

*Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2015*

Interviewees: Timothy Jenkins

Interview Date: December 9, 2015

Location: Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 1 CD; approximately 2 hours, 21 minutes

START OF RECORDING

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

EMILYE CROSBY: This is Emilye Crosby, with Timothy Jenkins, on December 9, 2015, at the Library of Congress, and we're here as part of the Civil Rights History Project, which is cosponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. And also here are John Bishop and Guha Shankar. Good morning, Tim. Thanks for joining us.

TIMOTHY JENKINS: Sure.

EC: Can you start by telling us when and where you were born and about your family?

TJ: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on December 30, 1938.

EC: Can you tell us about your family?

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: My mother and father were long-term Philadelphians. My father originated from Richmond, Virginia, and my mother had been born in Philadelphia. And my mother was a housewife, and just a volunteer in many different church activities.

And my father had a barbershop in North Philadelphia that was quite an unusual shop because of its mixed clientele of professionals and laypeople. And they gave me quite an exposure to all strata of life in Philadelphia.

My grandparents are of some interest. On my mother's side, he was a--. William Albert, he was--. William Albert Jones. He was a member of the school board, an active Republican promoter after Reconstruction, and formed an organization in Philadelphia, of all things, called Remember John Brown. [Laughter] My paternal grandfather was also interested in education. He founded one of the Rosenwald schools in Courtland, Virginia, called the Courtland, Virginia Normal and--. Industrial and Normal Institute. He was part of the following wave after Booker T. Washington's creation of Tuskegee Institute, and it's now a historic site in Courtland, Virginia. Courtland, Virginia used to be New Jerusalem. It was renamed after the Nat Turner rebellion. [Laughter]

EC: So what was the Remember John Brown, what was that organization about?

TJ: Well, it was basically an organization for black Republicans. It met on a regular basis, at least annually, and sometimes more frequently. And they dealt with questions of finding financial support for blacks and developing businesses and educational institutions. And also for other aspects of civil concern dealing with public issues of Philadelphia.

Timothy Jenkins

EC: And so, did--. What--. You mentioned that your, both of your grandfathers were active in [the] Republican party, or both--. Were both of them active?

TJ: No, I don't, I don't know about my paternal grandfather, but given the time, and given the fact that he was a Rosenwald institution and what Virginia was like after Reconstruction, I wouldn't be surprised if he too were a Republican.

EC: And so was he--. You said he founded--. Was he then the principal or--?

TJ: Well, actually, I have a wonderful picture of him sitting in his wicker chair with his faculty around him and his students behind him, in front of this clapboard wood building. And it has "Reverend O.G. Jenkins, president of the Courtland Normal and Industrial Institute."

EC: Sounds like that you had a very strong background with both of your sets of grandparents, in terms of land and education [5:00] and politics. Were you--? Did that influence you growing up? Was that something you were thinking about or aware of?

TJ: Well, I didn't--. It wasn't until later that I discovered my paternal grandfather's history and contributions and started reading some of the old newspaper articles that my aunt had of her father's work when he was in Richmond. He founded what is still the largest African American Zion Episcopal church in Richmond, called Hood Temple. I have visited there with my children, and I've also become aware of his activities in the development of different programs in northern Virginia. But that, I didn't know that when I was a youngster; I really researched that as an adult.

EC: Okay. [Laughs] So what was your childhood like in Philadelphia? What was your own schooling like?

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: I had something of a peculiar educational career. I did not go to a neighborhood school. I went to a special school of practice. It was called the Thaddeus Stevens School of Practice. And it was a training facility for teachers and the production of teachers. And it had a student body that was drawn from all over the city and more concentrated in the neighborhoods adjacent to the univers-- To the school. It was at Spring Garden Street in Philadelphia. And it's still there, although I think it's sold to a developer and going to become either offices or condominiums.

EC: So was that an integrated school?

TJ: Oh, heavily integrated. In fact, there were few African American students. There were Chinese students. There were European immigrants who were there. And they had a broad concentration of Jewish, Irish, and Eastern European background students. It was an interesting environment because we had a very extensive field program. The teachers used to load us up on buses and take us down to the museums: the Art Museum of Philadelphia, which is quite famous; the Fels Institute Planetarium; Natural History Museum. Some of that had lasting impacts on me. I fell in love as a grammar school student with the Eastern Asian aesthetic traditions. I was fascinated by a room that they had at the Philadelphia art museum called the scholar's room. And to this day I have reminiscence of that room, and I've tried to duplicate some of it in my own study.

EC: [Laughs] Sounds like an interesting start. What made you decide to go to Howard University for college?

TJ: Well, I was recruited by a peripatetic promoter who set up appointments in Philadelphia, and the school that I went to, Central High, was kind of the premier public

Timothy Jenkins

institution in Philadelphia. So they always made it a part of their schedule to stop at Central High and give out literature on Howard and to solicit students who might apply for scholarships. And I made that application and was successful and got a full tuition scholarship to go to Howard, so that made sort of a selection for me. But I also had some family knowledge about Howard. I had a sister who had gone to West Virginia State, and she knew about Howard. I had a brother who had gone to Lincoln University, and he knew about Howard; another sister who had gone to Cheyney University, all historically black colleges. And Howard also had a connection with one of my neighborhood friends. One of my father's clients ran a [10:00] confectionery store, and his sister was the dean of women at Howard, and he told me lots of the background of Howard, and all of it sounded interesting and especially interesting to get out of Philadelphia. Most of my time had been in Philadelphia, and I wanted to see a new environment, and Washington sounded very attractive.

[Camera turns off and on again]

EC: When did you enter Howard?

TJ: Immediately after completion of high school. That would have been 1956.

EC: And what was Howard like in those years?

TJ: Howard really had a character that was very stimulating. It had a very vibrant program of student activities. I quickly got involved in the debate society. I got involved in the classics group. And we had a philosophy club that was engaging. But most importantly we had a very rich collection of faculty members who by their backgrounds had been involved in a lot of the social action interests of the black community for decades. Rayford Logan, who was one of my professors in history, is, of

Timothy Jenkins

course, famous for his black reconstruction studies. He also was the general secretary for the Pan-African movement, of which W.E.B. DuBois was chairman. Then I had Sterling Brown, poet, raconteur, and linguistic critic, who introduced us to the whole business of dialect as a form of communication and the history of black literary contributions from the beginning of the American Revolution with Phyllis Wheatley, down to the current poets and writers of the day. And Sterling Brown was more than just a teacher. We came to endear him as a colleague. He invited us to his home frequently and there with people like Stokely Carmichael and Courtland Cox and Jean Wheeler. We were able to absorb both the music that he provided. He had lots of blues and jazz and a whole history of that sort of thing. So he created an entree between the academy and the people of the field and of the folk traditions of the South. Before coming to Howard, he'd been at the Virginia Union and he'd been to some other historically black colleges, and he had a rich background.

And his father, who was also named Sterling--Nelson Brown--and his father was a biblical scholar and may have started the first correspondence school for black ministers. His observation had been that whereas many people had gone into the ministry in the South, they didn't go through seminaries, they didn't go through college, and they had the barest understanding of really the scientific theology. So he started to develop a program that would correspond with these ministers, and they would have regular reading assignments, and they would have exams, and they would have questionnaires that they had to fill out. To my knowledge, he started this in the early 1900s. It was the first evidence I can find of a correspondence course through the mail to qualify people to be semmanans.

Timothy Jenkins

EC: That's interesting. I had no idea.

TJ: But in addition to those two, we had Harold Lewis, who was a political scientist and deeply involved in many of the social movements from labor movements on through modern movements. And he was a rich source for us. I could go on and on [15:00] about the various faculty members. Of course, E. Franklin Frazier was my professor in sociology and you know his famed study, the *Black Bourgeoisie*. And these teachers offered a special access through a vehicle which was called the Little Forum. That was an informal reading club that assembled once a month in one of the lobbies of one of the residential halls, Cook Hall. It allowed a student and a faculty member to present praxes and interpretations of one book per session. Both the faculty member and a student would comment, and then it would be open for discussion, and we'd have cookies and coffee afterward. It's interesting to me that lo, these many years, when I hear some of my colleagues on radio and TV interviews talk about their background, they lift up this Little Forum as one of the pillars as one of their educational preparation. It was particularly important because it was the only forum that we had where students and faculty were on a peer relationship. The opinions of students were weighted as heavily as those of faculty. We were free to criticize and object and protest what some of the faculty members were saying. And it became a melting pot for thinking about both the mixture of our formal studies and the current events of the time. So the Little Forum is one of the most important features of Howard.

I got involved in student politics and ultimately ran for student council and became president of the student body, and that exposed me to, of course, the politics of the university and also the politics of the students and the fraternities and all that sort of

Timothy Jenkins

thing. And most importantly, it gave me access to the president of the university, both formally and informally. He was Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, a real--. The first black president of Howard University. He was an enormously important person in the whole world of scholarship. He was important because of who he was but also the kind of issues that he spoke to. He was president of Howard during the McCarthy era, and he refused to dismiss any of the people that the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Senate committee under McCarthy, tried to expose or excoriate for being leftist sympathizers or communists. And throughout all of that he continued with a heavy subsidy of money coming from the federal government. He resisted the pressures to modify or expel the students. Significantly, one of the students, Pauli Murray, sat in at the cafeteria in the House of Representatives in the 1940s. And they--. The Capitol police arrested them, and they tried to get them expelled, and Mordecai Johnson would not expel them, as he wouldn't expel any of the faculty who were pursued by congressional types.

EC: With your politics at, with your involvement in politics at Howard, did you get to--? Did he ever talk to you about his negotiations or how he walked this line between the congressional appor--funding and what's going on on campus, or did you observe that?

TJ: I'm afraid we didn't have exactly a peer relationship. [Laughter] The--. I stole little bits and pieces of his time. He used to have a house that was on campus, and he would walk from his house to his office--which is also, of course, on campus--and I used to waylay him on the path that he would use, because his secretary would never give me an appointment. [Laughter] And he used to sit down with me on the long granite

Timothy Jenkins

bench behind Founders Library and have these wonderful conversations about this and that, but mostly it was concerning university policies and things [20:00] that we were upset about and things that we were demanding in terms of curricula, faculty changes, you name it. And that was kind of our informal learning bench being on the granite walk behind Founders Library.

EC: So you mentioned the various things that the students were interested in or protesting. So your senior year at Howard must have coincided with the start of the sit-in movement. What kinds of things were Howard students engaging in before the sit-ins started?

TJ: Well, the students were largely engaged in campus issues. We were concerned with the matter of black studies. We were concerned with having more younger faculty. We were concerned with some of the curricula designs. And of course we had the other kind of grievances about long lines and inadequate food and lack of participation in faculty tenure decisions, all that sort of thing. But the social aspects of what we were engaged in was largely off-campus during the years prior to the [19]60s.

I happened to be selected as a delegate for the university to the United States National Student Association. That's a confederation of some five hundred or more colleges and universities across the country. And they had annual meetings; they had quarterly meetings; they had various programs. And one of the programs that I got involved in was the International Relations Seminar, ISRS, that was held at Harvard. I met students from around the country who were very politically active. They were interested in a number of questions, like the liberation of Namibia, the South Africa question, the business of the legislation that restricted political expression for

Timothy Jenkins

getting scholarships from the--. Supported by the federal government. They were very active in some of the labor relations issues on their campuses. And that exposed me to a different level of political activity than we had at Howard.

Going back to that forum year after year also connected me with some of the militants around the country. I can remember Barney Frank, aide to the congressman; Frank was an active student member. One of the guys was--. Later became the representative for the National Football League. Don Hoffman was active in the student politics and ran for local office in his home state. It was quite an exposure to people. And one of the exposures was to another subgroup, the Students for a Democratic Society, SDS. Ultimately, I was deeply involved with SDS, and they were very concerned about the issues of being opposed to the war. They were opposed to the Vietnam activity. They were also very militant on the business of draft resistance. And that exposed me to another, more radical dimension of politics.

At one point, toward the end of my term as president, there was the sit-in breakout in Greensboro, North Carolina. And we didn't have a direct role in that, although as I mentioned, Pauli Murray had been a proponent of integrated lunch counters in--. Back in the [19]40s, so there was certainly a tradition there, even a broader tradition than just Pauli Murray. Many students were in protests and demonstrations and things downtown against the segregated department stores and drinking fountains and other kinds of things.

EC: Was this all during the [19]40s? Was that the--?

TJ: This was during the [19]40's and into the [19]50's. In fact, there's a book done by the fellow who's now the dean of students at the, at Yale College--Holloway, John Holloway, Jonathan Holloway--on the history of Howard. [25:00] And he deals with

Timothy Jenkins

three professors: E. Franklin Frazier, he--. Let's see. E. Franklin, Ralph Bunch, and there was a--. Harris, Samuel Harris, the famous economist who went to University of Chicago and made a name for himself. He talks about, in that book, the Howard fervor that was in the faculty during the [19]40's and [19]50's, and the conflicts that they had with the administration and the broader society. So the--. Howard has a nexus with all aspects of African American political activity almost from its beginnings, and so that was reflected in who the faculty were and also the kind of issues that were introduced into our studies, it involved what the faculty used as their academic focus. And it was worked through the entire context.

So in my last year and also my term as student body president, the sit-ins erupted, and we were asked and approached to support the students who were in the South. And the student council decided to make a contribution to the legal defense and to the funding of the students who had been arrested. And we were confronted by the administration that said that the--. Since the student funds were compulsory that we could not appropriate funds that were compelled contributions from the students to use for political activity that was off-campus. And so we had a big confrontation on that, and we had, we -. Ultimately the dean of students forbade our use of our bank account to support the sit ins. Well, we found a little twist around that: when the, when the students decided to have a convention in Raleigh, North Carolina, we appropriated money to pay for the transportation of the students [Laughter] to go to the convention, [Laughter] and also for the hospitality at the convention, which wasn't really a direct expenditure of the students or their direct action, but it was nevertheless in support of the movement. Dean--. Dr. Armour J. Blackburn, who was the dean of students at the time, was adamantly opposed

Timothy Jenkins

to our political involvement. Fortunately Mordecai Johnson was president, and so we made appeals to him that overruled the vice president for student affairs to allow us to make that expenditure.

EC: So did you--? What are some of the other ways that the sit-in movement affected you or affected Howard?

TJ: Well, I think it's safe to say, given the timing--I'm graduating in 1960, June 1960. The sit-in movement started in April, in its big manifestation. Of course, I learned through my participation in the campus chapter of the NAACP that the NAACP chapters had been involved in sit-ins long before 1960. In fact, one of the NAACP chairmen, Barbara Posey, in Oakland, I believe, was involved in sit-ins, and we were supporting as a chapter of the NAACP the sit-in movement then. But that wasn't a campus-wide activity until after the [19]60s sit-ins became national headlines and a national mobilization of students. So it's safe to say that there was limited direct involvement in that until after the [19]60s. As soon as I--. In my graduating year--. In fact, the point of my transition from undergrad to graduate--Stokely Carmichael, Courtland Cox, Dion Diamond, Jean Wheelley--Wheeler--and a number of other students had just been admitted as freshmen at Howard. And they were, as you know, stalwarts in the founding of SNCC and the activities of the whole [19]60's revolution of the South. [30:00] So we sort of passed each other at the door.

In the book that Stokely wrote called *Ready for Revolution*, he deals extensively with his Howard experience. And I think it's a six- or seven-hundred-page book, but almost a hundred of those pages are devoted to his life at Howard. And he talks about the kind of cultural and political contests that he was engaged in. But he mentions, in a

Timothy Jenkins

complimentary way, the handoff that I had provided for the students when I talked about the need for social activity and relevance and demands and direct action in his book. In fact, he made the complimentary remark that when-- After he listened to the administrators of Howard, that he listened to me, and he thought I was like a man among boys. [Laughter]

But my association with the Howards continued after my graduation because the year following my graduation, I was elected the national affairs vice president of the United States National Student Association, which involved some six hundred or more campuses, of which Howard was a member. So I came back to the campus many times in the capacity as the vice president of the national student association and had lots of involvement with the-- What was then the new organization called the Nonviolent Action Group, which had started on campus, to integrate both lunch counters and also amusement parks and other things in the greater Washington area. So my continuing ties to various people at Howard went beyond my period as a, as an enrolled undergraduate.

EC: Did you attend the SNCC founding meeting in Raleigh?

TJ: You know, that's a, that's a question-- I have vague recollections of meetings and so many meetings, but I don't think I was at Shaw. And there are a couple of reports and books that dispute that, but I don't recall being at Shaw per se. But I quickly got involved in a big way with SNCC while I was national affairs vice president. While I was national affairs vice president, I was also on the executive committee of SNCC and the executive committee of the Students for a Democratic Society. And so that, again, kept me involved in a lot of student activity beyond the period of my undergrad tenure.

Timothy Jenkins

EC: I have a list of participants at the conference, so I'll check it and see if I can--

TJ: Yeah, I don't think-

EC: --find you.

TJ: --you'll find me there.

EC: Yeah. You have told me in the past that when you were-- That in your involvement with the US National Student Association that you were actually initially interested in being a vice president for--is it international affairs? And that you were sort of maneuvered into the--?

TJ: Well, my introduction and original fascination and preoccupation with the National Student Association was through its international arm. I had gotten involved in what I mentioned, the ISRS, the International Student Relations Seminar, and I had participated in a delegation that went to Cuba. I had gone, hosted students from Africa and [the] Caribbean in the United States, and so I had a real focus on international affairs. And it was my intent when I went to the final congress as a student to run for the international affairs vice president. I had-- Did not know at the time that there was a heavy involvement from the CIA in the international arm of the National Student Association. They had, they had-- In fact, this International Student Relations Seminar that I participated in at Harvard was funded by the CIA. I didn't know it at the time. It was certainly not disclosed. But the people who were the CIA operatives, who were also involved in the staff and advisors for the National Student Association, were very concerned that a person with my connections [35:00] with the South and with militancy and with the Civil Rights Movement and previous chairmanship of the local chapter of

Timothy Jenkins

the NAACP and so forth could not be trusted to keep the confidentiality agreement that existed between international affairs officers of the International Students Association and the CIA. So at the convention when I was actively campaigning for international affairs vice president, they did a maneuver to prevent my selection by getting the convention to name me national affairs vice president by acclamation. [Laughter] So the -. I was, I was not elected in the normal channels. I was preempted in my effort to become international affairs by this group of National Student Association alumnus, many of which were, in fact, CIA agents, [Laughter] after their--. Or maybe during, but certainly after their tenure as officers of the National Student Association. So that's how I became national affairs vice president. But fortunately, [Laughs] that was when the sit ins were in their explosion. So I was in a much more influential and important position [Laughter] as national affairs vice president than I ever could have been as international affairs vice president. So fate has a way of working things out.

EC: I know that the US NSA had their annual congress--is that what it's called--

TJ: Yeah.

EC: --in Minneapolis, in summer of 1960. And there was a debate about whether or not to support the Southern sit-ins?

TJ: Oh, that was, that was a constant issue. The National Student Association had, has a policy of, basic policy declarations and individual resolutions that are adopted by the assembled group at their national conventions, called congresses. And for a long period of time, since Brown v. Board of Education, they had been taking positions on integration and the issues of integrated education in particular. And this was strongly

Timothy Jenkins

resisted by the component of the membership that was Southern: places like Clemson, the University of Alabama, Texas A&M, all those schools were members of National Student Association, and they protested what they called "politicizing," which should be just strictly student and educational issues, and getting involved in other things. Well, it succeeded to get the resolutions passed every year on education, but with the sit-ins, it was a bit of a departure from strictly educational subject matter to deal with social integration. And so there was a walkout of Southern schools protesting that. And I of course got involved with that, because we were supporting a resolution in support of the sit-in movement. That resolution passed, and we lost a large number of Southern schools as members as a result of that.

We also had issues because during the time that I was national affairs vice president, that was the beginning of the young Bircher movement in the collegiate community. The Birchers were the youthful offshoot of the John Birch Society, and with the presidential election with Goldwater, there was a tremendous rightwing student element in the United States. They called themselves the Young Americans for Freedom, YAF, and they were very vocal. And many of the people who now are in the anti abortion movement and shutting down Planned Parenthood, some of those same names are some of the same people who were in the YAF movement in the student days. And so that became a major confrontation of what to do with YAF. It culminated in my case in a particular incident when YAF invited Bill Buckley to be speaker at their side convention. They tried to get him as a speaker for the congress itself, and of course [40:00] we resisted that. But they had a parallel meeting that was adjacent to the campus that we were meeting on, and they invited Bill Buckley to speak. And after Bill Buckley

Timothy Jenkins

spoke, I gave a rebuttal of what he had to say and accused him of being slave-owning, fascist mentality, [Laughter] which made the YAF people go ballistic, and they--

EC: You were so politic. [Laughs]

TJ: --they introduced a resolution to censor me, saying that I had abused my authority as national affairs vice president to speak on a political issue and without authorization and no resolution to support me. A big conflict arose, and we ultimately had a vote on the motion for censorship. And that, during that time we were able to expose all of the rightwing ideology and how it affects educational policy, international policy, political policy, military policy, etc. I have a recording in the records of that debate. And ultimately the resolution to censor me was defeated, and I was able to continue my career as national affairs vice president. But the politics of the rightwing were just beginning to take shape, and the Birchers that we now see as the Trump supporters are, were just beginning to organize and test their muscles. And the National Student Association became one of the forums in which that clash was revealed.

EC: So one of the things that I know that during that year that you were national affairs vice president, you were very active in the sit-ins and supporting SNCC and bringing students and various groups together. One of the people that was also central was Ella Baker. Do you remember how you met Ella Baker, or can you describe us for her? *[sic]*

TJ: Well, Ella Baker was kind of a great eminence in the world of civil rights for a long period of time. Of course, long before we were involved. She had been initially associated with the Pullman car porters and was a confidante and friend of **A** Philip Randolph and had supported his call early on for a march on Washington back in

Timothy Jenkins

the, in the [19]40's and [19]50's. She was instrumental in the management and operation and founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and she was an official on their staff. She was prominent in the YWCA movement. [The] YWCA movement was really a shelter for a lot of militant blacks in the [19]30s and [19]40s because with the label of "Christian" they were able to do a lot of political activity without being attacked. So she had grown up in that kind of organized labor and civil rights and community service environment. She was adopted as an advisor to SNCC, and as SNCC people, particularly in Atlanta, had become familiar with her--YWCA, where she was employed, had an office in Atlanta and became very close to some of the SNCC movers--SNCC movers and shakers. Well, she became kind of the godmother of SNCC. And my association with her grew as I got more and more involved in SNCC activity. I was surprised to see, when looking at some of my old records, that the meeting that was held of the SNCC executive committee in December after the founding of SNCC was held at the Butler StreetY in Atlanta, and when I read the minutes, I was surprised to see that I was chairing it. [Laughter] That was the meeting at which Marion Barry was replaced by, I believe, either Chuck McDew--. I think it was Chuck McDew became the next chairman of SNCC. So that put me in interface with Ella Baker in a really special way, and she's risen in the world's eyes as one of the matriarchs of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

[Camera turns off and on again]

EC: Okay. One of the things that happened that year that you were US NSA vice president was the Freedom Rides. And [45:00] did, were you ever tempted to join the Freedom Rides?

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: No, I wouldn't say that I was "tempted" to join the Freedom-- Freedom Rides came a little after my-- I was no longer an undergraduate; I was no longer national affairs vice president, really--

EC: Oh, okay.

TJ: --because the Freedom Rides came in [19]61. My term was the academic year from [19]60 to [19]61. So I was leaving NSA at that time and then enrolling in law school. I had a number of friends who of course I had met in the movement, in the SNCC meetings and also at Howard, who were participating in the Freedom Rides. But I never was directly involved in the Freedom Rides except to engage in fundraising and other kinds of support in the North for what they were doing in the South. Of course one of the interesting things was I was at Howard--I'm sorry, at Yale--and William Sloane Coffin, the chaplain at Yale, who participated in Freedom Rides, as you know, and was one of the historic figures there. And of course I interrelated with the, with Bill Coffin many times. I, in fact, was sent on funds that he raised from the Connecticut chapter of the Women's League for Peace and Freedom to support Medgar Evers's widow after his assassination. So my continuation with civil rights went into my law school years in a heavy way. And I was one of the principal circuit speakers to raise funds, along with the Freedom Singers, in all of the campuses in the United States because, having been national affairs vice president, I had contacts who were current officers of student organizations around the country and was able to open their doors as supporters and as forums for student activists to come and lecture and speak.

EC: I know that one of the things that was going on in the summer of 1961 was a debate in SNCC about whether to focus on direct action or whether to move in the, in

Timothy Jenkins

the direction of voter registration and political power. And I know that you were sort of a central figure in that debate or that discussion. Can you describe that and some of what was going on that summer?

TJ: I think it's important to appreciate that there was a kind of division of emphasis in the SNCC membership. There had been, from the beginning, a religious contingent of SNCC people who largely were influenced by the teachings of Jim Lawson, and they tended to be associated with the Nashville student community. Diane Nash and Marion also came from that Nashville environment. Jim Bevel and others. And their orientation to student-- To direct action was as a religious expression. Their notion was that they were doing something that was consistent with their Christian ethic and that the nonviolence was also a part of it because that was the Christian way to do things. Well, there were others who were interested in the objection-- In the objective of integration but didn't come to the question from a religious perspective. They came with a greater interest in the politics of it and concern with social change as a business of the exercise of civic responsibility and prerogative. So at a given point the people who were the religious contingent were insisting that they be paramount and that that be paramount in the ideology of SNCC. At an early stage there was a question of what the name of the organization would be, and it was agreed that it'd be the Student Coordinating Committee. [50:00] And the people from Nashville insisted that "nonviolent" be added to the name as a way to distinguish it from other kinds of student organizations like Students for a Democratic Society and Northern Student Movement and other kind of things.

Timothy Jenkins

Well, at a given point the dichotomy of objectives became so pronounced that there was a fear of the organization splitting along the lines of the religious oriented and the secular oriented. And of course I was in the secular side of that question. And Ella Baker was instrumental in harmonizing the two diverging interests. There's a letter that she wrote to me in my years as the national affairs vice president, urging that SNCC not have this difference that would be disruptive to the ultimate purpose. So that was a real expression of her influence that was critical for the survival of SNCC. And of course during that whole period she was very supportive of the kinds of efforts that we were trying to do with political voter registration as the real method of change.

It was, it was my view, and I think it was shared by Charles Sherrod, Charles McDew, and Charles Jones, as the three Charleses, that supported the approach of politics over religion. And we were adamant that you could not really change the South unless you changed its politics, that all that business of wade-ins and sit-ins and pray-ins was fine, from a cosmetic point of view, but it didn't alter the status and the political situation of black people, that that was only going to be altered when you took the control of the organs of state. Because the organs of state determined who the police chief was. The organs of state determined which roads were going to be paved. The organs of state determined what the budget was going to be in college and in primary and secondary school. The organs of state determined who was going to have access to public employment. And unless you took control of the organs of state, you would be out there as beggars, not as really determinants of the right in a material way.

So from our point of view voting was the key. We borrowed the, Nkrumah's encomium from the New Testament, the "Seek ye first the political rights, and all the rest

Timothy Jenkins

shall be added unto you." [Laughter] And we thought that the political rights were more important than the spiritual rights that were enshrouded in [the] sit-in movement. So the direct action campaign and the voting rights campaign also were competitive on resources. Who were the groups that would support which? And so that became another aspect of the contest between.

EC: And that same summer you're meeting with other people. So you're meeting with Harry Belafonte and the members of the Kennedy administration about this question too?

TJ: Well, there was a kind of focus meeting that was held at the Cappahosic, Virginia, which the Kennedy administration operatives were seeking to influence the direction of the movement to emphasize the business of political as opposed to confrontational street demonstrations. And that was really motivated from two points of view. One, the street demonstrations were volatile. They frequently erupted or invoked, or provoked, violence. And they were unpredictable. And the voter campaign also had more statutory and constitutional justification for federal involvement than some of these other social things. So they were interested in [55:00] procuring a more orderly political protest. Well, their interests coincided with our interests, from our perspective, because unless and until we had political rights, the others would not be secure. So we were interested in promoting voting as a primary thrust because we saw that as the real engine for change. Now, historians have distorted that, and some have characterized--even our good friend Howard Zinn--as something, we were co-opted by the Kennedy administration to go away from demonstrations. 1--. That's not correct. We weren't co-opted. If anything, we were co-opting them to become supporters and invested in what

Timothy Jenkins

we wanted to do. Granted, they had a political interest as well. If they could change the South, if they could have more blacks voting, if the blacks who voted were more Democratic or ran into their politics, that would be a gain for them. But that was very secondary to anything we were concerned with. We didn't care whether they voted Republicans or Democrats; we wanted them to be able to vote so their voices would be heard. And if the administration was prepared to support getting us the right to vote, then we were prepared to invite their support in every way we could: monetarily, politically, and of course through the powers of the courts. That was the nature of the relationship, and we had this sort of culminating meeting in Cappahosic, Virginia, and that brought together the assistant attorney general for civil rights, Harris Wofford, who was the special assistant to the president, and Burke Marshall, who was, who was to become the assistant secretary--. Assistant attorney general for civil rights. This was a kind of seminal meeting that launched an integrated, comprehensive, South-wide voter education campaign. At that conference, we had Charlie Jones, Charles Sherrod, and Charles McDew as participants, as was I. It was at that time that we established the foundations of a relationship with operatives in the Justice Department and in the White House in support of what we wanted to do. And they of course wanted to give support to the political change in the South as well.

EC: I know that one of the points of contention, at least for a few people--I think Diane Nash, I've read her comments on this--that one of the things on the table was how the Kennedy administration would handle the drafting of the young men working on voter registration, and she felt that that might be a way of manipulating people if they were going to defer draft.

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: Well, one of the peculiarities of the draft machinery is that there are local drafting boards. There's not a national drafting board, per se. Those are locally determined. And the people who sit on those local draft boards are usually the nominees of the elected officials. So the draft board of Mississippi reflects the politicians of Mississippi. And they have the prerogative within the range of statutes to select people and to go after people to draft people based on their own motives. And of course they did use that authority to target SNCC activists and other civil rights activists to get them off the streets and put them away for [the] equivalent of three years.

In fact, one of the organizations that I was associated with later took on that issue. It was the National Conference of Black Lawyers, NCBL. And during my career as a lawyer in the, in the trenches, one of the issues we went after was the improper use by General Hershey, who was then the head of whatever the formal title of the registration effort--. He was going after SNCC people with a vengeance! We even had one case where they went after one of our [1:00:00] students, activists, and imprisoned him, even though the statute said that the enforcement of the draft was only pertaining to people under twenty-three years of age, and he was more than twenty-three years of age! We ultimately took that to the court and got it thrown out. But that just showed that clearly the administration was not using all of its muscle to support what we wanted to do. It was manifested also in a more direct way in the voting registration question, and that's where I think SNCC made its, some of its major contributions, because we succeeded in the testimony on the Voting Rights Act to force the administration to amend their draft to include a provision that said that voting-rights cases would be heard by a three-judge court, not by a single judge. That was critical. The whole Voting Rights Act would have

Timothy Jenkins

had no life in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana if the judges that were appointed by the senators of those states were making those decisions!

So we made the determination that we needed a provision to create an exception in voting-rights cases so that they would not be tried by a single sitting judge but rather be a three-judge panel with two of the three named by the chief judge of the court of appeals. That was strategic because the Supreme Court had made clear that the whole business of the selection of the-- I've lost my thoughts.

EC: Of the judges to hear--.

TJ: Yeah, that the business of the selection of judges was a political question and not a legal question. And that meant that the political process had to solve it. The only way we could get a political process to solve it was to have three judges because then the court of appeals would name the judges. As politics would have it, most of the judges of the court of appeals had been appointed by Eisenhower. And they were Republicans. And they were interested in allowing blacks to vote. Therefore when the chief judge of the Fifth Circuit, which covered most of the Southern states, made appointments, he would put two sympathetic judges on the panel with one unsympathetic judge. And that allowed us to win most of those cases.

Well, that becomes part of the sophisticated way in which we were both allied and opposed to the Kennedy administration. Because Kennedy was really not interested in supporting that three-judge court. He opposed it in testimony before the House Judiciary Committee. And we succeeded in convincing Chairman Celler from New York, to go with us, and we over--. And frankly, we got Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee to go vote with us to overwhelm the Democrats from the South [Laughter]

Timothy Jenkins

who voted against it. So the politics of this is sophisticated beyond the normal black and white of "We were supporting Kennedy; we weren't supporting; he was supporting us." It was, it was more subtle than that. It'd get down to the fine granulations of where the interests lie, and partisan politics is sometimes irrelevant to racial politics. SNCC was in it for racial politics, not for partisan politics.

EC: I know one of the other things that you did that summer of 1961 was raise the money and organize a seminar. I can't remember, what was the formal name of the seminar in Nashville?

TJ: Oh, well, what I was really trying to do in Nashville was replicate the Little Forum experience that I had had at Howard. It was clear to me from interacting with the students who were the leadership of the, of the sit-in movement that they had no exposure to the questions of black history, civil rights struggle, racial conflict, constitutional context, international implications, because they were raised in a, in an educational system that [1:05:00] forbade that kind of exposure and information. So what I wanted to do was I wanted to have a kind of cram course to invite the leaders of the sit-in movement to sit down with some of the top minds who were knowledgeable on the racial implications of politics, economics, sociology, and learn. And that was the seminar that I put together. It was supported by the New World Foundation, the Taconic Foundation; it may have had some Ford money. And it was supported by Dr. King. He wrote a letter of support. Ella Baker, in the two-page letter that was later republished in a recent conference, she supported it, and she supported the concept of bringing together the whole SNCC mechanism to do the voter registration thing in a major way. And that conference I called the first Freedom School, because it was the first time many of these

Timothy Jenkins

students who were in the South had ever been exposed to that kind of saturated black history and history of political struggle and the history of racism in America. So I celebrate that seminar as one of the few places that I had a chance to touch the pages of history.

EC: I always point to that seminar to my students when they're interested in protest, the sort of--. That, and actually, Stokely Carmichael's chapter on Howard and sort of the intersection of education and protest in a meaningful way. It's kind of--. Speaking of Stokely Carmichael, it's kind of interesting, because the Na--. In many ways, your orientation is towards the political end of things, and the seminar's located in Nashville, which is the stronghold of the more religious direct action phase of the Civil Rights Movement. And Stokely Carmichael writes in his memoir about that seminar that--. Getting in trouble because of his involvement in one of the demonstrations that came along with that. I don't know if you remember any of those dynamics at all or not. Do you know what I'm talking about?

TJ: I certainly know the seminar, but I don't know of a particular demonstration as a sidebar to that.

EC: He said that they were doing some demonstrations in downtown Nashville, and he got in trouble for not being explicitly nonviolent in every way. And--. But that's sort of a distraction.

TJ: But we, but we selected, we selected Nashville because they have historically had a thing called the Race Relations Institute, which goes way back to the [19]30's, and have a long and celebrated history of bringing blacks and whites and thinkers together to talk about issues of race. So it really made sense, from a historic

Timothy Jenkins

perspective, to hold our seminar in the cradle of Fisk University, which was the sponsor of the Race Relations Institute historically. So that's why we ended up at Nashville. It wasn't because we were there by the religious persuasion of Jim Lawson or Diane Nash or others.

EC: But the sort of educational mission and history there. Were you at--? Do you have memories of the Highlander meeting in August 1961 where this debate kind of came to a head of the direct action and the voter registration, and Ella Baker kind of pulled things together?

TJ: There were so many meetings that it's hard for me to distinguish one from the other. We had many meetings where that happened, and many of them were held at the, at Highlander. And Highlander was a favorable place to be uninterrupted, out in the woods, so we could eat and sleep with the subject matter and not be disturbed. So I can't even distinguish a single Highlander meeting--

EC: [Laughs] Sure.

TJ: --because I was in and out of Highlander all the time, [Laughs] and we were always meeting on the same subjects of civil rights.

EC: So that reminds me, there was a letter that you shared recently, and you told me about, I think it was leaving Highlander, and you and Ella Baker were in a car with a group of people, and there was an accident?

TJ: Well, it was, it was really an attempt to injure us, but, [Laughs] more than an accident. [1:10:00] It was a provoked act of violence. We were going from Highlander Folk School, which is in Monteagle, Tennessee, to the airport in Chattanooga. And along the way--. We were riding in one of these little boxy Volkswagen buses. And

Timothy Jenkins

we were in there singing and doing our normal movement stuff, and this ten-wheeler or eight-wheeler truck came along with a driver who saw that it was an integrated group. And he pushed us off the highway. And as you know, that's the Chattanooga mountains. Those are very rough, steep places. And we almost went crashing over and down into the ravine below, but for being stopped by a tree that happened to be between us and the bottom. We sat for quite a bit of time, rocking back and forth such that if we shifted our weight too much to one side or the other, we would've gone down. Fortunately before we went down a pickup truck was mobilized and came and hooked the front of our bus and pulled us out of that ravine.

[Laughs] Ella Baker was not a person who particularly emphasized her religious tenets. In fact, she was very skeptical, having seen ministers up close for a long period of time, about the ethics and importance of what they were really doing. And she used to always ridicule the statement that she learned as a child, "Thank God for Jesus." She used to toy with us and say, "Now, what does that mean? How could that have any meaning? What significa--. I mean, 'Thank God for Jesus.'" Well, after we had this incident in the Cumberland Mountains, and the tow truck pulled us out before we had slipped down to the ravine, Ella, when she was on her stretcher being taken to the ambulance, motioned for me to come close to her. And I did. And she said, "Thank God for Jesus."

EC: [Laughs] You know, I've seen some letters by her where she expressed a desire to be part of the Freedom Rides but that she said after this accident and hitting her head, she didn't think it was probably the best use of her time to, and--. And, you know, there was other work that needed to be done, but also she probably shouldn't offer up her

Timothy Jenkins

head to the segregationists for [Laughs] on the Freedom Ride. And I never knew the context of that accident until you told me about that, or the incident.

And that fall you started school at Yale, law school at Yale, and at the same time SNCC moves into McComb for the first voter registration project at the end of that summer. What was your, what was your motivation or your thinking about why you entered law school?

TJ: Well, there were two prongs. One was the business of having some skills for [an] ultimate career and to have skills that were relevant for social change that would be meaningful as opposed to peripheral.

The second was part of a scheme to make sure that we had some people who survived during what could have been a disaster, either through murder, incarceration, or the draft. Our fear was that all of the SNCC people could be wiped out in an overnight event if we were all vulnerably located in the South in our various projects. So the suggestion was made that maybe we should have some who would be out of the reach of those disasters, and I might be a good candidate for that, and going ahead with enrolling [1: 15:00] at Yale in New Haven, where I would be, have a student's exemption, where we certainly wouldn't have any violence question, and I could be useful in continuing to mobilize white campuses as supporters and to continue to get volunteers from those campuses to go to the South for various stints of time, either for the summer project in Mississippi or the other things of voter registration in some of the rural areas of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. So I went to law school with that dual purpose of sort of being like Che Guevara in the Sierra Madres that would come

Timothy Jenkins

back to reestablish SNCC if it had been wiped out, or, on the other hand, going and getting a set of degrees that would be helpful with the long-term movement.

And thirdly, to be a Northern voice for SNCC. And I did organize concert tours for the Freedom Singers and many speaking engagements at all of those campuses from New Hampshire on down to Pennsylvania, New York, and--. So it served multiple purposes to be at the law school. And of course being at the law school also gave me another set of professional contacts and mobilizers for SNCC. William Sloane Coffin, who was the chaplain at Yale, was ultimately recruited to be a Freedom Rider. And that's no accident. And he also brought another colleague of his from Old Westbury to be a part of it too, and Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

So being in New Haven was really a Northern adjunct to SNCC. And it was at New Haven that I came to know Peter Countryman and Joan Countryman, who started a thing called the Northern Student Movement. And the Northern Student Movement was designed to do in the North exactly what we were doing in the South. And the Northern Student Movement was one of the unsung heroes of that whole era. And I was able to do that, having met them in New Haven. So New Haven had a lot of fallout both for me personally and for, I think, the movement.

EC: What are some of the things that you think are significant about the Northern Student Movement as an unsung hero?

TJ: Well, the fact that they got people who would take a year off from school, and instead of going to Paris or Heidelberg or some place, or Rome, that they would go to the South and spend a dedicated period of time working with poor people; that they would teach schools, Freedom Schools; that they'd create health clinics; that they would

Timothy Jenkins

create, again, social organizations. And the Northern Student Movement was not alone. There was the Young Christian Students, YCS, which did similar things. And, before it turned more political, the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society. There were several satellite student organizations which were non-Southern which were critical to the success of what was happening in the South. And the communications were facilitated by the fact that they had organizational corpus that was independent, independently funded, and also able to be supportive and auxiliary to what SNCC was doing. And Northern Student Movement was perhaps the most prominent of those dedicated to the question of civil rights alone.

EC: In fall [19]61, when SNCC's working in McComb and then extends to some of the surrounding areas, so, I guess, so part of, so the voter registration push that you're a part of sort of connects with Bob Moses, who had come to voter registration by way of Ella Baker and Amzie Moore, and kind of meet up in McComb. Do you have something to show?

TJ: Well, there's this letter that Ella Baker sent to me, dated [1:20:00] June 21, 1961. In that letter, she introduces me to Bob Moses and to Amzie Moore and to a number of other people who ultimately were the backbone of the voter registration effort in Mississippi. Of course that voter registration focus on McComb was one that we contrived to be a kind of catalyst for statewide effort. We chose McComb because it was very rural, very isolated, and nobody else wanted it. [Laughter] In the competition for funds for voter registration, the NAACP wanted Atlanta, SCLC wanted Montgomery, CORE wanted Louisiana and New Orleans and Bogalusa. Nobody wanted--. [Laughter]

EC: Mississippi.

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: McComb. [Laughter] But SNCC thought it important to go into one of the most hostile and remote areas of the movement and make a beachhead there that could be a model for the rest of the South. And that's how we ended up with McComb as a designated place. Of course, we also had, through the good offices of Ella Baker and Amzie Moore and Bob Moses, contacts of people in those areas that would house us and allow us to come and operate.

McComb had another unique asset, and it was a building that the police would not touch. It had a Masonic lodge that was there in McComb, black Masonic lodge, which had a history of militant behavior and immunity from police violence. I don't know what it--. What it is, whether it's Masonic Brotherhood or what have you, but for some reason, Masonic lodges became housing for much of SNCC in Jackson and other places because there seemed to be a Southern white abhorrence about defiling a Masonic lodge! So we found--. [Laughter] Once we found that out, where were we going to hold our meetings? We were going to hold our meetings at the Masonic lodge! So they had to find a facility there at [a] Masonic lodge that allowed us to mobilize our movement quite successfully.

There's an antidote [*sic*] that I should tell you. When we were traveling down from Chicago to McComb for the very beginning of our effort there, we drove through Alabama. And we had an experience in a little city called Deal. Chuck McDew, Charles Sherrod, and Charlie Jones, and I, were driving in this old jalopy. And in Deal we hit this dog that ran out between two parked cars. On the heels of that incident, this lady, elderly white lady, started complaining and screaming in the street that we had killed her dog and that she wanted compensation for it. This crowd was beginning to form around the car, and the question was were we going to pay, how much we were going to pay, or whether

Timothy Jenkins

we were going to pay, and we divided--. Chuck McDew and I didn't want to pay anything. Charlie Jones [Laughs] and Sherrod wanted to pay something.

While we were in the midst of this, and the crowd was getting more and more hostile and starting to close in on us, this elderly man with a white linen suit and one of those fine straw hats came down from a porch that was adjacent to the accident scene. He obviously was a figure of authority in the community, because they cleared a path for him as he came through the crowd. He said, "I saw the whole thing, and there was nothing these boys could have done to avoid hitting that dog. And they didn't have any way that they could possibly [1:25:00] keep out of the path that they were in, because there were cars on both sides." And that quelled the crowd. Then he turned to us and said, "I don't know how long I can keep these sons of bitches quiet. [Laughter] Y'all boys better get out of here." [Laughter] We drove from there to--

EC: You didn't need to be asked twice.

TJ: --without a stop from Deal, Alabama, to Mississippi. And it was the first time in my life I was glad to see a sign saying, "Welcome to the Magnolia State."

[Laughter]

EC: You never know how it's going to go. So McComb, what was your assessment of McComb and the work in McComb at the time?

TJ: Well, I guess the best thing I can say about McComb is that it's still there. [Laughter] I mean, it's still going. Students are vitally involved in the history of the civil rights. They're doing student projects. They have engaged the local school in creating a [stable?] part of black history in their curricula. They have youngsters who have taken time to devote themselves for summers on this. They have scholarship programs to get

Timothy Jenkins

the, some of the McComb students into higher education. The local community hasn't just withered at the termination of our particular project. The local people in McComb are still there, and they're still advocating for their rights. And, very importantly, they're passing on to the next generation of youngsters the lessons of yesterday. So I think McComb really represents a high point in our efforts, because we established a beachhead in the rural and most backward corner of the country that has still survived.

EC: And is that McComb work, does that involve Teaching for Change?

TJ: Teaching for Change has been an institutional arm to make McComb real. Teaching for Change, of course, is an organization that tries to do that in a broad way across many different places. But the McComb project has been kind of a poster child for the success that can come from working with schoolteachers and with parents in local communities. And to make them feel that they can change the direction of the education of their kids by having them understand more deeply the importance of history and the social engagement that the community had, not just the schools.

EC: One of the things that happened as part of the McComb movement is that Moses moved into some of the surrounding even more rural communities, and in the process, one of the people that was helping him, Herbert Lee, was murdered by a state representative. What was it like to be in your early twenties and dealing with, you know, life and death?

TJ: Well, I particularly point to that Herbert Lee story as a teaching tool in mobilization of black voters throughout the state. I found one of the old WBAI recordings of a speech I gave in, I guess, [19]62 or [19]63, in Holmes County. And the focal point of that discussion was the business of the Herbert Lee story and the

Timothy Jenkins

importance of not letting Herbert Lee die in vain. The--. Of course, Bob Moses, in his own saintly way, has had a tremendous influence, and all of the details of how that influence has been felt are still not fully known. But certainly his willingness to go out and live among the people in a really--. As an intellectual gorilla, if you will, to create an, from a ground-up movement of people who demand change, is the symbol of what the organization Teaching for Change is trying to do. It's trying to introduce through the vehicle of public education the means by which self-help in the community can be mobilized. What we've done in Teaching for Change is to have a website [1:30:00] that does that, teachingforchange.org, connected with the Civil Rights Veterans Association. The One--SNCC One Vote, or One Vote SNCC, I forget which--dot-org are all techniques to make sure that this experience isn't lost and doesn't cease to be replicated in other communities around the country. Of course, Bob Moses's influence in the whole of Mississippi is a part of a legend that is yet to be fully explored and told.

[Camera turns off and on again]

EC: I know that I saw a documentary maybe a year or so ago at the launch for the Civil Rights History Project website about Greenwood, Mississippi. And there was a, it showed you giving a speech in Greenwood, and you were talking about the Albany movement. Can you talk about what Greenwood was like then, what the Albany, Georgia movement was like then, and sort of your role moving in and out of these communities?

TJ: Well, you say it was a speech at Greenwood, but I would say rabble-rousing. [Laughter]

EC: I like that word. [Laughs]

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: I was, I was leading a sing-in. It was the only time that I'd been able to sing with Bobby Dylan, Pete Seeger, and--. Oh, I forget his name. Just died.

EC: He was a folk singer?

TJ: Yeah.

Male 1: ()

EC: Bikel?

TJ: Theodore Bikel, Theodore Bikel. But it, Greenwood represents one of the triumphs in another way. Mrs. McGhee, who owned the farm, was a militant person and who protected her farm with her sons and the use of firearms as a device to keep off the Klan and their sympathizers. Greenwood was a place where, again, local people who had no prior preparation for politics decided they'd had enough and they were going to participate in voter registration. That little film *The Streets of Greenwood* is, I think is only twenty minutes long, but it captures what was the essence of social change that affected people deeply, where even people who couldn't pass the literacy test and therefore didn't even try to register to vote felt obliged to help carry people in their cars to those places. People who couldn't pass the literacy test were defenders of those who did want to take the test. And it became a, really a marvel of how people could stand up. Also, when they cut them off from the food stamps and so forth, Dick Gregory was helpful in getting money for the food supplies to be shipped into Greenwood so those people could survive through the winter. So Greenwood represents a real place of triumph. Now the elected officials in Greenwood and the county are all majority black, as a result of the success of the Greenwood movement. Albany, Georgia as well, I referenced in the, during one of my songs, that we're not going to turn our, we're not

Timothy Jenkins

going to let Chief Pritchett turn us around. Chief Pritchett was a, was the worst kind of redneck law enforcers, or this law enforcers, in the-- Georgia.

Albany, Georgia was a peculiar place because it's southwest Georgia. All the attention was put in Atlanta, and it was progressive. But southwest Georgia had the heaviest population of black people in the state. And southwest Georgia was neglected. Charles Sherrod chose that as the place that he was going to spend his primary time. Charles was also successful in mobilizing an organization that came around to him in the grassroots fashion that was consistent with Ella Baker's philosophy, let the people decide what they wanted to do. The people of Albany came around and decided that they wanted to vote, and they had marches, and they had demonstrations, and they went on for nights. [1:35:00] Sometimes they were even surrounded by police, in a hostile way. They were-- The police were not there to protect them. [Laughter] They were there to destroy them. And in fact they had mobs that were, that on occasion kept the blacks from--who were assembled in those churches--from even leaving for threat of violence. So Albany represents the rankest, most ferocious expression of police-sanctioned violence in the country. And maybe many people talk about Bull Connor in Birmingham and others, but there were never, but there was never a police force that was more vicious and violent than Albany, Georgia.

At a certain point, they reached out and asked Dr. King to come and participate in some of the demonstrations, and he, to his great honor, did get involved and get SCLC involved. And the revolution was really not so much what they did politically, although they did change the politics in the sense that blacks were elected as well as able to vote, ultimately-- But Albany represents, again, one of those little spots of opportunity that

Timothy Jenkins

SNCC was able to open up as a demonstration to the entire South of what could be done once the people decide to do it.

EC: I know a lot of--. I don't know a lot. Some scholars and some participa--. Some SCLC folks have described Albany as a failure, the Albany movement as a failure. How would you respond to that?

TJ: Well, I think it depends on what perspective you came with in the first place. Was it the expectation that it was going to be a headline, celebrity case, the kind of vast movement of thousands of people that you had in Birmingham or in Montgomery? No, Albany was a rural area off the side roads of history. There were no celebrated victories that came all of a sudden. It was gradual. It was slow. It was multi year. And there were no demonstrations that culminated in lots of television and so forth. There were a handful of things that were covered by people like Sutton in the *New York Times*, but others didn't cover it. It wasn't a focal point. It wasn't a flashpoint that led to something bigger and broader and more extraordinary. But it was, in my view, a tremendous success. Because people who were going to lose their homes suddenly were able to get farmers home support. They were able to understand how the intricacies of public, of the Agriculture Department had to be manipulated and understood to fill out the forms to get the different things. And it even [Laughs] illustrated about the fact that Charles Sherrod's wife ultimately became the administrator for one of the Department of Agriculture's program in the Albany, Georgia area. No, I don't think Albany was a, was a failure. It was just a slow-boiling success [Laughter] instead of a rampant one.

EC: And that was Shirley Sherrod who was in that major position? Was that the Department of Agriculture?

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: Department of Agriculture, yes.

EC: Can you, you mentioned--. You touched on it briefly, but can you tell us about that festival in Greenwood on Mrs. McGhee's farm? What was that like?

TJ: Well, there were, there were, there was a, there was a peculiar confluence of people. The--. It was intended to be a folk festival that would symbolize the culture of the region. All that people heard about the South made it sound like there was no culture there. But the Greenwood Folk Festival was to dispute that and to show that there was a great deal of culture that was not seen and not appreciated. It became a kind of institutional way in which the larger entertainment community could express its support for what the people of Greenwood were doing. And so their coming together with names like Seeger and Dylan and Joan Baez and--

EC: Bikel?

TJ: --Bikel [1:40:00] gave visibility to the people's struggle in addition to the music and culture that those people represented. So that was the surrounding parameters of what the Greenwood Folk Festival was all about.

EC: You mentioned before that you did, helped arrange concerts or performances for the Freedom Singers and that you spoke at events with the Freedom Singers. Can you talk about the Freedom Singers and their role?

TJ: Well, you know, there was a history of the use of music for important purposes. There were the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. There were the Howard Gospel Singers that operated for years and still operate. One of the things that the, that SNCC had as a component of its whole approach to these matters was the mobilization of the people through song. It was appreciated that with the--. Particularly in the black

Timothy Jenkins

community, where music and religious vocalizing was an important part of people, incorporating those songs and taking some of the words of those songs and changing them to be more focused on the current movement was one of the things that SNCC did. The "We Shall Overcome" is really a song that Charles Tindley wrote. He was a minister in the Methodist Church, and he was in my hometown of Philadelphia. And "I'll Overcome" and those--. He made it as a religious ballad, and of course with Jack *[sic]* Carawan and with Pete Seeger and with the Freedom Singers, we turned and said "We Shall Overcome" as a political anthem. But the whole business of the power of song is an important part of what the SNCC was all about, and it was one of the tools by which we could get the community investment and enthusiasm about what we wanted to do. And the songs had a--. In addition to the spiritual content, they also had a reinforcing impact on the kids who were in demonstrations, so they could feel that there was, there was solidarity and group involvement that gave them additional courage when they were locked up or when they even were in jail, they would sing those songs and be buoyed and encouraged to feel that they were not alone. So all the words of those songs and all the songs that were part of the movement's hymnbook each have peculiar meaning to me. Even now, when you see the SNCC people sing those songs, they all get misty-eyed because those songs are so deeply connected to the history of the movement.

EC: You mentioned earlier that William Sloane Coffin helped raise money for you to go support Myrlie Evers after Medgar Evers was assassinated?

TJ: Yeah, I was of course a student at law school in New Haven, Yale. When we heard that Medgar had been assassinated, we were stunned and at a loss for what to do. And Coffin had a long-term association with the Women's League for Peace and

Timothy Jenkins

Freedom. There's a great constitutional case called *Uphaus v. Wyman* on freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly. And the *Uphaus* of that case is in Connecticut, and he was associated with leftist organizations all the time. The Women's League for Peace and Freedom was one of those organizations that was on the House Un-American Activities Committee's list and so forth. But they are still, were still a vibrant organization, and they considered that the Southern movement was part of their mission. And they raised money to enable me to both travel to Jackson and to actually be the first person out of state [1:45:00] to go to Myrlie Evers's door with a check from the Women's League for Peace and Freedom in Connecticut, to let her know that she was not alone.

EC: What was that like to do that? [pause] I know that in the Memorial March in Jackson, there was a confrontation between some of the marchers and the police. And I've heard, it was, was it WBAI? Is it the same? I heard a recording of you and Dave Dennis and some other people in that context. Do you recall that?

TJ: Well, as you well know, the--. You're talking about the aftermath of the funeral? Well, there's a, there's a public side and a private side. The public side was that, of course, there was this march after the funeral that was supposed to be a procession through a section of the city that had all been approved by the police and so forth. And the local youngsters--and SNCC people--didn't like the orderliness and the confinement of having a police escort and so forth, and they wanted to go in a different direction and sing freedom songs and not be as solemn as the main body of the funeral wanted to be. So they broke off from the main march and were going to go in another direction, and of course the police made their response of trying to contain them and

Timothy Jenkins

force them to go in a direction that they [were?] chosen. And that led to the confrontation that I think is recorded on the--. What's Judy Richardson's book, or film series?

EC: *Eyes on the Prize*?

TJ: *Eyes on the Prize* really describes that whole setting very thoroughly. The private side of that was a role that I played that had never been exposed. And that was while I was at that demonstration I was informed that there were a group of black veterans who were armed and were on the buildings surrounding the line of the march with an intention for violence. I was told that I'd better get up there or something was going to happen. And I went up to the roof overlooking the marchers just at the moment when John Doar, who was the assistant attorney general for civil rights, stepped out in front of the crowd, and *Eyes on the Prize* captures his statement, "I'm John Doar, you know I stand for what was right." But from up on the roof they couldn't hear John Doar's words, and they didn't know who John Doar was. And they thought that he was acting on behalf of the local police to contain and squelch the student protest! They had telescopic rifles, and they had John Doar lined up in their sights when I got to the roof. And I remember coming out there, saying, "Stop, in the name of Medgar." And they stopped. That--. Can you imagine what the history of civil rights would have been if black veterans had assassinated John Doar?

EC: No. I think we'd have a very different history, for sure.

TJ: I've had, I've had what I consider three brushes with history. The first you mentioned was the business of having that first Freedom School for the SNCC leaders. The second was in Atlanta, when the SNCC affiliate called the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights was [1:50:00] organizing a demonstration to go down to the--I

Timothy Jenkins

guess it's Hart's, or--the big department store in Atlanta. And there was a tremendous amount of pushback from that from the black leadership establishment. Their principle was that "We don't have to have demonstrations in Atlanta. We're able to sit across the table and negotiate these things out. So we don't--. It's disruptive and inappropriate for Atlanta to have these demonstrations." And one of the promoters of that was "Daddy" King, Martin King's father, who was opposed to demonstrating in Atlanta. We had this big meeting up--. I guess it was at Morehouse's chapel, when the question was being hotly contested of whether we were going to have a demonstration, whether we weren't, whether it was appropriate, whether we should follow the leadership of our elders or whether we shouldn't. And I was one of the final speakers at that rally and urged that they go forward with the demonstration--. And that they not only go forward with the demonstration, but that they take the route of the demonstration to Martin Luther King's house and ask him to come out and participate, in spite of the fact that his father was on the record as opposed to any such direct action in Atlanta. That was the decision of the group, that they'd go forward with the demonstration, and that they would call on Dr. King to join them. To his immortal credit, he did. When he participated in that demonstration, it resulted in his arrest, just two days before the Kennedy/Nixon election. And Bobby Kennedy sent Coretta King a now-famous telegram saying that they would support in any way they could Dr. King and his release and his protection in jail and so forth. That incident was then captured in leaflets and handouts by the United Automobile Workers and the United Packinghouse Workers and distributed all across the major areas of the United States, from Boston to Philadelphia to Newark to Chicago to Detroit to Houston. It is statistically agreed that at the point of that date in the election cycle, the

Timothy Jenkins

black vote was equidistant between Kennedy and Nixon. After that torrent of leaflets and mobilization and communication in the black community, some 250,000 people who were not prepared to even vote did vote, and they voted for Kennedy. Kennedy won that election by 100,000 votes. So I consider that that was the second place I had some contact with history. And the third place was in the John Doar survival.

EC: Yeah. That demonstration in Atlanta, that--. Was that in conjunc--. Oh, the grocery--. I mean, the department store is Rich's, in Atlanta.

TJ: Ah, yes, Rich's.

EC: The big one in Rich's.

TJ: Rich's.

EC: Was that in conjunction with SNCC's October 1960 conference, the one that decided the organization to keep going, and you headlined the mass meeting to close that? Is that the same? I know it was close in time, but I can't remember--.

TJ: Well, the, this was--. The unique thing that I'm recalling is the mass meeting for the demonstration. I don't remember an association of that with a conference per se.

EC: Okay. Yeah. I--. The timing is close, but I'm not sure.

TJ: It might have been connected, but I, but I don't, I don't--. There's no strong connection in my mind.

EC: Sure. One of the things that I know that you remained involved with throughout this period, of course, is SNCC's push in multiple directions for political power, voting registration and political power. And you mentioned, not today but in

Timothy Jenkins

another context, a white lawyer from Mississippi, Bill Higgs, and the two of you worked on some things together?

TJ: Well, in all fairness, I have to say that Bill was the guiding spirit in the business of that three-judge court amendment being added to the Voting Rights Act. Bill Higgs was an unusual guy. He was a native-born Mississippian, went to Old Miss, and was also a Harvard Law graduate. And while he had many, many invitations and opportunities to merge with white upper crust of Mississippi, he chose to make his whole career in civil rights litigation. And he not only participated in helping to write that legislation, but in defending the other black lawyers who were frequently under attack in the courts, both federal as well as local. Judge Cox, who was an appointee resulting from Eastland being chairman of the judiciary committee, used to call blacks then-word in court, and lawyers, and submit them to all kinds of ignominities. And Bill Higgs was one of the few white lawyers in the South, and probably the only white lawyer in Mississippi, who would take civil rights cases fearlessly throughout his entire career.

EC: Did you ever know or hear of an attorney from Mississippi called, named William Reedy, Bill Reedy?

TJ: I don't know.

EC: From Meridian? We just met him, and I'm trying to place him. What were some of the things that you worked on in relation to voting and politics with SNCC that we haven't talked about? The--. Were you involved with the MFDP?

TJ: Oh, yes. Larry Guyot, Lawrence Guyot--we all just know him as "Guyot"--who was the president of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, gives me and the group of student lawyers that I was associated with during the summers that I was

Timothy Jenkins

at Yale Law School with having found in the statutes of Mississippi the provision that allowed for protest voting and for the establishment of local political parties. That was the foundation for developing first mock elections for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and then ultimately the participation in the Democratic party itself. That I think is a-- We found-- Bill Wood, who was also a student at Yale Law School at the time, was working with me, and we found in the Mississippi Code a provision which really had been put there in the Reconstruction era to protect white people [Laughter] who were then being excluded by the Republican party that was controlling politics in Mississippi. It allowed for protest votes, and it allowed for challenges, and it allowed for independent election activities. So that's one of the little hooks and crooks of the Mississippi law that we were able to find.

Other work in the voter registration is most important in the years after SNCC, where statewide mobilizations through the black elected officials, through lead--the leadership conference of--what is it called? The-- I think it was called the Black Leadership Council or Forum--that got behind voter registration in a big way, getting the unions and getting others and creating this multiple foundation-supported thing called the Voter Education Project. The Voter Education Project that was handled-- Was headed for years by Leo Bryan *[sic]* and then by [2:00:00] Vernon Jordan, it became a way in which philanthropic money could be channeled in a tax-exempt way to voter registration. And crafting that and putting that together and making sure that it was adequately supported was one of the things that we were able to do in a unique way. And I think it made a lot of difference, and I'm sure Vernon Jordan would be able to attest that much of the South and its change was largely a result of the Voter Education Project.

Timothy Jenkins

Significantly, however, the Voter Education Project, VEP, refused to go into Mississippi. And so when the-- Bob Moses and SNCC went to McComb and to Greenwood, they were on their own, because the Voter Education Project considered that those places were too hot and too unlikely to have a result. So that made the heroic intervention of politics in Mississippi all the more important.

Male 1: ()

[Camera turns off and on again]

TJ: That's very finely documented in an article by Dr. Larry Rivers that appeared in the *Journal of African American History*. And what it talks about is the influence that Mordecai Johnson had on the whole underpinnings, philosophically, of the direct action-nonviolence movement. That article [is] called, I believe, "The Rankin Chapel and Howard University Connection to Dr. Martin Luther King." Something to that effect. Mordecai Johnson was heard by Dr. King in Philadelphia at an occasion when Dr. Johnson was a student at Crozer Theological Seminary. And he'd come into Philadelphia for a weekend to hear this speaker, Mordecai Way

tt Johnson. Mordecai Johnson was a mentor of mine, as I've mentioned, when I was a student leader. But he was a person who also had spent a lifetime looking at the whole question of nonviolence in international and national contexts. And he was an aficionado of Mahatma Gandhi. One of his vice presidents, William Stuart Nelson, even took a leave of absence from being vice president to go and live in India. He came back with such a vibrant impression of the power of nonviolence that it became a cardinal part of what Mordecai spoke to the rest of his life.

Timothy Jenkins

Dr. King was so impacted by that speech by Mordecai Johnson that he said he locked himself in his room for the next ten days and read every book he could get on Mahatma Gandhi. And that was the change of his mind to see that nonviolence was a cardinal part of his life. Frequently it's said that Dr. King's inspiration came from Thoreau and Emerson and Carlyle and Tillich. But if you listen to Mordecai--. I mean, if you listen to Dr. King himself, he attributes it to Mordecai Johnson. I've heard him say that to me personally, and he's said it to history in a way that has been distorted by others and lost.

EC: Are there other things about the movement that we haven't talked about, the sort of mass movement of the [19]60s, that you think are important?

TJ: Well, I think that the--. That what we have to make sure is people don't think of the movement as something that only existed when there was a thing called SNCC or when the people were in the streets. [2:05:00] There were successor organizations that adopted the techniques of SNCC and direct action that have gone into the women's movement, gone into the movement for disabilities, gone into the movement of poor people, gone into the movement for income equality, gone into movement for gender differentiation and protection. All of these things, in my view, benefit from the seeds of the direct movement of SNCC, and the techniques and the DNA of SNCC is in all of those subsequent movements.

The other thing that I would have on the record is that there are things that aren't related to direct action at all but are related to social change that were inspired by SNCC. One of those is the National Conference of Black Lawyers. The National Conference of Black Lawyers was started in 1968, and--. On a call from Floyd McKissick, who thought

Timothy Jenkins

that the black bar needed to move beyond just the narrow focus of civil rights as it was known up to *Brown v. Board of Education*, to get into other areas of federal regulations, federal and local economic development programs, poverty programs, housing programs, other kinds of applications of defending the rights of the people who have no voice. And I think that there's a tendency to gainsay the relevance of those earlier movements on those later movements. But when you look at those lawyers who made up the National Conference of Black Lawyers, started in 1968, they just had their hundred and-- Not hundred, but their forty-sixth anniversary conference in Durham, North Carolina this summer. [Coughs] The people who went through that: Judge Leon Higginbotham, from the Third Circuit; Nathan Jones, chief judge of the Ninth Circuit; Bruce, Bruce Wright, New York Court-- Any number of judges, any number of lawyers--Raymond Pace Alexander, who handled the case, the Girard College case that established that there could be no discrimination in charitable-funded organizations--that was all the offspring of the direct action campaign that went in other directions. And I think it's significant to know that institutions like the National Conference of Black Lawyers have been felt in other ways. They defeated the appointment of Haynsworth and Carswell to the Supreme Court of the United States. They have been working-- The hand of SNCC is under a lot of things moving in an invisible way to change society and America. And it's not known, except for those few of us who have been part of both, that they're really the same movement.

EC: So speaking of that, there's, historically and today, a very strong SNCC presence in Washington, DC. Is there an explanation for how many SNCC people came to be in Washington and something of what they've done in the city?

Timothy Jenkins

TJ: Well, of course, the big magnet is Marion Barry, the so-called "mayor for life." Marion Barry, interestingly enough, wrote me a four-page letter when he was still a student, in which he outlined the importance of blacks taking over the political structures in the localities wherever they lived. Marion also made sure that while he was mayor, every level of the hierarchy was integrated. He also made sure that women were given responsibilities that previously were never considered for women. He made sure that the programs that the city supported went in areas [2: 10:00] that never before had been funded, like summer jobs programs and playground improvements and dealing with problems for the elderly and housing for the homeless. Marion Barry is an illustration of how pervasive this thing has been.

But you can, you can really trace in other directions--. You could go to Harold Washington in Chicago and see his impact, yeah. You could look at some of the lawyers who were in San Francisco who had their experience dealing with the Panthers. You can look at the representation of the prisoners in Attica Prison and the Soledad Brothers and the Bobby Seale cases. The law has benefited tremendously because of this foundational kind of leavening that the direct action campaign required as a shake-up in the concept of what law should be and the due process should be and what representation of people who don't have funds, and really a leveling field that takes the economics out of the business of enjoying human rights.

EC: What are some of the ways that your participation in the movement has shaped you and your, you know, sort of your life and your work and your values?

TJ: Well, if you look at my resume, you see that I've done a number of things. But I have to say that all of them have been related to the kind of experience and

Timothy Jenkins

orientation that I had the benefit of being exposed to in SNCC, in the student campaign. I was co-chairman of the National Conference of Black Lawyers at one point. I was a member of the governing board for the postal service, and chairman of the Corporate Responsibility Committee, appointed by President Carter and confirmed by the Senate. But I was able, while there, to create a focus on the discrimination against blacks that had been hidden for a long time. Woodrow Wilson started it [Laughter] when he relegated blacks who had been successful in the postal service to menial jobs. He did that, of course, throughout the federal government. But in the postal service we were able to reverse that. And as chair of the Corporate Responsibility Committee, I was able to get Dr. Kenneth Clark, of Brown v. Board of Education fame, to come in and study the postal service and see all the systemic manifestations of discrimination that needed to be overturned, and the regulations were modified. I was even able, sitting in that position, to do something about the discrimination that had impacted Amzie Moore, one of our earlier participants in Mississippi voter registration, to get his pension restored. I've had international expansions of this. I was a consultant to the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Geneva to look at the whole way in which the information highway is passing by poor and in affluent and sometime racially segregated communities. This, I think, is something that has continued in my, in my career. I was in education in different ways, as a professor at both Howard University's law school and the David A. Clarke School of Law, but I was also on the board of trustees at both of those institutions, Howard and University of the District of Columbia, and I served as president of the University of the District of Columbia. All of those things have been part of the whole civil rights orientation, even my business activity, in dealing with export-import. The exports and

Timothy Jenkins

imports that I was engaged in was from Africa and the Middle East that didn't have access to the United States. I was sensitized to that exclusion during my era of civil rights.

There are other aspects of dealing with the, justifying the rights of publishers to be heard and publishing houses to be funded in ways that bypass the big houses [2:15:00] that exclude. I helped put together the broadcast station WHUT, which is the only full commercial station that is owned by a historically black college and university. And they also have an allied commercial FM station.

What I'm able to say is that for me the movement didn't stop; it just changed forms. So whereas one time you're on the street, and now you're in the suites, but you're carrying out the same mission. I wrote a letter in the twilight of SNCC to John Lewis, who was then chairman, saying that I thought SNCC people ought to make it their business to professionally infiltrate the machinery that was being created by the legislation that we drafted. I thought that SNCC people should migrate into the organizations like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, like the National Labor Relations Board, like the Federal Reserve. All these different things that are subsequent to the movement are still relevant to the movement, but they're being administered by people who are indifferent to the movement. It was my observation that labor, after passing legislation, then put their people forward to be the people who administer it. We did not do that. And I urged--. I think that that's one of the shortcomings of our movement that needs to be corrected. The notion that you're selling out because you're going into the belly of the beast, but you're going in with a different

Timothy Jenkins

mission than just drawing a paycheck. And that's what needs to be highlighted as a career goal for people who are sensitive and concerned.

I think it's also one of the shortcomings of the movement that when we went through the era of Black Power that we lost connection with the more progressive elements of the white community and did not have the foresight to continue the alliances that are so critical for real social change. It's my view that the reason we have now a red state/blue state kind of situation in such categorical terms throughout the South is because we did not fulfill the mission of mobilizing the poor white community to what their real interests are! And so you have people in the state of Kentucky voting to kill healthcare provisions that are aimed to alleviate the kind of conditions they're suffering under, because they don't want to be associated with Obama and Obamacare! If we had been able to do in the poor white community what we were able to do in the poor black community, we would have a different politics today. And I think the challenge that's left for the next generation is to undo that era. Part of it was brought about by the egotism of some of those involved with Black Power that wanted to exclude whites, but also by the myopia of seeing that the problem is really broader than race; it deals with the human rights question, not the civil rights question, and it requires that the poor people who are affected by the same oppressive legislative provisions, the same migration of income from the bottom to the top, are not racially divided. And that's the part of the unfulfilled mission that the next SNCC is to fulfill.

We were not the first SNCC. There was a Southern Negro Youth Congress that was a progressive organization of the [19]40s. [2:20:00]That was the first SNYC. And that was molded around the kinds of thoughts that W.E.B. DuBois had and some of the

Timothy Jenkins

thoughts that Eleanor Roosevelt had about the need for youth to be involved with the questions of poverty. Hopefully there'll be another SNCC after this that will fulfill what was the promise that we missed.

EC: Thank you very much. It seems like a good place to end. Thanks.

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, March 29, 2017