

**Julian Bond Oral History Project  
“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”**

**Interview with Dorothy Zellner**

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American University  
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## PREFACE

This interview is part of an oral history project entitled, “The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-1968.” Unless otherwise indicated, the interviewer is Gregg Ivers, Professor of Government and Director, Julian Bond Oral History Project, American University.

The reader is encouraged to remember that this transcript is a near-verbatim transcription of a recorded interview. The transcript has been edited for minor changes in grammar, clarity and style. No alteration has been made to the conversation that took place.

Notes, where and when appropriate, have been added in [brackets] to clarify people, places, locations and context for the reader. Ms. Zellner reviewed the transcript for accuracy.

### Biographical Note for Dorothy Zellner

A native of New York City, Dorothy Zellner (b. 1938] graduated from Queens College in 1960 and shortly thereafter attended a workshop sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE] in Miami, marking her first entry into the Southern freedom movement. From there, she went to New Orleans to organize and lead a sit-in project. In 1961, Ms. Zellner moved to Atlanta to work for the Southern Regional Council and began volunteering part-time in the national office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC]. In June 1962, Ms. Zellner went to work full-time in the communications department at SNCC, where she worked very closely with Julian Bond. Ms. Zellner worked in Atlanta until June 1963, when she moved to Boston to head the SNCC office there. Among her responsibilities was recruiting volunteers for the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. Ms. Zellner spent six weeks in Greenwood, Mississippi, working in the SNCC office in a variety of capacities. Ms. Zellner left SNCC in 1967 but remained active in the civil rights movement for many years before becoming a nurse. Ms. Zellner was among the editors of *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010), to which she also contributed a chapter on her experience in SNCC. Ms. Zellner continues to write, speak and teach about feminism and civil rights.

**Julian Bond Oral History Project**  
**“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”**  
**American University**

**Dorothy Zellner (07-JBOHP)**  
**September 28th, 2018**  
**New York, New York**

**Interviewer: Gregg Ivers**  
**Videographer: Audra Gale**  
**Production Assistants: Gracie Brett, Lianna Bright, Colleen Vivaldi**

**Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Dorothy Zellner [DZ]**

GI: Today is Friday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and we are in New York City at the home of Ms. Dorothy Zellner to conduct an interview for the Julian Bond Oral History Project, sponsored in part by the School of Public Affairs at American University. My name is Gregg Ivers. I am a Professor of Government at American University and Director of the Julian Bond Oral History Project. Ms. Zellner worked very closely with Julian Bond in the Atlanta office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the early 1960s. We'll let her talk about that and much more this afternoon. Ms. Zellner, thank you so much for sitting down with me and having me into your home.

DZ: You're very welcome.

**ENTERING THE SOUTHERN FREEDOM MOVEMENT**

GI: Why don't we start by having you tell us how you got to Atlanta and how and when you began to work with Julian Bond?

DZ: Well, in June of 1960. I went to Miami, Florida to be in a workshop that was conducted by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and I should say parenthetically that's before CORE became crazy, as it is today. From there, I went to New Orleans, where they were getting ready to do the integration of the first public schools. So it was 1960. And in Miami, Florida, which was totally segregated in those days, we got arrested and so forth. I went with the group to New Orleans. They asked me to do some outreach in the white community. So that's a whole other story; you can hear some of that later. I was so unbelievably -- the words fail me -- I mean, I had found my people. I had found what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I was 22 and I came home, and I started writing letters. How can I go back South? And did anybody want a little Jewish New Yorker? No. I didn't know it but SNCC at that time didn't even have an address, but I was writing letters, and nobody was answering them.

By an incredible fluke of fate, I managed to get a job in Atlanta at the Southern Regional Council [SRC]. I started there in June 1961. I suppose, for your students, they should know that every single person that they meet in their life is precious and they should try to be on the good side of every person that they ever meet because this was a total fluke. The person who was then the research director at SRC had been a professor at Queens College where I went to school and he was the only black professor, the only one in the entire school, and his contract was not renewed. I got to know him because I was the editor of the newspaper.

When I wrote to SRC it turns out that, miraculously, he had become the research director. He said come down and I'll give you a job, which is the only reason I ever got there. It seemed a lot of people arrived in the South with a suitcase and they said, "Here I am!" You know, people like me. "Oh, this is what I want to do." Black people and white people. But I was much too cautious for that, and I had to have a job.

I got a job with SRC doing a rather interesting job, actually, as it turned out. I compiled the research and did most of the writing for what is now a famous survey that they did about the sit-in movement, which ended up on page one in *The New York Times* the following August. It was a retrospective of the first year and a half of the civil rights movement. And I had spent weeks and weeks and weeks going through their files and finding out where people were arrested, and how many people were arrested, and who was arrested, and what were the demands. I actually didn't realize it that I'm becoming a little mini-expert of the first year of the sit-in movement.

So I wrote that paper and then spent all of these months clipping out articles about SNCC. But I was so shy, and I was so awe that I never went to the SNCC office, which was about a fifteen-minute walk away. I was on Forsyth Street and the SNCC office was on Auburn Avenue. So what was that, a twenty-minute walk? And I just couldn't bring myself to go see all of these heroes [laughs]. A Danish writer came to SRC and he said, "I want to go to the SNCC office. Will you come with me?"

So somehow or another I got the courage up and I went over with him. And whereupon we met James Forman – the great Jim Forman, who took one look at me and said, "Can you type?" This famous thing that became a part of the women's movement about how women were treated and then so forth. Women were not definitely not treated super well, even though inside the civil rights movement I think that they were treated better than on the outside. But I never interpreted this as a sexist remark because Jim, whom I loved beyond words, who I would have walked through fire for, he had no small talk, he had no time.

He was only single-minded about the movement and his head was like this giant switchboard. And he knew exactly which openings there were, and he needed someone who could type. That was the purpose of that question, not because as a woman I was naturally expected to type. And I said, "Yes, I can" [laughs]. He said, "I need you and will you come in after work?" So for the next several months I worked during the day at the Southern Regional Council and I went to the SNCC office at night. And that started about October 1961.

For several weeks, I was typing. That was my job. I was perfectly happy. I met both these unbelievable field secretaries, Willie Peacock and Curtis Hayes, and my job . . . they would sit next to me and I would type.<sup>1</sup> They would give me what we later called an affidavit. I don't know where we have this language from. It is not a legal affidavit. And I was a very fast typist, self-taught, but I made lots of mistakes. I made an "x" where I made the mistake and I kept going. Even to this day, when I look at some of these documents from 50 years ago – this is now, hello students 57 years ago! – I can tell what I type because of all the mistakes, the "x's."

I hope you're explaining to everybody what a field secretary is and all that.

GI: Why don't you do that?

DZ: Well, SNCC was organized like a wheel. In the center was the national office. And it went out like this [gestures to show hands coming out from a wheel]. Everything not in the national office was "the field." Where these words came from, I don't know. All our resources and everything went to the field. Actually, we got paid more because we lived in Atlanta and we had to pay rent. But the conceptual resources and the actual political resources and all the other resources went to the field, and the field was where people were being organized. It's an interesting model. People still ask me about it today whether it's a viable model for an organization. A field secretary would sit next to me and he would say, while I'm typing away, "on such and such a day, I took Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Smith to the courthouse in Clinton, Mississippi," – because by then we were concentrating in Mississippi – "to register to vote and they waited eight hours in the broiling sun and then the sheriff came out and this one got arrested and that one got beaten up."

These things we would send to the federal government – SNCC would. I just did the typing and then Jim would send them. I think we spent easily two years sending things to the federal government. And this is why none of us are crazy about the Kennedys. Nothing. No answer, even though your students should know that there were laws on the books at the time from 1957, which restricted what these registrars could and could not do.

And in some of them were provisions of how they could be disciplined or even arrested if they didn't act properly when they were registering people to vote. But that law was never enforced. So that was my job. Then I said to Forman, "You know, I can also write." Now, this is where he demonstrated that SNCC was not as sexist as the times were. He immediately said, "Oh, wonderful!" He didn't say, "Oh, little Jewish girl from New York. Who cares?" He said, "You've got to work with Julian Bond on *The Student Voice*." I said, "What is that?" He explained to me that was the monthly newsletter. I must have met Julian around Christmas 1961, I guess. I don't know exactly. And I don't remember my first vision of him or anything. At the time he was still in school, or right on the edge. I can talk later of what my vision of him was.

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<sup>1</sup>. Willie Peacock and Curtis Hayes were field secretaries in Southern Mississippi, who, along with Hollis Watkins (JBOHP-11), were among the very first students from Southern Mississippi to work for SNCC.

Two or three months later, I ended up being a roommate with his sister, Jane Bond. Let's see, I think it was the spring of '62. Jane and I moved together naturally on the black side. And I have spent many years explaining to students what this racial segregation means in terms of how people treat you. I use the example of when I first went to Atlanta, I lived on the white side. I lived near Peachtree Street. And I remember getting a phone connected and it was all, "Oh, Miss Miller, this; Miss Miller, that" – Miller was my family name. Then when I move with Jane to Telhurst Avenue in Southwest [Atlanta], the same thing, getting my phone switched, it was, "Hello, Dorothy." That the honorific had totally disappeared.

When I talk about segregation it has been boiled down to Mrs. Parks sat down and Dr. King had a dream. I think that's basically what most students are learning, certainly in grammar school and probably high school. And I try to explain to them how segregation governed your life from the time you woke up in the morning until the time you went to bed. And my favorite example is Rich's Department Store, which did not have a dressing room for black women when I first got there in 1962. I used this example in a speech I gave last week: A woman could spend \$400 on a dress – and there were black women in Atlanta at the time who had four hundred dollars to spend on a dress – she couldn't try it on. And she could never return it. The subtext of that was your body will taint this garment. This is the example, actually it turns out, that is the most riveting for a lot of people now. Because I think they sort of used to think, "Oh, well, you sit in the back of the bus and you do this, and you do that." You don't realize that every tiny little thing has to do with segregation. And our book, *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, had some unbelievable examples.

This is *Hands on the Freedom Plow*. And this book has the most touching example of that.

[Ms. Zellner holds the book up in front of the camera]

We have a story in the book – this is a book by fifty-two women, either their own writing or oral history, just a few oral histories – who took her daughter to buy shoes in downtown in some Southern city. I don't think it was Atlanta; it was much deeper south than Atlanta. Her daughter, who was the writer of this piece, was five years old. She had to go to the bathroom. And, of course, there were no bathrooms for her. This little girl peed in her pants. She was totally humiliated and remembered it to this very day. And her mother for the rest of her life living with her daughter in the South, took a piece of butcher paper and had her stand on the butcher paper and she would trace her foot. And she would bring that piece of paper with her to buy shoes rather than bring her own daughter because she knew they had to go to the bathroom they would be there for all of them would be humiliated.

So those two examples, somehow that gets through about what this all was like. So Jane, when I lived on the white side, there were black people who worked at Southern Regional Council and they used to come, and they could only come at night. And this was this was 1961, 1962. And because if they came at night the chances were less that a neighbor would see that a black person was come to mind. Then of course then I moved in with Jane and we were on the black side. Well, of course, we never had to worry about any of them. Because the black people didn't care if I was white and they were perfectly accepting. Nobody was jumping up and down, but nobody cared either.

Here I was working with one Bond and living with another Bond. Julian and I also, by some quirk of fate, were born on the same day. Not the same year, but the same day. We shared a birthday. I was two years older than he – exactly. When I met him, this was winter of 1962, I was 24, so he was 22.

So I was coming into work part-time and so was he because he had some sort of a job. And I guess it might have been *The Atlanta Inquirer*. I don't know what his job situation was. He had at least one child then. So, I imagine our actual contact when I was a little bit on the fly. But right away we worked together really well. I don't know what he thought of me. I was, of course, entranced with him. Naturally. And the most interesting thing, you know, everywhere you go, it's, "Oh, see he was so handsome." But the thing that got to my heart was that he was so unrelentingly funny. And if you knew him at the height of his wit and his humor, I mean, he was truly a devastatingly funny person.

So we worked on putting out *The Student Voice* and Forman seemed to be happy. And then I was fired at the SRC because they said my position was being automated out of existence. But the real reason is the FBI had come asking questions about me and they decided it would be better if I left.

## **JOINING SNCC**

GI: They were asking questions about you already? You must have made quite an impression.

DZ: Well, it's nothing that I did in the South. It was because of who I was. Over there they [FBI] must have a file on me. I've never inquired about my files and never gotten my files. Anyway. At that point Forman had been asking me to join the staff. So I said to myself, "This is your chance. You were fired! [laughs]." Because, as I said, I was very cautious as long as I was working there. I still worked, and I was volunteering at night. And I think I probably got up in the morning and I came home until, who knows, maybe 11 or 12 night. I just did my job and I went straight over to SNCC.

And of course I've met all the people there. They were getting ready to do in the winter – in December – I think [SNCC] was getting ready to do the ride to Albany, Georgia. I probably met Casey and Tom Hayden here in town, people like that. In fact, I did meet them at the Southern Regional Council. Emilye Crosby now reminds me that we must have gotten a grant from the Southern Conference Educational Fund for me. I had no memory of that. I thought I went straight on staff. Emily said, "No, that's not right." He [Jim Forman] must have gotten an initial grant. He said, "Yes, you can come on staff." At that point, I think Julian started working in the office more. Forman must have raised money for him. Honestly, I don't know.

## WORKING WITH JULIAN BOND

Emilye Crosby, when she gets ready with her book, she will know everything about those early years. We worked from that June for entire year into the summer of '63. For an entire year, we were working together in Atlanta. When Forman left the city to go traveling to do something, he would have Julian be the person in charge. Julian, and for people who didn't know him, first of all Julian did not like being in charge. In those days he did not like being at the center of attention either. If we had lived in a civilized country and he had just been able to do what he'd like to do, he would have been a poet. Maybe a professor.

But the poet came first actually. He was continually being put into positions of authority, which in those years he was not really crazy about. I remember when it was the winter – it must have been the winter of '62-'63 when SNCC had nothing. No money. Nothing. And Forman was traveling, and Julian and I were there in the office with other people. Julian was in charge and there was no money to pay for the heating bill for the gas.

I have this very vivid memory of walking in the neighborhood looking for scraps of wood to burn in the fireplace. We had a fireplace. This was on Raymond Street. And we seriously considered burning up some of the furniture. Fortunately, some money came through and we were able to pay the gas bill. I remember Julian being kind of uneasy on those days, when he had to be in charge. But then he was twenty-three [laughs]. And all sorts of things were happening in the field. You never knew when you were going to get a call that somebody was in the hospital or that somebody was dead. We sort of lived under that fear all the time. So here is Jane [Bond], of course, who is very beautiful. Here is Julian, unbelievably handsome. Both of them really quite witty. I did not hang around the Bond home at all. But I knew all about them and I knew that Dr. [Horace Mann] Bond was this legendary intellectual.

The Bonds were not in the commercial middle class, black middle class. They were in the intellectual black middle class. And, of course, Dr. Bond was, like, three or four on the list of black intellectuals, starting with W.E.B. DuBois. I never really got to know him. I've got this. I got to know Mrs. [Julia] Bond much more. Dr. Bond died earlier, I think, at least, as far as my relationship with Julian. So we were co-workers and we were friends. He was so egalitarian about the way he viewed people. I don't think he ever thought in regard to me, "Oh, this is a white woman." I don't think he thought of me that way. I mean, he must of. But he accepted me the way I was.

The way I was then, I think, was a little difficult because I had come from New York. In New York, you have a meeting at nine o'clock, you sit down at nine o'clock and you have the meeting. Here, I was in Atlanta, where nine o'clock meant 9 p.m. or 9 a.m. or three days later. I had a lot of serious adjustments to make, and I don't think I was too graceful about it either. So he sometimes defended me [laughs]! Of course, I would sometimes get a little irked with him because he would say he was coming at one o'clock and he would show up at four o'clock.

I confided in him. You see, I didn't have too many male friends that I could confide in. The



times were so sexist. It was either you worked with somebody or you had a romance with somebody. There were very few things in between. For a person who loved gossip the way Julian did . . . I don't know if you knew that.

GI: We do now.

DZ: Nobody has said this before? [laughs]. He was – what's the word – if you said to him this is confidential, he took it to his grave. He was absolutely trustworthy in that way. This was something that I really appreciated as a young woman. I was able to talk him, to confide in him.

## **SNCC'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WHITE MEDIA**

GI: Let's talk about your relationship with the mainstream white media.

DZ: Claude Sitton . . . was the bureau chief for *The New York Times*. It's really important to explain what the bureau chief is because people don't realize what the print media was like. He was in charge of the whole South. And he was traveling. He was traveling all over the South. But there were also stringers. I don't know if people know what stringers are. These are part-time people who will do a story and then get paid for a story. Or, if something really is happening, and you can't get your regular staff there, then you would call up the stringer and say, "Can you cover this for us?" Claude Sitton was the reason why we got our first big press. That was the summer of 1962.

That's when he went to southwest Georgia. He was in a church that was surrounded by the sheriff's deputies, and it was a church where voting registration meetings were being held. This was our other great project, this was the Southwest Georgia Project. He didn't know if he was going to get out alive and he was scared to death. Fortunately, for us he was there, he was scared, and he wrote a story. This story ran on the front page, and I think that's what made our reputation, actually. That's what made us pull away from the pack. This story. So we had a very fond relationship with the press. Now, he knew Claude and I knew Claude, but I didn't know him well. But I knew Fred Powledge quite well, who was with *The Atlanta Journal* and Karl Fleming, a little less well than Fred, who was with *Newsweek* magazine. These were, as a group, very honorable people. They saw what was going on and they cared. On our side, I don't even remember talking about this with Julian, but we always told them the truth.

This is what I have told young people for the past fifty years. If you work with the press, you don't say they were thirty-seven hundred people when there were thirty-seven. You say there were thirty-seven people. Or you say two got arrested without saying thousands got arrested. Very quickly they trusted us. So when they called up, they usually they would speak to Julian. He was the communications director. I was his assistant, associate, whatever. We didn't really have titles like that. Normally he would speak to them, but if he wasn't there, I spoke to them. If I said, "We got a call that so-and-so was arrested," they would they would check but they would be ready to run with the story. This was very unusual, very unusual. And we weren't trying to push anybody, we weren't trying to

promote anybody. We just wanted to tell the story of what was happening. So we had, for that time, from '62 all the way to the summer of '63 a very cordial relationship with the press. And, of course, everybody's always critical of the press and I'm critical of them, too. But these were good relationships and they thought very highly of him, very highly of him.

GI: Did you and Julian have a difficult time getting the Atlanta papers to cover the civil rights story. Years later, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* acknowledged it missed what it called the biggest story of our lifetime.

DZ: Yes, Fred Powledge was with the *Journal*. I knew him quite well. He came over and interviewed Jane and me. He came to our house, and that's what was unusual. We weren't just a news source for them. We were actually human beings. But they were smart enough to realize was the major story, the domestic story. And they're their bosses also realized this was a major, the major story. Well, I don't know if they would say the major but a major domestic story. It was a little different. It wasn't like scrabbling around so much. After a while if you got on the phone and you called Fred and said, "I've got something for you," he called you back. He cared about it. He cared about you.

GI: Did you have a relationship at all with *The Atlanta Daily World*, the city's major black newspaper? Did you work with them in any way or were you more concerned with trying to get the white papers like the *Journal* and *Constitution* to cover this story?

DZ: I know that Julian had close relationships with *The Atlanta Inquirer*. I actually didn't. I don't remember that we had this sort of bifurcated sense of the local press versus the national press. I think if anything we really tended to concentrate on the national press. I don't remember, until the summer, of '64 very many, if any, TV people around. And I don't know whether it's because they themselves had very few people who were traveling on the road. They were carrying these enormous cameras. They were hardly mobile.

I think the first time I saw a lot of TV people was in the summer of '64 when the three went missing. I don't know where they were in Atlanta and I don't remember watching the news in Atlanta either. Mostly, it was concentrating on the national media. At least that's my memory of it. But I know that Julian had a close relationship with *The Inquirer*. And I really was outside of internal black politics, the internal black community.

## **NAVIGATING THE COLOR LINE IN ATLANTA**

GI: What was it like, as a white woman, dealing with whites in Atlanta who did not share your views on the civil rights movement?

DZ: That's an interesting question. After I went to live with Jane I was totally in the black community. A couple of years later there was much more of a consciousness of trying to organize in the white community. But in those years, no. I was one of the few white people there. I don't remember Forman saying to me, "You need to attend this meeting. You need to go here. You need to see what the white people are thinking." I've tried to explain this young people.

When I was out in the white world, that was danger, a dangerous world. When I was in the black world, in the black community I was safe. So safety equaled black. And I've tried to explain to people who spent years of hearing, "Oh, don't go into that neighborhood. It's too dangerous, and this and that." It was totally the reverse. For us, it was be careful if you go to this X, Y or Z white neighborhood.

GI: Why was that?

DZ: Because you would be hurt. You could be arrested. You see, I lived in Atlanta, but I was not in Atlanta. My mindset wasn't that I'm here, that I care about this. I was living for SNCC. I was living in the black community for SNCC. If we were in Atlanta, the worst place that you could be on earth was Mississippi. Southwest Georgia, which I never went to, was not good. But Mississippi was the end of the earth. As time went on, we had more and more people working in Mississippi. My function was to tell these national press people what the actual conditions were in the United States of America that most Americans did not know. Our mission was to explain to people if you were black and you try to register to vote in the Delta of Mississippi that was equivalent, say, of me opening this window and jumping out without a parachute from the 15th floor. You were literally taking your life in your hands. It was later on that people, at least in '64, tried to organize in the white community. And my ex-husband later on tried again to organize in Mississippi, this time in the late '60s, early '70s.<sup>2</sup> So there were people who cared about that. I actually wasn't one of them.

What Forman wanted me to do was the press. He also wanted me to do whatever else he wanted me to do, and I was only too happy to do it [laughs]. Our whole Mississippi chapter is another chapter that is not that relevant to Julian, even though Julian was sort of involved, but Julian did not work in Mississippi when 1964 happened. By then, he probably had three kids! So, no, I don't know the answers to those questions. My only direct experience with fear came before I even got involved in SNCC when I went to the rabbi in New Orleans and tried to get the rabbi to help the people who were going to organize the first sit-in. And there I saw a rank fear. Total fear. I put that down to fear because they were Jewish.

Of course, later on I learned that it was fear of being Jewish but also fear as being a white person to take on some of these other white people. Many years later – your students should look at an independent film called, *Delta Jews*. Now, where you can find this I don't know. You will hear out-and-out, super-duper Jewish racists talking about, "How dare these people come from New York! Things are fine here. We've always gotten along fine." You know, the "fine" school of thought. So in my mind, I had crossed over. My racial identification had changed so that white people were potentially dangerous, and the black people were potentially friends.

I don't know what would have happened if we had some sort of organized effort. I was not

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<sup>2</sup>. Ms. Zellner is referring to Bob Zellner, who joined SNCC in 1961 and became its first white field secretary. While still married, Ms. Zellner and Mr. Zellner worked for SNCC until 1967.

rooted in Atlanta. I could have been on Mars. I was on Raymond Street [in Atlanta]. That's what I cared about. I actually thought I was going to be on Raymond Street for the rest of my life. I thought that was going to be my life vocation. That's one of the things I appreciated about Julian because Julian had no nationalist feelings at all.

When I look back on it, what on earth made these black people accept white people like me? When we walked on the streets, we white people had options of being white, of having our privilege. Black people never had that option. It's very hard to work side by side with people doing the same job or similar job when you know half of them outside the world of privilege and the other half did not.

That's why white people were ultimately asked to leave SNCC. This was a contradiction that was never, never resolved. Julian, he felt that if you deliberately went on the "right side" – lower case "r" – then that's what counted. I don't think he thought, "Oh well, after she works here, she can go to the movies and sit in the orchestra section." Jane and I once almost got arrested going to see *Lawrence of Arabia*. *Lawrence of Arabia* was playing and a bunch of us went to see it. All we [wanted to do] was to go to see the film. We were not going on a sit-in or a demonstration. Jane reminds me that we went into a restaurant nearby – she remembers the name of the theater and everything – and we were just killing time until the movie started. The people panicked. They thought that we were doing a sit-in there.

Now, I could have gone to that movie by myself. Nobody would have said boo. That's what I mean. But they didn't hold that against me. They could have held it against me, but they didn't.

## **THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION**

GI: What was your perception of the Kennedy administration and what was involved in working with people in it?

DZ: Well, I hope everybody realizes that when I talk about myself or even when I talk about Julian and what we did, we did it in a context. We were not just doing it as individuals. Forman and Bob Moses were the ones who really articulated the policy. I considered myself on the food chain, not very high on the food chain. So I think I was quite cynical about the Kennedys. I knew that all these letters that we were sending would get no response. That's what we expected and that's what we've got -- no response. What was going on inside, I don't know. I don't know whether people weren't saying, "Oh, those pesky people they have written to us again, and we're just going to ignore them."

They completely ignored us. At least on the record they ignored us. When the Freedom Rides happened, that was before I got involved in SNCC. There was some direct contact with John Doar and other people. SNCC people seem to be very fond of John Doar, by the way. They felt he was a genuine person. So I think they tried to use that as one of their entrées, to be candid.

The other entree was the Southern Regional Council [SRC], which was more or less considered very "goody two shoes," the white ladies with the teacups and all of that. They were people who had money, but they wouldn't get involved. They were the ones who did not accept Virginia Durr. Virginia had become too radical for them or, so they thought. And they were the ones -- the Southern Regional Council -- who wouldn't let Anne Braden in the door, literally in the door. They were so terrified of her because she was a raving Communist, of course.

While I worked there, she came to visit me. And she could not come in the door. I had to meet her outside. So these white people didn't acquit themselves very well. When I do read some of these biographies now, I'm really disgusted, people promoting themselves about how brave they were. We didn't expect anything, and we didn't get anything. But the idea was to keep pressing.

Now, I would have to say that I grew up in a left [wing] family and I was much more left than almost anybody at the time there. Most of the SNCC people, Julian included, were democrats, small "d" democrats. You know, I don't know about Julian? Dr. [Horace Mann] Bond, I don't know. Most of the SNCC people believed that sooner or later they could kick the door open. Our job was to give them the nonviolent ammunition to do that. When we were sending all these press releases around -- this was the time when the Kennedys still had the Voice of America and they were saying overseas this is the greatest democracy in the world. There's only one little problem here: people can't vote. Later on when we got to the summer '64 that was a different story. That was different. And that effort, in the end, failed to kick the door open.

## **WORKING WITH THE FBI**

GI: How about your relationship with the FBI?

DZ: They had apparently come to the SRC. They never came to me directly. But I did have a strange experience with them. And this was probably the spring of '63. They called me up. I think I wrote about it in the book. They called me up, and this guy said, "This is Agent Nicholas." I remember his name. And he said, "Do you know where Dr. King is?" I said no [laughs]. They're calling this young woman, this young white woman, and they're asking me where Dr. King is. So I said, "No, I don't know where he is." They said, "We trailed him to the airport and then we lost him." I said, "Well, I can't help you. I don't know where he is."

Then I called Julian right away. I remember calling him. I said, "Do you believe this?" So we both howled over this. This is hilarious. I considered them totally ineffective and useless. And then later on I had another experience with them in Mississippi. Their position was they could do nothing unless the crime was committed, crimes in front of their eyes. That was their stated position. Now, right with the middle of this crisis that we're in about everything, it's like, "Send in the FBI!" No, we didn't feel that way. This was part of the apparatus that was oppressing everybody, and everybody knew that the FBI had undercover people who knew about lynchings and never did a thing ahead of time because they wanted to keep their people undercover. Their reputation was very, very, bad. Very

bad. They were either useless or stupid or, in fact, collaborators with racists. They still may be the same for all I know.

GI: So there was a sense of frustration from your end?

DZ: Oh yes! We called them as a *pro forma* thing. You had to call them. So-and-so was arrested, you called the FBI. Just letting you know, and so on. Because we want to make a record of what was happening. "Help! Help us!" that's what we were saying. "Help us! We are legitimate people. We are following the laws of the United States. We are following the Constitution of the United States. This is post-Civil War. H-h-help!" And we got nothing. Virtually nothing. I think that makes people very bitter, as you can imagine.

And then when [John F.] Kennedy dies all this incredible mythology springs up. You know, how great and wonderful he was. Actually, he was very fearful. He had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the civil rights movement. Turned out that Bobby had a lot more integrity than Jack did. Because Bobby was quite vicious and then somehow saw the light later on his life before he was killed. Did I actually think about that in those days? No. I thought we are supposed to get the apparatus to work on behalf of black people. That's what I thought.

I thought, I'm in a black organization. Black people are telling me what to do. And it's fine. That's fine with me. And not only is it fine, I'm lucky to be here. I'm lucky. What do I know what to do? Do I know how to go out in the community and come in and convince Mrs. Smith to go register to vote and lose her job and possibly her life? No, I don't. I can write, and I can type and I'm lucky that somebody can make use of what I can do. That's the way I thought then and that's the way I think now about my role.

That's why I have to laugh at some of this. I'm a witness to history. I was hit over the head by a cop and a famous photo was made. I was, in fact, a very hard working, lower-level, skilled person. That's what I was, in an organization where some of the leading people didn't have one-tenth of the education that I had. I looked to them for guidance and leadership in an organization where I was one of the older people – let's not forget that. I remember sitting with Bob Moses in 1962 or '63 – and Bob Moses is two years older than I am and we were both considered almost over the hill! So I was 24 and he was 26. Forman was 32 and he was the oldest person in sight [laughs].

## **THE STUDENT VOICE**

GI: Can you tell us about *The Student Voice* and the purpose it served?

DZ: *The Student Voice* was [started] to inform other people in the South what was going on. It was to inform this truly immense support network that functioned outside of SNCC. This is solely to do with Jim Forman, who was an organizational genius and who set up these "Friends of SNCC Chapters" all over the country. When I think about it, I'm just staggered. He set up this method that he set up is now being adopted by everybody. They take it for granted that that's the way you organize. It was very unusual. We had SCLC. SCLC did

not have support groups in various cities throughout the United States. The NAACP was a membership organization and they had chapters. And CORE had a couple of projects in the South and mostly was in the North. So SNCC was really unique in that way. The method of organizing was totally different from everybody else's. It was not to promote a great leader like Dr. King. That's the source of the clashes between SNCC and Dr. King. It was to do this [work] day by day. At first unobtrusive, steady organizing, to organize people who would be willing to sacrifice something.

I want to show your students this photo.

[Ms. Zellner takes the book, *Hands on the Freedom Plow* and turns it towards the camera].

So the photo is important because all of these women are waving a piece of paper that is a pledge that they have a written pledge that they will go to jail at that demonstration. This is one of my favorites because it also shows the enormous amount of women that were participating, who normally don't get too much credit, that people knew only too well what was going to happen to them and were prepared.

[Ms. Zellner returns to discussing how she and Julian Bond worked together]

So this is what we would do. Okay, a church has been burned down in Southwest Georgia. So Julian would call, or I would call and say, "Okay, what happened?" That that was our skill, by the way, is finding out what happened. Julian had worked with *The [Atlanta] Inquirer* and I had been the editor of my student newspaper, so we knew the rudiments of journalism. We knew "who, what, where, when and why." And that's what we did. We said, "okay, what happened, what time, who went there, why did you go there?" As opposed to getting a call, "Ahhhhhh! This has happened, this is terrible." We actually pinned people down, "Well, what has actually happened?" Then we wrote it up. Then, in the summer of '64 when we were in Oxford [Ohio], Julian – and I remember very well – we did a workshop.

Because these volunteers, some of them had been asked to be communications people in their own projects in Mississippi. I remember standing right by the blackboard. Julian and I stood there, and we told them, "It is your job, of course, to call if something happens. It's your job if somebody is missing. That it wasn't just communications to write things. It was to communicate. If somebody was missing, to call the FBI, call the hospitals, to call the jails, to find people. We had kids there, some of them nineteen years old. Andy Goodman was nineteen. And we were very, very, very conscious that they had left their families at home and that we were we were the ones who were going to have to call their family.

I remember we stood there, and we told them, "You're in the South now and people don't care about time." But if people go out and they're on some errand or something, especially if it's interracial, and if they were supposed to be back at three o'clock – and I remember saying – if they were supposed to be back at three o'clock and it's ten after three, start looking.

Well, sure enough the very next day, the very first day that they went South, this young

woman who had been at the workshop, she did what we said because she was in Meridian when Mickey and James and Andy did not come back. She's the one who called the jail, and she got the jailer's wife, who admitted that they had been there. Otherwise, we would never have known where they were. She said, "Oh yes, they were arrested but they've been released." Well, now we knew where to look. So the communications department was not by any means just writing. It was literally to communicate.

The other thing was, I was a recruiter in the Northeast. And most of the people who came South from that area came through the SNCC office there, which I ran. And in the archives, you can see what we asked, name and address, and who's your congressperson. Your local name and address, who's your congressperson your parent's name address newspaper your local newspaper, do you know anybody on your newspaper? We were very, very conscious to communicate. This was part of the communications strategy.<sup>3</sup>

### **COMPARING ATLANTA WITH MISSISSIPPI**

GI: What were the similarities and differences between your work in Mississippi and your work in Atlanta?

DZ: The essence of my work was actually quite similar. I was not expected to go out and do organizing in the field. I was not a field worker. Even when I was in Mississippi, I was not a field worker. For one thing, I personally was useless as a field worker because of the way I spoke. Because I would open my mouth, and everybody would know that I'm not from there [laughs]. Now, I used to have a much stronger New York accent than I have now because I'd lived away from New York for twenty years. But there is a shot there in that film that Stanley Nelson did, there's actually some contemporaneous footage of me interviewing somebody. I have the heaviest New York accent that you can imagine, and I'm saying something like, "Do you realize you might be killed?"<sup>4</sup>

In Atlanta, life was a lot easier. What I remember is working on *The Student Voice*, doing press releases, getting information from people in the field and communicating directly with the press. Those are the main things that I remember. I did other things, too. I remember spending at least two days at the mimeograph machine doing a petition for somebody who was arrested [and had] been imprisoned at Parchman prison. There were other things I did in the office. In Mississippi, it was like we were hunkered down in the bunker. We *were* in the bunker! We were in enemy territory. By this time I was married. Mickey, James and Andy had died. We all knew they were dead. They weren't found here. Actually, I didn't know that in the beginning when they first went missing. I actually thought they were missing. And one of the black guys that I worked with, who I was very fond of, said to me, "You can't be serious. They're not missing. They're gone. They're dead."

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<sup>3</sup>. The archives to which Ms. Zellner are deposited at the Wisconsin Historical Society, and can be accessed here: <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/31632>

<sup>4</sup>. Ms. Zellner is referring to the 2014 documentary, "Freedom Summer," written and produced by Stanley Nelson, which was released on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Freedom Summer project. The film appeared on the PBS Series, "The American Experience."



That was a few hours later and he knew . . . all the black people knew. They were gone. They were not missing.

So we were in enemy territory. We were there for six weeks. Seldom did I leave the office, except maybe to go to a restaurant in the black community. But there was a white woman who came in, and I have spent all these years being curious about her. It's too late now. But her actual name was Lady Montgomery, and she was a young white woman who lived on plantation in the next county. She came several times. Now, whether she was a spy for somebody I never found out, or whether she was somebody who genuinely wanted to know what this meant, I have never been able to track her down. I'm sure that people actually could. I don't know whether she was a spy or who she was. That was very unusual. That's when Judy [Richardson] and I were shot at.<sup>5</sup> I don't know if she talked to you about that. So that was another brush with death and that's when the FBI came. And they were completely useless. I've written about that, too.

The difference was that we were communicating in Mississippi not only with the press. We were there when the parents called. We were there to communicate to the lawyers. By then, in Mississippi, we had this huge structure of the help of auxiliary people. We have doctors there, we had nurses there. And lawyers. Tons of lawyers. I remember we were just sort of helping people sort of travel around, where to go, and communicate that way. Then we had the WATS [Wide Area Telephone Service] line and, of course, everybody knows now about the WATS line. Forman was the one who found out there was such a thing as a WATS line. It is really staggering how much it cost because in 1964 dollars it was very expensive. It was fifteen hundred dollars a month for the WATS line and the WATS line allowed you to call anywhere in the United States for as long as you wanted for a flat rate.

But you couldn't get incoming calls. So any incoming information had to be in code, and we became quite adept at that. My famous example is somebody would call and say, "This is a person to person call." You had to have a person to person call – I'm sure your students won't even know what this was [laughs] – so they say, "This is the person to person call for Dorothy Check." So I would say, "Oh, she's not here now." So they'd say, "When is she coming back?" I said, "Thursday." So that meant, "Where is my check?" So we learned how to do some code. But the WATS line was very, very important. In Mary King's book – that's a very useful book [about] '64 because she took meticulous records.<sup>6</sup> I didn't take meticulous records – the WATS line was really very important. It made all of these calls possible, like I told you about this woman in Meridian [Mississippi], and made calls to find people who were missing or who were late.

We also had a wonderful nineteen-year-old boy from Harvard named Peter Orris. I'm very proud of him because I was the person who interviewed him and said, "go, go, go!" He set up for all of us these two-way radios. So that technically came into the communications

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<sup>5</sup>. Judy Richardson is interviewed in this project [JBOHP-3].

<sup>6</sup>. Mary King, whose oral history [JBOHP-08] is also available for this project, received the Robert Kennedy Award for her book *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*. Ms. King succeeded Ms. Zellner as Mr. Bond's communications associate in 1963 and remained in that position until 1966.

office. We had to monitor the radios. We had some hair-raising experiences of people calling in on CB radios. And people were following us and. We had to keep track of that. So it was a war zone. That was the difference. In Atlanta you were – well, at least from just speaking for myself, I was in a halfway civilized place in Atlanta. In Mississippi, definitely World War III – in the war zone! I remember the day that we left we took a bus to New Orleans. Did we have a car? No, we didn't have a car. I remember getting out in the bus station in New Orleans and I felt like I was in Paris! Even though it was segregated there, too. Very hair raising, very hair-raising.

## **JULIAN BOND AS A NATIONAL FIGURE**

Okay, so now back to Julian. I actually left Atlanta in the summer of '63 and then I ran the SNCC office in Boston, and my-then husband went to Brandeis. Then we went to Mississippi the next year, and then we went back to Brandeis. When we came back to Atlanta, that was '65, we were there briefly and then we went somewhere else. When was Julian's case? What year was that?

GI: He was first elected in 1965, and the Supreme Court decided his case in 1966. He took his seat in January 1967.

DZ: So we were there. I don't know if we're visiting or whether we're staying there. I think we were living there. Julian, I remember, he had already been thrown out of the [Georgia General Assembly] but he was going to sue. I don't know whether people will be happy about this memory, but this goes to what I said before about Julian's innate self as a person who was contemplative and inward – his natural self. All of a sudden [he] was about to become a national figure, which he didn't know at the time, we didn't know at that time. We thought it was one of these routine cases. He was so stressed that he had a terrible case of the hives! He was beyond stressed because this was not his natural milieu. It really wasn't!

Of course, he coped with that and it went away. Then, I think that is when he started to enjoy being the center of attention. I think from '68 on, after he was nominated to be vice president. He had this sort of mischievous look. If you know, Julian, you know that look. He had this mischievous look where he'd tell you, "Oh, I was on so-and-so program, and I spoke to Whoopi Goldberg." He had this mischievous thing, "Can you imagine I know a person like that?" It was not altogether believing that he was so famous. In later years, when I'd see him in New York or elsewhere, it was very common, you [could] walk anywhere with him and somebody would just come up, "Mr. Bond I just want to shake your hand." He was really great about that, "Thank you very much, thank you." He sort of grew into that person. When I knew him, he was not that person. In the back of his mind, I think he kept saying to himself, "Is this really happening?" [That] is one of the reasons he thought things were funny. "Is this really happening to me?" He was a very dear person.

## **THE LEGACY OF JULIAN BOND**

GI: How would you describe Julian Bond's legacy from the 1960-1968 period of the freedom movement?

DZ: He was a living bridge between the black intelligentsia and the black community as a whole. Because the intelligentsia, even his father, other people like him, were quite separate from the regular mass of black people. And because of what he chose to do with his life, he bridged that gap. Now, he was not in the field a lot, but he did go into the field. He'd talked to regular people in a regular way. I think there were some black intellectuals who could not do that. In his career, over his lifetime, it turned out that his chairmanship of NAACP was pretty important. I tended to scoff at that, that this was meaningful. But looking back at that, I think it was meaningful. When he got the Spingarn award, he invited me and Judy [Richardson]<sup>7</sup> and other people to come with the family, and that was a really special time. He invited us because Obama was speaking [laughs]. But I wanted to see him get the Spingarn, which I'd heard since when I was a child. I have to say I was an unusual white person that I had heard of the Spingarn Medal.<sup>8</sup>

He grew into this sort of fame, but he used it pretty well. It turned out that history will say that what he did for the LGBT community, which would have been totally unpredictable in the '60s, will turn out to be one of the most meaningful things that he did. I don't think he intended it in any way. It wasn't on his radar. It wasn't on our radar at all. But he was quite brave in his advocacy of that community long before it became popular to do that. When I went to Washington, and I would stay over there, he would be talking about that. That was very meaningful to him. I'm sure you've heard stories about that. He would be on panels with black ministers and they would be talking about how horrible this was, and he would take them on. He was fearless about that. What was so amazing about him was that he was so quick. You could say something, and just before you just before you knew it, out came this incredible statement that was funny, witty and just on the mark. I think history will definitely see him as an important person for many things that he did. Not just the civil rights movement. For many things.

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<sup>7</sup>. Judy Richardson (JBOHP-03) is interviewed for this project.

<sup>8</sup>. The Spingarn Medal, established in 1914 by Joel Elias Spingarn, the chairman of the board of the NAACP, is awarded "for the highest achievement by an American of African descent" from the previous year. Mr. Bond received the award in 2009.