

# Dr. Miriam “Mimi” Feingold Real

Two Sessions

## SUMMARY

Mimi Real was born May 31, 1941 in New York City to politically active parents. Her Movement activities began in high school when she organized a local group of high school students to join the Washington, DC Youth March for Integrated Schools in 1958. While a student at Swarthmore College, she was on one of the first Freedom Rider buses in 1961 soon after a previous bus was burned in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Real was arrested upon arrival in Jackson Mississippi for "breach of the peace" and sent to the notorious Parchman prison. Dr. Real is a retired history teacher with a college counseling consultancy in Mill Valley, CA. This is part of two Zoom interviews with Dr. Real conducted by students, led by Zion DeBerry, '20, supported by Diego DeLa'O, '20.

## LOCATION

Recorded via Zoom teleconferencing system. Mimi Real was at her home in Mill Valley, CA. The interview Team was in their separate homes throughout the San Francisco Bay Area during the “shelter in place” order due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## INTERVIEW TEAM

Lead: **Zion DeBerry**, Stuart Hall High School, Class of 2020  
Support: **Diego DeLa’O**, Stuart Hall High School, Class of 2020  
Instructor: **Howard Levin**, Director of Educational Innovation

## TRANSCRIPT PROCESSING

Transcript and video content represent the interview in its entirety with minor edits due to breaks and occasional language. Initial automatic transcription via Otter.ai. Zion DeBerry completed the initial edit phase (5/20/2020). Howard Levin completed the secondary edit phase (5/30/2020). Please report additional suggested edits to: [howard.levin@sacredsfs.org](mailto:howard.levin@sacredsfs.org)

**April 28, 2020**

## Zion DeBerry

As you know, we are here to record our conversation with you. We intend to publish your story as part of our Convent & Stuart Hall Oral History Production class. We are recording videos of this and intend to publish this on our school website and on nonprofit educational websites including a written transcript. This ultimately means your

story will be available, once published to anyone via the internet connection. If you agree, please say your name and if you will allow us to publish your story.

### **Mimi Real**

My name – my formal name is Miriam Real. Today's date is April 28, 2020. And I agree to have all this material published and released.

### **Zion**

To start off our interview, I'm just going to have you give us a quick minute introduction of yourself.

### **Mimi**

My name is Miriam Real. Everybody calls me Mimi. I was born on May 31, 1941, in Brooklyn, New York. And that is where I grew up. I was what is called a “red diaper baby” – my parents were politically radical, although they were school teachers involved with the New York City School System. I went to public school in New York City. I went to a K through eight school, PS 241, and then went to Erasmus Hall High School. From there, I went to Swarthmore College. Then I was supposed to go to graduate school the next year, but instead, I was in Louisiana working on voter registration with CORE. After a year, year and a half, I did go on to the University of Wisconsin Madison for graduate work and eventually earned a Ph.D. in US history, with periodic forays back to Louisiana to work with voter registration.

And then when I left Louisiana, I joined friends who were working with SDS, the Students for Democratic Society, in Hoboken, New Jersey. We, after a couple of years, decamped from Hoboken to San Francisco. And we lived in what would later be called a commune. That word wasn't being used then. And I eventually broke away from that and eventually found my way to a job at the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California Berkeley, where I worked for about 10 years as an interviewer and editor. And from that, I got the idea of branching off on my own to do oral history, if I could make a commercial business of it, which I did. I started a company called Oral History Associates and for about 10 years I did that. We did a number of histories of corporations and nonprofits, not only in the Bay Area but throughout North America.

And then I met my husband and got married and settled down in Mill Valley, California. I had a son, who is now grown and is an attorney in Palo Alto. I stayed home for a number of years to be a full-time mom. After that, I became involved in working at the school that my son went to, which was then called the Hebrew Academy of San Francisco, it later changed its name to the Lisa Kampner Hebrew Academy. I became very involved with that school, and eventually ended up teaching there and taught there for about 10 years, teaching primarily 10th, 11th and 12th-grade social studies:

European history, US history and US government politics, and the AP versions thereof. The school eventually closed about two or three years ago. While I was teaching, I had also developed a private tutoring practice primarily prepping high school students for the SAT and the ACT. And so after the school closed, that became my full-time occupation. And that would be what I would still be doing were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Zion**

Thank you, that was perfect. So I'll start the interview off. Can you tell us what a normal day for you in Brooklyn, when you were a middle schooler, was like?

**Mimi**

I should explain. I didn't go to middle school. The elementary school I went to was K through eight.

**Zion**

As a sixth through eighth-grader.

**Mimi**

It wasn't very exciting. I went to school, came home, did homework. Television had just arrived on the scene so maybe my brother and I went next door to a friend, a neighbor, and watched a little television with them. Then we'd have dinner, maybe do some more homework, I'd read and go to bed.

**Zion**

Since both your parents were educators, would you say education was something really important in your household?

**Mimi**

Absolutely, absolutely. It wasn't ever articulated as such but it was very obvious that my brother and I were both expected to do well in school and we had the kind of background that made that possible. My parents encouraged us to read, we listened to the radio station of the New York Times, we listened to classical music on the radio. When I was very young, my mother read to us a lot and instilled in me a love of reading, which I have to this day.

**Zion**

I definitely see that you're following and your parent's footsteps. You said that there was an unspoken standard. Can you explain that a little more?

**Mimi**

I was expected to do well in school. I got a lot of praise if I had good grades. My

parents would help me study for tests. I can remember my father quizzing me in preparation for a biology test. It was a standard in the household. Every year – there was a newspaper in New York that published the names of high school students who had, I think, done well on their Regents Exams. That was something. My grandfather would go through that list and would proudly announce what percentage of that have the kids on that list were Jewish. But the unspoken assumption was that that was what you were aiming for, that your name would be on a list of people who had done very well on an exam.

### **Zion**

Would you consider the influence of your parents being activists, was that what really inspired you to get involved?

### **Mimi**

Absolutely, absolutely. It wasn't that they were telling me that's what I had to do. But that was the model that I saw. My parents marched on picket lines. And they took me to NAACP meetings. And it was just clear in the discussion at the dinner table or talking about what they just read in the New York Times, what their opinion was about world affairs or national affairs. And so I absorbed that like I absorbed oxygen from the atmosphere. It nurtured me. That's what I grew up thinking, that it was right to fight for social justice and to fight against oppression and to stand up for what was right. They got into a lot of trouble because of their political backgrounds. They both ended up losing their jobs with the New York City Public School System. I don't want to say that was a source of pride, but they weren't embarrassed by that. It was very important for them that they did what was right and they would never in a bazillion years have thought about selling out. We were brought up to think of the FBI as the enemy. For example, we were told if the doorbell rang and we answered the door and it was an FBI agent at the door, which was a real possibility, we were told to tell them that our parents weren't at home. There was a whole protocol that we followed. One time the FBI came and my mother answered the door – my mother who was the sweetest most angelic woman in the world – had some really sweet, cutting words for them. She said something to them like, “Is this what your mother raised you to be? Don't you have anything better to do with your life?” Those stories would be told to me with pride so I grew up thinking that that was a good thing.

### **Zion**

What other specific issues your parents were passionate about?

### **Mimi**

Oh, yeah, very much so. They weren't all that many in that era. But one of the things I remember they marched on a lot of picket lines about the Rosenbergs – Julius and

Ethel Rosenberg – who had been arrested for being spies. That was a very famous case. They were on lots of picket lines, not only in New York but in Washington, DC. I think there's a photograph somewhere in some book where they actually ended up getting pictured marching on this picket line. So I knew a lot about that case and that it was a real travesty of justice in the courts also. What other issues were they involved in? They took me to NAACP meetings. That was also an era where there was an organization called the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, which was against nuclear weapons. They were involved in that, they went to meetings and demonstrations. That was something that I got involved with also. The other thing that they were passionate about is that they were both members of the teachers union, which is not at all related to the current day teachers union. At that time, it was a very radical organization, very, very progressive, and accused of being a communist front group.

### **Zion**

Was there ever a protest that you did not agree with your parents on?

### **Mimi**

I can't think of any. I can't think of any. And they always supported me. That was a key element in my development in The Movement was the support of my parents because when I got involved in civil rights in high school, and then in college, they were 100% behind me in supporting what I did.

### **Zion**

When did you decide to not start going on your own to protests and meetings?

### **Mimi**

It wasn't like a decision. It was just when I was old enough to go off to be on my own and not have my parents with me. And that was in high school. I can remember going to picket lines for SANE with my brother when I was in high school. When I was in high school, the Supreme Court came down with its very famous Brown vs Topeka Board of Education ruling desegregating schools and there was a Youth March for Integrated Schools [1958] that was organized nationwide to bring young people to Washington DC, in support of this decision. And I saw that as an opportunity finally to do something. And I organized the busload of kids from my high school. And we all went down on a bus and milled around, wherever it was, we milled around in support of Brown vs Topeka Board of Education.

### **Howard Levin**

Stay on that topic for a little bit. Let's just take that as a micro-story. Here's her first mention of an event that she directly was involved in. Flesh out some more questions about that experience and that event.

**Mimi**

One thing that might be worth saying is that what propelled me to this event was that it was the first opportunity to “Do Something,” capital D, capital S. This was the 1950s and it was an era of enormous conformity. In some ways, I was doing social protest – although I didn't see it that way – simply by not wearing a little cashmere sweater and pearls to school or a little sweater set. Our school ended up not having a prom, but I wouldn't have gone to it anyway. But that was the extent of anything I could do because there was no way of protesting, particularly racial injustice. They say there were periodic picket lines for SANE. But when the Youth March came along, it was finally some way that we could get involved and show our support and, and as I said, “Do Something.”

**Zion**

What was the energy like? How were you feeling at that moment?

**Mimi**

Very turned on, very motivated, very excited. I honestly don't have too many recollections of that particular event. It's probably been overpowered by my subsequent history in the Civil Rights Movement. But there was something just very inspiring and almost overwhelming being on a bus with other kids, all of whom – we were all there for the same purpose and we were all going to something that had a higher purpose than just a school basketball game or....

**Zion**

A bigger impact.

**Mimi**

But aside from that, I don't have too many recollections of the event itself. Someday I ought to refresh my memory and see if there's anything online, any videos of that event that might trigger a memory or two. I assume that it was something like the March on Washington where Martin Luther King spoke, that it was like that, but on a much smaller scale. And with mostly high school kids participating.

**Zion**

Was it just high school kids from all over the area?

**Mimi**

I think it was all over the country. Probably it was primarily kids from the east coast because that would have been a very, very long trip for anybody coming from the Midwest or the west coast. The demonstration was in Washington DC. But it was certainly larger than just Brooklyn or New York City. And that was exciting in and of

itself. It was something bigger than just our little world in Brooklyn.

**Zion**

Going back to the meetings before you got on the bus, being obviously a white ally, what was the experience like?

**Mimi**

Are you talking about the Youth March for Integrated Schools from my high school?

**Zion**

Sorry. The NAACP meetings.

**Mimi**

The NAACP meetings? I do have to say, I felt a little weird because I don't know exactly what my father was doing going there, whether it was just to show his support, or what. I was too young. But I remember feeling very much "the other" as one of the very few white people in the audience, my father and I. It didn't make me feel bad, it just was different. In some ways that was part of my growing up, I had grown up in this very kind of insular community in Brooklyn, everybody does, you grow up in your own little neighborhood. And my own little neighborhood was predominantly Jewish and predominantly white. So that's what I knew. And here was this very, very different situation. I had a similar broadening of my perspective when I went away to college, because I went to Swarthmore, which is a small Quaker college, and there were not that many Jewish students there, and not that many kids from New York. So that was also something that I had to adjust to was this whole new world of all these people who weren't New York Jews.

**Howard**

Why did you choose to go to Swarthmore?

**Mimi**

Because of its academic reputation. I was a very good student in high school. If I may be permitted a moment of whatever. I was voted "Girl Most Likely to Succeed" out of a graduating class of 1600 kids. I don't know if I ever lived up to that title, but I was a very, very good student in high school. I knew two things in going to college: I wanted to go to a good academic school, and I wanted to go to a small campus because I had spent my high school years in this enormous, enormous high school, I think it had 5-6000 students. It was like a mini-city, practically. So I wanted to go to a small campus and Swarthmore at the time was one of the best small academic liberal arts colleges in the country. So I applied there and several other places and I got into Swarthmore and went there.

**Zion**

Did you go into college with a basic idea of what you were going to do?

**Mimi**

Oh, yeah, I did. I did. And the incredible thing is that that is not exactly what I ended up doing. So there were two levels. Academically, I went in as a biology major and I was a biology major for one year and realized that that was not my calling. So I switched majors to history. But one of the reasons that I also went to Swarthmore is that as a Quaker college, it had a very strong and very, very long reputation for having a very, very progressive atmosphere. To the extent that anything was happening in the 1950s, Swarthmore was on to it. The Quakers, at least then, were very progressive in their ideas about racial justice and about war and nuclear weapons. So that was one of the reasons I went there, I knew that if anything was going to happen with political action, it would happen there or it could happen there.

**Zion**

Was there a club or something there that you joined?

**Mimi**

Right. There was a club called the Swarthmore Political Action Club, which we referred to as SPAC for Swarthmore Political Action Club. I joined that right away. And there were several other students who entered as freshmen that same year who came from backgrounds similar to mine, and we all gravitated to SPAC. It was pretty much of a moribund organization up to then, I don't even know what they were doing, if anything. And we really jazzed it up, we really put some life into it. At first, the only thing we could really do was to participate in anti-nuclear testing and anti-war demonstrations, primarily in Philadelphia under the rubric of SANE, The Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. But then we were constantly looking for other issues to become involved in. And that's when history kind of delivered something to us on a silver platter and that was the sit-ins in the south. And we, of course, couldn't do anything directly, there weren't segregated lunch counters in the Philadelphia area. But there were a couple of things we could do. A one was that the NAACP organized a nationwide boycott of the major chains that had lunch counters. At that time it was Woolworths and Kresgies, these were what were called "five and dime stores," 5 and 10 cent stores. And they called a boycott of these stores. So SPAC organized a picket line, and we would go every weekend and picket the Woolworths in the nearby town of Chester, Pennsylvania. We did that day in and day out every weekend, rain or shine, winter and summer, for quite some time. And then one of the members of SPAC actually went south to attend the meeting where SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was founded. So we sort of had a presence there, although he was merely observing, he didn't participate or anything. And then the sit-ins spread northward as far as Maryland, and



we would go down on weekends and participate in the demonstrations. I guess that was the first time I got arrested in some of those demonstrations.

**Zion**

I think so yeah.

**Mimi**

And the Dean of Women actually called me in. And, as I say, the atmosphere at Swarthmore was very open and they did not clamp down on our activities on campus. But the Dean of Women called me in and she was very, very concerned because she said, "You know, it's okay for you to participate in these demonstrations because your grades aren't suffering, you're able to keep up with your schoolwork and there are no consequences." "But," she said, "you're serving as a role model and there are other students. They're joining in these demonstrations, and they're going south and some of them are on shakier grounds academically," and I don't know exactly what she was telling me to do, but be careful of who I was trying to impress or who I was trying to affect because I might be leading some poor students astray. So I nodded sagely to her and made the appropriate noises and went right on doing what I was doing. I can remember though, we'd go on these demonstrations with our backpacks, with our books, and I have a vivid memory of sitting in a jail cell somewhere in Maryland, reading my textbooks.

**Zion**

What was the experience like going to jail for the first time?

**Mimi**

Again, in a weird kind of way, inspiring I. I never felt like I was in physical danger for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that I'm a white woman and that would play a much larger role later in my experiences in the Civil Rights Movement, but there is this whole mystique in the south around white women. And so I knew if anyone was going to get beaten up or manhandled, the white women were going to be the last to experience that sort of situation. So I wasn't worried about that. I really felt like I was a soldier in the "Army of Truth" or the "Army of Justice," and I was playing my role. And this was something that I was very proud of. With that feeling that I think only the young have, I absolutely had the feeling also that nothing was ever going to happen to me. Other people might get beat up, but somehow I was invisible. It sounds awful to say that but that's how we all felt.

**Zion**

I totally understand that. You said you would write journals. What would you write about in your journals?

**Mimi**

I don't ever remember saying that.

**Zion**

I thought you said you wrote journals?

**Mimi**

When I was in Mississippi I did. I wrote just about what was happening, what we did and people's names. I just sort of kept it, it was like keeping a record. I guess somewhere in the back of my brain, I was operating as a historian, I wanted to record what was happening.

**Zion**

After the sit-ins and you got arrested, what did you do next? What happened next?

**Mimi**

There were a number of other things we did at Swarthmore in terms of racial justice. One of the things we did was we did discover finally, some segregation right there in our backyard. There was a roller skating rink – it was somewhere out in that suburban area – and this roller skating rink had a very, very clever way of segregating. Heaven forbid there should be signs that said “Whites Only” or “Colored Only Tonight.” But they had some way of indicating that certain nights were for whites only, and other nights were for blacks only, but as I say they didn't use those words, they had some euphemistic way of saying that. So we decided to make a test case of it. Which we did. We gathered together a group from Swarthmore, a racially mixed group and we went to the roller skating rink and we had it all very, very carefully planned out. We went in an assortment of groups so that there might be a couple of white kids together. And then there might be a little group of two or three kids racially mixed black and white. And maybe a black kid all by him or herself. And true to form, the whites were admitted and the racially mixed groups and the blacks were not admitted. And we brought suit against the roller skating rink for a violation of whatever civil rights law it violated at the time. And I remember it went to trial – there was a trial and we all got called on to testify. “Yes, I went up to the ticket booth that night. I had my friend with me who was also white, and we were admitted.” And then one of the black kids would get on the stand and say, “I went up to the ticket booth and I was told this was a private night and I could not go in.” The courts ruled in our favor, in other words, the courts ordered the roller skating rink to cease and desist that practice, which they did. That was a great victory on our part.

And then we also got involved... It was very clear to us that the student body at Swarthmore at that time was primarily white, it was like 95% white and probably a good portion of the black kids were African exchange students, they were from Africa. I

remember there was one kid from Ghana and one kid from Kenya. And the only blacks on campus were the cafeteria workers, and of course, the janitorial workers. And we took it upon ourselves to try to organize them into a union because we felt that they were being underpaid and overworked or whatever it was that we felt. We did not get very far with that project. And it may have been that there wasn't really all that much interest on the part of the black workers. This was a period when even if they weren't paid very well at Swarthmore, this was probably a good job for them, it was a steady job, they had a steady income, they probably had vacations and sick pay and all those things and they didn't want to risk that. So our organizing efforts didn't come very much. And then, of course, it's very hard to organize on an ongoing level when you're a student because ultimately you graduate and you leave the campus and I don't think anybody else carried on that program after that.

But then when I was in school, I was still at Swarthmore, I had an aunt, who was very involved in an organization that was involved with social justice issues. And she had a lot of connections in the nascent Civil Rights Movement and she knew a number of people at CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, and she gave me an introduction to CORE. So that was one thing that I could do when I was home on school vacations, which you will discover in college tend to be very long, I volunteered at CORE's national headquarters which were in Manhattan. And while I was working there in the spring of 1961, that was when CORE organized its Freedom Ride. And by the time I was working there, things had progressed to the point where CORE was beginning to – this was going to become a nationwide push to get people from all over the country to ride buses to Mississippi. I decided I wanted to be part of that. This was enormously exciting to me because again, it was a chance to really, really do something in the deep south and meet the enemy head-on. So I signed up to join the Freedom Rides. And, of course, being the good student that I was, I made it clear that I couldn't go on a ride until the academic year ended. So I was duly signed up by CORE to join a ride in June.

**Zion**

Did you have to do as a group preparation or some sort of training for the protest?

**Mimi**

For the Freedom Rides?

**Zion**

Yes.

**Mimi**

Let me backup for just a minute. When we participated in sit-ins in protest movements in Maryland – and this was mostly on what's called the eastern shore of Maryland, which was far more segregated and deep south like than the rest of the state – we

were given some cursory instruction in nonviolence. We went into it knowing that these were nonviolent demonstrations. We might have had one or two meetings where we were shown how to go limp if we were hit, how to get into a fetal position and cover our heads and protect ourselves, but not fight back, and not talk back, not spit back, not retaliate in any way to anything that was done to us. That tended to be, I think, somewhat rudimentary. Although there was a lot of talk about what nonviolent direct action meant. It really wasn't until the Freedom Rides that we were given really serious training. We had to sign a pledge that we would be non violent. And again, there was a lot of talk about what that meant, the whole idea of the Beloved Community, and the very religious ideas underlying nonviolent direct action. And then we had a whole evening spent at a workshop where we would act out various scenarios of walking into the bus station waiting room, sitting down in the white waiting room. Part of the group would be assigned the job of being white racists and yelling all kinds of things at us and spitting and hitting and pushing us off chairs. We would have to practice the proper nonviolent technique. We were also told exactly what would happen to us when we got to Mississippi and what we were obligated to tell the sheriffs when we were being interrogated and what we weren't. Basically we were told that you have to give them your name, like name rank and serial number, the basic information. But beyond that, you weren't obligated to answer any of their questions. And the important thing to understand was, that if you decided to answer one question, you opened yourself up to having to answer all of them. In other words, if you wanted to take the position that all you were going to give them was your basic information, then you had to respectfully decline to answer any other questions that they asked.

## **Zion**

Could you tell us what the bus ride was like?

## **Mimi**

Sure, sure. Because it was in some ways, somewhat nerve-racking. We were the first bus to go through Alabama after the restraining order had been lifted, the restraining order that had been put in place by the governor of Alabama after the bus burnings. So we were the first Freedom Ride group to go through the state of Alabama after that, and we honestly didn't know whether our bus would be burned, or whether we would get through Alabama without any incident. And neither of those things turned out to be true. Our bus was not burned, but we did not get through without incident.

Our group gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, we set out from Atlanta and rode the first leg of our journey to Montgomery, Alabama, and we spent the night in Montgomery. That was where we had that nonviolent training I was talking about. We got to Montgomery fine, well, the bus ride was fine. We were simultaneously nervous – we would have been I think brain dead if we hadn't been nervous – but on the other hand, we kept our

morale up by singing and talking to each other and just trying to make it as upbeat an experience as we could.

When we got into Montgomery, that was the first inkling that maybe things weren't going to be exactly as we thought they were going to be. Across the street from the Trailways bus terminal in Montgomery, there was this huge mob of very angry looking white men with the stereotypical beer bellies hanging out over their belt buckles, cowboy hats, they're waving their arms in the air, and they were screaming things. We had the bus windows closed, in part because it's the middle of June, it's hot as Hades out there in Alabama and the air conditioning was on in the bus, so we had the windows closed, so we didn't hear exactly what they were yelling. They were being held back by those sawhorses that you see that they use to hold back crowds. And there was a very, very thin smattering of what looked like Highway Patrolmen or sheriff's deputies or something. They did not look like they were in any way capable of holding back this mob. And I do have to say, we all put on a brave face. But that was fairly nerve-wracking, getting off the bus. We didn't know whether these men would crash through the barriers and charge us. They didn't. And I think that it was because they knew that the eyes of the country were on them and the eyes of the federal government were on them and there were probably representatives of the Justice Department there who were watching. So we got off the bus and we were hurried into cars from local black families and we were each taken to the homes where we would be spending that night. I could talk about that because that impressed me enormously. That gave me the very first real sense I had of what segregation in the south was really all about. And you want me to talk about that?

### **Howard**

Is this still Montgomery? Yes. I think you should tell us about that.

### **Zion**

I agree. But I'm sorry before we go any further, I don't think you told us how many people were on the bus with you.

### **Mimi**

I think there were eight. It was a group of eight. And it was totally mixed: men, women, black and white and mixed in terms of age group and occupation. One of the ministers from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and his wife were in that group. There were two other white women, one of whom was from Atlanta, Georgia, so she really, really stood out because she was a southern white woman. And, of course, she got the brunt of remarks if anyone knew where she was from because she was considered a traitor to her class. But yeah, there were eight of us.

### **Howard**

Tell us more about your experience that we're going into in terms of Montgomery and

then we can pick up from Montgomery on our next interview.

## **Mimi**

I think I can get you out of Montgomery enroute to Jackson. So we got off the bus and we were very quickly loaded into cars from local black families where we would be taken to their homes to spend the night now. I don't know if you have come across it, I think the letter is online and if it isn't, I can certainly make sure that you get a copy. Apparently, in that few moments that we were milling around having gotten off the bus, we were approached by a newspaper reporter from one of the Montgomery newspapers who tried to interview us, and for some reason or another, he approached me, he thought I was the most "normal-looking" of the lot of them. And he subsequently wrote me a long letter, which I got when I was in Parchman Prison – I can send you that letter, but it is a priceless statement of the thinking of a typical middle class, well educated white person in the south in the early 60s and it is horrifying. [Link to the letter] I have no recollection of him approaching us in any event.

I was put in a car with one of the other white women, her name is Judy Frieze, and we were driven to the home of a family, it was a middle class, black family, obviously active in whatever passed for The Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery at that point. They were taking such an incredibly enormous risk. That is what struck me. The mere fact that they had us in their car driving us to their home was illegal in Alabama then. The only way white people in black people could be in a car together was either if the driver was the black chauffeur and was driving around the white people, or the white person was taking their black maid home. But this of course was neither. Judy and I were actually told to lie on the floor of the car so that nobody would see that the people driving us were driving white girls at that, white women. I mean, good grief! A black man driving white women? Yikes!

So then we got to their house, which was a lovely home in a very middle class looking neighborhood, a lovely brick home that had a huge picture window that faced out onto a little garden, right off the sidewalk. A typical city home in a nice residential neighborhood. And the family told Judy and me to stay away from the window. In other words, not to let anybody know. Now, this is a black neighborhood. But even so, they were terrified that anybody would see that they had white people in their home, Freedom Riders at that. So then they proceeded to treat us like royalty. They insisted on feeding us dinner at their formal dining room table with formal dining room service while they themselves ate in the kitchen. And Judy and I were mortified, absolutely mortified. We kept wandering into the kitchen and saying, "Please come out and eat with us. We don't want you eating in the kitchen here." "No, no, no, no, no." We were honored guests and we were to eat – we ate this wonderful fried chicken dinner in the dining room.

And then somehow we ended up getting driven to a church in Montgomery. I think that was where we had the nonviolent training that evening. And it was in the basement of a church. And at the same time in the sanctuary of the church, there was a rally going on being addressed by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. We got to hear a little bit of him, although we didn't actually get to meet him. Anyway, we did our training and then we slunk back to our house where we stayed. We spent the night there. And the next morning, we had a repeat of the meal where we're served like royalty for breakfast in their formal dining room while they ate in the kitchen. And they kept coming out with dish after dish, you know, serving platters of food. And this is one of the stories that I love. Judy and I – I'm from New York, Judy is from Boston – what do we know from southern cooking? Everything is served in serving platters or serving dishes. And then we have in front of us a plate, like a dinner-sized plate, and silverware. And one of these serving dishes has something that looks like hot cereal, it looked like Cream of Wheat. And Howard, you're smiling, so you know exactly what I'm talking about, we had no clue what this stuff was. So we thought it was hot cereal, but we thought it was weird that they didn't have any dishes, any bowls for us to eat it and we thought okay, well maybe this is how they eat it down here. They eat it on their dinner plates. So we each took a block of cereal and we made a well in it like at Thanksgiving when you make a well on your mashed potatoes for the gravy. So we made a well in it and they had a pitcher of cream or milk or something, we poured milk in it, we sprinkled a little sugar over it. And then there was also a huge platter of eggs and sausages, and we helped ourselves to those too. So we're busily eating our what we think is Cream of Wheat, eating it off a plate and trying not to get the milk to run all over the eggs and the sausage. And every once in a while the family would come out from the kitchen to make sure we were doing okay, did we need anything more, did we need more milk? Do we need more juice? Do we need more eggs? Or anything like that. And to this day, I think they must be cracking up. I mean they were too polite to say anything or to even laugh to see these two white girls from the north, eating grits from the plate with milk and sugar on it. Of course, later on, when I was working in Louisiana, I learned that what was in that bowl was not cream of wheat, it was grits. And what you did was you piled your plate high with grits, and then you put the eggs in the sausage on top of that, and you kind of poured the drippings from the sausage over that whole thing. And it was actually very, very tasty. A cardiac disaster, but very, very tasty. So anyway, that was our breakfast.

So well breakfasted, we then proceeded to the Montgomery bus station where we were going to catch our bus to Jackson. And we had decided – it was a policy of the Freedom Rides that you took every opportunity that you could to test segregation. So by that time, it had been firmly established that segregation in interstate travel was illegal. So we all decided that since we were going interstate, we were going from Alabama to Mississippi, we would go into the white-only lunch counter and get a cup of coffee before we set off on the bus, which we did. And that, of course, created this

enormous kerfuffle. At first, they refused to serve the blacks in our group and insisted that they go off to the black lunch counter, and they of course insisted – we all insisted on their rights and all of our rights to be sitting at that lunch counter. And we said we are interstate travelers. So we had to produce our bus tickets, we had to show them that we had a bus ticket to Jackson, Mississippi, and that sort of – they very reluctantly – you could tell it just offended them to their very essence to be serving us. But it was like they had no choice. So they kind of slammed cups of coffee down in front of us. Then we finally board the bus.

May 4, 2020

### **Zion DeBerry**

Can you retell what it was like when you first arrived in Montgomery and you met that family and then went to the church?

### **Mimi Real**

The bus driver was so nervous about pulling into the Trailways Bus Terminal because there was this huge mob of very angry looking Ku Klux Klan types across the street being held back by a very thin line of sheriff deputies, or whoever they were. He actually let the regular passengers off at the terminal and then continued to drive down the street to a black-owned dry cleaners and he led us off behind the dry cleaners. And then we met up with families who were going to be taking us in for the night. And that's when that reporter, Bob Duke, attempted to interview me, although I have no recollection of it whatsoever, but he wrote me a long letter when I was in Parchman. We were taken to the homes of local leaders, black leaders. I want to say one thing about them. I had then, and to this day, I have enormous admiration for them. They were taking risks beyond anything that I was taking or any of us on the bus because they had to continue to live in Montgomery. And they were taking this enormous risk of housing two white women, "pinko commie agitator Freedom Riders" from the north, and heavens knows what kind of ramifications they might have suffered. They took care of us that night, I think I told you the story of them serving us dinner in their formal dining room and then serving us breakfast and that's how Judy Frieze and I learned what grits were.

We then went from there back to the bus station in Montgomery. And we figured as long as we were there and in an integrated group we would try to desegregate or test the lunch counter, because presumably, it shouldn't have still been segregated. We went into the white-only lunch counter and ordered coffee. And there was a great kerfuffle, the waiter or the waitress – I can't remember now who they were – they were all upset and all in a twit about serving us and finally after conferring with their supervisor, they came back and said, well, they could serve us, but only if we were



interstate passengers. So we had to produce our bus tickets to Jackson and show that we were indeed interstate bus passengers and they served us our coffee.

Then we proceeded to the bus. And then we had the next crisis. This was first thing in the morning so this was the first run of the day, I guess, to Jackson, and the driver who was going to be taking that post showed up, realized that he was going to be driving a bus that had a bunch of Freedom Riders in it, and promptly turned tail and refused to drive the bus. He went home. So Trailways had to quickly come up with another driver who would be willing to drive a bus that had Freedom Riders in it. This was a regular bus, there were going to be lots of other passengers as well. So they finally did find somebody who came, but he agreed to drive the bus only on the condition that first of all, we all – our entire group – sit in the back of the bus. And we agreed to that. And the other condition was that we were not allowed to leave the bus at all until the bus got to Jackson. So that means at every little rest stop where everybody else could get off and use the restroom, we could not. So we didn't have much choice, we agreed to that also. We finally get on the bus and the driver gets on the bus and we're about to take off and there is a bang, a loud bang that sounded like it could have been a bullet. So the bus didn't leave again while the sheriff or the police or whoever came and searched the bus and searched the bus station and determined that it was firecrackers. But obviously it had been set off to scare us half to death, everything to try to prevent us from continuing this ride. And finally, the bus took off.

This particular run was what they call the "Milk Run," the bus stopped at every conceivable little crossroads in the middle of nowhere. I mean, seriously, it would be a crossroads with a combination gas station that sold snacks, and there would be a restroom there. But of course, we were not allowed off the bus to go to this little snack bar convenience store. And neither were the black people on the bus because everything was segregated in these little stores so they couldn't use them either. The bus gradually began to fill up. We were sitting in the back, very, very, very obvious because here we are an integrated group sitting in the back of the bus. More and more people started to get on the bus and pretty soon, it was standing room only. And of course, all the rest of the passengers are regular passengers. And all the black passengers, of course, have to be in the back of the bus. So they're all in the back of the bus and they see us. And to this day I am overcome by the reaction of the people in the bus. They were so blown away and so grateful to us that they just kept saying, "Why are you risking your lives for us? We're nobodies. Why are you doing this?" But they were saying it in a way of immense, immense gratitude. So everybody, all the ordinary people going about their business in the back of the bus, knew who we were and knew what we were trying to do, and they just kept thanking us over and over again.

Then a young man got on the bus, and of course, he was shoved to the back, and he was carrying this huge picnic basket of food. So we got chatting with him and it turned

out he was a serviceman, he was a native of Mississippi – by this time the bus had crossed the state border and we were now in Mississippi – he was a native of Mississippi but he was stationed in Hawaii. So he had just been home, visiting his family, and he was on his way to Jackson, I guess to get an airplane to eventually go back to Honolulu to his base. And he had been given this huge picnic basket of food by his mother and we rapidly figured out that the reason for this was that it was typical for blacks at that time, if you're going to take a long bus ride like from Montgomery to Jackson, you were not going to be allowed off the bus. Even if there was a “colored restroom,” you weren't going to be allowed in the little store to buy food. So you carried food with you. So this kid's mother had fixed him a lunch, a typical wonderful, wonderful southern lunch, which he proceeded to give us. He gave us everything in his basket. It was fried chicken, and cornbread, and I think there were greens of some kind. And then a great big old layer cake that was in a pink bakery box, but the mother obviously made it. And he shoved all this onto us and he said, “No, you know,” he said, “you guys aren't going to be able to get off the bus to eat. You must be starving to death. This is for you. And we kept saying, “No, no, no, we'll share it with you. But this is your lunch also.” And he said, “No, no.” He absolutely refused to keep it. So we ate our way through all the fried chicken and the cornbread and the greens. We took the layer cake, I ended up being the keeper of the layer cake. He finally got off the bus I guess when we did in Jackson and went on his way. That was just an example. I was being blown away all this time seeing what the south was really like. It wasn't all these stories of great heroism and Martin Luther King and all that stuff. It was people like this, this young serviceman in the back of a Trailways bus, giving us his lunch, giving us his entire lunch.

When we got into Mississippi, I am trying to remember if we had police escort through Alabama, and I think maybe we did, and that fell away in Mississippi. I'm not actually sure of the facts. Because we were the first bus to go through Alabama after the bus burning, there was a lot of nervousness on everybody's side of what would happen to our bus. But once we got into Mississippi, the next thing that kind of blew my mind, so we're sitting in the bus and singing our freedom songs and relaxing and reading and doing whatever one does, sleeping, on a long bus ride. But I was riveted looking out the window. I had never seen anything like this. I grew up in New York, in a big bustling urban center. So first of all, this is all totally, totally rural. And we see fields and fields and fields with people bent over, all blacks. I don't know what they were picking, I don't think it was cotton, it didn't look like cotton. But they were field hands. And then every once in a while you'd pass a shack or a little cluster of shacks. It was like I'd been transported into some third world country. I'd never seen people living in dwellings like that. You could barely call it a house, it looked like the first wind storm was going to blow it over. So that was my next bit of education of what the south was like. In other words what we were really battling.

When we arrived in Jackson we knew exactly what to do. The whole thing was pretty much choreographed, both by CORE and by the Justice Department and the law enforcement people in Jackson. We got off the bus and we all filed into the whites-only waiting room. The idea was that we would go up to the counter to buy something. Most of the guys wanted to buy more cigarettes – this was back in the age where everybody smoked – so they were going to buy cigarettes and the rest of us would buy chewing gum or candy or something. And waiting for us in the white-only waiting room was a deputy sheriff. It was almost like a little script. He ordered us to leave, he actually ordered the blacks to leave, and we made it clear that we were a group and that we weren't leaving. And he said – and we went through this whole little thing about three or four times – “If you don't leave, I will have to arrest you for breach of the peace.” And we didn't leave, we just sat there. We went through this little charade three or four times. And he arrested us, put us under arrest and led us out the front door. There was a black paddy wagon waiting for us so we went right out the front door into the paddy wagon. The paddy wagon drove us to the Jackson City Jail, which is where we were booked.

Then I get my next taste of segregation. We have our little integrated group and we're all marshaled into the lobby of this big building. The police offices or the sheriff's office or wherever it was we were being taken, was on an upper floor so we would have to take the elevators. There was this whole ridiculous charade where they could not load our whole group into an elevator and take us up, heaven forbid, no. I'm trying to remember if they just separated us by race or if they separate us by race and sex? So there were multiple trips up and down the elevator while we were all brought up to the booking area. Then we were booked one by one. We had been given very careful instructions about – and I think I mentioned that earlier – what we were required to answer and what we weren't required to answer. And also told that if you do start to answer questions beyond what's absolutely required, then you're going to be required to answer all their questions, in other words, don't answer any more than you have to. I was in due course called into the booking room – and this was done one at a time. And there's this guy, a sheriff's deputy. At this point, I was at a level of combined nervousness and having very strong feelings of being committed to the cause that we are committed to. So when I took one look at the deputy, I did everything I could not to laugh. The guy was this stereotypical thing right out of Hollywood central casting of a white Ku Klux Klanner with the beer belly hanging over his belt buckle, the cowboy hat on his head, sitting back in his chair with this southern drawl. It was a stereotype. The fact that this guy was real, I had a terrible time taking him seriously.

Anyway, we got through my name and all that stuff and then the only other question that we were told that we really ought to answer is the religion question, that we would be asked: "What religion are you?" He got to that question. I had one of these – you know how sometimes in great duress, you have these mental conversations that

seemed to go on for some time, but you realize it's less than a second? I had one of those conversations in my head. "Okay, what am I going to say?" I'm Jewish, but I knew enough to know that the south, in addition to being horribly racist, was also horribly antisemitic. So I thought, "*Oy gevalt!* That's all I need. I'll say Jewish and I'll find myself dragged off into who knows where and I'll be really asking for trouble, so maybe I should say something else." So I could say I was an atheist, I didn't have any religion? I thought, well, that's not going to go over very big, because the south is known for being very religious, practically evangelically religious, so I'd better not say that. Or I could lie and pick some Christian denomination and say that's what I was. But there was something deep inside me that wouldn't let me do that. I couldn't. I couldn't lie and say I was something that I wasn't. So I ended up saying I was Jewish. And the deputy sheriff – I think at this point I was probably the most nervous that I had ever got – he looked at me with a sneer on his face that if looks would kill, I would have been dead right then. And he said, "Ohhhhh, so you're a Jewess." And he kind of hissed "s." I knew what the term Jewess meant. I had read it. I think Shakespeare uses the term, but it's certainly not a term that's used in conversation in any circles that I was part of, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, my goose is cooked now." I wasn't going to engage him in some long conversation so I just said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Oh, you know, a member of the race, they say they are." I honestly didn't have any clue to what to even say to that. And so I just sat there. And he went on and said, "You know, the Chosen People." And I thought, oh, my gosh, I am not about to get into a theological discussion with this redneck about what the concept of Chosen People really means and what the Jewish people are all about. First of all, I wouldn't convince him anyway but this is a particularly fraught situation and I'm not going to get into an argument with this guy. "Heavens knows what's going to happen to me." So I managed to kind of squeak out, I said, "Judaism is a religion, not a race." Then he moved on to the next question. I think I did manage to get in one final – at this point, I was getting a little punchy – I finally said to him, "Do you really believe that black people are inferior to white people?" And he says, "Statistically, it has been shown that they are."

So I get booked by him. And then at some point also I get moved along to the fingerprinting guy, and then and the mug shot guy. And the fingerprinting guy – they all have to drive their little knives in and get in there their little insults – so the fingerprinting guy, as he's fingerprinting me, he's looking at me saying, "Oh, do you date..." and then he uses the N-word. They all asked that question, they all thought that of course, being the "pinko commie radical nogoodnik Northerner" that I was, I probably did all these other things, like I probably was one step away from being a whore and that of course I slept with – and then they'd use the N-word. And then the fingerprinting guy also started asking, "So, are you a member of CORE? Are you a member of the NAACP? Are you a member of the Communist Party?" None of which I answered, none of those questions I answered, I just concentrated on letting him print

my fingers. You've seen the mug shot. I'm sure.

[image of Mimi, 6-21-61]

**Zion**

That's that one?

**Mimi**

My famous mug shot. Yes, yes, yes, that's the very one. The thing that's behind my head, to this day, I don't really know what that is, but it was something on the wall, it's because I was so short that I didn't cover it up. Most of the mug shots that were taken, the person was tall enough so you didn't see it. But that's about what I looked like. We had gone straight from this long bus ride. And so I didn't have time to comb my hair or anything, so I was looking a little bedraggled. We were taken...

**Howard Levin**

Hang on one second. Can you explain the smile?

**Mimi**

Thank you for asking, everybody always asks that. There are two parts to that. One is there's an automatic reaction, somebody sticks a camera in my face, I smile. But in this particular case, it was me sticking it to them. I no more felt like I was a convict or I had done anything wrong, it was they who were the lawbreakers. And so I was gonna smile at them.

**Zion**

It looks like you're like staring right at them and smiling too.

**Mimi**

Yeah, seriously, I mean that the best way to describe it is that I was just sticking it to them. Like, "You can't do anything to me, it's your system that's wrong. I'm just here. I'm just a soldier in the army here, trying to straighten things up. It's you guys who've messed up." I think some of the Freedom Riders did adopt the typical mug shot pose. I think part of it was also, as I was saying before about the deputy sheriff who interrogated, there was one level on which I couldn't take them seriously, they were all a stereotype of southern rednecks.

So then we were taken to the Jackson City Jail where we spent the night. Judy Frieze and I were put in one cell – we were in the women's section – and Wyatt T. Walker's wife, who was the only black woman on our trip, was in a cell to herself. She wasn't quite alone, she had mice or rats during the night. We spent the night. By the way, I still have the cake, the pink cake box.

**Zion**

You do?

**Mimi**

I'm still carrying that with me. So the next day – I'm trying to remember if we had breakfast at the Jackson City Jail – but the next day we were transferred to the Hinds County Jail, which is where all the previous Freedom Riders already were. By the time we got there, the Hinds County Jail...

[photo]

Oh yeah, there we are, there's my admittance slip so to speak and breach of the peace.

**Howard**

Go ahead and read it for us.

**Mimi**

"You, Miriam Feingold have been committed to the Hinds County Jail by order of Judge James Spencer for the crime of breach of the peace. Your sentence has been set at \$200 and 4 months. You will be released from jail, December 29, 1961. JR Guilfoyle, Sheriff of Hinds County by Jim Kelly." And then there's this marking in the lower left-hand corner, "WF," – that's the south right there – even on a little booking slip like this, they have to make it clear what I am so I get put in the right cell.

**Zion**

That stood for "white female?"

**Mimi**

White Female. Right.

**Zion**

That's interesting.

**Mimi**

Heaven forbid we should be mixed together. Hinds County was severely overcrowded, and that was just on the women's side, heavens only knows what was going on over on the men's side. And that was with the white women. I assume the black women had the same problem. But the white women, it was one big – like a bullpen – holding cell which was built for a maximum of eight people. In other words, there were four sets of bunk beds hanging from the wall so it could accommodate eight people. There were far more than eight people when we arrived. I'd say there were probably about 20 of us.

And everybody had been given a mattress, a sheet, a pillow, and I think maybe a cup. The older Freedom Riders or those who had any kind of physical problems or whatever, we're given the bunk beds to sleep and the rest of us slept on the floor on our mattresses. So at night, the floor of the cell was just one solid carpet of Freedom Rider bodies on top of mattresses. And then during the day, we would stack the mattresses underneath the bunk beds and have the floor to move around on.

## **Zion**

What was it like at night trying to sleep? What was the feeling like?

## **Mimi**

Actually, miraculously, none of us had any problems sleeping. We kept busy enough during the day, we tried to remain active, which I can tell you about in a second. We all slept very well and the jailers didn't attempt to interrupt our sleep. But during the day, we had the day very, very well organized. There were a number of Freedom Riders who had particular skills. One of the Freedom Riders was a woman who was considerably older than most of us, who was actually a classics professor at some university. And she started teaching us Greek. So we had a Greek lesson every day. And then there were several people in the cell who had fairly advanced ballet skills so we had little ballet lessons. And then we would just maybe walk back and forth in the cell to have exercise. And then, of course, we sang an enormous amount during the day. I don't know where the men were, but they were somewhere in the building so that we could hear them singing and they could hear us singing. And also we could hear the black women singing, so we would kind of sing to each other.

We were only in Hinds County for a couple of days because by that time, Hinds County was running out of room. First of all, they now had no white women's cell, if they had a regular-old white woman prisoner, they had nowhere to put her. And same with the other races and sexes. So, Hinds County worked out a really nefarious deal with the state. From their point of view, this was going to be a win-win situation. Hinds County appealed to the state. The state had a prison in Parchman, Mississippi, up in the northern end of the state. Parchman had then – I don't think it has quite as bad a reputation now – but it had then a pretty hideous reputation. It was a work camp and it's been the subject of a number of movies. It was really bad. So the idea was hatched that they had plenty of room in Parchman, particularly in their lockdown section called the maximum-security unit. I'll get back to that in a second. So this is going to be this wonderful arrangement where Hinds County could empty its jail of the Freedom Riders by sending them all up to Parchman. And then Parchman, of course, would treat us so horribly that we would all cave in and go home. I think that was the plan, nobody said that out loud to us, but I'm sure the idea was, "Make life as miserable as possible for the Freedom Riders and then a) they'll all go home, and b) more Freedom Riders won't keep coming," Because the problem was the Freedom Riders kept coming and coming and coming. So the jail was getting more and more crowded.

So we were transferred up to Parchman. I was in the second group to be taken up. We were loaded into a paddywagon and driven – it's a long drive up the Mississippi Delta. I do have to say, that was one of the other times that I was the most scared because I thought this is a perfect opportunity for the driver of this paddywagon to simply drive off into the swamps and unload his load, and we would never be heard from again. But that mercifully did not happen and we were delivered to Parchman, the State Penitentiary. Now, the reason that – they told us to our face that they were putting us in the maximum-security unit for our protection, particularly they said this to the white women, they wanted to protect the white women because most of the prisoners at Parchman lived in cottages and spent the day working in the fields because it was a huge farm. A lot of the fresh produce that was served at meals, and a lot of the dairy and stuff came from that farm. So the prisoners would spend their days working in the fields. What we were told was that it was for our own protection, protecting us white women against the black field-hands, who might do heavens knows what to us, if we were allowed to circulate among the general prison population. We, however, put another spin on it. We didn't believe that for a second. I mean, we did believe that they thought that but we also knew that they didn't want us getting anywhere near a regular prisoner for fear that the regular prisoners would catch whatever we had, catch our ideas and would get ideas into their heads that they didn't have before. In other words, the prison officials thinking that their black prisoners were perfectly happy and that we would show them how there was all this racial injustice and stuff and that they would start to protest. And then they'd have a prison riot on their hands and then where would they be? The upshot was that we had to keep separated.

And so they put us in what was called the maximum-security unit, which was where they kept prisoners who could not, for whatever reason, be permitted to circulate with the rest of the prison population, either because they were too violent, or because they were on death row. I sent Mr. Levin a PowerPoint, and in the PowerPoint there are there's a slide that shows the layout of the maximum-security unit. The maximum-security unit consisted of a central building and then two wings coming off it. And on one wing were all the female Freedom Riders and on the other wing, they started off with all the male Freedom Riders. These were regular jail cells, I mean, tiny, closet size things. And each cell was meant to hold only two prisoners. Again, they were bunk beds chained to the wall. But that got overcrowded. So they had us three to a three to a cell with one person sleeping on a mattress on the floor. And they had us segregated by cell, it was sort of patchwork. So the very first cell might be just white women and the next cell was black women and the next cell might also be black women, and the next cell would be white women, etc, etc, down the length of the cellblock.

At the time we were all very young and very idealistic and we were filled with



enormous, idealistic zeal. So a lot of what they attempted to do to harass us, kind of backfired, because we would just go on doing whatever it was we were doing. There's the famous story of the mattresses. We did a lot of singing. We had the day, very, very, very carefully choreographed. It was very carefully scheduled. It was like a school day practically. And even though nobody had a watch, there were enough people who had a sort of an innate sense of time, so we would have blocks of time where various things would happen. And one of the blocks of time was singing and we would sing freedom songs.

**Zion**

Which songs?

**Mimi**

Everything from We Shall Overcome, This Little Light of Mine, Michael Row Your Boat Ashore. I can't remember all of them.

**Zion**

Did you have a favorite?

**Mimi**

Just because of the emotions it arose, We Shall Overcome. Normally if we weren't in prison, we would have sung it standing in a circle with our arms crossed, holding on to the next person in the circle and sort of swaying in the rhythm of the song. But again, the men who were on the wing opposite us, and it wasn't all that close but they could hear us singing, and then they would sing back to us.

The jailers were hard put to find ways to harass us. One of the ways they came up with was to order us to stop singing. I mean, there was no reason, they couldn't say we were disturbing anybody, but they'd order us to stop singing. They threatened to take away our mattresses if we didn't stop singing. Well, we did not stop singing and they took away our mattresses. So now we're sleeping on – the two girls who are sleeping on the bunk beds, they're sleeping on just a sheet of steel. And then the third girl is sleeping on the concrete floor. And then they also turned the air cooling system – they didn't have air conditioning, but they had some sort of air cooling system and it would get cool enough in the evening so that it got quite chilly in on the cellblock. And of course, steel and concrete both conduct cold very well so you'd be sleeping on this cold hard steel and on the cold hard floor. The steel had little ventilation cutouts all through it. So you'd wake up in the morning and not only were you stiff and sore and cold, but you had all these little imprints all over your body, these little circular imprints all over your body from the cutouts in the steel.

That went on for a couple of days. We kept on singing by the way and the only reason the mattresses came back was that the governor of Minnesota announced that he was

going to send a delegation to Mississippi to investigate the prison conditions under which some of the citizens of his fair state were being kept because some of the Freedom Riders had come from Minnesota. And the jailers, needless to say, at Parchman got very nervous and scared about this. So just prior to the arrival of this delegation, they returned our mattresses and they issued us fresh uniforms and brought us all to the showers and tried to make it look like we were one big happy family. And I do have to say the commission from Minnesota was in part fooled by that. I don't know if later they learned the real truth of that. But that's how we got our mattresses back.

The jailers did other things. The cells all faced on to an alley along which the jailers would move to deliver meals and stuff like that. And so the trustee would stand outside a jail cell smoking a cigarette, and he'd only smoke about half of it and then he'd drop it on the floor still lit. And it would be just far enough away so that the girls in that cell couldn't reach out and get it because a lot of kids smoked, a lot of people smoked. I didn't happen to smoke then but a lot of people did. So that was one way. I assume they thought they humiliated us by making us wear prison uniforms. I could only laugh, it was such a stereotype. The women, we had black and white striped skirts. The prison uniform in the old days used to be black and white striped. The men would have shirts and then pants, black and white striped. We didn't get black and white striped tops. We were allowed to continue to wear whatever blouse we had on when we were arrested or when we were driven up there. But we were given a fresh skirt every week. We showered once a week because the shower wasn't in the cell. The cell would individually be opened and then the trustee would accompany the prisoners up to the end of the cellblock where the shower was, and then we were allowed to shower. And we were given soap – another joke, this soap might have been borax. It was just really harsh, industrial soap. And we were given a fresh towel. And then when you were finished showering, you were escorted back to your cell. But again, we didn't take that as harassment, it was obviously meant to be, meant to make us feel miserable, but we carried on anyway.

As time went on, they managed to think up more hideous things to do to make life miserable for the women prisoners. Let me back off for just a second.

The prison officials in Parchman, and in general in Mississippi – and I encountered this again in Louisiana – they had a terrible time, particularly with the white women because southern culture, particularly then, deified white women. It was not very far from *Gone with the Wind*. It was like, white women were these fragile delicate creatures that had to be put up on a pedestal and protected at all costs. We were one step away from the angels. That's on the one hand. But on the other hand, here we were white women Freedom Riders, so we were these horrible, “pinko, commie,

radical, agitators, race mixers,” and all these other horrible things. So they didn't quite know what to do with us. My feeling is that, more or less, they never laid hands on the women prisoners. They did on the men. They beat the men and they turned hoses on the men. And they treated them physically pretty badly. But the women, no. They were reduced to finding things like the cigarette trick. The other thing they did was, after about the third or fourth paddy wagon full of people arrived at Parchman – this was after I was already there – they decided that they needed to start doing vaginal searches of all the women Freedom Riders coming in because “heavens knows” what they were trying to smuggle into the prison in there, private of the most private parts. And these exams were done at the end of the cell block. So we all heard it. And the individual Freedom Rider girl would be held down by trustees and a woman trustee would stick her gloved hand in a bucket of some kind of disinfectant and then stick her hand “where the sun doesn't shine.” And we could hear the Freedom Rider women screaming, because needless to say it was, I'm sure incredibly painful. I was spared that, I arrived there before they started doing that but they did that afterward to all the incoming women. On top of being very painful, I think the woman doing it, at least was a woman trustee doing it – she would stick her gloved hand back into this same bucket of disinfectant before she did the search on the next girl. It wasn't very hygienic, to say the least.

### **Mimi**

I was blown away by the enormous disparities of the whole situation. First of all, the attitude of the jailers, they genuinely believed that we were monsters, that we had come to destroy their wonderful way of life. That we were “commie pinko agitators” and all those things. And they held all the racist beliefs that we laugh at now, but that's what people actually believed. It was hard for me to believe that that people really thought that way.

### **Howard**

Let's just pause for a second. Any questions, Diego or Zion, about her experience in jail?

### **Diego DeLa'O**

That story is pretty... I didn't even know that they did that kind of stuff. It just really shows how crazy times were. It's crazy.

### **Zion**

I'm still baffled about that.

### **Mimi**

It was clearly done solely for the purpose of torturing us. It was an additional harassment. It was about the only thing that they could think of.

There are a couple of other things I wanted to mention. Mail. So we're in a state penitentiary and we're under their regular rules, which is that you're only allowed to write I think one letter a week or two letters a week and you had to write it on what passed for prison stationery. They gave you this piece of paper that had all kinds of instructions on it about what you could or couldn't write about. And they had lines and you wrote on the lines. And your mail, of course, was censored, and if you wrote anything that was in any way controversial or any way suspicious, the jailers would simply mark it out. In the same way, we were allowed to get mail, although we were not given all the mail that we received, we would be given it on our way out. One of the few pieces of mail that of course was delivered to me was the letter from Bob Duke. And if you notice, even that letter had been somewhat censored, those black lines, through various words, were the jailers. I'm sure Mr. Duke, as a good journalist, wouldn't send out a letter looking like that. But I'm sure the jailers were absolutely thrilled to deliver that letter to me.

### **Howard**

Did you have any contact with your parents and other family at all while you were there?

### **Mimi**

Yes. Most of the letters that I wrote from prison were to my family. And we had developed some fairly simplistic code so that I could write more or less about what was happening in jail without it looking like I was writing about that. So I would refer to CORE as the apple and I would talk about the apples, whatever it was about apples. I don't remember the rest of the code. Yeah, I'd write to them and they would write to me. My recollection is that most of their letters did not get through, but I seem to remember that I got a packet of letters on my way out that also included letters from college classmates of mine, great support. And of course, those would be heavily censored. But my parents, needless to say, were enormously supportive of what I'd done and they were busily organizing little fundraising tea parties and coffee klatches while I was in prison,

### **Zion**

Did you stay your entire sentence, all four months?

### **Mimi**

No. This is also a thing that CORE had pretty much arranged that you agreed to when you went in. Mississippi had this rule that if you were going to post bail, you had to post bail within 40 days. And if you didn't post bail by day number 40, you had to serve out your entire sentence. So what CORE asked of us, realizing that most of us could not commit to staying in jail for four months, was that we commit to staying in jail for 40

days, because the idea was to have a jail-in, in other words, to pack the jails in Mississippi and make it so uncomfortable for the state of Mississippi that they'd have to do something. So that's what we promised that we would do and that that's what I did. At the end of 40 days, Judy Frieze, who I had ridden down to Atlanta with from New York, she had asthma and she actually had an asthma attack the first night that we were in Parchman and I sat up with her all night. She survived that okay, but it took a fair amount of persuasion on our part for them to allow her to have her asthma medication. But her parents came down – I can't remember if they drove all the way down from Boston, or if they flew or what, but in any event – they came to pick her up and they got in touch with my parents to ask if my parents wanted them to pick me up also since they were going to be in the neighborhood, as it were, and my parents said, "Sure, that would be great." So I got out of jail with Judy and her parents drove us. I honestly don't remember now how I got reunited with my parents, whether we drove back up the East Coast or whether we flew.

But there are a couple other things I was going to say about Parchman. One was that I look back now and I am so amazed at the resourcefulness and ingenuity that we had in finding ways to amuse ourselves and uplift ourselves. The day was totally, totally organized. We had organized periods, one of them would be singing, and then there would be another time during the day where we had Bible reading because each cell had been issued a Bible. And we continued with ballet lessons, somebody would be giving instructions while the rest of us would be attempting to follow them in our cells. We would have exercise time where we'd figured out how many times back and forth in the cell equals a mile and we would try to walk a mile every day, which we didn't always manage. And then every evening we had what later has been called the Parchman Radio Hour. Have you heard about that?

## **Zion**

I have not.

## **Mimi**

This is pretty cool. Every evening – this was like a radio program, obviously, we weren't on the air, really – each cell had to contribute and act. And it could be anything, you could sing a black spiritual, you could read from the Bible, you could tell a funny story, whatever your imagination came up with your cell could do. We did that. And after every two or three "acts," there would be a "commercial" and I think one of the cells would be responsible for the commercials. So, we'd have a commercial, for example, for the soap. And you can imagine the takeoffs that we'd make on this, seriously this soap would be practically burning skin off your face. And so, "Rejuvenate your cells with Parchman soap!" And then the skirts, we'd have another commercial about these "stylish" black and white striped skirts that we had to wear. Stuff like that. So that was something that really kept our mood buoyed up.

**Zion**

That sounds pretty fun actually.

**Mimi Real**

Yeah, that was, that really was because you never knew from one evening to the next, who was going to do what.

**Howard**

Who organized these things?

**Mimi**

There was one cell that was kind of in charge. It was one of the black women who was a real leader, I think from New Orleans CORE, but I might be mistaken.

The other thing that also happened – well, there are a couple things. Our row of cells backed up onto another row of cells, and in between those row of cells, the backs of them ran a kind of utility corridor where all the piping and stuff was. But the other row of cells was close enough to us, and also the ventilating vents were on the wall facing into that little space, so that the cells that backed up to us could hear us. I was under the impression, and I'm so I'm sticking to it, that the cell block behind us was Death Row. So we backed up onto Death Row, and needless to say this being Mississippi in 1961, all the people on Death Row were black. And they were so unbelievably moved by our singing, our mood, our upbeat, what we were fighting for. People had figured out how to send messages to the men on Death Row. You did it through the vents. It involved a safety pin and a long string. I don't know how anybody came up with a string, because we can have a string in our cell. You'd attach a note by the safety pin to the string, and you'd somehow feed it out through one of the slats in the vent, and then whip it with a fast motion. And then the person in the cell right behind would somehow be reaching out through the slats of his vent, and would catch the note. So we actually sent notes back and forth and got notes from them. They were so unbelievably moving. I mean, these were people who were not, let us say, terribly literate, but just the most heartwarming notes. And they loved our singing and how much it meant to them.

There were also – we had times during the day where it was quiet time where each cell could do whatever it wanted. Some cells made chess sets. And since neither I nor the two women I shared a cell with – none of us played chess we, we didn't do that. But in some cells they did, so they fashioned chess pieces, I think, out of bread, wet bread, which would then dry. I can't remember now what they use for a chessboard. There's one of the Freedom Riders who managed to keep her chess set and she's now donated a replica of it to one of the civil rights museums in the south. That's Carol Ruth

Silver. We didn't do chess in my cell. We spent a fair amount of time reading the Bible, which was somewhat new to me. I don't know that I'd ever read the Bible to any great extent. Anyway, that was my period in prison.

### **Mimi**

Things didn't end there, though, because although we had been committed to jail, we had not been tried, we had not been given a jury trial, a trial with a jury of our peers. So that's another whole long story. But suffice it to say, CORE was faced with a huge financial problem. The state of Mississippi insisted on trying us individually, deliberately to create this enormous financial burden on CORE of *schlepping* each of us individually back to Mississippi from whatever college campus we had returned to or wherever it was we had returned to. So, CORE held out the possibility to each of us that we could either plead *Nolo contendere*, otherwise known as Nolo, or we could plead "not guilty" and have a trial. There were arguments on both sides. I personally felt like pleading Nolo was a sellout, after all we had gone through, I wasn't going to let them get away with not having to put on a jury trial.

### **Howard**

What does Nolo mean?

### **Mimi**

It means you're not contesting the charge. Nolo means in Latin "not" or some negative thing and *contendere* means you're not contending or not disputing the charge. I think it goes on your record in any event.

Quite a number of us did elect to stand trial. I seem to remember that there were two trips back to Mississippi. Once when we were all arraigned and that was done – they allowed us to do that as a group. But then we had to come back for our trial. And that to me, was another incredible, incredible eye-opener. To this day, it just brings smoke coming out of my ears. It was such an unbelievable travesty of justice. Again, it was like something right out of some grade B movie about the south or, some novel which is really exaggerating the case, but the fact is that this is absolutely the way it happened.

So there I am in the courtroom and just to give you the highlights, the judge, it seems to me, spent most of the time with his back turned to the courtroom. And the jury, that was the first thing that got me. So this is Mississippi, but this is 1961. Women were not permitted to serve on juries in Mississippi in 1961, so this was an all-male jury. Needless to say, blacks were not allowed to serve on juries. So this was all white men. And I don't think one of them was under the age of about 65 or 70. So this is about as much a jury of my "peers" as if they'd been a bunch of Martians or something. And I spent half my time watching them, and they practically, to a man, fell asleep. The whole thing was a travesty of justice. It was ridiculous. We were all being represented

by a black attorney from Baton Rouge who did a lot of work for CORE. I actually have – somebody sent me only a few years ago – the transcript of that trial. Again, it's hard to believe that in the 20th century, this passed for justice. Heavens knows this kind of thing probably goes on today, but I would hope to a far lesser degree. Needless to say, the judge aroused himself from his stupor enough to find me guilty. I don't think he listened to a word that the defense attorney had said. I was found guilty and sentenced to whatever it was I was sentenced to, I guess, back to the four months.

I did not go to jail. There must have been some legal maneuver at that point. I do know that the conviction was appealed. And the appeal went all the way to the Supreme Court, not my particular case but all the cases together went to the Supreme Court and they overturned. I think without a comment.

**Mimi**

I just think, if I could just insert one little thing, I think this is such an important thing that you're doing. And it is so important that the stories of the Civil Rights Movement be recorded and be remembered. Because I think we're getting to the point in history where they are being forgotten, kids in school are not learning about them. It's a really crucial story.

**Zion**

And what we're doing is we're trying to turn that oral history into regular history.

**Mimi Real**

Yeah, yeah. Perfect.

**Howard**

Thank you so much.

**Diego**

Thank you.

**Mimi**

Bye, bye.