

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Dr. Doris Derby
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Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
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Joe Mosnier: ...[April] 26, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This is a collaborative project that we are undertaking for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Uh, we are in Atlanta, Georgia, on the campus of, uh, Georgia State University with Dr. Doris Derby, um, who has graciously agreed to sit down to be one of the, uh, interviewees in our, uh, inaugural year for the museum's work to develop a foundational oral history collection to support its work. Dr. Derby, thank you so much for sitting down with us. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Doris Derby: You're quite welcome.

JM: Um, let me start today with a – I'd love to have you talk a little bit about, um, your childhood, your parents – I know that your great aunts were also very influential figures as you kind of came into yourself as a – as a young adult. And just

reflect a little bit about what seems to have been a quite exceptional childhood in so many respects.

DD: Well, you know, I was thinking about, um, about my grandparents and, um, my relatives and, um, the atmosphere that they created as, uh, for – I think for all of my aunts and uncles and those of us as we grew up. My grandmother on my mother's side, my maternal grandmother, um, she lived in Bangor, Maine. And, um, there was a – and I knew her. You know, we used to go visit during the holidays, during the summer. When I was growing up, we were very close in terms of our family. My mother came from a family of eleven children. And my grandmother was originally from Haiti in the Virgin Islands, and her husband, my grandfather, was from Virginia.

Now, interesting enough, I didn't know about it, but I later found out that my grandmother and her oldest son was the – were original charter members of an NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] chapter founded in the 1920s. [Someone coughs] I didn't know about that until I read the book that a historian wrote. It was called *Black Bangor*, the black community in the late 1800s and early, you know, 1920s, '30s. Um, my grandfather on my mother's side had a store. It was a, uh, in Bangor, Maine. He was a businessman. Everybody loved him, and loved — and his store, um, was called a "Bangor institution."

On my father's side, I have, um, grandparents that, um, were very active in the community. And, um, my paternal grandfather was a Boy Scout leader, just as my father was. I think that there's a theme there in both sides of the family: hard work, determination, um, goals, and within the climate of some, uh, racism, but they took the route of working hard to overcome it through their initiatives. And, um, so, I think that

that's something that, you know, those are values that I inherited on both sides: strong family, strong community, uh, work hard, and, uh, you know, achieve – achievement for self, family, and community. And that's what led me to also embrace the struggle, uh, in the South.

JM: Um-hmm. I'd like to hear a little bit more about the community – its fabric, the kinds of things that you were involved in [clears throat] as a young person, church, um, social service, um, school.

DD: Well, uh, I grew up in a community in the Bronx called Williamsbridge, and, uh, it was an interesting community. It was diverse, and yet we had a, um – the black community was welded together through the four – three or four – churches in the area. I, uh – my father was Episcopalian, and so we went officially to the Episcopal Church. But my three girlfriends, who lived on the street on the same block as I did, [5:00] they went to the Baptist Church down the street. And so, I went there also. So, I really went to two churches every Sunday. And, uh, I sang in the choir, the child – the youth choir, uh, in their church, and, um, I was active in other ways in, um, the Episcopal Church. There was several, um, people from the Caribbean Islands, as well as the South – South Carolina, North Carolina – and, um, so, I had a mixture there.

In the, in the community, you know, every time I went to another level of school, from elementary to junior high to middle school, uh, I had to walk a longer distance, but the environment, the people were, uh, more, uh, varied. But the block, the neighborhood, the immediate neighborhood was very varied, too. Uh, we had a Jewish delicatessen. Italians owned the liquor store. We had a Chinese restaurant and Chinese laundry and a black restaurant owner. So, it was very – quite varied. The Italians were the largest

population in our community. And, um, so, as I said, we – as we got older and went to another school, we got more people coming from farther away, some from what we called the Lower Bronx, and so, you had that mixture. Many were – some were Latin; some were, again, Caribbean; sometimes a few African; as well as, you know, Greek, Italian, Jewish, all of that. So, I grew up along those lines.

But I also had a quest from an early age as to, “Where are our black positive images in the media?” I’m not seeing very much of it in books, in magazines. Now, in newspapers, there are black newspapers. Uh, but in film, uh, you know, we gravitated to what movies there were, which was *Amos and Andy* or, um, *Tarzan* where there were some black African people who were running around.

And I had a great-aunt, who was, uh – she was like a great-great-aunt. My grandmother on my father’s side, she called her, “her aunt, Great Aunt Jesse.” Great Aunt Jesse was a missionary in Liberia, and she would write letters to my grandparents, my paternal grandparents, telling about her experiences in Liberia, Monrovia, and, um, sent some photographs, but mainly, you know, stories. And so, I said, “Oh,” you know, “I have to find out more about this continent that has all black people or a variety of black people, uh, where we came from.” And, um, so, that was one of my missions.

Now, I also grew up, uh, in the arts. All of the, uh, children in my mother’s family played musical instruments, except for – well, my mother did also, but she studied dance. And my sister and I studied dance from elementary school. And, uh, that, of course, uh, pursuit expands your horizons. And combined with the ideas, uh, from my great-aunt about Africa, I wanted to know more. So, when I was in junior high school, anytime we had a social studies report, I did something on Africa or the Caribbean.

I was very privileged to grow up in New York City, because in Manhattan we had something called the Schomburg Library [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture]. And the Schomburg Library was a collection of African, African American heritage, Caribbean heritage books. Um, and one time when I was going to visit my aunt, who lived in that area, uh, and, uh, I found out that they were having auditions for, uh, a scholarship to the Katherine Dunham Dance, uh, dance class. And I tried out and I got it. So, I would have to go to Harlem once a week for my dance class, and then I'd stop at the Schomburg, and I got to meet some new kind of people.

So, um, [10:00] I got interested in pursuing and learning more about the African heritage and African and African American images, uh, the variety of people, etcetera. And so, when I didn't see books and magazines and – in the media – it was in my mind that I would have to do it myself.

JM: Yeah.

DD: My father was a – he used to take pictures at all of our family gatherings. And he had his camera and his, uh – he had the, uh, photographs made into slides, so that whenever we had family gatherings, he would get the projector and the screen and the slides out. And so, that's what I did later on, also. Um, and that's what I'm still doing.

JM: Yeah. Can I ask – did you actually meet, uh, Miss Dunham?

DD: Yes, I did. I met her a couple of times.

JM: Yeah.

DD: Now, she didn't teach the class herself. It was – had her name. But I did, later on, have a chance to meet her.

JM: How did – how did you come by, um, by your teenage years to be interested in joining the youth chapter of the local NAACP?

DD: Well, we had a chapter at our church. Our church had a – the old building of the church became like a community event place. Uh, the Boy Scouts met there. The Bible School, uh, took place there. We had – different organizations met there. We had fashion shows there, banquets, all of that. So, the church, uh, often in the black community, uh, was the facility for community events and community organizations. So, actually, uh, that's why when, uh, I became a part of the Civil Rights Movement – having functions in churches, mass meetings and, uh, rallies and all of that, it wasn't so different for me.

There were a lot of things that, uh – even though I grew up in New York, the part of New York that I grew up in was really outside – it was in the, within the city limits, but it was right at the edge. And, uh, people used to say, “Oh, you live in the country.” In a way, we did, because we used to raise chickens and ducks. And my father had – we had a big vegetable garden. We had trees, apples and cherries. We had – we raised, uh, grew grapes. We had a big grape arbor. We made grape juice or grape jelly, wine, etcetera. So, um, and not too far from my house, we used to go – like on the weekends, we would go sort of exploring. And, um, there were areas that were forested and had brooks, and there were deer up there and that kind of thing. Now, that was for a certain period of my life, but as I got older, of course, those things changed.

JM: Um, would you say that your household was a, was a politicized one? Say, I'm thinking of, um, mid '50s, say the sequence of *Brown*, um, Montgomery, Little Rock

– were those things that were frequent and subjects around the dinner table in the household?

DD: Oh, definitely. I mean, uh, we – with my grandparents and my aunts and uncles, like I said, we had a lot of family gatherings. And then, when we would get together, we – my parents and – we were always, the children were part of the conversation. And we were listening to what happened to my grandparents and what happened to my father when he was growing up.

For example, uh, he was, um, the only African American male in his civil engineering class at the University of Pennsylvania. And, uh, he told us the story about when, um, he won, uh – he was in gymnastics and fencing, and he won some awards. Uh, he was an engineer, in civil engineering. But when he went to collect his awards, they had the awards ceremony somewhere else other than the university. And they – whoever was at the door said he had to go to the service elevator. So, he left. He did not go to pick up his awards. That was when he was in his, you know, early twenties in the '30s. So, there are stories like that.

There are stories of – my grandfather and my father would talk about, um, riding the rails, [15:00] catching the train, jumping on the trains and going to New York from Philadelphia, where they were living at the time, because they had moved from Boston to Philadelphia, my grandfather and the children, to find work. And then, as he got older, my grandfather and he and probably his brother would, uh, jump on the trains to go to New York to get some work.

So, we knew about economic disparity. We knew about the trials and tribulations, the variety of work that they had to take just to make a living. Uh, I knew about, um, the

fact that when my father got his civil engineering degree, he was discriminated against, and then the only job he could get with them was – whatever he did, it was in their name.

Um, my uncle that was married to my mother's oldest sister, he talked about his story. Uh, he was – he did training at Tufts University to be a dentist. And, um, he couldn't really – he didn't have anyone who would, a dentist who would take him in as a partner or an intern. Then he couldn't get the money to, uh, to work, to put his – to have a dental, um, office together. So, he ended up, he and his wife, my aunt, they had three children. They ended up leaving Boston and coming to New York. And, uh, what did he do? He ended up being a skycap at the airport. But, you see, his intelligence was still there. So, there were discussions about these things, these disparities, at the dinner table during the holidays.

Another aunt who was married to, uh, a man, um, from New York, they would – you know, we would have them for the holidays. Now, that aunt, my Aunt Julia – I had two aunts named Julia. One was on my mother's side and one was on my paternal – father's side. And, uh, Aunt Julia was, uh – she was an executive secretary. Now, all of my mother's siblings finished high school, like eight or nine of them, the ones that did not pass away, got high school degrees, and they all played instruments. And, um, they, um, talked about how – the different things that *they* went through. Um.

[Siren sounds in background]

JB: Let's stop for just a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a break for a fire alarm. [Laughs] So, we had to leave the building for a few minutes, and we're now back. And Dr. Derby, you were talking about your Aunt Julia.

DD: Yes, Aunt Julia Greene, uh, who lived on 135th Street in Harlem, um, for a period of time, uh, for a long period of time, you know, as I was growing up. However, um, before that, um – you know, she had migrated from Bangor, Maine, because it was hard to find a job. She was, uh – lived in Boston for some years and she was an executive secretary for W.E.B. DuBois. She later left that and went to New York. When she was in New York as an executive secretary, she was recruited by the U.S. Government, uh, as one of, uh, let's say, ten or twelve, uh, black women to be secretaries, uh, in the, uh, in Washington, D.C. when the, um, they were integrating the workforce, uh, in Washington for the government.

JM: This would have been about what year?

DD: That would have been – I guess it was in the '30s, '40s.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: No, not '40s. '30s.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: No, wait a minute. It was after – it was after World War II.

JM: Okay, so it was late '40s?

DD: I think it was after World War – so like middle '40s, I would think.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

DD: Um-hmm. So, she did work there for a period of time and then she came back to New York. So, of course, she had her experiences. Her husband also – he

worked for, [20:00] I think, the Civil Service in New York and he had his experiences. And so, whenever relatives got together, they talked about their experiences: what they were doing, what had happened, how they were coping with it, what else they were going to do, you know, what the children were doing, what their goals were for their children, and so on and so forth.

So, I mean, it wasn't – we didn't really, uh, as growing up, we didn't consider that we were *not* going to go to college. But, of course, we lived in New York City, where we had city colleges, and we – and this university, Georgia State, is a city college and is a commuter college, and that's what my sister and I went to. My brother, who came along nine years later, he ended up going off to Howard University.

Um, so I think that, um, I *know* that, um, this – these roundtable discussions that we would have over dinner and at celebrations, uh, certainly influenced me in that as – when I was a college student, I began to have discussions with people I would meet that seemed to be interested in what was going on in, um, the government, in, um – you know, in Africa, in just culturally what were – you know, where, where are we as African American people? And where is the United States? How are we going to make some changes? Because, uh, there are things that need to be done.

JM: I know that one of the, one of the places at, um, Hunter College where you began those kinds of conversations was the Christian Human Relations Club. And I want to ask about that generally, but also, [clears throat] um, I think in '61 – you might tell me it's 1962 – uh, no, sorry, it is '61, if I'm not mistaken, the Christian Human Relations Club organized a bus trip to Durham, North Carolina. And I wondered – I'd love to have you describe that, and I also wonder if that was your first trip to the South.

DD: Okay. Let me, uh, just say a few things before that. Uh, my grandparents believed in traveling. And, um, none of them were ever in the military, but they, uh, they, um, would take – were very active in the church. And my family, my father – *I* was very active in the church, in two churches, as I told you. And so, uh, my grandparents' church would take trips. They would go on trips to Canada and upstate New York or somewhere, and sometimes they would take me with them. Um, when I was a Girl Scout and a teenager, um, my Girl Scout leader had, um, adopted a child, and, uh, she was from Detroit. So, she – I used to babysit for her, and she wanted me to go to Detroit to take care of the child for a couple of weeks. So, I started traveling. That whole, you know, activity of interacting with people and learning about new places and so on was a part of my learning curve.

And, um, again a part of the church, I – my church activity – um, I was also interested in Native American, uh, people, heritage, because we had always heard that we had, we were part Cherokee. So, uh, the, uh – there were different projects that you could participate in as a college student during the summer. And the one I found out about was, uh, going to a Navajo Indian reservation in New Mexico, so I did that that summer.

And when I was – when I came back, uh, and I was thinking that I wanted to go to Africa, I happened to, uh, run into an old friend of mine. And I said, “Well, guess where I just went?” you know, and, “New Mexico!” And he says, “Well, guess where I’m going? To Nigeria for an exchange in the college.” So, I said, “Well, ooh, I want to – I want to go. How do –?” You know. He said, “I’ll tell you about it when I get back.”

And he called me when he got back and he told me. He was a – he was at Yale Law School and he told me. And so, he said, “You can apply to the NAACP, and they –

you may get a scholarship,” which I did do and I did get the scholarship. I was an NAACP member, had been since I was sixteen. [25:00] So, there I went. I was the baby of the group. Most of them – most of them were graduates, grads, or in grad school, professional school. So, that summer of 1960 was the summer that I spent in Africa before I had any trip to the South. And it was quite interesting when I finally did go and live in the South and how I saw some similarities in the culture and so on.

But at any rate – so, when I came back, I was active – continued to be active on campus in the Anthropology Club and also the, uh – there were a couple of us that founded something called the African Scholarship Committee, in which we raised funds for the students who came over under the Kennedy – John Kennedy Airlift. And they lifted students to come over from some of the newly independent countries, and – but they didn’t have very much money, so we did that.

And so the other group that I was active with was the Christian, um, Hunter College Christian Human Relations Group. So, yes, uh, we had a mixed group, blacks and whites. Uh, Hunter College was, um – Hunter College in the Bronx was a smaller school than Hunter College in Manhattan, which was the main school. And, um, so, we had a nice group of about – what – ten, twelve, fourteen students that went. And our purpose was to, uh, talk with some of the student leaders and the community leaders about, um, segregation and the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides and so on and to find out what we could do – we wanted to learn more about what was going on and to see what we could do to support them.

And so, when we came back, there was a group, uh, that had started, uh, or maybe it was continuing – it had already started, but we worked with them, the Northern Student

Support Movement. Um, and so we wanted to publicize, inform people about what was going on, have some speakers to come. Uh, Ethel Kennedy came to Hunter College. Malcolm X actually came, um, and some other people. So, that was a very informative time.

JM: [Clears throat] Do you remember – yeah, excuse me. Do you remember your Durham visit? And as your sensibility about these things was widening – you'd been to New Mexico, you'd thought about your experiences in Durham, and – did you have a – what kinds of, what kinds of things were unfolding in your mind in these years as you were now sort of looking towards your last year of college? And, and did you anticipate at that point becoming so deeply involved in the southern freedom movement?

DD: Well, I, I *was*, you know, being involved. Uh, don't forget the African countries were, um, becoming, moving towards independence. Nigeria, for example, when I went there in the summer of 1960, they were not yet independent. They became independent that October. Um, while – actually, when we went to Nigeria, on the way, we also stopped in France, in Paris, in Rome, Italy – um, Paris and Rome. So, again, my eyes are being opened. I'm looking at – seeing, you know, achievement and non-achievement and so on. So, these things were happening, and they were not foreign to me because they fit in with what I had heard through my oral history of my relatives: the struggles.

When I went to the Navajo Indian Reservation and I saw what had, what was happening with the Indians, the Navajo Indians – and as a person who was a cultural anthropologist, I believed in – believe in – living in the community and finding out what kind of life the people have. And it was interesting that, um, there were, uh – there was a

black community, migrant community, in, uh, [30:00] the city, the town of Farmington, New Mexico, and then there were the reservations, the Navajo Indian reservations. And I went to all of that. I mean, I – I love to be a part of other cultures. So, I could see economic inequality in a lot of different places and, uh, sort of semi-segregation in those – you know, in that respect, in New Mexico.

And then, of course, I had been reading about Africa. I had been associating with people who were looking – who were exploring African culture. It was the AMSAC, the American Society of African Culture, and, uh, I started to go to their meetings in New York. They were looking at making connections, cultural connections, identifications and cultural connections between Africa and African Americans. Whereas it had been portrayed, you know, in movies – or understated, grossly understated, in movies and TV and so on, and even if you didn't – if you weren't adventurous and tried to research, uh, information in the library, you wouldn't find out very much. But I *was* adventurous and continued to do research and read lots.

But, in addition to, uh, reading, I was, uh, I was – I was very excited about African culture, the dance and, uh, the artwork, discovering that, the music. Uh, it just excited me. And so, I was studying African dance, I was listening to African music, I was, uh – brought back African art, and, um, you know, I would show it. I started to take it and show it to people at different meetings – African sculpture, African trinkets and whatnot. Um, so, this just became something that I did.

When I, uh, did go to the South, I took – I had things with me. And I used to, um, show African art in the Head Start programs and at churches, and I took African dresses and, um, all kinds of things. That's just what I've done. I wanted to share what I knew,

what I learned about African culture, so that people would know that there is not a void. It's just – the void was from the American side purposefully to keep us from knowing what our culture was. And, um, I started to, uh, look for when I was – yeah, that was from when I was in junior high and going on through high school – looking to identify artists, writers, dancers. So, I was out and about, experiencing African and African American and Caribbean culture from a very early age.

JM: In the summers –

JB: [Can you hold on just a minute]?

JM: Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling again.

DD: Let me just say, you know, I continued to study African dance throughout college and graduate school after I went back. When I was in Mississippi, I had a dance group, uh, when I was working at Tougaloo College. I continued to paint. Then I added, you know, the photographs.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: I always used to take pictures, but that was just, you know, family and friends. But then, later on, I wanted to document so that the things that I felt I was lacking when I grew up, that I had to really find out about, I had to look for, I wanted other people to have those, that, those visual images. And I wanted to show the, um, what the average person was doing as well as the leaders, as well as the, um, people whose names you know, the artists and whatnot. I wanted to show – I had a quest to

show our culture in total, and not just a little bit or negative stereotypes. And that's really what I still do. [35:00]

JM: Let me ask about, and I will – I will ask more questions that will draw out all those themes. Um, let me ask about your transition in the summer of 1962. You,, you originally had a plan, I think, to go back to New Mexico to do some more anthropological work.

DD: No, I was –

JM: Oh?

DD: I was – um, I had a –

JM: Excuse me. Mexico, not New Mexico.

DD: Yeah, Mexico.

JM: Pardon me.

DD: I had a friend who – she was an anthropologist also. We were. And, um, she had gone to Mexico to do a master's in cultural anthropology. And I was interested in – uh, as I had been reading and, um, studying, uh, African images, I was interested in the African images in Mexico, in the Mexican sculptures in Oaxaca. And so, they – I had met someone who had, uh, done a master's in art. Um, what was the name of that guy? I can't think of it now. But, uh, you could – you would do art history as well as visual art, and I was doing a lot of painting at that time. So, I wanted to investigate whether I would like to do a master's there and visit her, because it was the summertime. And I was, uh – I had started teaching in that January of '62, and so, um, I had the summer off. I was teaching the third grade.

So, I had planned this trip and I decided – back then, you know, I didn't mind going on the bus, so I decided I was going to take a bus trip and go to, um, uh, Georgia, to Atlanta, Georgia, and then to Albany, Georgia, where one of my colleagues from Hunter College – and we were part of the Northern Student Movement together – she had gone to Albany, Georgia. She decided she was going to, uh, drop out of school and work there in voter registration and other areas. So, I had heard that she was sick and that she was in jail. So, I said, “Well, I'll go and see her, see how she's doing, maybe spend a week, and then I'll go on to New Mexico – I mean to Mexico.”

And so, as it turned out, I was told, “Well, if you're going to go to Albany, Georgia, you have to go to Atlanta first and meet up with, um, the SNCC folk, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” because I had already started working, um, to establish – there was, like, a New York SNCC office.

JM: So, that work had already begun in New York?

DD: Yeah, it was just – it was developing.

JM: Yeah, okay.

DD: I think. And there were – that was '62. I think things were just, yeah, sort of developing, and I was getting involved.

JM: Yeah. Right. What did you find when you arrived in, um, the SNCC office in Atlanta?

DD: Well, um, I thought that, uh, I'd be there like a day, and we'd go off to Albany. But I had to – you know, you had to make sure there was transportation. There was a lot of activity going on. Um, there were projects, and people were coming in and moving around, and, um, it was a whole operation. Uh, and I – so, I had to wait to see

who was going and how we were going to get there and so on. So, I just said, “Okay, well, I’ll wait and I’ll get to know who’s in the office.” So, I did. Met a lot of the key players, uh, Jim Forman and several people, Bob Zellner, um, Ruby Doris Smith, several.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: So, finally, when, um, there was a car ready and there were a couple of people that were going to be going to Albany – of course, I didn’t know how far Albany, Georgia, was. It’s three hours away. Um, so, I think there were about four of us that went in the car. Little did I know at that point that it was dangerous to ride in an integrated car, because Jim Forman, Bob Zellner, myself, and I think there was one other person.

But, uh, we arrived in Albany, Georgia, and, uh, we went to the SNCC office, and they arranged [40:00] to put us up with a family. And then, the next day they came and they said, “Okay, well, we need to do some canvassing,” and, uh, go to the SNCC office and see what was on the agenda for the day – um, not the SNCC office – the –

JM: Albany Movement office.

DD: Albany Movement office in Albany, and, uh, see what was on the agenda: what had transpired, what – you know, what the police were doing, what was – you know, what was Dr. King doing? And who was needed to do what? So, before I knew it, I was in that mode. But I have always been in a community acting, helping mode. It’s like, “Okay, what do we need to do? What are we doing? What do we need to do?”

And so, um, by that time, I found out that my friend Peggy [Dammond] had been – she was in, I think it was Americus, Georgia. She was in Americus or in Terrell County; they used to call it “Terrible Terrell,” “Terrible Terrell County.” And, um, I was

just starting to learn more about, you know, students getting arrested, and demonstrations going on, and the chief of police – no help from him – and so on and so forth. And, um, some of the members would get arrested, so they would need everybody who could do different things. They need all hands on deck, so to speak. Well, I could see how things were going and I had a lot of skills, and they were asking me to do this and that and the other thing. And so, I ended up doing several things. And before I knew it, the summer was almost going to be over, and I decided I wasn't going to New Mexico.

And Charles Sherrod of Albany, Georgia, said, "Well, we need you to go back and do some fundraising for us. And, by the way, we need some canned goods, we need food, we need clothing for the people who have been kicked off of their jobs," and, um, and all that. So, that was my next task.

JM: Back up in New York?

DD: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

DD: I went back to teaching school and to raising money and, um, different kinds of goods for the Albany Movement.

JM: Yeah. I'll ask about that in just one second. I wanted to – [clears throat] I wanted to have you reflect a little bit about that full summer in Albany. Obviously – you mentioned that you came with many skills that you were able to deploy directly, because you were capable in many ways that were very relevant to the movement. Were there ways in which [clears throat], um, you didn't feel equipped, maybe because, say, of the question of violence and threat that there isn't really a convenient answer to that? Did you feel – were there ways in which it was upsetting or difficult?

DD: Well, there were so many things, so many activities going on, and there was excitement. There was the mass meetings, and people were planning things, and, um, uh, you know, there was the training, uh, in nonviolent techniques for demonstrations, which I did participate in some. And, um, so, it really wasn't – I wasn't thinking so much about something happening to me. Uh, I mainly was interested in doing what I could do and what I was needed to do.

Now, when I grew up, um, my father and grandparents were very self-sufficient and had a lot of skills and it was like, "We do whatever we need to do." Um, we grew our own food. We raised our chickens and ducks and, uh, fruit trees and flowers. And we painted the house when we needed to. My father had carpentry skills just as his father. He supplemented his income, which when he didn't get an engineering job, he ended up working in the civil service, New York State civil service. And he would – he was a cabinetmaker in the evenings. And I used to, uh, go to the basement with him, and he showed me how to make things out of wood.

And I used the pieces of masonite that he had [45:00] left from his cabinet – that's what I painted on. And, um, so, I was always recycling things, and that was part of my imagination, that I would make something out of something that I would pick up and I'd look and I'd think of what kind of design it had, or, um. And then, my mother taught me how to sew. My sister and I, we made our Easter outfits by the time we were in fifth and sixth grade. So, I was always very adaptable. I was traveling, so I was used to being in other places or staying with other people. We'd travel to our relatives'. We'd travel through the church to new places. Um, and I, especially, in my family, did that. And I

just started thinking, you know, that was sort of my inheritance from my aunts and my grandparents.

JM: [Coughs] When you went back to New York, you did a lot of work, with others, to, um, really bring the New York SNCC office forward. Can you talk a little bit about that effort and how it connected then to the organizational effort for the March on Washington?

DD: Well, the, uh – that was '62, '63, especially. When I came back from Albany and, uh, I started teaching again, I knew that I had to do fundraising, so I connected with, uh, another group, Rae Brandstein – I can't think of her group right now. I have some papers from that. And, uh, so, I – this was an interesting lady. She was, uh, a white lady. She was in a wheelchair. Somehow or other, and I'd have to look at some of the old documents, we got together. And she – she liked the project of, you know, finding – we wanted to, uh, be able to get a bus, a school bus – yeah, she had some kind of educational program. We wanted to get a school bus and fill it full of food, canned goods, clothing, and books. And so, we worked together on that project and her organization. And, at the same time, it expanded people that I knew that could help SNCC.

And so, we – SNCC needed a New York office for fundraising, so there were a group of us who would – you know, went there in the afternoon or the evening, because I got out of school like at three o'clock and I'd sometimes go down there, uh, in the early evening. Um, so, there were people I was meeting through that group, as well as developing SNCC. And then, the March on Washington, Bayard Rustin, his group – so, we were part of a committee.

JM: [Coughs] Excuse me.

DD: To come together to recruit people to work to organize the March on Washington – be in contact with the SNCC people and King’s people and all these other organizations.

JM: Um-hmm. You also in this period co-founded New York Artists for SNCC, and that must be a very interesting story.

DD: Well, that was just starting – that was just starting around, I guess, in that spring of ’63, and then later on, uh, I would come up from Mississippi, because I went to Mississippi to work after the March on Washington. I’m kind of fuzzy now with the dates. But, um, I especially was, uh, talking with the visual artists to get them to, um, perhaps donate some work or, um, doing images of the civil rights, uh, different, uh, incidents and whatnot.

And I was still – I had already become friends with a lot of artists, visual artists, writers. When I was in high school [50:00] I was a part of the Harlem Writers Guild. And, as I said, I was going to the AMSAC, American Society of African Culture meetings, where I was learning more about, um, what they called “Negritude,” um, which was called “Negritude,” African – tying in African philosophy and African culture and African American carryovers – African carryovers into the New World.

Um, so, I also was with, um, as I said, the writers and actors, and just talking about how we could fundraise to raise money for SNCC in Atlanta and then, um, put on concerts to raise money and so on. Uh, some of the, uh, actors and entertainers would have parties. But then after I went – you know, that was kind of a short, relatively short period, because then I was concentrating on being in Mississippi. But I would come up

to New York, back to New York, and then sort of be here or there for a short period of time.

JM: Right. Let me ask about Bob Moses' invitation that you [coughs] consider coming, after the March on Washington, down to Jackson, Mississippi, and how that conversation with Bob Moses unfolded initially, and how you weighed that prospect, and then how you made that decision, and what you encountered when you arrived?

DD: Well, I mentioned that I was – my charge from Charles Sherrod was: we need to, you know, get – we need funds and we need this, uh – we need to, uh – they needed a vehicle, so the school bus. So, I put, uh – I had my little committee and I was organizing a big fundraising event at a church in, uh, Manhattan. So, I was told that, like, “Oh, it'd be great to have Bob Moses. He can come up and speak, and you can, you know, get contributions,” or something. So, that's what we did.

And so, after – that was a great success – then Bob Moses asked me would I be willing to come to Mississippi to work in an adult literacy project that he was working on, um, pulling together as a, um, pilot project. And so, you know, at that point, I told him I really had some other things that I was going to do. I was teaching. I was, you know, happy doing what I was doing, working with SNCC in New York and with the artists, and continuing on, uh, meeting artists in my mission of getting images, and I was painting.

Um, so, he left and went back to Mississippi. And he called me a couple of times and said, you know, “Would you – we really need you. We think we're going to get this grant for a year. And, um, we want to develop adult literacy materials in conjunction with SNCC's voter registration efforts, developing materials that would, um, meet the

needs of people when they go to register to vote or to vote.” And all kinds of outrageous requirements were made, so we wanted to see if we could gear the development of literacy materials to some of those things and also to some of the, uh, areas that adults needed writing to function and to give them a better life, such as knowing about credit and shopping and other things like that.

So, he called me a couple of times, and I said, “No.” I really didn’t want to go. I still had it in my mind that I would go off for my master’s in anthropology and pursuing – I was really interested in African influences in many ways, uh, in other places, so, for example, in India, African influences in Mexico, as well as definitely in the United States, and in the South particularly.

But when I – that spring, May, June, uh, when you had the [55:00] demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, and some other places, and you had the violence, you had the police bringing out the dogs, and the fire hoses, and so – these photographs, these vivid images of all of this violence – and, um, I was watching the news and I saw this come on, and I said, “Okay.” I got up and I told my parents, I said, “Look,” you know, “I’m going to go to Mississippi to work on this literacy project, because if the people there can continually – children and adults, they’re going there and just demonstrating, and they’re suffering like this, the least I can do is participate in this literacy project. I am a teacher. I’ve already been. I haven’t – you know, I’m committed to the struggle in many different facets.” And that’s what I did. So, I called Bob and I said, “Okay, I’ll go. I’ll go to Mississippi after the March on Washington.”

JB: Can we pause a second?

JM: [Coughs] Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: We just took a little short break. Um, you just explained how, having seen so much of the, um, violence in media imagery and so forth in the spring of '63, that you – that was the moment you resolved to go to Mississippi after the March on Washington. Let me ask you about the March on Washington. You were there, and what memories stand out most vividly for you? Are there parts of that experience that come first to your mind when you think about it now?

DD: Well, I [clears throat] – I remember, um, just, uh, you know, all the people that I worked with to pull it off, and then getting there and seeing everybody, uh, you know, a lot of the SNCC people that I had met, because I had gone to a couple of SNCC conferences. All of the people, um, from – the SNCC folks, uh, coming up with community people and, um, everybody being there and just so enthusiastic and so, um, thinking that we would be – full of hope, you know. We were full of hope that this is going to make a difference. Seeing people from all walks of life, children and old people and young people and entertainers, and hearing the speeches, and being there, uh, with our core, some of the core SNCC, uh, workers.

Just, I mean – and there was no violence. You know, pulling it off was just so inspiring because there was no violence. It was – so many people were, um, you know, speculating that something was going to happen. And here are all these people, and then you had, you know, black, white, Asian, people from all different ethnic backgrounds, different countries, out there. And the weather was good. We didn't – you know, I mean, everything went well, and so that was very exciting to see. [Loud muffled sounds]

People that we knew and hearing the inspiring words of so many different people that were speaking.

JM: You make your transition in the fall of '63 down to Jackson and will be in Mississippi for the next nine years and involved in a series of very, very interesting projects, and we'll talk about those in sequence. I want to ask generally, though, if you could start by sort of painting a picture of the Mississippi you encountered in those years, um, especially early, just when you – you know, soon, a year or two after you arrived. Um, what were the most relevant things for you to report if you were trying to help someone of a different generation now understand what that was like?

DD: Well, I'll start with, uh, that first year. When I arrived, uh, you know, I was given the title of a SNCC field secretary [1:00:00] and put on the payroll for ten dollars a week. That's what SNCC field secretaries made. And, um, there were homes of people that – Jackson folks that we would be put up with. Um, you'd stay with a family, um, because, you know, we didn't have money to pay for – of course, I had a little savings that I had from my teaching. But, um, we were, you know, put up with a family, and then we were – you know, someone would pick you up to – or the family would drop you off at, um, the COFO office, Council of Federated Organizations, which was an office that was an umbrella, uh, office, and so, there were several – SNCC, CORE, NAACP – um, all, you know, had people working there.

And, um, the office was just, uh, buzzing with activity: initiatives relating to voter registration, and demonstrations, and integration of facilities, and organizing counties, and organizing a mock election, a governor's election, new people coming in needing orientation, working together to put on events or activities, mass meetings, and coming

together to plan, strategize, as well as execute those things that needed to be done to, uh, make that activity or event a success.

So, I think a big thing was that – the main thing was not that everything had to be planned out in advance, because you didn't know what was going to happen from one day to the next. But it was the attitude that we all had that it's time for us to do something. And we're going to take it day by day, uh, be creative, uh, work hard, uh, value the community people, and we're going to make changes and be open to seeing what is it we have to do to make those changes. And we're going to be creative in terms of making changes with young people, changes with older people, getting people out and doing positive activity to meet a goal. We knew that we were having a lot of obstacles put in our paths, uh, that there was danger, um, you couldn't rely on the police, you couldn't rely on the FBI. We could rely on ourselves and the people in the community. Um, it was a productive period, but it was scary to a certain – you know, in a way.

You had, uh – we did realize that it was important to have the media coming in. And there were demands that the media, the big networks, have black people coming in, that we were not going to just have white – you know, an all-white crew – each time and at the Movement, it was integrated. Another thing that happened is when we saw that when something happened to children of white families, that – young people who were there, it got a lot more publicity, um, but it was important to make sure that reporters really knew what was going on. We had – um, it was interesting that we had some white southerners who joined the movement and who had [1:05:00] important roles to play also, not only in the black community but in the white community. And, uh, we just kept being creative and coming up with ideas to respond to what was happening and to plan

and to study how things were so convoluted and how they were so stacked against us, but where were the little cracks in the dam, in the bridge?

JM: [Sneezes] How did you find your way forward most successfully, crossing that space between, um, your education and background outside the South and the conditions that you would find in rural black Mississippi in those years?

DD: It wasn't such a big – it just wasn't such a big divide, you know. My parents and my grandparents, we used to go camping from the time I was very small. We used to go up to the mountains in New York and camp out – we had our sleeping bags – um, maybe for a week or so. And I grew up with that. I also grew up, as I said, being very handy, because that's how my father was. And, uh, we worked together as a family inside the house as well as outside the house, in the church, and so, this was – it wasn't hard for me to adapt people to be part of it like an extended family.

I could – it didn't – strangers didn't, uh – I wasn't afraid of strangers. I wasn't, uh, you know, there was trusting. Trust. We had a – what was the expression? SNCC – a band of sisters and brothers in a circle of trust. And if you would see what the people who lived there, uh, what they had to give up, and what they were willing to lose, then – I mean they were so brave and spiritual. I mean if you would hear them talk, it was like – they were so spiritual and religious. And we got that from them as well. So, we gave them a certain kind of spirit and expertise, and they gave what they had, and together we just were able to do so much. And their determination – they were not afraid, even though they knew full well what could happen, even more than we did.

JM: Can you reflect a little bit about, um, the roles that were available to you as a woman, say, in relation to all the other folks, um, active in the movement at different

levels, inside SNCC and local grassroots, um, in local communities? Was that an active question in your mind in those days, your status as a woman in that mix?

DD: Well, some people talk about that, but, really, that never fazed me. I always did what I wanted to do. I had my own inner drive. And I found that when I came up with ideas and I was ready to work to see it through, and I think that happened with a lot of women in SNCC. Uh, we needed all hands on deck, and so, when we found ourselves in situations, we had to rely on whoever was around. And if somebody had XYZ skills, and somebody only had ABC, we had to come together.

Uh, we used to joke about that, but in reality, uh, the women, you know, were strong. In the struggle, the women were strong. Uh, when you see the young girls, teenagers that got arrested and what they had to go through when they were in jail in these small, these rural areas, these jails with two sides to it, you know, uh, no facility, really, for women. But they were willing to go and get arrested [1:10:00] because they were going to demonstrate against a certain thing, stand up for it. Um, it was – when you were in an integrated car and you had an out-of-state license plate or something, if you did, whoever was in that car, whether it was women or men, or black or white, or other, you knew that there was danger, potential danger. And, um, you know, the book *Hands on the Freedom Plow* talks about all of the different types of experiences that we had.

I remember when, um, a couple of us were in a car and we decided to stop at a gas station. And, uh, and that was, I think, in the early '70s. And we went to go into the bathroom, uh, this was – “men” and “women” and “others;” so, I was going to go in the “women.” And the guy comes over to me, and he pushes his sweater or jacket over to the

side, and then he shows me this big gun. And just a look, you know, maybe one sentence. So, you know, that's a situation right there. So, we left.

And those – you never knew when a situation was going to come up like that, how you were going to react. But we had a certain goal. We knew what we needed to do – that wasn't the time.

JM: Let me ask about – John, could we pause just one sec?

JB: Sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Let me ask about, um, I think, late in the fall, October of '63, you and a couple of others, um, began the conversations that would lead to the creation of the Free Southern Theater, and I'd love to have you tell that basic story and what you imagined, um, you wanted to do with that work.

DD: Well, John O'Neal and I and a couple of others were a part of the adult literacy project. And John had a background in theater, but he was also a SNCC person from Carbondale, Illinois. And, uh, there was a young man, Gilbert Moses, who was from Cleveland, Ohio, who also had a background in theater. And we would – I was doing a lot of art, painting. We were housed on Tougaloo College campus. There was an art teacher – he actually – he was German. He was a German teacher who wanted to teach art, but he couldn't. They didn't have money to have an art teacher, so they got him to teach German, and then he taught art on his own. And then, he had a studio – a classroom he turned into a studio. So, a group of us used to go there and paint and talk about what we were doing.

And then, um, so, my areas were art and dance, but I also had – I used to go to a lot of off-Broadway and Broadway plays – off-Broadway black theaters, theatrical groups in New York. The great thing about New York is all of the exposure to the arts that I had, and I was *always* looking for it, that quest for black images in theater, in film, in magazines, and so on – and in, you know, visual art.

So, um, we would talk as we were working in the literacy project. John and I would talk about, you know, there's so much going on, there's so much drama. And, um, there was a professor of theater on Tougaloo's campus, Bill Hutchinson – is a white guy. And, um, so, Gilbert was an editor [1:15:00] of the *Mississippi Free Press*, and he was around at different things. You know, even though we worked on the literacy project, we were still also working, going to the COFO office every day and involved with those projects. And, uh, the COFO office, we would try to recruit people to do something, perhaps, with the literacy project as well as the other – participate in other activities that SNCC had going on.

And so, we just started talking one day. It was the three of us, and we just said, “You know, we need to have – there's so much material here for plays. And a theater group could – uh, we could write plays about different issues related to the movement, as well as bring scripts that, uh, writings that are being, um, produced in the North so that, uh, people could be exposed to all of this.” And, uh, we just said, “You know, we need to start a theater.”

And the theater – we thought of the theater as the vehicle or the housing for the other arts. So, we could have plays that, you know, had music and dance, and I would do the dance group, and we'd have, we'd need to have the art, you know, the stage and the,

um, backdrops and all of this. And so, we said, “Well, let’s write something,” you know. And so, we wrote, uh, you know, why we wanted a free southern – a theater, and we called it a “Free Southern Theater” because we wanted to take the plays out to the rural areas, go around and perform out in the cotton fields or in the, uh, well, churches. Uh, you didn’t have a whole lot of community centers, just in certain places, you know. If there was one big grocery store, like gigantic grocery store, we could have a play in there. You know, it’s like wherever you can have a place where people can congregate, outside or inside.

And so, we said, “Well, let’s think now. We need to see about contacting some people in New York to get scripts, and see if we can get some people to come down and work on this, and also recruit students from Tougaloo College and Jackson and see, uh, what issues we want to talk about in conjunction with SNCC, like perhaps develop a play about voting and the good things about being able to vote,” and so on and so forth. So, we wrote a prospectus and then we decided we were going to go to New York and make contact and try to raise money and so on and so forth. And also we started producing plays and we got Bill Hutchinson involved, and he liked the idea. And so, and that’s how it began, and actually it lasted for nineteen years. It did move; the base moved to Tulane University in New Orleans, uh, and John and Gilbert went with it, and I stayed. I did not go with it.

JM: Yeah. Do you remember – I think the Theater’s first performance was, um, summer of ’64, Freedom Summer, I think in McComb, Mississippi. I don’t know if you maybe were there or not.

DD: I was not there. [Someone coughs] But we had the first – the first plays were in the spring of '64 at Tougaloo campus.

JM: Okay.

DD: We did *Purlie Victorious*. [Clears throat]

JM: [Pause] Can you describe that just a little bit?

DD: Um, yeah.

JM: Or maybe the better question is your sense of how your early work, um, in various communities – how the outcomes matched up against your hopes and objectives.

DD: Well, *Purlie Victorious*, we did that on campus. And the literacy project – so, we spent the majority of that spring [1:20:00] trying to raise money and get publicity and getting it together, but we did have the play, the *Purlie Victorious*.

Um, the literacy project was a yearlong pilot. And Bob was trying to get some more money for that to continue. The people who were overseeing it, um, the project coordinator was from New York, and, um, it didn't look like we were going to – we only had a little bit of money left. We decided to, um, take the project to New York and have the target group be, um, people who had – rural people who had moved to New York from South Carolina. And we were going to keep the project until the end of December, keep going with the methods that we were developing and see if we could get the money continued. So, I decided that I would go back with it to continue.

John was going to stay in Mississippi, but they were also talking about possibly moving it to Tulane, because the, uh – Richard Schechner, who was in charge of the theater department at Tulane University, liked the idea of the theater and offered to house it there, because Tougaloo, I guess – he had more money. So, I disagreed with that. And

then, so, the literacy project – I decided to go on back and see if the literacy project – see if, how, if that would, um, if we could get the grant and if we could come back. We didn't get the grant.

JM: Did *not* get the grant.

DD: We did not.

JM: Right.

DD: So I said, "I'm going back." And there was a professor from the University of Michigan who was doing a research project on looking at achievement, uh, by black students in predominately white schools versus in predominately black schools. And they wanted – they needed one other person to help with the study for the spring of sixty – for the spring of '65. So, I joined that group, and we did our research at Tougaloo College, Talladega [College], and Tuskegee [Institute]. We did Tuskegee first, I believe, Tuskegee, then Talladega, and then Tougaloo.

JB: I'm going to have to stop for just a minute.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DD: And somebody had heard about me being in the area, being a teacher, and so they came and asked me would I be interested in working the Head Start program. And I was very – I was interested in it. Um, I had taught the third grade. I also had taught, uh – during summers, sometimes I would work in daycare programs at church and that kind of thing.

But, again, this was a move that was not going to be like, um, the standard. It was going to be very different, because you had conditions where you had the whites that didn't want us to have it, you had – you didn't – uh, the black teachers who had regular

teaching jobs did not – they were afraid to be associated with the Head Start program. So, teachers had to be recruited. They had to be trained. We had to find, perhaps, um, individuals who had one, two, three years of college, or high school graduates who had their own, um, little daycare program, uh, who were good with children, who were mothers of large families, and who were interested in this.

And so, recruitment of teachers and then training, [1:25:00] setting up some – again, identifying facilities, that was a whole – there was a whole big push. Uh, how far could you get out and reach people? Well, uh, you know, some people, some farmers had big plots of land, so, in some cases, uh, they had a building or they were willing to build one to house a Head Start program. Churches, for the most part, were used.

So, I was recruited to be a teacher for, um, a center in – outside of Rust [College], uh, outside of Holly Springs [Mississippi]. We had our orientation at Rust College for the teachers who were around in that county. So, I'm trying to think of the name of the school. All of a sudden, I can't think of it. But, uh, I was the resource teacher for that center. And so, I built a lot of things, like I made – uh, had our, the teachers, uh, the helpers – we made, uh, toys for the kids to play with out of recycled things. There I was doing my thing with recycling.

So I got, uh, tires, and we painted the tires and put them in different places and made designs. And, uh, horses that you use to build, um, you put – got pieces of wood and you had them put them over that horse and make it like a seesaw – a lot of different things, because I was familiar with horses, [someone coughs] because of the wooden horses, which my father used to use all the time. And I got the wood for the seesaw and sanded it down.

So, and then, we didn't have a lot of materials, books and things, so I had the idea of the children – we show them things, we do things with them, and then have them react, for example, to pictures or something. And then, uh, take notes on what they said or record what they said, and then turn it into a book. So, we made our own books. Excuse me, could you –?

JM: Absolutely.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

DD: I got local musicians, identified local musicians, had them come to the center and perform. And, um, as I said, prepare the books, uh, make brown books for the kids, just all kinds of things. I really enjoyed it. We had an orientation with the different teachers.

Uh, so later on, like in the middle of the summer, I guess it was, Polly Greenberg, who was the director, um, they were – wanted to – they wanted me to come and be a troubleshooter-teacher-trainer at a couple of other centers. And the first one was the center in Durant, [Mississippi]. The Child Development Center in Durant was in a building that the community had donated. One person had donated the land, and the community members had come together and built it out of cement slabs. It was a really nice facility.

JM: You mean the black community, specifically?

DD: The black community.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

DD: Had come together, and it was a beautiful building. Because the majority, I'd say the majority of the Head Start centers are probably in churches.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

DD: So, I enjoyed that. During that time, uh, Adam Gifford from England, uh, was hired to make a movie, a documentary film, about that Head Start. They chose that Head Start center, and then, I was the lead teacher in that. The movie was called *Chance for a Change*, and they had different versions of it that they used for different reasons.

JM: Let me ask about, um, uh, [1:30:00] a next major, um, initiative that you undertook and were involved with for a number of years through the late '60s, [clears throat] and that was the [clears throat] the Poor People's Corporation, excuse me, and its connection, then, to its elements, including, um, Liberty House and Southern Media.

DD: Well, the Poor People's Corporation was an umbrella organization to promote, especially to promote, uh, economic development, um, opportunities. So, um, one of the things that it had, um, that it promoted was the establishment – promoted and facilitated the establishment of cooperatives. Um, the majority of them were handcraft cooperatives. Uh, there were a few farmers' cooperatives. And we provided assistance to people who wanted to start cooperatives. And so, it would be, um – they might be started by a group of individuals or by one of the grassroots organizations in a particular area. Um, so several – just promoting the atmosphere of self-help and cooperation, working together, uh, that was a move, a movement, really, that took hold in Mississippi and in Louisiana and in Georgia.

The Poor People's Corporation, uh, started the handcraft cooperatives and the Liberty House, uh, marketing. We saw that if people are going to, uh, produce crafts,

handcrafts, they have to have access to raw materials to buy in quantity. Then there has to be a place to store the raw materials and the finished goods. There has to be a place to keep the business aspect. Then there has to be an arm for marketing. So, all of that, we decided to have that – that was going to be in Jackson.

Um, the handcraft cooperatives were established throughout the state. Um, we had certain minimum requirements for persons who wanted to establish a co-op. One of the things I did – there were a handful of us – one of the things that I did was to, uh – we worked through SNCC, uh, offices in other parts of the state. And they knew that we would send someone to, uh, a group – meet a group of people who thought they would like to start their own co-op. Okay, so I would go out and talk to people, uh, “Okay, we need to have at least ten people to start this co-op. And you’ll have to have a little bit of seed money, and you’ll have to find a place, and here are some of the things that you’d have to do,” and so on.

JM: [Coughs] Excuse me.

DD: “If you think you can do that, call, you know, contact us, and we’ll come back up. And we will arrange to have someone come and teach you how to make a certain handcraft, some particular handcraft.” So, we would look at what was already being produced, and then who do we have around that can, that has been, would be willing to go to that workshop for a period of time, depending on what it is, how long it would be that they would be needed.

So, we recruited volunteers, crafts persons from the North, to come and spend time in the co-ops. Sometimes they couldn’t really stay as long as it was going to be needed to, uh, keep that development going in quality. So, they would teach me how to

do something, or it might be a short thing, or I would find out from somewhere how to do something, go somewhere. For example, the candles: I went somewhere and I was taught how to make candles. I came back and went to the co-op. I stayed here for a period of time and taught them how to make candles. Someone [1:35:00], uh, came and, uh, taught a group how to make leather goods. Well, I was taught also how. I did a little of that, and then I was in a position to go back and kind of check it. So, it was different things. We called it Education and Training for Cooperatives, ETC.

JB: Was there a favorite co-op that you had at this time?

DD: A favorite?

JB: Yeah.

DD: Um, not really.

JB: Or one that kind of just tickled your fancy?

DD: Well, I really liked the leather goods. Those were nice. And I liked the black dolls. The Una Sewing Cooperative, um, we made the black rag dolls, male and female, and, uh, that was really an important move, I think, at that time, because, uh, black dolls were not readily available, and that was a big seller. Unfortunately, I don't have one of those left.

JM: [Laughs] Oh, no.

DD: I ended up giving them away to one of my relatives' children.

JM: I should thank you here for bringing so many examples of Liberty House handcrafts to share with us before we started today.

DD: Um-hmm.

JM: Thank you.

DD: Well, there was the “America I Am” exhibit that traveled across the country last year and the year before, and, um, they had a few of my items, including my SNCC blue jean dress, jumper dress.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: That, you know, SNCC women had an outfit, and the guys had an outfit. The guys wore the blue jean overalls, uh, and the girls had a blue jean jumper dress when we’d go out.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: So, actually, I was just wondering what they – where they are now.

[Laughs]

JM: Right. [Laughs] Right, right. Um, when you think about the – that span through the late ’60s, you were also heavily involved in Southern Media, and that connects to your long practice as an artist. And you had a camera with you, I think, when you probably first went into Mississippi, and then became probably even more systematic with your photographic work. And I’m real interested to have you talk about that whole experience of having a camera in your hands in Mississippi all those years.

DD: Well, you know, when I first went, I just had a camera. I didn’t really take a lot of pictures, because I was painting and I was more interested in that. Um, but, uh, in ’68, um – Southern Media was started, maybe ’67, um, by two white guys from, uh, I think it was California, one maybe from California, and one from the Midwest. And they had come to Mississippi to make a documentary about what was going on in Mississippi.

But after they were there, they thought that they really needed to be able to train, uh, young blacks to make our own movies, and, um, pictures, and document – have the

skill. So, they looked around. They made a kind of – they had one guy who was a trainee, and they kind of made a little movie about Southern Media and what the purposes were: to go out, make films about the different activities taking place, how people were living, and what was going on with the movement, and so on.

And, um, so, they came to the Poor People's Corporation, Liberty House. They kind of had a hard time recruiting people, I think, and, um, they – the two guys, Bill Peltz and Geer Morton – they weren't going to be able to stay there indefinitely. So, they wanted to leave it in the hands of – like, the equipment and the ideas – in the hands of some people that had a stable place and had access to people who might be interested. So, they came to us.

And I always was the experimenter, the one [1:40:00] that, um, “Okay, we have a project. Let's do it. Okay, you do it.” [Laughs] And so, I said, “Okay,” you know, “I'd like to do it.” And so, they, uh – I helped recruit, as well as be part of it. So, that's what we did. We would go to different, travel around to different places. This was, uh, something I did part of the time.

I was still working with, um, the Liberty House. I was doing marketing and PR and, uh, sales promotion for Liberty House, traveling throughout the country, uh, making appearances on television, radio, newspaper, magazines, going to companies, going to retail stores to see if they would handle our products, going to wholesale places. Um, but at the same – and then, when I would come back, part of that time, um, I would answer letters that were sent to me as a result of the PR I was doing. Uh, I might, in between, if we had a new co-op to start, I might go out to that for a little while.

But then, I also, um, was, um – I would also spend a lot of time with Southern Media. And I had always liked to document things. Um, our family always kept in mind stories and keeping records. And so, I was called, like, the family historian, because I was always listening to my grandparents and writing things down about what they said, and so on and so forth. [Sighs] So, that's how I got involved with Southern Media, and I just stayed with it and brought back all these photographs.

And the thing is, you know, a lot of people – there were other people who took pictures. But the question is where are they and what are they going to do? Um, we might have – there were a couple of other guys in our group, but one is deceased now. Maybe one of the other ones – well, actually, two out of that are deceased. And probably another guy is deceased; he was much older.

So, I thought that it was just really time, um, like in the '90s – in the '80s, I had a few – was starting to exhibit, but I was – the thing is I'm doing other things. I have a fulltime job.

JM: Of course.

DD: But there's a group here that I would say was helpful to me in being able to do more with the exhibits, to facilitate it, and that was – we have a black women's photography collective called Sistography.

JM: Right.

DD: And I became a member of that. [microphone noise] And so, the main thing I had to do was get the photographs together, start to look at the negatives and contact sheets. But they would, or we would organize the exhibit. They would have a, uh, curator. You drop your pictures off, and if you had time, you could help put them up. If

not, somebody would be doing it, and then we'd have a reception and artist talk. So, I'm still a part of that group, and it's still very helpful to me.

JM: [Coughs] What do you see when you look in those photos today? When you think about your years in Mississippi, what's in those images that stands out most for you?

DD: Well, I'll tell you, uh, the women in all walks of life doing so many things with – in the Civil Rights Movement. Then, there's the children and their faces. Uh, what's happened with them? What do they see? How are they being influenced? What will they do tomorrow? And then, the men – you have these stereotypes about black men, but my photographs show men doing very constructive kinds of, um, activities. And, [1:45:00] um, they were all there for the Movement in so many different ways.

The flourishing of – the development and flourishing of the co-ops, the farmers' co-ops and the handcraft co-ops, and then you had the housing co-ops, and then you had the partnership between Tufts University and the Mound Bayou Hospital. You saw health care reform, health care and medical reform, and outreach. You saw educational outreach and reform. You saw economic development. And I'm recording all those things, and I want those things to get out, because those are still issues today.

But I want to show – I will always want to show our images in the arts, because if you pursue the arts and you're creative, you'll find a way to deal with everything. But if you're only mind-centered, if something happens and you can't figure it out, and you think that's the only way you'll going to be able to achieve it, then you may not have the confidence that you can. But if you have a creative energy about you, you're going to

always find a way to do things. And so, that's why I have established – I've started a theater group here on campus and also an African American filmmakers group.

JM: Um-hmm.

DD: We just started that this year. And so, I see the same reasons for starting those things then and, even more so, now. We have a lot of students who are interested in film on campus.

JM: Um-hmm. Let me ask you the last question that I have for you, and then we'll make sure that we pause and recap any other things that we should come back with. Um, but I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about – you've described yourself and, um, kind of your life philosophy in some ways as a black womanist. Can you describe how you think about that issue and what you mean when you say "black womanist"?

DD: Well, you know, Alice Walker, um, she described it briefly. I mean I don't really go into long philosophical discussion about it. Um, I thought that what – how, uh, she, uh, defined it was good, you know. It was a black woman working alongside of and in conjunction with her family and her community to develop the community, to bring our people forward. And, um, it's not to say, "Well, the women need to be doing this, and forget about the men. We're going to do it," and so on. No, it's a group thing. It's a holistic approach, I think. And that's basically how I feel about it.

Uh, age wise, you know, all the ages together. You've got to influence the children. You've got to take the children with you to expose them from an early age – when I think about the things that my father exposed me to, my mother, um, the family seeing each other, relatives, all the time, on the holidays, having those discussions – those are the same things. You see they had those discussions before I was in the picture.

That's what I realize, that even though that I didn't know that my grandmother and my oldest uncle on my mother's side were charter members of the NAACP, I know now that they discussed those things. So, when my Aunt Julia went – was recruited and agreed to go to Washington, it was because that atmosphere, that growing up, those discussions and the not hiding things from them. Some people today, they want – or even back some years ago – don't let the kids hear what's happening, keep them away from that, um, but we discussed things, the political. Now, I never knew what my father – how he voted. He didn't discuss that. But, um, we talked about the issues. We read about them; we were encouraged to read about them. We got – we had *Ebony* and other magazines that [1:50:00] keep you informed, uh, to a certain extent, and we were encouraged to go read and research for ourselves. So, that – that's really what I'm about. I'm not following any, like, any doctrine. It's really a reflection of how I grew up.

JM: John, can we pause for just a sec?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: [Microphone noise] Dr. Derby, I want to just say a special note of thanks for, um, your energy and, uh, seriousness and all the time this afternoon and early evening here to contribute, as you have, to the series. Thank you very much.

DD: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed doing it and I look forward to, uh, hearing – getting a copy of the tape and a transcript if you do one.

JM: Absolutely. That's definitely something we'll do. Thank you, again, so much.

DD: All right. Thank you.

JB: Thanks.

DD: Okay.

[Recording ends at 1:51:05]

END OF INTERVIEW