

*Civil Rights History Project  
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program  
under contract to the  
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture  
and the Library of Congress, 2013*

Interviewee: Luis Zapata  
Interview Date: June 27, 2013  
Location: Silver Spring, Maryland  
Interviewer: Emilye Crosby  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 02:02:01

Emilye Crosby: Are we running?

John Bishop: We're running.

Luis Zapata: Is that bag not in the way?

John Bishop: It's not, but it is better to keep it down. Okay, we are rolling.

Emilye Crosby: This is Emilye Crosby, with the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And this morning's oral history is part of the Civil Rights History Project, which is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. Today is June twenty-seventh, 2013. And we're in Silver Spring, Maryland, with Mr. Luis Zapata at his home. And with me is John Bishop. Thanks so much for joining us this morning.

Luis Zapata: Thank you. It's a great thing to do.

Emilye Crosby: Can you start by telling me about your family and where you grew up?

Luis Zapata: Well, I grew up in Orange County, California, the home of the Ku Klux—not that, the home of the John Birch Society—sorry, [laughs] I was moving ahead too far—home of the John Birch Society, as rightwing as you can get. My folks were, I guess, liberal Democrats, you could probably say. And I grew up, until I left out when I was fairly young, and had no idea about politics. So, all that came much later, well, later in my life, not much later.

EC: What kind of work did your parents do?

LZ: My father was an engineer. He always had trouble because it's a—he was a mechanical engineer. And, you know, they—my father is Latino, and my mother is Anglo, and so, he had some trouble with that in jobs and stuff like that. My mother owned a yarn shop on and off, and taught knitting and things like that, sewing—not sewing—crocheting and crewelwork.

EC: What do you remember about growing up? What were some of the things that shaped your life?

LZ: Oh, my goodness!

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Getting beat up as a kid, coming home from school. There wasn't a large Latino population in the community. And I remember having lots of problems—[speaking to someone] yeah, that's the one, um-hmm—lots of problems until I learned to fight back. And then, eventually, I just—I went off and actually left home fairly young, came back, and left home fairly young. You know, I was fighting about the ladies and stuff like that and, you know, what young men do.

EC: How did your family deal with racial-cultural identity in that context?

LZ: They didn't.

EC: They didn't?

LZ: They didn't address it at all. It was not talked about. It was not addressed. It was not anything.

EC: So, you were sort of on your own to figure that out?

LZ: Um-hmm, um-hmm. And I remember my brother was dating somebody, and her mother said, "No, you can't," to the daughter. And nobody ever talked about it. It just was accepted that's the sort of thing happened.

EC: So, I'm sorry, he couldn't date—?

LZ: Yeah, the lady's—

EC: Oh, the mother of this person—

LZ: Yeah, the young lady's mother said—

EC: Okay, not your mother.

LZ: Said, "I will not have that." And she said, "I'm sorry, but I can't do it," and that's kind of—

EC: Yeah.

LZ: That was standard back then. We're talking about in the fifties.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And so—and he was older than I was, so—

EC: Yeah. Did you and your brother talk about it at all, or was it all just—?

LZ: No, we didn't talk about it.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: He had his problems and he still does. And I, you know, I just leave it be.

EC: Yeah. So, you say you left home fairly young. What did you do when you left home?

LZ: Well, I started working—I think I was about ten, nine or ten. And I would work in people's gardens and make money and I had a paper route. And then, I would work on boats and scrape boats, because I could swim and I'd dive down, and you'd go under the boat and you scrape the seaweed off and stuff. And then, some of my friends and I would—there were tour boats that would go out from Newport Beach, and they would throw quarters, and we'd dive down and get quarters and that sort of thing. That's how I burst my eardrums, too, when I was a kid. And from there, I became a dishwasher and a busboy, and then, I learned to be a short order cook. And, actually, being a short order cook is something—and eventually a chef—but I worked all over the country. You know, if I was traveling, and somebody needed somebody—you can always find a job as a short order cook.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And you can—if you know how to do it, you can eat a whole day's worth of food in an eight-hour shift and, you know, so if they don't pay you that much, you still don't have a food bill.

EC: [Laughs] It sounds like you've picked up quite a few handy skills over the years.

LZ: Yeah, and I guess [0:05:00] working—my mother taught me to knit when I was—I think I could knit—I don't know how old I was. My first slippers I had to knit. “Want slippers? Knit them.” So, and I've become a craftsman. That's not on my biography for some reason. But a lot of the stuff you see around here I made myself. I do Native American craftwork and other craftwork. I was making sandals and selling them. You can't make a living as a craftsperson. But, you know, my hands are good enough so I was a carpenter and a cabinetmaker over the years and done things with my hands.

EC: Yeah. How did you get involved in Movement work?

LZ: [Sighs] Well, I really guess it happened—I went to San Jose State College, and that's probably where I really learned about politics. I was liberal. I remember it being—some kid in school called me a communist in elementary school or high school, maybe it was junior high, in Newport Beach, and I didn't even know what a communist meant. But I started to understand politics and get involved in politics. I went to school first as a physics major. I don't know what that was about. But I didn't fit in very well with the physics majors.

But I became—at San Jose—and that was during—all the things were happening at Berkeley, and I became politicized and got more politicized. Was involved in, you know, an invasion of the Dominican Republic, and all those things. And then, I went to work with Farm Workers and did organizing and, you know, worked in the fields.

EC: So, did you—when you went to San Jose State, was that part of a—you know, was that a regular sort of trajectory out of—graduated high school, go right into college?

LZ: Well, I wasn't—I mean, there were some spaces because I was working. But, yes, the objective was I'd get a degree in physics, then I'd become a normal person, [laughs] and that never happened.

EC: And be an engineer or something?

LZ: [Laughs] Yeah, and that normal person never did happen. You know, that couldn't happen. Or, you know, some sort of scientist. I think I wanted to be an astronaut or something at one point in life, you know.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And, but that, you know, I could tell all sorts of stories, but the physics majors I couldn't even talk to them. They just—[laughs] they lived in a whole different world. I was worried about social issues, and they didn't know what a social issue was.

EC: You didn't think about changing your major? You just went for the—?

LZ: I actually, of course, dropped out. I was with Farm Workers, and the story behind that is they had started the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, and somebody at—it may have been Lee Bankhead, who was the head of Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, under COFO—I don't know who contacted Chavez, but Chavez said at a meeting, "Anybody want to go to Mississippi?" And I said, "What the heck? It can't be any worse than here," because we were getting beaten up all the time by the cops. I didn't know they were going to *shoot* at us in Mississippi. Damn! But anyway, I stuck up my hand, and the next thing I know, I was in Mississippi.

EC: Well, let me—oh, go ahead.

LZ: So, I didn't—I dropped out of college.

EC: Okay.

LZ: And it wasn't until, oh, probably the '80s or the '90s I went back and eventually got a—and I didn't go back in physics. I got a degree in English, because—

EC: Better fit?

LZ: I had done more writing than I'd done anything else.

EC: So, did—I'd like to ask a little bit more about how you got involved with the Farm Workers, but just to clarify, were you in school until you went to Mississippi? Were you working with the Farm Workers when you were in school?

LZ: Yeah, I was pretty much in school, although I had dropped the number of credits I was taking so I could do more with Farm Workers. But I think I was still officially registered.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And then, I just left. I said, you know, “This doesn’t make sense. This isn’t what I want to do with my life.”

EC: So, how did you connect with the Farm Workers and become an organizer?

LZ: Well, they were all around. This is San Jose. And so, they were organizing in the fields outside of San Jose. I mean, they were everywhere. And a lot of—Luis Valdez—I went to school with—do you know who he is? *La Bamba*, and he became a well-known playwright. But I was already into English more than anything else, and Luis Valdez and a lot of other Latinos were involved in all sorts of politics.

And how I got involved? I mean, it just was like the Civil Rights Movement—it was in the air. I mean, you know, there was no major struggle like there was in the South, in terms of African civil rights, Afro-American civil rights, in San Jose, because San Jose at that time had the largest Latino population north of the border. It was larger than it was in L.A. So, you know, it was just normal.

EC: So, did becoming—did working with the Farm Workers, did that then give you a space to be Latino in a different way, after sort of it not being addressed in your family?

[0:10:00]

LZ: That’s interesting. I hadn’t thought about that. Probably I was moving into that. And, interestingly enough, of course, there wasn’t any space to do that in Mississippi. And it just—I mean, not to jump through history, it was after I came out—of course, one of the things that was

happening in the Afro-American movement is they were looking to the diaspora and back to Africa.

And I started to focus on, after Mississippi, not so much the Latino but the Native American issues, because we are—most Native people, the brown doesn't come from the few Africans—and there were a lot of Africans that were brought to Mexico and other areas, and especially Cuba and places, but most of it comes from Native people. And although it's colonized enough that—but they don't focus on that. But usually I—matter of fact, there's supposed to be a letter published in the *Post*, the *Washington Post*, I just wrote about that and folks not paying attention to that it's a Native American issue.

EC: Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

LZ: Oops. Am I supposed to repeat anything? I don't know what I said.

JB: I stop them periodically to close the file, so I don't have one enormous file.

LZ: Okay. Yeah, understood.

EC: So, what kind of—tell me about organizing with the farm workers?

LZ: Well, I was a kid, and I was a kid when I went to Mississippi, in terms of experience. I became a fairly good organizer, I think. I'm now considered a pretty good organizer. But we were just—we were told to go out in the field and go join the workers and then convince them—because there would be people yelling and screaming, saying, “Come on strike! Join us! Huelga!” And so, I was supposed to join in the fields and then convince people who were working around me to go join them. We'd get a whole bunch and we'd walk out on strike. And usually, it was one or two or three of us who were doing that.



The people who had been working for a long time doing it were known by the cops and known—a lot of times the cops weren't there, but the thugs, the plantation—they weren't plantations. They were farms. The farms—the thugs knew who the organizers and they wouldn't let them onto the field. But since they needed hands, you could go in and say, "I'm just a—," you know, I'd dress in raggedy clothes and I'd go in, and they'd let me in there. Then, the idea was we'd take people out. We'd lead people out on strike, because we were trying to do this strike. There were other things happening. There was a grape strike, of course, which was PR. I mean, that was all about getting to the media and making speeches. But I was just this young kid. I didn't know what I was doing.

EC: So, the grape strike's going on, but is this a different strike?

LZ: There was also—I usually worked on the strawberry strike. I mean, they were working for higher wages. I even worked one time on asparagus—boy, is asparagus hard to pick! You cut each little thing with this little hook knife. God! My back is a lot older now, but—[sighs]. But, no, it was getting higher wages for almost all of the things. But what made the media, and what—they were asking people all around the country to boycott California grapes unless they had a unionized sticker on it. But I don't think—no, I never worked in a grape field. I never worked picking grapes.

EC: Okay, yeah. And so, when—at this meeting when they were looking for somebody to go to Mississippi, did you have a picture of Mississippi in your head?

LZ: I didn't have the slightest idea what I was volunteering for. Duh! I mean, young kid who thinks, "Oh, this—," I knew about, you know, black struggles, etcetera. I didn't know what I was doing, no. I went down there, and it was more community organizing, and I got into that. And I have done lots of thinking over the years about how isolated it was that time for people in

the rural areas all across the South. TV, if you had it, the biggest news was who won the bass fishing contest. There was almost no national news. There were no national papers. You'd just get these local papers that just talked, again, about the bass fishing contest or who married who. And you had no sense of geopolitical—certainly not other countries. Nothing was mentioned about other countries. And so, you really didn't focus on national pictures.

It was only until I went back—I've forgotten when I was—maybe on Mike Espy's campaign—and I saw cable TV and realized that people had cable TV in their homes and they were watching [0:15:00] New York stations and seeing stuff that had never—nobody ever saw when I was there, in terms of national news. We got more via SNCC channels of things happening in Africa and New York than we did through the news media. [Laughs] There was nothing on.

EC: Yeah. So, no idea about Mississippi. Did you have much sense of SNCC before you got to Mississippi?

LZ: Oh, I knew a little about SNCC.

EC: Okay.

LZ: Because they had—you know, they were in San Jose making speeches and stuff. I mean, I knew enough, I think, to understand that SCLC was the middle-of-the-road or the less militant. And by then, I was getting pretty militant, and so I understood that this was, you know, a fairly militant—but it wasn't until I got immersed in that that I began to understand, you know, the real differences and of what was—I don't even know if I understood what COFO was back then. It was, okay, they're starting a union, and I'll just go down and help, and that will help all peoples, etcetera. And, I was naive, you know?

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And people like to look back and say how they had great insight. I didn't have great insight. I was working and organizing, getting people to try and join the strike, and doing that sort of thing, and in all sorts of discussions about that. We did a lot of voter registration. I probably spent as much or more time doing voter registration and things like that, getting Head Start programs going, and all the things—everybody did everything.

EC: Um-hmm. Do you remember how you came into Mississippi, like who you met first?

LZ: I think I met Lee Bankhead first, because they were waiting for me. And I had a map and I brought down a car loaded with clothes, and it was a car that was a gift to SNCC or COFO or I don't know who it was a gift to, and it was loaded with clothes for people and some other stuff. And I think I was alone. I don't remember. Over the years—because I actually went north a number of times or to California and did fundraising—over the years, I think I brought three cars down, including one hearse, which we had to tell people it was an ambulance, because nobody would ride in it.

EC: I was going to say that was a little ominous going into Mississippi with a hearse.

LZ: People didn't—because it had some of the stuff stripped off and it was black, but then, we'd tell them it was an ambulance, because people would say, "I can't," you know. It was a big vehicle, so nobody needed a seat. You'd just pack bodies in. And I had all sorts of driver's licenses. I had a Mississippi driver's license, a California driver's license, someplace or another. When I was in New York, I think I got a New York driver's license. You could have multiple driver's licenses back then. Now it's all computerized, and they won't let you do it. But I had—you know, so I was always one of the drivers. And there are some funny stories about driving in the North, but that's okay. And so we'd have to tell them it was an ambulance. Then everybody thought it was okay, they could ride in it.

[Phone rings] Is that going to interrupt? Let me just shut it off.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

EC: [Laughs] It's hard to be a movie star.

LZ: You're just a blur, by the way.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: You're all blurs.

JB: Well, we're smiling.

LZ: Okay, I can see the smiles. I can see that. But—

JB: Okay, we're back.

EC: A few minutes ago, you mentioned that by this time you're becoming militant.

LZ: Oh, I probably was basically militant. I probably was militant when I was in elementary school and didn't know it.

EC: What did that mean to you then?

LZ: I believed in fighting back, I guess, in struggling back, instead of just taking things, taking it and laying down, that you ought to change the system if the system wasn't right. And I don't know where I got that. Certainly, none of my—my folks weren't doing that. None of the friends that I had when I was younger, none of them were political. In college, I met people who were doing that, and I was very involved with them. But, no, it was—I guess it's in my instinct. You know, it's just something about it. You have to fight back.

EC: Yeah. So, when you got to Mississippi, you sort of describe driving in. Do you remember how you were introduced to what SNCC and COFO were doing and the people?

LZ: No. I think—and it's part of a lot of cultures. There's not a lot of talking and explaining. SNCC people tended to do more of it, but they expected, I think, a seasoned union

worker who knew how to organize. And I knew a little bit how to organize and I figured it out on the run. [0:20:00] But over my life, I've learned that a lot of times people don't explain stuff. I was—I forgot to put down ironworker. Isn't that interesting? No, I did! I was a union ironworker for a while, and that means climbing tall buildings and putting steel together. Nobody really tells you how to do it! You go out there and you're supposed to watch and figure it out. And the same thing, I guess, was true for cooking, for being a short order cook, because nobody gave—you didn't go to class. They didn't have classes for that, and you'd just figure it out.

And I would figure out how to convince people that they ought to join the union and work to get higher wages. And you would tell them something, and that didn't work, and you'd try and tell them something else. And I learned pretty quickly it had to be, usually, for their personal benefit. For me, of course, it was about. "We need to change the system." But if I talked about changing the system, people would get glassy-eyed. They just wanted to have more money on the table because they couldn't feed their kids.

EC: Right.

LZ: So, you put things in terms of what helped them personally and how it was going to help their family, their brothers and sisters who also were chopping cotton or picking cotton. And that's how you did it. And I guess I figured it out pretty well. People thought I was a pretty good organizer. And I've gone on to do a lot of organizing and given classes in organizing since then.

EC: Yeah. Who were some of the people that you worked most closely with in Mississippi?

LZ: It was mostly ministers. Lee Bankhead was the head of Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. I guess on the board was Fannie Lou Hamer and Ms. Ruffin and Reverend Johnson, and

I'm running out of names. I can see lots of faces, but I'm running out of names. There's another woman. As you notice, most of those are women. If they weren't women, they were usually ministers, because the men had to work generally.

But the Movement, I'd say, was carried on the back of really strong women and ministers who were willing to stand up. And that was a great deal, I expect, because ministers couldn't get fired by the white establishment. Everybody else basically worked for Mr. Charlie. And so, if you wanted to—and people would get fired for trying to register to vote or for organizing. And so, we—those were the people who made the decisions.

And you probably know enough about SNCC that it is a bottom-up, I mean, it's a grassroots organization. It's not like, and I don't want to disparage any of the other civil rights organizations that were top-down, because some of those leaders are now very famous and have statues and stuff like that. And they're good people, but it's a very top-down decision making process.

SNCC was always a grassroots, bottom-up, and we got paid, as I recall, it was \$20 a week, out of which they took taxes and all that. So, it was either \$17 and change or \$18 and change. Not a whole lot of money. But the reason they paid you that, and they were clear about it, is if you couldn't live off the community, if people who were dirt-poor and didn't have anything weren't willing to share their food and lodging, then you shouldn't be there. Either the community thought you were worthwhile, or, "Get your butt out!"

EC: Um-hmm. You were telling us earlier about some of the families that you lived with in Mississippi.

LZ: Oh, you were talking about—well, I stayed with them for a while. I lived with another—I was mostly out of Cleveland, and so—well, let me tell you about the shack we had in Cleveland.

EC: Okay.

LZ: It was behind somebody's house, and we could take a shower in there. It had a commode and a sink behind a curtain. And that was the SNCC office and the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union office and the COFO office, and it was one room. When I went back years later to work on Mike Espy's campaign, I drove by it and saw it. It's not half as big as this room is.

EC: Really?

LZ: I mean, it was this little teeny thing. And we would stack cinder blocks up around the bottom, and we'd sleep on the floor, because occasionally people would come by and shoot at night, and they'd shoot through it.

EC: So, you'd use the blocks as protection?

LZ: Yeah, we'd just sleep there. You know, it happened often enough you didn't even hardly wake up, because they wouldn't come in. They'd just drive by and shoot.

But, no, the family you're talking about, that's just one of many hundreds of stories. And I mentioned that to you earlier so—and I guess he'd volunteered to have somebody come and do voter registration. He's black and probably about six foot ten, [0:25:00] maybe taller, and he had his own plantation and he had workers on it. And he and his kids worked it, too. They worked the fields. They worked their butt off.

And I remember when I was driven out there. Somebody from SNCC drove me out. And it was pitch black, and the dogs were barking, and this person comes out. And I'm not that small;

I was, you know, I'm about six foot. I think I'm about five-eleven and a half. And he gets me under the arms, and I start to go up and up and up until I'm faced with somebody. I go, "Okay, what am I doing here?" Nice guy, wonderful family, fed me more food, and they keep saying, "You're done eating? What's wrong, boy?" [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: They packed in so much food! Breakfasts, which was their big meal, looked like Thanksgiving dinners! Every morning with pancakes and waffles and sausage and biscuits and hamburgers and rice and ham! And, of course, they grew—you know, they had a farm. They had all these animals. But they just packed some food in.

Yes, but he'd take me every day. Every morning, he got up and he actually went out in the fields before sunup. And then, he'd come back a little after daybreak and take me to groups of houses and leave me there. And I was trying to get these people to register to vote, which was a standard thing to do. Not quite that way—I had never been on a black plantation before, and he was well-respected and probably somewhat feared, especially in the white community. He had a shotgun and a rifle in the back of his pickup truck. And nobody messed with him.

But, yeah, that's just one of the—you know, they're, oh, hundreds of stories. You spend years in some place doing organizing and, you know, whatever.

EC: Do you—I know it's hard to always remember, but do you remember where he was, like which county or town?

LZ: I believe it was Washington, or maybe it was Sunflower. [Sighs] No, I'm guessing it was Sunflower, and it would be interesting to research it. I've wondered about that. He probably was well-known. Yeah, it'd make a nice history, but I moved on after that. And I saw him at meetings occasionally, but he had a plantation to run.



EC: Yeah.

LZ: And he worked hard.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I mean, he took time out to get people registered and he thought that was critical to get people registered. And that was still during the time that you could go down, and they'd turn you away. Now, the Voting Rights Act had not been signed at that time. And even after it was signed, it took a long time to get implemented.

EC: So, if you were in Cleveland, you must have spent time with Amzie Moore.

LZ: Oh, sure.

EC: Can you tell us what he was like?

LZ: Oh, my goodness. Very quietly strong. I'm trying to remember. For some reason—he was at a lot of meetings. He usually didn't speak in churches that I can remember. Our big thing was to get music or singing, freedom songs, and getting firebrand speakers. But I don't remember him speaking. He did a lot of strategizing. But I don't remember him—I was much closer, say, to Fannie Lou Hamer, Ms. Ruffin, and people like that.

EC: Can you tell us about both of them?

LZ: [Sighs] [Laughs] I remember Fannie Lou would get so mad, and she chewed tobacco, and she'd get so mad, she'd spit and then spit and then spit again. Everyone paid attention to her. Everyone listened to what she said. She probably was as much the backbone of what happened in that part of the Delta as anybody. Her henchman was Ms. Ruffin, and I have no idea now what Ms. Ruffin's first name is, or if I ever did know.

EC: Susie.

LZ: Susie? Oh, really? Good! A great lady! Between the two of them, the young guys would come in from SNCC, and they always deferred. I mean, if there was an argument about or disagreement, you might say, about how to handle, you know, whether we would work in this particular town or that particular town, nobody ever—I mean, she won all the arguments between the two of them.

EC: So, how would they do it? Would they just say what they thought, and that would be it?

LZ: They'd say, "No, that won't work, and you don't know what you're talking about," and they just bullied their way into it. Yeah, they were tough ladies, tough ladies.

EC: Yeah. You said before we started filming that Ivanhoe Donaldson was a really good organizer.

LZ: He did not organize in the Delta while I was there [0:30:00] that I knew of. But in terms of tricks for organizing, you know, he'd come in and stuff, he was probably—had an instinct for being on a one-to-one, or one-to-a small group of people, in terms of getting folks involved in doing stuff. He was incredible. I mean, there are people that stand out. Stokely Carmichael, Kwame Ture.

EC: How did he stand out?

LZ: He was good. He certainly was a good organizer. He certainly was fearless. But I think that people really, for some reason, and I don't know, maybe it was what Ivanhoe looked like. He looked like just somebody from the field. I mean, he really did. If you looked at him, you wouldn't think he was anybody but another field hand. And he knew how to talk and act in a way that convinced people.

And then, there were people like Bob Moses, who probably to me was the intellectual lead in SNCC. I mean, he had the book learning. He had the, you know, of course, the intelligence and the insight. And in terms of Pan-Africanism and linking that, he probably, I saw, as the person who—his thinking formulated it.

EC: Yeah. So, do you remember—so, you're doing voter registration work and you're working with the Mississippi Farm Labor Union—

LZ: Um-hmm.

EC: Do you remember the discussions in Mississippi about whether or not to put on the Summer Project?

LZ: That happened—the Summer Project came right after I got there. It came about, what, four or five months. And they were just coming, was all I knew, and we expected—

EC: Okay, so that was already in the works?

LZ: It was in the works. And I was just—you know, I was—now, I join in. I mean, I'm a seasoned political hack or whatever you call it. Then, I would attend meetings, but I was a naive little kid. I mean, I wasn't a little kid, but I was, you know, I was—certainly I didn't participate. Oh, I might get into a discussion about whether we should go to this thing, or have a rally at this church. But in terms of the grand strategy, that was done over my head. And I probably—well, it was a good thing, because I didn't know enough to understand what was going on.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And a lot of decisions were made and, by the way, I've told people since then—I was telling people at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion of SNCC that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Challenge probably is the reason that we have a solid Republican South now. Because once, you know, once we got the Voting Rights Act, and they realized that black folks

were going to vote, and the Democratic Party was going to probably be majority black, all over the South people fled to the Republican Party. And back then, no Republican could win anything in the South.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: And so, did we foresee that? I don't know that anybody at any time said, "Well, what the result of this is going to be is a Republican South." And that's what we have now. And that's, of course, a key political factor in a lot of the things that I think are wrong with this country. So, you know, unintended consequences.

EC: Yeah. Do you have a sense of how—do you remember whether or how the Summer Project changed the work you were doing on a day-to-day basis?

LZ: We had a lot of volunteers who were green and didn't know what they were doing. They were willing to go out and do stuff because [laughs] they didn't know how dangerous it was. We had—I didn't work with that many of them. But there were a lot of mass demonstrations, they could knock on a lot more doors, and we did that. And I guess I was seasoned enough to give them a lot of information.

There was a lot of pushback among some of the more seasoned civil rights workers that these folks didn't know exactly what they were doing and maybe it wasn't worth the effort because they were taking up resources. They were very useful in helping, as I recall, getting some of the Head Start schools going, because a lot of them were college students with, you know, education, et cetera. I guess I was a college student with education, but I didn't think of it that way. I mean, what do you do with a physics degree? Give me a break.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: I didn't finish it ever. But that's—you know, I was, you know—I could teach math and I did. [0:35:00] I tutored in math sometimes.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: But they were really helpful in the Head Start schools and some of the other programs. We had—people would send clothes down, and we had distribution programs, and they were good at working that stuff out. In terms of going out and going in the field and getting someone who was chopping cotton to agree to join the union? It takes—being a community organizer takes getting empathy from the person you're organizing. It's a one-on-one or a one-on-a few people community. They might have made it if they had lots of time, but they were only there, most of them, for the summer.

EC: Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

EC: I know at a certain point SNCC shifted from regular voter registration in the summer to registering people for the FDP.

LZ: Um-hmm.

EC: Were you involved in that or any of the FDP organizing?

LZ: Oh, yeah. It was all one group. I mean, the FDP weren't separate, and Lawrence Guyot was always there and people like that. Yeah, did I think of it as that big a shift? We had to get them registered. Otherwise, you know, that was always key is getting people registered to vote, because if you couldn't vote, you know, being in the—

EC: Right.

LZ: But a lot of our meetings focused on joining MFDP. And so, there was a lot of emphasis on that and what that could do, yeah.

EC: Where were you based that summer? Do you remember? Were you still in Cleveland?

LZ: Yeah. I was pretty much always—that's where most of my stuff stayed.

EC: That was your—yeah.

LZ: I would go stay places. I went down to Delta Pines plantation and hid out there while we were doing—and hid out is the word, because they were looking for us, and we used to sleep in ditches and stuff. So, I'd go places and maybe go work someplace for three days a week or even longer. But my stuff, which consisted of a couple of pairs of jeans, and I used to shave then and had a razor, I guess, that would stay and a toothbrush—I don't know if I took my toothbrush. I don't know if I brushed my teeth.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: I must have!

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: [Laughs] You know? And—I must have brushed my teeth. Anyway, but I don't remember ever brushing my teeth. I mean, you never think about those things.

EC: Routine.

LZ: Routine—those things that you do.

EC: Um-hmm, second nature.

LZ: And I was, I guess I have to admit, one of the places I did a lot of organizing, especially among young men and women is I would go to the joints, drink beer and dance. And most of the SNCC workers didn't do a lot of that, but I'm—

EC: So, you developed a special talent—

LZ: [Laughs] Yes, I drink a lot of beer!

EC: [Laughs] To organize at the jukes?

LZ: Colt 45, yes, I drank a lot of beer.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And, you know, but that's places to organize. You can talk to people. It's wherever you can meet people and talk to them.

EC: Yeah. Did you go to the precinct meetings or district caucuses or any of that, going up to FDP?

LZ: I don't think—did I ever go to a district caucus meeting? I certainly went to precinct meetings. And I certainly, yeah, I remember driving, because I was one of the drivers so I would, you know, in the hearse. We talked about that, yeah.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: I would drive the vehicles and so I'm—yeah, I went to—but I would drive. And I wasn't up front doing stuff. I was in the back, urging people to participate and stuff like that. I mean, I was not in that leadership, and SNCC didn't want us in that leadership. I mean, it was them. They were there to make the decisions. This was—if it was going to be a Mississippi Democratic Party, Freedom Democratic Party, then they had to take the leadership of it. The whole idea, the Saul Alinsky model, where you work yourself out of a job, you want people to lead and make the decisions. So, I never tried to do that.

EC: Um-hmm. Some people have talked about what it was like to kind of see that in action during the FDP meetings leading up to the state convention in Jackson and then, you know, if they were there in Atlantic City.

LZ: I didn't go to either Jackson or Atlantic—I know I didn't go to Atlantic City. I came up here for the Challenge to Washington, D.C. I drove a whole bunch of people up. I didn't go to either, and I'm not sure why. Again, maybe I had no reason to go, except as a driver, and they didn't need a driver. But, no, I was at neither.

EC: When you drove people to D.C., was that to do lobbying and preparation?

LZ: No, it was the Challenge. I guess you'd call it lobbying. We came up and we stayed at All Souls Church, filled the basement. And we'd go every day to the Congress building [0:40:00] and to the Democratic Party headquarters and do, you know, basic lobbying.

EC: And so, was this—this was the Congressional Challenge?

LZ: Yes.

EC: With Ms. Hamer and Ms. Gray and stuff?

LZ: Um-hmm.

EC: So, how long were you up here for that, do you know? I mean, just roughly, I'm not asking, you know.

LZ: I'm guessing two weeks.

EC: Yeah, okay. And so, you were helping drive people around?

LZ: I would drive people—you like stories? My favorite story was in—I mean, I'd driven in the big city. I'm from California. I'd driven in L.A. and San Francisco, you know, and Oakland and place like that. But I was driving this car and going back to All Souls from something we were at, maybe it was a rally on the Mall. I don't remember. And whoever heard of turning a six-lane street into one-way, when it was two-way the other time? D.C. has these streets. Everybody who's in D.C. knows this. And I turned onto this street and I knew how to get back to the church, and I'm looking at all this traffic facing me.



EC: [Laughs]

LZ: And there's a cop sitting there, and he looks at me, and then he looks at the people in the car, half of which were still wearing bandanas from working in the field, because these were mostly union people, so they, you know, they were field workers, and nobody told them to dress up. They didn't bring their Sunday clothes. He looks at me, he looks at the people in the car, and he looks at the Mississippi tags. He looks at me, and he looks at the people in the car, and he looks at the Mississippi tags. And he just shakes his head. And he holds up all this traffic, makes a big deal out of it, but he says, "Come on."

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: [Laughs] You know, you feel about this big. "I've driven in the city before, but nobody has one-way streets that were two-way yesterday," you know. And they make it one-way going out, because it's all about the suburbs—

EC: Right.

LZ: So, it's a two-way street most of the day, and it's one-way going out in the afternoon, and one-way coming in in the morning, you know.

EC: Right.

LZ: Okay. I do know how to drive! "Come on. Come on."

EC: [Laughs] Oh! Did you have a chance to see Mrs. Hamer and Mrs. Gray and Mrs. Devine do their—sort of, you know, speak to people or talk about the issues at the Challenge?

LZ: Oh, sure. I mean, all the time, yeah. I mean, that was normal, because they did it all the time.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah, I mean, the same thing happened in D.C. I—on one hand, as I said, I was more politically naive. On one hand, I knew this was a big deal, and we were trying to upset the system, and I knew all the politics of it. But I didn't have a good geopolitical—I mean I wasn't in strategy groups. And so, I don't think I really was focused on the import, because it was my job to get people to come, as many bodies as I could. And so, I was out there saying, "Oh, this is great stuff, we're going to do this," how important it is. And then, once we were here, logistics: making sure people got fed, people showed up where we're supposed to be, what building it is, give me a map so I can find it. [Dog starts barking] But, you know, I wasn't at that level of leadership. Now, in the union, I had more to say in what we were trying to do with the union. But MFDP had its own leadership.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: And they wanted local people and local officials to do it. And it wasn't—SNCC was very much about that, and we were witnesses.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And facilitators.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And that was what we were supposed to do.

EC: And what about—you mentioned Guyot's role in reference to FDP.

LZ: Well, he's a good friend and has been over the years. Sometimes I think he remembers his role as more—anyway, he was key to it. He was certainly a powerful figure and he certainly was key to developing the strategies. And being from Mississippi, he had—you know, he played that card a lot. When people would say, who weren't from Mississippi, "We

think this,” he’d say, “Well, you’re not from here. You don’t get to make that decision.” And I’ve heard him say that many, many times.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: He didn’t take too well to people who disagreed with him.

EC: I don’t know if you were aware of this or involved in this at all, but I know that, you know, that after the Convention Challenge, there were some differences between SNCC and FDP over endorsing Johnson-Humphrey and working for them.

LZ: Um-hmm, yes.

EC: Can you speak to that?

LZ: No. I really—

EC: Okay.

LZ: That was—again, I let decisions like that be made by other folks. I—to be honest, I know what I’d say now, and I don’t know what I would have said then, if my opinion had been asked.

EC: Yeah. [0:45:00]

LZ: But that wasn’t my decision, and I shouldn’t have, even if I had an opinion—

EC: Yeah. So, talk about—you said in the union work that you had more say in shaping things. Can you talk about that?

LZ: Well, it’s how we would—you know, and at one point we even started a co-op that was union, and that was in Shaw, as I recall. But it was the strategy of what do we do now, you know. Can we really have a strike? Will the plantation owners just get other people in from other areas? And we did have a number of small strikes. Could we just leverage and demand for better wages? How many people could we get out to do certain things? And it was more day-to-day

level about—because that was handled by a smaller group and, like I said, there were a few leaders who were local, but we had more input.

EC: It seems like it was a real difficult context because mechanization had already had such an impact on the Delta and the number of laborers.

LZ: Yes, certainly for a lot of things. But when it came to chopping cotton—and chopping cotton, to explain to people who don't know, you've got to get the weeds out. Johnson grass is the biggest thing. And you take a hoe and you chop all of the weeds with a hoe. I don't know that they ever found anything that will replace just backbreaking labor. And picking cotton, although there are some mechanical devices, picking cotton, especially if it's a smaller plantation, it doesn't pay to do it other than by hand. So, we did have some leverage.

Some of the other things, like corn and stuff like that, we didn't even fight that battle, because you pick that—there are automated corn pickers, etcetera.

EC: So, can you describe the decision to actually try the strike and what happened?

LZ: Well, we tried some small strikes. We'd strike individual plantations. And there were a couple of times we actually got better wages, and there were a couple of times—more than a couple, about eight times. And I couldn't remember the plantation owners' names if I had to. I mean, I don't know, maybe somewhere in the recesses. But it was always an ongoing decision about whether this was going to work. Do we have enough people? Were enough folks signed up from that plantation? If you didn't have the majority, then it wasn't even worth it. Would they bring others in? And therefore, people would just be without a job, because there was nowhere else to go. Nobody else would hire you once they heard you were striking.

We had food banks set up on several occasions, and we'd get people to send money. That's one of the things I did when I was in the North is I'd raise money for food and clothes.

So, could we sustain the people and for how long? And who would take care of the kids, you know? And people had some—it was a really hard decision. We got—we never had [coughs] a large major coordinated strike across a large enough area of the Delta to make any difference, or the county, Bolivar County. But we did increase the wages for some people, which then forced other plantations owners, we learned, raised their wages to be competitive, so people wouldn't jump to another plantation. So, we had what I would call limited success. And we considered any, you know, ten cents an hour a large increase.

EC: You know, I'm not sure about the timing of this, and this might have been after—I was trying to look at the dates, but this might have been after you left Mississippi. But at one point there's a strike, where enough people are striking that people get evicted, and they set up a Tent City.

LZ: Oh, yeah.

EC: And take over the airbase. Were you part—?

LZ: That was—where was that? It wasn't in Bolivar County, right?

EC: It was Ms. Blackwell, Unita Blackwell was involved.

LZ: Yeah, Unita, yeah.

EC: So, I know she was in Mayersville, but I'm not sure—Sharkey area. But I'm not sure that's where the strike was.

LZ: Yeah. And I heard about—actually, a lot of that happened, and it was still happening when I came back when I was north one time, I think. Sometimes I get mixed up in my head, I'm sorry. [0:50:00] It's been a lot of years and I don't focus on this much. I think that happened, actually, it wasn't in Bolivar County. Maybe it was—I think it was in Sunflower. And it was set

up by the time I got back. But they had a lot of internal problems, and I never really got that involved. And then, it was still ongoing when I left, though.

EC: Okay. When you would go north and raise money, would you set up those trips? Or would SNCC set them up, and then you'd just come in and speak?

LZ: SNCC would have a schedule for me.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: And I went to California a couple of times, New York, Boston, Washington, D.C. And they had churches, they had a place for me to stay. They just needed my body there, and I'd tell them what was happening, and tell them how much we needed and what we needed. And then, there was always some other folks from the local SNCC offices. The local SNCC offices in the North really did—were mostly support organizations. And so, they would take checks and they would collect the food and that sort of thing.

EC: Yeah. So, I've heard these stories about SNCC meetings, you know, when the group would gather, you know, sort of as a staff. Did you participate in those meetings? Do you have memories of those?

LZ: We had some small ones. Of course, the Delta is in the west of Mississippi. Most of them were in Alabama. I mean, that's where the big—. I went to a few in Jackson, but we didn't have many local meetings. I didn't leave the area much.

EC: So, you didn't—

LZ: Yeah, I went to Jackson occasionally. It was a decent ride to go to Jackson.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

LZ: So, there would be local meetings, and that's where I would attend. But I didn't go, nor was I interested, because I thought, you know, I was supposed to be working there.

EC: So, you'd stay close to the field and no travel to Atlanta or different places?

LZ: Yeah. And that's what I thought that's what my role was. Now, I'm older and different, and I get involved in leadership decisions and stuff like that. But even then, even now, I've worked a lot of political campaigns, and there are—when you do a political campaign, I mean, for Kweisi Mfume I was his coordinator for Montgomery County. And so, in Montgomery County decisions, you know, I was part of all those decisions. Statewide, you know, I went to not that many of the meetings, because they didn't have many statewide, and then there was a core of people that made decisions. And that's a top-down thing again.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: But that's a lot of the way things happen. They make decisions that—and we got a newsletter that would tell us about it. What was that called?

EC: Was that a Mississippi newsletter?

LZ: No.

EC: Or a SNCC one?

LZ: It was a SNCC newsletter.

EC: Was that the one for staff?

LZ: Yeah, and we'd get that. And then, of course, we'd get phone calls, and they'd tell us—we had a WATS line. You've heard about the WATS line?

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: We had the WATS line, and then—and the newsletter was always great, because was it Frank Ciociorka? Did that great art stuff, man.

EC: Oh, right. Yeah.

LZ: I wonder what happened to him.

EC: I think he passed not that long ago, like in the last four years maybe.

LZ: Oh, really? I hadn't heard that. You know, I'm on the SNCC email list, and I can't read it all. I'm sorry. It's—you know, there's got to be 30 emails a week, and I'm on a lot of email lists. Yeah, but Lee Bankhead, I heard, had passed. I heard that when I was at the reunion.

EC: Okay.

LZ: I believe that's correct.

EC: I don't know much about him.

LZ: No, Lee is a woman.

EC: Oh, okay. I didn't know much about her, obviously.

LZ: She was, I guess, director of the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union.

EC: Okay. Can you tell us about her?

LZ: Strong woman, very thoughtful, well-organized, knew everybody. Didn't do a lot of in-the-field organizing herself, but she, you know, she was the person who—you know, all decisions went through her for the union.

EC: Where was she from?

LZ: I believe Cleveland.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I believe Cleveland. If it wasn't Cleveland, it was somewhere around there, because her roots were in the area.

EC: So, from the Delta?

LZ: Yeah.

EC: For sure, yeah. So, the SNCC staff meeting in Waveland, Mississippi, in November of '64, [0:55:00] is one of these sort of infamous meetings. Do you have any recollection of that?



LZ: No.

EC: Is that the kind of thing that you wouldn't go to?

LZ: I didn't go.

EC: You'd just stay in the field?

LZ: I probably read about it.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: That doesn't even ring any bells.

EC: Forman—well, there was a lot of sort of discussion in the organization about the white volunteers who were staying on, and a contingent had gone to Guinea through Harry Belafonte, and there was a lot of sort of flux within the organization about what do we do now in the aftermath of the Challenge. And Forman invited people to write position papers, and so, there was this, you know, a lot of—several days in Waveland, Mississippi, discussing all of this.

LZ: Yeah, I remember hearing that. As I told you, there was some resentment about some of the volunteers who were not steeped in the SNCC tradition of, you know, it's local control. And they would come into meetings and sometimes want to make decisions. And they'd stand up in meetings and say, "Well, we think this and that." And I'd tell them afterwards, "It's not a business. You know, unless you're from here, you don't make a decision about here." So, yeah, there was some pushback, and that was discussed in that meeting. I heard about that. I didn't get a sense—nobody was asked to leave that I know of, I mean, so I don't know that any hard decisions that I knew of came out.

And to be honest, I haven't read a lot of the books. I know Jean Wiley, who I mentioned to you, who's a dear friend and worked on a number of the history projects, and, you know, whenever I'm in California, I stay at her house, and she's there. We don't hash over those days

much, and to be honest, I haven't read any of the stuff she's written, really. I've moved on unfortunately.

EC: Did you know her from SNCC?

LZ: I met her, I think, one time—no, twice. She didn't come out in the field much. Among other things, she doesn't believe in using outhouses, and no place I've ever worked had anything but outhouses. And she liked—you know, she was an office person. But she, again, tremendously organized, thoughtful and analytical.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I mean, she's like Moses, like Bob Moses.

EC: Yeah. So, you said that there's tons and tons of stories. Can you tell us some of your favorite ones?

LZ: Favorite ones—that I can talk about in public.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Well, one time the Deacons of Defense and Justice came. I guess you know who it is, but they were a group from Louisiana and they decided they would come across the border. And we had—they energized a lot of people. And, of course, SNCC was nonviolent, so you know I couldn't whatever. But we had this deputy sheriff, Deputy Weeks, I think was his name—I don't know his first name—who used to beat folks all the time and he was just pretty open about it. And he stuck his shotgun in my chest one time and he was not exactly a friendly guy. Somebody apparently threw a Molotov cocktail on his front porch in this place in the country where he and his family stayed. And nobody was hurt. He changed around a 100 percent, or 90 percent, or 75 percent. It changed his whole attitude to being a nasty son of a bitch.

EC: Do you have an explanation for that?

LZ: He didn't want to see his kids burnt up.

EC: So, he figured that he had to do right if he wasn't going to see that kind of retaliation?

LZ: I don't know if he called it "right." He had to pull back, because, you know, people could fight back.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: And, as I said, you know, SNCC was nonviolent and officially I don't know anything about any of that.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: You know, even though I was considered one of the drivers around there. Oh, another good story—drivers. I was the one, because, you know, we got chased a lot down country roads. And what I would rig up all the—not all the SNCC cars—a number of SNCC cars is I would run a wire to the tail lights and put a switch under the dashboard. So, if you were driving at night and you were being followed, you could turn off your taillights.

EC: That's handy.

LZ: So, you know, there were little things you did, you learned to do.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: So, I would, because I had worked on cars when I was young.

EC: Do you remember the impetus for the Deacons coming to town?

LZ: I don't know that—well, they wanted to help. And they believed that fighting back was a solution, which was not a SNCC-authorized solution. And they had—but the meetings were held right where I lived, so it was a little hard not to be part of it. And [1:00:00]—

EC: Was that the Meredith March when they were—the Meredith March was in June '66 from Memphis to Jackson, and I know the Deacons were protection for that march.

LZ: No, it was a group of about six guys, five or six guys, easily guys who you wouldn't want to, you know, push the wrong way. And they just came and talked to local folks. And we had half a dozen meetings with people coming to talk to them. And you know, I'm not sure they—I didn't host the meeting. I mean, SNCC can't do that. But, you know, stuff happens.

EC: Yeah. Well, I mean, I know that there was quite a bit of discussion and quite a bit of non-discussion about the issue of nonviolence and what it meant for SNCC people and how that shifted over time.

LZ: Yeah. Well, I think everyone—and I was part of a number of those discussions. Everyone agreed that we would be nonviolent. But whether it was a tactic, or we believed in it morally, there was some real difference of opinion. And, as far as I know, it was simply agreed up until the time I left—and, of course, things started to change and started more Afrocentric concerns—that, you know, why you did it wasn't important, as long as you were officially nonviolent.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: So, it—you know. And there were those two schools of thought.

EC: But was there conversation—were you part of any conversation with local people about that?

LZ: Oh, sure! I was part of—you know, people would say, "We ought to just go get our guns." And I'd say, "Well, in general, I don't think that's going to work," because it wouldn't have. And we didn't have any manipulation of the levers of power. And any armaments that people had were small hunting rifles or shotguns. The one incident I was telling you about with

Deputy Weeks was very isolated. He was out there by himself, and so there was nobody around to watch his house. And that one incident—and he was really a son-of-a-bitch. I mean, he would do things that most of the police force would never do. So, he probably didn't have a lot of backing either, because it would look bad.

JB: What kind of things did he do?

LZ: He'd just walk up and smack people walking down the street if he thought they weren't—you know. He'd walk up to young people and even old people and push them and slap them around, I mean, just with no provocation whatsoever. There were cameras on when he put a shotgun—it was a demonstration about voter rights—and he put a shotgun in my chest. And that was caught on tape somewhere, and he got some feedback about that.

EC: Yeah. And he's a Bolivar County deputy?

LZ: Yeah.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Cleveland, maybe Cleveland City.

EC: Oh, so like a city police officer?

LZ: City police officer. I don't think I understood where one stopped and the other started. Maybe they were all county.

EC: Generally, in Mississippi, there were city police and county sheriff and deputies.

LZ: Yeah, so he would have been county, because he was a deputy.

EC: Okay.

LZ: Yeah, you're right. You're right. He must have been county.

EC: Though at a certain point, Mississippi started having all these auxiliary police. And a lot of times they were the ones that were most out of control.

LZ: He had been known—people knew him for years, so I think he was—he was—had been there for a while.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I mean, he was—people talked about him from the first day I got there.

EC: Yeah, so he was—

LZ: He was, you know, one of the biggest problems.

EC: Do you remember the Meredith March? This is the march which is most infamous for Carmichael introducing the phrase “Black Power” to a national audience, really. In Greenwood, he uses the phrase “Black Power.” It’s captured—

LZ: What year was it?

EC: June ’66.

LZ: No, I don’t, as a matter of fact. And it’s interesting—like I said, we didn’t get news. So, if it made national headlines, I didn’t find out about it until I went to the North.

EC: Yeah. Well, it’s interesting because, well, James Meredith starts this isolated march.

LZ: Yeah.

EC: You know, he’s going to go by himself. He called it the March Against Fear, and then he’s shot second day out.

LZ: Yeah.

EC: And so, then civil rights organizations go to Natchez to pick this up, but SNCC made it a kind of organized, a voter registration organizing campaign, because this is after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. And so, they tried to, everywhere they went, tap into their SNCC [1:05:00] contacts and networks and use it to register voters. So, that’s why I thought it might have been—not just through the national news, but through the—

LZ: Ah, it—if I was involved, I don't remember it. The biggest demonstration—we didn't do many big things—was when we went down to Jackson, and I don't know what year that was, maybe '64—yeah, maybe '64, and they arrested everybody.

EC: At the fair—and took them to the fairgrounds?

LZ: Yeah, that was in the fairgrounds.

EC: I think that was '65.

LZ: '65? That was the biggest event in Mississippi I was at. And we were—

EC: Can you tell us—?

LZ: You know, they locked us in the fairgrounds. They had some sort of—I guess I remember it being two partitions. Occasionally, you'd see the door open and you could see that the women were locked in another one. All the men were locked in our side. And I started out in solitary confinement, then they let me out into the general population.

EC: Were you in solitary because you were identified as one of the organizers?

LZ: I believe so, yeah.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Because I brought a big group down. And then, I don't why they let me out. I mean, you never knew anything.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: Funny story about that. And they—a lot of times they had the door open so you could see—it was a big double door—you could see the women and, of course, a bunch of guys. I wasn't watching the guys. I was watching the women, you know. And this cop was trying to get this woman to move, big woman, and she was sitting down. And he hit her one time with his billy club, and she just covered her head. And then he went to pick her up, and he had—she must

have weighed 250 pounds—and he had her halfway up, and she kneed him in the groin. And you could hear him scream all the way through the walls. I'm sure—then they shut the door, and I'm sure they beat the shit out of her. But, you know.

EC: You know, I've interviewed a few men, who have said that one of the things that they found most difficult about nonviolence was not protecting, not moving to defend women and children—

LZ: Yes, yes.

EC: Given their upbringing and their socialization.

LZ: Um-hmm.

EC: Was that an issue for you?

LZ: Well, more than a few times when we had demonstrations—you know we'd have demonstrations, we'd go to various towns—they would start swinging the clubs at everybody, and I would just get—I mean, I guess I knew there was nothing we could do. I would just lay over people and protect them and let them hit me. I—you know, even though I fought when I was younger, I guess it didn't occur to me that that was an option. Because I think if you had really fought back, unless you did something, you know, planned, some sort of planned counterattack, you'd just get beaten up and thrown in jail. And, as it was—I actually saw my arrest record one time many times later, and it was about this thick. [laughs]

EC: Really? Yeah.

LZ: The worst jail I was in—I don't know why I was in that jail. The worst jail I was in—I don't even remember where it was. But they would put us, you know, there was white cells, of course, and the blacks. The black cell was one cell, one big cell. It had a sink and a toilet and mattresses, and it all sloped. There was a slope so it would drain in the center. And the toilet



was overflowing and the mattresses were near the center, so basically they were soaked in urine and feces. And so, you slept on the floor uphill. That wasn't a nice place, as I recall. That was probably the worst jail I was in.

I went to more than a few jails. Sometimes if there were more of us, we'd do things, you know, like I remember I used to, because I carve and stuff, and I remember making—taking Styrofoam cups and making a chess set.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Because we could smoke and we could get cigarettes, and I melted a chess set on the bars, and we had this vertical chess set.

EC: Yeah? [Laughs]

LZ: And we played chess, you know. And I was really putting effort into getting these beautiful chess pieces, the pawns and the queen.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Hey! What else are you going to do in jail?

EC: You've got plenty of time to work at it, right?

LZ: Yeah.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah, I don't remember—you just went to jail. It was something that happened, you know.

EC: You know, you talked about you had no idea about Mississippi, you know. So, what was it like to then spend, you know, four years there? I mean, how did you adapt? Or what did Mississippi mean to you after you had been there a while?

LZ: I was working—[1:10:00] I mean, I believed in changing the system. And it was an effort to do that. In retrospect, I wish I had more insight into what I was—you know, some of the decisions I made and what the effect would be, long term and short term for the people I was working for. But I accepted the role of being a minion, I guess. And knowing I was doing something I believed in, I thought it was part of what life's about. I mean, I really wasn't very philosophical about it. It was something you did and you had to do.

And often when I was in California, I would, you know, go work with, see farm workers again and talk to them and tell them some things we were doing, and we'd share information.

EC: I know by the late—

JB: I'm going to pause for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

EC: Do you want to put them on?

LZ: Well, not if—

JB: You can try that, and I'll tell you if it—

LZ: Okay.

JB: You can move around—

LZ: Yeah, because I can't see anybody, you know. Wow, there's a world out here!

[Laughs] It's a trip.

JB: I'm getting hits on them. I think it would be really distracting for people.

LZ: Okay.

JB: Sorry.

LZ: Alright. I'll be in a blurred world.

JB: And I can't get the lights up any higher.

LZ: It's okay. The next break, I'll get some more to drink, too.

EC: Do you want to do that now?

LZ: No, it's okay.

EC: Okay. I think by the late '60s SNCC has people working with the farm labor union, not the farm labor, but the farm workers in California, as well. Is that right? Do you know anything about that? That there are actually a couple of SNCC people out in California?

LZ: Who were on SNCC staff?

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And were they—no, I don't.

EC: Okay.

LZ: And it's interesting that since the reunion, there is a Latina who is doing—she was doing some, you know, Latinos and Latinas who were involved in SNCC—there weren't many of us. And I didn't know any at the time, but I've now found some others. But do you know if they were black, white, or Anglo, or—?

EC: I think that they were black and white, but I don't know a lot of detail, so I don't want to—and I know Maria Varela made some connections.

LZ: Yeah, she was the one, yeah.

EC: But she's not who I'm thinking of with this particular piece.

LZ: I'll ask. Do you know which—you know, to a certain extent farm workers was segmented into which strike they were working on. There was a strawberry strike, there was a tomato strike, and, of course, there was a grape strike, which was the one with a big boycott. And there were a lot of efforts in different areas, the Delano Valley and San Joaquin Valley and stuff like that.

EC: I'm not going to be able to pull it up.

LZ: Yeah.

EC: I've read some work on it by a historian, and so she was piecing together the interconnections. But I don't have enough detail to be able to say with any—

LZ: Yeah, I don't know if there was any formal, ever a formal interconnection while I was involved.

EC: Right.

LZ: And except when occasionally I'd go back, communication—we didn't have cellphones.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: You know, we didn't have the internet. You know, how things have changed so much! So, getting word back was, you know, when you talked to somebody on the phone—phone calls back then were expensive. That's why we used the WATS line.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: I mean, I tell kids today, you know, we used to make calls only at night. And then, we used to just make sure we talked to, you know, somebody—we'd call person-to-person, and then after they said, "No," you know, they'd get the person, so you could call in station-to-station. You couldn't afford communication.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And now, things are so much different. I mean, between unlimited phone calls and the internet, you'd know. But back then, once you left a place, you were isolated. It was very difficult for me to find out what was happening in Mississippi after I left.

EC: I wanted to ask about, you know, sort of how you came to leave. But before I do, there are a couple of documents that we dug up on the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union.

LZ: Okay. And for that, I've got to put on my glasses, because all of this looks like it's— oh, boy! I think I did this! [Mumbles as he reads] Yes! My goodness! I'd love to get a copy of this.

EC: You can keep that.

LZ: I think I typed this. That's Cieciorka.

EC: Yeah, I wondered.

LZ: That's Frank. [1:15:00] I didn't do this one, no, because I would never have put that square at an angle, with the SNCC logo. I still have SNCC pens, by the way, with that logo.

EC: Oh, do you?

LZ: Yeah. People have tried to get them. No, you can't have them!

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: I also have the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union button, which I—

EC: Oh, yeah? I don't know what that looks like.

LZ: Could dig up and show it to you.

EC: I'd love to see it.

LZ: It's upstairs. It's a black and white hand, and then, there's a lantern being held in front of it.

EC: What's the lantern symbolism?

LZ: Light.

EC: Okay.

LZ: Oh, my goodness! Yeah, I did this first one.

EC: So, can you—we can maybe get a picture of that, so people know what you're talking about.

LZ: Okay.

EC: But can you tell us about the—?

LZ: Let me look and see if anything else—mimeographed. [Mumbles as he reads] No, I didn't—I don't remember seeing this one. Oh, my goodness. My goodness, got a flashback to the past. This page of city workshops, I don't remember this. I'd like to read it but, of course, I'm not going to do it right now while we're on. And this is the—

JB: Can you hold it up for a second?

LZ: Hmm?

EC: He said hold it for a second.

LZ: Got it?

JB: Okay, thanks.

LZ: My goodness!

EC: So, can you tell us about how you came to type that up and who-all was involved in pulling it together?

LZ: Because I could type! I could type.

EC: [Laughs] And they let you in the field?

LZ: What did we have? We had this little portable typewriter. It was like a Royal, a little—you know, with the little keys, and you'd smack it, and it sounds terrible. And also, there were people who had—the churches had typewriters. There were people with typewriters. There was no such thing as a computer back then. This came out of meetings and the kind of work I'd do, yeah—my phone, how much I get paid, yeah. You know, we took notes, and Lee ran the

meeting. And I think—I don't even know which meeting this was, though. Most of them—Reverend Jackson was in most of those. Ms. Ruffin would come a lot of times. Fannie Lou had lots of stuff, so she wasn't at a lot of the meetings. There was another minister. And I don't know when we did this. I mean, this wasn't such a big deal that it sticks in my memory, but I remember typing it. And how did we photocopy it? How did we copy it? We didn't have photocopies then.

EC: Mimeograph on carbon?

LZ: We had mimeograph and then we had stencils—dictographs? Mimeograph you had to have a special—but then, there was a dicto-thing. I've forgotten.

JB: That looks like the kind where you cut the stencil.

LZ: Yeah, yeah. But they both—mimeograph is one type, and there was another copying thing, dicto-something-or-other.

EC: Did the Atlanta print shop ever do anything for you?

LZ: Not that—I mean, there were no black print shops, and no white print shop would have done it.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: We didn't have the money to do that sort of thing.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: We could have asked for some of the flyers we had sometimes, we would tell people up north what we wanted. If somebody was coming down, you'd say, "Can you do this?" And we'd get, you know, hundreds of copies that way.

EC: Yeah, because I know the SNCC office in Atlanta at a certain point had a print shop.

LZ: Yeah, they—a print shop?

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: I know they had a copier.

EC: No, they had a print shop, actually. Wilson Brown?

LZ: That's right! They had somebody who was linotype, who used to do linotype.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I remember talking to somebody who had that, and I was jealous or something because they had all that stuff, because we didn't have any of that.

EC: I know at a certain point Varela was making films and—

LZ: There were people coming through doing things. The—a lot of the churches had—it's not mimeograph. There's another—and that's what I think this is done on.

EC: Okay.

LZ: That's why the copy is so poor. The dictograph, dicto-something-or-other. Anyway, it's much easier to cut the stencil. Mimeograph, if you make a mistake, you had to cut it off with a razor blade. And this one—this was blue paper. And you'd put the, like get the master in, and you'd crank it along.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah, I worked—boy, those—yeah.

EC: So, with something like that, would you carry that around, then, to people and use it as a way to—?

LZ: Oh, yeah. No, actually, I think this—we would do this in churches after a speech. You know, we'd have all the rabble-rousing, the singing, and people would make, you know, presentations, and we'd have either—I don't know if we used clipboards [1:20:00] or if we had a table. But churches have all that. And we'd tell people to come to the back, and I would help



people. I'd be one of the folks signing folks up, helping them fill this in. A lot of people couldn't read and write.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And so, we'd be filling it in for them. And I think I even carried this to bars sometimes. I believe I did, you know, because that was one of my venues.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Which meant, since I got up at sunrise, I didn't do a lot of sleeping.

EC: Must have kept you busy.

LZ: Yeah.

EC: Were there things that were hard about being in Mississippi, or things that also you found particularly rewarding?

LZ: Well, the whole thing was rewarding, I mean, in its total. And we had fun, too. I've told people that—I mean, I know it must have been one of the most horrible things in the world to be in a concentration camp. But I'm sure people found moments of enjoyment. I mean, certainly we had relations, I'm talking about intimate relations, and we danced and we laughed. And got our ass beat up. But there were plenty of good times.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: It wasn't just all, you know, serious. It was a lot of good times. And, you know, the songs got people pumped up really good. I mean, people sang songs in jail. They sang songs in the field. They sang songs, you know, in churches.

EC: Were you ever a song leader?

LZ: Oh, everybody led. I mean, I still [starts singing], “We are soldiers in the army. We have to fight. Perhaps we have to die. We have to hold up the blood-stained banner, have to hold it up until we die.” I was the bass.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Yeah, and they went on forever. I mean, and the Freedom Singers used to come by. I mean, they used to tour all the South, and they were wonderful, wonderful.

EC: Yeah. So, are there—you mentioned Lee Bankhead and a few other people. But are there other people that you spent a lot of time working with that you can tell us about—or that stand out?

LZ: I can’t say any names. I’ve been—and I’ve tried to call his name. I lost it about ten years ago, maybe. Fannie Lou Hamer’s nephew and I used to do a lot together. We used to—matter of fact, he and I were the ones who were in Delta Pines plantation. We went to Yazoo City together and got our asses run out of there.

EC: Can you tell us about those two, Delta Pines and Yazoo?

LZ: Well, okay. I wish I could tell you his name, but it seems not to be there. I remember at the Delta Pines one, he—okay, Delta Pines, we went there. Oh, yeah, because there’s a couple of good stories. Delta Pines was a plantation, the old-fashioned plantation that had cabins that people lived in, sharecroppers. They basically were, though sharecroppers were not supposed to have existed. And we were doing voter registration. We couldn’t have done union organizing. [Dog starts barking] We had—it wasn’t that sort of place we could have done that.

That’s—and I spoke to you briefly before the interview about it—that’s where we met some older people down by the river who were living in these shacks. And they were talking about, oh, we were “the same group that had come to organize to get people to register to vote

before.” We said, “Nobody’s been here before. This is SNCC.” [Laughs] We’re the only ones stupid enough or tough enough or whatever to go in there. And I talked to them and I talked to them about when it was.

I found out it was in the ’40s or the ’30s! I mean, they didn’t know, and they were old enough. And, of course, they were old then. And that the Communist Party had—because when I said the word “communist”—I knew enough of politics, as I was reading. No, I didn’t know it was Communist Party then. I know they’d come in in float boats, and I actually researched it later after I got out of the South, and found out that it was CP, the Communist Party, who had come down to Mississippi to register people to vote, and they came down the river and were stopping where they saw houses. But so, I realized then that we weren’t the first. I mean, the ’60s wasn’t the beginning of it.

EC: Um-hmm. So, were they more receptive because they had this memory of earlier people?

LZ: Well, they seemed receptive, but they would—these particular people were, simply felt they were too old. And how would they get out? They didn’t have any transportation. You had to go to whatever town was close, and I’d have to look on a map. I’ve forgotten. But they didn’t have transportation, so they couldn’t basically get off the plantation. I mean, there was no way.

Somewhere along the line, somebody dropped a dime on us. Somebody called, and so there were these people driving up and down in trucks looking for us. [1:25:00] We left our car. We had walked in and left our car where it wouldn’t be seen. And so, we were hiding out for some several days. Oh, God, I almost had his name! I remember when we got back, his hair was so—he couldn’t get a brush or a comb through it, and he had to just about shave his head,

because he had something like a short Afro. [Laughs] But poor guy. And mine was pretty funky, too. We hadn't washed or done anything. We had been eating uncooked greens and stuff like that for three days, hiding in ditches, and ditches are not fun to hide in.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: We went to Yazoo City. I don't know how they—I guess they knew the car, and the cops had lists of SNCC cars, and that was always a problem. And the cops just met us and said, you know, "If you don't turn around and leave, then you're going straight to jail, and we'll keep you in jail for several months." And we said, "Okay, we'll turn around and leave." [Laughs] And we left.

EC: I know Mrs. Hamer had many brothers and sisters, so I imagine she had quite a few nephews. But is there anything you can tell us about that might help us track down his name if we can try to look into it?

LZ: No. I don't even know his father's name. I mean, I probably did. I mean, I knew his family and I knew him—I mean, if I can't remember him, and he used to stay in the office with me.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And I've wondered, because I thought maybe I'd try and find out if he's still alive, and to reach out. And I didn't think about him for a long time. You know, it was just part of memories.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And I guess it was hard for me to leave. Once I left, part of me wanted to go back and part of me wanted to keep in touch and see people. You couldn't make phone calls, as I said to you. And a lot of people didn't even have phones. And, you know, cellphones are so much—

changed the world, as has email. And people didn't write much. I mean, not many people wrote things, so—dictograph! That's the word, dictograph. [Laughs]

EC: Okay. What—why, how did you come to leave?

LZ: I figured it was time. There were a lot of groups coming in. Delta Ministries was in doing a lot of work. There were a lot of groups, a lot of—we got a lot of volunteers about the time I left. And I was up north doing fundraising. And I started to go down to go back, I said, “You know, I'm not sure.” And I talked to people, and they were doing lots of stuff. And I didn't think I was key anymore. I didn't think I was needed that much, and there were a lot of volunteers. And I said, “It's time to move on.”

And I also bumped into—I was in D.C. And they were, because I had done short order cooking and, you know, done all that to put myself through college. And they were starting a union, I mean, not starting—the Cooks, Hotels and Restaurant Workers Union was doing a big—they were striking all over the city. And I happened to be talking to them, and they said, well, you know, “We'd love to have you work for us.” I mean, they paid—they paid a real salary, by the way!

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: And, you know, I said to the guy, you know—and so, I stayed.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And then, I thought, after the strike—we did pretty well. We won some places; some places went non-union. And I thought of going back and, of course, by that time, there was a lot of Pan-African stuff, and some of that already had changed things. And I thought that was good. I thought the Pan-Africanism was good, and that it needed to be more an all-black movement.

EC: Um-hmm, and so you decided to stay in D.C., the D.C. area then?

LZ: I stayed in D.C., then I started traveling. I went—I decided it was time to go to Mexico. I spent a lot of time in Mexico and I traveled around Mexico and did a lot of things with traditional Native religion. Got really interested and I can—I can marry you in D.C. and California.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: I mean, I'm a priest. What the hell is that? You know, I got really into some Native cultural stuff. And I traveled to other countries in Central and South America and traveled around the States. I had traveled some in the States, but I got to, you know, bum around the States and worked wherever I went, worked in foundries in Minneapolis and ranches in Arizona. And, you know, for a while just was trying to figure out—and always doing political stuff.

EC: Um-hmm. How do you think the—I mean, I know you've been [1:30:00] an organizer and an activist, it seems, your entire adult life. How do you think that work in the sort of black freedom movement and in Mississippi influenced that?

LZ: It taught me, you know.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: It taught me how to organize with people who I may not have had something in common with to start with, though we all have things in common, of course, and I guess I focused on that. It broadened my horizons in ways I never could have imagined when I went down. I don't know—did that make me any—no, I guess I was always, I was never really good with fear. I mean, I don't have good sense about when I'm supposed to be afraid. I always had that problem. You know, I went with farm workers, and they were beating us. And for a long time I was an ironworker doing towers and bridges, and people would say, "It doesn't bother you?" "No. The most that can happen is you fall." And the ground will stop you.

EC: [Laughs] Indeed!

LZ: Indeed! It isn't the fall that hurts; it's the sudden stop. And so, I guess it—I don't know if it taught me to have gumption to do what I think is right. Or maybe I already had that, but it certainly cemented it. So, you know, if I really think this is the right thing to do, I'm a little bit of a bulldog.

EC: Yeah, yeah. What was it like to go back and work on Espy's campaign?

LZ: Really a trip! And we took—well, we took a van full of volunteers down. None of them—some of them had been to the South some, but none had been to Mississippi, that part. I mean, I even, as I said, drove by and saw the shack. I said, "I lived in that?" I mean, "This isn't big enough for my dog!" [Laughs]

It was—I mean, the South had changed but hadn't changed. I mean, many things in Jackson—well, he wasn't in Jackson that much, because he was running in basically the same areas I worked in, which I think was the Third Congressional, Fourth Congressional District.

EC: It might have—well, you know, it changed a number of times, but it was the Delta District.

LZ: Yeah.

EC: And it might have been the Second Congressional District, or the Fourth, because they shifted them.

LZ: That rings a bell, yeah, the Second or Fourth, yeah. Anyway, so it was the same area. And in Cleveland, there was an amazing—I think the sheriff was black or something—anyway there were an amazing amount of changes in that time. Once you got out in the rural areas, because I tried to go to rural areas, and you'd go to these houses where, you know, no sidewalks, the ditch runs down in front of the house, and, you know, there's a little bridge across it, and it's

up on these little concrete stilts. That's what all of the black neighborhoods in Cleveland, was like when I was there. You could tell when I was in Cleveland, and in most of the South, what was black and what was white, because the streets were paved and they had underground sewers, and in the black area they didn't.

There were a lot of teachers making good money, and the schools were integrated. So, they were making the same money as the white teachers, or I don't know if it was the same, but they were making good money. But then, in the rural areas, it wasn't. Working on his campaign was thrilling. He won, I think it was 82 votes. And I told people on the way back: every one of us can say we changed—we got 82 people to vote. And so, every one of us can say, "If I wasn't there, that wouldn't have happened." And I've used that example many times since then.

EC: Yeah. How did you get connected to his campaign?

LZ: Hmm?

EC: How did you get connected to his campaign?

LZ: Probably through the Democratic Party.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: You know, I worked with the Democratic Party. And they put out a call. They needed help.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And we organized—yeah, because the Democratic Party, I think, rented the van. We had one of those stretch vans. I think it seats 12, and we probably had 11 or 12 people in it. We had it jammed.

EC: Yeah, yeah. It must have been a nice feeling to have him win.

LZ: Oh, yeah, it was incredible.



EC: I remember, I've heard stories that when Amzie Moore and Bob Moses first started talking about voter registration and political work, which led to SNCC's campaign in Mississippi, they were talking about having a representative from the Delta, and Mike Espy was the first.

LZ: Yeah, that was the full circle.

EC: So, what are some of the highlights or things that you think are particularly important that you've done since then? As you say, it's a long, long list. [1:35:00]

JB: We're going to stop.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, so what is this button?

LZ: That's one of the official buttons put out by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And I may have one of the only left around in the country. People have tried to get it many times. I've got a number of buttons from back then, CORE buttons and SNCC buttons and things like that.

JB: Well, when the Smithsonian finds out about them, they'll be knocking on your door.

LZ: I've actually wondered what to do with it. There are a number of libraries. I've given—probably going to give them to my daughter, who gets all sorts of stuff. Actually, I made for her birthday one time—unfortunately, we didn't have t-shirts back then.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: But I made her a t-shirt from things I've done since then, political events and marches on Washington and stuff like that. I took them all and made her a quilt.

EC: Wow.

LZ: So, they are all sewn together, and I sewed up this quilt, and so, she has this quilt as part of my political history.

EC: It's too bad she has it; otherwise, we could take a look at it.

LZ: I probably have some pictures of it, but I'd have to find them. They're digital, so I can probably dig them up.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

LZ: Okay, so.

JB: Could you take off your glasses?

LZ: Oh, I'm sorry. So, so long for me seeing anymore. [Laughs]

JB: I know. Sorry about that.

LZ: That's okay. Occasionally, I come downstairs. I've been wearing glasses for many many years. But, occasionally, I come downstairs. Wake up, and I get downstairs and I say, "Wait a minute!" [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs] I can't see anything! What's going on?

LZ: How did I do that?

EC: Yeah. So, can you talk about Ms. Hamer in a mass meeting?

LZ: I thought we did that. She was a very powerful speaker, *really* powerful speaker, and she dominated the room. And I think everyone—I mean, people have seen her, and there are lots of movies. I've seen her, you know, "Keep on keeping on," and stuff like that. More, I think, impressive was how she dominated meetings, and she was in a number of meetings with all of the major SNCC people that you hear about, and *nobody* ever went against her. They tried to, but it didn't work. And I've been told a number of times is what they'd simply do is say, "Well,

we're just not going to disagree with her. We're just going to go do our thing." [Laughs] Because you couldn't. She was a very powerful person.

EC: Yeah. Can you remember any examples of what some of the differences might have been?

LZ: Oh, no, not—I don't. Boy, I'm trying to dig up some old memories. They were political, whether we'd have a demonstration or which town we would be—should focus on to try and do voter registration. Most of it wasn't union stuff. And some of it was, I guess, tactical for the Democratic Party, the Freedom Democratic Party, whether we—I think at one time we were trying to run a candidate, and whether it was going to—whether we could use that for just—[clears throat] it was somebody who was registered, because not many people were registered at the time. I'm trying to remember who that was. I have a vague picture of him in my mind. But it was a male and somebody they were going to try and run. And I remember whether it was a waste of—our *effort* to try and do that. It was symbolic, but was it important enough to do? And to be honest, I don't remember which side she was on.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

LZ: I don't think we did it, which means probably she wasn't supportive of it.

EC: Yeah, yeah. I do know that there were a number of symbolic, you know, largely symbolic candidates early on.

LZ: Yeah.

EC: And I guess you would have been leaving Mississippi right about the time that the first elections took place where there were significant black voters after the Voting Rights Act.

LZ: Um-hmm, yeah.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah, I mean, but we used to do so many things to—those are the details about, you know, they had some places they wanted you to tell them how many beans were in the jar, and some places you had to interpret the Constitution. And we'd, you know, go over the Constitution line-by-line, hour-by-hour, and very few people would they accept. A couple they did; we had, you know, a handful here and there register.

EC: Do you remember or have a sense of what the impact was like on the ground in Mississippi after the Voting Rights Act passed, how that changed your work? Or if you weren't working on voter registration, then how it changed the context for that?

LZ: When I left, [1:40:00] it still was hard to register voters. The FBI was mostly Southern crackers. And, I mean, you know, when the FBI would come after, you know, there was a beating or something like that, and interview you, you knew nothing was going to happen. So, mostly they upheld the system. So, we didn't—we had not seen any change by the time I left.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And I guess one of the things I regretted, by the way, was staying and seeing some of that come to fruition. But a lot, as I said, a lot of people were coming down. And there were a lot of people—there was enough money that people were making salaries and holding events that were funded. And it was hard to compete, so—

EC: So, who—do you know who these folks are, or what the mechanisms were?

LZ: Well, Delta Ministries sent a number down.

EC: Okay, um-hmm.

LZ: Delta Ministries sent a number down, and there were some other groups, too.

EC: Yeah, yeah. Well, and I know—and this was in a different part of the state, but I know that once, you know, and a little bit later, that it was—once Charles Evers uses Fayette, establishes Fayette as his base, there's a lot of interest in some of his political campaign.

LZ: Um-hmm, yeah.

EC: So, I know that the campaigns were drawing outside attention.

LZ: Yeah, they were, and money and people, which is a good thing. I mean, things changed. A lot of, I think—I don't want to badmouth any other organizations.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: It's not something I want to do.

EC: You mentioned the poverty programs, or Head Start.

LZ: Um-hmm.

EC: Did you work closely or collaboratively with any of them?

LZ: Oh, sure. I mean, [laughs] everybody did everything, again.

EC: Yeah, yeah.

LZ: And that's the whole thing. I even taught, you know, math in some of them. But getting funding, getting a building, doing all that organizing, it was giving the kids a head start. And I think everybody believed in it, everybody worked on it. It was just one of the many things that people did. We were 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We were available bodies while most people had to work or had a bunch of kids they had to take care of. So, a lot of the stuff that needed to get done, we could help get done.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I was a reasonable carpenter, so, you know, I remember we were fixing some building up and, you know, putting up partitions and stuff like that. So, everybody just pitched in and did what they could.

EC: Yeah. So, what are some of the—I think I just asked this, and then we took the break. But do you want to pick out some of the things that you've worked on, some of the many things you've worked on?

LZ: Well, I have a [penchants] for working on failed causes, I guess.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: I mean, I worked on Jesse Jackson's two campaigns, for instance. And I designed a way of building Ferro cement fishing boats after the revolution in Grenada. I was very involved in Grenada, and it was a wonderful, wonderful place. I mean, they had a true bottom-up government. They had local community that would feed into regional communities that feed up, so the government they established was that way. They abolished, for instance, prostitution. They didn't do it by abolishing prostitution, but they said anybody who was in the trade, if you want a job, we will find you something to do. There was nobody left.

EC: How did you get involved in that?

LZ: I don't know. I heard about it. You know, I'd, of course, you know, been to Cuba. And I heard about it and I said I'd go there. And I was really impressed and I worked in the fishing villages for a little bit, because I had lived—yeah, I had already lived in the Caribbean when I went there. I lived in Trinidad for a while, just went to Trinidad and Barbados and the Dominican and Haiti. And so, I had already been to the Caribbean, because I traveled.

And so, I had a way of building Ferro cement fishing boats, and we were going to be building—the government was going to be building them, and I was director of the project. And

then, of course, the U.S. invaded. [Laughs] You know, I just like to work on campaigns that don't work or issues that don't work. Dennis Kucinich, I was his national coordinator of states, yeah, okay. [Laughs] So, you know, and Kweisi Mfume, I was his, as I said, county coordinator, and he didn't win either. We lost by, well, [1:45:00] three percentage points, and they had almost ten times as much money as we did, the Democratic-supported candidate, the Democratic Party-supported candidate.

EC: One of those moral victories, right?

LZ: Yeah, no.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: Moral victories. Anyway, so I've worked on, oh, things like immigration issues and Palestinian issues. We did win two. We won the immigration and—the Dream Act in Maryland and, of course, gay marriage in Maryland. So, I've had some, but most of them—you know. And I do a lot of work with elected officials. And I think I've done a lot of things in the community over the years, supported issues of empowerment in the community that have been successful.

EC: I think that, you know, people coming out of the Movement have different and changing and, you know, complex thinking about the relationship between organizing work and traditional politics or—

LZ: Oh, yeah, okay.

EC: You know, I don't know if traditional politics is the right word. But working through the political process and how effective that can be. You seem to have done both.

LZ: Yeah, I do both. And I've been in, certainly, those discussions numerous times. The biggest or a good example, I think, of that that I have mentioned many times is I did a lot of work with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, and you know about that.

EC: Do you want to just give a little bit of an introduction?

LZ: Oh, okay, for people who don't know, there is a lot of discrimination in Mexico against Native people. And it's usually run by people, mestizo or Anglos, who run the government. And the Zapatistas are mostly Mayan and several other tribal groups in the Chiapas part, which is the southern, southeastern tip—well, not quite all the way down to the Yucatan—of Mexico. And they basically said—there was a lot of land that was owned by nonresident landowners who lived in Mexico City, and they just took it over. And they said this is Native land and they set up a government. And there was a lot of back and forth, and especially the landowners would hire paramilitary police.

And I went down to document several massacres, and there were a lot of people, men and women and children, killed. So, it is a struggle that still goes on, and they have what appears to be an independent land, but it's not totally independent. But they are making sure that the profits go to the people. And I can give you lots of examples in Mexico. I was in El Salvador, where the coffee pickers don't drink coffee, because they can't afford it and they'll get fired if they take a coffee bean home. So, they're picking coffee all day long but can't even drink coffee.

Okay, getting back to—we had—and I was with a support group in the States, because, you know, we could do more to help them through money and trying influence. And there was a situation going on with the federal police going in and doing a lot of mayhem. And we were, you know, crying and screaming about it all over, the political lefties I was with. And then, we finally got—through a friend of mine and somebody else's—got to Kennedy, Senator Kennedy when he was alive, and his aide made a phone call and stopped it.

Now, that happened because people worked on those political campaigns. In Kennedy's case, actually, he was a good enough guy. I have lots of elected officials that I can call up and



say, “We need to look at this. We need to do something about it.” They don’t do it just because you’re a nice guy or a nice woman. They do it because you can turn votes out and you *will* turn votes out. You have to be able to say, “I will turn votes out and kick your butt out of office unless you get right.” And the same thing, you know, for a lot of these issues. As I said, we got marriage equality and the Dream Act passed in Maryland because we did the grunt work of going out to the people and having them go back to the politicians. So, it’s both.

EC: Um-hmm.

LZ: Yeah, I don’t think you can do just one.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I mean, I’m as far out on the left as you can get, but you have to work within the system, too. I remember—who was it that used to say, “Revolution will not be televised,” right? If it’s not televised, then it didn’t take place. And, you know, and it’s not going to in this country, because they—if someone’s [1:50:00] a strong enough leader, they usually buy them out one way or another.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Or assassinate them. They do that, too.

EC: What are the things that you’re most interested in today?

LZ: [Sighs] [Laughs] The Supreme Court decision, you know, they just—in case, so everybody knows, they just overturned part of the Voting Rights Act. And unfortunately there’s no way you can affect the Supreme Court by doing political work. They seem to be in there for life. They did some decent things about gay rights, but only because, I think, they had no choice on that one.

I'm interested in whatever is happening. I'm always interested in the struggle, in the Palestinian struggle and other struggles of people all over the world, not just in the States anymore. I used to be—when I was in the South, I didn't look beyond the U.S. And now, I look beyond the U.S. with all the problems all over, and—

EC: Was that that isolation that you talked about in the South, or is that part of your own sort of growth and travel?

LZ: I think it's growth and travel and certainly the isolation. You know, I remember—who was it that came from Africa? There was a song. It was of civil rights.

EC: Oh, [1:51:19]?

LZ: [1:51:20], yes. And, I mean, Africa then to me was just like this far place, and I knew nothing about it. I mean, I knew Mexico and I knew, you know, down probably—I don't even think I had been south of Mexico, in that part, then. But, you know, all that far stuff. And you knew about, of course, European history. Everybody read that in school. But there was no African history, no Central and South American history, no Caribbean history. And it wasn't until I got—in the South, you certainly wouldn't learn about it, except for that one time. I mean, Africa was never mentioned in the news. And, yeah, it was personal growth.

EC: Um-hmm. Were you part of conversations in SNCC about Africa and the larger international context?

LZ: Some of them, yes. And I would put them in context of Native people—well, actually, it was probably more Latinos at the time. I wasn't that focused on the Native issues. Yeah, I would say, you know, there's a tie. And I certainly appreciated people going back to their roots. And it actually probably is—and it also affected a lot of other people. A lot of Latinos

started to look at what that means. It wasn't just the Brown Berets that were doing it, but the La Raza. And I was one of the original members of La Raza.

EC: Can you talk about that?

LZ: I was a distant member. I mean, I—when I was in California, but by this time I was on the East Coast. And probably, along with Kristy Rodriguez, who was my play sister, and she was—you know, I knew the people involved in it, but I was just, you know. We, by that time, we had—phones were working, we did a lot of correspondence electronic—did we have the internet? No, we didn't have the internet then, not when it started. God, my brain! You know, it's hard to remember how you communicated. So, we got—we'd write letters, yeah. Oh, yeah, I remember.

EC: Historians are—you know.

LZ: Hmm?

EC: Historians like that letter-writing era. [Laughs]

LZ: Yeah, yeah. Well, if you could find the letters.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I mean, I actually—I've got boxes and boxes of that stuff up in the attic. Boy, I ought to give that away, too.

EC: Is this personal correspondence and organizational papers?

LZ: No, correspondence with political organizations. I mean, I was involved in so many political organizations. Yeah, and I've actually found—I don't know. I've tried to give away—do I have—no, I gave that away. I had some old SNCC stuff that was official correspondence in the—but I gave it to one of the libraries.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah, but it's all hard copy. I need electronic so I can sort through it.

EC: Yeah.

JB: Yeah.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: I don't know. I mean, I do so many political things now, as I said in the biography. I was sitting there and I could—I've got a copy. I can put on my glasses, except you can't—you don't like me to do that.

JB: [1:54:41]

LZ: And look at some of them. And I was—I know I'm missing a whole lot of them. Worked on just numbers of political campaigns. I worked on the Statehood Party when I got to D.C., because that seemed like a reasonable thing to do.

EC: Were there a lot of Movement people involved in the Statehood—? [1:55:00]

LZ: Yeah, they were local Movement people.

EC: Local Movement people?

LZ: But, I mean, Julius Hobson was known for a lot of stuff. He was one of the key people. Josephine Butler was also part of the U.S.-Soviet Union Friendship Society. And, [sighs] gosh, she passed away. There were three major people. Hilda Mason, who was well-known as—I mean, you've probably crossed her name. She's black, and her husband was a lawyer, and he's white. But she was doing a lot of civil rights stuff in the South and in the North. And those are three of the key people. You know, they were all lefties.

EC: Yeah, yeah. Well, what are some of the—are there other things that you would like to talk about that you think are—?

LZ: Oh, I'd like to talk about. Well, you know, I don't know that this is a forum to plead for change, but, you know—but that's what I'm always worried about, is empowerment of people, so that people get to make decisions for themselves. And I note, for instance, that especially in immigration, as people—and people say, “Oh, they—you know, people shouldn't be able to come to this country.” First of all, I've got a nice sign over there that we don't recognize the borders. You know, the borders are artificial. And I don't know who invited the Pilgrims here anyway.

EC: [Laughs]

LZ: You want to talk about immigration issues? They didn't—they weren't invited. The fact that—there was even an article in the *Washington Post*, an editorial by a Latino, and I had to—I think they're going to publish the letter to the editor I wrote. And he was saying about, okay, “Now we've made it because the politicians are paying attention to Latino issues.” Look at the schools! Our kids are just doing terribly, and black kids aren't doing very well either.

The problems of racism are still alive and well in this country, and we need to do something about it. I mean, the Voting Rights Act is a very small part of it, but there needs to be some willingness to address it. People who thought that Obama would do something about it, of course, were wrong. He's trying to, if anything, hide from the issue, so it doesn't get thrown back at him.

But there are just serious issues, and a lot of them are issues of poverty, not just ethnicity. And for one of the richest nations in the world and, of course, there's the 99 percent—well, it's even worse than that. It's the .01 percent that own just huge amounts of wealth and make decisions for everyone else. And that's what we really should be addressing.

EC: Are there differences you think—I mean, there's obviously the technological differences, but what kinds of—you know, if you're talking about the organizing you did in Mississippi when you started, and the organizing that needs to be done today, how would you talk to young people today about that and what they might do?

LZ: Well, actually, some young people are really getting involved. It's nice. There was a generation—when I go to political events, there was a generation that is younger than I am, but not the kids that are coming out of high school and just getting into college. There was a time, if you go to those meetings, this is old folks and young folks, and there was a time when there were generations that weren't involved, aren't involved.

I actually fault us, the older folks who were involved, because we didn't teach our kids to be active. I mean, if we'd have spent as much time ensuring our kids were activists, I know so many people whose children—and we'll use Jean Wiley, because she's mentioned. She's got a kid. He doesn't—he's not in politics. And dozens and dozens, and these kids were brought up around politics, but not—they weren't given the fire in the belly to be involved. I think some of that's changing.

In terms of—kids are certainly more informed now. I mean, they know stuff, not just about sex, but about politics, about international, they know. I mean, you can't find a kid, probably, in the D.C. area that doesn't know more about Africa when they're 12 than I did when I was 21, or Central America. [2:00:00] I mean, so there's information there.

But there's also a great push to keep people from pushing for change. And I think that's always been there and sponsored by the large corporations, the 1 percent, or the .01 percent that control the media and help and try and foster decisions on other people. And they've gotten more

sophisticated at it. So, it's a different battle, and we just have to try and figure out. Again, just fight it one step at a time.

EC: Okay. Thank you. Are there other things that you want to—that we should touch on?

LZ: No, I just hope kids continue to get involved.

EC: Yeah. Do you talk to students in classrooms at all?

LZ: I don't talk in classrooms. I talk a lot one-on-one. I don't go into classrooms. I noticed a number of the SNCC people at the conference at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary are doing classroom work. I do some. There have been a couple of events they've asked me to speak at, and usually it's larger events. But I don't and it's, you know, what it was like.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: And I tell them it's not what it *was* like. It's what it *is* like.

EC: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah, I think going into classrooms would help. I like to think that I try to work on issues that will get attention politically or in the media that will reach more people. And I certainly credit teachers who are out there day after day.

EC: Um-hmm. Well, thank you very much for talking with us.

LZ: Okay.

JB: Yes, really good.

LZ: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 2:02:01]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council