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: Jennifer Lawson

Interview Date: December 11, 2015

Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 4 hours, 9 minutes

START OF RECORDING

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

EC: All right, this is Emilye Crosby with Jennifer Lawson in her home in Washington, DC, on December 11, 2015. We're here with the Civil Rights History project co-sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Thank you for doing the interview with us.

Jennifer Lawson: Thank you for asking me to do this. It's an honor.

EC: We're honored as well. Can you start by telling us when and where you were born and about your family?

JL: Yes, I was born in Fairfield, Alabama. Fairfield is a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. One street is Fairfield, the next street is Birmingham. And it's on the Western side of the city, and I was born there in 1946, in June of 1946. My father came from central Alabama. He was the fourteenth of fifteen children, and he then was born in 1899, and he left his--. He was born in what is now Bullock County, Alabama, near

Union Springs. And he left that area when he was 15 years old and left working on the farm there and moved to Birmingham just really, essentially, ran away to find a job and find work in Birmingham.

EC: Did he want to get away from the farm, or was he just--?

JL: He wanted to get away from the farm, wanted to--. He had a third grade education. He was an incredibly curious man, really smart guy. And he wanted more. He wanted to be able to learn more. And he came to Birmingham. He went to Birmingham, and in Birmingham he got a job first in the coal mines there. And after working in the coal mines he then ended up driving the locomotive through the coal mines, and he started saving his money, and he bought a tractor, and he took it apart, put it back together again so that he would then know how to repair tractors. He did the same with a car, and then he started a little business that he called Lawson's Repair. And he then he would essentially take everything apart, put it back together again and so--.

EC: That's amazing.

JL: His business, he repaired washing machines, refrigerators, and the people that he served lived throughout the Birmingham area. And through him I ended up getting to travel to some of the places that were mining camps and company towns and to hear union leaders and when people were on strike in some of the company towns. It was quite--. There were these communities, Powderly, Bessemer, Brighton, and these were these other places, little towns that were company towns for Tennessee Coal and Iron, which later became a subsidiary of US Steel.

EC: So he would take you with him when he was picking up or delivering or?

JL: Right, exactly.

EC: Would he ever go around and repair stuff where it was?

JL: He did indeed. He often would. If a car had a break down it's quite possible that he would then repair that car onsite, you know. Rather than towing it or anything he would repair it onsite. And he taught me and my brothers. When we were relatively young he taught us how to do some basic repairs so that I felt very comfortable with technology. It was something where when I was really small he insisted that I learn to rewire a motor and to create a motor, so I really began to understand the principals of how a motor worked, but it was boring to me to have to wind all of these coils of copper wire to actually create a motor from scratch.

EC: That's amazing.

JL: But I learned those kinds of things, and then he would allow us to keep the money if we then did small repairs so that in the winter time when a car- someone's battery didn't start or something, and they needed a battery charged, those were things that we learned to do.

EC: So it enhances his business gives you spending money.

JL: Right. Exactly.

EC: I'm just sort of amazed at that ability, that he could just learn how to do all of those things just by taking them apart. That's kind of remarkable.

JL: No, it was quite remarkable, and we have--. There's an article we have been searching for, my brothers and I have been searching for.

[5:00] We had heard about it when we were children, but we've never found it. It was ...other people though, so many people around us talked about it that we felt that it must exist somewhere, and that was that during- around WWI, before I was born…I mean

WWII, sorry, before I was born, that during the--. Because there was gas rationing that it was very difficult, he liked to travel too. He really enjoyed seeing the world as much as he could and travelling, which meant that he would travel, drive places. He would drive from Birmingham to Toronto or from Birmingham to Los Angeles.

And he then on one of these trips around 1945, he drove, apparently, from Birmingham to Canada, and the article that some people say was in *LIFE* magazine, but I've never found it, was--. The headline for it apparently was that this Birmingham man goes to Canada on one gallon of gas. And the reason that he was able to do the one gallon of gas is because he only needed the gasoline to start the car, to ignite the fuel, but then the rest of the journey he'd really be burning these low grade fuels like kerosene. And he had done some special convertor to allow him, in the car, with the car engine, that allowed him to do this.

EC: Wow.

JL: So he was, you know, an inventor in his own way too, and he was constantly--. He was a tinkerer. So we owned our own home, and we lived in Fairfield, and immediately behind there was a little small backyard, but the majority of our backyard was taken up with his business, his repair shop. And there would at any given moment would be, you know, two or three cars there for repair, and he had a couple of men who worked with him to help him, and then he'd also have a refrigerator or small appliances that he was working on too, fans.

EC: It's kind of amazing that he stayed in Birmingham, I think, or in that area, with that kind of curiosity. Do you have a sense of why he--. And an interest in travel. Was he connected to family or the community in a way?

JL: I don't think that that was necessarily what kept him there, but I think that we--. It's not as though we were--. Had the financial wherewithal to--.

EC: Pick up and move?

JL: --pick up and move somewhere. I think that it was quite an achievement, I think, to live as comfortably as we were living where we did own our own home. But we were living in a community where people--. The economic range went from the doctor and the pharmacist who were a couple of blocks over who had sort of much more magnificent homes. We had just a little modest, you know, bungalow-style house, and then there were the kids who lived in the alley, and their houses were actually in the alley, and so in some of those when I was growing up, they didn't even yet have plumbing, indoor plumbing, you know.

EC: So, yeah, so a real remarkable--.

JL: So you had that kind of economic mixture, and with my father's business there any number of times when the mines were on a strike or when there were layoffs that instead of collecting cash for work that he would do, he would come home with all kinds of things, you know, it's like--.

EC: Barter?

JL: Here's a lady's watch or a radio or something, but it was real barter--.

EC: Yeah, whatever you could get for his--.

JL: --business. Whatever he could get for it. That's right, exactly.

EC: I guess if your customer base doesn't have money you don't have--.

JL: Yeah, right.

EC: Did you ever think it was strange that he had you learning all of this along with your brothers, that he didn't differentiate?

JL: At first I did, but then it was something where I enjoyed it. I thought I liked it. I liked the fact that he didn't differentiate. I liked the fact that he respected us as thinkers, not just as his children. I mean, there were times when he definitely treated us as his children, and we were subject to the same kind of corporal punishment as all the kids in the neighborhood, which was just awful, but there were other times when I feel that he respected us as thinkers. He would buy books, [10:00] he'd buy his version of the encyclopedia, and it was--. And for him, a good evening at home was that after he had worked that he would sit and read just at random, you know, from the encyclopedia. And it was something that was a kind of curiosity that inspired me as well.

For travelling he'd talk about other places in the world, but as I said, he'd talk about places that he wanted to go to, but it was quite something for us, in our community, for us. The other people would marvel at the fact that we then would go to Mexico or go to Canada.

EC: That's just sort of in general out of reach in your community?

JL: Right, exactly, exactly.

JL: What did you like about the travel?

JL: Oh, just the fact of seeing the rest of the world. I mean, one part of it was that here we were in Birmingham, and that in Fairfield we had our own little protected community in some ways, and of course none of these places are actually truly protected, but we had a little parallel universe of the--. So it was totally segregated during the time that I was growing up, I mean, absolutely segregated. There were signs in downtown

Fairfield that said Laundromat, White Only; Gas Station, White Only; restaurants, all the business.

And the bus stopped in front of my house that then went to downtown Birmingham. It was just, you could get on the bus and for, you know, really cheap, go to downtown Birmingham, but it was that kind of segregated bus that had the moveable barriers that were White on one side, Colored on the other, and you were supposed to sit behind it. And we kids would play with that by then getting on the bus, and we usually, in our neighborhood, we would get on it would be pretty empty, so we'd get on and move the barrier up towards the front.

EC: So Whites didn't have any space?

JL: So Whites didn't have any space to sit by the time it, you know, moved around to their neighborhood on its journey.

EC: Would you get in trouble?

JL: Of course.

EC: But not serious trouble?

JL: But not serious trouble. Yeah, we were never threatened or anything. I mean, the driver would, you know, sort of make us, you know, yell at us and tell us to move back.

EC: Well, you know, I've seen the images and heard people talk about like in Montgomery in some of the testimony of the cases that came out related to the bus boycott that the front of the bus reserved for Whites would be empty because Whites didn't even ride the bus in as high of numbers, and so moving it seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

JL: So we had this somewhat protected world and it was--. We had our own doctors, pharmacists, dentist, and so my father was a part of that world in that he was the repair person. People were organized by churches in part, but we were a little bit different in that respect too that while my father belonged to the largest Baptist church there. He was active there. He didn't require us to go. He required that we should go to a church on Sundays, but it didn't have to be his church.

EC: That's very interesting.

JL: So he encouraged this kind of free thinking. Now I haven't mentioned my mother. My mother had been--. Before they married she had been a school teacher, and she had attended college, so she taught school. But after we were--. My brother, I have a brother who's two years older, and after he was born she stopped working and was a housewife. And so she would from time to time go work as a substitute teacher at the schools, but for the most part she didn't work. She spent a lot of her time reading.

EC: Oh, really?

JL: Mm-hmm, so she read novels. She read--. Mostly I don't remember any real nonfiction books, but I do remember novels and magazines.

EC: Do you have a sense of whether she missed that work, being able to work? Do you know?

JL: I think she did. I think she, for me, she is a rather tragic figure because I think that she was lonely in some ways and missed the world that she would have had [15:00] had she been working.

EC: And was that something--. I mean, obviously, I don't know if you know this, within their relationship, did your father want her to be home, or did she feel like she should be?

JL: I think that it was a sign of, for those times, I think that that was a sign of wellbeing. I think that for the men of that world that it was a sign that they were a good provider, and it was a sign of how well they were doing that their wives didn't work. And there were other women in the neighborhood who, you know, to make ends meet, they had little home businesses where they were the Avon lady, or they were the hair stylist, but working out of their kitchen as a hair stylist, not out of a real shop or a salon, or a seamstress. So there were all kinds, but my mother didn't work at all, you know. She didn't work, but I don't think it was something that really suited her that well, and I think that she was really depressed because of that. You know, you don't think of it as being depressed when you're a child, but when you look back and you recognize that, oh, this is what's wrong with that picture, you know.

EC: You started to talk about what the travel meant to you, and then I think we got diverted.

JL: Yes, so the travel, for me, and I got diverted because I wanted you to understand that it really was this truly segregated world and that it was a world where you couldn't go to a descent library, and I'll come back to that. You know, please, I'd like to come back to the library part, but instead you--. So it was so constricted, and when we would travel we would go to places like we'd come here to Washington, DC, or we would go to New York. And my father then was always the one, the leader of these excursions, and we went, when we were children, we went to the Museum of Natural History, the Hayden

Planetarium, and those places in New York so much that I had grown to hate them. It was like, "Oh no, not again. I don't want to see the mummies. I don't want to see--."

EC: Too educational.

JL: But you appreciated it very much, but it was--. And he would have this--. He sort of was our tour guide.

EC: Today is the Coney Island day?

JL: Well, he had this narration. There were some things like I keep trying to remember where it was. There was some place where they had an exhibit that was these stones from someplace like Peru or some--. But he wanted us to understand that the people had built those without any mortar, and that they had cut the stones so precisely that you couldn't slip a sheet of paper between them. So it was that kind of--.

EC: That's pretty intense.

JL: Yeah, it was that kind of narration that went with it.

EC: You can't just go look at the dinosaurs?

JL: No. So he had all of these details of things that really were interesting to him, and he expected that they should be of equal interest to us, and that one day at the Smithsonian, you know, certainly at the Museum of Natural--. One day was not enough. You needed multiple days to go.

EC: Sounds like he should have been a teacher.

JL: So he was in his own way very much so, very much so. And we used to joke and say that, "Boy, if he had a real education he would have been really dangerous."

EC: It sounds like it.

JL: ( ) The travel, for me, was this exposure to this much, much broader world. It was a place where, coming to New York, going to New York you didn't feel that, "Oh, Whites must live here. Blacks must live here." We visited relatives who lived in integrated neighborhoods.

EC: So it really makes that seem like an arbitrary--.

JL: Right, exactly, exactly. You went to, you know, you got on the New York subway, you got on a bus in New York City, and it's just people on a bus. You went to a pizza place or you went to a restaurant or something, and in Birmingham the only restaurants you could go to were the, you know, sort of soul food Black-owned places. And for the larger White restaurants, you couldn't go there to eat, and if you wanted their food then they had the little window [20:00] in the back.

EC: Would you do that? Would anybody in your family do that?

JL: There were times where if a new restaurant that was supposed to have something very tasty or something, there were times when people would then go and try the food and, you know, to--.

[Camera turns off and on again]

JL: Okay. In Birmingham you couldn't use the library. To avoid integrating things there was one point where they even took the seats out. So it was, you know, you could--. But we were relegated to these segregated libraries that had, you know, sort of worn books and these tattered books, and so it was--. In Fairfield we then, the women in my community, had started their own library. And so I and some of the other kids, we volunteer and help with the library.

EC: Oh, cool.

JL: There was a pharmacist, our pharmacist, Dr. Parham, P-A-R-H-A-M. He owned a building, Parham's Apothecary, and his building was sort of the center of our little Black world. And that was the place where I had my first job where I got paid really, separate from working for my father, and that was working in Dr. Parham's store. And I worked at the counter, and he had ice cream and, you know, I sold ice cream to my friends. But his wife, Mrs. Parham, then took one of the rooms above the drug store and made it a library, made it a community library, and she and several other women of the community then maintained that library.

EC: Was it a popular place?

JL: It was for us. I don't know how many people used it, but for my generation it was an important place, yeah.

EC: So you've talked about this a little bit already, but can you talk about sort of how you encountered race and understood it when you were young?

JL: I think the first time I became really conscious of race was when I was very young, probably about five or so, four, five. It was directly across from my house. My

house was at the corner of a rather busy intersection, and when I say busy we're talking about relative terms here.

EC: We're not talking DC?

JL: No, we're talking relative terms. People actually did walk past because they used the sidewalks and walked past because there was a mailbox on the corner. The bus stop was on that same corner, and across the street from my house there was a store. The store, from the time that I can remember as a child, the store was owned by the Ragusa family, and they were Italian Americans. The grandparents lived there and were the ones who had first, you know, when I was really small they had started the store, but then they had--. There was this younger family, I assume their children. The son and his wife and children worked in the store and they lived adjacent to the store. So they lived--. This was a White, Italian American family living in the store, and this was not uncommon. You had then one of these--. Probably for every six blocks you had then one of these little Italian American grocers.

EC: Interesting.

JL: I played with this girl, Teresa Ragusa, who lived across the street, and she and I were like best friends because we'd get up in the morning, and we'd go out and play. And so since she was right across the street we played together, and the other kids, you know, she played with the other African American kids, and there came that point when it was time for us to go to elementary school, and that's when her relatives and my, you know, Black friends said you can't play together anymore.

EC: Really?

JL: And we sort of didn't get it. We didn't understand.

EC: And you're getting it from both sides.

JL: Right, exactly, [25:00] that you can't play together any more.

EC: Would you to sneak and play?

JL: Well, she would be on the other side. We'd stand there talking to each other from our respective sides of the street.

EC: That's so sad.

JL: Oh, it really was, you know, I'd be sort of saying, "Look, I got a new doll." And then she would sort of say, "Oh, could you come over?" And I'd say, "No, I can't." And she would say, "Oh, and I can't come over." So it was this sort of separation like that. So that was my first sort of consciousness of that, okay, it's a world where we are separated by race, and then I'd hear the adults--. There would be the times where you'd hear the adults talking about something really awful that had happened, you know, a lynching or things that they were talking about.

EC: Would they try to protect you from that, or would they try to teach you about it?

JL: They really didn't talk to us directly about it, but you'd hear. They wouldn't stop talking just because you were in the room or around.

EC: So they didn't try to keep it from you, but they weren't really engaging with it?

JL: Right, exactly, exactly.

EC: Do you remember any of the things that you heard them talk about?

JL: The worst thing, and I don't--. I was older when this happened. I don't remember what year it occurred, but it was well-documented. There was a news article. There were several news articles about it. Was of an African American man who was kidnapped and castrated in Birmingham, and that the people, the White men, who

kidnapped him to sort of harm him even more they poured kerosene on the wound, and unbeknownst to them that actually saved his life. That caused the blood to clot so he did not bleed to death, but instead that actually saved his life. That became something that people talked about.

EC: That's awful.

JL: Yeah, yeah, so that was--. You knew that that was a part of this world as well.

EC: And did you connect that to yourself, like that something like that could happen to you or your community?

JL: Oh, you very definitely did. I mean, you know, you knew that this was a world where you knew about--. I knew of the Ku Klux Klan, and I knew that the Klan had marched somewhere. I didn't know how close or how far it was from me, but I knew of the Ku Klux Klan. I knew what it looked like, what an image of them looked like, you know. I knew that there were all of these awful and threatening things that Whites did to Black people.

EC: Yeah, were you aware of the bombs in Birmingham? Was it bombing hill?

JL: It was, of course. And by the time that that was really more intense then I was getting towards high school or already in high school, and we would go back and forth. Birmingham, as I said, we lived just, you know, Fairfield is a suburb, but it's truly just right there adjacent to Birmingham. And about maybe six blocks from my house there was a small historically Black college, Miles College. And the college was financially not doing terribly well, but it was a place where there were then college professors and others who were there at Miles, but because of the state of disrepair we considered it a playground.

EC: They're trying to save the college, and for you it's a playground.

JL: Right, because we could ride our bikes around. There was no traffic on the campus and things, but it was--. That too became a place of community in a sense. One year, for example, my mother and some of the other people in the neighborhood, I don't remember my father participating in this, but some of the other people in the neighborhood, we went to Miles College to a screening of the film Imitation of Life.

EC: Oh, yeah.

JL: That it had been banned, I think, or they couldn't play it at the segregated Black theater downtown, the Carver Theater, named after George Washington Carver, of course. So we couldn't go to the Carver Theater to see this film, but the Miles College was doing a screening of it, and so we went to this screening of Imitation of Life. And this was one of the earlier versions of it. [30:00] There have been several versions of that, but this was one of the earlier versions of it, and I don't know if you're familiar with it, but it's a, you know, great melodrama, the woman who's passing for White.

EC: So what did you think of that when you were young?

JL: Oh, it became to me, that was one of, I feel, one of the few times that we as younger people were having a discussion about race with our parents and with, you know, multigenerational--.

EC: So the screening included a discussion?

JL: The screening didn't include a discussion, but we just at home, and ours was a society of front porches.

EC: Yeah, and so there was lots of discussion.

JL: Lots of discussion.

EC: Yeah, what did people think about the idea of passing?

JL: Oh, there were people who, you had people in your family, you know. Everybody sort of knew someone who was passing, who had disappeared. There were families of--. We had some friends who within their families there were people who they were very, very light-skinned and it was almost as though they were prohibited by their families from marrying anybody darker.

EC: Want to preserve that light.

JL: Preserve the lightness or go towards even more lightness if possible, and it would then--. You'd hear that one person from the family had, you know, was passing now, and so they were--.

EC: We talked to Vernon Dahmer's family, and you know, they said that quite a few family members had left and crossed over the line.

JL: Exactly, yeah. Yeah, it was a fairly common occurrence in that way.

EC: Birmingham. How were you aware of that, or what kind of impact did that have?

JL: Well, we would move back and forth readily. I took music lessons in Birmingham. I studied violin, and I'd go on Saturdays for my music lesson, and at another point I studied piano. And there was a Black business street in downtown Birmingham, and we would go over to these activities, and I also had a relative who taught at a high school, the most prominent high school in Birmingham, Parker High. Through her then, she knew like, for example, Angela Davis's family or this attorney Arthur Shores, and that these were people who lived on this street of this sort of wealthier Black families, Center Street. They had lovely suburban-style, ranch-style houses arrayed along that street, and the attorney, Arthur Shores, was one who's house was

regularly bombed. Later, with urban renewal, ha, that they then also built--. When they started talking about the freeway they destroyed that community specifically.

EC: And it was one that Whites were angry about because African Americans are encroaching or building nice homes? Is that--?

JL: It wasn't encroaching. This was a community that had been traditionally Black, but it was just the fact that these were people who had nice homes, and so if you can destroy any place, let's do that one.

EC: So getting out of their place with homes so nice?

JL: Yeah.

EC: What were your schools like?

JL: The schools were--. I went to Robinson Elementary school, and the school was, you know, these were all segregated schools again in Fairfield, and they were very poor in terms of classroom resources, equipment, the teachers were not, you know, you had a mixture. You had some teachers who had very little training, had gone to Alabama State and studied education, and then you also had people who were absolutely brilliant, and people who would have in today's world probably gone on to Yale or Harvard or some place and, you know, taught at a major university or at an Ivy League school, but they were then relegated in that segregated world to these limited choices, and so each of these schools would generally have someone like that.

EC: So you were exposed to both very, very good and poor--.

JL: Right.

EC: Educational at the same time.

JL: Exactly, exactly, there were people you felt, though, that people cared. For example, at my elementary school, at both the elementary school and the high school, [35:00] the people who were the school lunchroom ladies, they cared about the quality of their food because they lived right there in the neighborhood. So they didn't want you going home and saying what they had prepared was inedible. Instead, you know, you'd likely go home and say, "Oh my goodness, she made the best peach cobbler." And they were using food that was allocated to the school, and in some cases it was the government subsidy. So it's, you know, somebody says, "They could do remarkable things with those cans of government cheese," you know.

EC: Yeah, it's not a lot of variety. It's not a lot of fresh stuff.

JL: Right, right, but they did quite remarkable things, but the quality--. There were people who, they cared. They cared about us as kids too quite often.

EC: So they had a real connection. There was a sense of community with the school.

JL: Right, right, and so there were some kids whose families, you know, one kid whose mother was an alcoholic, and people--. It was not just the teachers, but other people in the community would quite often try to reach out to families like that to be really supportive and helpful too. You know, you felt this sort of sense of community and of caring. The high school hand-me-down band uniforms, hand-me-down musical instruments, the books, you know, we got the books after Fairfield high school had used them.

Fairfield High School was the White school, and then ours was Fairfield Industrial High School. This gave me a sense of connection to all the way back to that world of Booker T Washington because this was the argument that, "Oh, they need to have this industrial

training, and that everybody shouldn't go to college." So you had a mixture of the vocational education as well as the college prep. It wasn't called college prep, but you had that mixture in the school.

EC: So that influence was still present. It wasn't just the name?

JL: Right, right, no, it was Fairfield Industrial High School. In the school, one of the saving graces of my life, and for many of us who lived there, was that we had this remarkable man, Edmund J. Oliver, EJ Oliver, who then was the principal of the high school. One of the alums has written a book about him. He was tough. He was really tough, but he really sort of ran the school almost as if it was a private school even though he was dealing with, you know, this mixture of kids, the majority of whom were kids of miners and people who worked in the coal mines and the steel mills and who lived in allies with substandard housing with no plumbing, and that's the majority of the student body.

Occasionally you had this family that was a little wealthier and could go to London and Paris or something. Then you had the ones like my family. So he had this real range and mixture, but he put an emphasis on, "trying to make ladies and gentlemen out of all of us," and his rules, and all of his homilies of, you know, "Dare to struggle. Dare to win." We, of course, resented that kind of authority, but on the other hand we respected it, and later, after we had graduated from school, people appreciated him so much that we even had alumni chapters in different cities all around the country even though the school no longer exists.

EC: That's interesting.

JL: We still have--. Every other year on the even numbered years on the Fourth of July weekend we have a reunion.

EC: You know, that seems like one of the valuable things of some schools in that era where everybody was expected to do well regardless of background. You described to me another time when we were talking about a family trip, [40:00] and you were going through Mississippi, and your family was stopped. Can you talk about that?

JL: Yes, very definitely. This was on one of the trips west, you know, we would sometimes go to Los Angeles, Pasadena, and when we'd do that we'd even loop down through Mexico and come back. So one time we were in Mississippi, and it was nighttime, and we were stopped by the police. They came over, and the policeman shown his flashlight into the car at my father and said, "So boy, boy, where you going?" And my father said, "Oh," he says, "I just got these little cotton pickers in the back here," pointing at us, and he says, "I'm just looking for some work, just looking for some work for them."

EC: Your father was quick on his feet.

JL: And of course we were resentful like crazy that he's calling us little cotton pickers and everything. Then that completely disarmed though the policeman, you know, and his thing was, "Oh, well, you know, I think if you go over there I think they might be hiring somebody over--."

EC: That must have been a really mixed feeling because of course if he doesn't do that who knows what will happen , and yet, on the other hand he has to be subservient.

JL: Right, right, and it bothered us to see him, I mean, we of course thought the world of our father, and it bothered us to see him be subservient to people who--. Because he

had a lot of White customers too, and they would bring their cars and everything, so that was the, "Boy," you know, "how soon you think you'll have this one fixed? You think my car will be ready by Thursday, boy?" You know, so it was, yeah.

[Camera turns off and on again]

EC: Did you ever see him challenge that kind of treatment?

JL: No, no, we never saw him challenge that, never, no. We never saw him either challenge it, but we also never saw him sort of being obsequious in any way. His answers were straightforward, but it wasn't as though he was being hat in hand obsequious either. He was active with the masons and with other civic groups. They had a burial society, so he was active with these groups of men, and they would read papers. We had a local Birmingham Mirror I think it was called. We had a little local Black newspaper, and the Pittsburgh Courier was another paper, and the Chicago Defender. We would get all of those Black papers, and so they would talk about things that were happening.

And he took great pride in the fact that he had at one point been a business partner with this guy AG Gaston, Arthur Gaston. And Gaston became one of the first Black millionaires, and Gaston went on to… who was in Birmingham, and sometimes we would go over to the Gaston's. It was quite wonderful because Mrs. Gaston was very gracious and would show us her latest buys from Paris or New York. They would invite us kids to swim in their swimming pool too, which we liked.

EC: Oh, I bet you did. Was that at the hotel, or was that at their home?

JL: This was at their home.

EC: Wow.

JL: Yeah, this was at their home.

EC: That's something. So you said your dad would talk about what was in the papers?

JL: But again, it wasn't so much--. They would talk about it, but it was more again this kind of matter of fact talk of, you know, this has happened. But it wasn't "people should" or there was no sign of action or thought of--.

EC: Was your father or mother registered to vote?

JL: Yes, they both were. My father was also active with the Republican party. Most of the people that I knew, they were all Republicans. One of the reasons that they were Republicans was because the Democratic Party at that time, throughout Alabama, [45:00] was connected to the Dixiecrats. It was really connected to White citizens, councils, some of the most racist groups. And so they then were very much a part of the Republican Party. One of his trips that we didn't go on, I want to think that he may have gone to California to a Republican political convention at some point.

EC: I'm trying to think. I know one of the conventions from 1960 was in California, and I can't remember which it was. One was in California and one was in Chicago that year. What awareness did you have of the Civil Rights Movement? As it's growing stronger you're probably what, middle school and high school?

JL: We didn't make the distinctions of calling it middle school. You went elementary through grade eight, and then ninth grade through twelfth was high school. My first awareness of it was the Montgomery bus boycott. So I would have been about nine, I guess, then.

EC: That makes sense.

JL: With the bus boycott there was--. I knew who Rosa Parks was. I knew about the demonstrations and the boycotts, and we had had some kind of boycotts and some activities in Birmingham, and the people in my world had been a part of that.

EC: Did you know Reverend Shuttlesworth or ever go to meetings?

JL: I did not know him, and I knew of him. I knew who he was, but I did not.

EC: How far away is Montgomery from your community?

JL: Montgomery was at that time, I think it's about 120 miles or so, and this was pre-freeways, so you had to go through some pretty god-awful towns. There was this one town in Alabaster, and it was like a speed trap. So you sort of eased your way slowly through Alabaster because it had both the speed trap aspect of it, but you also worried then about being stopped by police. So it was a longer journey than 120 miles needs to be, but.

EC: So it doesn't feel as close as it would today?

JL: No, no, but we did go to Montgomery, and we went to Montgomery because each year, maybe once or twice each year, we would go down to my father's, where he had all of those relatives in Bullock County. And there were a couple of times when we spent two weeks in the summer on the farm with all relatives down there, which was yet another world.

EC: Did you enjoy the farm?

JL: I did. I did very much so. And again, it was one where my father had introduced me to it in a way of just sort of taking us out there, and there we are, and he sort of says, you know, like "This is our land as far as you can see and as far as you can walk. This is our land." You know, "Our folks own this land." And so he would then take us and

show us things like there was one place where there's a spring that comes out from the ground with this mossy spring water, and the water was delicious, but it was ice cold water that was coming from underground. So, you know, those were marvelous things to us, and he would show us different plants and things. I remember him disliking it when he showed me a thistle plant and show me how to, you know, he had me rub it on my hand.

EC: Experiential learning.

JL: Yes, exactly, and it hurt.

EC: I'm sure it did.

JL: But he'd take us out, and I learned to use a rifle. We were talking about people who hunt, and that in our house we always had several guns, mostly rifles and things. So he would show us, take us and start with the tin cans. And then, watch out birds and squirrels, you know.

EC: Yeah, did you like shooting?

JL: I did not really. I liked the tins cans. I liked the sort of practice of it's like a game and a sport, and you're trying to become accurate about it, but to me there was no joy in killing anything, you know. Even [50:00] a rodent to me would not be fun to kill in that way, so I didn't like that. But I did enjoy lining up the tin cans and shooting them.

EC: Target practice.

JL: But then I just became fearful. More concerned about all of the awful things that could happen with guns because in our community back in Fairfield there were a few years where it was popular for kids to get BB guns, these little air rifles, pellet guns, for

Christmas gifts. And then there were the awful stories about people losing an eye to a pellet gun.

EC: It seems like every time a BB gun goes off it's headed for someone's eye.

JL: Yes, it's headed for someone's eye.

EC: It's like a homing pigeon.

JL: So with those stories, I don't know whether those were suburban legends or what, but it was not of interest to me.

EC: What about other elements of the Civil Rights Movement?

JL: The first was the bus boycott, and so knowing about the bus boycott, that was my first introduction. And then I want to think, but it's a hazy memory, that there were some boycotts around stores, some idea of boycotts around stores because of treatment. And it came more into focus though, when I was in high school with the Freedom Rides. And that was very definitely something that we were, you know, glued to radio, TV, watching news, looking at newspapers, and you know, getting word about what was happening, particularly as the Freedom Riders came towards Birmingham and the treatment they'd get where I think it was Anniston and then Birmingham. So that was all something that was very, very palpable.

EC: Did you go into Birmingham when Freedom Riders were in Birmingham?

JL: Not in connection with them. We went to downtown Birmingham probably every week. Every week we were, and sometimes multiple like, as I mentioned, I would go over for my music lessons in the summer. I went swimming there. Since Fairfield had no public swimming pools I went swimming in Birmingham, and so there were all these kinds of activities that we were constantly moving. We had relatives that lived in one

other part of Birmingham, so we were just always moving back and forth through. That whole geography was my world, so I didn't think of it as separate. And it was an easy kind of movement back and forth. I could bike to the swimming pools. I could bike to some of these places.

EC: It's almost like it's the same. The Freedom Rides going through Birmingham must have made that seem very real.

JL: Oh, very much so.

EC: ( ) in your community.

JL: Right, no, very much so, so the Freedom Rides were very definitely a big deal, and then also when Martin Luther King and the demonstrations of Martin Luther King in Birmingham Jail, and the call then for students to participate. That was the first time that we then, and I was in high school, and Professor Oliver, our principal, forbade us to participate and leave campus. In fact, he sort of, you know, locked the school doors because he didn't want us participating in the demonstrations, and that that was just the wrong thing to do with a group of--.

EC: You wished he hadn't.

JL: Yeah, because then of course we then left school against his orders and went downtown Birmingham to participate. Some of the kids, some of my classmates, were arrested, and this is now the Kelly Ingram Park--.

EC: [19]63?

JL: --demonstrations and things. Some people were arrested. Some were, you know, hit with the fire hoses and everything. I was not. I wasn't in that area when those events took place. But I had left school and was participating in these demonstrations.

EC: Were you arrested?

JL: No, no, not at that time.

EC: What did your parents think?

JL: By then my mother had passed away. My mother had died, and my father, though at first he was then upset that we had disobeyed, because I think that the principal called our parents, and you know, [55:00] so we were suspended, I think, from school. And so for a couple of weeks we were, you know, being castigated for what we had done. It wasn't that we were being castigated for participating in the civil rights activities. It was for disobeying our elders.

EC: Is that coming from your father or the principal?

JL: The principal but with parents.

EC: Piling on?

JL: Piling on, and then it turned at some point. There was a point at which it changed where then we were being hailed as heroes.

EC: Do you think it's when the victory came, or you mean over time?

JL: This was right during that time period it became okay that we had done this. So by the time I graduated from high school in May of [19]63 it was okay. This wasn't mentioned because I think the principal was still smarting from the fact that we had disobeyed him, but now it was not as though this was an awful thing that we had done. I think doing so gave me greater confidence. I think that we, I and my classmates, we certainly felt that we did the right thing. Ant that with my father we went to a couple of mass meetings, but I don't remember precisely what the meetings were about. I know

that they were connected still to the campaign that King and others, SCLC had in reference to Birmingham.

EC: Do you remember what it was like to be in the mass meetings, how you felt?

JL: I felt it was a very positive feeling, and the only other time that I had experienced that was when we had gone to that screening that I mentioned at Miles College when I was younger. Because it was the people of my community, that we were a community, but we were a community around an issue or a topic, not a community around a funeral because that's generally when we would gather in a church or in any place where we're sitting down in a large group, you know, over fifty. And to my sense this was probably like a hundred people or more, and you know, crowded churches. These were the only times when we were then there for a serious conversation about a topic, and not for a preacher haranguing us about you know, fire and brimstone and--.

[Camera turns off and on again]

JL: I don't. Not at that point. Later, but I don't remember hearing him speak when I was in high school in Birmingham.

EC: When you were in high school did you have any sense that you would ultimately immerse yourself in the movement and become a full-time--?

JL: Not at all, very definitely not, not at all. At that point I really thought that I would have a career in medicine. And I was focused more on the sciences, and I thought that I would probably live in New York and work in New York.

EC: You mentioned to me another time that you had internships in the summer in New York. Is that one of the influences?

JL: Right.

EC: Can you talk about those?

JL: It's interesting because that was one of the conflicts that I had with my civil rights work, having at that age to make some really hard choices and tough decisions. In the summer of [19]63 I was in New York, so I did not participate. I followed the March on Washington in the newspaper and television, but I was in New York working at Sloan Kettering Center because I had this internship there.

EC: How did you get that? Do you know?

JL: Yes, I know exactly how I got that. My father, as I mentioned, my father was born in 1899, and so my father [1:00:00] was an older father in one sense, and he had had a previous family. He had been married before, and his first wife had died, and in his first marriage he had two daughters. He had another child too who didn't survive, a young guy who died as a young boy. But he had these daughters, and so I had two sisters, and my sisters lived in New York City. And my sisters worked at Sloan Kettering. They were lab technicians.

My father had seemed to be in some ways the proverbial Jewish mother where he wanted a doctor in the family. And so he had tried that with them and had not succeeded, but he had gotten to the point that they had become lab technologists. So they were lab technicians, and they worked at Sloan Kettering, and they worked in cancer research. And so when they then learned that there was this internship program they invited me to

apply for it, and I was accepting. So they said that I could stay with one of them while I went through there, and it just happened to be the year too that they were both pregnant.

EC: Interesting timing.

JL: And so I ended up also having newborn nephews.

EC: Wow, that's quite an experience. Did it give you a sense of what you wanted in your immediate future?

JL: Well, I was most impressed. I loved working in New York City, yeah. The children were interesting, but I had been around babies in my community. Sadly even at that point teenage girls would have their own kids and everything, and I knew that was not something that I wanted.

EC: Not right now.

JL: No, but what I did really love, I loved living in New York. So I stayed in Queens with my sister and would take the train into Manhattan each day, worked at Sloan Kettering, and through the people at Sloan Kettering I met--. There was one woman who worked there as well. She was a nurse, and she was originally, I think, from Sweden, but she became a friend, and invited me sometimes to stay over in the city with her and her roommates. And one of her roommates was a flight attendant and another worked at the UN, and they would invite me to, you know, parties and things.

So this was all quite heady stuff for, I think I was 16 or 17 years old at the time. So this was absolutely wonderful. And we'd go to plays, and I saw the Flying Dutchman. I saw several other really wonderful plays, and saw experimental theater as well. My sister leaned towards the Broadway musicals, my older sister did, and so I'd go to those with her, you know, but in addition to that then these friends that I had met liked things

that were a lot more intellectually challenging and much more cosmopolitan. So it was just wonderful.

EC: It sounds like you had a lot more opportunities to see the outside world than your average southern kid.

JL: Right, exactly, exactly, so I was, you know, really enjoying that experience, but I also felt that I should be at the March on Washington. And I would talk with the doctors there about this. I made some really nice friendships for that time, and we'd talk about this.

EC: Were they interested, supportive?

JL: They were supportive. They were. All of them were absolutely supportive, and they even sort of said that if I was interested that one was, at that point, a dean at Cornell, and said that if I was interested he would help me get into Cornell, and then I could then go to Cornell's medical school. And so they were very, very supportive. So I had this wonderful array of friends there, but I also then felt by virtue of what I was reading about and what was happening in the movement that I should be, you know, in terms of the March on Washington, that that's where I should be as well.

EC: Did you try to figure out how to get there? Did you get that far?

JL: No, no, because I knew it was, you know--.

EC: A lost cause?

JL: Yeah.

EC: Were you interested in being a doctor? Did that appeal to you?

JL: I was. I was very. At that point I was interested. I felt that I was good at science [1:05:00] and particularly at biology. I thought that I could be a very competent doctor, a

good doctor, but it was also something where the experience that year at Sloan Kettering that I began to realize too though that I didn't want to work with people who were dying. I didn't work directly with patients. Instead I was doing this lab work and doing the math. This was pre-computers. So we'd do these lab tests, and you'd do the readings, and then I'd spend the last half of the afternoon doing all of these computations, and you were doing those with one of these big calculators and a slide rule.

EC: Wow, yeah.

JL: And I loved my slide rule.

EC: Did you?

JL: And I was so thrilled that I had mastered the slide rule. So you'd do all of these computations, and then you'd give the results to the doctors, and that's the way--. You were doing blood and urine analysis, and they would then make decisions about treatment. And then there would be times when they would say, "Oh, you don't have to do this person's anymore. You can just discard that." And that meant that the person had died.

EC: That must have been tough.

JL: And so that was something that I felt was like, I don't know. I'm not so sure about being doctor.

EC: Yeah, especially not one working in cancer treatment perhaps.

JL: And then the next year I went back to Sloan Kettering. The summer of [19]64 they invited me back. I went back the summer of [19]64, and this time I thought, well, maybe I should focus more on the research side, and this was now, they were doing the experiments with the lab animals, you know, with the dogs, and you'd inject the dye into

the dogs, the rats, and tracing tumors and things. So that was also not exactly something that--. It gave you a real sense of how challenging and how difficult this work was and how we were so clueless about cancer. And there was one doctor who I worked with. I don't remember his name, and he was so highly respected because he had done some kind of isolation of something that was considered quite important. And then I remember thinking, "This is so wonderful. I'm getting to work with him." And one day I just sort of casually asked him, "So how long have you been doing this?" And he said twenty years. And for me, at my age, to think that twenty years and all that he has done is to--.

EC: Isolate this one.

JL: --isolate this one little thing that in terms of a cure or a treatment of cancer means very little, just you know, seemed as though you were trying to sort of eat the moon or something.

EC: So those hands-on experiences were very educational?

JL: They were very educational, very, very good, very productive for me. But that was the point at which then I was--. That was the summer of [19]64, where again now, I felt that I really should be in the south, and here I was reading about Goodman, you know, Chaney, and Schwerner.

EC: Yeah, reading about the civil rights workers who were murdered in Mississippi.

JL: I was reading about Freedom Summer in the pages of the New York Times, and --

EC: Were you in college by this time?

JL: I was. I was at Tuskegee. I was at Tuskegee.

EC: So would this have been the summer after your freshman year, probably?

JL: Right, and at Tuskegee, the first year right after I arrived there I started meeting students. You end up with the usual group where they're trying to get you to become part of a sorority and I realized I had absolutely no interest in that whatsoever. And there was a group of students who were talking about some demonstrations about desegregating the little downtown area of Tuskegee, and so that appealed to me much, much more. That was something that I was far more interested in. So I then attended some of the student meetings around that. And then I also met this woman, Mrs. Lomax, Michael Lomax. They later were the head of Fulton County, and now I think he's with [1:10:00] the United Negro College Fund.

EC: Okay.

JL: His mother, at that time, had a little newspaper in Tuskegee, and she and this other man, Dr. Gomillion. And Gomillion was interested in voter rights, and for some reason, I don't know why I went to meet with him. I was really curious about what he was doing, but I became very interested. His focus was gerrymandering, and about how they had taken Macon County and done all of this work. The Whites had just broken the county up in ways so that you would never be able, Blacks would never be able to have a majority and get a vote. And for some reason that intrigued me and was of real interest to me. And it didn't have anything to do with my school work, but I went over and met with him, and through a combination of those meetings and meeting other people I became much more interested in working on some of the civil rights issues there at Tuskegee.

EC: I know that he was involved in a Supreme Court case related to voting in Macon County. Do you remember whether that had been heard before or after you met him? Was it--?

JL: I don't know.

EC: Yeah.

JL: Yeah, I don't know.

EC: I think it goes back to the fifties, but I'm not sure when it actually hit the courts.

JL: The work that he was doing was something that he had been doing for quite some time. Financially at that point--. At one point, I don't remember whether it was that, because I was able to go to college only because I had a full scholarship, my father had sort of said, you know, "You want to go to college? That's great."

EC: Go ahead.

JL: Right, go right ahead.

EC: Did your older brother go?

JL: My older brother did. My older brother went to Tennessee State for a while, for a year, and then he transferred to Tuskegee.

EC: So he followed you?

JL: He did indeed. So we were both at Tuskegee, and I think he actually ended up at Tuskegee before I did though. Yeah, he didn't follow me. I think he was at Tuskegee before me. I then, when I was at Tuskegee, I then really was not getting--. Maybe I'd get, you know, ten dollars every quarter, you know, from my dad or something.

EC: Very generous allotment.

JL: Not much at all, so that I needed to work, and at one point the job that I had--. I had gotten myself a job working in the hospital based on my experience with Sloan Kettering. I had gotten a job working at the hospital there at Tuskegee, and I quite that when they wanted me to draw blood. And I felt that I was inexperienced, and I was comfortable with working in the laboratory, and they kept just sort of saying, "Oh, you just go and do it." And I just thought, "No, you don't practice on people." And they kept really pushing me, and so the one point where I sort of, "Okay, I'm going to go and do this." And it was a young woman who was in labor, and then I felt no way in the world I am going to go and play and practice with this poor woman who is in so much pain, and so I just said, "I quit."

EC: I assume that was a Black hospital?

JL: Yes, yes. Working in New York, did you consider trying to go to college in New York?

JL: I didn't. I didn't at that time because I had this scholarship, and I had gotten the scholarship by participating in a science fair. It was a state-wide science fair. I won this, it was Gorgas sort of scholarship or something, the Gorgas something scholarship, and it was full tuition and room and board for four years to a Black College in Alabama. So it was a segregated prize.

EC: Is that to buy off people who might desegregate the schools?

JL: But it was a prize nonetheless. It was a Black prize. I think that there was a White equivalent [1:15:00] that went to then the University of Alabama or Auburn or something, but then this was to the Black schools.

EC: I was going to say what was your project?

JL: My project was one where I did a demonstration of sounds waves, of showing how the frequency of sound waves could be graphically represented by, I created this thing that would kind of like bobble in water, vibrate in water. It had like a pool of water as a part of it, and I made this little thing that would sort of touch down on it like a needlepoint, but with something like a little cork or something, and that then if the frequency was higher it had a different wavelength from the base waves. And I did all of the appropriate paper work to--.

EC: To support this?

JL: --to support this.

EC: Sounds like an interesting project. So you--?

JL: So, you know, you had the little rheostat thing to where you could rev it up. I mean, this was pre-Radio Shack they had this. It was called Tandy I think, and there was the Tandy corporation, and they sold all of these kind of hobby things that went the gamut from the kind of stuff you could find now in a Radio Shack to these little hobby kinds of kits where you could get a piece of little leather and stamp it with designs and burnish it. Yeah, so that was my kind of place. I'm still gadget-oriented, and so it was my kind of place. So I could go there and pick up enough things to sort of assemble this, and put this project together.

EC: I wondered if it was sort of influenced by or shared interest like your dad's ability to take things apart and put them together to construct something like that.

JL: Right, exactly, well, we had been very much encouraged along that mode.

EC: To develop that interest.

JL: To develop those kinds of interests, or to feel that if you had an interest like that that you should just do it. And the same was true of, it ranged from architecture, so that at one point he was going to expand the house, and he asked that we would submit designs for the expansion. So we all did. We proposed that we should have this play room, and that we should have--. My room would be on one side. Their room would be on the other side, the boys, and that we would be separated by this larger play room that would have an elevated platform for our electric trains.

EC: How did that go?

JL: It went quite well. The one thing that he did that he shouldn't have done, he shouldn't have followed our advice about the skylights. We thought that it would be great to have skylights in this play room, and the heat that came through those things in summer. Un-insulated glass, I mean, it's a wonder it didn't set the place on fire. It was--.

EC: In Alabama. So did the three of you develop it together?

JL: First we were working separately, and we had, each, our separate designs, and then after he sort of picked aspects from each design and everything then we became more of a team and worked together.

EC: That must have been pretty exciting to have that kind of impact.

JL: It was.

EC: I mean, that's real efficacy.

JL: And I had the vision that the room for the trains would have the scenery all around the walls, and it would have the sky lights, so it was like my little Sistine Chapel bit to paint all of the stars and clouds and things, and then the--.

EC: Did you do that? Wow.

JL: --and then the trees along the walls and everything, so it was quite an undertaking, but.

EC: Sounds like it. I don't know many parents who have their kids--. Give their kids the space for that.

JL: Yeah, or say, "Fine, go draw on the walls," you know, yeah.

EC: No, that's not allowed.

JL: Then I'd move from that to wanting canvas, and so he would buy me canvas and paints, so I started doing oil paintings, and I would draw. There was one time that he--. A friend of mine had a Monopoly game, and oh, I just thought it was so much fun, and I wanted a Monopoly set. And he refused to buy me one. He said absolutely not, and so one weekend I borrowed my friends Monopoly set, and I copied it. I got cardboard, and I copied her--. I wish that I had it now because it would be, you know, folk art now. [1:20:00] But I copied her Monopoly set down to making my box, making the box to put the board in, and the only thing that I didn't make as original things were the little pieces. I made the little houses, but then there were the little tokens you could have as a--

EC: The one that was you.

JL: --that represented you, right, exactly.

EC: Little car, and --.

JL: And I found--. I've forgotten where I got those, but I got some little toys or something to serve for those.

EC: Did you like playing Monopoly as well on your board?

JL: I did, very much so, with my own money that I had made. But I took the time to do the whole thing.

EC: Sounds like you had a lot of creativity and independence in your childhood.

JL: And that became a real asset. Those were things that became, you know, real strengths for me later. So going back to Tuskegee and now my having to sort of make a living for myself, at one point I had worked in the hospital, and then another point I worked for this photo studio. There I was doing these colored tints. There was a point where instead of colored photographs they were black-and-white photos, and you then applied, you know, like little rosiness to the cheeks, lipstick, but you touched the--.

EC: Wow, on black-and-white photos?

JL: On black-and-white photos.

EC: It's almost like you PhotoShopping.

JL: Yeah, it was. It really was, and so I then was doing that for this photographer. Years later, long after I had left Tuskegee, I discovered that that was like a famous photography studio. This was one of these, you know, like there's James Van Der Zee?

EC: Yeah.

JL: Well, this guy I think is Polk, was another one of these, you know great photographers and someone who documented the African American community in these striking ways. So that was yet another place that I had worked, but through this work sometimes I ended up meeting people who were beyond just the classroom. So I didn't have an experience of Tuskegee with just, I'm getting up, and I'm going to class, and I'll be back in my dorm room.

EC: You're connected to the community.

JL: But I ended up then meeting people that took me beyond that, and I was put into an honors program where I didn't have to go to conventional classes. I had one, like I

took calculus with just meeting with the professor, and I was allowed to pick classes that were not limited to the undergraduate program. So I took classes in the school of veterinary medicine because, like I said, I really enjoyed biology and everything, and so I took a course in animal parasitology I remember.

EC: Is that parasites?

JL: Yeah, it was disgusting.

EC: I bet it was.

JL: You know, "How many worms can inhabit the stomach of a--?" You know, so I took some of those courses, and I took another one on poisonous plants, but through the school of veterinary medicine I was taking these sort of more advanced classes, and that then led me to mingle with a group of people who were in some cases actual professors as opposed to students. So through them I met people. There was a woman, Doris Mitchel, who was a resident of Tuskegee and who came from, I think her father may have been a doctor. She herself was a veterinarian, and she and Odetta were friends.

EC: Oh, okay.

JL: She had a Daimler. I had never. She had a little sports car that she had had imported from Germany. She had a Daimler that she'd sort of tootle around in.

EC: In Macon County?

JL: In Macon County, and this house that was just incredible. So I was being exposed to this, people who--. And it was both intellectual exposure and cultural, but also then it meant that you were talking much more seriously about ideas, and then of course ideas at that time meant that you were talking about race and racism as well and the problems [1:25:00] of segregation and the lack of opportunity for people of color.

EC: So what are some of the civil rights things that you're doing while you're at Tuskegee while you're also working and expanding your network?

JL: So I started working on going out into the rural Macon County with registering people to vote, and I don't remember whether that was at the behest of, you know, Gomillion group or some--. I don't know quite how that started, but that was one of the things that I started doing, and then I met Gwen Patton and George Ware. George was a graduate student in chemistry, I believe, at Tuskegee at the time. And so I met these other students who had similar interests, and I began to work with them.

EC: Was the student group at Tuskegee focused entirely on civil rights in the community, or were they dealing with campus issues?

JL: Both, both.

EC: Both, yeah, what was the group like? What do you remember about the group?

JL: At first I think we were a very cohesive, productive group, and then we later became divided, and the division came not out of really an intellectual or strategic divide. It became much more the question. Winky, Bill Hall, came to Tuskegee as a representative of SNCC. It became much more a question of, "Wait, this is our group. Don't you tell us what to do." That became the kind of dividing line because we were now beginning to have demonstrations and participate. I can't recall what some of the key issues were then, but I know we were doing some--.

EC: On campus?

JL: The issues were not on campus. We were doing work. The work was much more desegregating Macon County in the sort of downtown Tuskegee and issues then about voting rights there. And that had sort of brought us to the attention of SNCC, and so

people like Willie Ricks and Bill Hall, Cleve Sellers, people started coming through. SNCC people started coming through, and that then lead to this kind of tension with our group of feeling that, "Well, SNCC can do whatever it wants over there, but that we will be doing these things here. This is our group, and this is what we will be doing." There was a point at which I felt that that was counter-productive, and that what we were talking about was a bit too parochial too. I started leaning towards SNCC because I felt that they were engaging the larger issues. The dialogue was much more about what was happening in the country as a whole.

EC: It was a broader picture.

JL: And it was a strategy. They were much more strategic in thinking that, "Well, this is a Black Belt county. If we can do this with these Black Belt counties, plural, that then we might be able to create some change rather than 'Let's march through downtown Tuskegee.'"

EC: Do you think your broader exposure made you receptive to SNCC's analysis or to choosing the broader analysis over the more focused?

JL: I'm not sure because with some of this was the exposure beforehand since I think I was predisposed towards civil rights activity from having grown up in Birmingham, having participated [1:30:00] in the demonstrations when I was in high school, Birmingham then being the place where the church had been bombed.

EC: Yeah, I guess you would have been a freshman in college?

JL: Yeah, I was in college then. My brother though knew the family from one of the girls, so it was this--. So I think I felt this connection to those things. And I also used to read a lot, and some of the readings also, and I had grown up in this circumstance that

was very much a union town too, you know, with people who were coal miners and steel workers, and talked about John L. Lewis, you know, and the importance of unions. So I think I had that kind of sense of that, if we are organized, that organization and being organized, you can have a voice, that you won't be alone, and that your voice can make a difference. So that was something that I think had been there as a small seed that was now beginning to grow, and by the time I was in Tuskegee again in [19]64, then right after I had come back from New York they were asking for volunteers. They wanted more student volunteers to go to Mississippi to work on the November elections.

EC: Oh, okay.

JL: And this was the November [19]64 elections. They were trying to get people to come to Jackson, Mississippi and to other parts to help register people.

EC: And you had just missed Freedom Summer?

JL: And I had just missed Freedom Summer, and so I said yes. And for me that was one of the times in my life that I felt that I was making a conscious decision about doing something, and I was doing it alone, and that was fine with me. It wasn't like, "Oh, you're my best friend. Well, you go with me. We could go." It was that, no, this is something that I feel is important to do, and that I will go.

EC: And you didn't need other people's approval or support or company.

JL: I didn't need other people's approval, validation. I didn't need parental validation, approval. I could say, yes, I will go, and I went.

EC: What was that experience like?

JL: I went and I stayed--. I want to think that I stayed at the place where Eve Esther Simpson. I think that she went there, and that they had us come to a meeting, and after

we got off the bus they said here's well you'll stay, and I said fine, and then they ask, and said we are going to meet, and so we'll be gathering here, and then they told us what they wanted us to do was to go do this door-to-door canvassing in this particular part of Jackson, and that's what I did. I was really comfortable with that. The part that was uncomfortable for me, oddly enough, was the social side of it because I was a shy introvert. And so I'm fine when I'm working, but then when people are socializing I wasn't accustomed to the sort of--. I remember saying to someone, "Your husband says that," and she just laughed. This girl just laughed because, you know, I had made the automatic assumption since they were kissing on each other and everything.

EC: That that was her husband?

JL: She just thought that was so funny, you know, that I would assume that. And I realized that--.

EC: Just cause they were kissing.

JL: Yeah, and that it's something where this was a time when people were a lot more liberal with--. And so that's where I was not there with them on the social side of these things.

EC: Even though you had been doing these New York parties?

JL: Right, but these New York parties, they were much more Mad men-style. I mean, they were tame by comparison to--.

EC: Yeah, so going to Mississippi for voter's registration was a whole different exposure.

JL: Yes, so it was an eye-opening experience in that way. I was very comfortable with the work side of it, but it was like, [1:35:00] "Oh, I don't know. These people where, you know--."

JL: Okay, so you know, where one of the guys like flirting with me or something, that was a little off-putting and a little scary to me because I was, you know, so green and everything.

EC: Eighteen, nineteen years old and not ready for that. And so then that was--. So if that's the November [19]64 election it's after Freedom Summer, but it's before the Voting Rights Act. So are you still having trouble getting people to be successful at registering to vote? Do you have a sense of whether they're accomplishing this?

JL: I didn't because I just felt that I was like a little soldier in the--.

EC: In the bigger unit?

JL: In the bigger unit, and so I didn't feel that I was privy to nor understood the larger strategy and how successful people were at that. I just felt that then this was something I could do. I could talk to people, and I felt very good about it. I was really proud of myself for having gone because people were talking about, "Oh my God, Mississippi? Oh, it's too dangerous, and I would never go to Mississippi." It's like, Mississippi, Alabama, it's right--.

EC: I was going to say, people in Mississippi say that about Alabama.

JL: Yeah, exactly, exactly. You know, here I am in Tuskegee. I'm in the middle of Alabama, and I'm going to think that it's more dangerous to go across the border to, you know, the state line to Mississippi? And of course this was after, you know Freedom Summer, and after Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, so it was--.

EC: Does that exacerbate the concern or the fear?

JL: It very definitely--. I didn't feel that made it a given that something would happen to me or that my life was in mortal danger or anything. But I could understand how people from the north or somewhere, a student from Chicago or something might be quite reluctant to do so.

EC: Were you still in school for the Selma to Montgomery march?

JL: I was.

EC: I mean, I guess I just made a big leap from--. Well, I guess it's November [19]64. That organizing started in early [19]65, so that would've been the same school year then.

JL: I was in school, and I left--. I'll have to look and see when I left school. I worked with SNCC. I started working very definitely with SNCC. I moved away from the campus group.

EC: You moved away from the campus group.

JL: I still worked with them occasionally, but I moved much further away from the campus group and started working with SNCC, and at first in Wilcox County, and this was down around Gee's Bend. Then I worked. And so there was a point at which I left school, and I want to think that I left school in probably in the spring of 1966. I was still in school when my classmate Sammy Young was killed, and Sammy was a part of the student group there, and so we as a student group were participating in the Selma to Montgomery activities from Tuskegee. I know that we were coming from Tuskegee. I was not yet working and living in Lowndes County. Later I actually worked and lived in the Freedom House in Lowndes, but that was later, but at this point I was still in Tuskegee, and Gwen Patton, George Ware, Sammy Young, George Paris, Wendy Paris,

that group of us were working, CJ Jones. There was a whole group of us who were Tuskegee students, and we would go work with SNCC in Lowndes County and go over to Selma, and that's when I met Phyllis Cunningham who was there with the medical group.

EC: So when you initially are working with SNCC you're still in classes, and you're going back and forth from Tuskegee to Selma to Wilcox to Lowndes?

JL: Right, and at a certain point that--.

EC: And you're part of a group?

JL: Yeah, and at a certain point that became unrealistic and untenable, and I decided that I would leave school. [1:40:00] I felt that I had to make a decision.

EC: Was that a hard choice to make?

JL: It was. It was a very difficult decision for me because I felt that, you know, I had worked out one way of having my college education paid for, and--.

EC: With the scholarship.

JL: Right, and now if I said goodbye to that and worked full time in SNCC that I had no means of support.

EC: What would you do to return to college?

JL: What would I do to return to college? What would I do even for just to--?

EC: Pay the rent?

JL: Yeah, to live, you know, that when students were going to go home for a summer or something at the end of the school year, where would I be going?

EC: Yeah, so you didn't think you could or would want to go home to your father's?

JL: I didn't want to. I could, but I wouldn't want to.

EC: You were sort of passed that of living at home?

JL: Yes, and because my father, he was an eccentric tinkerer, and as the years were going by he was becoming even more so. And sadly, you know, I think he was beginning to show some signs of dementia. For me, I didn't want to return to Fairfield to live. That was to me something that I just knew that I would never want to live there in my life, you know.

[Camera turns off and on again]

EC: Can you articulate why it was that you felt you had to make the choice, or that you wanted to make the choice to work full time in the movement despite what it could mean in terms of your future?

JL: I felt that I was becoming… my time was too divided between the two. I was torn between these activities that on one hand I had a professor who was then sort of saying, "Don't forget we're to meet at a certain point," and as I said, they had been quite liberal with me in terms of the approach that was being taken about my classes and everything. So it wasn't as though I had to show up to twenty classes or anything, but still I did need to write papers and to do certain things in order to succeed academically. At the same time though, then there was the, "We need to have a meeting. This is taking place. We need to go and talk to canvas this area to get the people to come to this meeting."
So where do you stand? What do you do? And I thought long and hard about it, and it was a hard decision. I remember become quite depressed at one point about, you know, "What do I do?" And I didn't have anybody that I really could talk to about this. My brother, who was at Tuskegee, he and I are very close, but he was sort of a good guy, more sort of social party animal. He had a sports car, and he was supportive of the

movement, but he had definitely created a good work-life balance for himself which involved parties and girls and things.

EC: And sports cars?

JL: And sports cars, so I just felt that I had to just think this through and just make this decision, and that's when I decided that I would work. I would leave school and work with SNCC, and I convinced myself that I could return.

EC: That you would find a way?

JL: That I would be able to at some point, that if later I wanted to go and study medicine I would be able to do so, but that for now--.

EC: Did you know that SNCC had, or at least, was trying to have the work-study program? In Mississippi the SNCC folks would work for a while and then go back to school for a while, and SNCC would support that effort.

JL: No, I didn't.

EC: I think it was one of Ella Baker's, not surprisingly, right?

JL: Right, exactly.

JL: So we were the student group, which was Gwen, Patton, George Ware, and a number of us were working both on the campus. Our student group met on campus, but the real focus of our work was the Macon County area, [1:45:00] downtown Tuskegee, such as that is, and then we also though started working with SNCC and the other civil rights group on the Selma to Montgomery march. That was when we students became really part of a group that was going to not start so much in Selma but go and demonstrate in Montgomery.

EC: Do you know what the thinking was behind going to Montgomery rather than Selma?

JL: I don't recall.

EC: I guess I'm jumping ahead a little bit here, but the work that you were doing with Tuskegee students in the county or in the community, when you start working more with SNCC, not so much in Montgomery but in the rural counties, is that more or less the same kind of work, or is there a distinction, a difference in that work?

JL: For me the distinction was that it was strategically more around the vote and around registering African Americans to vote and trying to gain pluralities of voters in those Black Belt counties. And so Macon, Wilcox, Lowndes, those counties in Alabama had significant Black populations, and we were then trying to get as many registered voters in each of them.

EC: At that point were you thinking about the role of independent politics, or were you thinking more directly just in terms of the vote and not necessarily what happens next?

JL: We were thinking that if we could register people, and that if you could get a plurality in that particular county that you could in effect have Black people in charge of the county government, and that you could change the dynamic of life in the county by having then the sort of authority of county government.

EC: Were you aware of--. I mean, I know that you said you followed Freedom Summer. Did you have an understanding of how SNCC thought the challenge had gone in Atlantic City? I mean, I know the people who went through that, many of them were disappointed by that.

JL: Very much so, yes.

EC: And also learning from it, and so was that something that was communicated to you or that you were aware of?

JL: I was aware of it in a general way. I mean, it wasn't as though--. People didn't mull over it, talk about it, you know, ad infinitum. But there was the notion that that was an approach that had worked only up to a certain point. That had failed in one sense, but now what we could do is begin to deal with these Black Belt counties and particularly Lowndes, and that if we could then gain and really transform the government of one of these counties that that would be a path to a different kind of victory and a different kind of politics.

EC: I don't know if you would remember, or if you would have been aware of this, it's been a long time, so I don't remember the specifics, but I had a sense that although Dr. Gomillion was a path-breaker in many ways pursuing the franchise and challenging the gerrymandering, that once the Voting Rights Act passed, or once he won some of those court cases that some people thought he was a little conservative in applying that, that he wanted to be careful not to, you know, threaten Whites too much with this Black majority. Do you remember that at all?

JL: No, I don't remember that, yeah, yeah, yeah.

EC: That's interesting. And so I think that there would have been a difference between the Macon dynamic with that and the Lowndes dynamic, so I wondered if you were tapped into that.

JL: Yeah, and it's interesting because it's something where now, in hindsight, you know, so many years later, I'm curious about what we were attempting to do as a whole

in Wilcox County, for example, and why we felt that, "Oh, let's not put too much effort there."

EC: Why Lowndes got the bulk of the attention?

JL: I feel that I understand why Lowndes [1:50:00] got the bulk of the attention, but we had enough people and enough interest to have maintained activity in Wilcox as well, but I feel that there was somehow strategically that we didn't quite--. That it was felt that it wasn't necessary, or that it wasn't possible to have the same kind of win. And Wilcox was an interesting place in and of itself. It had a completely different dynamic there because of the kind of isolation of Gee's Bend.

EC: Okay, was it--. I mean, my sense is it had the same kind of Black supermajority, right?

JL: It had the Black supermajority, but the Whites had sort of cut the bridge so that Gee's Bend was this little world unto itself.

EC: And it was so difficult for them to connect to the rest of the county? JL: Right, exactly.

EC: Are there any sizeable towns in Wilcox or Green?

JL: There are, but I can't even remember the names of them, yeah. And particularly in Wilcox we didn't go to the principal town because that was the one that was sort of cut off in a sense, yeah.

EC: So is Gee's Bend a town? I always think of it more as just rural?

JL: It's more rural, but it is. It's an enclave. I mean, now something having that same dynamic we'd call a subdivision, but in those days it was--. And you probably know all of the history of it, and how--.

EC: A little.

JL: --coming out of the New Deal, it was one of those kind of--.

EC: Farm security, when people bought land?

JL: Well, where they had also a community center, and then people had these houses all sort of--. It was a planned community in that way.

EC: Was it funded through the Farm Security Administration?

JL: I don't know.

EC: Where Black farmers are buying land?

JL: Yeah, I don't know.

EC: Okay.

JL: All of the people were named Pettway.

EC: Black and White?

JL: All the Blacks. They came from the Pettway plantation, and they were all named Pettway. So everybody was a Pettway. But so it was an unusual place culturally, and a kind of isolated place. But going back to Gomillion, I remember him as being one of the players and a force there, but I don't remember doing things actively in Macon.

EC: There's a Reaping the Whirlwind, I think. I don't know if you've seen it. It's a book about Tuskegee, or the community, not the school. So I want to continue with Lowndes, but before, I don't want to forget Montgomery, so can you talk about what the Montgomery--. You said that Tuskegee students were going to Montgomery during the Selma to Montgomery march and doing demonstrations there. Can you describe your involvement in that and what it was like?

JL: I recall there, and now Jim Forman, in addition to other SNCC people, Jim Forman was also a presents at Tuskegee, and Jim and some other SNCC workers then were asking that we would then go to Montgomery. I recall that we then had picket signs. I don't remember what the signs said, but we then went to march in front of the state capitol in Montgomery, and this is what used to be the White House of the confederacy where Jeff Davis has a star or something. So we were going to demonstrate there, and students would go and march there, and then go back to campus, and we then went. And the day that we went there was a counter demonstration. I think there were maybe about, I want to think maybe about forty, forty, fifty of us. We were marching in this oval loop there in front of the state capitol. The capitol itself behind us, there were state troopers with their billy clubs, and they would slap them against their thighs for dramatic effect now and then.

So they were standing there in a big line, so you knew that you couldn't go further that way. And there was a point at which it was the Klan or a group, [1:55:00] that people said it was the Klan, but they were not robed, but they were these men and women, White men and women in these cars that came up street there, and they were coming up, and a few cars came up, and they of course yelled the usual "nigger" and a few other things. It was like a big parade though of them coming, and the troopers started saying that Klan was coming, and they were talking among each other.

We, meanwhile, are still marching like this, and then there was one point at which one of the officers said, you know, "Arrest them all." And we had been instructed. We had all gone through the training where if you're being arrested you go limp, and you know, you're sort of carried and thrown into the paddy wagon or the van or whatever. And so

we were arrested, and that's when we went through our usual going limp and were taken away. And we were arrested just before that group came fully up the hill. So there was on one hand a sense of relief about it because you didn't quite know if you're between.

EC: The highway patrol and the Klan.

JL: Right, and the highway patrol with their billy clubs, and then if you're with this, you know, sort of vigilante kind of group there, it doesn't seem like a safe place to be.

EC: No, not exactly.

JL: And we, I think, were thinking of it, I know I later talked with one of my classmates who was there, we were thinking that there was no place for us to go. If they had not arrested us then we would probably have sat down there and just--.

EC: And dropped between the two.

JL: Right.

EC: So what happened when you were arrested?

JL: So we were arrested, and we were taken to this place, to this jail, I think, which was a Montgomery County jail, and we were--. I think I was there for about like five days.

EC: Yeah, what was it like to be in jail?

JL: On one hand it was something where I wasn't afraid. I was not afraid at all, and I wasn't afraid because there were so many of us, you know, because we were together, and we were singing freedom songs, and so the camaraderie and everything at the beginning was very good. As time went on it became harder, and it became harder because of the conditions there. You know, the bathrooms were overflowing, so it was absolutely smelly, filthy, horrid. The food was, you know, just terrible, inedible

practically. So, you know, somebody sort of said, "Let's go on a hunger strike," and you felt, "That's easy enough to do," because the food was so absolutely so awful.

But I wasn't at any point fearful. I wasn't fearful for my life. More people were being arrested too, so the numbers were growing, and it was a more diverse group that was being arrested. There were some Whites from New York and other places who now were being brought in, so you were meeting these people, so it was like a giant gathering of people, of women. And there were some local women who were a little befuddled, people who had been arrested for other things. I never asked or found out what they had been arrested for, but they were a little--. They found us curiosities.

EC: I bet they did.

JL: Yeah, and we'd all sort of mingle and talk.

EC: And how did you get out? Did somebody bail you out?

JL: Someone bailed us out.

EC: They decided they didn't want to keep you any longer?

JL: Someone bailed us out.

EC: Did you have to go back and go to court?

JL: We did not. We did not. I want to think that William Kunstler had arranged for us to be released, and I want to think that they file some things where later all of the charges were dismissed. And I think we were arrested--. I think the charge was [2:00:00] that we were arrested for resisting arrest.

EC: That's always a curious one.

JL: Exactly.

EC: That you're resisting arrest with no other charge.

JL: Right, exactly, so I think that--.

EC: It wasn't probably too challenging to get it tossed out once, yeah.

JL: But I think that Kunstler--. Because I think Kunstler played a role then in our being released.

EC: I know that a lot of people say that he played an important role in coming up with some of the more creative strategies of forcing the issue and like that.

JL: And on a subsequent arrest in Atlanta with Karen Spellman, Fay Bellamy, and Ruby Doris Robinson, during the holiday season in December in Atlanta when I was working in the Atlanta office we were arrested, and then I think Howard Moore, Julian Bond's brother-in-law, he was the person.

EC: I knew that he did a lot of movement work. So you, Ruby Doris, Karen Spellman, and Fey Bellamy, what were you all arrested for?

JL: We had been working at the SNCC office all day, and it was in the midst of the Christmas holidays. And we'd been working, and we closed the office. The office was now closed, and we thought, "Oh, let's do something that would just be relaxing and fun."

EC: You said, "Oh, let's get arrested."

JL: And we thought, "No, let's go to Auburn Avenue. Let's go down to the main Black Street," at that time in Atlanta, Auburn Avenue, "and hear some music, and have some dinner and hear some music." We were walking there. We had afros, so we were rather distinctive.

EC: Identifiable as movement people?

JL: Identifiable, and so we were walking along, and Fey was very tall and gazelle-like and very striking, and so the group of us are all walking. It's just us women walking down. These Black policemen then slowed down to a crawl, and then they are driving alongside us at the same--. I mean, we're walking, and they now are driving along at the same pace that we're walking. And Fey then finally says, "And what are you looking at, and what do you want?" She used an expletive along with that, and they pulled over and arrested us. So here we were, and you know, of course, we're saying, "What? How can we be--. What have we done?" And--.

EC: How did you feel about that?

JL: Well, that became yet again another interesting evening, but it was--. What was it? Later we found that I think two of the policemen were like Vietnam vets.

EC: Oh, really?

JL: Yeah, but it was this whole thing of, "What? What is this about then? Why?" And it was this kind of, you felt that you were being harassed because we were obviously movement people, you know, and our hair was the giveaway, and the police would then just feel somehow they were going to show us who was the authority here.

EC: What about the fact that they're Black officers?

JL: Oh, that's why I feel it was more about--. I feel it was about them sort of feeling that, "Oh no, we'll show you who's the authority here."

EC: It's a way that they can exercise their authority?

JL: Right, exactly.

EC: They're probably not doing that in the White community.

JL: Right.

EC: I do think--. I mean, you probably experienced this, but it seems like Black police were explicitly intended to control the Black community when they were first brought in.

JL: Well, I think that there was a kind of--. And in different places I think Black police have played different roles, varying roles, but I think in this particular circumstance that this was a time when I believe that they felt that civil rights [2:05:00] and that the movement and you know, this is like Black power and all of those kind of frightening things for them, that challenged their authority and lead to sort of--. Could lead to riots and all kinds of problems. And I think that they just felt that, "Oh, this is an easy chance to just show these people in the civil rights movement."

EC: So your very presence is a threat?

JL: Yeah.

EC: So is this--. You said it's Christmas, it's the era of black power. Is this probably like December 1966, December 1967?

JL: I think it was probably like 1967. I'll have to try to find--. Karen, Karen. You know, I can get some validation for some of these things--.

EC: From her?

JL: --from her. Sadly, the numbers of people who are still alive and can do that have dwindled. Yeah.

EC: So, can you tell me, tell us what it was like to be organizing in Lowndes County. Were you living in Lowndes County at that point?

JL: I was living in Lowndes County, and I--. I had, at first, I had been living in Wilcox County and would come over for meetings with Stokely Carmichael, Ralph Featherstone, Courtland Cox, Charlie Cobb, Ivanhoe. We would, you know, meet there

from time to time. And they would be, some of them would be coming from Atlanta, and we would all then have these meetings. But then, when I was asked to actually come and work in Lowndes County, then I moved into the freedom house. So the building--. There are photographs of the shack which I had been--. I think belonged to the Jackson family, so they're, that shack of a house was our office by day, but it was also then where we actually stayed. And we had sleeping bags, and so we'd sleep in our sleeping bags and the building was--. You could see the stars by looking up, and you could see the ground by looking down. [Laughter]

EC: It's just like camping.

JL: Yeah. And that--. We had a, it had one of those little potbelly stoves, the wood stoves that you'd, you know, you'd use that to keep warm. And so those conversations around the fire meant that you turned one way and, after that part of your body started getting toasty, you then turned another way. So these conversations had this sort of natural rhythm of movement to them. [Laughter]

EC: That's crazy.

JL: But it was really interesting that I, that was a very special time for me. I was very pleased that the, that I was considered one of the key workers there, and that it was not that I was being treated like, "Oh, you're a girl, you're a woman," but it was that, at the--. In the evening, when we'd get together and we'd be sitting around that, you know, the little stove, or we'd be talking, that we were talking about what had happened during the day in terms of our work in the county, but it was a wonderful time where we were also talking broader strategies, and about the world, and we were--. Some of us were reading Frantz Fanon and you know, reading his books and, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and we

would talk about what did, what does freedom mean. You know, what does revolution mean. What does change mean. What does it mean to have power, what's happening in the world, and what is it that we would want for our people. Ralph Featherstone, for example, felt that economic empowerment was absolutely essential, and he thought that we should eventually work on projects that would bring greater economic empowerment to people, and that's something that he, before his death, had worked on some projects that were around the economics.

EC: He was a teacher, too, right? Before he was in SNCC?

JL: Yes, yes.

EC: What were some of the economic ideas that he had, or projects he worked on?

JL: Well they were--. In some parts of Mississippi, they started doing catfish farming, where--.

EC: Oh. They--. Okay.

JL: Mm-hmm. Where you could, where people could then raise catfish and sell those commercially. [2:10:00]

EC: Mm-hmm. I mean, I heard of that in the delta but I didn't realize that SNCC was involved with that.

JL: Well, SNCC, per se, wasn't but--.

EC: He was working independently?

JL: Right. He later, as time moved on, he began--. Yeah. And that he, then, for example, Ed Brown, Rap Brown's brother, was another person who was interested in the economic empowerment ideas, and so he eventually became the head of that group,

Mississippi Action for Community Education, MACE, in Mississippi. And so Ed and Charles Bannerman, and a few others then worked on setting up.

EC: Okay. Those catfish farms, and some of the other thing--.

JL: Those kinds of activities, they had one--. Fine Vines, I think it was called, for it was a blue jeans--. Where people were doing, they were doing textile work and then also doing piecework for sewing jeans, like garment work. So that, they were doing those kinds of things, and I worked with them, I worked for MACE but in Quitman County, as the deputy director of an adult education program. And I did that maybe around--. Was perhaps about 1969, maybe.

EC: So Quitman, that's' where Marks, Mississippi is?

JL: Yes, exactly.

EC: And so this was after the--.

JL: You know about--. Yeah?

EC: This is after the Poor People's Campaign and the Mule Train from Marks to DC, and then you're there doing adult education?

JL: So I was there doing adult education, and I was running, using the churches. And this was, again, something where I was very comfortable, again, being on my own in the middle of nowhere, Mississippi, and I even lived a few miles out from Marks, in Lambert, Mississippi, and that--.

EC: Wow. Out from.

JL: Yeah. And that I would set up, I made arrangements with several of the churches, that we could then use the churches at night as adult education centers, and we trained teachers. I brought a woman, Daphne Mews, was a former DC schoolteacher, to

Quitman County to do, like, a two-week teacher training program, and then the teachers would work at nights with people, after they had gotten off work, to learn. It was basic literacy, and it was quite moving because these were adults in all sorts of age ranges who were just so thrilled to learn to read and write.

EC: People who had probably been denied that opportunity?

JL: Opportunity for their entire lives. Yeah. So, going back to--.

EC: Let me ask one follow-up, and then go back.

JL: Mm-hmm? Sure, okay, sure.

EC: When you, was your approach to adult education, was that influenced at all by the Citizenship Schools that Highlander and SCLC had been operating? Were you aware of the Citizenship Schools?

JL: I was not aware of the Citizenship Schools, I was aware of Highlander, I had never been to Highlander.

EC: Really?

JL: Yeah, yeah.

EC: Well, some day.

JL: And I was aware of Highlander and knew of the principles of--. You know, the principal people there, knew of its founding and everything, but that, I did not know of their Citizenship Schools. And this was more just when I had talked with Ed Brown, with Rap's brother Ed, and we then had talked about--. I came to that after becoming, feeling that it was time to leave SNCC. And so I, after I left SNCC I worked with the National Council of Negro Women, with Dorothy Height, and worked on these economic empowerment projects for women under the auspices of the National Council of Negro

Women. And Unita Blackwell, and also Fannie Lou Hamer, and I spent more of the time, most of the time, working with Fannie Lou Hamer out of Ruleville, who I--. [Recorder is turned off and then back on]

EC: So, should we pursue this line and then go back to Lowndes?

JL: Your choice.

EC: So, I'll pursue this for a minute and then we'll work our way back to Lowndes, but can you tell us what it was like to work with Miss Hamer, and what she and Miss Blackwell, Unita Blackwell, were like?

JL: Well, working with Fannie Lou Hamer was, she was such a spirited and, and--. She's the kind of person where, when they--. There are some people who are charismatic and have personal power under all circumstances, and so she [2:15:00] was the kind of woman if, when she walked in the room, you took notice. And you took notice, and that she had this great sense of humor as well, but that she also had this, you know, real seriousness about her, and this determination. And so she was really, at this point, she was really eager to try to change Ruleville, and to try to achieve something for the people in the area, so she was almost more like a local politician in many ways, trying to create change and bring in projects for the people there. So the National Council of Negro Women, and Dorothy Height--. This was a point at which one of the major magazines, *TIME* or something, had done a big story and there had been some study that had talked about hunger in America. And Mississippi had been the focal point of that, and it talked about the amount of childhood malnutrition in Mississippi, and so the National Council of Negro Women proposed that they would do something about this. And so, working with Mrs. Hamer, they had pulled together--. They were going to develop several

projects, and among them was a pig bank. And that Mrs. Hamer's responsibility was in identifying a group of women who would participate in the pig bank. The university of--. I think it was Purdue University, or some other universities had then--.

EC: That's possible. I think they might have been a land, or an Ag college.

JL: Right. Had then, were supplying these particular kinds of pigs. [Recorder is turned off and then back on]

JL: --were supplying these pigs that were different from the old wallow-in-the-mud pigs. Because the--. And the wallow-in-the-mud pigs, wallow in mud, I'd learned, because they can't, their skin doesn't breathe in the same way, and so they need, then, cool liquid or to--. In order to perspire, in a sense. And that these, but these other pigs were very lean and would be primarily--. More of the pig would go to food than the thick skin that these others, that the traditional pig, had.

EC: So a more efficient pig?

JL: A more efficient pig. And so it was my job to, then, hold meetings and give the orientation to the youths of--. To how the mechanics of the pig bank, and how a family would get a male and a female pig that they would raise the pigs, the pigs would have piglets--.

EC: Hopefully they got along together.

JL: Right. And then once the pig had piglets, it was their responsibility to return two to the bank, and they could then keep the rest for food, and to perpetuate food. And it was--. When people heard of the rules that went along with it, like it's not to go into the mud, but instead it will--. It can be staked like you would a sheep or something--. The people were--.

EC: Like, "What's wrong with you all?" [Laughter]

JL: Right, exactly. As I said, "Next you want us to give that pig a manicure." [Laughter]

EC: We're going to be giving pigs baths.

JL: So it was a challenging project, and did not go as planned.

EC: Really?

JL: Yeah, yeah. But--.

EC: So do you think it was because it was a different kind of care that the pigs needed, than what people were accustomed to? Do you think if it had been the kind of pigs that were already in Mississippi, it would have worked differently?

JL: I think it would have worked a bit differently, but then there were other problems. The reason for that was that there were other problems that people, that the s--. You know, the people who we're working with, that the nutritionist and everything worried about, which was that those were primarily fat as opposed to lean meat, and perpetuating an unhealthy diet, and that you were trying to get healthy food to people. And so I think that it would have worked if, one, if we had then just had a lot more patience, and had stayed with and organized people for a lot longer, I think that this was the kind of thing where it was a photo op, an opportunity, you know--. We're doing good, we have the pigs, goodbye, and that now they're to maintain it on their own, and--.

EC: It required a longer commitment?

JL: Right, exactly. Yeah.

EC: Mm-hmm. So--.

JL: Which, I think, has always been one of those questions [2:20:00] around, even, the movement, you know, when we--. This ties back to Lowndes County, in a way, where, with people like Bob Mants remaining in Lowndes, and feeling that, no, the work isn't done, that we come through, we do a campaign, but at what point do you declare victory and that the work is done, or is it something that continues over a lifetime or multiple lifetimes?

EC: And, you know, another--. Lowndes, I think is a great example, and I'm leaping ahead, but you all did a lot of political education work in Lowndes but it wasn't sustained over time.

JL: Right, right, exactly.

EC: Well, can you--. So actually, I want to go back. When we were talking about Lowndes before, you said one of the things that made you feel good about that is that you were treated like a valued worker, and not like a girl or a woman or whatever, some special whatever--. And you mentioned the Freedom House, so I assume you're living in a freedom house with men and women and what's that like for you, as a young woman, to be living in this situation, which I believe, probably ten years earlier, people would have considered problematic for a young unmarried woman, to be living in a house with young unmarried men?

JL: Right. And that it was because of the, that we were--. Of the relationships and the work, that I was comfortable with that. You know, I was comfortable, and that it was, I felt perfectly fine and with the guys, and that it was--. And that's not to say that people didn't have relationships with each other. From time to time, Stokely would arrive from a trip that he had been on, a speaking engagement or something, and he'd come back with

some gorgeous person who [Laughter] was supposedly going to volunteer. [Laughter] And so, you know, after that, the adventure of this, wore off for this person, that they'd usually disappear. Although there was, there were a couple of people who did sort of actually stay in the movement and actually continue to work in the movement. But, you know, but it was--.

EC: Stokely was a good was a good recruiter?

JL: Well. I, I'm not so sure, but he definitely--. There are a number of people who saw Lowndes County thanks to Stokely.

EC: He was a draw.

JL: He was a draw, yes. [Laughter]

EC: Can you describe a typical day in Lowndes?

JL: A typical day was one of--. That we would, after getting up and then deci--. We'd talk, usually meetings were on the fly, sometimes we'd sit down and have a more formal meeting. We'd get communications with Atlanta and other SNCC offices, was very important. And we had this system, the, this WATS phone system, that was really important to us. You know, we're talking pre-cell phones, primitive communications, really, in many ways. But we did have walkie-talkies in some of the cars, and so that it was, we had some form of rudimentary communications, but we would get this information from Atlanta, and that, we'd also--. It wasn't truly a fax machine, but we had some way of getting materials from Atlanta. So we'd get information from Atlanta, and we would then talk about, we'd sometimes have calls with Atlanta to talk about what we were planning to do, and some of the kinds of questions were that, let's say that there's a reporter from a magazine, from a national magazine or something, wants to come. And

then the question is, do we allow this or not. And do we want this person tagging around with us while we're trying to get work done or no, and what's the value, maybe it's a good thing because then he could publicize what we're doing, maybe not. So we'd have discussions about things like that, and then we'd have discussions about where we are individually going to work and what's happening. Who's working in Hinesville, who's working in another part of Lowndes, and how's, what's the progress.

And I thought of this work as working individually with people, [2:25:00] talking to people, talking to families, talking to men and women, voting age, to then try to get them to motivated and willing to come to a mass meeting, which would generally be held at a church at night, or on the weekends so to get them to come to a church, and then that's when Stokely or somebody would deliver the larger message, to talk about what the strategy was and why what we were doing was so important. And then to move from that towards the longer goal, which was now the November election. And so the work kept building towards that so it was, it had a structure, and that the, for food we were eating all kinds of god-awful things, canned sardines and saltine crackers were a common meal. And sometimes families would share their food with us, and--.

EC: Was that part of it challenging for you, the living conditions?

JL: No, not--. It was the, I think I was still so focused on the work. Yeah. And every time--. Now and then there was a little bit of levity with it, I had, I remember at one point, I had brought this old portable record player that I had, and I had, like, a handful of 45s, and so that you could hear a bit of music, or that we would go to Selma and, if we had a meeting in Selma, then I'd take advantage of being in Selma to have a shower, you know, to--.

EC: Wow. That--.

JL: To wash my hair.

EC: That says something, right? To have to go to Selma for a shower.

JL: To wash my--. Oh, one of the funniest times to me was, once, I don't know why we couldn't go to Phyllis's for this, but once we went to one of those little by-the-hour motels, to take showers. [Laughter] You know, the kind that has the bed with--.

EC: You're a little desperate, to go to a--.

JL: --you put the quarter in and everything?

EC: It's interesting, to go to one of those to get clean.

JL: Yeah. And it was like, while we were there, it was like, "Ooh, a bed," too, you know? And you had to think that, "Oh my God, when was the last time you slept in a real bed?" [Laughter]

EC: Yeah, because you're on the floor in a sleeping bag?

JL: Yeah, yeah.

EC: Yeah. And you--. Phyllis, that's Phyllis Cunningham, who was at the--.

JL: Yeah, that's Phyllis Cunningham.

EC: With the Medical Committee?

JL: Medical Committee, yes.

EC: So would she be stationed in Selma?

JL: She was.

EC: Okay. Can you describe, tell us about some of the local people you worked with in Lowndes?

JL: The people that I remember most vividly were Mr. Hewlett, who was the head of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and that he was a rather small-framed man who was sort of soft-spoken, but with a sharp sense of humor but also persuasive. And then there was the Jackson family, and that was a multi-generational family so they had some younger people, younger kids who were younger than we were, even, who then were active and would tell us about things that were happening. Like, one night people were, some whites were shooting at the tent city on the highway. There was a very visible tent city on the highway, these were people who had been displaced from, they were sharecroppers who'd been pushed off because they had participated in the civil rights activity. And that was another one of those kinds of discussions that I remember, at one point, we had, which was the whole question of, is it better for people, and is it safer for people, to be on the highway, in this more visible situation, or you could put them in the land behind the freedom house, but then obviously if they're there, the problem, then, is an invisible problem somewhat.

EC: Right, so that they might have some protection because they're visible, but they're also vulnerable?

JL: They might have some protection because they're visible, but they also, then, it makes the statement of, this problem exists.

EC: Oh, okay. So that people can't ignore them?

JL: Can't ignore it, right, exactly.

EC: That people [2:30:00] are being evicted in many cases for trying to register to vote.

JL: Right. Exactly, exactly.

EC: This is after the Voting Rights Act, correct?

JL: Right, right. Yeah. And so that's, so it makes the problem more visible, and so you can then have the hope of getting the Justice Department involved or something, so. But you also want to be careful and concerned, you're concerned that you're not putting people's lives in jeopardy. And so when something comes, like they're shooting in the tents or something, then that's an emergency kind of thing, where people got in cars and then went racing up to find out and make sure that the people there were safe.

EC: And when you're racing up, are people in this effort, are people that are converging on Tent City, are they armed?

JL: They are.

EC: How did that work in Lowndes?

JL: They, these, it was, you were dealing with, you had people, local people, and local people were generally armed, yeah. Local people had their own rifles. We, as SNCC people, did not.

EC: Did the fact that people who tried to register get--. The fact that they were evicted, did that make your work harder?

JL: Of course. It became, with other people being evicted, there are times when some people wouldn't even talk with you. They'd see you coming, and they could tell we had on our denim uniforms, in a sense, and between the afros and the denim, they knew exactly who you were and it's a small place in that sense. You know? They knew you were not somebody's cousin or something. And so, in some cases, they just didn't want to talk with you and they felt that you were threatening their livelihood, their security.

EC: Was that hard for you personally to cope with, that kind of reaction?

JL: No, because I felt I understood it and that I felt that I was going to try to work with people in a way that I wanted them to understand. I wanted to talk with, you know, "I want to talk with you but I don't want to--. Is there somewhere else we can talk? Is there another time when we can talk?" So that that was more my approach, it was to not say that, "Oh, I'm going to stand right here and I can see that guy in that pickup truck and I know that he's the guy you work for and you're living in his house, you're a tenant farmer right here on this land, that no, I'm going--. I'll leave, but is there another place, another time when I can talk?"

EC: Would that usually be successful?

JL: It was--. It wasn't that it was always successful, but I felt I did have success with that, and so we would meet people, sometimes at a church or someone's house, and at night, which was a little creepy, going to some of these places because it's not as though--. We're not talking about places where there are house numbers, and--.

EC: Or streetlights.

JL: Or streetlights, and--.

EC: Sidewalks.

JL: Right. Exactly. So if somebody's telling you, "Go down and turn not at the--. Right after the county road, take the third right." You know?

EC: I always like it when they tell you to turn where the tree used to be. [Laughter]

JL: Right. Those are some great ones. [Laughter] And there's not even a stump to show where the tree used to be.

EC: Right, everybody just knows.

JL: Knows, right, exactly.

EC: What were the conversations like, about the--. So in Lowndes County, you've got the Democratic Party, you've got--. Well, in our country people, at the time, think about the Democratic and Republican Party. And in Lowndes, you start organizing around an independent party. What were those conversations like?

JL: We were talking about trying to have the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and that was our--. That was the local party that was represented by the Black Panther as a symbol. That we, and Mr. Hewlett as the head of that, we were talking about--. Success would be them getting the majority and Mr. Hewlett being elected sheriff. You know, it was--. Those were the c--. We were talking about county offices, this was not, "Let's go to Atlantic City and challenge seats and things," this was, "Now, let's have a victory here with this county, here." And that if these are things that we could do in other black belt counties, that this could be a kind of success.

EC: Why not just participate in the Democratic Party? [2:35:00]

JL: Because the Democratic Party was at that point, on that county level it represented a real segregationist, racist citizens' council grouping, and so that was not even a question.

EC: Was that hard? I mean, did local people immediately see that, was there any sense among local people that they should belong to one of the existing parties?

JL: Oh I don't think, I think that they knew that that was not even a question, yeah.

EC: I know you mentioned that your parents were with the Republican Party. Was that an option in Lowndes?

JL: I don't recall any blacks in Lowndes who were Republicans. You know? But I don't know that they would have been, made themselves more visible because I don't know that they would have come forth for a public debate or anything.

EC: Was there any talk of using the Republican Party as a vehicle for--.

JL: Not among us. I don't recall any.

EC: Do you have a sense of why that wasn't considered an option?

JL: I think that it was, again, more the question of that, here was, that moving away from national political parties, and national politics, that here on this small microcosm level, that we have this opportunity to demonstrate the ability to, that if people register to vote and are the majority, to claim, then, the role of the majority they are in to run the county, and then have all of the benefits that running the county would bring to them. So I think that that was much more the notion at that point.

EC: How did the Black Panther become associated with Lowndes County?

JL: The majority of people who were living in Lowndes and other counties, then, the adults, the education was so, so poor that the majority of people were illiterate. And that you would then have people voting based upon a symbol. And the, when it came time for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which was the official name of the party there, to choose a symbol to represent it, they thought, they said, "Well, the other party, the Democrats, were the--." They had that white rooster, and they said, "What we need is a mean black cat to run that old rooster out of the county." And so that was, then they sort of said they wanted a black cat, a black panther, to be that symbol. And this was still at a point where, in the South, you had enough wildlife that there were the occasional panthers and things. So they wanted a panther to be the symbol. And that's when the

Atlanta office sent down the drawing that became used, and I was one who would use my limited artistic skills to reproduce these things on posters, and on our sign for the Freedom Organization's headquarters.

EC: So would you paint those--. I mean, would you be able to just look at this panther because it--.

JL: I'd do it freehand, I would--.

EC: Freehand? And you'd draw that panther, and--.

JL: Right, right exactly.

EC: Paint.

JL: Right, then I'd draw, sketch it, and then paint in the outline, give him his whiskers and everything, his pouncing move, and--. So I'd do that, and I did it on posters as well so we would have, if we were having a meeting and having a poster, it would say, "The Lowndes County Freedom Organization," and then it would have the symbol. And that we, as we got towards November, then we started becoming very concerned about violence. There was this whole question of the whites and how they might react to blacks in the county seat for voting. And so we started thinking that, "Well, it would be great if we could somehow communicate, vote, and then go home." But don't stay, don't linger, vote and go home. And so we decided that was the message that we would try to get across in all of the meetings, the mass meetings that we would have. But then somebody here sort of says, "Oh, wouldn't it be great if we had billboards?" And I said, "Well, if you get me the lumber, if you get the lumber I'll make the billboards." And I think I made maybe four of them.

EC: So you actually, you didn't just paint them, [2:40:00] you made the billboard--.

JL: We made big billboards, billboard-sized. We made billboards, and that I then hand-painted these things, and that the message, again, was vote--. I think it was November eighth. Vote November eighth, or whatever the date was, for the Black Panther. "Pull the lever for the Black Panther, and then go home." And the go home was, for us, an important part of that.

EC: Because you didn't want anybody to get hurt?

JL: Right, we didn't want--. And so, of course, as soon as we put those up, some of them were shot, riddled with bullet holes. [Laughter]

EC: They become target practice?

JL: Right.

EC: I know one of the other things that you were doing was creating political education material?

JL: Yes, and those were, when we talk about the kind of conversations that we had at night, that--. You know, this is the time where there's no television, there is no radio. As I said, we would have long discussions until it was time for bed and that--. So Courtland, Stokely, all of us would talk and that--. Sometimes Courtland and I, in particular, would talk about, "Well, wouldn't it be great if we could try to have people understand more of what the strategy is here." You know, and we sort of said, "Well, maybe we could--." you know, I said, "Well, if you could state it, I could draw it." And that we would then, we came up with making these sort of comics, almost, this graphic representation of what we were--. You know, there was a man named Mr. Blackman, and he lived--. So we would do these, and then, to be able to use in meetings to talk about what we were, what

the strategy was and what we were trying to do in getting the vote, and why the vote would be important.

EC: Do you--. How did people respond to those?

JL: I think peopled liked them. I think people liked them, and I think it was something like--. You know how, same way that you have a hymnal and you can follow along? I think it was that kind of thing, where people could, when they, they could follow the story, in a sense, and it gave a kind of, in the same way that now a Power Point would do, it gave a kind of graphic representation to what's the story. So it wasn't just people standing there talking. And in some cases, sometimes these people standing, talking, could go awry because people could begin to go on and on in ways that were meaningful for them, but not necessarily really the appropriate language or a real connection to the audience, and not enough of a real dialogue with the audience, too, yeah.

EC: One of the things I found interesting was the descriptions of what the offices were. What a sheriff does, what a coroner does--.

JL: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah.

EC: And can you talk about why that was necessary?

JL: It was necessary because people had been so disenfranchised in all of these counties, that they had not a clue, it didn't seem feasible and real, that these were jobs that they could have and that people, that the African Americans, could have. And that they didn't have a sense of, what does this person do and why does it really matter? What role does the coroner play, what role does the sheriff. What's the sheriff's responsibilities? You know. To just, and it was as if they had just been handed power

and ordained--. You know, from on high, centuries and decades ago, and so that was the way it was always going to be. And that this was our way of trying to break that spell and help people peer behind that curtain, and have a greater understanding of, "Oh, okay, so that's how this works."

EC: That these are actually defined jobs, and--.

JL: These are defined jobs, yeah.

EC: --clearly identifiable, yeah.

JL: Right, exactly.

EC: Can you talk about how the candidates were chosen or selected for the freedom party?

JL: That, it was--. I did not play any real role in that, and I have a feeling that it, that people emerged and that was always something that was wonderful to see, where you go to these mass meetings and when you first start to work in a community, you can often--. [2:45:00] First of all, you're thrilled that people actually come to a meeting because that's an act of courage, you know. And that there are people who come, and that certain characters begin to stand out. You know, often there's a minister who assumed that he is the leader because he has the church and that he is the leader and that everybody's going to listen to him, and that's the beginning and the end of it. But then there's someone else, and quite often it is a woman who will then stand up and ask some very good questions or make some very good statements that then paves the road for others to participate as well. And that you began to then hear and see who the leaders, or the potential leaders, really are. And it, so you see this leadership that kind of emerges from that, and those were the

people that we would begin to really focus on and work with to find out whether they were indeed willing to--.

EC: Run?

JL: Run.

EC: Or assume some leadership position.

JL: Right, exactly. Or to whether they're willing to convene the next meeting or something.

EC: I mean, that sounds like it's, epitomizes Ella Baker's ideas. Were you aware of that at the time?

JL: I wasn't, I wasn't. I didn't meet Mrs. Baker until much later. I knew of her but I didn't meet her until much later. I kept, I learned, I was learning my sort of--. my job in the Civil Rights Movement by on-the-job training, in many ways. And that I was learning, I had the very good fortune that I was working with some of the absolute best. You know, I was working with Charlie Cobb, and Courtland, and Ivanhoe, and so we would talk about things, and so through some of the discussions that we would have, I knew, I grew to know of community organizing and some principles and some thoughts, so I knew who Saul Alinsky was even though I had never read anything by Alinsky. You know, and I knew of certain others, and--. But, again, this was in, through these discussions that we were having.

EC: So that you pick it up as you go along?

JL: You pick it up as you go along, or you discover that you're having a certain degree of success with something--. That I find that, if I'm going, and if I meet one woman and she's amenable to something, and that--. If she says, "Sure, you can spend--

." there were occasions where I spent the night at a family's home because they agreed that then, the next day, they were going to be doing something or going somewhere where I could meet other people.

EC: So then they can connect you, and--.

JL: Right, exactly.

EC: I've always, is it, was it Alice Moore who ran for tax assessor? I'm blanking on her name.

JL: Yeah, I'm blanking on the people at this point--. That name seems familiar but I'm really--. It's amazing how, when I, it's very interesting, going through an interview like this, because after fifty years of being disconnected to the events--.

EC: Trying to dredge them back up?

JL: To trying to--. Yeah, yeah.

EC: Well I've read about the Lowndes County movement, and if I have her name correct or not, I recall that her platform for running for tax assessor was, "Tax the rich and feed the poor," which always kind of stood out to me. And--.

JL: [Laughter] Where is she when we need her now?

EC: I know, right? I know. Can you describe--. You know, you talked about these SNCC folks who were good organizers that you're working with, can you describe a few of them for us?

JL: Sure, sure. And it's that--. Charlie Cobb was just a--. Charlie, I think, is still one of the smartest people that I know, and it's, and that he was, it was always interesting to just see his mind at work, in a sense, to be confronted with a problem. You know, we were there, and that we were mulling over a particular problem, and that then to have

Charlie sort of articulate what he sees the framework of the problem. Courtland [2:50:00] was always very good, too, at then beginning to connect it, connect the dots to a bigger picture, and put it in a context. And so for me, the two of them were just wonderful. And then Bob Mants had this more folksy connection to the people, and thinking of, "Okay, now how do we translate this to the people?" And I think that I fell more in that same spectrum with Bob Mants, on, "Okay, now here we defined the problem, we know what we need to do, and now let's come up with a plan." And so I think, I think that I would say that Courtland, Ivanhoe, and Charlie were more the larger framework thinkers in that way, and that, then, that Featherstone, Mants, and I fell more into the implementation. Let's now come up with a plan of action and start moving on this, yeah.

EC: And where does Stokely fit into this larger picture?

JL: Stokely, initially, I think, was much more on the "Let's think it through" stage of things, and side of things, but he would--. I think he would see, too, the others, to Courtland and to Charlie at first, and that there was a point at which, when he became more sort of--. When the media began to pay far more attention to Stokely, that's when he then began to, I think, emerge, and began to trust his own thinking, which was sometimes not necessarily the best thing for him to do. [Laughter] I think he suffered as a result of not having all of those really solid, you know, ears and minds to bounce ideas off of.

EC: So that, with the media attention, he becomes more of an individual person?

JL: He became more of an individual acting along, and that he, because as time would move along, I think he became trapped in his own rhetoric, too. And so that, rather than

having a thoughtful answer to something, it became, "Black Power." You know? It became a lot of empty sloganeering, unfortunately.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

JL: It was rather sad to see what happened, was happening to Stokely, too, because that--. He then began to really believe that it was him that they wanted to hear, and that they, that--. And it was really about him, and that the media were, you know, that it was him and the media rather than, and it was no longer about the organization, or no longer about the cause, or--. So he became somewhat trapped in that world.

EC: So--. And, of course, that's one of the things that Ella Baker had worried about early on, or had objected to with SCLC, right? The sort of projection of an individual or the focus. How did he respond when people tried to pull him back?

JL: Oh, he would get angry, you know. Because he felt, "You just don't see it. It's me." You know, I--. Yeah. And then, of course, I think that he thought that, perhaps, it was jealousy or that there were other motives, but that he couldn't--. And that he could not understand that there were times when we thought, as an organization, that what his off-the-cuff remarks were completely antithetical to what we as an organization felt, and that he could not just define himself as being our spokesperson. Or that if you're going to be connected with an organization, then you really need to reflect the ethos and the thoughts and the direction of the organization, that you're--. So he began to think of himself as, "Oh, I'm the leader. [2:55:00] You folks just need to--."

EC: Get in line?

JL: --"get in line and follow."

EC: Can you think of a specific example of a topic or an incident?

JL: Not at this point I can't, yes. Mm-hmm.

EC: You mentioned, earlier, the murder of one of your classmates, Sammy Young. And in Lowndes County, Jonathan Daniels, a white seminarian--.

JL: Right, right.

EC: --was also murdered. Can you talk about those two incidents and their impact on you or the movement?

JL: The, of, when it was, I think, very early in 1966, in January of 1966. And that I, by now, was living--. I was living in Tuskegee, but I don't think I was still--. I'm not sure whether I was in school or not, but I know I was not living in a dormitory, I had a small apartment off-campus now, and was working actively with student groups and others, and we had had a meeting, earlier that evening, and that Sammy Young, Jr., and some other students, we'd all been a part of this meeting. I had gone back to my place, I was at my apartment, and someone knocks at the door and it's one of my classmates who then one of these--. Not classmates, but one of the other people who had been a part of the group. And she was there in disbelief, saying, "They killed Sammy." And that--. You know, I couldn't, it just was incredulous to me. I mean, this was someone that I had just seen a few hours before, and she says, "They killed Sammy," and that they she told me that Sammy, and that these other people had gone to this gas station, he was, and he had asked to use the restroom. And the guy had told him, no, he couldn't use it, he wouldn't allow him to use the restroom. And that Sammy had said, "No, man, where's the restroom, I'm going to use the restroom," and that the guy had pulled a gun on Sammy, and Sammy had pulled out a golf club, because he had a golf club in his car or

something, and but that the man shot him. And you know. And that he died right there, at the gas station.

And so it was--. That was a pivotal point for me because it was yet another one of those times where I've, and this was still when I was trying to make this decision of which direction am I going in, do I stay in school, do I leave and work full-time in the movement. And that's when I just felt that, okay, this is part of "You go, you work in the movement, you can come back to these other things but that you have to, that we all have to change this place, that we can't--." You know, what does it mean to be a doctor if this is the world that you're going to live in? That there are all of these--. There were doctors, a lot of black doctors. Tuskegee is an unusual place, they had a VA hospital and so there are an abundance of black professionals right there, who taught at the school, who worked at the VA hospital, the Tuskegee airmen, all of this. You know, that's all a part of that little world there. But that you could then be killed in that little world, too. So I just felt that, you know, it is more important to spend time trying to make this world safer for African Americans, a better place, a more equal place, and that--. So that was yet more that was moving me towards working full-time with SNCC.

EC: Does his murder influence SNCC's position on Vietnam?

JL: I can't recall, I really can't recall because that was, we were very definitely, the whole thing of the Vietnam was very definitely an issue for us, but I can't recall specifically a connection to Sammy's murder.

EC: What about Jonathan Daniels?

JL: Jonathan Daniels was killed in Lowndes County, and he was killed when he was standing next to Ruby Sales. And Ruby was one of my classmates at Tuskegee. [3:00:00] Ruby had been at Tuskegee, and had then become active.

EC: What was the context, the situation?

JL: I wasn't there so I only know what I heard and read, and it was my understanding that someone had been incensed by the idea of Jonathan Daniels being there with these black people, and that had then said ugly things to him, and that Daniels was killed, in part, trying to also protect Ruby.

EC: Yeah. Did it have an impact beyond the personal, in terms of what SNCC was trying to do in Lowndes?

JL: I don't think so. I mean, I feel that it was something where I think people in these areas that, always, when someone dies trying to help them, that I think that that's always something. It works sort of two ways, I mean, on the one hand the part of it is, "These people are so crazy they'll kill the white people, you know what they'll do to us." So this can be a frightening thing, but I think there's another side of it, of, that you treasure life and the value of a life in a way that you feel that, "Oh, if somebody is trying to do this to help us, that we should--. Surely we can do this for ourselves and we can move one more step forward," you know. But I don't know that it had that big an impact in that way.

EC: Young people often don't have the same sense of mortality as their elders--.

JL: Right, oh, definitely not, definitely not.

EC: --and yet you call in SNCC had to confront people dying--.

JL: Constantly, constantly. And there was another classmate from Tuskegee who became active in the movement, and I forget, I'm trying to remember where he died.

George Best. B-E-S-T. And he and another guy, they died, middle of the night, their car was found overturned in a shallow, like, not really even a river, or--. More like a little creek or something. But they had--. And we never knew whether they had just accidentally run off the road, or whether they had been run off the road. So it was, it, the circumstances were uncertain but the car, obviously, had veered, had gone off the road and flipped. And they had been trapped underneath and died.

EC: How did you cope with those kinds of things?

JL: Just feel that you've been to far too many memorial services, funerals, and you sang the same civil rights songs and everything, far too many times. But you also, it kind of--. I'm sure it--. I mean, part of it is somewhat like being in the army, I would think, so when we think of ourselves as veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, I think the term is an apt one. And I believe that many of us, including myself, have suffered at various points from forms of PTSD. Because there's some, some of these things become just so alarming and so frightening, and so horrible that [pause] And then there are the other times, when you feel that, "Okay, we've lost yet another person," but this sort of steels your, it hardens your will Move on. Because you feel that you want there to be a victory because we've already lost so much and lost so many wonderful people.

EC: That we have to get something out of this.

JL: We have to, yeah, yeah.

EC: We talked another time and you told me, speaking of violence and PTSD, about a time when you were in the car with George Greene?

JL: Yes.

EC: Can you tell us about that?

JL: That was right, that was, I believe—[someone sneezes]. It was either on my way to Montgomery for the, from Tuskegee, for that march, or it was returning. And either way, it was that George was driving. We had this fleet of--. There was the, SNCC had a fleet of cars [3:05:00] called the Sojourner Motor Fleet, and they were these, like, Dodge Darts or something, but they were these cars. And you could sometimes tell one of them because they also had these long whip-like antennas on them because they were equipped with the, some of them were equipped with the walkie-talkies so they were kind of visible. George was an incredible driver. I mean, he really, he should have been at NASCAR or something, because he had this real skill like that. However, however. The last thing that you wanted was to be in the car in the middle of the night on a highway in a car with George, speeding down at over a hundred miles an hour. You know?

EC: Wow. And these are not four-lane highways?

JL: No. These are two-lane.

EC: And they're not interstate?

JL: No. And that it is, we were stopped by a policeman, and it's being there with George, and you just don't quite know how he's going to respond to this. Oh, just absolutely frightening because you don't know if he's going to do something that will give the policeman an excuse to shoot him, shoot us. So, very scary.

EC: Was he going that fast because he was afraid that someone like--. You know, that the Klan might stop you all, or--. Is this before Viola Liuzzo's murder?

JL: And that's what I don't remember, whether it was before or after Viola Liuzzo was killed. But with George, he often, under any circumstance, he drove really fast.

EC: So once he had the skill, he employed it whether he needed or not, perhaps?

JL: Right, right. And that he could do that, I mean, it was a skill that he had that was this kind of skill where you probably have seen, like, in movies or things, where people can spin the car, where they're going at a really high rate of speed in this direction, you're going north, and then they can just have it where it just switches and then goes--. He could do that. But still, you don't want to be in the car when he's doing it.

EC: Unless there's somebody after--. Well, even if there's somebody after, you don't want to be the--.

JL: Right, yeah, yeah. Because you'd have think that, "No, it may not make sense to be, to out-run them." You know? These are not situations that you feel you can win necessari--. And those were the k--. That was, speaking of the situations you don't feel you can win, that was one of the conversations that I remember we had, as one of those night discussions, which was the whole question of nonviolence versus violence. And the notion of whether, of how senseless it could be, that if black people were to try to take on the injustices through a kind of military action, and through an armed revolt, and at how, that you felt that it would be suicidal, ultimately, because that, you're just out-gunned in terms of firepower, and that--. Or the other one was, similar to that, was there was one point where we would get news of other groups, like there was this group, the Republic of New Afrika, and other groups who then felt that their philosophy was that there should be a state, a black state or a black country--.

EC: Yeah, what did you think of that?

JL: --carved out. And, again, it was one of those things where we felt that that was untenable, that it wasn't something that you, that we were not fighting to have Lowndes County and, you know, to move through that, to have the state of Alabama declared to be

black Alabama, Blackabama, something, that, no, that wasn't our goal. Our goal was to make the entirety of the United States a place that we could all be comfortable and live, with equal rights. And that our goal was to have equal rights, not to have this isolated place. [3:10:00] So we had meaningful and good discussions about black culture, the role of black culture, segregation, self-segregation.

EC: With these, did you oppose the idea of a black state for logistical, sort of practical reasons? Or the idea of it in general, or some combination?

JL: A combination. For me personally, I felt that it was, that it wasn't, I wasn't seeking to have a black state, I was seeking to be comfortable living in the whole world. And wanted to be able to have equality for me and my people in the whole world, not in some--

EC: Isolated?

JL: --isolated place.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

EC: What was it like during the Lowndes County primary election or nominating convention?

JL: That, there were--. I recall it being a tense time and lots of drama. Real concern about what might happen and that Hinesville, Hinesville was the county seat, I believe, and--.

EC: Sounds right.

JL: --but there was this real concern about what might happen, and so the kind of drama around that. And just, us kind of moving about the county, to make sure that

nothing really bad is happening. Because, again, this is in a time when you don't have, really, the best efficient, the most efficient news-gathering.

EC: Yeah. So you have to really travel the roads to see how things are going?

JL: Right, you have to travel the roads, and to--. Yeah.

EC: I've seen pictures, you know, of all these people gathered and voting, and--. Were you there at all, or were you just traveling the county?

JL: We were--. As I recall, we were taking people, driving people to the polls, too. I want to think that I took people to the polls.

EC: I was actually thinking about--. So, there's the convention where people are voting just to, within the Lowndes County Freedom--.

JL: Lowndes County Freedom Organization.

EC: And then after that--.

JL: After that, November was the actual, I think that I'm confusing it with November, which is when I drove people to the polls. I don't remember the convention. I don't remember the Lowndes County Freedom Organization Convention. But I remember, then, the--. It's the November election that I remember, where we were then actually taking people to the polls, and that was--.

EC: And it was tense?

JL: --the tense, and there's also the kind of anticipation of, "Will we be so fortunate as to win or not," and "Will the seats be--." You know. So.

EC: And what was it like, I mean, how did you--. I guess how did you foll--. Were SNCC people or Lowndes County people able to be there for the vote, the count of the votes, or how did you learn the results?

JL: I recall learning the results later, not being, I don't think we could be present for the count of the votes.

EC: And none of the candidates were successful?

JL: Right, right, exactly.

EC: How did people locally respond to the election, then, to not being able to win in this first round?

JL: I think that it was one where they were, they probably were less surprised than we were. I think that they had, you know, lowered expectations, lower expectations. But it was, the good news was that people were willing to continue. You know? It wasn't as though they felt that, "Well, you folks tried something that was interesting, now let's go back to life as usual, or the way things were." But you felt that things would continue to move forward. And that was the good news, that was, to me, the win of it all.

EC: How long did you stay in Lowndes, or what, when and how did you leave and move on to something different?

JL: I, after that, we ended up from--. There was a SNCC conference, I can't remember where this particular conference was. We would have these national, these annual meetings of sorts, and that one was at this place, Peg Leg Bates Resort, and that these would be the meetings where we would have the election for officers, and so one was the point at which John Lewis had been the chair of SNCC.

EC: I think this one was Kingston Springs?

JL: Kingston Springs, [3:15:00] New York, and that may have been Peg Leg Bates Resort or something, or--.

EC: I think it's actually outside of Nashville? Kingston Springs, Tennessee--.

JL: Kingston Springs, okay, Tennessee, yes. Okay. Kingston Springs, Tennessee. Because there was one, I know, was up in the Poconos or something, the--.

EC: Yeah. That's the Peg Leg Bates?

JL: That's the Peg Leg Bates Resort. But we'd have, we'd go to these places--. One famous one that I was not present at was Waveland. But so we'd have these meetings. And at this particular meeting, and I guess it was the Kingston Springs meeting, that that's the point at which John--. It was assumed that John would continue as the head of SNCC, and that I recall Fay Bellamy being very outspoken in the same way that I was talking about how sometimes the local women would then stand and speak a truth that then created a different dynamic, changed the dynamic? And this was a time when Fay did that, and that changed the dynamic of the meeting so that it became clear that, in essence, that John's time was past and that now we were moving towards Stokely, and that we were moving towards a new day and a new form of leadership and a new central, a new group of principles, in many ways. And that I was voted to the central coordinating committee, I was voted onto that, and so I was being asked to, in essence, play a greater part in the leadership of SNCC, which was, I was honored by, and that I then ended up moving more towards Atlanta. And I may be getting dates and everything all mixed up here, but that I started, after Lowndes County, then, I started working, eventually I started working out of Atlanta more.

EC: What was your work like in Atlanta?

JL: In Atlanta, I worked with--. It was much more strategy and discussions than actual organizing. I didn't do, we weren't, we were not doing, from the national office, we were not doing any work in the local community, but it was much more the providing

services to the people who were still working in counties out in the field. And so I worked with Karen Spellman and others, Ruby Doris Robinson and others, doing that. Fay Bellamy. And Ethel Minor, who had worked at one point for Malcolm X. The, that was a point, too, when I was in Atlanta, there became this different kind of fracturing within SNCC, which was Zoharah Simmons and a group, a guy named Bill Ware, I believe, who had created a local project to work in the inner city of Atlanta. Some reason the name Ivy City or something--.

EC: Ivy City? Is that what you said?

JL: I'm not sure what it was--.

EC: I think there were a few names for it. Was--. Oh.

JL: But it was a, there was a local community there, and where it was a low-income housing, and they started to work there, and it was--. And what, in essence, you were having, was this kind of discussion and debate about what's the future, and which direction does SNCC go in? And part of it is black power, part of it is dealing with urban problems and urban issues, and the--. With the question being, "What are you doing when you attempt to deal with urban issues?" Versus the Lowndes County kind of get-out-the-vote, and securing the vote.

EC: In Atlanta, were African Americans, did they have pretty good access to the ballot at this point? If they would go out and register?

JL: Right, in Atlanta, yes. [3:20:00]

EC: So in Atlanta, you can, people can register, it's just a question of whether they will, and then if so what will they do with that, and whether that will do the trick?

JL: Right, right. So in Atlanta, it wasn't about the consolidating political power in that way, or having the authority and having, being able to hold office and you know. You had had blacks that held office, you had blacks who were quite wealthy, you had a whole, all of the problems and all of the resources that you might expect in an urban area, and Atlanta was, in the South at that time, a rather unusual urban area. People would call it, "Up north, in Atlanta," or you know. LA, Lovely Atlanta. But Atlanta was a much more liberal and advanced area for a major southern city, and the, but the Atlanta Project, which was what the group, that Gwen and Bill and others were focused on, they then wanted to do this organizing within, felt that we should be focusing on organizing within this--.

EC: Is it Buttermilk Bottom? Was that a different part of Atlanta?

JL: I think that's a different part.

EC: Oh! I had it. Vine.

JL: Vine City. Yeah. And I see why I called--. Ivy City is here in DC, Vine City. Yes. But they really wanted to, they had--. And that was, and so that was beginning to cause some tensions.

EC: Well, they were advocating for separatism, right?

JL: Right.

EC: Is that--. Yeah. And so there are internal tensions, within SNCC, on where to go?

JL: Right, right. And so those, so it was a time of lots of meetings and discussions and questions about the future and where we're--. You know, which direction and where we're heading, and.

EC: You mentioned the Waveland meeting, which is one you said that you weren't at--.

JL: Right.

EC: --it's kind of a famous meeting.

JL: Right, exactly.

EC: And that one takes place in, you know, November 1964, which is when you're in Jackson, working on voter--. I don't know if it was the same--.

JL: Same time, right.

EC: The same general time frame. And you're really, at this point, moving in the direction of SNCC, so you're still--.

JL: Right, right.

EC: But for a lot of people that's kind of a moment of feeling like things are coming apart.

JL: Exactly, yeah.

EC: I know Judy feels that way, and yet for you, that's really more of a start.

JL: Exactly.

EC: I don't know if there's anything more to say about that, but do you have any thoughts on what it was like for you to come into the organization at that point? you're almost like a new generation.

JL: Right, right. And that's in essence what we were, but it's, it was--. And that--. We were in different organizations, in many ways, then. Because Judy was, then, a person who was then the Judy of desegregation and lunch counters as well, and that was not as, that was not my world. You know, the lunch counters or the Diane Nash and the

sit-ins, and the bus rides, and the freedom rides. But instead, mine was this really, the voter registration.

EC: It was always fieldwork and voter registration, power--.

JL: It was the fieldwork. Voter registration. It was looking at political power, black power within that context, but black power within the context of political power within the United States.

EC: As opposed to separat--.

JL: As opposed to a separatist thing of, "Oh, well we'll go and have the, South Carolina would be a good state." [Laughter]

EC: [Laughter] Not Mississippi? [Laughter] So how did those debates or discussions, that aspect, affect you within the organization?

JL: That, I found those--. To me those were stimulating, and it was somewhat energizing because it's through discussions like that that you would then gain a better sense of yourself and of what you believed in and what you understood, and the world as you saw it. And so it, you know, I began to realize that, no, I thought it illogical to be separatist, I thought it illogical to be an advocate of armed warfare of any kind, I thought it--. That these were things that did not work for me and that, over time, later, those became [3:25:00] some of the aspects that led me away from SNCC. You know, so that by the time that the election of Rap Brown and Phil--. What's Phil's last name?

EC: Hutchings?

JL: Yes. That I just felt that, no, this is you know. This is not, in the same way that Judy probably felt about Waveland, but this was now not the organization that I wanted to belong to.

EC: And so that must have been, Rap must have been elected in 1967? And Hutchings in 1968?

JL: Yeah, that's what I think.

EC: Okay. That sounds right. So as you move away from SNCC, where do you--. Well actually, before--.

JL: As I moved away from SNCC, that's when I moved towards Mississippi--.

EC: And the work with the National Council of Negro Woman?

JL: Woman. And then with MACE, with--. And so those became the late [19]60s for me. But I've, I was still sort of in Atlanta in--. I was in Atlanta through part of--. Yeah, I think I was still in Atlanta in 1968.

EC: What was it like, what was the Atlanta office like when you begin to work there on a regular basis, like who are the key people, what does the work look like?

JL: When I was there, the Atlanta was, the office was on Nelson Street, I think it was 360 Nelson. And that we, you went up a flight, it was an industrial kind of loft-like space and you, the entry was on the second floor, up a narrow flight of stairs. Downstairs, Wilson Brown was the king of the printing press. And the press was an important part of it, and that was, you know, Julian Bond and the--. But Wilson was the actual printer and he practically lived in the building, you know, manning the press.

EC: Was he a printer before he came to SNCC, where did he learn that?

JL: I don't know, I don't know. But he really practically lived there, doing that.

EC: And he creat--. So he would create the booklets, he would create the fundraising materials, and--.

JL: Right, right. And we had, I think there was a publication, *Student Voice* or something, I think that--.

EC: There was a *Student Voice*, and then the name changed at a certain point, the--. Well, there was a *Liberator*, and I don't know if that was--. Anyway.

JL: I don't--. But he, but the publications were coming out of there. Then, on the, on that second floor, the main floor, which is where the offices were, there was one point where it was Jim Forman and who else was--? That Ethel Minor, Freddie Green Biddle, Karen Spellman, Fay Bellamy, Stanley Wise, Bill Porter. Those are the people that I remember most, there, on that. And Jack Minnis, and Bill Mahoney. And Bill Mahoney was an interesting person; this goes back to the question of passing. Bill Mahoney could easily have passed for white. Bill, somebody has said that Bill had gone to some student demonstration when he was at Howard, I think, or something, and had worn a, put a sign on himself that says, "I am black," or something, but you would not have thought of him. He, you know, as an African American. If you'd--. Just by sheer appearance.

EC: You wouldn't?

JL: No, no.

EC: And he was involved in Howard in the early days, right?

JL: Right, right.

EC: Was he on the freedom rides?

JL: I don't know.

EC: Sit-ins for sure.

JL: Yes, but very definitely. Yeah, mm-hmm.

EC: So if I'm looking at this list, it looks to me like, is Jack Minnis the only white person that you can remember in the Atlanta office at that time?

JL: At that time, right, yeah. Mm-hmm.

EC: Oh, do you remember when Dottie and Bob Zellner submitted a proposal to stay on staff but work in the white community?

JL: I remember that, but--. And I didn't really know them that well, but I remember discussion of it and the idea that, if people were basically[3:30:00] saying, "Sure, you go and work in the white community but you don't need to be in SNCC in order to do that, just go and organize your people, you know?"

EC: Yeah, yeah.

JL: And so there was still, there was that whole question of having sort of pushed the whites out, was still, that notion was still very much in discussion, there would still be someone who would, whether it was Zellner or someone else, there was another guy--. Oh, what was his name, I can't recall his name right now--. Where it would surface from time to time, and in these very emotional ways, too, where people felt, you know, some of the whites who felt that they had been such a part of the family, and it was now like they had been kicked out of the family. And that I remember, Courtland and some of the others trying to depersonalize it, and saying that it's not about you as an individual or anything, but there's a point at which we must do this, that we as African Americans, we as black people, have to be in charge of our own destiny, we can't have things look as though it's this, we can't have this kind of, you know, paternalism of, that you must do this for us, or you must, that we can't do it ourselves. That this is really important, that we do this.

EC: Did, was he successful, do you know? Do you have a sense of whether there were people who were responsive to that way of looking at the issue?

JL: I think that, to this day, when you, you know, if you follow some of the reunions and things, that I think, to this day, there's still that undercurrent of that.

EC: So I know we already talked about--. Actually, I had another question. So not only is that list almost all black, but there's a strong representation of black women.

JL: Yes.

EC: What is your experience, working in this office with such a strong group of black women?

JL: It was, I--. Oh, Mildred Tillinghast was another person, so even--.

EC: Muriel?

JL: Yeah, Muriel. Muriel Tillinghast. And there was a Mildred, I'm trying to think of--.

EC: Forman?

JL: Yeah, Mildred Forman, and then there's another--. Myrtle Glascoe. So yes. I mean, I--. Joyce Brown. I felt that there were a number of strong women, a number of women who were very much a part of the organization and of its day-to-day functions and activities, and that was true not just there but in other places as well. I thought of some of the fundraising activities as being very much dependent upon the work of Bobby Yancey, and of Shirley Cooks. Shirley Wright, Shirley Cooks. But I thought that it was, I thought some of the portrayal, sometimes, by people outside the organization based upon Stokely's crude comments over the role of women, the position of women in the movement as prone? Yeah. I thought that there was this notion that it was male-driven,

when in reality I don't think it ever was. You know, when you, whether it's, you're talking about Fanny Lou Hamer or Unita Blackwell or you know, Annie Devine, you--. Locally you're talking about strong women and powerful women and women who are in decision-making roles, and within SNCC you're talking about the same.

EC: At this point, I know SNCC has the project in Lowndes, and some of the other nearby countries in the Alabama black belt. What other projects, what other sort of organizing or fieldwork is going on at this time? Do you have a sense?

JL: I'm not quite sure how strong the fieldwork is in some of the places at that point because you have these people who I associate as being very much a part of SNCC. The, so southwest Georgia, and then you have Cambridge, Gloria Richardson. You have these people in all of these different places, but that I'm not, I don't have a real visceral sense, [3:35:00] I can't tell you what the goals were and what we were actually doing in these different places. And partly that's because during that same time period, things began to shift towards black power and the media focus on black power, which was also this turn towards Stokely. And as the turn towards Stokely occurred, you were beginning to have the emergence of the Black Panther Party. And these questions about what role does SNCC have, what connection does it want, should it have, with some of those groups. There was a group in Philadelphia, I don't know the formal name of the group but I know there was a group of militants, black militants from Philadelphia who were seeking a relationship with SNCC and--.

EC: Yeah. We talked a little bit about your work with MACE and with the National Council of Negro Women. Were there other things about that work that we should discuss?

JL: By the time that I was working with them, Unita Blackwell had become the mayor of Mayersville, Mississippi. And it was, and you also had, there was a group of people unconnected to SNCC in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. And these groupings were making me, were raising the question. These activities were raising the question for me of, what next, in a sense. What is the more meaningful work that we should be doing? Because I felt that there was a kind of incrementalism that was similar to that feeling that I'd had when I'd encountered the doctor at Sloan Kettering who had been working twenty years, and--.

EC: Got this one little?

JL: And got this one little thing. And that's what I kept feeling, that, "Well, okay, Unita Blackwell is mayor or Mayersville, Mrs. Hamer is trying to get an economic development project for Ruleville, Sunflower County, and MACE, here are these little pockets of things. What does it add up to? And does it add up to something of real significance in that way? Now, mind you, also you had, in the same sort of, this same world, let's not forget that there's Martin Luther King and his work, let's not forget that there's Malcolm X, and you also have the questions and issues about the international scene. And I had, in--. I think it was nineteen--. I'd have to find out what year. One year when I was working out of Atlanta, I had been asked to go to represent SNCC in Cuba as an artist. I was, they were having a world congress of the arts and Bob Fletcher, Willie Ricks, Ralph Featherstone, Chico Neblett, I think, and I went to Havana. And we went through Mexico City, and I recall being in Mexico City for New Years of that year, but I want to think this was around 1966 or so, but.

EC: Was Stokely in Cuba at the same time? He made a trip to Cuba and I don't know if it was the same event or something different--.

JL: I don't think he was. I don't think so, yeah, I don't think so. I don't think--. Yeah.

EC: Okay. Yeah. Do you know h--. Were you chosen because of the artwork you did in Lowndes?

JL: That's what I was technically being chosen because of my, you know, work as an artist, but when you'd think about it, that doesn't--. What was Ricks chosen for? [3:40:00] [Laughter]

EC: Well, I was wondering. I mean, you know, Neblett was a singer, right?

JL: Right, exactly.

EC: But--.

JL: But, you know, Featherstone and Ricks--. Ah, you know. What. So, and Bob Fletcher was a photographer, yes.

EC: Photographer. Yeah. I was wondering who I'd forgotten--.

JL: But we never had to show our wares, so to speak, there. But at that point, though, I met people from all over the world, and met people from Tanzania, from Mozambique, and from other countries. And to talk with them and to hear about their struggles, was and eye-opener and also to experience, firsthand, Cuba after its revolution. And what was striking to me was to sort of wander around Havana--because I did a lot of wandering around when we weren't in the meetings, and I skipped a few meetings to just go wandering.

EC: Did you have good Spanish?

JL: No, none at all. Nil. But that I ended up meeting a group of dissident Cubans who were, who wanted to talk about blackness and the issues related to race, because they felt that the Cuban revolution, while it had addressed issues related to economic equality and inequality, and helped improve the lives of the poorest people there, that it was killing black culture. And that it was institutionalizing, it was requiring, they had made it illegal to perform certain--. The Santería and certain African rituals and everything, outside of the context of the folkloric institute. And that Castro had made some, like a grand speech about, "You don't have to celebrate your Africanness or anything because we are all Africans, all of us here on Cuba, we're one people and we're all Africans and that, you know, we'll--. So we'll have the folkloric institute, and that--.

EC: Since we're all Africans, we can't all perform the, participate in the--. [Laughter]

JL: And that it was divisive and separating people to talk about these things of using other, the language of the Santería, and to talk about those cultural remnants, and those cultural remnants needed to disappear, we, that they needed to be allowed to fade in order to have a new Cuba of the future. Yeah. So this group of people were upset about that, and they would want to--. And here I am, I'm just as crazy as a loon, and I got out and they sort of meet us at the, what was it. There was an old amusement park, and they were sort of saying, "At midnight nobody's there, meet us there." [Laughter]

EC: And there you were.

JL: And so, and they would, you know, I went to their homes and everything. There was, one of them was this woman who has since died, but she became one of, she was perhaps the leading filmmaker of African descent of Cuba, and that she made at least, made two or three films and--.

EC: Were you able to stay in touch?

JL: Not for long. I did for a while, but not for long. And then she became, she died of something, like, really, you know one of these awful things where it's like an asthma attack or something. But I remember, too, I participated on a TV program with Hydée Santamaría, who was one of the heroes of the Cuban revolution, she was one of the few women, one of the key women participants, and they had us on some local, on a Cuban TV program, and that she sort of disparagingly says to me--I had an afro--and she sort of says, "The nice thing is that here, we in Cuba, we can be free and so, and we can be free to be beautiful, too. So we don't have to wear our hair--." [3:35:00]

EC: Sounds like Cuba was an interesting experience.

JL: Yes, yes.

EC: So you can be beautiful, huh?

JL: And that I then was on this program, trying to explain to her that this is, for us, this is beauty. And that's the reason that I'm wearing my hair like this, to make the point that my hair, this is its natural state and that, in its natural state, it is beauty as well. And then she says, "On, but no. See, I can, if I want to, I can be blonde and so I'm blonde now, and I--." So it was. Yeah.

EC: No connection.

JL: And then it was also something where here, it would have been one of these things where it would have been, it was rather outrageous because then she also said--. And, you know, we have, my, we don't have to, we are free and we don't have to do these things. And so it was like she had some friend and stuff, and she could call her Mimi Grito, you know?

EC: Oh, no!

JL: Yeah. So it was just awful.

EC: So that's the revolutionaries?

JL: And that's the revolutionary, that's this revolutionary woman that--. It was like, ugh. So I felt I understood and could identify with what they were talking about, about the racism and these remnants of racism that existed in Cuba, but it was enlightening to me but nothing that I could do with it, really. Or do about it or anything. But--. And I kept in touch with them for a while, but you know, eventually lost touch with people, yeah.

EC: Difficult to do, yeah. Are there oth--.

JL: I kept in touch with a Tanzanian man that I met there. And we, for many years, were like pen pals, and then when I moved to Tanzania, he was a part of the, this writers' group that I was talking about, with Walter Rodney.

EC: What was it like being in a writers' group with Walter Rodney?

JL: Oh, it was incredible. And again, it was one of those things where I was honored that--. I was the only woman in that group as well, but I didn't think of--. You know, these are things where, when they're happening, I'm not thinking about, "Oh, well I'm the only woman in the group." But it was more how we had formed the group, of being sort of serious. We were having discussions. I had met them, and we started talking and had met to talk about, "How could we, then, create literature and create material for our people? That, you know, why is it that we're always waiting for someone else to do this? And why shouldn't we do this ourselves?" And this had come out of my, you know, I'm

post-Drum and Spear, and so, and Walter Rodney, then, was talking. He had done his book, his--.

EC: How Europe--.

JL: *Developed Africa*, and was talking about other things that he felt that he could and should do, and so we were, in essence, talking about why don't we, then, create these works and publish them? And so that was the basis of our discussion, yeah.

EC: Yeah. So were you working on any particular--.

JL: Agreed to be sort of a historical--. He was working on a history, a book of history, but that he was also, had agreed to be the sort of historian for the group.

EC: So that he would pro--. Help with the context, and whatever ( )?

JL: Exactly, exactly, yeah. And that Ayi Kwei Armah was working on the book that he published, I--. I think it was *The Healers*. His novel, *The Healers*, and the other guy, Grant, I don't think he, I don't know of him having published anything. But it was really--. It was a very good experience, to work with them. And Walter was, you know, they were all really just, I mean, Ayi Kwei Armah is brilliant, Walter is brilliant. I mean, just really first-rate people, really keen and you know, intellectuals. And really good discussions about the notion of--which I still believe--which is, don't wait for somebody else to do it for you, don't spend the time whining and complaining, but do it. You know?

EC: Is this, this is in the [19]70s?

JL: This was 19--. I was in Tanzania from 1970 to 1972.

EC: And you said this is post-Drum and Spear? Can you say something about your work with Drum and Spear?

JL: Sure. In the late--. In sort of that 1968 to 1970 period, that there was a point, one point [3:50:00] where I was doing the Quitman County work and then there was another when I moved here, to Washington, DC, to work with SNCC people who had--. Former SNCC people who had, by that time, by this point, moved here to Washington and were beginning to talk about what would be Pan-Africanism and what you could create to sort of spread the knowledge about people of color, and to connect the African world with the African American world. And so Courtland, Charlie, and then there were some other people who were relatively, they weren't old SNCC people but they were political activists. Jimmy Garrett, Howard Fuller, Owusu, he later became--and a number of other people who had coalesced here, not very far from here, and that--. This looks like I, my husband is coming, too, we'll probably get an interruption at the door, just a warning that--.

EC: Should we just take a break now?

M1: We can keep going. ( ).

JL: We can keep--. It'll, I think we'll--. Yeah. And I'll be happy to repeat wherever we are. But there were, back in, at that point, a number of people--. Courtland, Charlie, and others--. Had gathered here and were beginning to have discussions about what culturally one could do to create change, and to strengthen the African American community. And one approach to it was, to connect to the African world and, through Pan-Africanism. And there was a C. L. R. James, the historian, was living here at the time, and there was the notion that perhaps one could, we could play a role in hosting and helping to craft the next Pan-African Congress, and that the Tanzanian government had said that they would be, they would host the conference in Tanzania, and that--. So as a

preliminary to that, then, Charlie, Courtland moved to Tanzania for a short period of time, and then ended up, Court--. Charlie actually remained there and lived there for a few years. Here, we then, I came here, I moved here, and became the art director for the publishing company, Drum and Spear Press, and then worked also to help with the bookstore. And I would, I did, again, the art direction and design for the bookstore. Tony, my husband--. Tony Giddens, then, was the manager for Drum and Spear Bookstore. Ann and Marvin Holloway were also a part of this group, and that, we had an overarching sort of holding company, and board of directors, and that was called Afro-American Resources.

EC: What are some of the things that you would do as the art director?

JL: I designed the book covers and the typography, would design and decide the typography and the style of the books. And that they asked for me to do the interior design for the bookstore, as well. And so, and I did everything from the shopping--. I was very proud of my design for the shopping bags for the bookstore.

EC: Oh yeah, what did they look like?

JL: They had a, it was sort of a stylized but distinctly African face on one side, and then the symbol of the Drum and Spear on the other side.

EC: What was it like to work with the bookstore and the press, what was, what were you trying to accomplish and what was the energy?

JL: Oh, the energy was, it was--. All of these places were, and all of this work, has always been filled with purpose, with a sense of purpose and mission. And it's, to me, great when you have a group of people where you share that sense of purpose and you share a vision, and then you're driven. It's, there's never enough time in a day to get the

work done. Because they're, [3:55:00] you can see how much needs to be done. And so you're always energized and you're always sort of pushing to get the next thing done and to have the next thing happen. We also were doing work with radio, and that's where Kojo Nnamdi, who has, currently has a radio program here in Washington, that we had a news program, a children's radio show, and we were doing, decided that we would do both books for adults as well as children, and that I worked with Courtland and with Daphne Mews to design a book, and then I illustrated a book called *Children of Africa* as a children's book, and that we later did a version of that in Tanzania, at the request of the Tanzanian government, we did a version of that in Kiswahili.

EC: That must have been exciting.

JL: It was. And I was asked by the Tanzanians, I was asked by a publishing company there to remain there to take on a three-year project, illustrating the English-Swahili dictionary.

EC: Did you?

JL: No. I--. And I didn't because I was, I had decided, at that point, that I wanted to, because I was now making my living, so to speak, as an artist, I wanted to actually study art formally. You know, you can see how this had been something that I was just doing because there was a need and I did it, but I had never had any training and I wanted the things to be better than they were. And so I felt that it was time to then study. But now, I would study art--. And but I was also writing, and so I thought, "Oh, well I should study writing, and I couldn't' quite make up my mind which I would study, and that's when I was coming, and I was going to apply to different universities and places around the country, and that's how I ended up, then, at Columbia, studying film. Because I thought

film would bring together all of this, and that I still had the concern about literacy and about the fact that we had been working on books. And books for talking about publishing books in Africa. You know, when there's still so much, when we were talking about such large populations where the literacy rate was so low that why are we talking about books? Is that just because that's what we are familiar with rather than taking advantage of audiovisual media?

[Recorder is turned off and then back on] EC: You were talking about going to film school at Columbia, and I started to ask if you were aware that some SNCC folks had worked with film as a way of working with community people who weren't very proficient with literacy. Were you, did you know about that?

JL: No, I didn't.

EC: That's interesting, yeah. So you were saying that you couldn't decide between art and writing, and then were also concerned about illiteracy, and--.

JL: And that's what led me towards film.

EC: Toward film. And I wondered if you could talk about that, but also sort of how your experiences in the movement have shaped the direction of your work life, and things that you've been involved in since?

JL: Well, I--. Working in the civil rights movement, there were always these moments where I felt that you were being, that the circumstances would require that you stare at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself, "Are you doing the right thing? Are you doing something to address some of the problems that are, that we are facing? What are you doing?" I never wanted to be a person who would then tell my child that, "Yes, oh, things were awful and I'm sorry I didn't do anything, that this is the world that we have."

And that I always wanted to feel that I had done what I could, in trying to make a difference. And when I looked at, as I moved through the years, I really felt that part of what was a sort of unifying theme in all of this was education. That we were really trying to make sure that people were well-informed, that people had the facts about the world, whether it was drawing the little Mr. Blackman, and here's what the coroner does, and here's what the sheriff does, or whether it was the billboard that says, "Vote for the black panther," and go--. That is trying to provide useful information to people, and that led me towards social documentary, [4:00:00] which then led me towards public television. and so I'm very fortunate that I've had a career of over thirty years, working in public broadcasting both as a filmmaker as well as an administrator. And that it is, I'd like to think, consistent with my work in civil rights, that when I believe that public broadcasting, when we work to provide kids with programs for, that are available, that are educational programs that are available to all the children of the country regardless of income or background, that that's consistent with the kind of thing that I was attempting to do in Lowndes County as well, or in Quitman County. And to--. When I see the same kind of reactions that I felt back then, when I took so much pride in helping someone in Quitman County learn to read, that now, when I sometimes run into someone and they find that I work in public television, and they then say, "Oh, I am so--. I learned this from public television, I became--. I was inspired to do this because of programs that I saw on public television."

EC: This is actually backtracking a little, but you talked about coming to DC and in essence, reconnecting with many, or continuing your connection with many SNCC folks,

and then joining, working with other political activists. Do you have a sense of why so many SNCC folks landed in DC?

JL: I think it was--. I think that DC is, particularly for the time that we were talking about, DC was a perfect place because we were, we had questions about how do we connect the struggles of our people with those, and to the people of Africa, and a feeling that if you don't eradicate the kind of racism that exists towards Africa, Africans, and people of the--. What was then called the third world, the developing world, that you, all of these problems will continue, that you don't deal with them in isolation, you need to connect the dots, they are one and the same, they should be connected. And Washington is a logical place for that, given the embassies, given the number of people who are here. Howard University and the University of DC had international scholars here, you know, as I mentioned, there was, there were people like C. L. R. James, the historian, who was here. You had people who would come through here, or were here, like Walter Rodney. And so it became a very useful place, and, I think, a kind of logical place at that particular time. And once you get a critical mass of people, then it becomes a community. And so Ralph Featherstone, just a whole--. Ivanhoe Donaldson, a host of people then were residing here. And we then would keep in touch socially, but many of us also worked together with Drum and Spear, in creating Drum and Spear.

EC: What do you want people to know about the Civil Rights Movement? What's important about it?

JL: I think it is--. I think it's important for people to know that the Civil Rights Movement, as it's defined in terms of that time period and its work, was a very important step in the history of this country, and in the development of this country. And that were

it not for the work of the Civil Rights Movement, I think that, I don't think that the United States would be as cohesive as it is now. That's not to say that it *is*, you know, cohesive, but I think that we were, would have had a much more fractured and possibly destroyed nation, that the riots after Martin Luther King's death, the riots in Watts, and places like that, I think that all of those places would have been far more - the devastation would have been far greater and it would, the differences between those with wealth and without, those of [4:05:00] difference races, would have been far, far worse and far more divided if we had not had the Civil Rights Movement to give a sense of possibility and hope. And that's what I think that the movement has contributed. And I think that there are threads of it that continued through to date, and will continue into the future. And that--. What we did during the movement, was built on the basis of what others had done before us as well, so it's part of a continuum but I do think that what happened in those particular years was incredibly important in avoiding the complete--

EC: Fracturing?

JL: --fracturing of the United States.

EC: Can you say anything about your work with the SNCC Legacy Project, what that is and your involvement?

JL: Sure. One of the--. I worked as a volunteer with the SNCC Legacy Project, and that is work that a group of us who were SNCC veterans do to try to make sense of that work, in the same way that you're, with your very good, excellent question about what does it all mean, that we're trying to really translate that into a language that others can understand, and that we'll know what we did, and have the facts of that work. We want to record that, we want to preserve that, we want to preserve the documentation of those

years and of that work. And so that's part of what the Legacy Project does. Another part of it that's very important is, meeting with young people. And because I think that there's a kind of romanticism that, "Oh well, I wish I had lived in that time period, we could have dealt with our problems differently." But it's, to try to help young people understand the reality of that time period and how it connects to today and what they're doing, and the importance of what they are doing today, in trying to make a difference, in changing their world and changing this world. So that's another important aspect of it. And finally, the, we also, there are many people who, when we talk about being veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, I think that it truly is like veterans of a war, and there are some people who were present when other people were killed, and who were themselves beaten and tortured, and so it's a rather--. They've gone through horrible experiences and some of them have not come out whole from it. I mean, you have people who, sometimes, have been in near-homelessness or who have died with, you know, where their families don't even have the money to bury them, and that, as a group, then, the Legacy Project has also been, then, a resource where we can then come together to help their families and to help them.

EC: We really appreciate the interview. Do you have any final thoughts, or should we close on that note?

JL: I'm very honored to have been asked to do this interview. It's inspiring to me to also try to find the time to gather as much information about my own past as possible, because I do think that it's important to have a good and accurate record of those years. And so I'm honored to have been asked, and I do hope that this information is helpful to someone, somewhere, at some point.

EC: Thank you, thank you so much.

JL: No, thank you very much.

M1: Very good.

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

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center on March 29, 2017