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, 2013

Interviewee:	Martha Prescod Norman Noonan
Interview Date:	March 18, 2013
Location:	Baltimore, Maryland
Interviewer:	Dr. John Dittmer
Videographer:	John Bishop
Length:	01:32:37

John Bishop: Okay, and I'll remove the first three takes.

John Dittmer: Good. Thank you. Alright, now we're going straight through.

Martha Prescod Norman Noonan: [Laughing] Okay.

John Dittmer: Today is Monday, March eighteenth, 2013. My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Baltimore, Maryland, with videographer John Bishop to interview Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, an activist in the Civil Rights Movement. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

We are delighted to be here and thanks for taking time to talk with us. Let's start with your family background. Where were you born and raised? Tell us something about your folks, your early experiences.

MN: I was born and raised in Providence, Rhode Island. My father was of West Indian descent. He is from the island of Saint Vincent, and he had migrated to Brooklyn in the early 1920s, where later, about a decade later, he met my mother, who was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and went to New York to work in one of the—one of FDR's Alphabet Agencies. And when she showed up, of course, there was no job. [Laughter] So, anyway, they met during the Depression and they married. And he became an optometrist, and they moved to Rhode Island.

They were both activists. My father, I remember early my father was involved in some efforts for Pan-West Indian Unity. My mother came from a family that had migrated to Buxton, Ontario, in the 1850s, and her grandfather was an activist. And why can't I think of his name [laughter] at this moment? But he was active in the Negro Convention Movement and the Underground Railroad, he was a minister, and so they had that tradition in her family. In Rhode Island, they joined the Progressive Party. At one point, my father was state chairman of the Progressive Party.

JD: That was a left-wing organization.

MN: I guess so. [Laughs]

JD: And then, he got into trouble, didn't he?

MN: Well, he didn't, not—well, yes, he did, actually. What I started to say was they tell me that my first political act was they took me to a—when I was three, they took me to an event for Henry Wallace, who was running for president.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And I must have heard, you know, conversation preceding the thing. And when his talk was over, I went up to him in that voice, you know, one of those loud voices that only a three-year-old can do, and said, "Well, you *look* like a nice man." [Laughter] And he was so

taken with it that I posed with him, and our picture was on the front page of the *Providence Journal*, they tell me.

JD: Oh?

MN: I always wanted to go back and look that up.

JD: Oh, that would be marvelous.

MN: Yeah. But, yeah, after his involvement, and I remember this event quite clearly. I think it was somebody from the FBI or from the immigration authority came to our house and threatened to deport him, even [though] he was a naturalized citizen. And I also remember that one of the other gentlemen in the group, who owned a factory, a jewelry factory—that was big in Providence, watches, costume jewelry—where my father had worked as he was losing his sight, he was called before HUAC and he knew that his financial life would be over just because of being called. And, of course, that was also on the front page of the *Providence Journal*.

JD: This was during the McCarthy era—

MN: Yes.

JD: With the House Un-American Activities Committee.

MN: Yes. Yes. Yes. He committed suicide.

JD: Hmm.

MN: It was very sad; committed suicide. So, my parents were very careful about activism. They did other things, like try to get a black teacher in the public schools—I think they were successful with that—and different ad hoc things, as they came along.

JD: What was it like growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, a majority-white town in the North?

MN: Well, it wasn't very pleasant for me, and some of that was my parents' decision [0:05:00]. My father began losing his sight when I was around five. He self-diagnosed. He knew he had glaucoma. And so, part of what they did, anticipating that his salary, you know, the finances in the household would be less, they closed his office and bought a house. It was an old funeral parlor in a white neighborhood.

Now, we lived in a white neighborhood previously, but this particular neighborhood was not happy about our coming there. People threw stones through the window. A few times I got beaten up going back and forth to school. I called all kinds of names. One of the—the first time I ever heard "I am black and I am proud" was from my mother, who told me as a young child—I must have been about six years old—she said, "When, you know, people call you a 'dirty black nigger,'" she said, "you don't respond with any ethnic—" this was a very ethnic neighborhood, too.

JD: Yeah.

MN: She said, "Don't respond with any ethnic slurs. You say, 'yes, I'm black and I'm proud of it.'" And that was my response at that time.

JD: Ethnic neighborhood—was it Italian, Portuguese?

MN: It was Italian, Greek—it was a mixture—Canadian. It was a mixture, yeah.

JD: How many—were there many blacks in your elementary school?

MN: Ah, no. [Laughs] I was the only black student when I went initially. And then, there was a second—I still remember. She looked like an angel. Marilyn Miller [laughter] came to school in little pigtails. So, there was just the two of us, Lexington Avenue Elementary School. For a brief time in junior high school, at Gilbert Stuart Junior High School, I was in a class with maybe four or five other black students. And then, my mother arranged for me to go to—

arranged a scholarship and everything at a local Quaker prep school, Lincoln School for Girls. And I was the first and the only black student in the entire school, which ran from preschool all the way through high school.

JD: Um-hmm, very exclusive school. [Laughs]

MN: [Laughing] Yes. And then, a young woman from Hampton, Virginia, also came to the school in my sophomore year.

JD: Who were your friends when you were growing up?

MN: Oh. I made a couple of friends in the neighborhood. There was a family across the street from us, and actually the mother years later told me this very interesting story. She knew when we came—she told my children this story. She knew when we came to the community, you know, everybody was against it, including her husband. And she tried to think of what kind of gesture could she do.

And so, as soon as my father put his little sign out, saying, you know, "Dr. George C. Prescott, Optometrist," she came to get her eyes examined. And he had put his office sort of at the front of the house, and we divided the living room in half, so he had a little office. And she said while she was being examined, she realized he couldn't see that well. But she went ahead with it. He understood, you know, the gesture. And so, when the glasses came in, he told her there was no charge. And she told my children that she was still using the same prescription forty years later.

JD: Oh, that's a marvelous story!

MN: It's a really nice story, yeah. So, you know, I was friends with her daughter. And there was a Canadian family a little ways, about a block away, and I got to know them quite well.

And at one time, I joined the Episcopal Church near us and I was friends with the priest's daughter.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: And so, those were my kind of local friends.

JD: Um-hmm. What was Lincoln High School like?

MN: Ahm, of course, it was a—I started to say it was a wonderful educational experience, but it was to a certain point. I was not allowed to join the glee club. And I believe it was because at that time the girls prep school's glee club would have concerts with [0:10:00] the boys prep school concerts, and they didn't want me socializing with the young men. Now, when Carol came, she was such a phenomenal singer. She was also fair. You know, she did join the glee club. You know, my freshman math teacher told me I was too dumb to learn math. It was an interesting experience from that point of view, yeah.

JD: Racially, things were starting to happen in the South when you were growing up. When Emmett Till was lynched in 1955, you were just, what, two or three years younger than he? He was fifteen at the time.

MN: I was ten.

JD: Oh, you were ten? Okay. Did that have an impact at all in the North? Of course, in the South, Movement people talk about that as sort of an iconic moment for them.

MN: It's very interesting that you should ask that, because I was thinking about—I just was thinking about it this past week. Because, yes, many of the women who are in *Hands on the Freedom Plow* describe themselves as children of the Emmett Till generation. I didn't know anything about Emmett Till. My parents kept that from me until I was in college.

JD: Oh?

MN: And, in fact, what I think of is that I was a member of the Rosa Parks generation. Of course, because I was integrating schools, the whole process of school integration in the South resonated with me.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: And I kind of thought, you know, "If they can go through *that*, well, I can deal with a little insults and problems that I have to deal with."

JD: Yeah.

MN: So, I knew Daisy Bates—

JD: Oh?

MN: And the Little Rock Nine. That's one of my earliest memories.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: And I had the image fixed in my mind of these—because it was kindergarten students.

JD: Yeah.

MN: It was elementary students, first graders, and college students integrating schools. And so, that—Autherine Lucy, I remember.

JD: Um-hmm, yeah.

MN: So, it was more the activism that I remember from being a young child. And, of course, one of the first books my mother gave me, the first books that I owned—we went to the library all the time—was *Harriet Tubman*. I think it was by Earl Conrad. That was the first one of the books she gave me.

JD: Yeah.

MN: Yeah.

JD: [Laughs] Good comedy author.

MN: [Laughs] Right.

JD: So, you did learn some Negro history, probably not in the schools, but through your family?

MN: Yes. A lot of it was musical. My mother actually sang opera.

JD: Oh?

MN: And—but she also sang spirituals. So, you know, I learned all the old spirituals through her. And she contradicted not just black history—she taught me some black history, but she also taught me that the history that I was learning in school, the general history, was off. I remember at one time, you know, in the middle of all this anti-Communism and so forth, she said to me, "Oh!" [Sighs] She said, "Oh, they're just mad because they can't sell anything over there in China." [Laughter]

JD: That's good!

MN: So, it was both not trusting the history, and the other thing that I remember about her is she was a very serious churchwoman and went to church every Sunday. You know, she played for churches and so forth; she was also an organist. But on the occasions when the ministers might start to talk about the role of women and so forth, she would say, "Well, you know." She said, "Martha Susan, it's Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You don't see any women writing this, do you?" [Laughter] You know, take it with a grain of salt!

JD: Tell me about your church. Was it a black church?

MN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, my parents went to Winter Street AME Zion Church. We were members at Winter Street. It was very small. The church was large. The church had been designed and built by a black architect. But the congregation had fallen off and was very small. I

decided, you know, at some point that I wanted to be an Episcopalian. And my parents said, "Well, you can go there, but you still have to go to Sunday School and you have to go to church with us as a family." [0:15:00] So, I spent a lot of Sundays, [laughs] in church all day. It was a wonderful small congregation. Everybody knew everybody. And because my father couldn't see, I would sometimes accompany him to the trustee meetings and the other meetings. And so, I learned about basic meeting rules, order, and how things are handled, the finances and so forth, in an organization.

JD: Um-hmm. Well, it came time for you to go to college, and you went to the University of Michigan. You've said that that wasn't your first choice. Talk about the situation that led you to Ann Arbor.

MN: [Laughs] Well, my mother was a graduate of the University of Michigan. She graduated at seventeen.

JD: Wow.

MN: Working her way through school, because her father died at nine, and so she had to help support her family, as well as go to high school and college. She determined that I should go to Michigan, too, and this was what she could pay for. At that time, there weren't scholarships, the kind of financial aid that's available now. So, she left Providence when I was a junior in high school, secured a job in Detroit, so that I would be certain to qualify for instate tuition—

JD: Wow.

MN: At the University of Michigan.

JD: And you and your father stayed in Providence?

MN: Yes. My parents lived apart for two years.

JD: Because of you?

MN: That's right, so that I could go to the University of Michigan. And actually, what—they loved this at Michigan—actually, what she told me was, "You're going to the University of Michigan. And if you don't get in, you'll have to go to Michigan State." [Laughter]

JD: Yeah, they would love that!

MN: Yeah.

JD: So, you ended up at Ann Arbor at a time when things were starting to happen politically there, too. Tell us about your freshman year, your first year.

MN: Well, of course, I didn't expect anything. I wanted to go to Fisk, because I had seen a *White Paper* on the Nashville Movement. And my mother, of course, wouldn't hear about it! [Laughter] When I got to Ann Arbor, actually, trying to remain a good Methodist that my parents had brought me up to be, I joined the Methodist Students Association on campus. And they had these Friday luncheons, brown bag events, and one of the early ones was they brought up two people from McComb, Mississippi.

JD: Oh?

MN: And I remember meeting Curtis Hayes, who is now Curtis Hayes Muhammad. They had a number of events that weekend. I followed them around to all the different events. Shortly after that, in that winter, Tom Hayden came back from a Freedom Ride in Albany, Georgia, and so we learned about that. I joined SDS—

JD: Students for a Democratic Society.

MN: Students for a Democratic Society, pretty much after I arrived on campus. They were the only organization talking about racism and what it meant. It was an all-white organization.

JD: Yeah.

MN: But—and peace. That was the other thing.

JD: Were there many women in SDS at that time?

MN: Yeah. It seemed—I think it was pretty evenly divided, men and women, um-hmm. And first—first, what I was doing was peace work. We had turned towards peace, I think, that fall, and so forth. And when Hayden came back to campus—and, of course, he was an alumni, too, so he was coming back to speak on this campus, and he had been editor of the *Michigan Daily*. He saw me in the office and he said, "I don't—" you know, "Why are you doing this peace work when your people are in motion all over the South?" [Laughter]

And so he invited a group of us to an SDS/SNCC meeting in April of 1962 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. And it was just so—I think it was Sharon Jeffries, Mike [19:45], Cathy Ennis, Dick [19:47], and myself. We piled into this old car. We put five dollars in for gas each way [laughter] and we drove through the night to get there. [0:20:00] And it was just an extraordinary experience once I was there, yeah.

JD: Um-hmm. Who was there? Do you remember?

MN: I think everybody in SNCC who was not in jail was there.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: My recollection is that everybody was there, and the same think in SDS. And I often think how there were in this little chapel—this was maybe fifty people, maybe seventy-five—and I think from that small group, there was the Antiwar Movement and the Student Civil Rights Movement.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

MN: Um-hmm.

JD: Wow.

MN: Yeah.

JD: So, with this in mind, after your freshman year, you decided you wanted to go south to work in the Movement.

MN: I did.

JD: But you didn't right away. [Laughs]

MN: I didn't. I was seventeen at the time, and it was under the age of majority. And my parents were adamantly opposed. And so—

JD: Did they tell you why?

MN: [Pause] You know, that's very interesting. I don't think they ever said why. They just said, "No." [Laughter] Well, they did talk about, and this, again, goes back to my mother's experience at University of Michigan. After she finished undergraduate school, she was admitted to the law school at Michigan, along with, I think, about five other African American students. She felt that they were admitted by mistake, that because all of them had attended predominantly white schools, the law school didn't realize they were accepting black students. And within a year and a half, they figured a way to flunk them out.

JD: Wow.

MN: And she felt unfairly, you know, excluded. So, her wish, of course—and I think this was pretty general at the time. Her wish, of course, was that I would go to law school or professional school. My father's wish was that I would be an ophthalmologist. But I think it was a general wish of black parents whose children got into these white, majority-white schools. I mean, it was—we were a very small group.

JD: Yeah.

MN: It was expected that you would become professional—

JD: Yeah.

MN: That you would sort of keep your nose clean. We called it "representing the race," which, of course, I had been doing from second grade or whatever.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

MN: You know, you were supposed to be polite, your clothes are supposed to be clean, and you're supposed to realize this—and it was—that you were given an incredible opportunity and that you should make the most of it. So, I think that was the path that they had set me on. It was a path for which they had made tremendous sacrifices. I don't remember my—I mean, my mother was a musician. I don't remember her ever being able to attend a concert.

JD: Oh?

MN: Because any little extra money they had went to my—to what she had to pay for me to go to high school. They did without in order to be able to provide the education.

JD: So, instead of going south, you enrolled at Wayne State for summer school?

MN: I went—that's exactly what I did. At the end of my—in 1962, the summer of 1962, I enrolled at their insistence. And, of course, again, being very conscious of finances, my mother hoped that I would graduate in three years.

JD: Oh.

MN: You know, if you go to summer school—

JD: Well, she graduated at seventeen. Why couldn't you? [Laughs]

MN: [Laughs] Right, exactly. It was so nice growing up with my mother. My mother was able to read—you know, I'd come home with a pile of books, you know, from school.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

MN: She'd read them the first week.

JD: Yeah.

MN: She'd know what was in them [laughter] and she would discuss them with me. I was just like—but anyway, so, I enrolled at Wayne State. I chose two courses by just guessing, because they were early in the morning. And I ended up with two professors who were in Facing Reality, a group led by C. L. R. James. [Laughs]

JD: Wow!

MN: It was George Rawick, who did a book on slavery, slave narratives, and Seymour Faber, who was a sociologist. And I picked them in the morning, because by that time, SNCC had sent Bernard LaFayette to Detroit to raise money.

JD: Oh?

MN: So, I spent the mornings in these classes, and the—Faber's class was a class on social change. Rawick's, [0:25:00] if I remember correctly, was European history from 1848 to 1917. There was one revolution after another! [Laughter]

JD: Yeah.

MN: And then, in the afternoons, I worked with Bernard and the Friends of SNCC group. Elizabeth Hershfeld, who was a Freedom Rider, was the main other person. But also a lot of young people who had been active in civil rights in Detroit joined the Friends of SNCC group. And a good number of them later became active on campus. They took over *The South*—the newspaper, Wayne State University's *The South End,* and they were instrumental in the, um—oh, the thing with Foreman and the black labor group. I'll think of the name in a minute.

JD: Yeah.

MN: So, and they were—it was John Watson and Luke Tripp, and they were already supporting the North Carolina, Robert Williams, and they were reading *Negroes with Guns*, and they were getting the *Peking Review*. [Laughter] They were very political.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

MN: It was a very political group. And eventually we had people from a wide spectrum, of the left, from the Catholic Workers Party, just—it was just a nice group of people.

JD: Yeah.

MN: But there was work to do, and that's pretty much what we all did together. We just did support work for the students in the South.

JD: Um-hmm.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JD: Then in the fall you went back to Michigan.

MN: I went back to Michigan, um-hmm.

JD: And where was your mind that year? Were you concentrating on your studies? Did you have a plan?

MN: Uh, no. I'm not even sure how much I went to class. I think I spent most of my time in the Student Activities Building. One of the things I want to mention that happened before I went—that summer that we did the Friends of SNCC work?

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: At the end of the summer, our culminating event was bringing Diane Nash to Detroit.

JD: Who was very prominent in the SNCC and in the national sit-in movement.

MN: Yes. And at that time, she was working in Mississippi and she was under indictment in Mississippi. And her sort of tag line at the time was, "Yes, my baby might be born in jail, but anywhere a black child lives in Mississippi, they're in jail already." But what, I think, was important to me, as a young woman, was that she was the star of the summer.

JD: Yeah.

MN: Bernard LaFayette is no mean speaker himself, but he chose to put her forward rather than himself. And the way he worked was very democratic, so I learned more about the SNCC way, and so forth, that summer. But to see her—she was nine months pregnant.

JD: Yeah.

MN: She delivered—she left Michigan in labor, and it said a lot about what a woman could do in the Movement.

JD: Um-hmm, yeah.

MN: So, I went back to school. I set up a Friends of SNCC group in Ann Arbor. We brought the Freedom Singers in. We did a variety of activities. I think that's '62-63?

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

MN: That doesn't sound—okay, it was '62-63. I planned to go south in '63 when I turned eighteen, but I didn't. My parents came to visit me in the fall of 1962.

JD: They were back in Providence then?

MN: No, they're in Detroit now.

JD: Detroit, uh-huh.

MN: See, my mother has moved to Detroit. And they realized I had difficulty remembering exactly where my classes were located. [Laughter] And they said, you know, "We're not paying for you to sit in the Student Activities Building." And I said, "Well, fine."

You know, "Don't send me any more money. I'll manage on my own." [Laughter] The hubris of a kid!

JD: Declaring your independence.

MN: Right. And that was the case, you know. From then on, I had to make arrangements for my own education.

JD: And then, in the summer of '63, you do head south.

MN: I do finally go south.

JD: Defying your parents.

MN: Right. I kept hoping in the winter [0:30:00] that I could convince them that it was okay. They made it clear that if I went, I would not be welcome to come back home again, and I didn't want that situation. But I did slip away at the end of the semester in 1963.

JD: And you ended up in Albany, Georgia.

MN: I did.

JD: With the project headed by Charles Sherrod.

MN: Sherrod, yeah.

JD: You were there a brief time, but talk about what it was like in Albany.

MN: Well, the first thing we did was we had orientation in Sumter County. And that's where, again, the whole SNCC philosophy of following what the people wanted, not thinking of yourself as a leader, but as someone who can be of assistance, and to listen to—to be guided by what community people wanted to have.

Even—Albany, even, was fairly frightening to me. I was scared the whole time I was there. Shortly after I arrived, at orientation, a young woman, I believe, in Sumter County was

raped by thirteen white men, one of whom was the, I think, the Sunbeam bread man, and he parked his truck in front of her house the whole time!

JD: Uh.

MN: She *died* from the infections and so forth that she received. And that—that was just a huge eye-opener for me, because I thought bad things happened, but I thought the *really bad* things were over.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

MN: And that wasn't the case. And I thought something like that could happen to me. I mean, that was even more frightening. The Movement, I don't know, they say at the time that the Movement was not what it had been before. I can only imagine what it had been before, because we were still having huge mass meetings. And, of course, the music—

JD: Yeah.

MN: The lining of the hymns and the music was just amazing.

JD: Was Bernice Reagon there then?

MN: No, because the Freedom Singers were on tour.

JD: That's right.

MN: They were on tour, but—

JD: But it all started there. [Laughter]

MN: The music was just—the lining—Sherrod is no mean singer either.

JD: Yeah.

MN: You know, he would lead the mass meetings and so forth. And Reverend Wells was there, and C. B. King was there. Going back to my parents, at one point—I felt kind of safe if I stayed within the black community. I felt like the real danger was when you started to march

downtown, etcetera. So, I was staying in the black community. And still, they came around—some of the police came around and arrested, kept arresting people, arresting people.

So, Sherrod had us take sanctuary in a church, which we did. But then, I guess there were white men driving by with guns hanging out the window, and so forth. And Joann Christian's father and her cousin, I think, Monroe—I'm losing his last name, but I'll come back with it—they sat on one side. One sat on the side of the church—the church was on the corner under a light—and one sat in the front of the church with a rifle across his lap, which I think kept us from any severe reactions.

But my mother heard about this through our sorority. There were—I think there were three women at the church who were Deltas: myself, Joyce Ladner, and Joan Browning, who had been an exchange student. And so, the Deltas sent out this alarm. And the head of the Deltas at that time was from Albany, Georgia, Jeanne Noble.

So, my mother, who was not speaking to me, [laughs] had thrown me out of the family, got worried. And so, she called an old high school friend of hers, Neil Staebler, who was a Democratic committeeman, and he put her in touch with someone in the Justice Department. And she worked her way up to—and she never told me this. Family members told me this story *after* she died. Evidently, they had been sworn to secrecy. [Laughter] So, the way they told it was, you know, she finally got to Burke Marshall.

JD: Assistant attorney general.

MN: Assistant attorney general at the time. [0:35:00] And he passed her off to Robert Kennedy.

JD: [Laughing] Oh.

MN: And when she got to Robert Kennedy, Robert Kennedy assured her, you know. He said, "I'll be sure that no harm, you know, comes to your daughter, Mrs. Prescod. You don't have to worry about a thing." And she said, "Well, I hope so, young man, because I would hate to have to talk to your brother about this." [Laughter]

JD: That's marvelous!

MN: And after that I couldn't get arrested!

JD: Yeah!

MN: [Laughs] I could just go anywhere.

JB: Can we pause again please?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JD: An important point in the larger scheme of things.

JB: Okay, John, we're back.

JD: You have written that, although this was a nonviolent movement, that you engaged in what you called "preventive nonviolence." Talk about that.

MN: Well, I think my first exposure to this was in Albany, Georgia, where Sherrod would let the gangs know when there was going to be a demonstration. And they would position themselves between the white crowd and the nonviolent demonstrators. And, of course, in these communities everybody knew everybody. And so, the people in the white crowd knew that there was this group of *non*-nonviolent people [laughter] they had to go through to attack the demonstrators. And that kept the violence, I think, down. We didn't hesitate to ride in cars with community people who were armed or to stay at the homes of community people who were armed. And I think, again, this protected us a great deal. I mean, Mr. Christian and his cousin

sitting on that porch, I think, kept people from shooting into the church. It's just an amazingly brave thing to do.

JD: Yeah, yeah. So, you were protected by the local people?

MN: Yes, very much so.

JD: And then, soon you realized that Sherrod had pulled a trick on you to keep you in Albany and you were really expected in Greenwood, Mississippi.

MN: [Laughs] Exactly. Yes, he told us that, because Medgar Evers had just been killed, it was too dangerous for us to go to Mississippi. But when we called over to Bob to—

JD: Bob Moses.

MN: Moses—to Bob Moses to—just to say hello, he was waiting for us. [Laughter] So, when Sherrod was out of town, because we were afraid he would talk us into staying—

JD: We being—?

MN: Jean Wheeler and myself. We were afraid he would talk us into staying. We got on a bus and went to Greenwood, Mississippi, where I spent the rest of the summer.

JD: Well, Greenwood by that time had been in the national news. There had been demonstrations. The police had set dogs loose on people. The Justice Department had gotten involved in a way. So, taking that bus into Greenwood, what were your thoughts? And what did you find when you got there?

MN: Well, again, I was scared. [Laughs] And when we got there, I think Sam Block and Willie Peacock picked us up. They had a car. It was like a bumblebee. It was yellow and black. And when they picked us up, they must have driven through Greenwood at eighty miles an hour. So, then I had another thing: Was I even going to make it to the office? [Laughter] You know?

JD: And Block and Peacock were the original two SNCC people who went into Greenwood, and so you were being met by the people who started it all.

MN: Yes, yes. And, you know, of course, they were heroes to us, and so forth. And that summer, we were working on getting people to the polls in groups, in large numbers—having Voting Days, having a Voting Day, rather than taking two or three people down at a time, and so forth. And so, my job was really to get familiar with the community and setting—I had learned this working with SDS and the Democratic Party—and, you know, setting up how, which homes had already been called on and which ones hadn't, and so forth and so on.

JD: So, there were still a lot of attempts made to register to vote?

MN: Yes. We had a Voting Day at the end of the summer, is what I remember, with two or three hundred people.

JD: How many of them were successful, do you think?

MN: Oh, I don't think anybody was successful.

JD: That they were using all of the devices they could—

MN: They just weren't registering.

JD: Such as interpreting the Constitution.

MN: Now, I actually never went inside, so I don't know what happened once people went inside.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

MN: But I know that nobody got registered. I mean, [0:40:00] for the most part, nobody got registered. But they were so brave to keep coming back and attempting to register. People drove—again, people were driving by. White men were driving by the office with their guns out, and so forth.

JD: Contrast—compare and contrast, will you, the—I've been interested in this—the way Sherrod was running the Albany Project, and the way things were being run in Greenwood.

MN: Well, Mississippi was—Sherrod's project—there were white volunteers in Albany. There were a couple of white volunteers in Mississippi, two men, but they never left the office. It was too dangerous.

JD: Dangerous for them and for the community?

MN: Yes. So, they actually lived, bathed, ate, everything, in that office. I would say that for me, and this is part of what attracted me to this Movement, they were both black projects, because the Movement itself was black. When I was in Albany, going to mass meetings, you know, there are seven hundred people in the church. Maybe there are ten white volunteers there. I'm not sure that's integrated.

JD: Yeah.

MN: You know, integrated to me is more of a 50/50 kind of a situation. The culture of the Movement was black. Sherrod was in charge. There wasn't a situation where he was sharing with a white person to run the project. When he left, Prathia took over. So, for me, there wasn't that much difference. Now, but again, this is what attracted me. What I saw in Chapel Hill were young black people in charge, taking charge of their destiny. That's what attracted me. We could do something about our own situation. We could actually change things.

JD: Yeah.

MN: So, in Mississippi, pretty much the same, as far as I felt it, as I experienced it.

JD: So, you were happy to be in a black-run black project.

MN: Yes.

JD: You were a woman in that Movement, and a lot has been written in recent years about the role of women in the Movement, the mistreatment, alleged mistreatment of women. What was your experience?

MN: I certainly never felt mistreated. And I felt encouraged to be sort of as much as I could be. I didn't feel—I felt myself a novice in these situations. I mean, I had never been in a—what was, I guess, a war zone to me before. So, I was feeling my way and learning. But I felt encouraged to do as much as the men were doing, or just as much as I could do. We were college students, so certainly we were treated as if we were smart. I don't, you know, I don't—never felt that someone looked down on me through that experience.

JD: Did women have roles they were expected to perform?

MN: Not that I was aware of.

JD: Taking minutes at meetings and things like this?

MN: [Laughs] I don't remember anybody taking minutes at meetings.

JD: [Laughs] Somebody did, because I read a lot of them.

MN: [Laughs] Somebody probably did.

JD: But one of the things I noticed was, in reading the minutes—

MN: I never did.

JD: Of the meeting, you would not—you know, they would have the names of the people who were talking, but it they didn't, you wouldn't know which gender—you know, nobody was putting down somebody because of their gender. But that's something, of course, has been out there. So, you were—in '63, things are going in Mississippi, and then what did you do in the fall?

MN: In the fall, we went to the March on Washington. And I went home to try to reconcile with my parents.

JD: Talk a little bit about the March on Washington. Was that a great experience for you?

MN: Actually, the March on Washington, after being in Mississippi, it seemed kind of too civilized or something, sort of toned down.

JD: You were with the SNCC people who were there. [0:45:00]

MN: From Mississippi, yeah. And I remember my identification was with the people coming in jeans from Danville and the people coming from Cambridge, Maryland, where they had had a hard-fought summer.

JD: Yeah.

MN: They did have seats for us, for people from, coming from Mississippi. We got to sit at the front.

JD: Oh?

MN: Uh-huh.

JD: Just like at the Democratic Convention, you were honored guests.

MN: Right. [Laughs] So, that—you know, we picketed the Justice Department the night before, and then we came to the march. Of course, the numbers of people there were just so impressive. But I think the, you know, reaction to John's proposed speech.

JD: This is John Lewis, who had his speech censored.

MN: Yes, the fact that his speech was censored. I remember being slightly conscious that there weren't that many women speaking on the program.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And just at that point, I felt like a soldier in the civil rights army. The other thing that disturbed me: Du Bois died on that day.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And Wilkins, Roy Wilkins, who was head of the NAACP, made actually a disparaging remark. I don't remember what it was. Or I felt he made a disparaging remark about Du Bois. And I thought it was just—how could you be so cheap?

JD: Yeah.

MN: Someone—

JD: Still holding a grudge.

MN: Yeah, yeah. And that's my recollection of the march.

JD: So, then you went back, you say, to try to reconcile with your parents.

MN: With my parents. And I carefully went back after—I did some fundraising first in Massachusetts. And then, I went back to try to reconcile with my parents and I carefully went back after classes started at University of Michigan. *But* what my mother knew was that classes had not started at Wayne.

JD: Oh! [Laughter]

MN: *And* she faked a heart attack.

JD: She faked it?

MN: To keep me—

JD: Oh.

MN: At home. And years later—

JD: Your mother is one of the most interesting people I've heard of. [Laughter]

MN: Years later, I asked her, you know, how could she have done that. And she said, "I would have done anything to keep you out of Mississippi."

JD: Wow.

MN: Anything. And when I was, you know, working on the bridges for *Hands*, and particularly reading your book, the level of violence in Mississippi in those years was incredible.

JD: Yeah.

MN: It was absolutely incredible. I got chills all over again, thinking of how dangerous it actually was.

JD: Yeah. But you were aware of that at the time, but it didn't deter you at all?

MN: I was aware—no, I wasn't. [Laughs] I knew I was risking my life.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: I knew it was dangerous. I did not know that the Klan or the White Citizens Council had a list of people that they had successfully murdered.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: I knew people were dying. But I think I was not—I think I was neither aware of the level of violence nor, later, of the level of surveillance.

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: You know, we joked about it, but I didn't think it was—yeah, the surveillance was that great.

JD: Yeah. So, you were up north at Wayne State and then you—

JB: John, can I ask a quick question?

JD: Yeah.

JB: You refer to John Lewis being censored, and I—this has come up several times. Could you just say why he was censored or what he was censored about?

MN: I think they felt the speech was too radical. And, if I remember correctly, he had something in there about marching through the South like Sherman nonviolently. [Laughter]

JD: That didn't go over well.

MN: Which didn't—again, it's this polite, this—the march is on a different level than the level on which we were working, I felt.

JD: Yes. And one of the things, I think, was that the march was turned around to be an endorsement of Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill. And in that first draft of the speech, he said it's too little and too late. [0:50:00]

MN: Um-hmm.

JD: And that was a no-no.

MN: Yeah.

JD: Several people would have dropped out if he would have done it, so a compromise was made. It was still a strong speech, but they had distributed copies in advance, so the press knew exactly what had happened.

MN: Yes. Well, I think he asked: "I want to know which side the federal government is on."

JD: Yeah, yeah.

MN: And *that* was not acceptable at the time either. And I think it was more the traditional groups—

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: Not necessarily SCLC, but—

JD: So, you're up north in the summer in 1964. The summer of 1964 was the time of the summer project, later known as Freedom Summer in Mississippi, three civil rights workers being killed, national and international attention. Why didn't you go back to Mississippi that summer?

MN: Well, two reasons. I actually was opposed to the summer project.

JD: A number of SNCC field secretaries were. Why were you opposed?

MN: Many, I think! I think the whole Mississippi staff, almost! [Laughs]

JD: Yeah, except Bob Moses. [Laughs]

MN: That's right. [Laughs] Because, again, I felt that the idea of having black student organizers in the black community in the South, I thought that was sound. It worked. And so, when I realized they weren't recruiting *black* students, I was discouraged.

And the second thing was I figured out if I went to summer school in 1964, I could finish school that following fall. And again, you know, that would just be checking off [laughs] one objective of my parents.

JD: Yeah, placating your parents, um-hmm.

MN: Yeah.

JD: But you did go to Atlantic City in August when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the legitimacy of the all-white Mississippi delegation. What was that like? What was your role there?

MN: I did go. And even previous to that, I did some work with Detroit Friends of SNCC, because the Michigan Democratic Party was the first party to support the MFDP. So, we were all proud of that. I was at that meeting where—you know, first we were just generally, you know, demonstrating on the boardwalk. And I went to the meeting where people came to talk to the Mississippi Democratic delegation to ask them to support, to encourage them to support the two

seats, the offer of the two seats. And I remember Mrs. Hamer getting up when it was over. I remember two or three things. One was, I think a gentleman from the Council of Churches was so embarrassed by the position that he was taking that he—

JD: Bob Spike, I think.

MN: Was it Bob?

JD: Um-hmm.

MN: Uh-huh. He looked down. He was red in the face and looked down through the whole time that he was making his presentation. And then, you know, Mrs. Hamer got up and said, basically said, "I know what democracy is. First of all, we should get to choose who our representative are."

JD: Yeah. They had appointed—the Johnson Administration had appointed Ed King and Aaron Henry.

MN: Yeah. And so, and the vote went with her. And I thought it was a wonderful victory!

JD: Yeah.

MN: I thought—and it's not just about this specific event. I thought it was absolutely amazing that within the space of what was that—two years?—of activism, with basically no money, we had made the vote a national issue. It was on the national agenda. It wasn't going anywhere after that.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And, to me, the whole Movement was like that. That given the opposition against us, given that there was, I felt, only this—there was just this small historical opening to make change.

JD: Yeah.

MN: I think we blew it wide open.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And so, [0:55:00] in that sense, I always felt encouraged. I felt as if we were—you know, there's a point in *Chicago* where there's a mass meeting, I think, after they've gone into Cicero, and the rocks are coming down and everything. And Mahalia Jackson sings before King's speech, and she sings, "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho."

JD: Um-hmm, yeah.

MN: "And the walls came tumbling down." And I—that just, to me, was such the perfect image. I felt not that we were sort of marching around the walls of racial oppression or segregation with horns, but we *were leaning on it,* and it was tumbling down. And it did.

JD: Yeah.

MN: [Laughs] Yeah.

JD: Stop?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling. John, can you back up just a little bit?

JD: Okay, we're going to go—so, you were attending the University of Michigan, and you made most of your credits for graduation at the end of the fall semester of 1964. And then, early in 1965, you joined the Alabama SNCC Project. Talk a little bit about that, what was going on, what you found there.

MN: Well, at first when I went to the Alabama SNCC Project, I was going on the weekends, because during the week, I was—*long* weekends—I was also working on a project with Pat Gurin from the University of Michigan, studying the vocational aspirations of students

at black colleges. And one of the colleges was Tuskegee, so in that process, we got to know a lot of the activist students. And another SNCC person, Doris Derby, was on that study.

JD: Uh-huh.

MN: And another historian, John Bracey—

JD: Oh, wow.

MN: Was also one of the interviewers. So, we got to know the students at Tuskegee, the activist students, and they were having mass meetings. And they actually tended to get together, oh, around eleven or twelve o'clock in the daytime [laughter] and, you know, kind of socialize the rest of the day.

In Selma, when I worked in Selma, I worked in a ward of Selma. I was assigned a ward. And we did, in Selma, whatever the people coming to the meeting wanted us to do. It could be something as simple as getting a stoplight on a corner or as complicated as trying to get black women hired at the Dan River Mills, which, of course, paid more.

JD: Yeah.

MN: I think the thing that struck me in Selma, and Mississippi was probably a little bit less. In Selma the going wage for day work was twelve dollars a week for a six-day week.

JD: Wow. Uh.

MN: So, we worked with Dan River Mills.

JD: Did you have any success there?

MN: I believe the women got hired. That's my memory. I'm not sure of it.

JD: Yeah.

MN: So, we were doing sort of economic projects. We also—I was working with people in another—we were working in another ward where the men working at the Pepsi plant wanted

to unionize. And we worked with an organizer from the AFL-CIO, who came in at night. The meetings had to be at night. He had to park—nobody parked all in front of the house, you know. So, that was the trade union organizing. And we were still taking people, going with people to register to vote. Later on, we challenged the assignment of the poverty funds to the mayor, and so forth.

JD: Okay. It was about this time early in 1965 that Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference came to Selma with the intent of dramatizing something that the Civil Rights Act of '64 didn't cover, and that was the right to vote. They came to Selma to make a big splash, to put pressure on Congress to pass the law. SNCC had been working quietly in the community for a couple of years. Talk a little bit about that dynamic, when SCLC came, and how things changed or didn't.

MN: You know, I think, too, and maybe this is a little off the subject. My firm belief, and I don't know if this, again, will be proven [1:00:00] when things are—all the records are open, and so forth. I suspect that after the MFDP challenge, and the kinds of people that the MFDP represented, somebody said, "You know, we can't let this radical SNCC organization create a populist party in the South. And you guys in SCLC should do something about this."

JD: I do know that in the fall of '64, there was a meeting held in New York with Al Lowenstein and lots of other liberals, the intent of which was to make sure that FDP did not get support.

MN: And there was also a document from an SCLC meeting about kind of taking up the issue of the vote and being in the middle of SNCC projects in Mississippi and Georgia.

JD: Yeah.

MN: So, anyway, we were not—well, I remember, in particular, we weren't like overboard about SCLC coming into Alabama, which had had a SNCC presence—I think LaFayette was there in 1961.

JD: Yeah.

MN: Um-hmm. So, at the same time, it's not like there was hostility. We all ate together [laughing] at the Walker Sig Café, you know, certainly talking with each other. I mean, it wasn't—

JD: Did you get to know King there at all?

MN: Oh, I just met him a couple of times. I think Andy Young was there more, and we got to know him.

JD: Yeah, King was going in and out.

MN: He was in and out, but Andy was there a lot. At that point, Diane and Bevel were working for SCLC, so, you know, we were certainly friends with them. And so, it was kind of an interesting arrangement. And actually in the wards in Selma, there was a SNCC person assigned to each ward and an SCLC person assigned to each ward, as an attempt to kind of work together through this. But they tended to be promoting demonstrations, and, you know, we were community organizers. And so, we were doing more, actually, kind of local groundwork kind of things, I think.

JD: The world became aware of Selma at Selma bridge when the police attacked demonstrators, tear gas, clubs. Talk about that and the impact that it had on SNCC and what it was doing at the time.

MN: Well, even though at the time SNCC had taken an official position against supporting the March to Montgomery, and so, there were SNCC individuals like John Lewis,

Bob Mants, participating in the march. After Bloody Sunday, you know, *everybody* came to Selma, and the SNCC staff in Selma that had not been participating in the march also participated in the next march, which we called the U-Turn March.

JD: Why is it the U-Turn March?

MN: Because, basically, you know, everybody was all revved up, and they were ready to go across that bridge and to go through *anything*. And when they got to the bridge, the leadership, the SCLC leadership, stopped, said, "Let us pray," and led the march back to Browns Chapel. So, it was very disappointing.

JD: They did that probably because a deal was made that they wouldn't be attacked as long as they turned around and came back. After that, why, there was a federal permission to march, and so the march from Selma to Montgomery got underway and was completed. Were you on that march?

MN: I didn't actually go on the march. I'm just going to go back to the second. There's a very interesting story in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, written by Fay Bellamy, where she describes going with, I think, Foreman and Stokely to a dentist's house [1:05:00] in Selma the night before this march, where Foreman and Stokely were pleading with King to go against his principles and break the federal injunction. But the thing that was interesting was, like, they knew where he was.

JD: Yeah.

MN: They came in the middle of the night, [laughs] and he got up and met with them. But he was also on the phone in the other room with the federal authorities.

JD: Yeah. King had a difficult role.

MN: Yes. [Laughs] I kind of feel sorry for him sometimes. But, um—so now, I'm forgetting your question.

JD: Well, no, that you did not go on the march.

MN: I did not go on the march, but I did go—well, there were two things. So, also at the same time—what SNCC did at the same time was have demonstrations in Montgomery. So, I did go and watch the demonstrations in Montgomery, because students from the University of Michigan came down. There was some kind of relationship between Tuskegee and the University of Michigan, an institutional relationship between the two schools.

JD: So, you were in Montgomery then, with all of the violence there?

MN: I was in Montgomery. I left when I knew things were going to get rough. Because, again, we had taken the position that we were no longer demonstrators.

JD: Yeah.

MN: We were community organizers and we were going to focus on that community organization. Now, I did go into Montgomery on the day the march culminated.

JD: Um-hmm. What were your feelings then?

MN: It was sort of ho-hum. You know, we expected it to happen. We knew—and we were at the church. It's right on the corner by the capitol, so we could hear the speeches. And we were feeding people, I remember.

JD: That was King's church, I think. Was that King's church when he preached in Montgomery? I'm trying to think—

MN: I believe so. And I want to call it Ebenezer, and that's why I know I'm wrong. [Laughs]

JD: No. No, that—

MN: It's the Montgomery bus boycott church.

JD: I can remember Coretta saying marching past that church and all it symbolized for her.

MN: And what I thought was beautiful was to see how many community people were participating in that march, you know, because the streets in Montgomery were full. There was a point where we couldn't drive anymore, you know. We had to park the car and walk the rest of the way, and so forth.

JD: And then, the march ended, and the press went away. And you went back to work, right?

MN: Right. And I think that our concern was even in what was proposed in a voting rights bill didn't offer any protection for people who were trying to register to vote and for workers, for voter workers. And so, you know, I remember kind of being like, [sighs] "Well, another bill. Won't protect us. Won't protect people," etcetera. Yeah.

JD: Um-hmm. Well, in a second, I want you to talk about what it was like registering people in that area, once the Voting Rights Act was passed. But it was at this time that Stokely Carmichael was going off from the march and organizing people in Lowndes County, Alabama, which became the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the first Black Panther Party. You have changes going on in SNCC. And you were continuing to be active in Alabama, and not much has been written or said about that. I wish you could go into detail. I believe the Medical Committee for Human Rights—

MN: Was there, yeah.

JD: Had a project there. What were you doing after the march?

MN: After the march, we were still canvassing. The thing that I remember was people were going down to register in droves. And I was making some attempt—we had these sheets of people who had gone to register, etcetera, and I was making some attempt, which I never did finish, of trying to organize them by wards, so that we would have the information of who was registered, who wasn't. You know, now it became more of an administrative kind of thing, because people—they sent in federal registrars, so people weren't having any difficulty getting registered.

JD: Um-hmm. So, it was a matter of motivating them to get out and register?

MN: Well, people were going in droves. We didn't have to do anything. I mean, they were just going in droves. But the thing in Selma is we were thinking about, "Okay, now there's going to be elections. Can we start organizing?"

But [1:10:00] by that time, everybody was pretty much out in the counties. And, as you say, the focus was on Lowndes County and the idea of an independent black political party. And that's where SNCC's efforts went at that time.

JD: Um-hmm. Did you work in Lowndes at all?

MN: I visited Lowndes. I was there, I think, for the first mass meeting. And I thought it was interesting that people, you know, as soon as that meeting was over, the people in Lowndes County had a set arrangement about how they were getting home so no one would be in danger.

JD: Yeah.

MN: [Laughs] It's like, oh, we've done this before.

JD: [Laughs] Yeah.

MN: You know? But I didn't—and I spent—I think I spent a couple of weeks there. When I came back to Alabama—I went home for a little while and came back to Alabama, but it was not—Selma was my permanent place.

I was at the meeting. We were at a Boy Scout camp, I think. We had a meeting where the whole discussion was about the formation of an independent black political party and the black panther. I, of course, wasn't so hot on the panther. I wanted a black star, but that was [laughs]—

JD: What was your problem? What was your problem with the panthers? [Laughs]

MN: I mean, I don't even remember—I don't even remember if I had the nerve to say anything about it. But I actually believe in nonviolent direct action, and I thought the panther was a little over the top, you know. And I liked something that would have connected it to the African struggle, which I think a black star would have done.

JB: Now, could you explain what the black star is?

MN: Marcus Garvey had the *Black Star*—

JD: *Star Line*, a steamship line.

MN: *Line,* a steamship line, as a symbol. And then, Nkrumah picked it up, I think, for the airlines, for the Ghanaian airlines. So, you know, there was that—I mean, this is in the back of my mind, say, compared to a black panther.

JD: Yeah.

MN: You know.

JB: I just worked with some—in Jamaica with Rastafarians and, of course, Marcus Garvey and the *Black Star* are really big there.

MN: Oh, yes, yes. My father always referred to him as the Honorable Marcus Garvey, you know. And I also think—I remember I did not have the same understanding about the

importance of black institutions as some of my SNCC colleagues at that time. I thought it didn't make a difference. If you had a Lowndes County freedom organization, and that organization wanted to field Independent candidates one year, Democratic candidates another year, I thought it was all fine.

JD: Yeah.

MN: But that shows my separation from the thinking of the time. You know, I was not representative at all.

JD: Um-hmm. When you were in Alabama in the ensuing months in 1965, what was—you've had all the attention in Selma. What were race relations like in the period after the march until you left? Did things improve at all? Did they get worse? Did they stay the same?

MN: Well, one of the interesting things was when we challenged the poverty funds, the mayor started meeting with us.

JD: Mayor Smitherman.

MN: Yes. He was very cordial and pleasant. And, of course—

JD: Was there a CAP board, a Community Action Program board there that was in charge of all that?

MN: All I remember was that the mayor was in charge of the poverty funds, and we held several mass meetings to have the community support to challenge it. But I left, actually, before that whole process was finished and I don't know what happened. And I was actually working with a woman from SCLC, Shirley Mercer, I think her name was.

JD: Okay. [1:15:00]

MN: But I know that there was a quick response. It was just immediate. While we were there, even during the Movement, I think I—we were able to—they talked to us, the Selma

officials. It was kind of funny, you know. The SNCC office was directly across the street from the police station, and we could actually see people in jail through our window. So, it was very physically close proximity.

JD: Which is very different from the image we get of the police in Selma, because all we have is those pictures of pushing back and beating and that there wasn't any communication at all.

MN: It was the state troopers, which is kind of interesting, you know, because everybody thought the state was more liberal than Selma. But it's the state troopers who are beating people on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

JD: Yeah, and you mentioned Wilson Baker, the director of public safety—

MN: Yes.

JD: As somebody you could talk to.

MN: Well, I had his phone number. I don't know how I got it. I had his phone number at home and in the office.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And I can't even remember. Did he walk up to me one day and say, "Well, you know, if you ever need me, here's my phone number." [Laughter] I don't know. But I did call him one night when we went to a restaurant on Halloween, which wasn't smart. And, you know, it looked like people were going to try to hurt us. He sent a car.

JD: Yeah.

MN: [Laughs] He sent a couple of police cars to take us home.

JD: Wow.

JB: Worth told me stories about the police station being across from the office and all. Was that already set up before you got there?

MN: Yeah.

JB: He says he set that up, and so that when he went out in the field he could talk to people and say, "Well, you know where my office is," and they'd all have to laugh. [Laughter]

MN: Yeah, because I think he was there in that early group.

JD: Um-hmm, yeah.

MN: He came early, so that was, yeah, that was all set up before we got there.

JD: When you were in Alabama this time, you also had an active social life.

MN: Well, kind of.

JD: [Laughs] I'm talking about meeting your husband.

MN: Yes, I did meet my first husband there, yes. He was the project director.

JD: Silas Norman. And you were married when?

MN: We married in the fall of 1967, and he had orders to Vietnam. And he was on that break. They give you like, I think, a 30-day, or it might even have been a 60-day break before you actually transfer over. He had applied to be—for CO standing before he was drafted, and they didn't give it to him. But he learned while he was in the Army—he kept going to different schools to avoid going to Vietnam. And then, he learned while he was in the Army that in that space, you're no longer under the chain of command and you go straight to the top. And that's what he did. And he was an officer, and as an officer, the burden of proof of your being a CO is now on the Army, not on you. It's just the opposite if you're an enlisted man.

JD: Oh, I didn't know that.

MN: Because, obviously, they don't want a pacifist in charge of troops. And so, he was successful in that, in doing that. I had told him, you know, after he proposed, and I knew this was hanging over him, I said, you know, "Well, if you go to Canada, I'll go with you. If you go to Africa, I'll go with you. If you go to jail, I'll wait for you." [Laughter]

He said my mother took him aside and said, "Young man, you are not taking my daughter anywhere where I have to cross an international boundary to see her, [laughter] and if you go to jail, I'll be tempted to shoot you before you get out of the courtroom, because my daughter will not be married to a felon!" [Laughter]

JD: Had you and your parents been reconciled by then?

MN: We were—I was living at home.

JD: Yeah.

MN: We weren't reconciled. They—my—again, I believe my mother insisted that I be allowed back at home, against my father's wishes.

JD: Oh, I see.

MN: And, you know, so there was still a lot of tension that really didn't dissipate until shortly before my mother died.

JD: And you entered a grad program at Wayne State in the summer of '66?

MN: I did.

JD: And you and Silas [1:20:00] were married in '67. You had—then had a baby, a small son, and you decided to go back to Albany.

MN: We did. Sherrod, by that time, was doing farming. He had a huge community. I think it was the size of New York City or something.

JD: Wow.

MN: It was this huge plot of land called New Communities. And we discussed, you know, going to work with him, and we went down there to visit. And he took us around, and he took us through the house, and here and there. The house was all shot up in the back. [Laughs] You know, it was just sort of a matter of fact, you know. And I thought we didn't really have the right to risk the baby's life.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And we both thought we should have more education. So, Silas went to medical school, and after we had two more children, I went back to school and entered a Ph.D. program in History.

JD: In 1967—you were down, and then you went back—changes were taking place in SNCC. Talk about how you fit into the discussions, how you fit into the changes in direction in SNCC.

MN: You know, unfortunately, I had a habit of going to SNCC meetings but not actually going to the meeting. I would stay outside the meeting and—

JD: Why didn't you go inside?

MN: I liked to meet with people from other projects, find out what they were doing, and that kind of thing. I mean, I would go in and out. I—

JD: There was a lot of tension in those meetings in those days.

MN: I didn't take it as seriously, probably, as I should have, because I thought that we had our marching orders, so to speak. We had Ms. Baker's—we had a philosophy. And to me the discussions that were taking place were within that context *and*, I believe to this day, easily resolvable. But, again, I was someone who was there in the beginning, or close to the beginning, and saw SNCC as a black organization.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

MN: And I saw the Mississippi Summer Project as the aberration, and then, what happened afterwards as a return to where it started.

JD: Yeah.

MN: So, it wasn't—I wasn't going, "Oh, this is something new!" [Laughs] I was going like, "Oh, this is something old," and it's actually something that Stokely says in the *Black Power*, you know, that it's just—we were trying to build vehicles of black power from the beginning.

JD: Yeah, yeah. So, when the "Black Power" slogan came out, you were not surprised or—

MN: No.

JD: Turned off, or—

MN: No. I thought it's what we were doing all along, was building vehicles of black power. [Laughter]

And interestingly enough, one of my parents' objections was to the integrated nature of the Friends of SNCC, because we actually had a party at my house in Detroit after Stokely gave a Black Power speech. And I swear my mother said to Stokely when he came in the house, "Oh! Young man, I'm so glad you all finally got some sense, and now what you need to do is organize, organize, organize!" [Laughter] Which, of course, was his slogan! [Laughter] She *loved* Black Power!

JD: Oh, yeah.

MN: So, no, it just seemed to me the same. But I think, of course, the people who had come in either in the summer of 1964 or afterwards saw the early SNCC as a, quote, "integrationist" organization, which—I didn't understand that.

JD: Yeah.

MN: And I didn't feel that what we were trying to do was to integrate into white society. I never had that feeling, either. I thought what we were trying to do was build these vehicles of black power and to radicalize the entire political structure of the country, because what oppressed black people in the South would want and would lobby for would be so much more liberal and radical than any other group of people in the country. [1:25:00]

JD: Yeah, um-hmm.

MN: That was my understanding of what we were doing. And so, I didn't see it as a big change.

JD: Um-hmm. When did you—?

JB: [I'm sorry. Hold on a second]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

MN: The other thing that was so clear was that we were still talking about a movement based in the black community. There was a brief talk about—you know, there were these white projects in Mississippi, but there really wasn't any discussion about building a black and white Southern movement together. I do think one of the opportunities that we missed because of these discussions in the meeting was bringing the Southern movements together, you know, creating at least a meeting of the Southwest Georgia, the Mississippi, the Cambridge Movement, bringing these projects together and developing a platform.

JD: By this time, there was more activity in cities, in the North. And you and your husband and your family were in Detroit.

MN: Yes.

JD: And you went back to graduate school in history at the University of Michigan.

MN: Yes.

JD: Briefly tell us what you've been up to the last 45 years. [Laughter]

MN: I think a combination of studying history, teaching history. I didn't finish my, the Ph.D. program, because of a series of family emergencies. I raised a family. I took care of my parents. And I've done a number of community projects, like an anti-hunger project, a program for children, a tutorial program for children with sickle cell anemia. And I stayed active with a number of what I would call post-SNCC projects, helping to organize some retrospective conferences about SNCC, helping to get Curtis Hayes out of jail in Liberia.

JD: Yeah.

MN: Things like that, yeah.

JD: And tell us about your family.

MN: Well, I have three wonderful sons, who we raised in the city of Detroit, in the inner city of Detroit. And so, they and we have experienced I guess what I would call a new set of dangers, in terms of attacks and arrests by police, and the level of violence that's now, I think, within the black community. My son was a pallbearer two weeks after he graduated from high school. And within my little circle of friends in Detroit, at least four women have lost their sons to gun violence. It's—it became pro forma.

JD: Yeah.

MN: You know, if your son came home late, you called the morgue to make sure they weren't there. And they were regularly harassed by the police.

JD: Um-hmm. And what are they doing now?

MN: Well, one son actually is a lawyer. [Laughter] And he says, unlike many other lawyers, he *believes* his clients [laughter] when they say certain things happened. That's my youngest, our youngest son, and the other two are physicians. One is a nephrologist with a subspecialty in kidney transplant medication. And the other has his M.D., he's a hospitalist, but he also has a Ph.D. in information, computers, and he's questioning the entire logic of mathematics. [Laughter]

JD: Oh! Your mother would be very proud!

MN: Right! Right, somebody became professional, right!

JD: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, and even before, you were involved in a project [1:30:00] as one of the instigators to gather the remembrances and the essays written by SNCC women. The result was a marvelous book published in 20—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JD: Okay.

JB: Okay, it's going now. I'll keep my eye on it.

JD: Okay. In the early part of the twenty-first century, why, you were involved with a group of women from SNCC to gather information, essays by a large number of women in SNCC, who would tell their stories about their experiences in the Movement. The result was a magnificent book published in 2010 by the University of Illinois Press called *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Account by Women in SNCC*. Show us that book and tell us something about it.

MN: The book is *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, and it contains the stories of fifty-two women who—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JD: Going again with the introduction?

JB: Well, no—well, better give it just in case we didn't close the file properly. Okay.

JD: Start where?

JB: You can start with the introduction.

JD: Okay. Alright. Early in the twenty-first century, you and a group of other women in SNCC began to compile a group of essays written by SNCC women talking about their experiences in the Movement. The result was a wonderful collection called *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* published in 2010 by the University of Illinois Press. Show it to us and tell us something about it.

MN: Well, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, and it's the stories of fifty-two women who were active in the Civil Rights Movement in projects connected with SNCC. It has the stories of—most of the women were college students at the time, but we also have included women who were middle-aged activists, white women, black women, there are two Hispanic women in the book.

JD: And for those of you watching this now into the future, it is also available in paperback edition.

MN: Yes.

JD: And we recommend it highly. Martha Noonan, thank you very much for being with us. This has been a real pleasure for us.

MN: Thank you.

JD: It's a wrap.

JB: Thanks.

JD: Uh! Sorry we had to do several takes.

MN: Oh, I think that's—

[Recording ends at 1:32:37]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council