

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Dr. Gwendolyn M. (Gwen) Patton
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Location: Her home, Montgomery, Alabama
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:51:26

JB: Okay.

JM: Today is Wednesday, June the first, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with filmmaker and videographer John Bishop. We are in Montgomery, Alabama, to do an oral history interview for the series, for the project entitled the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Today we're in Montgomery to visit with Dr. Gwen Patton. Dr. Patton, thank you so much for the welcome, and it's a pleasure to be with you.

GP: Thank you, thank you.

JM: Um, I thought I'd start today –

GP: You're welcome.

JM: Before we turned on, we talked about the fact that, um, that there are places here in your longer story where we want to be sure we place some extra emphasis. So, let me pick up, um, let me pick up today with this question for us to begin. Can you paint the picture of, um, of Tuskegee in the fall of '61 when you arrived to start your years at Tuskegee?

GP: Well, it was, uh, impressive. Uh, it was a large campus in terms of acreage. The buildings were, uh, very, to some extent, ornate. Uh, the main street leading up to the, uh, university, which we called Campus Avenue, intrigued me because there were no front entrances to the buildings on the main thoroughfare. So, I was intrigued by that.

And then, of course, when we went through the Lincoln Gates, and I knew that was named after Abraham Lincoln, uh, the National Guard greeted us. And that somewhat – didn't frighten me, but, uh, it bothered me. And they were very curt – courteous, but curt. And, uh, living with my grandmother, whom I called Mommy, on my mother's side, uh, I knew how to be stoic and, you know, and not to be too expressive, and I took cues from her, and we went right on, uh, onto campus.

Later, I learned that the National Guard had been called up because they were integrating the schools, uh, in the, uh, city, and they were to be there for protection, which kind of baffled me, because they were state troopers and, uh, they had never been friendly or kind. And I had *some* understanding how the state could be trumped, if you will, by the federal, by the national. And so, they were not under the auspices of, I think, Governor Patterson at the time, but rather under, uh, President Kennedy at the time. So, I learned that and I worked through that.

And the buildings with no doors on the main thoroughfare, which you would assume, I later learned that Booker T. Washington – even though I have to make clear that, uh, [Lewis] Adams founded the school, uh – but Booker T. Washington developed the school, uh, and

though he was called an Uncle Tom, especially by the black intelligentsia, [05:00] uh, with his five fingers and the fist and all of that, the Atlanta Exposition, and an argument with [W.E.B.] Du Bois, that I learned that, indeed, he was a race man, and he built the doors, front doors, entrances, *facing* the campus, and because the thoroughfare was used by white and black people, and he didn't want them to feel like they were welcomed. And so, all of the doors, if you go there even to this day, they're faced *inward* to the campus. So, that kind of pleased me; I liked that.

And then, I learned a lot more about Tuskegee's history from subsequent presidents much later in life. But when I broke my leg in the car – *I* didn't break it, but this mysterious car accident in 1967 – uh, I had learned a lot about Tuskegee, its history. I knew some before I went there, um, because when I was twelve years old, or eleven, I wrote my, uh, paper on George Washington Carver and, uh, and tried to dispel the myth of the “peanut man,” you know, that kind of reduced him. And I saw him as a scientist. And I learned about yams, because he also did stuff with yams. And I learned about paints and I also understood he had contracts with the paint people. And I learned about Ford, he and Henry Ford. I think my daddy told me that. My father, uh, Clarence Robert Patton Sr., uh, was a race man. In fact, I come from a race family on both sides, so I was rather astute, uh, in the history of black people, [someone coughs] even as a child.

And so, in '67, with all of that thinking, all of what I knew about Tuskegee, uh, Robert Moton, who was the president of Tuskegee after, uh, Washington – and they were building the VA Hospital, mainly for World War I veterans, uh, I mean, not mainly, but *for* black World War I veterans. Uh, there was this dispute as to who would be the doctors and the nurses, the professional staff. And the authorities that be, coming from Washington – we have to

understand Woodrow Wilson – uh, said that the professional staff will be white people and the “help,” the maintenance and the nurses’ aides and the bedpan deliverers and removers and all of that, will be black people.

Well, Robert Russa Moton, who was the president, said, “No, we have black doctors.” In fact, Tuskegee had a nursing program for RNs, or to become RNs, and there was Meharry [Medical] College, which produced black doctors. And he said, “Oh, no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no. We’re going to have black professional staff.” And living within the confines of Jim Crow, you know, he was kind of on target.

And the white powers that be, because they saw money, they saw jobs, said, “Uh, that’s not going to be.” So, it became a big struggle. We’re talking about in the 1920s now, uh, 1910s, you know, teens. And they said that, “If a black person, professional, crosses those doors at the VA Hospital, the Klan will be there to do X, Y, and Z,” which was violence. And Dr. Moton said, “Oh, okay.” So, he called out all of the World War I black veterans – this is lore, because I was not there, nor were my parents – and the story is that they lined the highway to the VA Hospital, the black, uh, veterans, and the Klan never showed up.

JM: Yeah. It’s a proud history, there’s no question.

GP: Of Tuskegee.

JM: Absolutely.

JB: I’m going to pause.

JM: Excuse me one –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we’re back.

JM: We're back after just a short break to adjust a microphone. [10:00] Dr. Patton, you were connecting the deeper history of –

GP: Yeah. And so, to bring that full circle, in 1967 when I was in this mysterious car accident in Shorter, Alabama, uh, and I found myself in John Andrews Hospital, uh, which was on the campus, and coming through some recovery, and that's a whole other story, I wrote a piece called "Booker T. Washington in Retrospect, the Father of Black Power," which validated why I wanted to go to Tuskegee in the first place. And what people *don't* know is that the first contemporary Black Power conference was held at Tuskegee and *not* in New Jersey. And so, Tuskegee was part of my, uh, deepening my understanding of race pride and race progress.

JM: Yeah. The conference you've just mentioned is the one in '67 organized by SHRP [pronounced "sharp"]? Yeah.

GP: Uh, in Jersey?

JM: No, the one on the campus.

GP: On campus it was organized by SNCC, and I underwrote it. You're talking about the Southern Human Relations Project?

JM: Exactly.

GP: Yes, which was, uh, and we called it SHRP [pronounced "sharp"]. We underwrote it.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Uh, you have to understand my role as a SHRP organizer.

JM: We'll come to that, yeah.

GP: Okay. But it was really led by SNCC.

JM: Okay. We'll come to that in some detail. That's great. We'll talk that through. Your initial, um – obviously, you – we won't stop to do a lot of the personal history that brings you to that point, but by '61, you obviously, as you say, are kind of a race person. You're very attentive and conscious about these things. Your family has been, um, quite assertively attentive and in many different ways.

GP: All of my life.

JM: All of your life, exactly. Um, but you're also a student starting college and you do things like cheerleading –

GP: Oh, yes!

JM: And going to class and theater and all those things.

GP: Oh, yes!

JM: Um, is there much to – is there much that distinguishes that period between your arrival on the campus and then your departure to the sanitarium when you have to go for the TB period, uh, tuberculosis period? Is there much in that early period on the campus where you're closely connected to civil rights, or not?

GP: Yes, because I had to communicate back to Montgomery, and you had – the Freedom Riders had come through. Uh, that's when I learned some additional things about my family. Uh –

JM: This is the prior spring, before you entered college.

GP: Uh-huh, May 1961.

JM: Exactly.

GP: I call it the Mother's Day Massacre.

JM: Yep.

GP: Uh, and the following day, which was a school day, if I'm – well, I was at the mass meeting that they held all night.

JM: Let's back up just one sec. So, what happens is [clears throat] the Freedom Riders come into town.

GP: Right.

JM: And?

GP: And there's just all kinds of activity. The Montgomery Movement infrastructure jumped into gear. Hazel Gregory, who was a secretary, uh, to Dr. King and the Montgomery Improvement Association, uh, and dear mentor of mine, along with some other ladies – Mrs. Idessa Williams, later became Redding – uh, they all jumped into gear, uh, to rescue and provide refuge for the Freedom Riders. Telephones were abuzz with, “They're beating the *stew* out of them,” you know. “Do something!”

But not in the household where *I* was with my Aunt Chick [Nathalie Foster Elmore] and my Aunt Flora [Flora Elmore Moore], who were two schoolteachers. My grandmother, Mommy [Juanita Foster Bolden, later Washington], uh, eccentric, did not have a telephone. Okay? But my Aunt Mary [Mary Foster Thomas], who lived next door to my Aunt Chick, who had lived in Pittsburgh, was a little bit more broadminded. And so, she was a part of the Movement in somewhat of a real sense, though my Aunt Chick and Aunt Flora were, as well, in lending their cars. But they were schoolteachers, and, you know, the reprisals – uh, [15:00] as well as they were kind of status conscious, if you understand what I'm saying. They were “schoolteachers,” quote, unquote. Aunt Mary was a seamstress, also a schoolteacher, but had made a living, basically, as a seamstress and a tailoress. And her husband was self-employed, you know, as a house painter.

So, Aunt Mary comes to tell me about what's happening downtown at the Greyhound bus station, and I want to go to the mass meeting. I knew Aunt Chick was not going to take me. Because I was a child of the entire family, I went to Aunt Mary's house, called my grandparents, the Pattons, who were very much involved, and they were independent workers, had their own business. They came and got me, and, uh, so I went to that and stayed all night and all of that.

JM: Well, I have to ask you to say a little bit more, because you stayed all night because of a very complicated and difficult situation. Can you explain that – at the mass meeting?

GP: Well, as a child – I'm seventeen – uh, I knew there was terror outside, the Kluxers, as we called them. We didn't call them KKK. We called them Kluxers; my family called them the Kluxers. But as a teenager, like other teenagers in that mass meeting, we felt invincible. And the adults, uh, most of whom, knew that God was going to protect us. And see, that had been introduced and then reinforced during the Montgomery bus boycott. We *knew* there was divine intervention. So, basically, there was no fear. Now, we saw these white men walking up and down, and down and up, you know, inside. I had no idea they were police or detectives or whatever. I thought they were newspaper people. And, uh, so that was that.

And then, a youngster younger than I, Joe Lacey, uh, was summoned downstairs in the basement. And you have to see First Baptist; this is a beautiful church. And I later learned – I didn't know that night – that he was instructed to crawl through the basement window to go to his grandmother's home, which was not far, to make telephone calls for those who had telephones to let people know we were okay. And he had to crawl under the houses, and at that time, we didn't have encasements around houses. The houses were built on what I call sticks, and then later on they put aluminum around them, and then later on they bricked them, and so forth. And later on they tore them down. Um, so that I do recall – he was about fourteen,

youngster. We considered him young – I was seventeen, a senior, and the whole nine yards. I recall that. Uh, but we just sang songs and, you know, and –

JM: I think, I think that day, earlier that day, um, some of the Freedom Riders had come to one of your relatives' home and –

GP: My Aunt Chick's home.

JM: Yeah, and an integrated group of Riders.

GP: Right.

JM: And I'm interested in having you recount the reaction of your –

GP: Oh, my goodness! Um, so I had them over. I was curious. I had been up all night with them, you know. And, see, there were lots of them.

JM: So, this is the day following the mass meeting?

GP: The day following.

JM: Yeah.

GP: And, um, some of them stayed out at Reverend Solomon Seay's home, out in Madison Park, and that's another story. It's an old black community.

JM: Let's leave that story and tell me about the one in your family, at your aunt's house.

GP: So, anyway, teenagers all over the city – I don't want to make it seem like it was just me that sections of Freedom Riders came to each other's homes. And my home was selected, where I lived, and I was staying with my Aunt Chick and Flora, who were schoolteachers. And, uh, and I was enjoying them, talking about the Freedom Movement and all of that.

And when Aunt Chick came home – Flora taught in Lowndes County, which is the country, so she came home much later, a longer drive. [20:00] And Aunt Chick was very smart, you know, in her dress, you know, uh, you know. And she wore these spiked high heels and she

had a clickety-clack when she walked and poise and all of that business. And when she came home and walked through the living room and saw these black and white kids, or young adults, in, in, sitting on our sofa, I did not notice that she was, uh, disconcerted. She didn't display that.

And because of whatever affectations – and maybe I even have some of that, being a product of that – uh, she says, “Gwendolyn, come with me.” And I go to the kitchen. And I knew she was going to get cookies and lemonade. I mean that's the nice thing to do. We call them repasts. And, as we, uh, prepared the tray, Aunt Chick said to me in a very, uh, admonishing tone, “I don't want any white people in my house.”

Now, I'm a race person, had not seen many white people in my life, my *entire* life. [Someone coughs] But I saw something a little different about – it was only one white boy, and I saw something different about him. And I said, “Oh, Aunt Chick,” I say, uh, “He,” I might have used – “There are different kinds of white people. They are not like the Kluxers.” You know, I had this discussion. And she made it very clear: “As long as I have to go through the back door of white folks' houses, they are not to enter the front door of my home.” And we always made a distinction between “houses” and “home.” And I had to take that under consideration. And then, she click-clacked, and I'm following behind her, took the lemonade and the cookies out to the group, and we ate, and they stayed a little while, and then they soon left.

JM: Let me, let me ask you about your experience in, um, in the sanitarium in, um, in Lafayette, because that was –

GP: Lafayette [pronounces “La-FAY-et”]

JM: Lafayette [pronounces “La-FAY-et”], excuse me. [Laughs] Thank you. Lafayette. Lafayette, Alabama. Um, you entered the sanitarium because of tuberculosis in – was it early '63?

GP: '63, January.

JM: And were there until March of '64 or so, a year and a couple of months. And I know that, having reading some of the things you've written that allude to that experience, it was difficult, including reasons obviously related to race. Can you sort of describe the essence of your experience in those months?

GP: Well, I loved, uh, the inpatients. Uh, it was a segregated facility. You had to enter, I did, the back door, up some steps. I can still remember, at age sixty-eight, the, uh, banisters or whatever you call them, rickety. I was extremely weak. I came up in an ambulance from Tuskegee, John Andrews Hospital. Uh, I knew about tuberculosis; it was a plague. And then, being, uh, in the, uh, at John Andrews in the Isolation Unit, I had oxygen. At that time, you had a tent. You didn't have the little thing; you had a tent. And everybody was in white, all covered up, mask, head – so, I knew this was something very drastic, because I really didn't know about TB and consumption. I knew about cancer, which was called the dreaded Big C, but I did not really know about tuberculosis. I didn't even know it affected the lungs. Uh, so I'm already traumatized by this disease.

So, when I get up to Lafayette, I mean Lafayette [La-FAY-et], and it's Benson – I believe it is, I have the correct name – Sanatorium [Batson Memorial Sanitarium], the front of the building is very impressive. I have a photo of the building here in my archives at home, very impressive. Now, mind you, I have not been around white people, and [25:00] those few I was around were not authority figures. So, we ride on around, go through the back, gravel and “red dut,” as they say down South for, you know, the red dirt. And, um, the ambulance people, uh, help me out. I'm weak, weak, weak. And I go through this back door, which is a vestibule, but it served as an intake room. I knew something then was wrong.

So, after the intake and all of the paperwork, there's this vestibule. And the vestibule leads to a horizontal, perpendicular hallway. And, uh, coming in, I go to the left. There are patients in the hall on beds. There are three rooms. The first room, in which I was placed, had three beds. The second huge room I think might have had six to eight beds. You crossed that hall, and there was a little black and white TV that was smaller than the television that I ever had in any of my, uh, homes or abodes. And then, across the hall, was another huge room with about eight to ten patients.

JM: Are you describing the segregated black section of the –?

GP: And that's the woman's side.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Uh, the bathroom was – let me, if I can describe, you've got the vestibule. Then you come up to this horizontal hallway, perpendicular, and then after you pass that entrance to the hallway, there is another hallway that continues vertically, and it's massive. At least, it looked massive to me, and glistening – the floors. And on that side, you had the kitchen. And then, you had the bathroom on the other side, if I'm making sense, across the hallway. I did not know that men were on the other side of the hallway, uh, from the women's, uh, section.

So, they placed me in the three-bed room. I guess that was for the elite. And, of course, it was crowded. And, um, I guess for the first six months, with shots every day, Streptomycin, and trying to get strength, uh, I didn't really pay any attention to the overall conditions, except that I knew, when I was able to get up and walk and go to the various huge wards, I guess – I was in the private room – the two wards, I found it horrifying. And we would clean up! And I thought that was part of the therapy, because I now know it's a lung problem and I need to

strengthen. And we would clean up our own area, mop and everything, and I thought it was part of the therapy of strengthening oneself.

And so, here it is now about June. I'm stronger. And a little girl comes in with her mommy, and they're in the ward, the big – the larger ward. And I feel, uh, a responsibility to be her mentor. I had learned how to crochet. I had already known how to crochet, but I crocheted so much, I tatted, made lace, you know, I was – you know, all of that, coming from my, learning from my grandmother on my mama's side, Mommy. [Someone coughs] So, I asked to be moved to the, uh, larger ward so I could be with the little girl. Her mama was very deathly ill – never, ever, got from under the oxygen tent.

And I guess [30:00] it's about August – well, before August. No, it's August now. Yeah, it's August, and there's the march on Washington. And we see it on this little bitty black and white TV. And, of course, at that time, the state – Governor Wallace, I think, was, uh, governor – and the state would just, just take away the television. It would just go on what we called “the blink.” But I saw enough of it to, uh, discern that this was important. This was about black people, it was about our rights, it was about freedom. And then, soon after that, in September, the four little girls –

JM: In Birmingham.

GP: In Birmingham. And that came on, because we all watched the news, because I would insist, because you had to fight about what we were going to look at. A lot of them wanted to watch the little – what is it, “Search for Tomorrow” or whatever those little soap box [Dr. Patton intends “soap operas”]. But the news came on at six o'clock, so there was not a conflict. And I always wanted to watch the news. And so, I then learned – I said, “Oh, my goodness! Wow.”

So, then, I took an extremely special interest in the little girl. She was nine years old, and for the life of me, I cannot remember her name. And, by the way, we very seldom knew our last names. And it was at that point that I said, "Look, the Movement is wherever you are." I had been taught that: that the Movement is not something that's imposed. It's not an extracurricular activity. It's wherever you are. And so, that sanitarium, sanatorium, became my movement base.

And I said, "Now, we need to –," meanwhile, they were bringing magazines to us on a cart and that business. And so, my mind said, "Wonder if this place has a library?" And I asked, I said, "Is there a library in here?" And they – I think they were stunned, and, uh, and out of that, "Oh, yes!" I don't know what the motivation was, and I said, "It's probably up that shiny hall." And so, uh, one day I took the little girl by hand and I ventured. And there were maintenance people, housekeeping people, mopping and sweeping and taking care of – but we had to clean up our own. Uh, there was a game room. You know, it was, it was, it was – uh, what do you call – splendor.

There was this huge baby grand piano in what we would call a sitting room or a parlor. And I had taken music lessons all of my life, so I went there and I sat down and I started playing, [sings] "Bom, bom, bom," Chopin, C sharp, "Prelude in C Sharp Minor." And, you know, it has a real classic kind of, [sings] "Dom, dom," and all. And, of course, the white people were just stunned, if not angry.

And across from the sitting room – there was the sitting room. There was a front entrance and its vestibule – and then, on the other side of that, was the library. And I went over there. After I – after white people started looking at me peculiar, my little brain said, "Oh, no, you're not going to do this, because they'll have you up here like a toy." And I would be coming

up here playing, you know, which made me fundamentally no different than a nanny taking care of a white child at the expense of my own. So, I said, "I better stop this."

So, I go to the library and I pull out some books. And then I politely walk back down the hall. Nobody said anything to me. Uh, the doctor was in and out, so he was like not a real participant. And I guess this was the head nurse, or whoever was in charge, but she was a woman. And she came to talk to me, quietly, that I was not to do thus-and-so, going up to the library.

JM: White woman?

GP: White woman and all of her white starch – kind of reminded me, later on, the nurse that flew over the cuckoo's nest. [Laughter] Uh, and I told her that, "I am a college student, and this is a little girl. And y'all need to work out some kind of arrangement for me and this child to go to the library." [35:00] And I guess there was a human inkling in her. And so, she arranged on Jim Crow terms for me and the little girl to go to the library. I can't remember what days, but we would go, and nobody would be in there but us. And we could look and pull the books and maybe stay for about thirty minutes and, uh, and read the books, because we couldn't bring them back. We could bring magazines, but not the books. And sit up there and read the books – I'd read her children's stories or whatever. And so, that was my first – not my first protest, but that was –.

And then, secondly, I got tired of the food. They always gave us "boil up" food. And what I mean by "boil up" food, uh, greens, which were healthy – I'm not opposed to that – but boil up food, potatoes, stew. And, uh, I asked one day, I said, "Uh, how come we eat all of this kind of food? Don't y'all have some other kinds of food?" And whatever, whoever this nurse was, she said, "Well, Gwen, you, you probably won't like this food." I said, "Well, what is it?"

She said, “Well, we’re having oyster stew.” I said, “Made with cream or milk?” And she said, “Oh, you –?” I said, “Yes ma’am.” I was polite. I said, uh, “I’d like to see the menu. And I think we ought to have a chance to look at the menu and see what you all are serving, totally, and put it on our little bulletin board.”

And after that, she didn’t say anything, stunned. They didn’t know what to do. They were ready to hurry up and get me out of there. And then, I decided I’d go to the kitchen. Because, see, when you walked down the little colored section into the main expanse of hallway, the kitchen was right there, not too far away. And I went in the kitchen and looked. And by that time, I guess I had a reputation, because nobody admonished me, nobody threatened me, nobody insulted me. They were polite. And I looked and looked and looked and saw what they saw. And then, they started posting the menu. So, when they had perch fish as opposed to whiting, when they had baked fish instead of fried fish, you know, I would choose, you know, other – and tried to encourage my, uh, fellow patients to do likewise.

Now, the other thing that was interesting about the sanatorium, they had a chapel – you know, a little, uh, prayer kind of room – on the glistening hallway. We had to go outdoors. And we would go outdoors and sit at this wooden table under a tree. I think it was a pecan tree. And that’s where we had our services. We never had a minister. We would conduct our own services. And the songs were always – one I remember most. [Singing] “Way over yonder where Jesus is, way over yonder where Jesus is, I’ve got a mother over yonder, way over,” I remember that, because my mother had passed. And, uh, I learned a whole lot of new songs that we never sang in the Baptist churches here in Montgomery. They were real, uh – I used to call them dirges of Christian music. Uh, they were sad and they were always about death. So, anyway, that had an impact on me.

JM: Let me ask about all this. You obviously were polite and, and, though youthful, a young adult, obviously had an air of confidence and assertion about yourself. Why do you think they tolerated you and those demands that you made, given what they might have said?

GP: I think that they were impressed with my intelligence. Uh, I think that they had made the assumption that black people were ignorant and stupid. And when they could see that I would discuss with them – I wasn't determined, I wasn't not trying to raise them [40:00] nor lift their consciousness – no, that was not – you know, but I would say things: “Why is it important for you to keep black people and little children from learning?” And I think they had no answers or couldn't answer. And, uh, and they knew I was going to be temporary. So, they were really figuring on how to get me out of there and would tolerate me and, I think to a certain extent, respect me at the same time. Because I made dollies and, uh, stuffed, stuffed, uh, stuffed – what do you call – ducks, you know, little stuffed animals.

JM: Oh, yeah.

GP: And then, my folks were sending me pajamas. You see, I also had that extended, uh, support base. I'm sure they had read about me, my grandparents, and they knew, also, that if something happened to me wrong, there would be at least some level of hell to play, or to pay. And, uh, whenever there were visiting times, my folks came. Tuskegee people came. So, I think it's that support base as well. And, uh, and I would make ducks and give them to them.

JM: Um-hmm.

GP: You know, the little head nurse who would come in all the time, I gave her a little duck. Uh, the doctor – I used to make these hard-to-crochet, um, hearts. You know, I knew how to stitch and double stitch and pickup stitch and, uh, and then stuff them, you know, get satin and

then stuff it with cotton. And I would make little ones and I would give them to the doctors and, you know, and people like that.

JM: Yeah. Thank you for that description of the –

GP: And, by the way, I was the only one with a college education.

JM: Yes.

GP: Well, with some, because I had not graduated.

JM: Yes.

JB: Joe, let's pause for a second.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: That was lovely.

JB: We're rolling again.

JM: We're back after a short break. [Someone coughs] Uh, Dr. Patton, let me ask you about, um, about arriving back on the Tuskegee campus in the fall of, uh, of '64. Um, it's a, it's a campus now that SNCC folks are visiting.

GP: Everywhere.

JM: Pick up the, pick up the story with what you came back to.

GP: Well, when I came back, uh, I had a roommate – cannot think of her name. But tuberculosis was considered like a plague, and she did not want to be my roommate. She was scared to death. I was one big fat disease. And, um, that bothered me to some extent, but it didn't, because the community in Montgomery embraced me. I got a job in a cleaners, uh, between, you know, convalescing. And, uh, I had sense of humor. My folks loved me. They

would make it their business to drink a, a glass of water from my glass of water. You know, they didn't put any, uh, disinfectant in the water.

And so, I have to always have this background story: So, one day I'm at – I'm staying – where am I? I'm staying with Mommy. But I'm at my Cousin Flora and Aunt Chick's, the la-de-dah teachers, and, uh, and, uh, and I'm eating there and I'm washing dishes and I pour some, uh, Clorox in the water. And they say, "Gwen, you don't have to do that," you know, being very – what do you call – somewhat paternalistic and caring and loving. I say, "Oh, yes, I do." And they said, "No, no, we love you. That's okay." I said, "I don't need to catch a cold from one of y'all. I might get TB again!" And they all laughed. So, I kind of, you know – so, I was prepared.

But when this roommate acted such a fool and trying to make me into a big fat germ, I asked for her to leave or to put me somewhere else. And so, the school – I was in Travis Hall [Dr. Patton intends to say Tantum Hall], which is the honor dorm – so, the school moved her. So, I was – I had my own room, you see, so I was really privileged. Everybody else had a roommate but me. So, when the SNCC people would come, the women, they could all stay in my room! And they did. And they all knew I'd had TB and – you know. And they never made an issue out of it. You know, whatever cake my grandmama sent, they ate it. If I bit off of it, they bit, and all. So, it was that sisterhood that gave me even further strength from the greater community. [45:00]

JM: What did you make of these – let me ask, what did you make of these SNCC women?

GP: They were tough. They were tough! Committed, resolute, but sometimes, uh, I thought that they – sometimes I thought maybe I was too deep, you know, that maybe there was

something wrong with the way I was thinking, because I was never for integration, *ever*, in my life.

JM: What were you for instead?

GP: Desegregation. Equal opportunity. Fairness. Justice. And see, that goes all the way back to when I was in high school. I graduated from high school in Montgomery. And they wanted me to go to the University of Alabama, because I –

JM: “They” being –?

GP: The school authorities, uh, the principal and my history teacher and my government teacher and all – because I had, because I was “up,” from “up North.”

JM: It’s still a black high school at that point.

GP: Yeah, but I’m in a black community up there.

JM: Yes. Yes.

GP: But they don’t see that. They saw that I was from – even though they don’t even know about Inkster [outside Detroit], but Detroit, so they made these assumptions. And, uh, so they assumed that I would know how to interact with white people and not be frightened or afraid or whatever, which I would not have been. But I didn’t see the sense of – going to the University of Alabama for *what*? How has the University of Alabama distinguished itself? You know, all of my life I’ve learned about George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, yams and peanuts and science. You know? What –? [Sighs]

So when they said, “Well, there’s football and Bear Bryant;” I said, “Oh, can I be a cheerleader?” And they considered that frivolous, and I wanted to be the world’s best cheerleader. I mean that was, like, an avocation of mine before I was in this mysterious car

accident. So, they said, “Don’t be frivolous, Gwen. Don’t be silly.” So, when they said that, I said, “Well, I’m not going up there.”

So, getting back, if I can make the story whole, I was never for integration for the sake of integration. And, then, you have to also understand my upbringing. You know, I didn’t think I learned any better sitting next to a white child. You know, that was not my paradigm. I didn’t define myself in juxtaposition to white people. And that was reinforced with my grandmother, which goes all the way back to ’56 on the bus boycott – I mean on the bus.

JM: After the boycott.

GP: After the boycott.

JM: Right.

GP: And she always sat in the back, and I would always sit up in the front and aggravate white folks, they were sitting there, squirming and pushing and all, being a kid. I’m fourteen at that time, fifteen. And one day, there were no white folks on the bus, so I went and sat in the back with Mommy. I said, “We walked all these years, all these days you walked, and my mama and daddy sent money and shoes and doo-dah-to-doo, and you *still* sit in the back!” I thought *she* was capitulating, that she – I knew she was a block captain, I knew she was in the Movement, I knew she thought voting was important. [Coughs] But I still thought, “Maybe *you* are afraid of white folks in a certain kind of way.”

And she, very ladylike, extremely ladylike, who had far more class than my la-de-dah teacher relatives, and she always called me Gwendolyn, the whole name, not Gwen, but Gwendolyn, very proper. Uh, and she said, “Gwendolyn, the bus boycott was not about sitting next to white people. It was about sitting *anywhere you please*. And I am *pleased* to sit here.” And I had to sit back and take that in, which altered my whole thought process.

So, when I meet SNCC people, all the men and women, in '64 – this is before Black Power – and they were about integrating and thus-and-so, I had a different kind of perspective. But I knew these were some good people. They were dedicated. And maybe I needed to look at my perspective, as well, to understand, be self-critical, [50:00] which never – but did not – I did not alter. Because the more I saw, the more I said, “This is silly.”

And it began with the desegregation of schools in Macon County. You know, they were getting the middle class kids, the professional children, to integrate the white school, which was downtown Tuskegee, when the poor black and the poor working folks *lived* in downtown Tuskegee so they could have – what – walking distances to the white folks' homes to clean up, take care of the chillen [Dr. Patton's purposeful pronunciation], and the husbands to be the yardman or the handyman. So, why are we going way over here in a bourgeois subdivision, which is going to require busing, when we've got black chillen [Dr. Patton's purposeful pronunciation] right over here? So, that was my first, “Oh, no, it ain't about integration.”

No, these folks – and then, at Tuskegee, you had the Negro swimming pool, where the professional, you know, chillen, and the, uh, VA and Tuskegee Institute chillen – and I use that word, uh, purposely – swam in the Negro pool, let's say on a Monday and a Wednesday, and the poor and the working class Negro children swam in the same pool on a Tuesday and a Thursday. So, I saw right away the class problem in the caste. And I had to just really struggle with this thing, integration, and integration for whom? And so, I just had a different perspective.

JM: Sure. Let me ask about – [clears throat] some of these, some of these very thoughts are right at the front of your mind, I imagine, when you are sorting out with SNCC the creation on campus of TIAL.

GP: Right.

JM: In early '65.

GP: Yeah, I didn't believe in submerging. And, see, that comes, goes all the way back –

JM: Yeah, describe that, “didn't believe in submerging,” a little more. Can you explain that in a little bit more detail?

GP: You should not – you should not take the identity of a grassroots organization. You should not subsume them. As an organizer, you should do everything to lift them up so they can have their *own* identity, their *own* structure, their *own* sense of how they're going to run that community organization. Now, that didn't come to me, uh, as a brilliant thought. That came to me as a result of MIA [Montgomery Improvement Association].

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference formed in 1957 at my church – I talk Southern, I like Southern “chuch,” we say “chuch” – uh, Hutchison Missionary Baptist Church, and they wanted the MIA to become a *chapter*, an SCLC chapter. And my grandparents and the folks whom I, uh, respected and had worked with [clears throat] as a child and as a teenager said, “No. It was a Montgomery Improvement Association that spearheaded and directed and kept together the three hundred and eighty-one days we walked. We are not going to give up that identity.” And to this very day, we have *never* had an SCLC chapter. But we still have MIA.

So, I'm coming from that experience and bringing it to SNCC. Now, we *have* an organization. It's called the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League, TIAL. We were here before you got here. We were involved in direct action. I was a direct action chair. You know, we've got a movement. We're not only fighting the *race* question, we're fighting the *class* question within black people, which they had *not a clue*, because they assume all black folk were alike, and we saw the sharp distinctions.

Uh, Dr. Foster, [clears throat] who was president of Tuskegee, and I have him on, uh, video, by the way, uh, in the archives, would have a Christmas party. See, Tuskegee was really a very bourgeois school. We didn't wash. We had a laundry on campus, and they would come and collect our clothing and our linen and wash it and bring it back. I mean, it was a very "bourgie" school, as close to a prep school as you could get. [55:00] But Dr. Foster, the president, would have the laundry people, the maintenance people, uh, the, the, uh, the help on, uh, the grounds – not the grounds superintendent, you know, he was in the bourgie class – at one Christmas party, and then the professional and the VA people at another Christmas party.

[Clears throat]

So, when I became student body president, which I'm leaping, I would always talk to him about cost effectiveness. And that became a principle of mine as we interacted, and we became very close. I said, "You know, it costs far more money [clears throat] for you to have two distinct Christmas parties than if you had one." And he, being a businessman, you know, [laughs] with a PhD, probably a Masters in business – I don't know what his PhD was in, because I don't know if they had PhDs in business at the time – he could look at the bottom line. And he began to reason with me, and soon afterwards we almost became peers. But I respected him as an authority.

JM: Yeah.

GP: And, plus, he had impeccable grammar. In fact, all of the black presidents – not all, but many – would send their writings or speeches to him for him to proofread and edit and all that, and I was impressed, you know, with his, uh, his grammar.

JM: There's so much activity on the campus in the fall of '64, early '65, but let me take the story to, um, to March, March '65. Um, your election as president will follow, but you are a

very significant figure in organizing inside TIAL and a campus figure. And, um, can you tell the story of those several weeks in March, from Bloody Sunday through the Alabama state capitol?

GP: Well. [Clears throat]

JM: Well, you'll see the Alabama state capitol a couple of times, because –

GP: Yeah, the march that didn't turn around.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Uh, Tuskegee had become a liberated zone.

JM: By which you mean –? How did it feel?

GP: SNCC stayed wherever they wanted to, they went to classes, they ate in the dining hall – uh, you know, the whole nine yards.

JM: So, that is to say, that the administration had given up an effort to –

GP: Had totally given up.

JM: Right.

GP: And we had, uh, faculty support – Jean Wiley, Maggie Magee, uh, Dean [Richard] Wasserstrom. Uh, it was a very, uh, complex situation, because Dr. Foster had hired all of these white people who were progressive, which always fascinated me, because most white people who come to black college campuses are progressives, you know. Uh, and Jean Wiley was black. Uh, so they displaced the black professionals. I'll never forget that. So, I had a meeting, later on when I was student body president, of black and white professors getting together to see if we could work this thing through, because the black professors were becoming nationalists, you know. And the white professors were our buddies, you know, they, you know. So, anyway, that's another story.

But prior to, uh, uh, the march from Selma to Montgomery, SNCC, as I said, was everywhere on campus and had freedom, you know. And, uh, Dr. Foster, really not knowing what to do, and Tuskegee being a quasi-private and public institution, the state had no authority, you know, Governor Wallace and the state apparatus. [Clears throat] So, uh, students would go to Lowndes County, go to Dallas County, you know, and help organize. And that made sense to us, because we were now toying with the whole concept that education has to be relevant. And if you're not serving the community, then what good does it mean for you to get a degree?

And, uh, so we would win those arguments intellectually, and we played excellent chess. I was a real excellent bridge player. You know, so it was all of that, if you can see the complexity [1:00:00] of what we were becoming. Plus, our professors had us read, uh, de Tocqueville. When you read that, I mean, how are you supposed to come out of that? You know? And then we had – Negro history was compulsory, you know. [Laughs] So, when you read, uh, Du Bois, whatever his limitations, or Booker T., whatever his limitations, how are you supposed to come out of that? I mean, I thought education was to inform you and change your behavior. And so, it changed our behavior to be more revolutionary.

You know, uh, I dealt with the whole question of homosexuality. In fact, my sophomore paper was on homosexuality. I went to look that up in the card catalogue at the time, and it always said “deviant behavior.” And I had a cousin, Bobbie, uh, who lived with me while I was in Inkster, at Wayne State [University] in library science, who was in love with a neighborhood family friend that my brother and I knew was a sissy, because that's what we called him, a sissy. His name was Junior; his name was Robert Harris. They've both died, so I can call their names. And we *loved* Junior. We called him Junior and we loved him. But we could not understand why Bobbie couldn't see that he was a sissy. We didn't know gay; gay was not a term. And,

anyhow, she got pregnant, so we said, “Well, maybe he ain’t,” right? We – you know. And they had a son and, uh, they got married.

So, I’m still close to Junior, and I ask him one day, “Are you a homosexual?” And he looked at me and admitted it. So, I said, “I want to write a paper on this,” I said, “Because when I look in the card catalogue, all I see is ‘deviant behavior.’ And you ain’t deviant to me. You’re a lot of fun. I love you. You know, so tell me.” That’s when he told me about the Mattachine Press [“Mattachine Review”] in San Francisco. That’s when he told me a book, something with, uh, “Twilight,” I can’t recall. It was a, uh, almost like a Bible to the, uh, gay world, male gay. Uh, “Twilight” or something, it had something to do with stars. And he told me what to read and Mattachine Press [“Mattachine Review”] and San Francisco and all of that business. So, I’m open to *that* now.

I’m not quite opened up to lesbians just yet, because – and we called them dykes then, “bull dykers” or dykes. But I was opened up to homosexuality. And that’s when I learned – when I read about it, that’s when I learned about Lesbos. I’ll never forget that. And then, I learned the clinical term if you – I shouldn’t use the word “clinical,” the, uh, what is – I shouldn’t use that term at all. Lesbos lesbian. So, I began to at least peek through that.

So, I don’t know how I got to this, but coming to SNCC, uh, I don’t know if they were so much in the heat of the day, uh, that they didn’t do a lot of thinking or contemplation like I did and maybe others, that they weren’t quite there.

JM: This –

JB: [uncertain short remark]

JM: Can we pause for just a moment? Excuse me.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

GP: Okay. Those facts off the record?

JM: Excuse me, I'm sorry. Excuse me.

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Okay, we're back. Please.

GP: Well, I have to be careful how I say this. So, in TIAL we had these kinds of discussions about people, personalities, identities, lifestyle. George Ware, who was from Buffalo, New York; George Davis, who was at that time from Providence, Rhode Island; Sammy Young, who had gone to school, uh, up in New Hampshire – Andover? No, he didn't go to Andover. He went to one of those prep schools.

JM: These are enrolled students at Tuskegee.

GP: Enrolled, my classmates.

JM: Who were part of your circle.

GP: My peers.

JM: Exactly, right.

GP: Uh, the girls were Ruby Taylor, who was basically – she was from the black belt here in Alabama, Pickens County. Other girls: Kathleen Neal, later Cleaver, was in and out. She had been to a prep school. You know, in other words, there was a broader – what do you call – perspective and different levels on the spectrum of understanding. And we could have [1:05:00] those discussions within TIAL. SNCC was so caught up in the heat of the day that we very seldom had philosophical discussions at that time.

JM: Much more tactical.

GP: Yeah, much more tactical: how to dealing with SCLC; they, you know, usurping; grassroots organizing, day in/day out; drudgery. You come home. You're tired. You know,

you've been beaten, you know, by a Kluxer or a sympathizer, a Klux sympathizer. You know, and so you didn't have that luxury. Uh, even though SNCC did do a great deal of talking, or as we would say, "gret deal of talkin,'" but it was all about [speaking in flat voice], "Who are you? Where do you come from?" And I don't know what that was about. It was an integrated group.

JM: It sounds like you're just about, just about to crystallize that notion of the scholar-activist.

GP: Oh, yeah, we had done that.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

GP: You know, you couldn't be dumb. You know, you simply could not be dumb. You could not be in the struggle, in the Movement, if you were not doing well in school. The Movement could *not* have, uh, insolent, uh – I hate to use the word "dumb," but that's, you know, the vernacular – uh, but undisciplined, uh, unaware kinds of people.

JM: Didn't you have to once, on that point, uh, answer – was it Stokely Carmichael who put that question to you – about is your education really valuable, shouldn't you drop out and –?

GP: Oh, yes! Oh, yes. Oh, oh, Stokely! Stokely really tried to get all, because he was impressed with Tuskegee kids. Uh, plus, we had also told the administration, "This is what we are going to do. You know, we are Freedom Fighters. This institution has prepared us to be Freedom Fighters." I mean, we were just, not in arrogant terms, but in rational terms, I mean, "What do you expect?" And Stokely was impressed with that. I'm sure they had that at Howard [University]. And it looked like they could have had it at Howard even better, because they had a president who was already – Thurgood Marshall and all of that. And perhaps they were intellects, but they dealt with it as an elitism thing. I know where Stokely and Thelwell and all of them were coming from.

So, and they had – also SNCC people, and SNCC men, in particular, had almost the same kind of attitude towards Southern blacks as a variation of how those white folks saw me at the sanatorium. We were Southern. We were supposed to be country. They had stereotyped us not to be deep thinkers, let alone make analysis. Uh, and I think that kind of set them aback. And Stokely, uh, wanted everybody to drop out and join SNCC. And I confronted him, I say, “You went back to Howard and got your degree. How dare you do that?”

Because also I saw a practical side. We needed the – the same reason that I had to tell Bettina Aptheker when she came down back in some years, so I guess that was '66, prior to my breaking my leg. And she was astonished that we had an ROTC and that we weren't picketing. And I said, “Oh, no, no, no, Bettina.” And I became very close, and to her father and her mother. I said, “These kids go to school.”

Oh, I know what it was! Bettina had come down, and we had this *grand parade* of all these ROTC folk, and, uh, General [Daniel] “Chappie” James [Jr.] was leading, or General Benjamin O. Davis, because they both were Tuskegee Airmen and Tuskegee graduates. And Bettina was horrified! And, uh, I said, “No, no, no, Bettina.” I said, “A lot of these students here need ROTC to get scholarships. It's just that simple.” So, it was a practical thing that Tuskegee kids had, as well as a philosophical underpinning. And I don't think SNCC people understood that very well, nor did antiwar people later. Because we had one of the best draft counseling centers. You know, we knew how to do CO, conscientious objectors.

JM: We're going to get to that. [1:10:00]

GP: Okay.

JM: Let me –

GP: But getting back to Stokely, Stokely could not argue.

JM: Even let me take you back, just for, just for, just for economy of time, because I know that we're pressing against your day and when you need to leave this interview. So, let me have you talk about that march of '65, from Bloody Sunday through – you will go ultimately, well, you'll go on Wednesday from buses, on buses from Tuskegee to Montgomery, and then you will go and make the march also?

GP: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Yes. So, tell me about that, those critical days.

GP: Okay. We're organizing for the march, uh, with SNCC people in Dallas County and so forth. I'm in meetings, as direct action chair of TIAL, with Jim Forman and others, Hosea, uh, Dr. King and all, in Birmingham, at A.G. Gaston Motel, and it was decided that we were going to leave, kick off that Sunday, and we were going to march until we got to Montgomery. We thought it was going to be three days, [laughs] you know, we had no idea. And, uh, and that had been decided democratically. So, even though we were philosophical, we were practical, we were also idealistic. This is what we *had decided*. So, we come back to Tuskegee and we are going to organize the east black belt.

JM: East black belt, right.

GP: Okay? Not only Tuskegee, Macon County, but also Bullock County [Alabama], which included Union Springs, which is a black belt county. And so, Sammy takes the lead in that, Sammy Young, uh, raising money and stopping cars on what we called Campus Avenue, the main thoroughfare at the stoplight, collecting buckets of money. See, we were also very organized.

We were far more organized than SNCC, by the way, in terms of logistics. I was so concerned about the scholar-activist concept that you could not cut classes and go on a

demonstration. So, we had to figure out who had cars. We didn't have that many cars, so we had to figure that out and do a grid, you know, a matrix or whatever. And you would go and picket downtown at the supermarket or the registrar's office every hour – we had transportation every hour on the hour, so you would not miss a class. SNCC was just, I mean, just, I mean, just like, uh, what do you call, uh, startled, if you will.

But Forman, who *is* an organizer and a tactician, marveled at it, and so, he really became the, uh, the mentor for TIAL kids on campus. Stokely soon left and went to Lowndes County, because he couldn't deal with the rural, you understand. The stereotype fit. Oh, I don't know if I want this on the record or not. But let – that's an assumption on my part. And they were practical people, deep common sense, you know, self-taught, were philosophical, still are – and their way of being philosophical: "Let me study that." That meant they were going to go in deep thought, think out all of the possibilities, you know, the obstacles and so forth. And I think people romanticize that. But anyway, Forman became *the* key person at Tuskegee, and Stokely became *the* key person in Lowndes County, for whatever reasons.

So, Bloody Sunday happened, and we see it on television in the dorm, uh, because we were not there then. And we were horrified, like the rest of the nation and the world. So, we're really going, we really, we really, we've got to really gear up, get our stuff organized, organize the community, get cars. You know, we're going to Montgomery! We're going to meet them and, uh – because we thought it was going to be Wednesday. You have to remember three days; we thought it'd take three or four days.

And, uh, that Tuesday, I think it was, Dr. King knelt, prayed, and turned around. Unprincipled! It had been *agreed* upon by the collective that we were going to do this march. Naïve youngsters: "How could he do that? He promised!" I mean, we almost went into

infantile, you know, behavior. “He *promised!*” [1:15:00] You know how little children: “But you promised! How can you break your promise?” I mean, we were – then we became fortified.

JM: But you were very angry.

GP: Oh, I was mad as hell. That night –

JM: Tuesday night.

GP: Judge Johnson, Frank Johnson – they just put a big thing up there, and I give him credit, because he did a lot of things *subsequently*, you know, around mental health and jails and so forth, his pen was a mighty sword – issued this injunction. I was too angry. And Dr. Foster – and I’m still being called in. Oh, we had deposed the student body president, because he was from New York and he was not a part of the Movement and would not put the student government at the disposal of the Movement. So, George Ware, from Buffalo – and this other guy was from New York City – deposed him, and George Ware assumed, uh –

JM: Control of the student government.

GP: Student government. But he had no power, because he couldn’t deal with the money or anything, right? But at least we had a space. [Clears throat] And George was in graduate school, chemistry – he was brilliant, brilliant! Still is brilliant. But Dr. Foster, uh, uh, chose to deal with me – a woman, had TB, you know, whatever his thing. He thought I was a little bit more malleable, not knowing where I was coming from. And, uh, and so, he called me in. I’m direct action of TIAL, too, so I gave him the hook.

And he said, “Gwen, you cannot march. There is an injunction.” We said, “An injunction? What is that, a piece of paper?” And he showed it to me, and I looked at it. And I looked at it and I said, “Oh, okay.” And he had copies made and put it in the dining hall on the chairs. But we had already organized this caravan and the buses. So, uh, I paid him no mind, no

attention, nor that piece of paper. I didn't even read the piece of paper, but George Ware read the paper, brilliant.

So, we get on up and we tell him, we tell him, I said, "We're going. Now, either you come and go with us –" we had organized the cafeteria workers, and I'm sure Dr. Foster had something to do with that. But we had organized them, and if he had not agreed, there would have been a little strike by them. And my buses came; we had paid for them. The cars – the community was organized. We must have had about thirty or forty cars in the caravan, because we believed in organizing totally. That was my whole thing, because I had come what – from the Montgomery bus boycott. You've got to have – the word at that time was a "base." And the cafeteria folks fixed us little bologna sandwiches and an apple and a little paper thing of juice and so forth. And we come on down to Montgomery!

JM: It's on Wednesday the tenth.

GP: Wednesday the tenth. Forman's book chronicles it very, very well. And, uh, so here we are in Montgomery. George had read, Ware – and perhaps George Davis, too – had read the injunction very well, and it said *nothing* about a march coming from Macon County to Montgomery. It was only an injunction from Selma to Montgomery. So, they were able to play the legal. Meanwhile, of course, they put us in jail. And, uh, you know, Dr. King and them are furious with us. And this Montgomery community turns on us, the *bourgies*, at Dexter [Avenue Baptist Church]. That's a whole other story! They never had a mass meeting at Dexter!

And I can tell you a whole story between Dexter and First Baptist, where we were kept out, kept all night in 1961 with the Freedom Riders, and how those two churches split. Dexter was an offshoot of First Baptist, a very lovely, beautiful church, ornate, pipe organ, terra cotta ceilings, you know, stained glass windows.

The preacher there, who did all of that, was called Reverend Stokes. He was a mortician [clears throat] but he was a race man. And if you go there to this day, he put those stained windows up, the pews from Italy, the whole nine – the pulpit. If you look at the window, one of the stained, huge – there is John the Baptist baptizing Jesus, right? And above that pane is Reverend Stokes. [1:20:00] Okay? You hear me talking about a race man? And, uh, so I have all these great stories. And when you go in there, uh, the church, by the way, the architect was from Tuskegee. Uh, the ceiling, the attic, is eight feet in depth.

So, down the road apiece, in which my grandfather built, one little town was called New Town – initially was all plantation. And so all of the folks out on, down the hill, what they call North Montgomery, Powder Town [Dr. Patton intends to say Pumpkin Town], New Town – and my granddaddy built a lot of those little shotgun houses – [someone coughs] uh, would come up to the church with their overalls and whatever.

And then, you got – now, you're getting a few little doctors – well, not too many doctors, no lawyers, but you're getting these la-de-dah schoolteachers, and they don't want to be bothered with those field hands. So, they get angry and go to Dexter, which is “downtown” and right up the street. All of this affectation, this status foolishness, and for years, families was like – uh, what do you call, when you have family feuds, family split, you know, based on superficial class stuff?

And it was only until Dr. King, who became pastor at Dexter – and they did not support *nothing, absolutely nothing*, the high-falootings – became dear friends to Reverend Abernathy, who talks with a diphthong, [imitates Reverend Abernathy], from black belt – I think he was from Marion, Perry County. They became close, then the churches became close, and then families became close. That's the story behind Dexter.

So, here we are on a March, cold, rainy, drizzly night, and we take refuge.

JM: Because you asked to see the governor. He refuses.

GP: Oh, he puts George Davis and all of them in jail!

JM: *And* I've got to say a couple of other things here. Tell, recount for this tape how many people you mobilized from the campus.

GP: Uh, I think we had twenty three hundred students at the time. That I remember. About fifteen hundred.

JM: Probably about fifteen hundred in Montgomery.

GP: Yeah.

JM: That's extraordinary.

GP: All we had to do – we had it organized. We would be in the dining hall, and we would begin to stomp our feet on the floor. And that meant we had to all go to the valley, because we were about to have a mass meeting. You know, and everything was done democratically. We had to vote on everything, you know, all of that. We were not involved in iconic leadership. Uh, there was no thing around women that I knew about at the time. Uh, it was all about if you had the skills, the analysis, if you could persuade, you know, uh, not so much persuasion but persuasion by reason, you know, then you became a leader.

JM: Take me back to Dexter.

GP: So, for some reason, the church was open. I don't who – if they were locking churches or not at that time – or if somebody broke it. I don't know. But we were in Dexter.

JM: As a refuge of sorts.

GP: As a refuge, yeah. It was cold. It was drizzling. We had no bathroom. You know, Forman does the great pee-in. And all of these little silly tactics that the state troopers would do,

and then the city police and the county and, you know, they're playing all silly games. And we're about tired and tired of fooling around with all of their little foolishness, the authorities' foolishness. So, we go to Dexter, Dr. King's church. And we're in there, and we wake up – sleep anywhere, on the floor, on the pews. The water – the toilets won't flush. It's colder in there than it was outside; they'd cut the heat off. You know, the lights wouldn't cut on. It was awful. Then we decided, "Well, we're going to take over this."

JM: And you have to tell me, have to tell the tape, how it was those things got cut off.

GP: The Deacons did it! The Deacons did it. I even – I won't call names, uh, because they have, uh – what do you call, uh, gone through absolution?

JB: Redeemed themselves.

GP: Yeah, redeemed themselves. So, it's no need in calling names. But I was furious! So, instead of leaving the church, we're going to stay there, because the cops were outside the church. And that's when Alabama State students came and served as [1:25:00] a buffer. Uh, but we still – after we came outside, we still held the church, because we had big meetings down there.

And there was this big meeting discussion between George Ware and Forman. And George had – he was older, he was a grad student. And George, I think, was looking out for the protection of the students, so he got into a whole, uh, state of mind as an adult. And Forman had manipulated us children, and here we are, you know, stuck, can't get back to Tuskegee. It's cold. They're in jail. So, George became protective, paternalistic, as an adult over these little undergrads, and Forman was a manipulator.

Well, I didn't see it that way at all! So, I took issue with George Ware. You know, I said, "No, we're grown. We knew precisely what we were doing. We knew the risks." You

know. And I think that was part of how I got elected student body president. You know, “How dare you be condescending? We’re not sheep. We’re scholars. And this is what we wanted to do. Nobody was killed.” So, that was a turning point. And we call that the march that wouldn’t turn around.

And some kids have researched the archives and my papers and have won state history awards. One kid in particular in New Mexico, his mama – his grandmother lives here, and he’s a military kid and he knew of Tuskegee. Because, see, we had organized the ROTC, and during my administration, they were my personal bodyguards, okay? You know, and where was the munitions shack – oh, yeah, we knew all of that. Bettina didn’t even know where I was coming from, or where Tuskegee kids were coming from. And, uh, so this young kid – and I read his paper at the state archives as a presentation – uh, his father knew a Tuskegee grad, ROTC grad, and he told him about the march that wouldn’t turn around. I’d never used that name. That name came from this youngster.

JM: So, that’s where that came from. Yeah. Yeah. Let me ask about your – well, actually, John, let’s pause for a minute [and switch tracks].

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we’re rolling again.

JM: Took a short break.

GP: Okay. Uh, the march that wouldn’t turn around – because we had said it was to be a march, and Tuskegee students, led by Sammy Young, who was one of the great organizers, but it was a whole committee, uh, buses and cars, to be true to what we had said, it was a relay march. People in cars would get out, like in the middle of the caravan, would get out and walk, and then the cars behind would come up, pick *them* up, students would get out. So, we literally held to

our word that it was a march. And then this youngster, uh, dubbed it or entitled it “the march that wouldn’t turn around.”

JM: Nice. Okay, let’s take a short break.

GP: Okey, dokey.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We’re cooking.

JM: Okay, we’re back after a break, about five or ten minutes, and we’ll do a last segment here to finish up. Dr. Patton, thanks so much for your patience in hanging in there with us. It’s a – I know it’s a lot of hard work in your chair. Uh, let me have you, if you would –

GP: That’s my postman.

JM: I’m sorry? Oh, that was – I think the mail carrier just came to the front door. That was the noise we heard. Um, if you could talk a little bit about, um – think about the period from spring ’65 forward, especially into ’66, I guess, the changes that, um, will quickly kind of, um, reshape, uh, SNCC, um, and how you continued to push your thinking about the question of social change, race, in the United States.

GP: Oh, that’s a tall order.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Uh, I’ll try to be brief. If you look at *Eyes on the Prize*, and it recaptures [1:30:00] the Selma to Montgomery March, you will see in Lowndes County, which was the greatest – the longest stretch and has been the most overlooked; it’s Selma to Montgomery, when it ought to read Selma to Lowndes to Montgomery. And I’ve always resonated with the grassroots people. And as you look at that, you see a lot of people on the side. Those were Lowndes County people and some SNCC people.

I was on the march initially. Uh, being an organizer, and perhaps a tacticianer, my greatest concern was how were the people going to eat, how were they going to go to the bathroom. So, my little brain told me, “Well, Tuskegee feeds twenty-three hundred students every day. Surely they ought to be able to prepare meals for the marchers.” And so, I went and talked to Dr. Foster about that, the president, and though we could not budget much money – and I had been on the march and saw the food, stayed overnight one night in one of the campsites. Len Chandler was there. I remember him so well. And I said, “I can’t take this food anymore.”

So, I guess my sensibilities of how I was raised as a black middle, solid middle class, and in the black caste, probably upper middle class, so my sensibilities – and I’ve always – and I was taught not to make distinctions among people. People, uh, are a product of their circumstances. And that’s a whole other philosophical, uh, influence that my father, as well as my extended family, uh, instilled in me: not to make a difference.

But I was tired of that food, and Tuskegee did provide a meal – I’ll never forget it – of barbequed chicken. I was so pleased at Dr. Foster, because I began to really feel now that he really understood the depth of what we were trying to do, and it was really a positive reflection of how we had been taught, uh, what our purpose was, our mission, uh, the Christian ethic to care for the least of these, Matthew 25. So, anyway, I just had to bring that in, because that’s still very poignant in my mind. And we didn’t eat the stewed, like, the boil-up food that I had seen in the sanatorium.

So, the march is over. Lowndes County has a rich, rich movement history, from slavery times to Reconstruction all the way up. They were proud people, still are. And I thought they were being cheapened, uh, not fully understood and not respected for their deep, deep wisdom. So, we’re having these great discussions, uh, with TIAL at Tuskegee and SNCC people and Jim

Forman in particular. We finally had come to the, to the, to the, to the, I don't – it's not a conclusion, but to the point that there is a fundamental distinction between integration and desegregation. And then, desegregation led to self-determination. [1:35:00]

Uh, we were *there*, and the Lowndes County people – we got the Voting Rights Act, right? We got the power of the vote. Now, what do we do with this vote? And the Lowndes County people made it very clear. John Hulett, [pause] oh, bless her heart, as much as I loved her, loved her, stayed in her home, she ran for school board, she was a schoolteacher – it'll come to me. I have it in the archives back there. They said they didn't want to be mayor or run for even city council, because we didn't even know what a city was. We didn't deal with city government; we dealt with county government.

JM: Yeah.

GP: They weren't interested in being state representatives. They were interested in being – holding those positions which were the *closest* to the people, foremost being the High Sheriff, you know, who would just come – unclothed, unrobed Kluxers – raiding and terrorizing the black community. They wanted the board of education so that their children could have a decent quality education, which had nothing to do with Bunsen burners, even though we needed them, but quality teaching. Uh, they wanted to be tax assessors, because those black farmers who did have land were always assessed tremendously, while the white heirs of the white plantations were almost tax-nil. And then, the collectors, the coroner, where black people would be found dead in jail –

JM: Yeah.

GP: Or on the roadside or in ditches, and the coroner would come and say it was suicide or self-inflicted. So, that made a lot of us think again about what is the significance of the vote. And that was to elect people closest to the people. They wanted their own political party.

There were efforts by Robert Kennedy, Attorney General at the time, to have the new black vote voted into the Democratic Party. And again, they dealt on a national level, on a – what we'd call a, you know, far-fetched. Our vicinity, our emphasis: the people who are closest to the people. We weren't interested – we didn't even know what a damned delegate was.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Now, of course, we knew about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

JM: Exactly.

GP: Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. And we made it very clear to SNCC that we were *not* going to replicate that model.

JM: Yeah. So, Lowndes County gets its, builds its own party.

GP: We looked at it. It wasn't in competition. We just felt going to Atlantic City, some far distant place, might as well go to Mars, from our –

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

GP: Range of experiences. We weren't interested in electing delegates. We were interested in electing the *sheriff*.

JM: I have to ask: In that next election, then, you think the election is stolen. Can you talk a little bit about that?

GP: Yeah, I wrote about that.

JM: Yeah.

GP: It *was* stolen.

JM: Yeah. Can you describe that?

GP: Yeah, I was there. [Sighs] There were still black people in Lowndes County. We were naïve. We thought the vote was some modicum of freedom, and that we could vote, be a free voter. But we saw the white *terror* surface with vehemence. People who were tenant farmers, who had to have a relationship with the owners of the plantation – we still called it a plantation [1:40:00] – uh, were in a very dangerous position. And the landowner, the white plantation man, would bring the field hands, these tenant farmers, to the polls. Tell them – the reprisals were just enormous.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Uh, and to people who had nothing, the reprisal was death, because they couldn't take anything – we didn't have anything, so what could they take but our lives? But the people persevered. They voted. Uh, I wrote a piece called “No Clouds in the Sky,” uh, where the plantation owner, uh, property owner, white property owners, voted for *everybody* who worked on his property, in his fields. Uh, that was a lot. There was, uh, gun violence. Uh, I just have to give you my paper, which also has –

JM: Sure, sure.

GP: The voting tally.

JM: I'd love to see it. You did in that same – that was the November '65 election – you did –

GP: This was November '66. See, the Voting Acts Right was passed in August.

JM: Sure, [clears throat] '66, excuse me.

GP: Yeah. We began to organize in Lowndes County.

JM: Yeah. Forgive me. I misspoke. You're exactly right.

GP: Okay, okay.

JM: In '66, um, you do, however, in part because of all the work that's been done, um, in Macon County, you do elect a black sheriff in Macon County.

GP: Oh, yes!

JM: Which is a –

GP: At the *consternation* of the black middle class bourgeoisie! He was dark-skinned in hue. Lucius Amerson – there's a book written by his son. Uh, I think I have the book back here for you to take notes, so you can follow up on it. Uh, yes!

JM: Let me ask a final – let me ask a final question. I know we're really kept you a long time. I want to ask one key final question. The, um, the car accident in '67 is very unusual. The circumstances are very unusual.

GP: Still don't know. I can't even get a police report.

JM: Yeah. Just – if you would, just describe the basics of that, of that episode.

GP: Well, it was the eve of the first Black Power conference, which was underwritten by SHARP, with SNCC people being the facilitators.

JM: This is going to happen at Tuskegee.

GP: At Tuskegee. Uh, you have to read Forman's book, because it didn't take place on Tuskegee campus. It was supposed to, and I had organized that, and was at part of where we were to meet in the rooms, uh, the night before. And, uh, Dr. Foster somehow cancelled that. But Dean Phillips, dean of students, whom we had cultivated, was a part of us now, you know, he was, you know, supportive for what we were doing, and so he arranged something at the Boy Scouts camp or somewhere. Meanwhile, I'm in this car accident. I'm taking a young man to my

grandmother's home, my Mommy, to layover because I had arranged for him to fly to Canada to avoid the draft.

JM: This is part of your anti-draft work that's begun, yeah.

GP: Um-hmm. And we're in this mysterious car accident. We don't hit anything; nothing hits us. [Sound of siren begins in background and continues] I don't know what the – I don't know how it happened. And it happened, and evidently I blacked out because I don't remember anything until I woke up at John Andrews Hospital on the campus.

JM: Yeah.

GP: And Forman, all of the SNCC people were there, and Tuskegee – we've got a new crop of Tuskegee people now. I had graduated, and they elected me, by the way – I was in graduate school at Tuskegee the summer of '66 before I went to SHARP as vice-president. They wanted to reelect me as president, but I had graduated, and there was something about, um, the student body president had to be a senior. But, again, George Ware – SHARP, with the legalese, said nothing about the qualifications of the vice-president. So, I ran as vice-president and won. And my main thing then was that we've got to line up presidents for the next four years, which we did: Warren Hamilton [1:45:00] and Benny James and, you know, and all, you know, to keep this movement thing alive. That's how I think; I think like that.

JM: Um-hmm.

GP: And, uh, so that night, February the tenth, 1967, I'll never forget it, uh, I'm in this tremendous car accident, I'm in John Andrews Hospital, so I'm at another, uh – what do you call it – obstacle in my life. And I have to have blood transfusions, and SNCC people and students – that's when I wrote the piece on Booker T. Washington.

JM: Yeah, yeah. About the accident, [clears throat] your sense – it was such an odd thing. A part of your car failed, didn't it?

GP: Yeah, the whole – what do you call it – axle rod broke in half.

JM: Yeah, yeah. So, you wonder if someone tampered with your car, yeah.

GP: I try not to even think about it.

JM: Right, right.

GP: But it has to be. I mean, how can an axle rod – isn't that the, kind of like the skeleton – how does it crack in half?

JM: Yeah, yeah.

GP: Uh, but what's significant about that, and then we're going to conclude, is that I'm in the hospital. Dr. [John] Hume, who's a bourgeois doctor, who never supported movement activities, really thought we were destroying the, what they thought the model city – that was the little thing they – that's why we tried to integrate churches. [uncertain word(s), perhaps, "Dr. Hums says,"? at 1:46:40], "Are you crazy? These white folks don't like you." Okay, and that's another whole story.

JM: [Coughs] We won't, yeah, we –

GP: And, uh, so Dr. Hume, who hated us, the Movement, me in particular, uh, student body president, wanted to cut my leg off, amputate.

JM: Yeah.

GP: I said, "Oh, no, no, no, no." And what kicked in, to be honest, was Freud, my whole thought process. I'm twenty-two years old, I think, and my thing was, "What if a man and I are intimate, you know, and some kind of – what do you call – pre-, you know, and we had kind of

taken off our clothes sexily, and then I say, ‘Oh, wait a minute! I’ve got to take off my leg.’”

That was my motivation.

JM: Hmm, yeah.

GP: I’m telling you, that’s honest.

JM: Yeah. Yeah, that’s a young person’s normal reaction, I think.

GP: And so, I called my paternal grandparents. No, I asked Dr. Hume – to show you another stream of thought that shaped my consciousness – I said, “Have you talked to another doctor about this? You know, have you had a second opinion?” And he was, uh, caustic and he says [speaking loudly], “That’s what’s wrong with you! You think you know everything!” And then, I leaned over. I said, “Well, have you talked with the Lord about it?”

JM: With the Lord?

GP: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

GP: He said [speaking loudly], “Well, what does God have to do with it?” So, I leaned back. I said, “Put the piece of paper on the nightstand.” I called my grandparents, my paternal grandparents. My granddaddy is straight as an arrow, Deacon, Trustee Emeritus, never smoked, never drank, Sunday School Superintendent for life, you know, read the Bible, taught me the Bible, you know, and all of the, the, uh, you know, the precepts and all of that.

And I told them, I said, “my dear, this man said that he didn’t need to talk to the Lord about my foot. Come and get me!” My grandmother and granddaddy dispatched my cousin; they came and got me, because this man was a heathen! And that’s how [laughs] I got out of the hospital. I think if I had never said that, then they would have sided with the doctor, because he

knows best. My little brain just always – but when he couldn't understand that the Lord had *everything* to do with it?

And then, when I got back home, I went to stay with my – Mommy, my maternal grandmother, because I just found so much comfort with her, that's when I called Bettina Aptheker, put all of my ducks in a row.

JM: That began your transition to New York?

GP: I told Bettina, "I've got to find me a doctor."

JM: Yeah.

GP: "What about the Medical Committee for Human Rights?"

JM: Yeah. Yeah, Medical Com – yeah. Let's use –

GP: And that's how I got to New York.

JM: Let's use that point as our stopping point today. Um, you've been so generous, and it's just such an honor and privilege to be with you. Thank you so much, Dr. Patton.

GP: But let me, because – thank you so much, but I want to be fair to SNCC. And so, it's when I'm in New York, it's [1:50:00] the SNCC people, and particularly Jim Forman, the CORE people, who had a relationship with SNCC people, and then I also – my fiancé was in New York, who really came to support me. Uh, Richard Wright's daughter – I became a cause célèbre – Julia Wright, Richard Wright's daughter, would come and see me when she came from Paris. And all – Bettina Aptheker, the Communist Party, the Social Workers Party, the Progressive Labor Party, and I was introduced to all of these new people, uh, Mary Kochiyama – I had never seen a Japanese person in my life, you know. Hispanic – I shouldn't say that – Latinas and Latinos, Puerto Ricans – I never saw a Spanish person in my life. So, my world was just really even – open even more. And so, when I got out of the hospital, or on those, uh,

furloughs from the hospital, because I would be in there for six months at a time – organized a union, [Local] 1199, played poker and won all the money, because I’m a good poker player, and all of that – that when I got out, that’s when I said, “I will work for SNCC.”

JM: Yeah.

GP: And I did.

JM: Yeah. Thank you so much. What a wonderful visit. Thank you.

GP: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:51:26]

END OF INTERVIEW