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(BA Degree; Business Owner)

*Woke up this morning with my mind
Stayed on freedom
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.
Freedom Song*



“I was born in Selma, Alabama on December 15, 1946. I am the second of two sons born to Cleophus Franklin Merritt, Sr. and Willie Mae (Pitts) Merritt. My father was born in Selma, but my mother was born on a farm in Browns, Alabama, which was a farming community in western Dallas County, near Uniontown.

My parents met in Selma while attending Selma University. Both graduated and after graduation, my father entered the insurance business and was employed by a Black-owned company, Protective Industrial Insurance Company, whose home office was in Birmingham. During that time, the migration of Black people from farms and the rural south had begun in large numbers. As a result, my mother moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana following graduation, where she obtained employment at General Electric.

All of my life experiences were preparing me for the Selma

Movement. In the early spring of 1963 I was a junior at the R.B. Hudson High and my brother was a senior. I heard that there would be a Mass Meeting at Tabernacle Baptist Church on Broad Street. I had no idea there was a SNCC representative in Selma organizing a voter registration drive and recruiting students to canvas the city. I later found out that it was the Rev. Bernard LaFayette and his wife, Colia.

Selma Student SNCC had a march in Selma scheduled for Monday, September 16, 1963. However, on Sunday, September 15, 1963, four young Negro girls were killed in a bombing attack of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. That brutal attack was the spark that really set the Selma Movement in motion.

On the morning of Tuesday, September 17, 1963, I got up and dressed as if to go to school. Instead, I went straight to the Brown Chapel AME Church. It was approximately 2 PM while we were preparing signs: ONE MAN ONE VOTE. The call was made for volunteers and I answered, "Send me". Shortly thereafter, about four of us were loaded into a car and dropped off in front of Pilcher McBride Drug Store on the northwest corner of Broad Street and Water Avenue in Selma. Almost immediately, the Selma Police arrived, handcuffed us and booked us into the Selma City Jail and later that evening, we were moved upstairs to the County Jail.

The next day the jails were filled to capacity so we were transported to a detention facility about 5 miles outside of Selma on Highway 80 West. There were approximately 40 of us housed in a barrack-style setting. The girls were also housed in a similar housing unit about 30 feet from the boys' housing unit. This facility was named Camp Selma, which usually housed prison inmates who worked on the county roads in Alabama.

On about the third day, some of the guys in our unit began taunting one of the burly guards walking past the window. Minutes later, two or three guards rushed in the unit, wielding ax handles, and forced all 40 of us into the mess hall and had us sit on the floor around the wall. Ten minutes or so later, the county sheriff, Jim Clark, appeared in the mess hall. I was sitting on the end and Jim Clark pointed directly at me and said, "You – stand up". Later, the other guys told me they got a big chuckle when Jim Clark pointed at me and said what he said, and I responded to him, "Who, me?"

and he said, "Yes, you". When I stood up, Sheriff Clark told me to face the wall and place my hands as high on the wall as possible. Honestly, I thought he had an electric cattle prod in his hand to shock me but he did not. Instead, he had me stretch as high as I could against the wall and asked me, "Standing in that position you can't cause trouble?" I responded, "No sir". We were then ushered back to the housing unit. After spending about 5 days at Camp Selma, we were released without fanfare.

October 4, 1963, I was walking about 4 blocks from my house when the truant officer, James Early, came around the corner in his car. He knew me, so he told me to get in his car. I complied. As he began to drive, I noticed that we were not heading in the direction of the R.B. Hudson High School. When we got to the Dallas County Courthouse, he stopped his car and took me inside to the Probate Judge Bernard Reynolds. The judge told me to take a seat on the bench in the hall with two other students, James Williams and Eugene Walker. We sat on that bench in the courthouse for at least 3-4 hours. At about 5PM, the judge had a deputy sheriff to take us to the Dallas County Jail about 4 blocks away.

When we arrived at the jail, we were taken upstairs to the third floor. The jailer opened the "bull-pen", and I could not believe my eyes. There was John Lewis, the Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the youngest of the seven national civil rights leaders who had spoken at the highly acclaimed March on Washington about a month and a half earlier. Seated next to him was another man whom I did not know, but later knew him to be Worth Long, who was a SNCC activist. The third gentleman was a protege of comedian Dick Gregory. It is my understanding that Gregory met Wolf Dawson while locked up in the Cook County (Chicago) Detention Center and led a hunger strike on behalf of Dick Gregory. Dick Gregory's wife, Lillian, was pregnant and locked up in the women's unit of the Dallas County Jail, having been arrested the previous day."