[Ladner]

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MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer

Re: Hazel Palmer/Joyce Ladner Interviews

Dt: October 22, 1998

Enclosed are two transcripts:

The first transcript is from an interview with Mrs. Hazel Palmer. I have previously sent you a series of interviews that Robert Moses conducted with Mrs. Palmer at Duke University.

The second transcript is of an interview I conducted with Joyce Ladner. Both Joyce Ladner, and her sister, Dorie Ladner, were active in the Mississippi civil rights movement through most of the 1960's particularly in the Hattiesburg, Mississippi area. In the interview Ladner discusses: 1) her reaction to the Freddom Rides coming to Mississippi in 1961 2) her relationship with NAACP leader Medgar Evers before he was assassinated in 1963 3) her reaction to the murder of Emmett Till as a child growing up in Mississippi 4) her analysis of Robert Moses' leadership style 5) the friction between the college-educated Northern SNCC staffers and the Mississippi staff members 6) and the issue of sexism in the civil rights movement. Dr. Ladner is currently a Senior Fellow at the Brooking Institute in Washington, DC.

Interview with Joyce Ladner
Washington, D.C.
May 23, 1986

Joe Sinsheimer:

...I need probably to get caught up on how you first got involved.

Joyce Ladner: My sister Dorie and I were freshmen at Jackson State College in the fall of 1960. And in high school-- we grew in Hattiesburg, outside Hattiesburg, a little black community called Palmer's Crossing. And we had known Medgar Evers from high school days when he had assisted us in forming an NAACP youth chapter in Hattiesburg. When we got to Jackson State we used to slip off-campus on Wednesday afternoons which is the time when there are no classes and go off-campus shopping and so on. We used to slip up to his office and talk to him about the Movement and what was going on.

And during that time the Movement, the NAACP was the only activity, civil rights activity, organization rather, in Mississippi. And we had, also you see, we had gone to Jackson numerous times when we were in high school to the Masonic Temple to state NAACP rallies. Clyde Kennard and Vernon Dahmer were our mentors. Vernon Dahmer had a sister-- who just died last year-- Aileen Beard who was a good friend of my parents and she and Mr. Dahmer and Clyde used to take us with them to Jackson to NAACP rallies. I remember Gloster Current and Roy Wilkins would come down to speak. And these were high points in my life.

In so far as I can determine now we went on these trips without the knowledge of local white people. I think the NAACP was organized in the '40's in Hattiesburg-- I was told it was-- but it was an underground organization essentially. People didn't publicly claim membership in it.

So when we got to Jackson State we used to go up Medgar's office and talk to him about what was going on. We also had some relatives who lived in Jackson. They owned a gas station on Rose Street right near the university. They used to come take us

off-campus on weekends to their home, and they were active in the NAACP so they took us to meetings. So we kept in touch with Medgar.

On one visit he introduced us to a man and he said, "I would like you to meet Tom Gaither, he is here to help black people get their freedom." That is all he said. {Break} Another time we were in Medgar's office, Medgar told us that there was going to be a sit-in at the public library. This was in the Spring of '61. Now there had been sit-ins all over the South at lunch counters. There had not been any demonstrations at all in Mississippi.

And he told us that there was going to be this sit-in at the public library and he asked us if we were interested in joining. No, we told him that we wanted to join. And Jackson State's rules were very, very strict. We, for example, were technically in violation just being in his office for we would never have been permitted to sign out of the dormitory to go to his office. That just wasn't done. We would sign out to go downtown to shop.

So he said, no you can't do it because you might get kicked out of school and we don't want that to happen. What you can do is organize the students. Once this happens have the students ready, have them organized for some sort of action. As I recall he didn't give us any specific charge to do whatever. He just told us about it. I remember Dorie, my sister, was president of the freshmen dormitory council in our dormitory--Ayer Hall-- and she told me I am going to call a meeting to give the prayer. Southerners pray every time they have a meeting. {break}

Where was I? Oh, Dorie told me to-- we decided that I should give the prayer. She said I am going to call on you to pray. And the intent and what I did was to talk about, I said, "Dear Lord we have rocky roads ahead ...." And it was lost on the students, they didn't, no one ever questioned me about it. The dormitory matron called me in immediately and asked me what was I talking about. Not only did she call me in, she went and told the Dean of Students who is now President of Claven College in South

Carolina and just apologized to me last month for threatening to kick us out of school before we voluntarily left.

Anyway, on the day of the demonstration-- well we had begun to talk about it to a lot of students who were sympathetic to the Movement. And it was hard to know who was and who was not. But James Meredith was a student, the guy who was president of the student council, Walter Williams-- and he was the one student who was kicked out of school at the ... demonstration. And we would talk about these sit-ins going on around the country and how we would love to see something like this happen in Mississippi. And it was like I am telling you about my interests and you have the same values, however, we are really not talking about doing anything ourselves.

On the day of the sit-in we were waiting in the dorm just to hear the news and I remember having the radio on. I was seventeen years old, I was sixteen when I went to college that fall and in the Spring I was seventeen. Dorie was eighteen. And we were listening to the radio and finally the word came up-- students had been arrested.

That evening at dinner, five o'clock in the cafeteria, we began to go around to students at tables in the cafeteria and say we had heard there was going to be a sympathy prayer demonstration that evening in front of the library and the female students should sign out for the library and they will see the guys gathered in front of the library-- because men didn't have to sign out, they had more freedom.

And we would stop and have a brief prayer demonstration... and it was like no one took responsibility for it but everyone saying I heard this is going to happen. Now there may have been a group of us, a very small group of us who got together to plan the specific action, I can't recall, but I know that is how it came off.

Sinsheimer: Who were the actual people that got arrested?

Ladner: Ethel Sawyer, Janice Jackson-- I just saw them in St. Louis about a month ago....

Sinsheimer: Now were they students?

Ladner: They were all Tougaloo students, all Tougaloo students. They were in the Tougaloo NAACP. Eight students....

Sinsheimer: Did you know any of them then?

Ladner: Not then, no. The reason they selected the library because they wanted a facility that was supported with public funds. Not a restaurant where there might to be a question of whether or not they had a right to go.... Now the students-- oh what happened after that was that the plan went along as we intended. So we got in front of the library and I thought we were going to have maybe fifty students, there were hundreds of students out there.

We got--Emmett Burns who is president of the Prince Georges County, Maryland NAACP was in the middle of a prayer when _____ who was president of the college came running through the crowd screaming, hollering, "What is going on, what is going on." Stopped us and students got angry with him and got very upset. And he went beserk because no one would listen to him. He went from one person to other pushing people and then he came up to where I was standing besides my roommate whose name was Eunice-- you know ever since that happened I blocked her last name out. She was from the Coast, Moss Point, Mississippi. And he came to a stop and grabbed her and pushed her down. And word immediately went out that the president had slapped a student.

Now we dispersed-- we got angry then and really turned on him and the police came on the campus. They came with dogs. We went back into the dormitory. The fellows sent word over to our dorms the next day that we were going to boycott classes.

Sinsheimer: Is this a black president or a white president?

Ladner: Oh a black, very much conservative. We were to boyoctt classes and wear black or wear white the next day and we should all assemble in the gym the next morning. In the

meantime the Tougaloo students were going to be arraigned the next afternoon. That night the Dean came over to our dormitory, called my roommate downstairs and told her that she had been expelled. We were knockouted.

And she was understandably upset. I was trying to tell her that you don't have to go anyplace because you didn't do anything wrong and we were all trying to keep her there but she called her parents and she said, "Well, they told me I have got to leave," so I remember her parents got to the campus about five o'clock that morning because they wanted her out of the dorm immedaitely.

The next day we assembled in the gym and the police came on campus and we went around to buildings to try to get students out of classes. A few students went to classes but most students didn't. By that afternoon when we knew the students were going to be arraigned we attempted to stage a demonstration to march down to the courthouse. We were stopped several blocks from the campus. Police had tear gas, billy clubs, and police dogs. My sister still has scars on her back from the tear gas pellets and her hair fell out for years.

Had these police dogs chase me down an alley and I remember knocking on this woman's screen door, "Please help, help, they are trying to kill us. let me in." And a nice lady came to the door and asked me what happened. First she told us to come inside and then she locked the door and said, "No one is going to come in here." I must have been there for hours, cops were all over every place.

And I must have been an hour or so before I knew that two girls were hidden behind her refridgerator. They had run too. Then up the street there was this black funeral parlor and they had hid students, somebody once said in the embalming room, I don't know where they hid them. {laughter} It was really nice to know that people had such sympathies for what was going on but we never would have known that otherwise.

So eventually I got up to the campus and all the students eventually were accounted for. We never got downtown obviously because of this roadblock. And the next day school

was closed, it was closed early for Easter. And when we came back Walter Williams the new student body president had been expelled and Dorie and I were called in to Oscar Roger's --who was Dean of Students-- office and he told us that he knew that we had been among the ringleaders of all this confusion on campus and he asked me, us, about the prayer and I took {offfense} about him daring to ask me about "my communication with my god," as I put it {laughter}. Oh I was hell on wheeels. I said, "How dare you ask me about my private conversation with God. You have no right to do that." And he was a minister too and he knew what I was ... it was wild.

But he said, "I have like mind to expel both of you, in fact we should expel you." We said, "What." He said, "We are going to expel you." And I don't remember whether Dorie or I said, "Well, you don't have to expel us because we are going to Tougaloo College in the fall anyway." Not to be outdone we told him that we were going to Tougaloo. Tougaloo was twice as expensive as Jackson State and we never talked to our parents about going or anything but we told him that we weren't coming back so you don't have to expel us because we are not coming back here anyway.

So we left, we went to Tougaloo that fall. {break} It was the fall of '61 that I met Bob Moses. I met Jim Bevel, I met Lester McKinnie, and Paul and Catherine Brooks, Diane Nash ....

Sinsheimer: On campus?

Ladner: Met them in Jackson. They had been on the Freedom Rides. I met some of them on campus but I don't recall specifically where I first met Bob {Moses}. There was an office on Lynch Street. The Mississippi Free Press was an early gathering place and I remember meeting Lucy Komisar-- I wonder whatever happened to her-- and Gil Moses worked for the Mississippi Free Press, and who was the guy's name who was publisher? I can see his face and can't think of his name. A lot of the people who had been on the Freedom Rides stayed around afterwards to work on voter registration.

I mentioned earlier that Medgar had introduced us to Tom Gaither who was a CORE field secretary at the time. All we knew that he was a student at Claven College in South Carolina and Medgar said, "I want you to meet Tom Gaither he has come here to help black people get their freedom." And that was all that was said. I didn't know he was organizing for the Freedom Rides, that was what he was doing.

In those days a lot was not spoken but you knew what was going on. They told you just enough and we had a lot of trust in each other as well. Now that fall I got to Tougaloo, I remember getting to campus in early September, late August, early September, and there had always-- I was rather frustrated because we had wanted to go on the Freedom Rides. We had gone to Chicago that summer to work, we worked at Spiegal mail order house to make money for school.

Sinsheimer: Both you and Dorie?

Ladner: And we had wanted to go on the Freedom Ride and our Uncle and Aunt had told us it was too dangerous to go. But when we got to Tougaloo that fall all these Freedom Riders were just out of jail and on campus and that was just the most wonderful experience I have had in my entire life. I mean all these people who feel like I do who have the same values as I do. Because now that I think back on it it was rather lonely growing up in Mississippi as a child in the '40's and '50's with a strong sense of justice and wanting to see something done about it. But really not being able to talk about it that much and not knowing people who shared your views and even if they shared them it was such a repressive environment you really couldn't do anything about it.

So to get to Tougaloo with all these people who were on and off-campus and it was totally sanctioned-- the president of the college, Dr. Beittel, was very, very much in favor of civil rights and activism and he set the tone on campus. So we had teachers who would go off to demonstrate. And it was an open environment, it was an intellectual-- I didn't fully realize that

was what I was, I knew that I was curious and I like to read and question things. In that environment we could discuss ideas. It was just the most marvelous experience I have ever had.

And it was in this context that I began to meet all these people. And Dorie more involved than I did. She dropped out of school twice to go to work fulltime with SNCC. That fall they were all down in McComb and also Diane and Jim Bevel and Catherine and Paul Brooks and Lester McKinnie were all living on Rose Street in the first freedom house. And they were-- I remember mneeting Diane, one of the early times I recall having met her was Mother's Day in 1960 or 1961, '61, when at the Masonic Temple Coretta King and Diane Nash-- Diane was pregnant at the time-- they spoke at this Mother's Day rally. I had forgotten that.

Sinsheimer: Sponsored by the NAACP?

Ladner: All the NAACP meetings were held at the Masonic Temple because it was the only non-public, private institution where we could meet. Now they were, after the Freedom Rides, they decided to stay on and work with direct action and then pretty soon the emphasis shifted to voter registration. Lester McKinney was one of the guys who had dropped outof Knoxville College. I believe he had been on the Freedom Ride and he in fact lives here in Washington. He is a Pan-African nationalist.

Sinsheimer: He worked in Laurel {Mississippi} at some point.

Ladner: He may have. Yeah, I think he left Jackson and went to Laurel and then he eventually left Mississippi. He didn't stay around that long. He practices polygamy and has a school and so forth. It was '61...well you can ask questions beyond that.

But when I went to Tougaloo I was able to get involved in a rather direct way. We used to go into Jackson, sometimes daily, to the office to do a little work or go out to canvass.

Sinsheimer: Who was coordinating that sort of thing?

Ladner: The people in the freedom house in the early period and Bob {Moses} came in and assumed a coordinator role to some extent, to the extent that Bob would coordinate things. There was a lot of activity on the campus. John Salter was on the campus and he was particularly close with Medgar. There was still the student NAACP chapter. I was never involved in that. I was in the SNCC group. Joan Trumpauer, white girl at Tougaloo, came to Tougaloo that fall immediately after getting out of Parchman {penitentiary} and the Freedom Rides and eventually she became my roommate. But she and I-- oh at some point she and I had a newsletter we used to send out around the country. We must have published about 600 copies of it.

I-- at one point I was chair of the student civil rights group and Ed was our, John Salter at one point and later Ed {King} was our advisor. And we sponsored a number of actions, we tried to persuade entertainers not to come to Mississippi to perform. At another point we brought in ministers from around the country to go to churches on Sunday with us. I spent a week in jail after going to Galloway Methodist in Jackson.

We used to go away often to Atlanta to a lot of SNCC meetings. Came here to Howard for a SNCC conference. Would take summers and do voter registration work and all the holidays we would go up to places like Greenwood. That is where I met Marion {Wright} Eddleman. I never dropped out of school to work full-time with SNCC. As I said earlier Dorie did twice. Used to go to the Delta. We would sort of take whenever we wanted to in an old broken down car. Anytime there was some trouble like people just got arrested in Greenwood we got to go up there and spend a few hours there like troubleshooters.

Those were the best years of my life I wish I could just .... I don't want them back but they were well worth living. Go on....

Sinsheimer: Let me interrupt you to ask another question.

Ladner: Sure.

Sinsheimer: I was very curious {about} what you said about growing up and feeling lonely. Just talking-- two stories I know very well, Peaccok's and Hollis' {Watkins} -- just in three different parts of the state that same exact feeling. Peacock I think spent a year at sixteen just hitching around the state. And Hollis actually went to California.

Ladner: I didn't know that.

Sinsheimer: But Peacock's first involvment was organizing a youth chapter for Medgar {at Rust College}.

Ladner: Really. I bet Medgar did that with a lot of folks.

Sinsheimer: At Rust. The question I guess I want to ask is Medgar was obviously successful with young people and old people. What do you think made him so attractive to high school kids-- to your particular generation?

Ladner: He was trustworthy, I mean you could trust him, he understood, he had a lot of empathy. Very gentle man. Not flamboyant and he didn't-- he was gentle and he inspired trust. He was not one of these charasmatic people that gives rousing speeches. He was an organizer, more than anything else he was an organizer. He spoke our language. When he talked to high school kids you got a sense that he understood the world from your perspective. He didn't talk down to us.

I have never been asked this before but he didn't talk down to us. I felt that I was talking to someone who really understood the way I felt. And I remember him talking about growing up in the South, in Mississippi, and how he had never liked what went on and he had decided that one day he was going to do something about it. And he came back to do something about it. And I used to think that if he could do something about it-- and he grew up long before I did-- than I can too.

But he moved throughout these various communities in Mississippi and meeting young people and older people and obviously cultivating a lot of such young people

{laughter}.

Sinsheimer: As I think about it he really did start sowing the seeds.

Ladner: He sowed a lot of seeds, he did. He was a very personable guy too. I remember one time he came over to the campus and came to the dormitory and they called me downstairs {for a visitor}. He brought me some money and said I was just in Palmer's Crossing and I ran into your Mother at the store and she told me to give you this money. It was a small amount of money....

Sinsheimer: This is when you were at Tougaloo?

Ladner: No, at Jackson State.

Sinsheimer: Oh, so he was sort of networking.

Ladner: Yeah, he ... now that i think back on it it must have taken-- well he could move around.... I don't remember thinking much of it at the time except that he had run into Mother that is all. But I wonder now if the dormitory matron wondered what was this man-- that was another clue I am sure to her knowing what we were about and what our intentions, {what} our interests were certainly. And her being able to confirm to the Dean of Students that these were troublemakers. Medgar Evers came over to visit them in the dormitory.

Sinsheimer: Was he married to Myrlie at this time?

Ladner: Yes, he was married and had kids.

Sinsheimer: Did you know her at this time?

Ladner: Yeah, she would come around, not often. She was a wife, she was a homemaker in every sense of the word. I met her-- she was like at rallies-- but I didn't know her. I saw her with children. I remember seeing him once in his office but when I say I knew her I don't know if she knew me or would know who I am. He was very personable. He was a flirt too, he would flirt {laughter}. Very charming man, very courageous, very brave. He drove on the most part on all these

lonely roads to all these towns by himself. Went on these trips all over Mississippi. Whenever there was any violence he went up to investigate it.

Very different from his brother too. Medgar was a man of tremendous principle, courage, with a very strong sense of himself. Very dedicated to a cause outside of himself. And I have to believe that he must have come to terms with the possibility of death long before he-- because one of the things I remember talking about with Bob {Moses} was the whole notion of courage and death. I remember asking him in the interview I did with him if he ever, if he was ever fearful that he would get killed. And he said that he came to terms with it very early on and decided-- in essence this is not exactly what he said-- but he said in essence that he had decided that he had to do his work and that you cannot be immobilized by fear, because then you become preoccupied with it. He wouldn't have felt ....

But I was terribly frightened in Mississippi. And I think, in fact I know that a lot of us who grew up in Mississippi, in the deep South, were much fearful than people gave from the North. That we understood so clearly the danger. And I was probably more frightened than a lot of the Southerners. I don't know why but it was a curious thing. I was frightened {but} I was also daring, I would keep going places and doing things. But I don't think I would ever say that I was fearless at all.

In a real sense the two events that left such a lasting impression on me were the two lynchings. One was Emmett Till and I like to think-- in fact I have written this draft of a manuscripts, two drafts, of a book on the South. I will never publish it because I can't get it right. But one chapter, one part of the book, deals with what I call the Emmett Till generation because I have interviewed a lot of people who were former SNCC workers....

Sinsheimer: I have some of that stuff on tape. I have thought about writing just a short little thing. Cleve Sellers in South Carolina, the fundamental thing he remembers about growing

up ... and he remembers that Jet picture....

Ladner: That Jet magazine seeing that grotesque body. I can name you ten people who saw that and who-- Ed Brown, Walter Stafford at Tuskegee from Baton Rouge-- you know you name them. They were all over but that Jet photograph and they ran it again last summer.

Sinsheimer: I saw it last summer.

Ladner: But it was emblazened in everybody's mind, the images, that grotesque body. And one of the people, I can't remember who, told me that they saw it and they {thought} one day they would avenge his death. Anyway, the Emmett Till lynching was-- I think I was eleven. I was born in '43 and that was what '56, no I was thirteen.

Sinsheimer: Which was his age.

Ladner: He was fourteen. Dorie was fourteen and I was thirteen. But we used to get the newspaper, The Hattiesburg American every day. The city bus would bring it, the papers to town to this little grocery store near our house. And I would bewaiting out at 4:30 every day to buy a copy of this newspaper, the Hattiesburg American and we used to clip these articles. And I had a scrap book and I don't know whatever happened to it. And I had this teenage girl I called my play Mama. I used to go up to her house and talk to her about Emmett Till and we would lie on the floor and look at these pictures and cry.

And then-- but also just feeling tremendously powerless, absolutely no power to ever do anything about this. I would sort of sit and dream about one day. You know one of the interesting things I started thinking about lately was how my dreams, my goals in life were projected around having these four sons. One was going to be the first black senator of Mississipi, one was going to be the first governor, and I think onewas going to be a lawyer and one was going to be doctor. Back then little girls didn't dream of being doctors and lawyers and governors and senators. I was going to have these kids, and my four sons were going to right

all these wrongs.

Now the lynching that had an even more, I want to say more devestating impact on me, but one that I experienced much more personally was that of Mack Charles Parker because he was lynched just, oh, just twenty miles from Hattiesburg. And I knew people who knew the woman involved and Hattiesburg was the largest town nearby and this woman was from Petal which is like two miles outside, a little town adjacent to Hattiesburg. And her house was probably four miles from where we lived, five miles. And that was too close for comfort.

And the national press, international press, who had come to cover it lived in Hattiesburg. They stayed at the two hotels in Hattiesburg. And my sister and I used to take the city bus and go to down and listen to these foreigners as we called them talk about the lynching. These were reporters.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Ladner: And this was history, they had come here to help us, they are going to get the story out. I remember it was hopeful-- during the time Mack Charles Parker was still in jail we were really hopeful because we heard that R. Jess Brown, the lawyer, black lawyers-- one of four black lawyers in the state at the time-- was handling the case and he had evidence that was going to prove that Mack Charles Parker was innocent. And we knew that he was going to get out of jail and we were going to show these white people that they can't do this to this poor man because he is innocent. He was lynched.

I remember when I heard the news. I think somebody came and told us that they had lynched Mack Charles Parker. And my town was like gripped with fear because it was very, very nearby. I didn't, I felt powerless but I remember feeling such an overwhelming sense of powerlessness because Emmett Till was a child. But I was frightened for Mack Charles Parker and angry too. Just reallly angry, no place to vent my anger.

And it was the year folowing this whole ... that we organized the NAACP youth chapter. As I started getting older and was able to go to Jackson to meetings and then

we organized the local chapter.

Sinsheimer: So you think you might have organized the NAACP chapter in '57?

Ladner: No, I think it was more like '59, '58 or '59.

Sinsheimer: Oh, the year after Mack Charles Parker ... okay.

Ladner: No, we were well into high school, we were juniors, juniors and seniors in high school during the year .... Now it didn't last long because one of our esteemed teachers, our English teacher, Christine Thigpen, went around to all of our parents' houses to tell them they should not permit us to be involved because we were only going to be killed and their homes was going to be burned. The parents got frightened. I will never forgive here. For years afterward everytime I saw I would-- and I remember walking up to her at school-- she was not much older than we were.

Sinsheimer: Did your parents support... they didn't support ...?

Ladner: No, they were terribly frightened. Even when we were in college they were.... They weren't political people but I tell my mother now-- she is now very proud of those accomplishments-- once she got beyond her fear and fear for herself and for us, then she was able to really deal with it. A lot-- I tell her now that you gave us all the background for becoming politically active because she always told us , "Never allow anyone to push you around." And I took that literally.

I remember my older sisiter Dorie once, Dorie was twelve, oh maybe fourteen, somewhere between twelve and fourteen and she was at the corner grocery store, Hudson's grocery owned by this white man. And there was this man who was a cashier and all his fingers were cut off one hand and she bought this doughnut and he handed her the change and he touched her breast like that. She beat him across the head.

And we went home and told mother about it

and she said, "Good, that is what you are supposed to do. He had no business doing that to you." I think she went up and talked to him about it too. But she always told us to stand up for our rights and not to allow anyone to push us over. And when I interviewed these former civil rights workers about the influences on their lives, they all talked about having parents who were independent minded. And who may not have been politically active but who taught them that they had to stand up for their rights.

And Ed Brown as I recall talked about having seen his father's guns and his father-- see a lot of these people had been in the war too, World War II, and they had gone abroad, some of them had gone abroad and they had seen freedom of the land in Europe and they had gone away and fought for freedom for the Unites States and they had come back to the same segregation, the same old bullshit.

And they were, I think in many ways our parents were responsible for our activism. So my mother couldn't understand the relationship between what she taught us and us going off directly challenging whites but surely I would not have been the same kind of person if she had not told us that we should never allow anyone to push us around.

Sinsheimer: Two stories that come to my mind. The first is, Hollis Watkins was saying that the first day when he and Curtis {Hayes} went to sit-in at the Woolworth's that he had-- they lived out in the country, Summit-- and he had just told his parents that he wouldn't be back but he didn't tell them why. He remembers in jail hearing that his father had spoken at the rally, how good that had made him feel. He was afraid that his parents wouldn't let him go at all and do that but his father ....

And then what Mrs. Palmer told me, how quickly she reacted. Mrs. Palmer, she tells the story of how she got involved in the Movement was she was working as a maid in this school and her son was carrying her back and forth to school every day. Her son was a football player up at Mississippi Valley, just giving her a ride to work. And

she called home for the ride at four o'clock or whatever and one of her other children said, "He is not here. Will has been arrested or he had gone to join the Freedom Rides." He had actually been arrested. And she went home and learned how to drive that day {laughter}. And she said, you know, if my kids are in it, I am in it. She didn't know what it was, she really didn't understand it but ... The parents, people don't understand how important I think the parents were.

Ladner: The parents laid the foundation. And a lot of our parents were opposed to our involvment but somewhere along the line I will bet most of those parents had set some kind of example by word or deed that these kids were following. And it didn't mean-- I told my mother once that it didn't mean that you had to be a registered voter or to mrach on a picket line but I always saw her as being a very independent-minded person who spoke her own mind.

My mother was one of eleven children and my grandfather, who I don't remember -- died when I was quite young-- my grandfather had been an independent person. He always told his eleven children that they should never work under white people {break}. The y shoudl never work for any white men. And he was half-white, Indian and white with an Irish mother ... and my mother had gone to .... {break} Anyway, this little community, Battles, on the southeastern border of Mississippi and Alabama, all these blacks and whites and Indians were mixed together. And all these white relatives, cousins-- on my mother's birth certificate she was called mulatto. Really wierd, really strange .... {break}

{All my mother's brothers and sisters} have worked in some sort of little independent, entrepreneurial area and they have never had 9-5 jobs or 7-4 or whatever working for anyone. So it was that kind of independent frontier spirit that nurtured me so I could be terribly frightened and lie awake thinking that Klan was going to come and throw torched on my street but at the same time it was like I am scared but I am going to jump out there and do it.

Frightened but do it, keep going.

But I never overcame that fear so when Bob told me that he came to terms with it early on I always wondered if I would have done more had I not been afraid. I doubt it, I really do. It is not productive to even speculate.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of him at the time? Was he really as much of a presence as...?

Ladner: Oh yeah, quite a presence. He walked into a room and the vibrations got stronger in a way. He was a very quiet, strong, strong, presence. And he listened and listened, and he listened to people argue for hours, sometimes days. And then finally when he got ready to say something whatever he said was generally good. He was a great summerupper. And also he is such a clear thinker, logician in a way. We argued with Bob or take opposite position from his but you never lost respect for Bob because his life was a sterling example of a courageous person. Tough minded, no nonsense. I don't remember Bob dancing or partying.

Bob gave me my first Odetta albulm and would sit around and listen to music, folk music and all and everything. Excellent strategist. You could disagree with him but you could never say I disagree with him because he doesn't know what he is talking about. He did. You couldn't disagree with him because he is not willing to do what he wants other people to do. He was willing to do. Couldn't say he doesn't make sacrifices, he did.

So he was flawless, he was our god. Not the guys too much, the women really. I used to get jealous when I thought there were other women who liked Bob.

Sinsheimer: Really.

Ladner: Like your priest you know. Sort of like extremely Catholic people who revere the priest. I was angry, very angry when Donna and Bob got married. I just thought that she did not deserve someone like him.

Sinsheimer: Really?

Ladner: Oh no, she was nasty, rude....

Sinsheimer: Difficult was how somebody put it.

Ladner: Shit, rude, nasty, extremely difficult. And how could our knight in shining armour take up with someone like that. Talk about opposites. And I resented her very much, a lot of us did. I thought he was too good for her. And she was also aligned with whites from the North. I thought she was very white-like person, a white person, a black who-- she didn't have much in common from our perspective, from my perspective, with black Southerners. She was from that northern contingent. In fact she and Janet ... who Bob married were very close friends.

Sinsheimer: Do you think you would have that reaction to her today?

Ladner: Oh I have worked with her in New York at Hunter College. She teaches anthropology at Hunter. She is in the Afro-American Studies department.

Sinsheimer: Do you think she would talk to me?

Ladner: I don't know, she might. You could give it a try. She went off into Africa, she is very Africanist. She was different when I knew her in New York. In the sixties she was an angry person, hostile, very hostile. She has mellowed. She has a child and she is very devoted to this little girl. A lot of softer on the edges.

Sinsheimer: Is she on good terms with Bob?

Ladner: I have no idea. But Bob was my little god actually. I didn't think Bob could do any wrong. And I was angry with him when he married Donna and I just.... It was funny I didn't think he was dating anybody. Because he was like a monk you know. We used to tease him and he would smile and blush you know. {We} didn't think Bob had a girlfriend and therefore he was save for everyone to tease him or protect him. He had all kinds of women rushing to protect him although he didn't need protecting at all. Just a very generous person. He was generous with his

time. He was caring. And whenever something happened he was willing to pick right up and go on back again and try it all over again. I remember when Jimmy Travis got shot, the very next day Bob was right back up there.

Probably one of the funniest things that happened in the fall of '63 when the girls were bombed in the Birmingham church, Bob drove this bus, this school bus filled with SNCC workers to Birmingham and Bob could barely, Bob was not a driver {laughter}. Not a driver at all. And this bus was just about to fall apart but we got to Birmingham. Ask Ed King about that because the car he was driving-- and Dorie was in the car with him-- was detained and they wouldn't let them out of Birmingham. What a horrible time.

When I think of those SNCC years I think a lot about the drivers. In SNCC everybody had a speciality and even though we were pretty free spirited I think because people back in Atlanta were. You couldn't harness these people who went out and risked their lives and all the danger and then work those 9-5 days, you just couldn't do it. You had a lot of crazy people come into the Movement because they were only ones really willing to be daring and challenging.

But the drivers, the people who were great drivers were Cleve Sellers, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Stokley-- if you get in a car with those guys ... George Greene who was absolutely crazy, certified. But they could drive and they could outrun any cop on any dark road. And I think the drivers and I think about-- we had a fleet of cars called the Sojourner Fleet, Rudy Doris named them the Sojourner Fleet. We had this walkie-talkie. I remember when we went to Atlantic City we had this convoy. Ivanhoe was driving a car, Cleve was driving, and I don't remember who was driving the other cars. Ed Brown was another great driver.

And we got into these cars. We went from Jackson to Atlanta, Atlanta-- we stopped in Denmark, South Carolina, Cleve's home and they fed us and then we went on up to Atlantic City. And we had these walkie-talkies so we were traveling in this convoy. Not walkie-talkies, car radios, CB's, and whoever who was leading the convoy

would let the others know whether the cops were driving. Ivanhoe was a good driver. Cleve was one of the best.

Sinsheimer: I wil ask him about that. He is in Greensboro so I see him every once in awhile.

Ladner: Oh, do you? I like Cleve. I saw him when I was in Greensboro a couple of years ago. I called him and he came over to my cousin's and saw me.

Sinsheimer: He came in and did a session with some students this past Spring {at Duke University} and he did something very interesting. He came in a three piece pin stripe dark blue suit. And he sort of worked this out to me-- he basically gave a very sort of academic overview of the whole sort of situation--economic, political, sort of the iron net that had been cast. And he said to the group-- this was at night-- could you excuse me for a minute I would like to make a phone call. Ran into an office next door and changed into blue jeans and a t-shirt. And it was dramatic and I thought it was very curious. And about forty minutes later he kept going and all of a sudden he just wheeeled around and threw on Stokley glasses and sort of rolled up his sleeves. And he was trying to get at how quickly you know we socialize, we just react to stereotypes. But it was very clever.

Ladner: And their attitudes toward him?

Sinsheimer: The first time they felt a little bit manipulated, the third time {second time} it was so good because he had the perfect glasses and he started talking, you know, in sort of the Black Power rap {laughter}.

Ladner: That is interesting.

Sinsheimer: It was an interesting little sociology experiment.

Ladner: The other thing I think about frequently is ... well a number of things. One is how If I think there was a single thing to describe SNCC as an organization, not the seperate

individuals in it but the organization itself, it was that we all believed in democracy with the smallest "d" possible. In that context the staff meetiings, those marathon staff meetings that would go on for days and days were the best example of how this belief in democracy was so overwhelming that we could never make decisions that we could stick to.

And would challenge anyone. I remember once Courtland Cox was-- we go through various stages and one stage was about being accountable, what do you do for SNCC? And Courtalnd was asked what did he do for SNCC and he made the mistake of saying SNCC pays me to think. And talk about people getting on his case. So everyone would as an example everyone in the room, there could be fifty or a hundred people, everyone had to have their say on what is the nature of thinking. Everything on what is the nature of thinking to what thinking processes one ought to engage in or does Courtland know how to think to "Damn nigger get off your ass." {laughter} "You have no right, I have to go out there and raise money for you to sit back here and think. How does that help the organization."

So you had to abstract-- there was various camps in SNCC and you could pretty much predict how people were going to come down in support of or against an issue based on which faction they were identified with. There was a northern white faction, there was the northern black faction and they much more often as I recall took issues, general issues rather similar to the whites. Because it was not so much defined by race so much as it was defined by an educated elite. And you had southern blacks who were the core of SNCC from the beginning and who as time went on began to feel displaced because of the superior skills and educational background of a lot of the northerners.

Sinsheimer: Where did the Howard group fit in?

Ladner: Oh they were the leaders.

Sinsheimer: They were the...?

Ladner: Leaders.

Sinsheimer: Do you put those people in a faction or not?

Ladner: I would say that there is no question in my mind that Ivanhoe {Donaldson} who was not at Howard but Ivanhoe was allied with Courtland {Cox}, Stokley, Ed Brown, no not Ed Brown, Ed Brown was more southern.

Sinsheimer: I had sort of picked up from like Hollis {Watkins} sort of an antagonism towards the Howard people.

Ladner: Yeah, because they represented the sort of the northern educated ... they were the leaders of that. And see you had people like Hollis and Peacock and oh I am trying to think of the others....

Sinsheimer: Sam Block.

Ladner: Sam, Jesse Harris, they were all southern, Mississippi people who had to sacrifice early on, who had busted their butts, dodged bullets literally, who knew the lay of the land, who knew the people, and who had a lot of interpersonal skills and human resources but didn't have a Howard education, hadn't taken literature courses with Sterling Brown or hadn't studied philosophy or whatever. So the Howard people could come in, especially Stokley, Stokley was so articulate. Stokley was very bright. And they could articulate the issues and I mean they could stand there-- so if you had someone like Peaccok standing there or Hollis who articulated slowly anyway. He and Bob really were very close.

And you see Stokley's standard is speaking rapid fire, and Hollis knew what he wanted to say, or Hollis knew the issues just as clearly but the inability to articulate them as well. Gift for gab versus the real substance. I am not saying Stokley didn't have substance but you can see you place local people at a disadvantage. Now if you can place people like Hollis at a disadvantage and cause antagonism you can imagine how inept local people would feel. Not that they would be hostile so much as feel inadequate perhaps.

Those conflicts really didn't emerge until about '63, '63 I would say because before then they ....

Sinsheimer: Where would Frank Smith fit into this?

Ladner: Oh Frank was a southern boy. You see there are some people who defy the characterization.. Frank had gone to Morehouse {College} but he was, he still is a Newnan, Georgia boy. Have you interviewed him?

Sinsheimer: I saw him before and I am suppoosed to see him tomorrow.

Ladner: He is from Newnan, Georgia still. That is his mentality. He was ....

Sinsheimer: I had to sit and wait for himn about an hour and a half and I was really creating a lot of false impressions. But when I got in there one-on-one he was great. He was great.

Ladner: He is a southern boy, still a real country boy. That doesn't change at all. He and I have a mutual friend, my oldest and dearest friend Walter Stafford from New York and he came out of, he went to Tuskegee and came down to SNCC when he was living in Atlanta. He was going to Atlanta University. We met back in '63. And he and Frank are also good friends and he says unlike anyone else who is in SNCC Frank has never changed at all. {Laughter} He is very much the same.

See you had the southern Southerners, college educated or no, were much more closely identified in a same sense that northerners were, northern whites and northern blacks I think. I think you would find much more-- you see I never perceived differences between myself and Mrs. {Hazel} Palmer. And I doubt Mrs. Palmer would have perceived as many differences between herself and other Tougaloo or Jackson State students or a Valley student or Rust Colege or whatever. I think the common culture of the South was a much stronger background.

Remember this is twenty-five years ago and the South was still one which had respect for elders.

Sinsheimer: The whole rural-urban thing is ....

Ladner: Very, very different. Jackson was the most urban center and it was a country town. You can see how country it still is. It was a very

small little country town. Eighty thousand people I think and that was stretching it. Another thing-- little things sort of make me think of bigger things that happened back then. I remember we wouldn't imagine calling Mrs. Hamer, Fannie or Fannie Lou, or Mrs. Palmer, Hazel....

Sinsheimer: I was curious to see Bob call Mrs. Palmer, Mrs. Palmer. Oh yeah.

Ladner: And that was an indication of what kind of relationship we had with them. We were in college-- I was getting a good education at Tougaloo, very good in fact-- but I would never have viewed myself as being as having the right to be more articulate on any issue than Mrs. Palmer or Mrs. Hamer. In fact for us their wisdom superceded any coursebook knowledge that we had.

Sinsheimer: What-- I am trying to think how to ask this question without it being loaded-- But what would you make of the whole issue of sexism in the civil rights movement?

Ladner: Yeah. Well, I didn't experience it and in fact it came as rather as a jolt when Mary King and other women in SNCC talked about it because-- I have really thought about this a lot, because the feeling is quite likely that some of the white women did experience it. I don't remember tthem ever talking about it, I was never privy to their conversation where it was an issue for them.

I do know that the structure of our work meant that we gave certain white people certain roles and we had other roles based on one simple factor: the extent to which it is dangerous. And that was always the defining factor. We didn't allow white people to come into work in Mississippi until '62-'63 when Casey, and Jane Stembridge came in. And they lived out at Tougaloo in the house across the street from campus. And they worked on this education project and _____ worked with them. Tougaloo, you know, was a little community.... Then they were able to work in the Jackson office but they could not go out into those smaller communities. And even when they got into those smaller communities they were confined to the offices. And that had

nothing to do with sexism but it had all to do with danger.

Now and let me take this a step further because Dorie and I have talked about this. And we were discussing this not to long ago and recalled how the guys used to when we were riding in these cars in dangerous areas they most of the time would ask the women to ride in the back seat because of the danger. Black women. And it was a southern, old-fashioned attitude about protecting women. Now that can be interpreted as sexism-- some of it-- I don't want to oversimplify it, nor do I want to downplay what were genuine concerns on the parts of white females. But I can't help but feel that Sarah Evans got a lot of it wrong. She really didn't understand what she was writing about. I started to write a review of the book at one point but I was never asked to write it.

Sinsheimer: She was a student of Bill Chafe's and Larry Goodwyn's.

Ladner: Was she?

Sinsheimer: Yes.

Ladner: She got it wrong, missed a great part of it because she didn't understand the context, the texture of relationships.

Sinsheimer: One of the other problems with her book is she didn't ....

Ladner: She didn't talk to the right people that was her first problem. When I read it, even before I read the book I looked through to see who was in the index.

Sinsheimer: I think for the first book it was .... You can use like "some women felt" or "other women felt " you know as a very effective sort of ....

Ladner: Sure... device. To exagerate the extent of the data you have. But when I saw the index even before reading the book, I flipped through to see who she talked to, she did not talk to the right people. She did not talk to enough people, nor did she talk to the principle players. There is no way in the world Ruby Doris Robinson would ever have felt that she

was being oppressed. She was doing was oppressing these men. Ruby Doris, more than anyone, was an oppressor. I mean she didn't oppress anyone but if anyone was....

Dorie and I have agreed this and talked about it a bunch of time that if there was a single person in SNCC who was the driving force it was not Jim Forman at all but Ruby. Ruby was the brains and strategist behind most of SNCC's operation until she became disabled. Now she was just .... Clearly just had more ability than most of the men by far. Now there is no question but that within the context of twenty-five years ago sure men in the Movement and the roles that men occupied were very consistent with those that men were occupying outside in the society. They were the leaders and more often than not men directed projects. There were a few places I guess where women were project directors. But at the same time I was never asked to type. I typed because I knew how to type. But hadn't known how to type no one would have told me that I should sit down and learn or whatever. I don't know any black women that were told that they couldn't participate equally on projects. In fact sometimes we did somethings that men weren't....

We protected men in some situations just as they protected us. Going out to some situations where you knew that men would not be accepted. Also there were a lot ofsituations where it was so dangerous that men went in, invariably men went in first to try to we called it "crack" the community, to crack a community. I think places like .... Sam Block slept in a car in Greenwood. It was also an old-fashioned attitude about what women do and what you don't put women through. I wish we had more of it today actually. Women would not have been expected to do that.

But women like Mrs. Palmer, like little June Johnson, who was probably about thirteen or fourteen were always mainstays to any organizer who came into a community. They were the ones that were the footsoldiers who provided the support, who got them in to see the Baptist preachers so they could use the churches, and so on. And see there is no way you could have oppressed a Fannie Lou Hamer. There were a lot of women like Susie Ruffin, have you met her?

Sinsheimer: No, Mrs. Palmer has told stories.

Ladner: I mean you could tell stories about Susie Ruffin for days. She would come into the office and terrorize some of those people. She used to hang out with this guy, her protege was Jim Phipps. And Phipps had a mental problem. I remember one time in the summer of '66 Phipps and Mrs. Ruffin came into the FDP office on Farish St. and essentially they cleaned house. Screaming at folks, throwing typewriters. The pressures of the Movement really hastened the neuroses in a lot of people too. This girl Harriet _____ ... used to walk around with her brown paper bag and she would ask if you would like to make chicken, I got my seasoning right here in my bag. She was as out to lunch as she could be. But those were some of the same people that were able to make contributions before they became so absorbed.

And one of the tragic things today-- I have gone back to the South to talk to people, local people who are still there, is that despite all the sacrifices they made they have really not reaped the benefits. And in so many cases the people who sat on the sidelines and played it safe, who were in college and couldn't drop out of school, didn't go on any demonstrations, didn't do anything are the ones who have-- just literally sat out. And they in many similar situations blocked any involvment or rewards that would be reaped by the ....

Sinsheimer: You have that sitaution in Greenwood. David Jordan, Cleveland Jordan's son.

Ladner: Oh, Mr. Jordan. I could tell you stories about him. He used to steal money from the collection we would take up. He was good, I liked Mr. Jordan. But I had forgot his name. And his son was involved?

Sinsheimer: Well, his son was a teacher and wasn't involved but his son is now the big leader and Peacock ....

Ladner: Mr. Jordan used to say, "Now you have got to help these little SNCC people." And he would come around to the Freedom House. He was a lot of fun. He would always insist on taking up a collection and we didn't take up much. But he would always take a little bit for himself

{laughter}. The human stories, or the human interest stories ... I look back on it a lot today because it still gives you a lot clues to the kinds of personalities. {break}

Sinsheimer: {What was Dave Dennis like?}

Ladner: Dave was so young. I didn't realize because he married my cousin in Hattiesburg but Dave was the only CORE field secretary in Mississippi for along time. And he was a good organizer, very courageous. CORE had a project in Canton... I know they had a Canton project. The way things were organized, anytime therewas a major effort like the Greenwood project, generally CORE, Dave and then we had, he was field secretary, but there was ... Matt Suarez who lives in New Orleans and George Raymond were ... and George died. They were CORE field workers, they were workers , they weren't field secretaries. They, when all of CORE's staff-- wherever there was a major action like in Greenwood or the Hattiesburg demonstrations everyone would come in from everyplace. So you would pull your forces in. You would just tell people that you would be marching on the courthouse in Greenwood and everybody would come.

Sinsheimer: How did you feel about going home, I mean to demonstrate in Hattiesburg? Was that scary?

Ladner: No, at that stage it wasn't. My fear mostly was before I got to college and then to some extent-- I guess '60, '61-- but then afterwards once everybody came to Mississippi we had so many more people {break}.

But I was just saying that by '63 there were so many civil rights workers in the state, there was so much activity going on, the level of danger was there to a greater extent but not like th early danger. It was a qualitative difference for me. One of the reasons, major reasons, Bob fought for the Summer Project was because people were getting literally picked off like flies and the only you could continue activity was to bring in sons and daughters of powerful lawyers or Congress or business people or whatever. Like you buy insurance that way. National media would follow these kids, atypical types that were going into this unusual place.

Also it was time for a confrontation, I mean everything was just slowly building up. You could either retreat forever or make the final push for the big one.

Sinsheimer: Did you have a strong feeling one way or the other about the summer?

Ladner: Yeah, but in my typical role of being in the middle, mediator, understanding both sides, I voted for the Summer Project and I felt that it should come off. And it was the only time that I went against what Peacock and the others wanted. They didn't want it.

Sinsheimer: How about Dorie?

Ladner: Dorie was in favor of it too. We had gotten sufficiently assimilated or something {laughter}. I don't know whatever. I am not sure. But I thought about the logic of Bob's position. You see people like Peacock-- this is just my reasoning. A number of things were happening. One is that you see the gradual loss of control over the situation. Also you could lower the temperature perhaps to some extent and not continue to expand and expand. Not lower the temperature so much as you could go back to basics instead of continuing to expand to bring in all these people. You could just continue to work on a small level scale in communities.

One of the things, the potential fear was that the Summer Project would bring in so many people for a short time then withdraw them and local people would have had their expectations raised unnecessarily and everybody else has gone back to Radcliffe and Barnum, Yale and Harvard and so on. And the people are left with raised expectations and no long term assistance to realize them. And that is exactly what happened. So they were right on that score. But I can't say that had the Summer Project not occurred that things would have been different. I think that a very real possibility was that people would have been killed in little local communities and they were black and they were poor and they were southerners.

Sinsheimer: Bob talks very dramatically and interesting-- what finally swayed him was Louis Allen. In

fact he remembers that he had heard about Louis Allen and he had the meeting that day and he finally took a stand. He said it was as you say that he realized that people needed protection.

Ladner: But Bob was very careful for a long time with personnel with regard to who was permitted to come into Mississippi to work. And he was not challenged that often because usually what Bob said was taken rather seriously. He understood the limitations, he understood that Mississippi was such a volatile place that he couldn't take the risk of bringing in huge numbers of people early on. That you couldn't put white women out in communities that if they were going to be in Mississippi they were going to be in Jackson or out near Tougaloo. He understood that even in the early stages that you didn't bring white guys in. In '61 there were no white men in Mississippi. What his name at the Mississippi Free Press but he was the only white male that I can recall.

And Joan, my roommate, Joan Trumpauer. But she was at Togaloo, she was a student at Tougaloo. And there were some other students at Tougaloo. Karen Kunstler, Bill Kunstler's daughter was there. ...Oh we had, Pete is still down there. He is a mechanic down in Jackson. What was his name? He was a Freedom Rider and he stayed on in Mississippi. He is still there. In fact he married a black woman and he is a mechanic, auto mechanic. I think he has a body shop or something in Jackson. Pete Stoler, I always forget about him because he became like part of the landscape {laughter}. He was crazy about my sister, he loved Dorie. Dorie couldn't stand him {laughter}....

End of interview.