a Murphy bed – you don't know what that is, and you can look it up someday. After that I was pretty much on my own. They agreed to pay my tuition to college. And at that time, tuition – because we were still under the Master Plan –tuition at UCLA was an outrageous \$156 per semester, per semester. So that's \$300 a whole year just to go to their damn school. They paid for that. And they paid for the books. Other than that, that was it. We got along great after that. I will say this, I deeply regret that because I was so rebellious and so resentful of authority, theirs and everyone else's

including teachers – no offense Mr. Levin – that I didn't really make friends with them until very much later in life. And I deeply regret not making friends with them and hearing their stories. I later learned my mother's stories, but my father passed before I could learn his stories. And I regret that very much.

**Sam**

Interesting.

**Bruce**

Because my parents could have been great friends once they were no longer parents.

**Sam**

Moving into sort of... so you went to high school and what high school did you attend?

**Bruce**

Dorsey High.

**Sam**

And what elementary school did you attend?

**Bruce**

Angeles Mesa, and Audubon Junior High School, which we fondly referred to as "Atom Bomb."

**Sam**

If I am correct, you would have been in 1960, you would have been 16. around that.

**Bruce**

Yep.

**Sam**

So you would have been just finishing high school. And that was when the Brown vs. Board...

**Bruce**

Brown v Board of Education was 1954. The sit-ins started in 1960.

**Sam**

Do you recall any racism from your childhood?

**Bruce**

Oy Gevalt!

**Sam**

Do you have a first memory of experiencing racism?

**Bruce**

Yeah. First of all, I was and am Jewish, though I'm not Jewish in a traditionally recognized format. But the neighborhood kids knew I was a Jew. And they also knew that my parents were Commies, Reds. So I grew up basically – I was the subject of being bullied and so forth. You might think that I'm the silent, tough guy kind of thing, but in fact, I was more of a talker than a fighter, so I didn't do well with the bullying. And some of that bullying was anti-Semitic. I experienced that. But I think the most interesting thing...the neighborhood I grew up in was on the outskirts of the neighborhood of LA called Leimert Park. And I was on Arlington Avenue. At the time we moved in there it was a white working class neighborhood, people worked at Ford and the wives would have been sales clerks if they worked outside or whatever. But under the system of residential segregation in Los Angeles, they had the system called redlining which meant that the the black, brown and Asian neighborhoods were tightly constrained. People could only live where the real estate industry and the banking industry said they could live. It was absolute segregation. For a while Western Avenue was the border of the black ghetto. On the east side of Western Avenue, everybody was black, 100%. On the west side, everyone was white, 100%. We were four blocks west of Western when we moved in. But because they kept bringing people in from outside to be low paid wages, they had to slowly expand the ghetto. And this was called blockbusting. So year after year, the the ghetto was was moving closer block by block to our house. I guess sometime in probably around '57, '56-ish, they busted our block. And what that meant was that they sold a house to a black family. Then that summer, every weekend, real estate agents would come knocking on our door and they'd say to my father, "Oh, Mr. Hartford, I'm sure you're very concerned with what's happening in the neighborhood. You must know what's going on, you know what's going to happen to the schools. I see you have two lovely children" – meaning me and my brother – "and we really want to help because we're concerned for you. And what we will do is we will right now write out a check, buy your house, flat out, just sign here." I don't know the exact numbers of what they were offering but they would probably offering about five grand less than market value. Then, because the pressure

in the ghetto – it was so hard to find living places people desperate, black and brown, in this case, black people desperate to find a way out of the ghetto – they could flip that house in a weekend. They could buy it for cash – so the real estate company owned it – the next weekend, they would sell it for \$5,000 over market price. So that's a 10 grand profit for almost no work. Now these were big blocks. They were 80 houses on my block. So do the math. 10 grand for 80 houses. That's \$800,000 profit for almost no work. And they did it in a summer. By the end of that summer – our family and our next door neighbor who were immigrants from Sweden who did not understand what all the fuss was about – our block went from all white to all black in the course of the summer. And there was enormous bitterness, anger and tension. The whites felt that they were being driven out of their only property, the only thing of value they held in the whole world and they were having to sell at a huge loss. The blacks coming in deeply resented the racism they were experiencing from the whites who felt they were being pushed out. And so they took it out on the whites. So, all that summer and for the next couple of years, I would be getting beat up by the white kids because I was a Jew. And I would be getting beat up by the black kids because I was a white kid. They would cut our hoses and they broke windows. Then after a while, as the border fight moved further and further west towards Crenshaw, the tension went down, but it was very bitter and very evil. And it really hurt a lot of people, but it made a fortune for the real estate industry.

**Sam**

You mentioned that you ended up living in an African American predominant neighborhood.

**Bruce**

Yes.

**Sam**

And you said that some of them obviously didn't like you. But were there any that you were friends with? Or did you get along with any of them?

**Bruce**

Oh, yeah. I mean that the kids who beat me up or kids who didn't know me? I'd get off the bus are there big couple black kids and they'd attack me. Why? Because some white kids had no doubt attack them, and they were doing retaliation. But you have to remember that because we were a leftist family, I grew up with integrated friends. And that was one of the things the white folks in the neighborhood really didn't like is

because we were the only people on the white side. Not only were we Jews, but we had black people coming as guests for dinner, including Paul Robeson, and boy that they didn't like. You don't know who Paul Robeson is. Look him up. So that was a normal part of life was to have interracial friends. Eventually, they moved and I moved.

**Sam**

Your parents always had the ideology that everyone – the equality?

**Bruce**

Yes, but like some people in the freedom movement, some of the whites had to like totally break with their family. And some to this day – now they are grandparents – their parents never met their husbands, never saw their children. A complete break. I was fortunate in the been the total opposite of that.

**Zion**

Mr. Hartford, did you tell your parents about this? How did they feel about the situation?

**Bruce**

They knew in general what was going on, but I wouldn't tell my parents when I was beaten up because I was so ashamed and humiliated. That I didn't want to say anything about it. Most of the time I just ran. It wasn't like I got pummeled and pounded. I was pretty fast in those days. So most of the time I'd get hit a bit. But it was so shameful because I'm young, I was a boy, thinking I was a man – or wanting to be a man – and men don't run, men are macho, men defend themselves. Even with three or four others against you. So I didn't tell them. I suspect they knew. But we just endured.

**Sam**

You said that you're so your parents left for Connecticut and You stayed in Los Angeles. And then you also mentioned that you, after that, attended UCLA.

**Bruce**

First Los Angeles City College.

**Sam**

Los Angeles City College.

**Bruce**



I don't think they call them that anymore because it doesn't sound good. But they were junior colleges or jumped up high schools, depending on how you look at it.

**Sam**

And then after that...

**Bruce**

Not nice schools like yours, but high schools like Dorsey, which ain't like yours, I've been to yours.

**Sam**

I understand that our high school is very nice and we're very privileged to go there.

**Bruce**

Yeah, Amen.

**Sam**

Yeah, exactly. And so after you went to community college in Los Angeles, you attended UCLA briefly.

**Bruce**

Yeah.

**Sam**

And did you get involved in any activist movements at that point?

**Bruce**

In the in the last semester at LACC, I got involved with CORE, so by the time then I went to UCLA. I was already a full time CORE activist. Congress of Racial Equality. And there was a chapter of CORE at UCLA called Bruin CORE. Everything at UCLA is Bruin, the Bruin newspaper, the Bruin Commons, the Bruin this the Bruin that, so we were Bruin CORE. And the jocks really didn't like that. They felt that we had appropriated their names and they beat us up for that. Well, they hit us a couple times, they didn't really beat us up. They were just jock-ish. What does CORE stand for?

**Sam**

So violence was definitely something you had to endure through your childhood. That's very interesting.

**Bruce**

Yeah, but not parental violence. My mother was a talker, I take after her, and she would try and parent me by guilting me and telling me what was wrong and appealing to my better instincts and guilting me and all this shit. My dad would give me a spanking when I needed it. He would wait till he calmed down, then he'd explain what I did, he would give me my spanking. I vastly preferred my father's method of disciplining than my mother's guilt tripping.

**Sam**

Interesting. You didn't attend UCLA for very long did you?

**Bruce**

One year. One year and then a later semester, which was also a failure. So a year and a sort of a half.

**Sam**

At that point, we're getting into the 60s, you're in UCLA, it's around 1960.

**Note**

{short section cut}

**Sam**

After you went to UCLA, you moved up to San Francisco, correct?

**Bruce**

I was active with CORE, beginning about March of '63. And then we formed another group in LA called the Nonviolent Action Committee, NVAC. I was active with them until fall of '64. So that would be about 15-16 months, 17 months. I then went up to Frisco to participate in the Free Speech Movement at University of California, Berkeley, or CAL, as we called it then. Then late in '64 I went to visit my parents, I stayed with them a couple of months – a month or two. And then in early '65 I went to Selma. But I really wasn't – I was just crashing in Frisco while I was participating in the Free Speech Movement. You may you may know where the Fillmore is. The Fillmore at that time, they were kicking all the black people out, and there was a bunch of abandoned buildings. It was kind of a crash pad in what had been an old grocery store that people were just occupying. And I just went there and crashed along with everyone else. But like, I wouldn't say I was living in San Francisco. I was existing in San Francisco.

**Sam**

Do you think that's because of the type of people that San Francisco attracted, a sort of cosmopolitan environment?

**Bruce**

I loved San Francisco and I hated, loathed Los Angeles.

**Sam**

I'm the same way, interesting.

**Bruce**

Are you from LA?

**Sam**

I'm not from LA, but I've visited I don't like it at all.

**Bruce**

Amen, brother, Amen.

**Sam**

And so at your year and change at UCLA, what did you do with CORE and NVAC?  
And feel free to tell any stories if any stories come to your mind.

**Bruce**

So CORE when I first started in early '63 was focused on housing segregation. At that time a lot of housing developments and apartment buildings had what were known as restrictive covenants, which meant that not only could not a black, brown or Asian person buy there, if a white person bought that house in the contract. was a clause that said they could not sell it to somebody who wasn't white. And in some cases, Jews were included in that. This was a time of enormous expansion so housing tracks were being built all over LA County and they would only sell the whites and sometimes not to Jews. So we were picketing them and protesting and so forth and so on. That and that was up through the summer of '63. I then went east to visit my parents and participate in the March on Washington. And when I came back, I went in September of '64, I started attending UCLA. And at that time, CORE was shifting its focus away from housing discrimination – having not solved it – to defacto school segregation. And the schools in LA were very, very segregated. So we started having protests at the Board

of Education, and we had sit ins and occupations and fasts and so forth. And that took us through into the winter into the November-ish time period. At that point, we formed NVAC in December of '64. And then from then to the time I left – it must have been November of '64, so from December of '63, to November of '64, we were focused on employment discrimination, protesting against companies that would only hire whites. So that's what I was mostly doing. With Bruin CORE, it was at first, the Board of Education school desegregation, and then the employment issues.

### **Sam**

And how many people were a part of these organizations, do you think?

### **Bruce**

LA CORE had a paper membership. I don't know, probably a couple hundred, two or 300, of whom maybe 75 to 100 might occasionally participate in something or attend a meeting, of whom maybe 25 to 50 would participate in a protest. In fact, what was distinctive about NVAC is you couldn't be in NVAC unless you participated. And in fact, if you didn't protest at least once a month, you lost your vote. So we were probably around 20 to 25. Bruin CORE was probably Around 75 to 100 in theory, and we could mount a picket line of I don't know. During the school year, we could mount a picket line of as many as up to 50 people. Obviously once school ended that dropped precipitously.

### **Sam**

And just before I slipped my mind, on our pre-interview, you mentioned a political seder. As one of the things... I just didn't want to forget, you don't have to spend too much time but I just want to know what that is.

### **Bruce**

While my parents were still active in the Communist Party, and then later after they were expelled – or escaped, depending on how you view it – they were associated with other leftists a lot of whom were Jews. And so, Passover is a major – Passover and Yom Kippur are the two major events of Judaism?

### **Note**

{short section eliminated}

### **Bruce**

The Jews who were active in the left wanted their children to experience a Seder so

they would have it but – the way of Jewish religious observance is not as closely controlled as Christian or Muslim religious services are. There's a lot of free choice in how you do it.

**Sam**

It's more interpretive.

**Bruce**

More interpretive. The thing about the Seder is, the main thing is you eat dinner and you read through a book and you take a parts in it and you do stuff. But the book you read, you can choose which version or you can write your own, as long as it sort of has the basic stuff. So there were left as Haggadahs – that's the name of the of the book – that gave the Passover story a leftist interpretation. That emphasized freedom and rebellion over God deciding shit.

**Sam**

So you almost use your quote-on-quote "religion" as your way of understanding politics maybe, for lack of a better way?

**Bruce**

I did not feel strongly religious. My parents were not strongly religious. First of all, my father was brought up Christian, he wasn't a Jew at you at all, my mom was the Jew. And we did both Christmas and Hanukkah. Their religion was leftism and communism, that was their real religion. But I decided when I was 13 or 14 or 15, I decided to consider myself a Jew. But I didn't like any of the official categories, you know, reform, orthodox, whatever. One of the things that Jews do – because each Jew can choose for themselves what it means to be Jewish – Jews are always asking each other, "What kind of Jew are you?" That's where you get the old saying, "Two Jews, three arguments." So other Jewish kids would say, "What kind of Jew are you?" And I didn't know because I'd never been in a synagogue in my life. First time I was in the synagogue was when my mom got remarried after my father died, and that was in the 80s. So I decided I would start telling – I didn't know what to answer, which was embarrassing – so I started saying, "Well, I'm a Four Nevers Jew." And they would say "What's that?" And I would say, "Never forget, never forgive, never again and never stand by when other people are oppressed." And that set them back. "What is this dude?" But they got off my case. But it wasn't really a big motivating factor in my life.

**Sam**

Thank you, I was just curious from a political perspective.

**Bruce**

Are you Jewish? Is that why you're asking?

**Sam**

I'm not. I do have a an an aunt-in-law that is Jewish. So I do I do participate in Seder meals and a couple of the holidays with my aunt.

**Bruce**

There are lot of Jewish aunts around, you got to be careful. {said with humor}.

**Sam**

You mentioned that you went to Connecticut to visit your parents. And you also attended the March on Washington?

**Bruce**

Yeah.

**Sam**

In 1963. And obviously, that is a very pivotal moment in history. And how did that affect your views towards the civil rights movement as like one of the biggest events in its history?

**Bruce**

It had a hellacious – it had a big impact on me. I had gotten involved in March – March, the month – and the March on Washington was in August, August 28. So from March through August, I was in protests and I was doing all kinds of CORE work. But I was afraid to be arrested. And my parents were really – they were so slick, particularly my mom. Their line was, "Bruce, we really respect what you're doing. It's great. It's wonderful. But the important thing is, you should go get your degree, focus on that. And then once you have your professional degree, then you can really help. So don't get arrested or do anything that might interfere with your education or your future job prospects. First, get your degree. Become a doctor or a lawyer or an architect, and then you'll be set and set You can be really be effective." And I was scared, I was scared to be arrested. I had a lot of experience in being scared of shit, you know, because of my childhood. So I went to the March on Washington. And it was such a profound experience that when I came back, I wasn't scared about being arrested no

more. I came back early in September, and over the course of the next 3 months, I was probably arrested half a dozen times. So you could see it made a big – arrested in non violent protests. I mean, why, not for robbing gas stations or anything.

**Sam**

Why did the March on Washington sort of reduce your fears of being arrested?

**Bruce**

It didn't reduce my fears. It increased my commitment. The first time I was arrested, my heart was pounding, I was sweating I was so scared I could barely you know do go through the ritual. By the fourth or fifth arrest it was, "Oh, how are they doing this?" I was critiquing the cops performance in their professionalism. It was "Oh yeah, okay, here I am. Oh, this jail? This is a terrible jail, send me to the better jail!" What was the question you've escaped my mind?

**Sam**

I asked why your fear decreased.

**Bruce**

It was a profoundly moving experience. It deepened my commitment to the Movement. And I think one of the effects of the March on Washington by bringing – current history says 250,000 people, I think it was probably closer to 300,000 – but by bringing whatever that number was of all all in one place, everyone saw how strong the Movement was, and that they weren't alone in it. And that was an enormous encouragement.

**Sam**

Just seeing everyone. Yeah, that's awesome.

**Howard Levin**

Is there anything more that you can say about either what led up to it or during the March on Washington or immediately after that that fed this motivation?

**Bruce**

It was a deeply emotional experience. And you have to understand that today, it's part of history, they teach it in schools and shit. But at the time, it was enormously controversial. The media was just having hysterics about the whole idea. A lot of the media, were convinced that if you bring a large number of Negroes into Washington,

inevitably they would get drunk, riot and burn the city down. And they literally actually mobilized the 101st Airborne Division and the National Guard to be on alert. The Congress told their white secretaries that they did not have to come to work on that day, because of the danger of being raped by these hordes of black people who, of course, that was what they were going to do is go rape the white women. Everybody knew that! {intoned sarcasm}. They closed the liquor stores. So that was one big controversy. The other big controversy was, "Nobody was going to show up." "This whole Civil Rights Movement is just a bunch of outside agitators making a bunch of noise." That most black people are happy and content that was actually the phrase they used. "Oh, our nigras is happy and content here in Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana." And so we didn't know what was going to happen. Just weeks before that in Birmingham, marches had been attacked by police dogs and tear gas and mobs, people had been shot. I was in New Haven visiting my parents. And so I signed up to go to the march in on a bus chartered by CORE – New Haven CORE. We got on that bus, maybe 10 o'clock the night before the March. And we didn't know what the hell we were going into. People were nervous. By this time I was an experienced professional, nonviolent protesters so I pretty much knew myself that this was going to be pretty much a cakewalk because I had enough experience to anticipate it by this time. But most of the people on the bus were scared. And I was nervous about how many people would show up. You know, because if there were less than 100,000 people it was gonna be considered a failure. So we're driving south on I-95 where it existed and the first hint, we have of what this event was shaping up to be was that late at night – it must have been three or four o'clock in the morning – we're on the bus on the freeway and it's going over a big bridge over some river, I don't know, the Delaware or the Susquehanna or the ["orsopeachy" river??]. And we could see up through the window up ahead through the driver, there was just red glow. And it was clearly something was on fire up the head of the bus. And we didn't know what the fuck that was. But when we got to the end of the bridge on the embankment where you could stand. There were people burning highway flares and holding signs, "We're With You" "Freedom." "We Support the March." "Freedom Now!" "We Shall Overcome." You got to remember that Kennedy – President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy – didn't want this march. And so they insisted that it be on a work day, a Wednesday, to limit the number of people. So these were obviously people who because they had to go to work, could not attend the march. So they'd gotten up in the dead of night, to show their support for the buses that were rolling south. So we're still on the bus and dawn starts to get light, off to the left, and as it becomes a light, we see that the entire freeway is nothing but buses. Absolutely nothing but buses. And that's when we knew how successful the march was going to be.



**Sam**

You said that you were probably one of the few people who were worrying about how many people were going to show?

**Bruce**

I think everybody was worried that there would be enough people? Yeah.

**Sam**

You weren't as worried as much of the physical consequences?

**Bruce**

Yeah, I wasn't worried about violence. I knew we weren't going to be violent and I thought it very unlikely that Washington would pull a Birmingham.

**Sam**

What was that sort of feeling like or what was the atmosphere like on the bus when everyone realized that "this was it."

**Bruce**

Oh, it was pretty good. We got off the bus. And they had people stationed all through Washington. "Bus go this way," directing the buses to these big parking lots and the bus would park there would be people directing us. "All right now you all go over there and go over there and go over there." And we went to the Washington Monument and there was a crowd of people. And there were people singing songs. Peter, Paul and Mary, a famous folk group, was singing. So we were gathered there, and the march was getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. And the time came, they had a program, "March starts at this time," and nobody was watching. And where were the leaders, nobody knew where the leaders were. As it turned out, they were meeting with Congress and got delayed and we're running late, as they usually did. And after a while, people said, "Well, fuck this shit." I mean, they didn't say it that way. We were at the Washington Monument we know we were going to walk-march to the Lincoln Memorial, – you could see the Lincoln Memorial. And after a while people just said, "Oh well, let's start marching." And we all started marching before the leaders showed up to lead us. And I thought that was so cool. And eventually I learned that the leaders had seen, "Hey, the people are marching!" And they rushed and they stopped in the middle of one of the march so that they could line up to be photographed with the people behind them. But in fact, half the march was already in front of them. So whenever you see those pictures of the leaders of the March on Washington with their

arms linked in the crowds behind them, you've got to know that a third to a half of the march was already in front of them. I thought that was so cool, with my anti authoritarian tendencies that I have.

**Sam**

Once you once you arrived at the Lincoln Memorial, what happened next?

**Bruce**

Well, we went through endless speeches. We sweltered. God,, August heat in Washington, you do not want to experience that.

**Sam**

It's not good. It's humid.

**Bruce**

Oh, hot, humid, miserable, not a breath of air, enormous crowds, people trying not to faint. But it was a greatly uplifting experience. Most of the speeches were deadly dull, except for John Lewis and Dr. King's, which were enormously inspiring.

**Sam**

What was it like to experience, obviously, Dr. King, Dr. King's speech?

**Bruce**

It was tremendously moving. I was crying, and everyone else wants to. And and then at the end, everybody just linked arms with everyone who was around, the people on either side of me. I didn't know what the fuck they were, they were total strangers, and we all sang We Shall Overcome. And that was very powerful. Then we managed to find a way back to the buses. People said, "What was it like on the buses coming back? It must have been really great, it must have been everybody enthusiastic?" Truth is I don't know. I fell asleep. I've been up all night. I've been through this exhausting march in the heat. I hit that bus. I fell asleep. I didn't wake up until they shook me and they said, "Hey, we're in New Haven kid, get off the fucking bus."

**Sam**

So you briefly mentioned that there was a folk group that was playing music?

**Bruce**

Many of them but yeah, Paul and Mary. Joan Baez. What's his name? Bobby Dylan.

Odetta. Pete Seeger. I don't think Paul Robeson was allowed to sing or he wasn't there. But, yeah, there was a lot of entertainment. Mahalia Jackson.

### **Sam**

I personally have a huge fascination with soul and funk music, which the production of it was pushed down because it was a predominantly African American.

### **Bruce**

And folk music was pushed down because it became too political.

### **Sam**

How did music like that that was being produced to sort of uplift the people participating in the movement? How did that affect? Did that help?

### **Note**

That was enormous, that was huge. The singing was the most important part of the freedom movement and the political movements today are weaker, far weaker, because they are not singing movements. And, you know, I could go into a whole long riff on the importance of that singing but most political movements to this day, the information of the movement, the ideology, the beliefs of the movement, are conveyed, mostly through written or through speeches. For the freedom movement, the information in the ideology was primarily delivered through song and to a lesser extent through speeches, which were actually more like, preachers preaching sermons. But important as Dr. King's speech was, it was mostly important to white people. For black folk, the songs had already conveyed that information.

### **Sam**

You mentioned that, obviously, you being white, I did read one of your articles on the CRMVet website. I can pull it up right now. It's called [\*That Darned "Why did you..." Question\*](#) and it's basically about people asking, "Why did you join the movement?" And why did you do this? And you basically say – you have one thing that really stood out to me saying that as a white person, I have more responsibility to stand up because we're the source of the problem. How frustrating was it to sort of experience the blatant just disrespect towards your friends – I would say that the African Americans were your friends?

### **Bruce**

It was enraging. It was infuriating. I was bullied as a kid, I grew up hating bullies. I hate

bullies to this day and the way in which racism is inflicted on the victims of racism or anti-Semitism or sexism or misogyny or bigotry or anti gayness or you know any of these isms, is a form of bullying. And, it just infuriates me and it pisses me off, but I also recognize that it's not just a personal issue. It's an economic issue that these forms of bigotry and hatred are used by the people doing them to gain power and money. And it's often the person who is being racist or misogynist or whatever, may not even actually believe it but they're just using it in a cynical and selfish way for money and political power. The redlining: the real estate industry loved to have segregated housing because they could overcharge non-white people overly high rents for substandard apartments. They could charge them more for a buying a house. The banks could charge them higher interest because they had no choice. And they could terrify whites into selling their houses at a loss. And they could terrify whites into voting for them by saying, "Hey, if you don't vote for me, those other people, they're gonna come in here, you know, you got to keep your schools white, you better vote for me because I'll stand for segregation." That's how a lot of politicians in California got elected. Governor Pete Wilson. was probably one of the most recent ones. I'll tell you an example. When I was in Selma, I was living in the Carver Housing Projects with a black family. The Carver Housing Projects was a federal housing project, completely segregated. Only black people live there. And everybody who ran the place was white. And the blacks had absolutely no influence on how the white managers manage the place. So I noticed – one of the features of the South is that it's hot and humid. And so starting in spring and going into October, you got lots of bugs, roaches in particular. And it's constantly a problem. The apartments in the housing project, were infested with roaches. So much so that you would sit down to eat at the table, you'd have to brush them off the table. You'd be watching TV and you'd have to brush have to brush them off your shoulders. At night, the big ones came out. And they were so big you could hear them going clickety-click across the floor. You could literally hear them. So the white managers – people complained about the roaches, of course. So the the buildings in the project were these two story brick buildings and each brick building had four to six apartments in it. So the white managers contracted with an exterminator company to keep the roaches down in the whole project. And there was about 80 buildings, 50, I don't know 60, 70, 80 buildings, I don't know how many but a lot of buildings. It was a big project. And undoubtedly, this company were cronies of the managers and probably politically connected with the mayor and so forth. So what they would do is they would go into one apartment of one building and spray that apartment. And then they would go to another building into one apartment and spray that apartment. They would spray one apartment, it would kill a lot of roaches, but it would shew the other roaches into the other apartments. And the next morning, we could lit we would literally sweep up with a broom a mound of dead roaches that that you would

fill a whole dustpan and you would dump it into the trash. But within a day or two they were back because they had just been shewed into the into the next apartment. And the people in the project went to the managers and they said, "Look just do all the apartments in one building at one time, and that way you'll kill all the roaches and they won't come back within within a day. They refused to do it. And they refused to do it because this way they could keep more crews working, paying them with the rent money of the tenants. And they could say, "Oh, you know them colored folks they don't care about roaches. They don't mind. They're so dirty. Their places are infested. There's no way you could get rid of roaches there." But in fact they had the system rigged to make sure that the roaches stayed and that the exterminator company had maximum business – and no doubt were kicking back bribes to the managers and probably to the mayor, Smitherman that was. And so that pissed me off.

### **Sam**

You briefly mentioned bribing and I recently watched Narcos, and there's a lot of corruption that is going on in the government. And do you feel like there was corruption within the American government during the Civil Rights Movement?

### **Bruce**

Before the Civil Rights Movement. During the civil rights movement. And to this day. Yes. And all you have to do is pay attention to current events. For example, in today's New York Times, there is a story about how the money that was supposed to be going to small businesses who are cut shut down because of the COVID pandemic, are in fact being sent to corporations that are using them to buy other corporations and to pay their executive \$1.7 million bonuses. Now I call that corruption.

### **Note**

{short section removed}

### **Sam**

After the March on Washington, where did you head after that?

### **Bruce**

I went back to LA and that's when I started UCLA and then went into the Board of Education protests and then NVAC. The first thing we did with NVAC– we were expelled. A group of us were expelled from CORE, LA CORE – I continued to work with Bruin CORE, but LA CORE, expelled us because we got into a big fight with them. We felt they should be more militant and have stronger demonstrations. But the

leadership of LA CORE was very tight with the Democratic Party – which at that time was dominated by whites – and the Democratic Party was terrified that there would be a white backlash in the election of 1964 if blacks pressed too hard for school desegregation, and housing, desegregation, and employment integration, and so forth. So they were pressuring the leaders of CORE to tone down the demonstrations, to go slow, to be moderate, and not to frighten the white voters. And our faction was saying no, we've got to be stronger and bolder and raise more hell. And eventually we split and they expelled us and that's why we formed NVAC. So the first thing we did with NVAC – now remember that we were 15 to 20 to 25 people. There was a drive in restaurant called the Wich Stand. W H I C H Stand, as in the end of sandwich, not like women would pointy hats and brooms, but the Wich Stand. And it was a drive-in. It had been set up in the late 40s in the south central area of Los Angeles which at that time was still a white working class neighborhood. But by 1964 it was entirely black. It was at the corner of Florence and Figueroa. If you were to shoot a missile in any direction, it would be an hour before it passed over any white people. I mean, it was a totally black neighbor. And yet this Wich Stand, all of its employees were white, down to the janitor, down to the to the dishwasher. They refused to hire any black people. And so we negotiated with them and then we started picketing. And once we picketed, since all of their customers were black, nobody crossed our picket line, and their business went down to zero. And neighborhood people would come up to us, Afro-Americans, and they would say, "Oh, thank you for doing this. We're so glad. We've been pissed off at these people for years. We're glad someone's finally doing something about this." They would bring us cake and lemonade. Some of them would walk the picket line with us. We were on the turf of a gang called the Slausons. Back then the LA gangs were very big. These were big, strong gangs. But they weren't narco gangs, narco gangs didn't really come until Nixon declared his war on drugs, which created the drug industry as a billion dollar industry, then it was worth killing people over. At this time, the gangs were basically turf gangs. The Slausons came by and said, "Well, you know, we're not nonviolent, but we appreciate what you're doing." And occasionally, they'd even say "Hey, I'm going to be nonviolent for a while, here, hold my gun," and they would walk the picket line. "Hey, look at me, I'm being non-violent!" And then they would come back, get their gun and go off about their business, or their knife or whatever it was. And they had a good time and we had a good time. We had a good relationship with them. So one night – like I said, we would pick it from four to midnight, seven days a week. So one night – must have been late December or early January – we're picketing and this car comes driving right through our picket line almost ran over Roberta Krinsky. "Who the fuck is this?" It was filled with like teenagers And more cars come and more cars come and suddenly there's like a dozen cars filled with white teenagers. And they come out of the car, and they start racist chants and singing Dixie.

And they had whole crates of eggs, and they started throwing eggs at us. And, "Where the fuck did they come from?" Well, the Wich Stand had another Wich Stand, which was in Inglewood, which at that time was a white neighborhood. And the other which stand was a hangout for white car culture, kids. We assumed that the owner convinced the kids to come into the ghetto, to attack the civil rights, protests because it would be fun or a kick, or hell maybe they even paid them, we don't know. So, we're being non-violent, we're well trained, we know how to handle this. And they're doing all this racist stuff and dancing around scratching under their armpits, mimicking apes as if we were apes. The neighborhood starts gathering – the people in the neighborhood – and pretty soon there's two or 300 very angry black people on the other side of our picket line. So you got this nucleolus of 50 to 80, white, racist teenagers, a picket line around, back and forth of I think we have maybe a dozen to 15 people that night. And then on the other side of the picket line, two or 300 black folk, who are not committed to non-violence, who are most definitely not committed to non violence. And so we were in this very weird situation. {short section cut} We would be saying, "Look, this is a trap. This is what they want. They want violence. This is how we win. Don't do this." So the Slausons start to roll up. And they had a war leader, a guy named Skillet, he was their war leader. And Robert Hall and Danny Gray were our picket captains at night and they were meeting with Skillet. And they were saying, "Look, look, don't don't do violence. This is what they want. We win by being non-violent." And as the gang kids rolled in, they were very well organized. They would report into Skillet. {short section cut} They would report in that surrounding the Florence in the corner, there were hundreds of cops armed and ready for action at two or three block distance all around. Now every night we were there normally the cops would hassle us, which of course really raised our profile in our respect the Slauson's had for us. Anybody the LAPD hate, they love, and vice versa. It was clear that the police were waiting for the white children to be attacked, at which point they would swoop in and smash the whole thing. And it was clear as day that it was a trap. It was a setup. I remember early on, it was Saturday night, this couple comes walking down the street, and he is dressed in threats. I mean he is ready for a night on the evening. She was in a green sequined dress. Clearly they were out to party and they see the crowd they walk over to see what it is she gets an egg right in the chest on her green sequined dress, which cannot be cleaned. And they didn't say anything. They just looked at each other, turned around, disappeared. Ten minutes later they were back. He was in sweats, had a leather jacket. He opened his leather jacket he had a sawed off, 12-gauge. She had her hand in her purse. I have no doubt what she had in her purse. We had to convince them. They were very polite. They said, "Would you please leave, move your pickets aside. We have some business to take care of." I mean, they didn't phrase it quite that way, but that's what they meant. So that's what the neighborhood was at. The Slausons were ready for

business. Suddenly, the Gladiators and the Businessmen, two other big gangs with whom the Slausons are at war, show up, as allies. So now we're dealing with the Slausons, the Gladiators, the Comptons – the Comptons also showed up, another gang – and the Businessmen. Somehow, we were able to hold that situation from breaking into violence. It wasn't easy. Anyway, after what seemed like an age, by this time, we were covered in eggs. I guess they ran out of eggs or they looked out and they saw that by now there were 500 angry black people, you know, definitely not happy with them.

### **Sam**

Not a good place to be.

### **Bruce**

And this is in the heart of the ghetto. So they run to their cars and they smash out through the line and through the crowd. And people are pounding on the windows and stuff. The Slausons and the Gladiators run for their cars and give chase. So the next day, we're back picketing, and Skillet comes up and he's very apologetic. He says, "Look"— first of all, he explains to us that they managed to catch some of the kids and beat the crap out of them before they got back to Inglewood. Maybe that's true. Maybe it isn't. We didn't care. As long as it didn't happen on our non-violent picket line, hey, "Take care of business." Because we were tactically non-violent, we were not philosophically non-violent. But he was very apologetic and he says, "Look, we never expected this. We're sorry. You are guests in our community, your friends, your allies. But don't worry." He says, "Look down there." And he points down the street. And about halfway down the block, there's a whole bunch of cars parked on somebody's lawn and a big crowd on the porch. He says, "Every minute, you're here, we're going to have 25 to 50 people there. If those white adjective—adjective come back, we will take care of it." We said, "Not on our picket line!" He says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know, you people are nuts. But don't worry. They'll never get back to Inglewood alive." And we said, "Fine, whatever happens, as long as it's not on our picket line, that's fine with us." Fortunately, the white kids never came back. And every minute we were there, from from then on, there was a posse of Slausons ready to protect us should they come back. Eventually, by February, they shut the Wich Stand down. Rather than hire a black person, they sold it to Chevron gas company who tore it down and put it in a gas station. And I believe it's now a McDonald's. There's now a McDonald's on that corner. And this was in liberal California, Los Angeles. So when I got to Selma, Alabama, it wasn't exactly a surprise.



April 30, 2020

**Bruce Hartford**

Sam, don't be upset, that's what they said about us. "You're going too fast and you're going too far."

**Sam Jubb**

I'm going to do some follow up questions on where we ended off. After reflecting on that story – which I thought was pretty powerful, I think Zion did too – I had the perception that if that situation went the other way, it could have been a pretty pivotal moment in the history of The Civil Rights Movement if a bunch of white teenagers were murdered, and if it did turn violent. As someone who had power in that situation to keep it a nonviolent situation, how did you control all those people?

**Bruce**

Oh, that's a good question. I don't know. I don't think we controlled...

**Sam**

How did you convince them?

**Bruce**

There were three players. There was us. There was this mob of, I don't know, maybe 50 white teenagers. And there was a crowd of eventually, probably four or 500 black folk from the south-central ghetto. And the only thing we actually controlled was our own behavior. But through the techniques of nonviolence – and we were highly trained in nonviolence, we trained regularly. And if I might just divert for a moment, if you go out on the web today and look for trainings in nonviolence, mostly what you'll find are trainings in the philosophy and the politics and the ideology of nonviolence, which we did some training in that too. But mostly what we trained in was how not to get killed, how to de-escalate violence, how to control a situation – strike the word “control” – how to influence a situation by controlling our own behavior. So, in terms of how we influenced the intensity and the degree with which the whites were attacking us – the egg-throwing and stuff like that – we weren't able to prevent them from pelting us with eggs and doing their racist chants and all that stuff, but through our behavior, we created a psychological wall that prevented them from coming and physically attacking us. Now maybe they wouldn't have done that without that wall. But who knows, but we prevented that. And later on in Mississippi and Alabama I used and others used those same techniques against Klan mobs who really did want to beat the shit – excuse me – beat the ever-living-daylights out of us. We didn't control the white mob, but we influenced it. We didn't control the black community, but we influenced it. There was a place where I talked about this couple who – she'd gotten hit by an egg and they came back and they were ready to take care of business. I remember them because my role was, I was acting as a substitute picket captain. So my focus was on keeping the line

going and modeling our behavior to influence both the other two groups, the whites, and the Afro Americans.

But as it happened – and our main picket captains, Danny Gray and Robert Hall, we're dealing with the gang leaders, the black gang leaders, particularly a guy named Skillet who was the war chief of the Slausons. The way it happened is that couple came up to me because I was obviously the one running the picket line. I dealt individually with them and the arguments that I made, I didn't try and preach the philosophy of nonviolence. What I said was, "This is a trap." I said two things. First, "This is a trap. This is a setup. The police have got the place surrounded but they're out of sight, waiting for violence to break out. You know who they're going to attack. You know who they're going to defend. So it's a trap. It's a setup." The second thing I said was, "Look, we are here for a purpose. We are trying to oppose the fact that this drive-in diner, all of its customers are black and it refuses to hire any black people, any brown people, any Asian people. And the way we win is through nonviolence This is our strategy. This is our, our tactic. And we need you to respect that in order to achieve the victory that we are clearly on the road to winning, which is why they brought in this mob." And, it was a logical argument and they could see that. They understood the logic of it. But when something would happen, like we would get hit with an egg or the whites would do something especially provocative, there would be an emotional surge and they would move forward and we would block them, and so they would have to come through us to attack the white idiots. I assume that Danny and Robert were essentially using the same arguments with the gang leaders because they were our standard arguments, we were trained in this. I think they understood that too, because when Skillet came the next day and said, "All right, we got guards for you now, stationed down the block," and I was part of this conversation and Danny said, "Well, you know nonviolence..." He said "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know all that shit, we know all that stuff. And you know, we're not nonviolent, but we respect you. We won't do anything on your picket line as you request but we'll take care of business away from here." And we said, "That's fine with us." Does that answer your question? I did I go into too much detail?

**Sam**

No, that was a perfect response. So at that point in your life, you were in Los Angeles and correct me if I'm wrong. That was around 1963?

**Bruce**

That incident was either December of '63 or January of '64. It might have been early '64. And it was cold. And in LA, you don't get much cold.

**Sam**

Did you spend most of your time in LA? Or did you travel around a little bit up until Selma?

**Bruce**

Oh, no, I was pretty much in LA. I mean, we went up to Frisco for a protest maybe once or twice or a meeting – there was a regional meeting at one point. But basically, all of '63, '64, except for the trip to Washington for the March on Washington and to visit my parents in Connecticut, I was in LA.

**Sam**

And so in terms of The Movement, what would you say your next steps or actions were after that incident?

**Bruce**

After that incident, as I said, they eventually closed the Wich Stand down, which wasn't a victory, but it wasn't a defeat. They didn't hire any non-whites but they didn't continue business either. So we kind of fought them to a draw. And then having not succeeded but not fail against a small little restaurant with probably 40 employees, we decided, "Well, hell, since we didn't fail against 40 employees even though we didn't win, let's take on a big major corporation that has thousands of employees," which was called the Van de Kamp's Corporation. So all through February into October, we were fighting the Van de Kamp's Corporation, again around employment discrimination. And many adventures and exciting things happened in that. I'm happy to talk about the Van de Kamp's campaign. Oh, and also at the same time, CORE – now remember, we'd been expelled from Los Angeles CORE but we were still part of Bruin CORE, UCLA CORE – CORE in California for the whole state took on Bank of America around employment discrimination. I'm going to suspect and go out on a limb that most of you at one time in your life has been in a Bank of America branch, or any other big bank. And you probably noticed that the people behind, the tellers, and even the platform officers behind the desks, were all races, black, white, brown, Asian, whatever. That was not the case in 1964. In 1964, all the big banks were firmly convinced that white people would not give their money to a bank that employed anybody who wasn't white. And I'm talking even down to the janitors. It was complete employment discrimination. And we took on the Bank of America as the test case, and we won it. Which is why when you go into the banks today, you'll see its workforce looks like America.

**Sam**

Wow, that's really awesome.

**Bruce**

Anyway, I can talk about those, I can talk about Selma, I am at your disposal.

**Sam**

I think I'm going try and get more out of Selma. So I think we might jump into Selma, if that's alright with you. Obviously, Selma, compared to the March on Washington, Selma was a little more violent, I would say, especially, especially two weeks before the main event. Bloody Sunday.

**Bruce**

Which I was not at.

**Sam**

You were not there for Bloody Sunday?

**Bruce**

No.

**Sam**

Do you remember hearing the news?

**Bruce**

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

**Sam**

Could you tell us about your reaction and your thoughts?

**Bruce**

I had decided to go south to work, initially, I assumed I would either work for CORE in Louisiana or SNCC in Mississippi. In the fall of '64, basically, NVAC had been totally defeated by Van de Kamp's. We were the little Chihuahua trying to – we attacked a German shepherd and the logical outcome ensued. So they totally destroyed us. And at that point, I was so alienated from Los Angeles, I left LA intending to go south. But at that time the Free Speech Movement had erupted at Berkeley, at the University of California Berkeley, which we call Cal. And so I went up there to support that and I participated in that, for a couple of months or six weeks or something like that. And then I went to Connecticut to spend some time with my family before going south. So I was actually in Connecticut, with my family when we saw the news of Bloody Sunday. It was very surreal. I don't think surreal is the right word, but I'm old and I can't remember the right words. At that time, there were only three television networks and everything was broadcast and you had to watch it when they broadcast it or you didn't watch it. They were running a very famous film for the first time called Judgment at Nuremberg. This was ABC. And it was a big TV event because this was a major, superduper whopper movie that everybody wanted to watch and it was about the Nazis and so forth and so on. And in the middle of this movie, they stopped the movie, they cut into the movie with the scenes from what had happened on Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that afternoon. I recognized it immediately right away because I'd been following what was going on in Selma. But a lot of people, including my parents initially thought this was part of the movie about Nazi atrocities. So, long story short, big emotional reaction. At that point, I cut my visit with my parents short, found somebody driving down to Selma, caught a ride and I arrived in Selma on – Bloody Sunday, obviously was a Sunday – I arrived on the following Tuesday.

**Sam**

And that's quite a coincidence that the sort of parallels between Selma and Nazi Germany, which is kind of crazy to think about, and that it happened like that in your experience.

**Bruce**

Yeah.

**Sam**

When you arrived in Selma, due to what happened a couple of days before, was there a different energy about it?

**Bruce**

I don't know. Obviously I can't say what was different from when I wasn't there. The energy was high.

**Sam**

Compared to previous marches? Did it feel any different?

**Bruce**

Oh, jeez, Selma was so totally different from CORE in the north that I had been experiencing. Totally different. CORE in the north as an organization and in the style of their work, their Gestalt, their milieu, their ambiance, was very much like the labor union. The Movement in the south was faith-based, like a black church. So, a CORE meeting started with Pledge of Allegiance and reports from the standing committees and there's a president and a gavel and new business and old business and good and welfare. I mean, it's all formal. A mass meeting in the south was like a revival, a church revival. The CORE meetings were very intellectual. The Southern Freedom Movement meetings – I'm saying this because it wasn't just Selma, it was everywhere, in the south – was highly emotional.

We got there in the dead of night, one o'clock in the morning maybe, what I said was it was Wednesday morning. Brown Chapel, The Movement headquarters church was open. People were sleeping in the pews and so I just crashed onto a pew. Dawn the next morning, I'm waking to bustling going on, people singing freedom songs, keeping children running in and out. They had a big kitchen in the back, there were people serving breakfast: cornbread, bacon, grits – I'd never eaten grits before, not bad actually – collard greens, which I didn't like. They gave me a little card, "You're here for The Freedom Movement." And there were a lot of churches serving meals, not just Brown Chapel.

So that afternoon – about four o'clock, three or four o'clock, late afternoon – a bunch of children – and I mean like 6, 7, 8, 9, 10-year-old children. The Brown Chapel was in the

middle of a federal housing project, which was entirely black. Did I talk about this in our last interview? So these kids start marching around the housing project singing freedom songs. And these are like elementary school, maybe, the first year of junior high. And everybody knew that was the signal to start gathering in Brown's Chapel for the mass meeting. And of course it was totally crowded. That mass meeting addressed by – King spoke, Hosea Williams spoke, Jim Bevel spoke, CT Vivian spoke, some of the greatest orators in American history. I was so emotionally moved, that I actually put a \$20 Traveler's Check in the collection bucket. And I'm pretty generous with my time but not my money. By the way, \$20 back then would be like \$100 today. That may not sound like much but it shows on my scale how moved I was. Now at that time, we were surrounded by the enemy, by state troopers, sheriff's posse, game wardens, the whole apparatus of Alabama law had us surrounded in the projects. They were not allowing any civil rights people out of that area. And anybody who tried – if we went as a group, the police attacked us. If people went as individuals, like to go somewhere, the Klan working hand in glove with the police had roving patrols to beat up anybody that they thought had anything to do with The Civil Rights Movement. And as you can see my complexion is quite pale. So I stood out in a group of black folks, so I was easily identified as somebody, "Oh, let's beat up that "expletive deleted" type person. We were literally surrounded, a couple of times we tried to break a march out to get down to the courthouse, but whole caravans of state troopers in cars came screeching around on the roads, which were all dirt roads, of course, to block us. That was the situation I found when – that was my first 24 hours in Selma.

### **Sam**

Was that the first time you really experienced or encountered the Ku Klux Klan.

### **Bruce**

Right? Yes, personally. I mean, in the early days of '63, we had the American Nazi Party against us in LA, but the Klan wasn't there. Or if they were, we didn't have any knowledge.

### **Sam**

You briefly mentioned that the Klan had a relationship with the police. They obviously had a very tangible presence, especially in African American neighborhoods. It was something to be very scared of.

### **Bruce**

Yeah. A couple of hours before I arrived in Selma – remember I arrived like in the dead of night – in the early evening of that night after dark, three Unitarian ministers had somehow gotten outside the perimeter – I think they'd gone to eat at a restaurant. These are white ministers, but they were there to support The Movement. They took a wrong turning, they were trying to walk back to The Movement office, and a Klan band jumped them. Beat two of them pretty badly, and beat the third so badly that after an enormous saga of trying to get him to the hospital, he eventually died a couple of days

later. So they beat him to death. The first night I slept on the pews. After that, I was invited to stay at the home of the West family, which was a very well known black family, very active in The Movement and they put up a lot of Movement people there. They had an apartment in the Carver Projects. And people were sleeping on the floors and all this kind of stuff. The only place I could find to sleep was – they had 12 children, 11 of whom were home, so they had a washing machine and a dryer because they had a lot of laundry. So I slept on top of – they were side-by-side, not stacked – I slept on top of the washer-dryer.

{momentary cut} Thank God we didn't have this technology during The Freedom Movement, we would've never got anything done.

The first night I was there they sat me down at the table and they said, "Look, don't go here. Don't go there. This is a dangerous spot. You can walk this block in the daytime, but never at night." And, "This is where the Klan hangs out. This is where so and so. Stay out of that neighborhood. If you need to escape, here's how." So they laid it all out. Well, those three ministers had just come and they weren't staying with anybody. They were bunking down at the Catholic mission. And they didn't have a local family to tell them, "Don't walk by the Silver Moon Cafe after dark." And not knowing that, they did and paid the price. So yeah, the Klan was a very serious presence.

You had the organized police – state troopers, sheriff's deputies, game wardens, and so forth. Then you had the sheriff's posse. The regular police had uniforms and all that kind of stuff, badges, and stuff. And of course, the posse wore ordinary khaki work clothes. And of course, they were on with pistols in clubs and cattle prods and stuff. And they had little tin badges that looked like they came out of crackerjack boxes. And instead of battle helmets like the cops did, they had construction helmets. So you could tell them, they wore ordinary clothes, tin badge, and construction helmets. The Klan looked basically dressed like the posse, except they didn't wear a badge and they thought the helmets were for sissies. So you knew they were Klan if they didn't have a helmet. But in some ways the distinction was irrelevant because Klansmen were members of the official police. And there were a lot of Klansmen in the posse. And of course, they were the posse uniform or the police uniform, except when they were off duty and then they wore what the Klan War. So they were all over the place.

### **Sam**

So obviously, as you said, they were something to be pretty scared of or at least something to worry about. Did you ever have any experiences where you felt in danger yourself?

### **Bruce**

Oh, sure. One time me and a couple of guys from SNCC we were walking toward – we'd gotten out of the Carver project, but we were still in the black community – and a

carload of whites drives, screeches up in front of us. And one of them puts out a shotgun, aims it right at us and says, well, I guess I can't tell you what he says.

### **Howard Levin**

If it's a quote, we want to hear exactly what you remember him saying.

### **Bruce**

"I'm gonna blow your motherfucking heads off!" That's what he said. And of course, I immediately started doing my CORE nonviolent training kind of stuff, but the SNCC people – they'd been there longer than I was and they knew what to say, so the SNCC guy says, "Just go ahead and do it, motherfucker." I guess that was the right way to handle it, it wasn't how we've been trained in CORE, but it worked. They drove off.

### **Sam**

Was there a culture shock – for lack of a better term – in the way they did things?

### **Bruce**

I wouldn't say shocked, more cultural amazement. They were very nonviolent. This SNCC guy knew what he was doing. There were times when they did the classic nonviolence. And in fact, one of my first assignments – I had originally thought I would work with SNCC. I ended up working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SCLC, which was Dr. King's organization. And that's another story. One of my first assignments with SCLC was because they knew that I had done CORE trainings, they wanted me to train Selma students and give the same training. They had an office with a big floor, an old wooden building, kind of funky, I believe that's the technical architectural term. I was training this group of maybe 15 to 20 mostly junior high, sophomore, freshman high school age Selma kids in nonviolence. Again, I wasn't doing the philosophical, I would tell them, "This is how you demonstrate this is how you protect yourself," etc.. So when we would do that in LA, part of it was you would say, "All right, now hit me, so I can show you what to do, how you curl up to protect yourself nonviolently." It was always very difficult to get, in the north, the people we were training to actually hit each other, or to curse each other or to throw rocks and bottles and eggs at each other. We really had to nudge them.

At my Selma training, there was a girl – I guess she must have been 14 or 15, Meg Griffin, she stood all of five foot-five and probably weighed 98 pounds. And I said to her, "All right, hit me." She looked at me and said "What?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, hit me and hit me hard." "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, just go ahead." And this big grin came over her face. And she walloped me so hard I was thrown back and skidded across the wood floor. I still have a scar on my back. After that, in training southern blacks, I never made such a big deal over "Hit me hard." Because once they had the idea that they could hit a white man, and it was okay, they were happy to do it. And it wasn't out of anger, and we all were laughing. I mean, everybody burst into



laughter when that happened. We got on great afterwards. So we did train in nonviolence, didn't always use it or we used it creatively.

**Howard**

Were any of these kids ever white?

**Bruce**

There were white supporters who came down from the north, but it was too dangerous for a white southerner. There was a time during the Freedom Rides when an integrated group rode the buses in Alabama and one of the buses was attacked by a Klan mob who set it on fire. They managed to get off the bus before it exploded. And they were kind of lying by the side of the road overcome by smoke and coughing. By that time the Klan had gone. This was out in a rural area, but it was right near a little country store owned by whites. There was a 10 or 11-year-old white girl who saw these people gasping for air. And she went and got a bucket and brought them some water. And for that transgression against racial norms in Alabama, her family was driven out of the county, they had to flee for their lives and escape. In Mississippi, some civil rights workers were – I think it was Hattiesburg or McComb, I don't remember – a white family was there. And they said, "Well, we don't really agree with these people. But we're good Christians and we'll invite a white civil rights worker to come to dinner and we can break bread together." Their daughter was Miss Mississippi. Now in Mississippi.

**Howard**

I'm just going to stop you because this is not your story, and we all know this story because we watched this on Eyes On The Prize. And just so that you know that woman, Jan Barnes, is part of the oral history project that students in McComb, Mississippi interviewed her about three or four years ago and she's on the website. It's a very cool story. {Watch interview with Jan Nave Barnes at [Telling Their Stories](#)}

**Bruce**

Outstanding. It must have been McComb, obviously. Okay, so I've lost my thread...

**Sam**

You were working with teenagers in Selma before the Selma March leading up to the Selma March?

**Bruce**

There were three Selma marches, but before the one that finally made it all the way to Montgomery.

**Sam**

And that was the one that had a lot of military presence.

**Bruce**

Yeah.

**Sam**

And the President {Johnson} was also making statements at the time that we're going along the lines with what the civil rights leaders were saying. How did it feel to have the President sort of supporting you after so much time of sort of failing?

**Bruce**

It felt I think for most of us, it was very elevating and it felt really good. You're referring to the speech he gave that he ended the speech by saying, "We Shall Overcome." I was in the West family living room, there were lots of people there watching that TV and everybody gasped and people smiled and beamed and so forth. On the other hand, not everyone in The Movement felt that way. A lot of the SNCC people who had been bitterly betrayed in previous years by the federal government were still so angry that Jim Foreman said that by Johnson using the words of "We Shall Overcome," he said, "He just spoiled one of our best songs for me," because of all of the betrayals, and all of the federal failures that had gone before. But basically, I think for most people it was a real triumph.

**Sam**

And then with the support of the federal government and the military, do you think a lot more people came out to Selma, to the final march?

**Bruce**

Clearly there were people who marched who would not have marched had it not been for the federal protection, but none of us would have marched had it not been for the federal protection because we would have been blocked by the state troopers.

**Sam**

Me and Howard had a conversation before class today, and I was comparing research that I've done with the Vietnam War and PTSD and how people feel as though when coming back from a different country, it's hard to come back to reality. And we sort of made that connection with Mississippi and Alabama. Did you feel like it was so different from the rest of the country? The military had to step in. That must be a pretty surreal experience?

**Bruce**

It was very definitely different. I don't know about the military stepping in as something significant than that. In some ways we forced them to use the military, that's what we were trying to do. In other words to politically force our political leaders to use the legal authority of the federal government to enforce something called the United States Constitution. That was our strategy. But culturally – when I left the south in February of

1967, 2 years, I experienced something very similar to what Vietnam veterans have told me about the experience they had of returning to “the world” as they referred to outside of Vietnam. I had been in the south where we were in danger all the time, constantly, it was like the war zone. And the only place I was safe was in the heart of the black community. So white people were dangerous, black people were safe. So I leave the south and I go to New York and I'm suddenly surrounded by all of these strange white people and I got scared. It took me two or three days to adjust to that. I've heard Vietnam veterans, similar things, it took them a couple of days to adjust.

### **Sam**

Coming back to Selma, I want to ask a couple of questions about the final march that succeeded. How was that? Just explain a little bit about that day and what that experience was like for you.

### **Howard**

What happens next after you arrived in Selma?

### **Bruce**

What happened next was – either Wednesday or Thursday – I don't know how we got through, somehow there was a court order or something that allowed us to march to the courthouse to demand the right to register to vote. You're surrounded by cops, they forced us into an alley, they had it rigged so almost nobody could go in to register to vote and no blacks who tried to register would be able to register. After that, the mayor issued some kind of emergency decree forbidding all protests. And I think at that point, Reverend Reed died. I'd have to look up my log to get the exact – so this is my memory. So we tried to have a march – no, he was still hanging on by a thread. The Movement had managed to get him to a hospital in Birmingham because the taxpayer-supported public hospital in Selma refused to treat anybody who was associated with the Freedom Movement if they were white, and their standard practice was that blacks could only be treated on Thursdays. So he was still hanging by a thread. So we decided to have a march to pray for him at the courthouse. And that's when the mayor declared, “State of emergency, no marches.” And they blocked our march, they blocked it right there in front of Brown Chapel. The police spread a rope across Sylvan Avenue – which is today, Martin Luther King Street. So we were lined up sort of pressed against that rope and we just stayed there for days, 24 hours, around the clock. And the kids made up a song called, “They Got a Rope We Call the Berlin Wall. [\[We've Got a Rope Called the Berlin Wall\]](#) And we were singing and preaching. It was raining, it was hot. I don't know, three or four or five days before.

Then Reverend Reed died, and we got a court order that allowed us to have a memorial march, which we did. Meanwhile, it's all going through the courts about “can we march to Montgomery?” And eventually, after, I don't know, God, it must have been 10 days or more, I don't remember, maybe two weeks it took. A lot of us believe that the judge who was hearing the case to allow us whether we had the right to march to

Montgomery, was a Democratic Party stalwart who'd been appointed to be his high judgeship and he was politically connected with the Democratic Party. And nobody could understand why he was taking so long to rule on this obvious First Amendment freedom of speech issue. He waited until the day after Johnson made his speech saying, "We Shall Overcome, and "I am going to submit a Voting Rights Bill." So that when we marched Johnson could spin it as we weren't marching to protest federal inaction, we were now marching to support him. And as soon as that could be spun that way, the judge ruled we could do our march.

So then the next couple of days we were totally organizing the march and then we marched. And on the first day of the march, it was supposed to step off at 11 am, and the leaders hadn't shown up until 2 pm – this being typical, because we never started anything on the time we were supposed to. And we marched out, and the Klan had a big mob outside on the other side of the Edmund Bridge, but the police kept them from attacking us. And we got to the border of Lowndes County. And there we had the first – am I going into too much detail for this march? Thumbs up. Under the court order, we were to march on highway 80, US 80, from Selma to Montgomery. US 80 in Dallas County, which is where Selma is, is four lanes so we could have as many people marching as we wanted. And we marched right up to the border of Lowndes County. But 80 going across Lowndes County is only two lanes, one lane in each direction. So the judge says, "Well, you can't... you're limited to only 300 marchers." So only 300 marchers camped overnight at the campsite on the border. The others had to be ferried back to Selma, where the mob had grown so big it was dangerous to try and get them there, so they had to be – John Doar of the Justice Department got the railroad to charter a special train to go to a site, it was a whole big megillah to get the people safely back. For the next two days, the march crossed Lowndes County, also known as "Bloody Lowndes" historically before all of this because it was a Klan stronghold like you wouldn't believe. That's later where Viola Liuzzo and Jonathan Daniels – who was one of the people also staying at the West house when I was there, so he was in a sense, my roommate – they were both killed in Lowndes County, gunned down.

**Sam**

Sorry to hear that.

**Bruce**

And then on the fourth day, we were back into Montgomery County and the road was four lanes again so we could have as many people marching as we wanted. And we camped the last night on the grounds of St. Jude – which was a Catholic, school, and hospital. And then the very last day of the march was from St. Jude, which is on the outskirts of Montgomery, to the steps of the Alabama Capitol where Dr. King gave one of his great speeches.

**Sam**

I heard in a video that where he gave that speech was also where the governor of

Alabama also gave a speech saying that slavery would be something that would stay in America forever?

### **Bruce**

I think Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America, took his oath of office there or something like that. And {Governor George} Wallace, in many places said, "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." And he kept up that until black folk got the vote, at which point he immediately changed his tune.

### **Sam**

So obviously looking back on the Selma March and that speech by Martin Luther King, that was a very pivotal moment. Could you feel the weight of that situation? Just seeing pictures of it, you can see how powerful it was.

### **Bruce**

Oh, yeah. One of the things about that march, for the 300, who "went all the way" – that was our phrase for those who are able to march the whole distance – out of that 300, 275 were local Selma and black-belt regional people who'd been active in The Movement, they were local black folk. And then 25 people who were representatives of other organizations and people from the north and big shots and so forth. Obviously I wasn't one of them, my job was that I was on the night security detail guarding the camp at night, and so I didn't march across Lowndes County.

But then on the last day of the March – the press said there were 25,000, my guess is it was probably 30 or 35,000 because they always underestimated – most of the people on that march were black folk from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, etc. And that was a very powerful statement. It was very emotional – it was very emotional. His speech was one of his great ones, I think they call it now, "Our God is marching forward," it's the one where he said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," which of course, is a quote from [??].

But one of the things that was really interesting for me is that I was one of the monitors on the march so I had a monitor thing on, I think we had armbands or something or a vest or something. And I'm walking along and, this little black woman with white hair, big white hair, marching beside me and she turns to me with a big smile and she says, "You know, they say I'm the mother of this." And that's how I met Rosa Parks. So we got to talking – I met her at meetings a few times after, I really liked her, she was great. One of the things about the march – anyway, we got separated, but the march marched past the spot where she had been arrested for refusing to give her seat on the bus. Now, that occurred late 1954 and she was alone. And I knew somewhere in the march, either ahead of me or behind me, she was walking past that spot 10 years later with 25,000, 35,000 supporters. That was very emotional.

Another emotional thing was understanding or seeing – they wouldn't let us erect a stage, so for Dr. King and the speakers, we drove up a truck, this flatbed truck, and that was the stage from which he and the other speakers addressed the crowd. From that stage, he could see Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where he had been a preacher at the time that the Montgomery Bus Boycott started. I had to wonder as he was giving this speech about “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice,” what he must have been thinking as he gave those lines while he looked at the church where he had been a little country pastor, nobody knew him, he was just ordinary church guy. And here, he's a Nobel laureate, a leader of a mass movement. Do you see what I'm saying?

And then the march ended. And as soon as the march ended, the federal protection disappeared. And we had to start ferrying people back and forth, back to Selma and stuff and that's how the Klan was able to kill Viola Liuzzo. They chased her, she tried to outrun them but they had a faster car. They drove up alongside her and opened fire on her. I was on that road that night.

**Sam**

Wow. And so you experienced the end of the march and those speeches. And so after Selma, which was such a significant march and after hearing your experience about how different it was to your previous experiences as a leader in The Movement...

**Bruce**

Well, I was never a leader, I was a rank and file soldier. We used to joke, we were part of Dr. King's Freedom Army. Towards the end. I might have made Sergeant.

**Sam**

So as someone who definitely had a foot in the wet cement of The Civil Rights Movement, do you think that after experiencing something like that, which was so different and powerful, that your mindset changed just a little bit or you were that much more motivated to keep going?

**Bruce**

It didn't turn me around. It reinforced me. It really revealed to me a lot of truths about America that – and I'm talking now about the whole four years, the two years in LA, the two years in Alabama and Mississippi – revealed to me a lot of stuff that, let's say had not been clearly explained in my public schooling. And it deepened my commitment to social justice. It made me quite cynical about politicians.

**Sam**

As I mentioned, the Vietnam War is something that I am very interested in. Learning your experience and interviewing you and reading a lot about you, one sort of thing that kept coming up in my mind was the distinction between right and wrong and how the right thing was constantly overlooked by a lot of white people, and it was constantly

disregarded. In relation to the Vietnam War, that's the cause of a lot of people's PTSD was just sort of the basic disrespect for human rights. What was that like to go up against like plain evil and keeping a level head? At what point was right wrong because you had to go to jail a couple of times, and obviously jail isn't something that's considered right, but something you had to do. How did you base what you thought was right and wrong?

**Bruce**

I'm not quite following the question, my answer will be that, first of all, it made me very angry. I was an angry young man. Today I'm an angry old man. I'm still angry. But through nonviolence and social protest and political organizing, it gave me a way to deal with that anger and controlling it in pursuit of making a change. As a young man – our culture says that to be a man, to be brave – you have to be brave and courageous – and to be brave and courageous in a man, you have to have a gun and be violent. That's what our popular culture says, and glorifies that. But through nonviolence, I realized that to be effective, you have to control yourself and you have to be strategic and tactical. And so I focused on – I wanted to be macho, I wanted to, hey, it really impressed the girls too. We're trained that way. And it was hard for us not because being nonviolent meant we would get hurt because you'd get hurt in a fight. We had to give up violence and be nonviolent because we wanted to win. And we sacrificed the macho for the victory. And that was a hard thing to learn, but people could learn it. A number of the people who were SNCC organizers and CORE organizers had come out of black gangs in the south and in the north because they wanted to win. They wanted to achieve something.

**Sam**

And you're pretty open with the use of the word PTSD – or the acronym?

**Bruce**

We called burnout, by the way.

**Sam**

Before I met you, that's not a term I had heard associated with The Civil Rights Movement. How do you – I'm trying to think of a good way to phrase the question...

**Bruce**

Don't worry about insulting me. I've got thick skin.

**Sam**

How has that affected you personally and what does that prove about what America used to be and what it's now I guess?

**Bruce**

I don't know how it affected me personally. I mean, I'd probably take 20 years of deep

psychotherapy for that. I don't know how to answer that question. Especially since we only got two minutes left, or one minute left. I hate working against deadlines. Writers always do.

### **Sam**

I can't, I think that might be a good place to end it then I can't think of.

### **Howard**

I just want to give you guys a chance to jump in, anything you want to ask?

### **Elsa Hagstrom**

I know we asked you, or Mr. Levin did, about what books you thought – but were there any movies that you thought actually somewhat captured the experience or were they all just like, off the ballpark?

### **Bruce**

Oh, yes, there have been a couple of very good movies about The Civil Rights Movement. I think the best movie about the Freedom Movement is called *Freedom Song* with Danny Glover. You probably never heard of it. But it's actually a movie about The Movement in McComb, which Mr. Levin knows very well. I felt that the recent – well, a few years ago – the movie *Selma* had almost all the details wrong, but they had the heart right on, and I am okay with them having a lot of the details wrong because you're trying to compress reality into a 90-minute film and you gotta make it understandable. So I thought that was an excellent film. I think that the *Eyes on the Prize* series, which I believe have seen, is also very good. Those are the ones that are coming to mind right now. But definitely see *Freedom Song* if you ever get a chance. I'm sure it's streaming or on Netflix or something.

### **Sam**

Just one more follow up question that came to my mind relating to PTSD. Do you think that telling your story and having other people who experienced The Movement tell their story is a way to cope with and help?

### **Bruce**

Absolutely. We've had a group of us who've met ever since 1999, we meet monthly. And a lot of that is the healing of sharing our stories and our lives with other people who had been there, done that and knew what we were talking about, in the same way that military veterans need support groups of other military veterans who have experienced the same thing. And so yes. It's interesting, our group when we first formed, there was about a dozen of us, and one of the things we discovered is that the majority of us after we left the south had never spoken about it for two or three decades because it was too painful and too emotionally difficult. And it was only through working it through with each other that we became able to publicly do speaking and so forth.



**Howard**

You see the exact same thing, maybe longer, with Holocaust survivors, camp liberators, Japanese internees, they go through 10, 20, 30 years of not talking about it. That's why interviewing folks like you, Bruce is so important at this point because you and others are – I think actually there's a difference. You guys have it different because you were activists. You are not necessarily victims. I'm in some ways you're we're also victims. But you were conscious activists as opposed to those in the south who were just purely victimized.

**Bruce**

And in the Holocaust. And another big difference between us and military veterans is that our PTSD comes from what we experienced in what was done to us, but not by anything we did to anyone else. And that's a big important difference. And we're much better off. I have great sympathy for the GIs for whom that cannot be said.

**All**

Thank you!

May 4, 2020

**Sam Jubb**

My idea was to start with the ending of Selma and the final march.

**Bruce Hartford**

Before we leave Selma, did I tell you the story about being thrown jail with the white Klansmen?

**Sam**

No, definitely tell that story.

**Bruce**

Because it's a good story and it has educational value, I think.

**Sam**

When did this happen?

**Bruce**

It was in Selma, I don't remember exactly when, it may have been after The March to Montgomery, I think probably it was but I'm not entirely certain. But I'd already been in Selma for a while. I have to explain the prologue. One of the things that made Selma is

that Selma is the county seat of Dallas County. Dallas County was notorious in the south because of its incredibly vicious racist Sheriff Jim Clark. And one of the things he was famous for is that he had one of the largest sheriff's posses in the entire south. Anybody who watches western movies knows what the posse is. The posse is the bunch of people who, when the bank is robbed, they run out, they ride up on their horses and chase the bank robbers, or they go out to do battle with the cattle rustlers. But there wasn't much cattle rustling or bank robbery going on in the south in the 1950s and 60s. So why did they need a posse?

Clark actually started forming his posse after the Korean War to prevent labor unions from coming into Selma, which at that time had some industry. It was to beat up and drive out and prevent any chance of unionizing. But after the Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation order, they shifted their focus to suppressing any black aspirations to be treated as American citizens. And by the time I got there, his posse was very large, somebody told me it was over 100. I don't know if that's true, but it was quite large, and a number of them were what they called "the mounted posse" because they had their own horses. One of the things that people don't know or aren't familiar with – I'm not sure this applies to Clark – but in the more rural counties and possibly Clark, sheriffs were not paid a wage, the sheriff's deputies were, but the elected sheriff didn't get paid, he didn't get a salary. And, of course, it was always a he. Instead, the state paid a fee, so every time he arrested somebody, he got money. Every time he served a court paper, he got money. Every time somebody was stopped at a traffic and written a citation, he got money for the citation and then he got a share of the fine or the penalty that whoever he arrested was fined. So a sheriff – leaving aside the bribes he got from bootleggers and other people of loose morals, a sheriff could make a lot of money. It was a very good job as long as he arrested people a lot and served a lot of papers and did a lot of sheriffing work. Of course that's really good if you're a sheriff except you've got to be elected. So if you annoyed the voters too much by arresting them and giving them traffic citations for going three miles over the speed limit out there on rural road 94, they would not elect you again. But if you had a population of African Americans who were not allowed to vote, why you could arrest them and cite them to your heart's content and it wouldn't interfere with your reelection chances. So this is one of the reasons why the southern sheriffs were so adamant against voting rights for blacks.

Another thing they used to do, another way they made money is that when you were in their jails, they would get a certain amount of money each day to feed each prisoner. But they didn't have to spend all that money and whatever money they didn't spend, they could keep. So if he got a-buck-fifty a day to feed me and he only bought 75 cents worth of food, he made an extra whatever 50 cents per meal on me. And the result definitely showed up in the quality of the food that we were given to eat.

So, Clark built up this huge posse and he didn't just keep it in Dallas County. He sent it – when the Freedom Riders were beaten up by the mob in Montgomery, the main

leaders of the mob, a lot of them were his posse. And of course, a lot of the posse members were members of the Klan. When Meredith went to integrate Ole Miss, University of Mississippi, and this huge mob rioted and killed three people, Sheriff Clark's posse was part of that. They were part of the ones beating up the children in Birmingham. And when I went to Marion, Alabama, as part of my SCLC assignment, there was Clark's posse. When I was sent to Wilcox County to march, suddenly we're marching along this rural road headed towards town and this gang of men on horses comes charging out of the woods at us, beating us with clubs and canes and shit like that. And then, of course, they tear-gassed us. The posse, they weren't – I don't think they were paid, although they may have had some expenses paid for them. All they had was a little tin badge and then they dressed in work clothing and construction helmets, they supplied their own horses, their own whips, some used baseball bats to beat us. There was a furniture factory in Selma at that time and a lot of the men who worked in the furniture factory got table legs, wooden table legs to use as clubs. They favored that.

So this one time, I was young and stupid, let me preface the story. I had been organizing these picket lines, mostly young junior high and high school students, to picket in Selma to enforce the boycott of the white merchants, which is a whole other story. And they were all arrested, of course, some of them were able to picket for all of two or three minutes before they were arrested, because the First Amendment – actually the US Constitution had, as Sheriff Clark said, “Well, that law ain't come down here yet.” They had to appear in court. And as the person who had been one of the coordinators, I thought I should go and be there to support them. So as soon as I walked into the court, the judge, who was a notoriously racist judge, ordered me out. And I went out and then I said, “Wait a minute, I should be with them.” So I went back in and I was immediately arrested for contempt of court and contributing to the delinquency of a minor, which is a major felony, and I forget what else, there were a couple of other charges. And Sheriff Clark was very happy to grab me by the arm and lead me out of the courthouse. And as he's putting me into the police car, the sheriff's car, he calls me a communist. Still not having learned my lesson about being brash and stupid, I said, “Communist, what is a communist?” And he knew the answer right off. He told me that, “A communist is any goddamn New York kike which wants our niggers to vote.” Well, except for the fact that I was from LA, he had me pretty much dead to rights. I thought he was giving the communists a lot too much credit, because they basically did nothing. The southerners said that the Freedom Movement was all “Communist this, communists that.” The actual real communists, who I knew because my parents had been communists, they did very little. He told me that was his definition of communism was if you thought black people had a right to vote, that made you a communist.

So he takes me to the prison. The police apparatus in Selma was housed in a three-story building, and on the ground floor, they had their various offices. The second floor was the city jail and the third floor was the county jail, which was much better

appointed than the city jail. Right across the street was another three-story building, which was the headquarters of all the Freedom Movement organizations, particularly SNCC and SCLC – SCLC at that time was on the second floor and SNCC was on the third floor. Anyway, you could look from one window across the street, across Franklin Street and you could see into the other team – the other side's windows.

So he throws me into the cell and there's this young white guy, buff, and he says, "Here's one of them nigger lovers, and you know what to do." So as soon as Clark turned his back and walked down the aisle, the guy commenced to beat on me. And he was hitting me and beating me and I curled up on the floor, we were trained to handle this. I'm on the floor, and he's kicking and stomping and beating, but he really wasn't damaging me very much. Yeah, I got bruises, it hurt, but I wasn't injured. One of the things you don't really understand if you watch too much TV or movies, is that beating up somebody is really hard work and it takes a lot of energy and pretty soon he got tired. So he stopped beating up on me. And once I saw he had stopped, I uncurled and leaned back, I was sitting on the floor and I leaned back against the wall. He sat down next to me. And he says, "Are you really..." so and so I says, "Yeah." I explained who I was, I worked for Dr. King. We didn't really get into an argument. He was just sort of curious about me. And we were talking and, and I mentioned that I had just a couple days earlier come back from this – about a week earlier – had come back from this thing in Wilcox where we had been attacked. And he says, "Oh, you were in Wilcox. Did you see me?" And I said, "What?" He says, "Yeah, I'm in Sheriff Clark's posse. I was one of the people on the horses." And he didn't say "beating the crap out of you," but that was sort of understood. And I said, "But you're in the Dallas County posse. What were you doing in Wilcox?" He says, "Oh, when Sheriff Clark tells you to go, you have to go. You got to do what Sheriff Clark says." So a little later on, I said, "Well, you're in the posse, for God's sake, what are you doing in jail?" And he goes into this long involved story, I can't even remember the details. He had been arrested for stealing something. But what it boiled down to was, he had somehow pissed off Clark. And Clark had arrested him for something, maybe something he actually did, maybe something he didn't do. He swore he was innocent, of course, not that I necessarily believed it. And I said, "Well, what does your lawyer say?" He says, "Oh, I haven't been allowed to talk to a lawyer." I said, "How long have you been in prison?" "Oh, four days." "And you haven't been able see a lawyer?" He said, "Well, I was able to call my family and they could bring me cigarettes. But no, they don't allow me to see a lawyer." And what shocked me was he thought that was normal. To him, Clark was the feudal lord, who could do whatever he wanted. And as he explained to me, "Look, it really doesn't matter. Eventually, Clark will get over his mad at me and he'll let me go and I'll go back onto the posse." It was like a mindset from feudal times.

So we're talking and this – I guess he must have been about 10 or 11 – this chubby little boy comes walking down the aisle between the cells. And he's very obese, Porky Pig kind of. And he starts, "Nay, neah, nay, neah, you're prisoners, you're jail birds!" And he starts throwing garbage and shit at us and, and teasing us. And a little girl

comes – maybe eight or nine and she's also like that, and she starts doing it. Well, they weren't hurting us, you can get teased, but when you're teased by a kid who cares? So I turned to the posse guy – I don't even know if I ever knew his name, I don't remember his name. I said, "Who are these kids? He said, "Oh, those are Jim Clark's kids, they live in the cell, two cells down." And I said "What?" He says, "Oh, yeah," he says, "We know that the niggers will kidnap and kill those kids if they are not guarded 24 hours around the clock. They haven't lived in their home for months. They've been living in the cell." And later on that evening, I could hear them watching TV and squabbling and doing kid stuff. I have no idea where Mrs. Clark was, we never saw her. But that's the crazy mindset of these arch racists. When I see these white supremacists, white nationalists with their AR15s parading at courthouses to force things open, I flashback to Sheriff Jim Clark and his insanities and this posse guy with this feudal mentality. I thought I should mention that story because it so typifies what we were up against.

**Sam**

Yeah, because he had those people almost brainwashed. It's like a mindset.

**Bruce**

Not almost.

**Sam**

He did.

**Bruce**

Well, I don't know if their brain was washed clean but it was definitely inculcated with some insane nonsense.

**Sam**

How long in total did you spend in Alabama?

**Bruce**

I came into Alabama about mid-March. I was in Selma until early June. At that time SCLC started up what they called the SCOPE project, which stood for Summer Community Organizing and Political Education. And essentially, it was a summer project like Freedom Summer the previous year, except that it was in six southern states where northern volunteers – mostly college students, mostly white – would be sent to help with voter registration and political education in counties in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, the two Carolinas, and Virginia. By that time I was on the SCLC field staff and I was sent to Crenshaw County which is the county directly south of Montgomery County, they're totally rural counties. I was the project director for that summer. Then at the end of August I had to return to Los Angeles for a couple of trials for the sit-ins we had done in the previous year. And then I was awarded a 30-day sentence on the LA County prison farm, which was known as the Wayside Honor Ranch, so I considered it an honor to have been awarded a vacation stay there. And

that was a whole other story, very educational. And then after I was released, having no doubt been rehabilitated, I was released, I guess it must have been January, or late January, early February of '66. I got on a bus and went back to Alabama. I worked in Alabama in Marengo, Hale and Perry counties until the Meredith Mississippi March, at which time I was reassigned to Mississippi.

### **Sam**

Do you want to talk a little bit about that march?

### **Bruce**

That march was – it was a major march but it doesn't make a lot of impression in the history books because there was no great legislation that came out of it. In other words, after Birmingham came the Civil Rights Bill. After the Selma to Montgomery March came the Voting Rights Bill. But the 1966 Civil Rights Bill was defeated in the Senate by the filibuster. And also it was a very controversial march because it was the march at which SNCC raised the cry for Black Power which was extremely controversial largely because of the media. See what people don't know... They used to have a museum in Washington, DC, I think it's closed now, called the Newseum, which was a museum of the news industry. And they had lots of exhibits all patting themselves on the back on how wonderful they were in the Civil Rights Movement and how they helped shape and change America for the better, blah blah blah blah. The truth is that the American mass media basically gave decent and fair coverage to the Civil Rights Movement for only two years, starting with the Children's Crusade in Birmingham and pretty much ending in mid-1965 after the Selma to Montgomery march. Before that time, yeah they would publicize when something dramatic happened, the Freedom Rider buses burn, riots, clubbings, and so forth. But they mixed it in with, "Oh my God, is this communist-dominated? What is this going to do to our standing in the world and the fight against... We're the leader of the free world." And blah, blah, blah blah. And, "Is this going to cause anarchy." And, "They're deliberately violating laws." and, wither and thither and hither. So that was all coming up to about Birmingham which was the spring a '63. So by '66, though...

See something happened, something happened in August of 1965 when we were in Crenshaw County. It was a little thing called the Watts Riot. And that terrified white liberals because it's not in the south, it's in the urban areas where they live. And the fact that they were liberals was not going to save them from black anger at what was going on. And at the same time the Civil Rights Movement in the North was beginning to challenge northern segregation, urban school segregation, and housing segregation and start demanding jobs for non-whites, which threatened the jobs of whites. So, suddenly there was a great falling off of support by white liberals. And the liberal news media began running more articles about "Kill whitey," "Black Nationalists," "Urban Guerrilla Warfare," etc, etc. And then along came the slogan Black Power, and they discovered they could sell as many or more papers peddling fear among whites of fear of black folk and brown folk too as they could selling any other scare story. So they

made Black Power enormously controversial.

We were on The March, we didn't know that. And there were a lot of arguments. Stokely Carmichael at that point was the leader of SNCC and at a speech in Greenwood, he raised the cry, "What we want is Black Power!" But it was just a slogan. There was no program behind it. And everybody cheered. But everybody – since there was no program defining what it is – a friend of mine, Don Jelineck, who passed away a few years ago, was driving with Stokely in a car somewhere – he was a white guy, he was a SNCC worker and he was a lawyer. And he says, "Stokely, my mother keeps writing me letters asking me, 'What is this Black Power thing?' What should I tell her?" And Stokely laughed – Stokely had a great sense of humor – he laughed, he said, "When I figure it out, I'll let you know." Nobody knew what it was, so everybody interpreted it in their own way. So we're all marching along and we're all giving our own interpretations of what Black Power was. By this time there was a very strong black nationalist current of the thought within SNCC which was that only blacks should work with blacks, whites should only work with whites and that they should reject non-violence. I did not agree with that. And they said, "Well, that's what Black Power means." I did not agree with that, so I argued with them. On the other hand, there were a lot of people who said, "Well, what we have been doing all along, has been fighting for that non-white people should have a fair share of political and economic power. And that's what Black Power means. And I said, "Yeah, that makes sense, that's what we're doing." And so in some arguments, I would be for Black Power and other arguments I would be against Black Power, depending on what the other person defined it as. So that march after Greenwood was one long – what's that thing they used to have in ancient Greece – the Agora where everybody would debate politics and stuff.

### **Sam**

So that negatively affected The Movement in a way. It created a lot of confusion.

### **Bruce**

It did. It created a lot of division within The Movement, and it also way undercut the financial support from white liberals. But it wasn't just Black Power that did that. The urban riots scared away a lot of people. SNCC's refusal to accept Johnson's betrayal at the Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City in 1964 over the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats, that alienated liberals who were basically aligned very closely with the Democratic Party. By 1966, The Movement was speaking out against the Vietnam War and that alienated – remember the Vietnam War was not created by right-wingers, it was a liberal operation. Eisenhower wasn't particularly right-wing and Kennedy and Johnson were the architects of the Vietnam War. So the liberals in America were split between those who opposed the war, and those who supported the war. And that split affected the support for the Freedom Movement as the Freedom Movement turned against and began to speak against the Vietnam War. So there were a number of things. But I think the biggest thing that undercut the Freedom Movement starting in 1966, was that we had won what we started out to do, which was to end

segregation in schools and public accommodations and win voting rights for non-white people. That was the original goal. But as we were working on those goals, and we saw the incredible poverty and political disempowerment, we said, "We got to address that." And as we started addressing economic issues suddenly a lot of the support that had been there for voting rights and eating at lunch counters evaporated because we were beginning to challenge the political powers that be and we were beginning to raise economic issues that people did not want – that were very controversial. And we didn't make much headway on those. And they are still with us today.

### **Howard Levin**

It's really important that we get from your experience in the Meredith March into Grenada, because I think the story of Grenada, and your story and your experiences in Grenada are really critically important. I think it's part of what you just described as pieces of the Civil Rights history that is not commonly told. And here you are. So I want to make sure that Sam gets you into Grenada so you can really talk about your hands-on experience doing the things you just said,

### **Bruce**

Sorry. You see, the historian in me is irrepressible. What can I say? So Sam, get me into Grenada.

### **Sam**

You mentioned that march in Alabama?

### **Bruce**

No, Mississippi. The Meredith March was in Mississippi. I'll tell you how I got to the Meredith March.

### **Sam**

Okay, do that.

### **Bruce**

As the Meredith March got bigger and bigger and more and more of a crisis, SNCC, CORE and SCLC all started feeding staff into The March to help it. And the NAACP refused to participate. That's another story. The team of us SCLC workers in western Alabama were one of the last groups to be sent into reinforce the Meredith March. We knew how to handle Alabama. We knew Alabama. We knew what we were doing. But we were scared of Mississippi. All over Alabama where we were working, when we talked to local folks, black folks, and they'd say, "Oh God, Alabama is terrible, but thank God I don't live in Mississippi." Later when I was in Mississippi people would tell me, "Oh, it's terrible here but thank God I don't live in Alabama." What it is, the dangers you know, you're not as scared of as the dangers you don't. But so we were scared.

And we're driving along and we cross over the Mississippi line and now we're on a



freeway. And we're driving down the freeway and we see up ahead the freeway is blocked off by police cars with their flashing lights and they're diverting everyone into a roadside rest area – you know how on the rural freeways they got rest areas. We said, “Ahh shit, they're going to arrest us, they're looking for people coming to join the Meredith March,” and we were thinking we were going to get a beating or arrested. Nope, wrong, totally wrong. Mississippi had gotten such a bad reputation that they were trying to rehabilitate their reputation. “Mississippi really is a good place, a good place to invest,” because companies were refusing to invest in Mississippi. So they thought they would rehabilitate the image and the way they decided to do that is they diverted everybody off of the interstate. And they had an encampment there where Miss Mississippi – in her crown, her tiara, and her court of junior Miss Mississippis were there welcoming people to Mississippi and handing out free Coka Colas and candy and stuff. So one of the assistant Miss Mississippis comes up to our car – and as plain as day, you've got five black men and one white man in this car, and we're in our jeans and we got our buttons on, it's plain as day who we were – and her face just fell. But, hey, she was a trooper, I gotta give her props, she had her job and she did it. She said, “Welcome to Mississippi y'all!” and started handing us out Cokes. And she had these bunch of buttons that said, “Welcome to Meridian, Mississippi.” And she said, “Take them!” And we took all the buttons and stuff and we were just laughing, mostly with relief.

Anyway, we escaped Miss Mississippi and her siren call, and then we started crossing Mississippi. And, “Where is The March?” We knew that it had been in Yazoo City, so the guy who was our leader, Albert Turner – he was the state director for SCLC for Alabama – he said, “We'll go to Yazoo.” We drove through the streets of Yazoo, which is a Delta town, it's the epitome of a Mississippi rural cotton town, racist to the bone. He took one look at the people walking on the street and he turned to us and said, “The march has already been through here,” he could see it in their faces. So we turned and figured out what road they would have been on and we went and caught up to them. And so all but the driver, we jumped out and we started to march. That's how I got on The March.

A week or 10 days earlier before I got to The March, The March had come through Grenada, Mississippi. Now Grenada, Mississippi had eight or 9000, 10,000 people maybe, and it was the main town between Jackson and Memphis on the main highway, north-south highway. And it had never had civil rights activity because it was too tough a nut to crack. Everybody had been terrified. They tried to have Freedom Summer there, but run out of town within minutes. When The March came marching through into Grenada, they marched through the main black community and people just came pouring out off their porches and The March swelled to enormous amounts. It was just amazing. Even the cops were amazed. And they had a rally on The Green – like a lot of Southern towns, there's a central green and the main part of town is around that green, that's where all the businesses and the courthouse and stuff is – they had a rally there and then they had a rally in the church. And the city leader, the city manager in

Grenada had a strategy – white guy, of course. There was a rumor that there was over 100 black people registered to vote in Grenada before The March but nobody ever knew who they were, and they never showed up at the polls, and this is out of a black population of 10,000 or something like that. I don't have the exact numbers. The county was half white, half black basically. So really no registration at all. So the city manager had this strategy that what he would do is they would make promises and ease The March through Grenada because their analysis was that “This civil rights thing was just a bunch of Northern agitators and their colored people were contented and happy.” They literally said that. So if they can just get The March through without any trouble, everything would go back to normal. So, as part of this strategy, he hired four African American voter registrars. So that night, a bunch of people were able to get registered, I don't know, there might have been 100 or so. Of course, what they didn't know was he was playing a trick on them in that they were only half registered. We didn't discover that until later. So then The March went on its way and everything went back to normal as far as the white power structure was concerned. But Dr. King had spoken that night because everybody – The Movement people, the cops, the community itself – had been amazed at the turnout. Other than Canton, where we got tear-gassed later, it was the biggest turnout and the biggest response in the black community to the Meredith March of the whole shebang, outside of Canton and Jackson, which of course was a big city, by southern terms. So he [Dr. King] had said, “After The March, do you want to SCLC to come back and continue to work here?” And it was just, “Yeah, yeah, yeah!”

So after the Meredith March, I was reassigned from Alabama to Grenada. The afternoon I arrived in Grenada – and this will give you a flavor, a sense of, I forget what their motto was, but it was something like, “We're a wonderful friendly place.” So we had an afternoon mass meeting at Belle Flower Church, and some of us are hanging around afterwards, most of the crowd had dispersed, and two white guys in a pickup truck drive up. One of them pulls out an automatic weapon and starts machine-gunning at people. Fortunately, everybody dropped and crawled under the church or behind the car, they shot up their car and then screeched off. They were arrested several blocks away. One of the people he was shooting his machine gun at was a federal agent with the Community Relations Service. They were arrested, not for any of that, but for allegedly pointing a gun at a white woman. And some weeks later, they were put on trial for that atrocious crime, and the jury took almost a half-hour to acquit them. And that was justice in Grenada. Welcome to Grenada, Bruce.

The thing about Grenada – July, August, September, October, November – in five months from the beginning of July to the end of November, the Grenada Freedom Movement replicated the entire history of the broader Southern Freedom Movement. Fighting around segregation – this was a year after the Civil Rights Bill passed, all of the public facilities, including the library and the swimming pool, were still completely segregated – so fighting against segregation. Fighting for jobs. Fighting for voter registration. And fighting against school segregation. This is 1966, Brown vs. Board of Education was in 1954, so that was 12 years earlier, Grenada schools: totally

segregated. You had a white elementary and a white high school and you had a colored elementary school and high school. And you could look at them and see which was which, you didn't even have to read the sign, you could just look at the quality of the buildings.

So we did the whole nine yards: sit-ins, canvassing, voter registration, mass marches. We had nightly mass marches. Sometimes we had two or three marches a day. The Movement was amazing. And usually, we would go up and circle around – initially we would have rallies on The Green, then they made that illegal. But the thing I remember, three or four times in the course of these months – the white power structure was split. You had the hardliners whose political philosophy was, “Knock them in the head, throw them in jail, and they'll go back to normal.” And you had the moderates whose political strategy is, “We need to attract northern investment, we can't have all this bad publicity, so we need to make the minimum number of concessions we can while still holding power, but yes, allow some Afro Americans to vote and we'll hire a couple janitors or something and we'll keep calm that way.” And these two factions went back and forth. So when the moderates were in the driver's seat, we could march and they wouldn't attack our marches.

The second day I was in Grenada, we marched up to the police department. Oh, no, no, we couldn't march at all because they would break up the march, so we drifted up there in little groups, and then coalesced to sing as a group to people who had previously been arrested for Movement activity before I got there. At which point 50 members of the state troopers – we heard they were forming up to attack us, so we dispersed – they came out and they didn't see any demonstrators to attack. But there was a crowd of local black folk who had been watching. And they figured, “Well, we'll just attack them.” And so they smashed them with the rifle butts and arrested and brutalized them. When the hardliners were in – so then we got an injunction that said that you have to allow people to peacefully protest. So then what they would do is they would mobilize the Klan to attack our nightly marches. The Klan would come in, and there would be no police at all, and they would attack us. And then the media would report that and then there would be big news in the mass media, and then the Governor would say, “Oh, what's happening to Mississippi's public image?” And then they would come in and hey would tell the Klan to stop and the police would pretend to stop the Klan. And then that would go down until we did something else which would put the hardliners back in power. So this happened three or four times, this cycle of several days of intense violence followed by a couple weeks of relative calm. But on some of these times, I remember times we were marching around the square – they outlawed us, they said we couldn't have rallies on the square, so we marched in the street around the square. And they would be like two or 300 of us. And there was be 5,6,7, 800 racists surrounding us throwing rocks and firecrackers. They had slingshots and they would put broken chain links, and they would shoot the slingshots at us which would put out an eye if they hit you in the eye. But through our non-violent discipline, and through the power of our singing, most of the time, we could literally keep them

from charging into us to club us and beat us and kick us. Not always, sometimes they did that. But usually.

**Howard**

I want you to take us on a little tour of what you can see on the map. You see this map, right?

**Bruce**

Uh huh.

**Howard**

We're gonna go right into the Belle Flowers Baptist Church. Where is this square that you're talking about?

**Bruce**

You see Belle Flower with the little red thing? Now go to your right along Pearl Street, keep going to your right along Pearl Street. Keep going. Now let's see, hold still.

**Howard**

There's the jail. There's the county court.

**Bruce**

There's the county court. Pearl St, we would come up. Move the map so the courthouse goes up. Okay, you see where it says County Courthouse. Right to the right of it is the square, it's got kind of green blotches. You see that?

**Howard**

Right here?

**Bruce**

Yeah, that's the county square. And we would march in those streets. That's it! That's the square. And you see how there's like parking and stuff and we would march. And you see that up in the upper part, there's a white car parked. That's a whole line of stores. That's one of the main places the mob congregated. That was the worst spot. And then they also were often along the right. They would be across the street from the square.

**Howard**

Great. Thank you.

**Sam**

After Grenada, how much time did you spend in Grenada working on actions?

**Bruce**

I was there from July to February of the next year. And by that time, I was just a wreck. I was down to 135 pounds. My stomach was hurting all the time. I couldn't sleep. I had to keep a pistol at the side of my bed. I was just burned out, so I left.

**Sam**

Did you come back to California?

**Bruce**

No, I went first to visit my parents in Connecticut. And then some of the people I had known from SCLC, Jim Bevel and Bernard Lafayette, had been hired to organize the first really big mass march against the Vietnam War, it was called the Spring Mobilization Against the War. And that was a mass march from Central Park in New York City to the UN building. And so I helped organize that and worked on that. And then I stayed in New York over the summer. We had a community project in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn, trying to organize against the war. And actually we got attacked by a mob there of pro-war people. And then in September, I went to San Francisco State, obviously in San Francisco.

**Howard**

I want to go back to Grenada for a second.

**Bruce**

There's a lot of Grenada stories.

**Howard**

Yeah, I know. Because you asked me and so I get to ask the question, and that is, you have a lot of stories about kids and kids' involvement, junior high through high school. Is there a story or two in Grenada of the active involvement of younger kids?

**Bruce** 58:13

Well, there was the whole school march. Is that what you're thinking of?

**Howard**

I think so. Yeah.

**Bruce**

Throughout the south, most of the Civil Rights protests, which is what mostly the media covered, the real Civil Rights Movement was done in people's minds and hearts and living rooms and in their places of work, but it was invisible to the media. What was visible were the protests. And most of the protests, a typical protest, would have at the front a few Black men, usually ministers or community leaders, and the rest of the march would be composed of black women and school kids, boys, and girls, usually, high school, if there was a college, there would be college kids Grenada didn't have a college. And, that would be what most of the marches were like. That was true in Selma

and that was true in Grenada. So the backbone of the protesting was adult black women, and junior high and high school boys and girls. Their courage was awesome. I very rarely use "awesome," but in this case, it was. The Birmingham movement was called the Children's Crusade because of that.

**Sam**

Why was it solely those people that you see?

**Bruce**

Because black men were, first of all, the most vulnerable to being lynched, brutalized, shot. And they were the ones with jobs who put food on the table and a roof over their heads and they would be fired if they were known to participate in freedom activities. Even registering to vote or attempting to register to vote, you would get fired for that.

**Sam**

So because they were women and younger people, they were seen as a little more vulnerable and they wouldn't sort of physically harm them.

**Bruce**

Yes, the women were seen as less vulnerable to physical assault and the children were so enraged and enthused, you couldn't keep them away. And time after time, the parents, the black parents would say, "No, no, you ain't going to the demonstration." And they'd say, "Yes, Mama. We are going to the demonstration." You couldn't stop them. When the march to Montgomery marched through Montgomery, the school tried to keep them in, and they were jumping out the windows to join the march. There were some you couldn't stop. Obviously, the majority didn't participate.

In late August, because the Grenada schools were still totally segregated, The Movement filed a lawsuit and because it was so flagrant, the federal courts immediately took it over and the federal judge said, "We ain't even dealing with the usual years-long bullshit. You are desegregating your school come September. Shut up and do it. And if you don't do it, your federal funding will be cut off." Uh oh, now you're talking money now they're going to listen. So they said, "All right." All through ever since Brown vs. Board of Education, there had been different strategies that the white powers had used to prevent real integration. And I won't go through all of them because I'm not supposed to be a historian. The strategy that Grenada used, which was the one that was most popular in '65 and '66, was called "Freedom of Choice."

What they did is they said:

"Yes, of course. We have to desegregate our schools. We will institute a freedom of choice plan, which means that parents are free to choose which school they send their children to, they can send them to the colored school, as they're supposed to, or they can send them to the white school, as we don't want you to do, and you are free to do that. Of course, your employer {landlord} is free to

evict you. Your employer is free to fire you. The Klan is free to shoot into your house. Your children are free to experience persecution and bigotry. But you're free to choose, freely choose."

And in most counties in places what would happen is, at the most, a handful of black children – their parents would put them into the white school to integrate it. But those were in places where there was no active Freedom Movement. At that point, Grenada was the most powerfully active Freedom Movement in the south. So they opened the freedom of choice plan, and we organized a mass march for parents to go down to fill out the form. And I think 300 black kids were signed up to go to the white schools. And the school board freaked. And the white power structure freaked. And they called out the Klan to attack our marches again, and they just went apeshit. And they delayed school because they had "too much paperwork." And they embarked on an intense campaign to convince black parents to freely choose to withdraw their children from the white school back to the black school. And that was the firings, evictions, physical threats. Over the course of two weeks, I think they got almost half to withdraw.

So by the first day of school, there were about 150,160, something like that, black children who were still registered to go to the white school. That compares to other black communities in the deep south – and I'm only talking about the deep south here – where 10 or 12 might come and it was a big hysteria in the white community. And Grenada was having 150.

And we in SCLC totally screwed up. We were so focused on our marches to the Green, which were being attacked so savagely, that we didn't even think about what's the first day of school going to be like when 150 black kids show up to an all-white school. And we should have known and there was a clue. The clue was that through fire, famine, floods, Civil Rights Movement no matter what happens in the south, high school football on Friday nights is a religious right that cannot be trifled with. Because they had delayed the opening of school, the Grenada – I think they were the Bulldogs, I don't remember – the white high school team played its first game actually before school opened because they delayed it. So imbued with the culture of the south, a number of the black kids who are going to go to the high school, wanted to show their school spirit, so they showed up at the football game. And they were immediately attacked, their cars were smashed and they were beaten and so forth. That should have given us a clue. It did not.

So we're in the church, we're doing our normal business on Monday morning – or the first day of school, I don't remember what day it was – and suddenly, kids start streaming in, bloody, beaten. There's a huge mob, 1000 whites had surrounded the white school and the children who are walking to school – because it was only a small town – are being attacked with chains and clubs. There are carloads of Klansmen with two-way radios who are scouting and are vectoring the mob. "Oh, there's some coming up White Street," to go and attack them. The parents who are driving their black

children to school in cars, the cars were being smashed and attacked. And everybody is retreating to Belle Flower Church because that was our movement headquarters, that's where they knew to go. And suddenly The Movement headquarters is like an emergency MASH unit, you know, like frontline combat shit. And we were sending people to the hospital. But of course you couldn't send them to the Grenada hospital; they wouldn't treat them. So we had to send them to hospitals an hour, two hours' drive away.

**Sam**

Wow.

**Bruce**

I remember a famous – because this was the school desegregation story in the south, we had national news coverage there. A guy who was a main network TV guy – I can't remember his name because my brain is no good anymore, that happens when you get old – he comes running into the office, totally hysterical. And normally we let them use our phones, we had two phones, but we were so busy calling the Justice Department and trying to get... “No, you can't use our phones.” There was a payphone on the wall, and he dialed it up, and I could hear him and he was shrieking into the phone, as he called his network or something. “I ain't leaving this church until you get me on protection!” He just totally lost it. And this was some famous guy who covered Vietnam and stuff like that. So the crowd is going. “What are we gonna do?” The plan is, “All right, we'll get together and we'll march the children to the school.” But because this is such a dangerous situation, and because of white racist see white civil rights workers as race traders, their presence will be provocative. So the few whites who are with The Movement in Grenada like me – and Joan Baez, the folk singer was there – we were not allowed to go on this march, which I was very downcast about, but I understood the strategy and so did Joan Baez. And we reluctantly agreed that we would to try and keep the children safe. So they marched to the – they didn't get within two blocks before the mob attacked them and drove them back. And kids had their legs broken. There was a girl, Emerald Cunningham, who had polio and couldn't run so they got her easy, knocked her down and were just beating her with clubs and just screaming hatred at her. And our news reporter, LA Times guy – I think it was the LA Times guy – asked a local white woman who was watching all this – and just saw them laughing and cheering the white mob.

Meanwhile, about 20 or 25 of the kids had managed to get into the school, they managed to get through the mob or escape the mob and run into the school. Now the mob would not chase them into the school because, in a big melee, it's possible white children might have gotten accidentally hurt. So they were temporarily safe in the school. Until around noon, they went onto the school announcement system and said, “All right, well, the first day of school we're closing at noon.” They called the white girls out and sent them home or something like that. Yeah, they, they had the white girls



come to an office, and then they sent them home. Then they announced over the loud announcement system. "All right, School's out for the day, everybody go home," meaning that the black girls and black boys who were heavily outnumbered by the white boys, were then pushed out into the mob who attacked them again savagely with the active participation of the white boys, of course, because they knew what they were supposed to do. So that started.

The next day Dr. King was there and he marched the children to the school, there was massive publicity. A lot of the children, their parents took them out. And we got court orders. The court orders were ignored. There were more court orders. It finally settled down after weeks of turmoil that there were 75 of black children in the white schools. And they endured a school year of Hell. They were searched for weapons, they couldn't bring any weapons to school. White kids could bring weapons. The white kids could attack them in the hall. If they defended themselves, the black kids would be suspended for fighting. In a lot of the classes, the teachers would not call on any black students. Some teachers had them sit in the far corner together, in other words, they imposed segregation. And this went on. Finally, after a couple of months, the black parents – there was another march of the black parents, this time whites [freedom workers] were allowed to go out, but I wasn't assigned to that march – they marched to the school to protest. They were all arrested. And another march they were all arrested. And we had more court hearings. This went on for a whole year. And I think by the end – I don't remember – I think maybe 50 were left. But of course, compared to the typical school integration where there would be half a dozen to a dozen, that was still more than any other school in Mississippi.

Talk about courage? Every morning those boys and girls would pick up their books, and they would go to school knowing that they were going to be bullied and persecuted, humiliated by the teachers, that the administration would punish them and reward whites. And they stuck it out because they understood. I asked them, I said, "Why are you doing this?" I was supporting them. It was very clear. They had no great desire to sit next to white students. They were not doing this because they wanted to be with white kids. They wanted to do this to fight back against segregation. They were so angry, justifiably angry, at being told, "You can't come here" that they were going to go there. And also, once they saw what kind of equipment and the buildings, they understood, the disparity between the colored schools and the white schools.

### **Sam**

They were definitely getting a way better education at the white school.

### **Bruce**

Well, I don't know whether they got better – they certainly had better opportunity. To tell you the truth, the white schools were so inferior to the kind of schools we had in California – and I went to a bad school, I wouldn't accuse anyone there of getting a good education. But they were doing it to fight against being treated as less than a full

American. They were doing it as a statement of defiance against bigotry and racism. It's very important to understand that because there's an assumption in white liberalism that the black children wanted to be with white people out of some ideological Kumbaya whatever. That wasn't it at all. It was courage and rage.

**Sam**

After Grenada, you said you sort of burned out?

**Bruce**

Totally, not sort of.

**Sam**

And in our last interview, you mentioned it took you a while to sort of start talking about what happened. But what made you realize that speaking about it is such an important thing?

**Bruce**

Well, that didn't happen for decades. It was only when a support group with people who had been other civil rights workers, most of them I didn't know, started it. Jim Forman was coming out to give a speech or something. Anyway, a group formed to help promote that and then it kept meeting and we became a support group of people, in the same way that military veterans who experienced the same war, formed support groups. And they usually do it by the war. The Vietnam vets didn't meet with the Korean vets and the Iraq vets – because they had that shared experience and the wars were different. It was only in the late 1990s that we started to do that.

**Sam**

Is there a shared reason for the cause or the effects that The Civil Rights Movement had? Are there any specific things that people highlight?

**Bruce**

You mean, why we were in The Movement?

**Sam**

Why it was such a detrimental thing to you guys mentally?

**Bruce**

Oh, I don't think it was a detrimental thing at all. I think participating in the Freedom Movement is the high point of my life.

**Sam**

But were there any specific things that people mentioned that affected them mentally?

**Bruce**

For the PTSD part?

**Sam**

Yeah, was it mainly the violence?

**Bruce**

Its a good question. I'm immediately coming up with three things, I may think of more. One was the violence and being in prison. It wasn't just the violence, it was the constant fear.

**Sam**

Also, the fear of violence and you're not really doing anything wrong. That's sort of another mental aspect of it that can be challenging.

**Bruce**

Over the years, I buy new cars. The first thing I do when I buy a new car is turn off the dome light. And if necessary, remove the bulb if I can't turn it off, so that if I open the car door at night, a sniper can't shoot me. That's a habit that was formed in The Freedom Movement. A friend of mine, Willie Wazir Peacock, he was in the habit of, if he's going into any place where he's parking and the cars are side-by-side rather than front bumper to back bumper, he would back in so that he could drive out if a mob was chasing him and he had to escape and he couldn't back out and do a {circle} . So those kinds of habits. Don't stand in front of a lighted window. So the violence and the fear is one thing.

The second thing I think that profoundly affected all of us was the incredible poverty and the human degradation and oppression that comes from poverty and misery and desperation. That had a profound effect.

The third thing is the grief of leaving The Movement. The Movement was such an intense emotional commitment to us. We all, most of us – everyone in our group has spoken about the sense of loss that we experienced when we left the south and left The Movement. That sense of community, that sense of purpose, that sense of solidarity, that sense of being all in it with each other, that you had people who would have your back through life and death. And to lose that was like losing a family, except that you rarely lose your whole family at once. So that was a third thing.

And then a fourth thing for me was when I went to San Francisco State I got involved in leftist politics, Students for a Democratic Society and so forth. And they were heavily influenced by Marxists. The Marxists had utter contempt for the Civil Rights Movement. It was non-violent, it was bourgeois, it was reformist, it was integrationist, it was this-ist, it was that-ist. They put down anybody who [was involved.]. So I quickly learned that I couldn't refer to any of my experience as four years as a civil rights organizer because it would be mocked and it would be detrimental to whatever it was I was doing against

the war. So it was like a training to not say anything. And other people who went into the left have said the same story. You might ask Mimi Real about that.

**Sam**

That's interesting. I think that's a really good place to end. But I think he provided us with some really good stories today. Thank you very much.

**Bruce**

Okay, well, thank you for the interviews.

**Sam**

Thank you very much for your stories and your time.