ROBERT MANTS: What I'll try to do is give my personal account of my involvement in the movement. This is my testimony, Reverend Sherrod, or as local people would say, how I got in the midst. I had the unique experience of having seen in SNCC periods from the redemptive beloved community, where we were trained in nonviolence and made a serious effort to take nonviolence on as a way of life, to the more nationalistic, much more what you would call radical phases of SNCC. I sat there in 1960, I was in the eleventh grade, minding my own business, getting in the midst. Up the street in the next block was the office of the Atlanta Committee on Appeal for Human Rights, the Atlanta student movement. Our house was right there on Chestnut Street right in the midst of the Atlanta University complex. SNCC, during that same period of time, moved its office off of Auburn Avenue to Randall Street, two blocks from my house. I saw all these folk, these young folk, these young students, marching by my house. My curiosity led me to stick my nose in other folks' business.

At Rush Memorial Church there on Chestnut Street in the next block, again, all these students from Atlanta University were gathered, and I was wondering what was happening. So I went up there, sat around long enough so that they made me the captain of the picket signs, with no soldiers. My job was to look out for the picket signs. They had these big placards. I took the picket signs when they would come off from picketing downtown, places of public accommodation. My job was to stack the picket signs neatly and orderly and pass them out. They raised my status in the sit-in movement to the manager of custodial services. They paid me $3 a week to clean the offices. Some of those people who were there at that time, I think, who recruited me and got me involved at that age, were Lonnie King, who at that time was chairman of the Atlanta Committee on Appeal for Human Rights, Ruby Doris Robinson (Smith at that time), her sister Mary Ann Smith, Herschelle Sullivan, Marian Wright, Frank Holloway, and Julian Bond, to name a few. At that time I was the youngest person in the Atlanta student movement. They were reluctant to have me involved in most of the direct action that was taking place because I

was a youngster. It was a legal question. If they were going to jail, I would be separated from them and I would go to the juvenile probation thing. But I stayed around anyway and became involved in some of the sit-ins and demonstrations, and some of the other direct action campaigns.

I remember very clearly the first time I met Jim Forman. My first encounter with Jim was in a direct action campaign in which blacks were moving into white communities and there was a buffer, Jim called it the Berlin Wall, to keep black people from moving from one section of that street to another section.

I was also, during that period, a student at Morehouse College, and when SNCC moved its office on Randall Street, I started hanging around there, sticking my nose in other folks' business. And I met Dottie Zellner and some other people who were working in the SNCC office. During that same period of time I was introduced to the Nation of Islam, through Minister Jeremiah X, and to another fellow whose name was John Churchville, who raised my level of black consciousness. Here we were, here I was, a young, impressionable student, with SNCC talking about, during that time, integration, the beloved community, and here was this fellow John Churchville telling me about being black and all this stuff.

What I did to find out for myself after John Churchville kept nagging me so much, I went to the library: to the Atlanta University library, the Lowndes Public Library, and started reading black history for myself. It was through John Churchville that I first became aware of my black identity.

Some other things happened around that same time. I met Willie Ricks for the first time—the Reverend C. T. Vivian had brought Ricks from Chattanooga, dropped him off at the SNCC office and left and went on back, and Ricks has been around since that time. There were several things happening in Atlanta, but the one thing that I remember most during that early period was a conversation with Sherrod nagging me to come to southwest Georgia. Here I was, a young student, first generation to be college educated, my parents had suffered and sacrificed for me to go to college. Here's ol' Sherrod talking to me about coming to southwest Georgia, dropping out of school. One Sunday morning, I asked my dad to come on the front porch so we could talk. I told Dad that I wanted to drop out of Morehouse and go work in southwest Georgia. My dad's immediate response was, "You must have been studying too hard, you need a vacation, you got to be crazy." But something else he said to me, it was many years later before I fully understood what he meant. I was out of school, grown, married, had a family. He said to me, "If you must go, go, because it's in your blood." I didn't understand that when he said that.

I later went to southwest Georgia and I'll never forget, this is 1963, and hell had broken loose in southwest Georgia. Three SNCC workers, Ralph Allen,

John Perdew, Don Harris, and a worker from CORE, Zev Aelony, were in jail in Americus, Georgia, for insurrection. Charles Sherrod threw me, a little city boy from Atlanta, right in the midst of what I thought was hell at that time. I later learned that there were some other hells outside of Atlanta and in other places.

During that same period of time was the March on Washington. Some of us who were working in southwest Georgia at that time with Sherrod and some other people had gone up to the Justice Department in Washington to picket. Sherrod left me and others with the responsibility of organizing the people in southwest Georgia; get them on the train. We had to get people from Albany to Thomasville, Georgia, to get folks to the train to go to the March on Washington. When we hit Washington, D.C., there must have been twenty-eight coaches of people from southwest Georgia and from Florida, Tallahassee and Miami, for that occasion.

Some other things were happening during that same period. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed and, again, here we were with some more direct action, because we wanted to test whether or not these places of public accommodation would allow us in. One of these same fellows who had been charged with insurrection, John Perdew, who was a Harvard student and from Denver, Colorado, came to me in Americus and said, "Bob, we need to test these places." I said, "John, let's see what happens everywhere else before we go in there."

There was a little place called the Hasty House on Highway 19. We went, there were about five of us, and a local fellow who went with us to test this place *at night*. We went into the place with all the blacks in there. I sat down. You see, I'm from the South, I grew up in the South and there are some things that we, before the movement, knew. It was inbred with us to find survival. I sat so that I could watch front and back, and the way I did that, there was glass so that I could see what was happening in front of me and in the reflection from the glass, I could see what was happening behind. That's what happens when you don't plan, and it was John Perdew's last-minute "Let's go test the place."

I was watching in the glass, and one of the local fellows who we called Kitty got up and went to ask the waitress where the restroom was. We didn't know Kitty was going to do this, and she sent Kitty around the building. We didn't know what happened to Kitty. It was the next morning after we had walked out of the Hasty House and got the shit beat out of us, that we found Kitty. I said, "Kitty, what happened?" He said, "Man, I had to use the bathroom, I went and asked that lady where's the bathroom, and she sent me around to the back of the restaurant, and I got the dog shit beat out of me back there." I said,

"Why didn't you come back and tell us?" He said, "Man, they ran me all across the bridge and up the hill, I didn't get back here 'til this morning."

We spent a good time in southwest Georgia. I remember what we called the Prayer Breakfast. Anybody who went down there and worked with Sherrod in southwest Georgia remembers the Prayer Breakfast. Every morning, over a glass of orange juice and a cinnamon roll, and the ravioli that people had sent from the North—that was my first introduction to ravioli—we would sing and pray. I'll never forget how we used to sing, "Let Us Break Bread Together." Very meaningful experience.

I do have three things to say in sincerity. First of all, what the southwest Georgia project did for me and for most of us who came from there, who later went on to other projects, was to build a sense of camaraderie, a sense of reverence for what we were about, a sense of commitment to what we were about.

I think that southwest Georgia was the proving ground for many of us and in many ways, the way in which we would go for years to come. I'm thankful for that experience. There was one other thing that southwest Georgia taught me and that was how to survive on nothing. I remember going with George Bess, may he rest in peace, over to Cuthbert, Georgia, Randolph County. SNCC didn't have any money; some people would see us coming, they'd run. We had to eat. We used to steal folks' chickens at night. Go up under the house and bury the feathers. Some people who were there during that time used to go out in different parts of southwest Georgia from Albany, pick cucumbers, squash, go fishing, so that we could eat. I remember a time when a farmer in Lee County told us that he had some wild hogs loose and if we caught the hogs, we could have one. Needless to say, that hog didn't have a possible chance, and we ate well for a little while anyway.

During the summer of 1964 in southwest Georgia there were many direct action campaigns, especially to test the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in regard to public accommodations. We were having mass meetings all over Sumter County, which also happens to be the home county of Jimmy Carter. We knew him before he was President Carter; we also knew him before he was Governor Carter. The town and the county were very tense with demonstrations. I remember the Martin Theater. We attempted to go into the Martin Theater before the Civil Rights Act was passed. Around the corner and up the back, a flight of stairs, where the colored folk sat. I remember very vividly all those nights we had mass meetings there; there was a little girl about twelve years old who used to walk across town from the south side of Americus, Georgia, and would come to the mass meetings. Her name was Sandra Gail Russell, and we would make sure that she got a ride back home after the meetings.

I later decided to leave southwest Georgia and go back to school, and I was

trying to get some report on myself as to whether my activity meant something, what was the significance of it, what did my participation there in southwest Georgia do, especially Americus, what difference did it make? I couldn't think of anything until I took a taxi from the Freedom House, going down the main street to the bus station to go back home on a Sunday afternoon, and I looked at this theater on the side, around the corner where the black people always went. There were some of those people who were leaders in the marches, other black people still going up to what we called the peanut gallery, around the back, in the back way. But I also looked to the front and there was a little girl, twelve years old, Sandra Gail Russell, with all these white people, standing in line with another little black kid about six years old, holding his hand. And I said, "My God, Bob, that's your report card."

I went back to Morehouse and I took a course in public speaking and part of our semester grade was based on giving a speech, a eulogy or a tribute speech. My colleagues in our class talked and made tributes to Martin Luther King, about Dr. Benjamin Mays, Thurgood Marshall, Mary McLeod Bethune, and a little boy in the class, Bob Mants, made his tribute to a twelve-year-old girl from southwest Georgia named Sandra Gail Russell. My classmates said to me, "Who in the hell is Sandra Gail Russell?" But that experience of the movement, or what we attempted to do in SNCC in southwest Georgia, was transformed from us to Sandra Gail Russell, to that little kid that she had in line with her at the Martin Theater in Americus, Georgia.

ROBERT MANTS: Let me tell you very briefly how I got involved in Alabama. I had left southwest Georgia and had gone back to school at Morehouse. James Bevel came to Frank Smith and myself, who were students, and said, "We want you all to go down to Alabama because there's an effort in the United States Congress to bring about the Voting Rights Act." Frank and I both refused Bevel, said we had been out there, got our licks, and we wanted to go to school; we wanted to get a college degree. Not long after that, in the next few

days, Frank Smith went to Mississippi and I went to Alabama. I went to Alabama with John Lewis, again, another spur-of-the-moment thing, to participate in the march in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery.

I never will forget how the leadership of that Selma to Montgomery march on "Bloody Sunday," the first march, was selected. Some of us who experienced this in other places had gathered at Brown Chapel, and then we went into the parsonage at Brown Chapel. Some of those people there were Andy Young, James Bevel, Hosea Williams, Albert Turner, myself, and others. Dr. King was not there that day. They were trying to decide who would lead the march for SCLC. Andy, James Bevel, and Hosea Williams flipped a coin to decide who would lead the march for SCLC. I guess I'll always believe that Andy and Bevel, having worked longer together in the movement, playing odd man, put the stuff on Hosea. John Lewis volunteered to lead the march for SNCC. Albert Turner volunteered to lead the march for SCLC, and here I am with no other choice but to march behind John Lewis.

It was during that period, the first attempt to march, that some of us decided to go back to Alabama. It was during that time that Stokely Carmichael, as he was known then, came from Mississippi, I came from southwest Georgia, and we and SNCC there in Selma decided this was the opportunity for us to capitalize off the motion of the march to go into Lowndes County.

Now Lowndes County had had a very long history of being the most violent county in Alabama. Folk there told you that they would kill you in Lowndes County, and there was no question they would kill you. I remember the first time we went into the county. Stokely Carmichael, Scott B. Smith, Judy Richardson, and myself went into Lowndes County. The people there, some of the people that we were able to talk to at first, including John Jackson's father and others, told us this is a very dangerous place. Highway 80 that runs through Lowndes County was notorious. I remember one evening, a prominent black doctor in Selma, at almost sunset, her car stopped on her and I asked her if I could help her, she said, "No, boy, just give me a ride into Selma and get me out of Lowndes County." Lowndes County was a proving ground for many of us.

It was also during that same time when we went to the Lowndes County Training School. Remember that during those days black folk were trained, and most of the schools in that area, especially Alabama, were called training schools. We went there capitalizing off the motion of the Selma to Montgomery march in an attempt to organize people there in Lowndes County. We went to the Lowndes County Training School, where we were passing out leaflets about the march coming through Lowndes County. It just so happened that the school was letting out for the day and we were passing out leaflets around

the school and on the buses. Although most people dodged us, didn't want to take the leaflets and stuff, there was one young fellow there who kept begging for us to give him some leaflets and some SNCC buttons, and that was the first time I met John Jackson, now mayor of Whitehall.

Carmichael, Judy Richardson, and myself were at the school. As we left the school the sheriff and state troopers came to us and pulled us over, saying, "Come on back to the school. Don't you all know that you all ain't got no business passing out leaflets and stuff on the school campus?" And this was the first time and only time Carmichael probably ever used his head. We were all there shaking, perhaps with the exception of Judy. We had these two-way radios in our cars with long whip antennas. Carmichael picked up the two-way radio as if he were talking to the base in Selma. The problem was that we were out of range, but nobody knew that. He told them—he was talking and the sheriff and state troopers and other folks could hear—that if we weren't back at a certain time, what to do. That perhaps saved our lives at that time because what happened was, they let us go.

It was from that point that we were able to begin to organize in Lowndes County. I would suspect and I still suspect very strongly had it not been for that incident at the school it would have been at least two, three, four months before we moved into Lowndes County to organize it. But what happened was, when the teachers and students were getting out of school, the word had spread around the county, them civil rights folks was in here. And we knew that. The next morning we roll back out, people waving, "You all all right, you all all right?" And once they had seen this incident at the school, we knew we had to be *bad* then. We were back out there the next morning.

I want to say something related to the formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Party, as it was called; the press called it the Black Panther Party. There were some people who you might not ever hear of, if you listen to some people, who were involved in that process. Without a doubt, central to the formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Party, and the emblem of the black panther, was Ruth Howard. The Alabama law required that any political party have an emblem. The Alabama Democratic Party had had the white cock; we wanted the black panther. Courtland Cox was also involved in that project.

I always marvel at how the public perception is of these great thinkers who sit around and carefully plan and strategize things. Most of the things that have happened in my experience, happened sporadically, spontaneously or freak of nature, or some other reason.

I think, in conclusion, and this is my challenge to young folks today, if you don't want to get in the midst, don't stick your nose into other folks' business.