AN ORAL HISTORY

with

IVANHOE DONALDSON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi, North Mississippi Oral History and Archives Program. The interview is with Ivanhoe Donaldson and is taking place on September 20, 2003, in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The interviewer is Rachel Reinhard.

Reinhard: We are at Rust College. Can you give us contact information? Date of birth?

Donaldson: You want to say what today's date is? September 20, 2003. So you have my name, Ivanhoe Donaldson. I live in Washington DC. I think the other stuff is not too relevant. My date of birth is October 17, 1941. So that takes care of that.

Reinhard: So where were you born?

Donaldson: I was born in New York City. I was born in Harlem, at home.

Reinhard: What did your parents do?

Donaldson: My dad had either just come home on break or something from World War II, and my Mom worked in a cleaning shop. She was the counter person that you see when you walk in to turn in your dry cleaning, shirts, and things at a cleaning store up in Harlem. My mother was also a writer of poetry. She was a fan of Sir Walter Scott. Obviously, that's how I got the name Ivanhoe. So I was born in Harlem; raised in New York City.

Reinhard: What did it feel like at that time?

Donaldson: You want my feelings at the point of birth?

Reinhard: What was it like as a kid growing up in Harlem?

Donaldson: In the era in which I grew up, families were very strong. Neighborhoods were very self-defining. By that I mean that strangers didn't come into your building and walk in your hallways and didn't walk around your neighborhood without people wanting to know what they were doing there. Neighborhoods were very protective of each other. When you think of this in a complex city like New York with hundreds of thousands of people and then you get a neighborhood, that kind of works. We lived in Harlem for a while. Then my dad, when he came from the service, became a New York City cop, and we moved up to the Bronx, southeast Bronx, the part that's no longer there. We lived on Intervale(?) Avenue. But my grandmother stayed in

Harlem, so I used to spend my weekends in Harlem and my schools days in the Bronx. My parents were West Indian, so there were a lot of strong family traditions in the West Indies, and my grandmother was a part of that tradition. And I used to spend all weekends—my dad's brothers were still living at home with their Mom, who is the one I am referring to as my grandmother. My other grandmother was in Jamaica at the time. She came up sometime in the midfifties.

Reinhard: So where did you go to high school?

Donaldson: I went to Andrew Jackson High School in Queens. It was an open enrollment school at the time, and I was always specializing in math and sciences. And so I took the train, took the bus, and went out to Queens to go to high school every day.

Reinhard: From the Bronx?

Donaldson: From the Bronx, train down to midtown Manhattan; then the bus down to Queens and back again. New York kids did that. Sometimes I think the children in today's world live in such a more violent community, but when I grew up that was not unusual to spend forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes getting to school. Of course, my grandparents, they would spend two hours just walking to work in the rural areas of Jamaica. So that's what that is.

Reinhard: So did you live in a West Indian community?

Donaldson: No, actually I didn't. I was very assimilated. When I grew, up my Mom probably had more roots around the West Indian community than I did and than my father did. By the time my father—my father fought in World War II as an American. He was an American national. Actually my father was an American citizen. His mother, when he was born, was visiting Detroit with family members, and he was born in Detroit and was taken back to Jamaica when he was about eighteen months old or something like that, but he always had the right to claim his citizenship, which in fact he did. His brothers and sisters were born in Jamaica, but they all came over very young. My grandfather, grandmother, and my father's father and father's mother came over here and brought the children with them. So by the time I came along a good piece of the family really saw themselves as Americans and not first generation immigrants—let's say—as the grandparents did.

Now my mom was actually born in Jamaica, and, but my mother was sort of a reactionary person. She was very much of an Anglophile, not reactionary in a negative sense. Probably negative in terms to me, but I mean that's already dealing on a more complex level about who we are as people. But I mean, she was very captured by European mannerisms and the English way of doing things. My mother would probably say that George made a big mistake giving away the colonies and stuff. I get my sense of independence from my dad and his brothers and sisters, which I had at a very early age. I mean, I was a very independent youngster.

Reinhard: How did you exhibit that?

Donaldson: Well, I don't know if it's something that you have to exhibit to know that you are; but when I was in high school I used to do voluntary work down at Henry Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side of New York. There was a St. Augustine's Church, and I don't remember what the other church was, but I hung out in St. Augustine's. These were chapels of Episcopalian churches in New York under Trinity, and they were run by a guy named Father Myers who actually became Bishop Myers out in San Francisco. He wrote a book called *Life at Dark Streets,* talking about organizing in New York.

I came along in an era where New York had gangs. Gangs were organized around neighborhoods and turfs, and you know, you just didn't go into someone else's turf without getting yourself into some trouble. Well, I met a social worker down there named Sandy Jones, who I liked, and he ran these sort of programs for young people, talking about human rights and talking about desegregation and open housing and schools and things like that. And I used to go down there and participate in these things. I was kind of young, but I went down there anyway.

Reinhard: Was he a black or white guy?

Donaldson: No. He was a black guy. My life as a child is basically always surrounded within the black community. I had very little reactions with the white community. Plus I spent a couple of years in Jamaica going to school. My mother wanted me to have a flavor of Jamaica, so she sent me back there. And even going to school in Jamaica with the people who today I would call white, I never considered black as a child. I considered them as Santo Domingons or you know, they were judged by the nationality because we have a lot of Domingons who came to Jamaica to go to school and people from other cultures and nationalities. So it was the culture and nationality that sort of drove, and not the issue of black and white; I wasn't conscious of it. I was conscious of race because I met remnants of the Garvey Movement as a child around Harlem and stuff and listened to these old geezers talking because Marcus Garvey was West Indian, so I became kind of curious about him and talked a lot about Africa, and I became curious about that.

So, but there was always a strong sense of self when things were going on. But in high school, I went to Andrew Jackson; up until I went to Andrew Jackson probably every place I went to had to be at least 90 percent African-American, or so I believe. I went to Jackson; it was feeder school from St. Albans and Laurelton, Springfield Gardens and Jamaica Village: white, black, Protestant, Jewish neighborhoods. So Jackson must have been maybe 30 percent black and 70 percent other. But we're talking a huge high school here; there were over 5,000. My senior class had over 1,500 people in it or something like that.

Reinhard: So what year was this?

Donaldson: I graduated Jackson in [19]59, so I guess I started there in '56. There was a lot of activity going on in Jackson. People were moving out of the neighborhoods just because blacks were moving in. People had up signs, "I won't sell." There was a thing called the Human Relations Club, and I joined it, and we used to go and do these kind of human relations' workshop plays out in different communities and neighborhoods and things. But even despite all of that, the African-Americans, black youngsters, at the school, they lived in their own neighborhoods. They ran together, partied together, and they played together, and it was white kids that came over into our neighborhoods and hung with us.

We never went to the white neighborhoods. You know, they were kind of like the avant-garde of beatniks or something like that. They were kind of hippy-dippy folks, who were like being hip hanging out with black kids. So even in that environment I still maintained a strong cocoon within the black community. Black kids used to go into the school at one end of the building. Jackson was this huge building built during the WPA [Work Progess Administration] with three front entrances. And the white kids used to go in the middle entrance and the far entrance, and the black kids went in the other far entrance. When we sat in the cafeteria, the black kids got their section; the white kids got their section. They were always trying to get the black kids to break up. And I used to say, "Why don't you guys try to get the white kids to break up? Why we got to break up?" We are not self-segregating; they're self-segregating. So you get into those kinds of arguments. But I just want to remind people: don't look at us and say we've done this and look at them and say, "Oh, these poor innocent kids."

But you know like everything in life, there are things that break through all of this. I ran track at Jackson, participated in sports, you know, that these were highly integrated activities at Jackson. And I know a wonderful human being. His name is Milton Blatt. He was my high school counselor, and he was also track coach. He went to Cornell and graduated at seventeen in the state of New York, passed to teach in the public school system because he was a minor. You know, back whenever that happened in the late [19]20's or something, [19]30's. And in my class was Milton Blatt's daughter, Janet Blatt, and in my class ahead of me was his son Joel. So he had two kids in school. And Joel played on the basketball team, and Janet was a cheerleader. So we all knew each other because there was a camaraderie among all the athletes in the school, having a common denominator of sports running through it. But Mr. Blatt was also the counselor to a lot of us.

You know Jackson was the school in New York, had multiple track systems in that point and time. You went to Jackson you were either in an academic plan, commercial plan, or vocational plan. Vocational kids used to always think they had it better than anybody else because when you get out of high school they get a job. And so with most of the commercial kids. The academic kids were the ones you know who say they were educated, but they weren't qualified to do the job thing. So you know there was sort of a weird sort of view of all of this. But among the many things that

Milton Blatt did was that he was also a person that people went to see when they were getting ready to go to college. He would advise people where and what to think about and stuff.

But anyway Milton Blatt coached the track team. He was also very much involved in human rights workshop, and my human rights activity led me to participate in neighborhood programs about open housing and things like that, which were going on in New York in the late [19]50's, big racial war stuff going on at the time, and open housing was a big, big issue. Desegregation of schools was still unraveling itself in New York; the law was clear, and the city was enforcing it. Enforcing it is one thing, and getting the realities to come forward are another.

At my activities at the Henry Street Settlement House, I met a guy named Roger Shaw who worked for National Conference of Christians and Jews. And then he had a camp in Beacon, New York, and he asked me to be a counselor up there; I think when I was a high school sophomore or something. I said, "Sure." So I went up there, and once again this whole thing is built around a human rights and a human relations agenda. You know, the National Conference of Christians and Jews is sort of set aside to get people to figure out ways to better relate and to reach out and so forth.

So all of this is like a continuum for me. And also I began to meet people whose paths I would cross many, many times in life at different levels and different ways. I mean when I was up at Camp Beacon, it wasn't far from Pete Seeger's house, and he used to come down and sing whenever he was around. And one summer, I remember; he was like around for about five weeks, and he sang almost every other day at the campfires. I met his wife, Toshi, and Toshi's father was a guy named Mr. Ota(?); I think that's how you pronounce it. And he used to teach judo down at the Henry Street Settlement House. So that had thrown a complete loop because I only knew him as Mr. Ota, and now I suddenly find out he is Toshi Seeger's father. And I don't know who Toshi Seeger is anyway. Then she's Pete Seeger's wife, and I am learning he's some folk singer from way back when, and I'm into rhythm and blues. But you begin to broaden your knowledge base and stuff. So that went on. What else you want to know?

Reinhard: So then how did you end up at Michigan State? You go directly from high school?

Donaldson: Yeah, high school to Michigan State.

Reinhard: I didn't want to make any assumptions.

Donaldson: Yeah. I went to State, and State was a way of radicalizing you fast, if you are open to that. When I went to State, maybe there were 25,000-plus students there. Now there are like 75,000 students there. But the interesting thing was there weren't that many African-American students at State. There were more Nigerians and then African-Americans from Detroit, and then African-Americans from New

York and the rest of the world, and then there were West Indians, to which I was not one. I was an African-American from New York. So State built a University in Nigeria; so they had this great relationship with and so forth. The president of the University was a man named John Hannah who was at the time Chairman of the United States Civil Rights Commission. But Michigan State was located in East Lansing, and East Lansing was a segregated town. Not only was it a segregated town, but then a lot of blacks owned property there, and most blacks students who lived off campus lived down Lansing.

Reinhard: Which is how far away?

Donaldson: Well, it bordered East Lansing, but I mean, it was irrelevant how far away it was. It could have been five seconds away. The fact is that the school's in East Lansing, is the biggest institution in East Lansing, and no blacks could live there. You know, I was outraged. Now, happens in life is that you end up crossing paths with people who impact you in different ways. I was in engineering in State. I was pretty serious about it, and I ran track at State, and I worked for the State newspaper, you know, the college paper. They didn't think black people could write; that's why I went over there to work on the State newspaper. You found that you wanted to break out of anybody's perception of your stereotype, you know, which people did a lot of back then. Do a lot of now, but it's a lot more subtle.

You know, you're a black walking around campus, you had to be an athlete or jock of some kind. A little guy to become a jock, and I was a jock, so there you go. And I went to State really because of connections, both of engineering and athletics, that were there that I knew about and wanted to have a relationship with. So anyway, Ernie Green was the senior in Little Rock Nine. You know from Little Rock, Arkansas. He was the only senior to graduate because they closed Central High School down after his senior year; so none of the other eight got a chance to graduate from Central. Ernie came to Michigan State. He was there a year before me. I met Ernie after I had been on campus about two weeks, and we established a relationship. Then I met a guy named Sam Harris who was working on his PhD or something or other, and we started collaborating and talking.

So black history week came, and I said, "I'm going to write about Marcus Garvey." So I started writing these columns about Marcus Garvey, and it started coming out like Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And when you want to write about Marcus Garvey the way I want to write about Marcus Garvey, you can really write some very explosive stuff, and I was into that. And then I discovered there was a Marcus Garvey scholar on campus who wrote a book about Marcus Garvey. He wanted to correct me about a couple of things, and I said, "Well, you are not right." I said, "I got this information from someone who worked directly for Marcus Garvey. We were talking about the shipping line, and this guy actually financed one of the ships." So he then started realizing I had some sources that he didn't have, and he wanted to, like, track backwards and got interested in my column.

But all of this sort of floated around for a while, and Sam Harris said, "I got a guy I want you to meet." And he says, "You know his brother." I said, "Who are you talking about?" He says, "Well, you know Bob Little." I say, "Oh, yeah, Bob Little." Bob Little lived in married housing, and I would go over and baby-sit for him when he had to go out with his wife some place. He was majoring in child psychology, getting his PhD in child psychology back then. Bob Little's life and I would cross for a long time. You know, but for different set of reasons why it wasn't going to cross this time, which was that Sam said, "There's a guy down in Lansing. His name is Philbrick X." And I said, "Who the hell is that?" He says, "I don't know if you're ready." I say, "What that mean?" He was teasing me. So anyway one day I went down to this mosque and Philbrick X introduces his brother who was Malcolm X, and I was just amazed by this guy. I was a little—theology stuff was like a little bit extreme, but his political message I tuned right into, which had a lot to do with self-reliance, independence, self-responsibility. So he made a lot of sense about a lot of things he said about the Anglo-Saxon Community, the white community in and around America. You know, I tuned in. Then I discovered something very interesting. I actually started a conversation with Malcolm, and I invited him to come on campus to speak, which was very explosive.

Reinhard: This was like sixty?

Donaldson: This is 1960; this is like in January. And the turnout was huge. There were more white students there. You kind of had to beat up on the folks to get the space for black kids to come in and sit down and listen to this guy. So Sam leans over and says to me that that is Bob Little's brother. I said, "Bob Little? Malcolm X is Bob Little's brother?" He says, "Yes, his oldest brother. Bob Little is the youngest of the Little children." And I say, "Bob Little has never mentioned this to me." And he said because they rarely communicate. He says, "You got more communications going on between them now than they have had in years." So it was kind of like an interesting phenomenon.

So anyway, a couple of weeks later, whenever it was, I'm sitting in the student union at the round table where the athletes hang out, and I'm opening the front page of the New York Times, and I don't remember whether it was the front page or the front page of some section of the Times, but the sit-ins had taken place in Greensboro, and there was a photograph of these young kids at whatever this restaurant was. It wasn't a restaurant; it was a fountain, counter fountain of a, like a five-and-dime-cents store or something like that. You really should know about all this now because I just went and visited over there in Greensboro just a month ago, and I do remember, but it's not relevant to this. So I read about this, and it connected. I said, "These students are about doing something." So Sam and I and Ernie and a bunch of other sisters and brothers, we got together and organized sympathetic demonstrations the very next day at the five-and-ten-cents store in East Lansing.

Now, why did we want to do something like that? Those white people don't want to see us walking up and down their streets. But we did, and we kept it going

every single day. Then John Hannah kind of got involved and said this was all being done by outside agitators and Communist agitators. This was the guy who was chair of the Civil Rights Commission. So I went to see Dr. Hannah and I told him (inaudible). So that led to a lot of stress between John Hannah and myself. But I knew that it was just a matter of time before I was going to get involved with the civil rights movement at one level or another. And of course I went through school that year, and I went south that summer, and I came back to school the following year, and I went south the next summer, and then I stayed south. And it took me a few years to get through finishing up school. But that's the long and the short of it.

Reinhard: When you first came south, where did you go?

Donaldson: Well, I had some intermittent sudden trips, things that created bonded relationships. There was a whole activist group down at the University of Michigan that I started making connections with. Bill McAdoo was a singer down there, who I really loved, and then there was Tom Hayden and a whole crew of guys and women, who a year and a half later would reactivate SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] at the Port Huron Statement. So there was all of this stuff about anti-HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee of the United States Congress]. So from time to time I'd go down there on a weekend. I'd hitch a ride down or get a ride down on Friday night; come back up on Sunday. So there was a connectivity.

Sometime during the fall of 1961 Bob Moses sent around an appeal to raise food and things for people in the Delta, who were getting pushed off the plantations. And I and my roommate at the time, Van Taylor, decided to organize food drives, and a professor at the University of Michigan lent us his truck.

So we got the truck in East Lansing and hauled all the food in East Lansing and Michigan State down to a warehouse in Ann Arbor and then started making these runs down in Mississippi with a stop in Louisville where we spent the night with the Bradens. We all got some rest and went on the next day, down in Mississippi. So there were connectivities happening. Also, Miles College was fighting for its accreditation and needed books for its library. So I and another guy named Larry Lack, we would take three or four days and haul a truckload of books down to Miles College and then make it back.

So there were these intermittent activities that were going on that gave me connectivity to SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] in Atlanta because they were the reason I did any of this stuff. So a lot of times I'd go through Atlanta, coming back. So I knew SNCC when it was just in the back of the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] office, and then it went across the street on Auburn Avenue, had the office upstairs, with Norma Collins sitting at the door, who is still around—she's Al Wynn's administrative assistant on Capitol Hill, Congressman from Baltimore—then when they moved up the block over the Bible Store and then to Raymond Street and then to Nelson Street. So it was an evolving

activity that became deeper and deeper with each trip or activity that I engaged in with the southern students.

Reinhard: So what was you first extended trip to Mississippi? Beyond dropping off the—

Donaldson: Well, actually my first extended trip was my first trip down there where I spent about three weeks in jail dropping off food.

Reinhard: In Greenwood?

Donaldson: In Clarksdale, Mississippi. I was taking it to Aaron Henry's Drugstore, and he was going to give me directions to where I'd go. Ben and I got in around three o'clock in the morning. So we were, I think—I don't even know if I was seventeen at the time. So I cranked my window down and let the air in, turned off the engine and went to sleep. We had crossed the state line plus we didn't have any drugs. A doctor in Louisville, actually a doctor by the name of Dr. King, gave us free samples that Aaron Henry could distribute to people who needed it, mostly aspirins and things of that kind of nature. And so that's what we were charged with, and for a week nobody knew where we were because they said we weren't there.

In Clarksdale, we were actually in the Coahoma County Jail. Clarksdale is the county seat. Inmates in Coahoma County collect the money from the parking meters. So I kind of had a fast mouth, so I got busted up my first night in there by one of the deputies. So one of the inmates was asking us what we did and stuff, and they like heard that people were, students were being active all over the South and stuff. So they were sort of like trying to provide a blanket of protection for us. He told me these guys worked on the chain gangs out on the road. And one guy said, "Well, those guys over there, they collect money in the parking meters in Clarksdale." I said, "They do?" I said, "Do you collect money?" I don't know what the street was, Third Street or something. "Do you collect money in front of the Fourth Street Drugstore?" He said, "Doc Henry's Store?" I said, "Yeah." Said, "Ah, that's very good. If I gave you a note would you take it?" He said, "No, I can't do that." So I wrote out this note on a piece of toilet paper, and I doubled it over, and I said, "Look. All you got to do is just drop it on the counter and keep on going."

So he did it, and that afternoon I could hear Doc Henry yelling out front about, "You got these guys in here. I want to know they're here. I'm going to have my lawyers down here," and stuff. And we got out about three days later. You know, but the whole attitude of the prison guards changed. They had put us under fifteen-thousand-dollar bond each. The whole budget of SNCC was like seven thousand dollars so that would have wiped out their budget four times over. So that's my first experience in the State of Mississippi.

Reinhard: So what was Aaron Henry like?

Donaldson: Well, I didn't know much about Aaron Henry. I didn't even know who Aaron Henry was. I didn't know anything about the history down here. I just thought he was a nice guy because he got us out of jail and stuff. And then when I got back to Louisville we were headlines all over. I didn't even know this case could become a cause celebre all over the damn country. These pictures of Ben and I, I had grown a beard; had a mug shot here and a mug shot there, and my parents saw this. I said, "My dad's going to kill me when he sees this. He thinks I'm taking classes." That's in Mississippi, you know. "What's he going to think?"

But Ann Brady told me all about Aaron Henry and the issue of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in the State of Mississippi and the fact that Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers were sort of operating with very little support from the national organization for both legal reasons as well as they were rebels as far as National was concerned. But, ah, so when I went down the second time I knew a lot about Aaron Henry, and I spent some time at his house for maybe two days or so. The thing is, in those days meetings were very intense. So conversations were very intense. And you could cover a universe in three or four hours, sitting around eating food. And then you were gone. And whoever you were traveling with you would sit and regurgitate that conversation all the way to the next town.

So it like began to form in your mind a context of the nature of what this was all about and the context in which all of this was happening. And then when I got into SNCC full-time, every SNCC staff meeting, which seemed to last forever, there were people who recited history. I mean, Forman either told some story about something that went on in Fayette County, or Bob Moses gave a little history about C.C. Bryant down in McComb or about Mr. Zias(?) in Issaquena County. So this oral history thing began, and certainly now I became curious about America and this whole thing. I'd been taking history. I didn't pay any attention. I started reading. I mean I started seriously reading on this. I started reading the existentialists and from Nietzsche to Sartre. I got more seriously in theoretical math, which I tended to find as a way of linking ideas together, and began to wonder why all of this history had sort of been denied to my generation.

In New York in junior high school you are responsible for taking a course in the history of New York State, but this one chapter dealing with the seven nations, the Iroquois Indians. There is nothing about black people in there. They talked about the melting pot and the Statue of Liberty and this stuff and that stuff and geography of the state, but the cultures that created this empire are told purely from a white point of view. Even got to the point where you know at that age you are saying to yourself, "How does Christopher Columbus discover what already exists?" You start beginning to challenge everything. He obviously didn't discover America because there were no Americans here. So you mean Europeans discovered that there was a world outside their own nose, and that's what they were talking about.

SNCC became not only a place where social change was fermenting. It became a university because you met all of these people who knew all of these things, and you were constantly talking about organizing and techniques of organizing and the fears that existed. There were a lot of conversations at SNCC about how to deal with your fears because you had to be off your rocker if you weren't scared of the things that you were doing. But the tendency of SNCC people was to constantly push the limits, no matter—you know—no matter where they took you or where they led. Sometimes you push the limits without even knowing why you are pushing them.

My generation was worldwide. It was historic, the children of parents who were killed in Europe in the frontlines, mother of a kid killed in the bombing of the airplane factory, father blown away on the frontlines some place. We were the same as them. You had after the war the opening up of an independent Africa. You had the Bandung Conference going on in the early [19]50s of the so-called, it was then called the nonaligned world, nonaligned nations, Nehru and Nasser sort of the leadership umbrella of all this. Well, that was the evolving of the third world. There was a kind of consciousness that this wasn't something happening in isolation. This was something—this rebellion was going on worldwide as people saw the sense of dignity, self-value, self-worth, the right to participate in the things that govern you, with rights to have influence over your school, with your neighborhood, your streets. So that's what that was about.

Reinhard: So how did you overcome fear?

Donaldson: You never overcome fear. You just learn how to manage it.

Reinhard: How did you learn to manage it?

Donaldson: You know, just keep going. I mean there is no textbook

Reinhard: Some people talk about faith. And you said that you weren't, at least now in that place so—

Donaldson: Well, I thought we were going to get to Holly Springs. When you think about SNCC you have to understand that SNCC was about the beloved community. There were people like Diane Nash, Charles Sharrod, John Lewis, and Reverend Lawson who wrote the SNCC Preamble, who engulfed the organization's philosophy of not just nonviolence as a pragmatic activity, but nonviolence as a way of life, as a way of relating to your neighbors, a way of communicating. And I came in from a quasi-sort-of nationalist background. I had all of this other stuff from New York and Michigan State and my own heritage trying to blend into this, and it was important to me emotionally to blend into this because these were people who were about something, and so whatever their answers were, they were better than what I had.

So it wasn't important to me whether or not this contradicted things that I had believed in. I was prepared to accept the discipline of the group for the betterment of

the struggle. I could take a punch as good as anybody, but I couldn't feel the same kind of love about the person punching me as they say Charles Sharrod or John Lewis would feel. They were very sincere about this stuff. I just realized that I was outnumbered and so better to go with the program, and sooner or later they would get tired of punching you and then walk away. You can crawl off, get a hot shower, and heal yourself. I mean, fear was just recognizing that everybody had it. In the group there was enough energy that you managed to move beyond it. And by moving beyond it, it's that you just learned how to recognize that everybody had it, and you still had this mission to do; so you could either just sit around and be overwhelmed by your fear, or you step up and say, "So what? Let's go do this." And my generation was saying, "So what? Let's go do this." And I was a perfect reflection of my generation in that sense.

And SNCC was purely an organization driven to changing the times that they lived in, whether it was getting a hamburger at a lunch counter that once you desegregate it you never go back to that lunch counter; you probably thought the place was really filthy. You sit down and say, "I'm not eating a hamburger in this joint." But the indignity of not going to be served made you go and sit there. And it just engulfed you as a lifestyle, basically. And there were histories of people who came before me, and I had to respect that history and honor it. You can't run away from your own history, and you can't have change unless you deal with your own history. So that's what that was about. Anyway Bob Moses, I ended up organizing; I was a part of the shock troops for SNCC for a long time. Those were the people that kind of went in and did direct action, get beat up and thrown in jail, don't get paid when you get thrown in jail. You don't make your $9.97 a week.

Reinhard: Really?

Donaldson: No. They said the jail was feeding you. What you going to do with $9.97? You know, so people with voter registration, they got paid all the time. But people who did direct action tended to have discipline, a strong tolerance, and understood danger. So Bob Moses talked me into going over to Greenville, Mississippi and work in the southern tier of county, which had never been opened by anybody, with Charlie Cobb and some.

Reinhard: When was this, [19]62?

Donaldson: Yeah, late '62. It was just before the Freedom Vote; I guess was in the fall of '63. Aaron Henry ran for election. (end of tape one, side one; beginning of tape one, side two) So we began to work those counties. It was very slow and very painful. But there are a lot of war stories. I'm not here to go through those stories.

Reinhard: So were you here for the Freedom Vote?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Reinhard: Where did you organize them at?

Donaldson: Those counties from Greenville to Jackson, Rolling Fork, south along the Mississippi River. Farmers used to come in those towns at night, drunk, looking for somebody to beat up. But anyhow it's been written about. One of the things about opening up an area you hadn't been in: Charlie and I went into Mayersville, which is the county seat in Issaquena County. We had a contact there. His name was Henry Zias. Mr. Zias had some strong sons, and they were like older than us, and we called a little meeting, and about four people came to Mr. Zias' house one night. We said we were down there to do some voter registration and to open up a literacy school and things of that nature and you know we would stay for as long as it took.

We'd sleep in the back room of Mr. Zias' house, Charlie Cobb and I, Mr. Zias would sleep out on the porch in a rocking chair with a gun over his lap, sort of protecting us. Here we are committed to nonviolence, and Mr. Zias is with his gun assuring that we could be protected by nonviolence because he was going to do violence to anybody that came around the house messing with us. This is a very, very rural county. In the county seat there was one blinking light, two intersections, a gas station and stuff, a blinking light, blinking red in one direction and yellow in the other. And that was the only traffic light in this whole county. The county was about 87 percent black. There was only two registered voters in the whole county when we went in there, two black registered voters. And we went deep out into the woods and stuff to some churches, began to have meetings of two and three and four people, and eventually we had mass meetings out there with about 300 and 400 people coming there.

And five years later Unita Blackwell was elected the mayor. You were kind of pleased to see that transition evolve and happen. Of course a lot of that was built on the back of not only the mock elections but then the challenge and the organizations that came out of the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Once the decision had been made to have a summer project and the umbrella organization of COFO [Council of Federated Organizations]—actually COFO was already in place because that's how we got our VEP [voter education project] money; the voter education project would not give money to SNCC, but it would give money to an organization that was engaged in voter registration. So Bob Moses put together COFO, and COFO basically was SNCC, the State NAACP Chapter, the SCLC Citizenship Schools and CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. CORE had a presence in Mississippi over in Canton. So outside of Canton everybody in COFO was SNCC. Bob was the director of it, Dave Dennis was the Deputy, he was the CORE guy and Aaron Henry was the chairman. But everywhere you saw COFO staff, that was all SNCC folks or SNCC related volunteers or what have you because that was where the energy was. It was just a way of getting Wally Grant to put some money in so that we could pay people their $10 a week.

Once beachheads had been established in Mississippi, it was just clear that you couldn't make an impact in the state unless you found a way to get national attention, and the only way in America you get national attention of things involved the white community. You know, so there were a lot of debates of pro and con about whether it's a good thing to do or bad thing to do to bring all these white volunteers in Mississippi. It would be disruptive to local folks, you know, because they would be arrogant and smart, and they'd know how to type faster, so they'd want to do it efficiently, and the person who could only type three words a minute would never get to the typewriter because they were too slow. And we said we'd handle that. So finally the staff had a vote in Greenville at a staff meeting, and we all recognized that Bob Moses and Jim Forman had already decided that it was going to be the summer project, and Bob's only concern was that Jim's presence had to be in Mississippi because Bob's view was that where Jim was, SNCC was.

So Jim needed to move some of his national staff to Greenwood for the summer. And Jim agreed to do that. And the rest has evolved in a lot of literature in terms of the training session up at Oxford and dividing up of the volunteers into various sectors. The fallout of some of that was that Bob broke Charlie Cobb and I up; he said that he needed to split up leadership among the field secretaries of SNCC because you had this massive group of people coming and the talent for managing that was very thin. So Bob told me I had to go to Holly Springs, to Marshall, Tippah County, to Union, DeSoto, and Benton Counties.

Reinhard: And he moved Frank Smith?

Donaldson: Frank was no longer here. Frank had been gone. Frank was actually in Washington at the Institute of Policy Studies at the time. There had been a tradition in Marshall County, actually Jim Forman had some relatives here I went and tracked down. They called him Sport.

Reinhard: They called him Sport?

Donaldson: Jim had done some organizing up here in Fayette, at tent city. You don't have to know the whole history around that. But when SNCC recruited Jim, he was head of the tent city boycotts and stuff. So anyhow there had been some long-term traditions in Marshall County, even though there hadn't been any in surrounding counties. So we knew that we could build a base in Marshall County. Plus, Willie Peacock was up here in [19]61 and Dion Diamond and James Bevel, who was at that time with SNCC. And three other people came up here, and they had some activity and stuff, and then Leslie McLemore I think came up here in [19]60. He overlapped with Willie. So there was traditional motions and activities that were going on up in here and around the county.

But my job was to organize a basis for the Freedom Democratic Party Challenge, to build a parallel structure to the Mississippi Democratic Party from the precinct level up, to organize some freedom schools, to maintain ongoing voter

registration, and to have direct action where necessary that wasn't disruptive to the principal mission here, which was organizing a parallel organization to the Mississippi Democratic Party and to get the volunteers home alive and safe. And we did a great job on the first ones obviously. Didn't do well on the last one because we lost Wayne [Yancy], and it happened on my watch, and we could have lost Charlie Scales in that whole process, but we got a little lucky, and we got a little aggressive when we had to get Charlie out of the state and the hospital and then on to Chicago.

But I'll never know what really happened that day with Wayne. Whether he was forced out of [his] lane into oncoming traffic or what happened. But it was kind of a brutal impact on the project, was a brutal impact on me personally. And I was very dependent on Cleve during those coming days because Cleve, I think, was with me the whole time from getting Wayne's body over to the morgue. We cleaned him up ourselves; we dressed him for his funeral. The whole staff, not the whole staff, but a major piece of the staff went up to Paris, Tennessee, to where his funeral was. It was a rough period, as you can imagine. But we had a great crew of people here.

Actually we got to the project late. I told Larry Rubin who came down from Oxford and Ralph Featherstone the whole—Cleve and I, and a group of other people left from Oxford to go down to Neshoba County. We were emotionally caught up in all of this stuff down there, and we just felt that we needed to maintain our presence in Neshoba County and in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and we would see what we could do to help locate Chaney and Schwerner and Goodman. So we left early and got back here like a day and a half or two after the volunteers had arrived. So I laid down my rules.

Reinhard: What were your rules?

Donaldson: Well, I'm sure that you've heard them. So I laid down my rules, and I made it clear that we had a mission. That's why we were here. We were going to do the mission, and it was the priority. We were going to do it right. We were going to do it well. We would survive any challenge from anybody in the Democratic side in Mississippi because we had dotted all of our I's and crossed all of our t's, and that the second congressional district, which we were a part of, would show up well in Jackson at the statewide convention. I drove everybody to understand that's what that was about. I didn't care whether they got tired. I didn't care whether they were in pain or what have you. We are here to do this, and we are going to do it. And we are going to support all the local community we can get to help us do this and to recognize that we are the resource that they have to help them move this forward.

I make my runs down to Greenwood for staff meetings and things with the rest of the second congressional district leadership and stuff, and as more of the local folks became more visible, I had staff to take them down to the meetings in Greenwood. And sometimes I would just jump in their car, and they'd take me down to Greenwood, so it became more of a support role as opposed to a leadership role. Our job—and I think we did a reasonably decent mission—was never to be a leader up

here about anything but to allow the leadership to evolve and to be their resources. That's the mission of an organizer. People who want to be organizers shouldn't be leaders because they confuse their mission. Leaders have agendas, and organizers, their agenda is to help leadership evolve, and therefore, they are not captured by ideological things here and there. They want to generate community leadership.

So if they want to organize around a tree, sidewalk, or light bulb, a restaurant that desegregates, a school that isn't very good, a hospital that doesn't have any blacks working there, whatever they want to do, you say, "I'm here. I'm your arms and legs to make this happen." That's what organizers are. It doesn't mean that organizer doesn't have an ideology or belief or philosophy. But if you truly believe in the democratic process, and if what you believe in is right, then people will get there on their own, and when they get there, it will be a hell of a lot stronger than you've ever been. I mean, Diane Nash used to say strong people don't need leaders; it came from the Ella Baker tradition. So SNCC people are always suspicious of leadership anyway, including their own. The one thing you didn't do around SNCC was flaunt being something.

Jim Forman used to sweep the Atlanta office out from time to time and do things like he was a janitor because he understood the character and nature of this thing that was being built up around him. And John Lewis, and Stokley, and Chuck McDew, and Marion Barry, and Phil Hutchinson, and Ralph, when they came to meetings, they didn't have any status any more significant than anybody else or the right to the floor more than anybody else. Each meeting chose who was going to moderate it, and Ella Baker would be sitting over in a corner somewhere making sure we didn't self-destruct. But I guess if we'd self-destruc,t she would have let us go ahead on and do it because she figured we would have learned something from it.

It was an organization that understood self-sufficiency. It had its own car fleet, Sojourner Motor Car Fleet. At one point and time I was the president of that. Ruby Doris Robinson, she used to drive you. We had our own printing presses and stuff. We understood that you had to be self-sufficient in order to create a sense of independence from the forces that were negative and that wanted to destroy you. And the more you were intellectually and mentally self-sufficient, the more you could do without any material things.

SNCC's view of money is that if you had five children you get paid five times more than anybody else did. Julian Bond was the highest paid person in SNCC, for all those years, because he had more kids than anybody else did. The organization had constant debates about leadership, money, control, management, what is work, what it means to fire somebody. There was always this internal thing, and it just was always on the edge, particularly, as more formally educated people crept into the organization, who wanted to live what they were trying to organize. See, in an organizer that's a luxury you can't have. You say when the revolution comes, you got to (blank spot on the tape), so I never confuse it with what they were trying to do because if they were

on the mission that we all came down here for, then the fact I was the leader here would not be confused, as opposed to thinking I was the leader of all of this.

When the volunteers went out to the counties they were on their own. They understood what they had to do, and I wasn't the leader of what they did. What they had to do was to find people who would be that, who wanted to be that, who were involved in that. We had to parallel the state Democratic Party rules that led to the selection of delegates to the presidential election. The rules that existed before the McGovern rules and before the '64 challenge, '64, '68 all led to the McGovern rules which basically has the major impact on how the party picks its delegates today. But, so they had to organize meetings down in the beats, and they all knew where the beat was. Geographic determination and then move it up to the County level and get people elected from the county level, and those people from the county level eventually went down to Greenwood, get people elected from the second district who went down to the state meeting in Jackson to elect the delegation that represented them in Atlantic City at the presidential election in '64.

So that was the train. The idea was to get a lot of people involved in that process. We had a few thousand people involved in that process up in these five counties. In terms of the election process, how it worked, it was documented. God knows where all that documentation is today; it may be Jan [Hillegas] knows, down there, COFO papers. But it was tedious. It was slow. It was boring. Some of the volunteers have actually forgotten what they did because they couldn't see what they were doing. I could see what they were doing, and the MFDP could see what they were doing, but they couldn't see it because they were down here at a micro-level, driving something up to the macro-level, and so it's hard to see that.

You saw it when you arrived in Atlantic City and saw this wonderful delegation of people clearly in charge of their destiny; arrived to do this challenge, along with the lawyers that teamed up to help them out. Joe Rauh who was the lawyer for UAW [United Automobile Workers] and two young students, Tim Jenkins and Eleanor Holmes; that's the macro. To get into the micro really sort of is going back to a tedious thing about how you organize people, issue of patience, talking about what was important about this, recognizing that you have an all-white delegation hostile to the African-American delegation, representing the state of Mississippi and the Democratic Party, passing rules and things, which were against the best interests of the minority communities, in general, in America. I think that part of this is important to remember—but there were clearly frustrations about it—that the retail industry that came out of the politics of the civil rights movement, whether it's women's issues, or age challenge issues, or physically handicapped issues, or gay issues, or our issues of control of one's neighborhood parallel the control of neighborhood school boards: all of this is generating each other.

So we were just down here trying to prove that you could make democracy work, and we almost did. It was a situation where it came down to a vote in the credentials committee as to whether we would get a minority report out on the floor

because we knew if we got the minority report on the floor, we'd win. So everything was gambled on getting a minority report out of the credentials committee and the ability of the incumbent democratic leadership to stop that from happening. A lot of strong people came out of this struggle of that of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, that got its birth from the mock elections of Henry and [Ed] King, which got its struggle from the voter registration activities. When they ran, I think it was 85,000 votes or something like that were generated in that election. White folks say black people don't want to vote. Now you get black people tell you, "That's white people's business." And you say, "Well, maybe it's time for it to no longer to be." But you had to, as stated by other people before, there was a tradition that we were just building on. So what's your next question?

Reinhard: You said volunteers sometimes lost sense of the macro-level, how everything was working together. What about the people that were being registered into the Freedom Democratic Party? How was this understanding developed?

Donaldson: I really think that you are asking me a question about them, and I think that they are the best people to answer questions about themselves. Any opinion I give you, whether it's right or wrong, really is not their opinion. It's my opinion. So you should ask them that.

Reinhard: OK. Then how did you tie into local leadership?

Donaldson: Because it was there. It was just a matter of giving it an opportunity to surface, giving it space. Bob Moses often talked about the importance of motion, space, and networks, that people who live in isolation have the greatest level of fear because they are so isolated; they don't know anything else that's going around. So when you create motion, people get an opportunity to feel that they are not alone, there are other people out here who think like they do, who want to make a statement and get up and take charge of a meeting and move forward to the next thing on the agenda.

Summer volunteers created space, the sense of continuity, the sense that people in America cared about what was going on down here, that you weren't going to be taken off to some God-forbidden, back bayou and blown away. Obviously, that happened, but there was enough other motion to give people the tenacity, the strength, the emotional courage to move on beyond that. Obviously, these volunteers came down here in the wake of the loss of three civil rights workers. And Andy didn't come to the state yet. I mean, Andy Goodman was coming down here because Mickey was concerned about the church burnings in Neshoba County. So space and a network and, also, even among distinct(?) people we recognized that because these volunteers were coming from all over America that their parents and their neighbors and their aunts and uncles—and most of these folks were white—will be concerned about them. And in that concern was a psychological umbrella of protection whether imagined or not, if you believe it's there, then it's there and with them came resources. They brought down money; they brought down books, and they brought down cars, and they brought down all kinds of things, which made life radically different suddenly.

We built in a summer; maybe we skipped three or four generations just that summer in motion and activity. With that comes a lot of loss and the mistakes, too, things that maybe, had things gone more slower and stuff, feelings wouldn't have been as ruffled and hurt as much and stuff. But I mean, I think Fannie Lou Hamer and Andy Devine and Victoria Gray, I think those people speak for themselves: pages of history.

Reinhard: Anything else to add?

Donaldson: No.

Reinhard: Well, thank you.

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