

*Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Ph.D.
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Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:37:29

Gwendolyn Simmons: I should have brought some water. I didn't think, but anyway.

Joe Mosnier: We'll take a break for that at some point.

GS: Yeah, okay, no problem.

JM: Yeah.

GS: I just get a little dry.

John Bishop: Okay, we're rolling.

JM: Um, today is Wednesday, September 14, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop on the campus of the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, to do an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress.

Um, we're delighted to have the chance to sit down with Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, um, to talk about, uh, a portion – and I have to say probably just a portion, because you have done so much work – but a portion of the work you've done, um, in the struggle over the years, and we'll be focusing mostly on the 1960s. Thank you for welcoming us to, to, uh, Gainesville and the campus, and it's nice to be with you.

GS: Thank you.

JM: Let me start with, um, having you talk just a little bit about some of the first impressions that you took of the folks in the Atlanta SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] office when you began to turn your attention that way as a young college student?

GS: Well, um, as I reflect back on, um, going to the SNCC office, as I recall, it was very chaotic. [Sounds like something is hitting microphone] Uh, it was a beehive of activity. Uh, it certainly, uh, was not what I expected, you know. It was, uh, often very untidy [laughs], and, uh, you know, phones ringing, people running around, lots of excitement, um, and a couple of people, of course, Jim Forman or James Forman, uh, being at the center of a lot of it. Um, Ruby Doris Robinson Smith also a very important fixture there, with lots of other people, black, white, and Asian, which was a big surprise for me to meet two people who would become lifelong colleagues, as it turns out, who were Japanese Americans. And so, that was, uh, quite – the first time I think I had ever met, uh, a Japanese person.

JM: Yeah.

GS: So, it was, it was – the place was jumping, [laughs] as they say.

JM: Um, you would have met Ella Baker, I suppose.

GS: I certainly did. You know, she did not have an office in that office, but, uh, Ms. Baker I would see at our gatherings and our meetings. Of course, when she – as long as I was a

student, you know, going there sort of hit and run, given that I was breaking one of Spelman's rules [Spelman College] by even being at the, uh, on the, uh, in that location, and had lied on the sign-out sheets saying where I was going, but, of course, over the years, uh, I had the great privilege of seeing Ms. Baker at work, uh, as she in a very gentle and non-obtrusive way, uh, lent us her expertise and her knowledge.

JM: Yeah.

GS: Generally only if we asked, you know.

JM: Um, yeah.

GS: But, yes, she had a profound – she made a profound impact on me.

JM: Yeah, and I'm sure as we extend our conversation today, gender will be a question that emerges again and again.

GS: Yes, right.

JM: And I think it's – I know that it's important to start even at the beginning with acknowledgement of that theme –

GS: Yes.

JM: And Ms. Baker as an example of so many – sort of her example raising so many questions that would be things that we would think about.

GS: Right.

JM: Um, I'm interested to have you reflect a little bit about, and you have in some of your writings, obviously, about the tension, that very basic tension between the pressures of family and, in relative terms in this context, the conservative college campus and its administration –

GS: Um-hmm, right.

JM: And your – the pull you felt towards deeper involvement in a more direct way.

GS: There was a terrible tension in my life, um, because I had been told by my folks, uh, not to get involved, in no uncertain terms. And, as the first person in my family to, uh, graduate from high school, to go off to college on a full scholarship, I was, you know, very aware of, uh, how tenuous [05:00] things were. And then, Spelman [College] was *adamant* that we were not to get involved and, in fact, had told us in freshman orientation that if they found out we were involved, we could lose our scholarships and be sent home. So, this was a terrible, um, thing hanging over my head: to know that if I got in trouble with the school, my parents were not going to back me up, uh, and yet the pull as it began to, you know, really grip me. Uh, I literally cried on a number of occasions about this.

JM: Yeah.

GS: And, of course, having Staughton Lynd, Dr. Staughton Lynd, as a very important person in my early life there at Spelman, uh, learning about the long struggle that black people had been engaged in since we were brought here, learning about it in a way that I never had learned of it. And then, to some extent, Howard Zinn, who, um, was there on the campus and a radical force. And then, uh, Vincent Harding and his wife, Rosemary Harding, uh, whom I met at the Mennonite House where I'd go for dinner, uh, on Sundays, uh, and to engage in the discussions that went on there. Um, they were pulling me toward the engagement. And the SNCC folk, who were my own age, many of them people who had already left school to work full time, they made it very clear what they thought about us who were still trying not to get involved. And so, there was a pull. Uh, I was – it sometimes felt as if I were being pulled asunder.

JM: Yeah. Um, you've written about episodes – I'm remembering the rain shower, the sudden thundershower outside the, uh, Memphis office buildings when you were downtown looking for a first job to find some additional funds for heading to college.

GS: Right.

JM: Um, and just the more encompassing realities of Jim Crow, obviously. I know that those things, obviously, would have propelled anyone towards – well, many people towards an engagement with the Movement. But were there, were there specific aspects of the personalities, the individuals you encountered in that group of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] – of SNCC folks, whose personal characteristics mattered a great deal in the pull you felt towards the group?

GS: Well, you know, it's interesting. I mean, I always saw, uh, Jim Forman as sort of my mentor, my early mentor. And even though he was not a college age person, I was very impressed with him. But Ruby Doris Robinson, you know, because she had dropped out of Spelman to work fulltime and, um, so she was someone I could relate to. But it also frightened me to think, "Oh, my God, I might do as she has done, drop out, and [laughs] I know what my folks are going to say and do." And, uh, you know, the SNCC field staff from Mississippi, when they would come in – uh, there were women in that group. Uh, these people were so brave it seemed to me. I was very impressed with them.

So, um, I think the, the SNCC folk who really moved me the most were both Jim and, um, Ruby Doris. And then I got to know and really be friendly with John Lewis also, who – he had dropped out of school, too. Uh, so, and then the Nashville staff, you know, those people, they just blew me away, you know: their bravery, the stories of them being jailed and beaten.

So, I was scared to death, too, but the fact that that had not turned them around, and when they said it was time to change this, you know, it really struck home with me.

JM: Yeah.

GS: Yeah.

JM: Did you meet, um, did you meet folks who had done, uh, Albany work and were doing the Albany work, [Reverend Charles] Charlie Sherrod and, um, Chuck [Charles] McDew and others?

GS: I certainly did meet them later, particularly in my second year when I became a member of the Coordinating Committee, you know, but there were so many people, you know.

JM: Yeah, they're out in the field more, yeah.

GS: Yeah, right.

JM: Yeah.

GS: And for some reason, that [10:00] Mississippi staff, I mean, I think we all, uh, sort of held them up [laughing] as the heroes, you know. And, uh, so they were the ones that impressed me. And probably the reason for that was that, you know, I'm from Memphis, and so my grandmother had told me all these horror stories about Mississippi. So, Mississippi meant something to me in a way that, say, Albany didn't, because all my life, you know, my grandmother's thing was: "Don't *ever* go to Mississippi. It's the *worst* of the worst for black people."

JM: Yeah. When you did finally, um, bump right up against the expulsion threat and then survive it, just barely –

GS: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, but then confront that decision about taking the further plunge, how did you – I mean, you were a young person, you were a very young person – how did you find your way across that terrain?

GS: I do not know. [Laughs] I wonder, you know, because it just, um, I don't know how I did it, really. I think certainly the models of the other students who had done it and survived, uh, death and brutality and, um – but [laughs] I find it interesting that, um, Vincent Harding and his project, um, where they filmed me and all, and they called it “Answering the Call.” And I guess that's what happened, even though I never – these were not my words.

Uh, but I definitely was – I was very conflicted, um, but yet could not go. I couldn't pull back, uh, even though I wanted to so badly, because the life that I had planned for myself, uh, I thought I was going to lose it – you know, going to college, getting a degree, uh, being able to live a middle class life, you know, with a nice home, a car, those things that I'd never had.

Uh, but then, you know, somebody like Willie Ricks, you know, would say, “I don't care how many degrees you've got, you know, you're still gonna be a – you know, the n-word – [laughs] no matter what! Uh, PhD, no D, it won't make a difference,” you know. And, of course, I knew that there was truth there, you know, even though I knew I wanted what that could bring me. I don't know why I couldn't walk away.

JM: Yeah. Um, can you describe the, the, the – I guess I'll say what may have been kind of an emotional and psychological challenge of confronting the prospect of going to Mississippi in '64?

GS: [Whispers] Oh, God. Yeah. That, um – and since I've, you know, talked about it and written about it, I have not been able to relive or remember, um, how I was able to decide I was going to do that. You know, I remember how frightened I was of going, the actual driving

from Ohio into Mississippi with my two colleagues who had been assigned to Laurel, Mississippi, along with myself.

And I know that having been a part of the planning of the, uh, Freedom Summer, primarily through working with Dr. [Staughton] Lynd, who was working on the, um, Freedom School curriculum and – I had taken a second class with him and was working with him on that for my project, so that – and I said, “I want to be a Freedom School teacher,” you know. Uh, so that really had me, and then just being on the, uh, Coordinating Committee and hearing the plans and meeting Bob Moses and really getting to know a number of the Mississippi staff and the plans.

And I think the main reason that I thought we might survive was because of the white students who were going to be going – you know, a thousand! And I was like, “They’re not going to kill *them*,” you know, uh, “So that’ll give us some protection.” So, of course, that was shattered, uh, [15:00] you know, because before I left, the second week of the orientation, uh, three, the three Mississippi workers had disappeared, and two of them were white.

And when we were called in to the plenary where we were told this, and Bob said, “They’re probably dead,” I – I just – I couldn’t believe it. I was like, “Dead?!” I mean, you know? Because I had met James Chaney, uh, that first week, and it was like, “Oh, these people really *will* kill us?” [Laughs] I mean, it was like, “Even whites? They will kill whites?” You know, “White *males*?” It was – so that definitely made me say, “Oh, we really could lose our lives here. This is, this is no joke, you know.”

And so, then I get assigned to Laurel, Mississippi, with two other black people, because it’s too *dangerous* to send whites into Laurel. Well, that just – I thought, “Oh, my God, but I thought that was the whole plan,” you know, to have middle class whites and some upper class.

That's going to bring some help, you know. The government is not going to let this happen, the federal government. They're going to send people in there to protect us, you know.

So, I just – when I went with my two colleagues, uh, James Garrett, as we call him Jimmy Garrett, and, um, Lester McKinney, I just thought, “We're never going to get out of here alive,” you know, “But we've got to go.” And I think in my case the fact that I had severed my ties with my family, I didn't feel I could go back home. It would just be terrible to admit that I was wrong and, you know. So, it was – I had to go forward.

JM: Was part of the, um – well, let me ask it this way. To what extent was, um, was your Christian faith at that point one of the mechanisms for accommodating and encountering all that fear?

GS: I don't remember it being, uh, a support for me at that point.

JM: Not particularly.

GS: It developed later, and it's so funny you mention that, because we talked about that in the class I teach on the civil rights and religion. Um, I think, once there and living in the community – and of course, you know, we had to go to church and we had to participate in a lot of the local community church-related activities – it's as if I redeveloped faith that, I think drawing from the faith of the local people. Um, that's when I remember it kicking back in, uh, even though I had been raised, you know, in the church and with very devout parents and grandparents and all. I don't remember drawing on that until I actually was in the state and living with a family and seeing their faith. I think I drew on their faith to bolster my own.

JM: Can you, um, as best you can, recall your initial pattern of impression of Laurel, Mississippi?

GS: Well, I think I've mentioned in something I wrote that [laughs] at one point when – because the way that I was able to go I slept the whole way from Ohio. Uh, and I couldn't drive so I was in the backseat, and the two men were in the front and they were switching off the driving. And when we'd stop, I'd say, "Are we there yet?" You know, and they'd say, "No, we're not," you know. But at the point that I recall waking up, and they said, "You're in Mississippi," and I was like – I don't know, this is crazy but I don't know why I expected it to look different [laughs] from the rest of the country. And I said, "Oh, it doesn't look different," you know. [Laughing] I don't know what I thought; monsters would be swinging from trees or something.

But we weren't able to go directly to Laurel because we didn't have, um, any structure there, so we went to Hattiesburg, which was one of the best-organized, uh, communities in Mississippi, ready for the [20:00] Movement workers and all. And so, what we did was to, uh, you know, get assigned places to live, but the three of us would drive the thirty miles north to Laurel. And we had some names and we started knocking on doors and telling people who we were, etcetera, trying to find a base of operations.

JM: You've written in a way that I remember very vividly, and I'd love to have you tell the story again of, um, of going up to the door of Mrs. Sphinks' house.

GS: Yeah, Mrs. Euberta Sphinks. Yeah, she was on our list. And, uh, when I knocked on her door and she opened it, um, and I was – you know, I had on what I think was the uniform, you know, the blue jeans, the blue jean work shirt kind of thing. And I went to say, "My name is," you know, "Gwen Robinson." And she said, "Are you one of those Freedom Riders?" And I was like, "Uh, is that good or bad?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." And she said, "Come in. I've been waiting on you all my life."

And that was the beginning of the Laurel Project. It just took off. She was a *dynamic* person. And, uh, she was like – when I went on to tell her what we had planned, and the Freedom Schools and all of that, she said, “Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! I’m for it! I’m *for* it! I’ve been waiting. You can stay with me!” And I said, “Well, I’ve got two guys,” you know, and she says, “I’ll get my neighbor to put them up.” And that was Mrs. Carrie Clayton, who lived across the street. She said, “Y’all can go back to Hattiesburg and get your things and come on back.” And that’s exactly what we did, and that was the beginning of the Laurel Project.

JM: What combination of factors motivated those two women in their specific circumstances, personal and material, to extend that invitation to the three of you?

GS: That’s a good question. Um, Mrs. Sphinks – I mean, the two ladies were not alike at all. First of all, I would say that Mrs. Clayton was at least twenty years older. She was an older lady, uh, a widow, had quite a lovely home, and, I mean, she was putting a lot on the line to let us move in there. But Mrs. Sphinks was a fighter. I mean she was like, um, “I’m sick and tired of this. You know, it’s time for this to change.” Mrs. Clayton didn’t talk very much. They were friends, they were neighbors, had been for years, but it was – as I try to recall, Mrs. Clayton let, uh, uh, Mrs. Sphinks do the talking, and she’d just nod her head and smile. But they were so gracious to us. You know, they just opened their homes.

Now, uh, Mrs. Sphinks’ husband, he was worried, as he should be. But he worked at the Masonite plant there in Laurel and he was in a union, so this – otherwise, I mean, he would have lost his job, you know. But – rightfully so – he was not nearly as supportive. She just was like, “We’re doing this! We’re doing this!” And I didn’t think he liked it so much initially, you know. But, uh, she was a driving force.

JM: How old would she have been when you arrived, approximately?

GS: Uh, I'd say late forties, early fifties.

JM: No children in the house?

GS: She had a son.

JM: Oh?

GS: Yeah, she had a son in the house. Yes, the other children were grown and had left Laurel.

JM: The son, the son was how old, approximately?

GS: He was about thirteen or fourteen. And that was another thing that was a little scary, you know, for him, what might happen to him, you know. Um, but, uh, the minute we let the people in Jackson and Atlanta know, folks started being sent in, you know. We wound up with, I believe, twenty-three volunteers. And so, they helped us get housing for them, and, uh, you know, we were off and running very quickly.

JM: Let me have you talk about that, some of the, all the things that you set in motion, but through, maybe through the lens of, um, the leadership role that very quickly was kind of thrust upon you.

GS: [Laughs] Oh, yeah, right.

JM: I don't know if that's the right way to say it. I don't mean to say –

GS: Yeah, it was! Listen! That is exactly the right way, because I [25:00] went there to be the Freedom School teacher, and, um, Lester McKinney was the seasoned SNCC worker. He had been to Mississippi. He had been to jail, you know, I mean, real – you know, I had been locked up in Atlanta, but nothing compared to what Lester had been through already.

So, uh, Lester disappeared. And you know anytime someone didn't show up, it was terror time, you know. So, of course, I was calling Jackson, Atlanta, you know. They got right

on the horn to the Justice Department, FBI, etcetera, and, um, we didn't hear from him for a couple of days. And then, they, they through – uh, I don't know, I don't remember if it was the COFO [Congress of Federated Organizations] office in Jackson, but clearly everybody – the alert had gone out.

And it was discovered that he had been picked up and he was in the lockup there. And I can't believe even to this day that he didn't tell anybody that he had been arrested the last time he had been in Jones County and he had not gone back for his hearing, to pay the fine, so they had picked him up on an old charge. And, uh, it was very difficult to get him out of the county, and the only way was that he had to sign an affidavit that he would not come back for five years, or he was going to do some real time.

That left, uh, Jimmy Garrett, who was from California, had never been South in his life, and myself. And I think – I don't think we even had any of the other volunteers at that point. It was just the two of us.

JM: It happened very quickly after your arrival.

GS: It happened very quickly. And so, when Jim Forman calls me and says, "You've got to step up. I'm trying to find somebody to send, but we don't have anybody right now. Everybody's tied up. So, we need you to become the project director." Well, I thought, "This has got to be a joke," I mean. He said, "You're from the South. You've been to jail." [Laughs] I said, "Yeah, but I don't know anything about organizing, you know? This is –."

He says, "Well, we'll send somebody. Don't worry. Somebody will be there soon to relieve you." And nobody ever was sent [laughs] to relieve me, and I wound up staying sixteen months.

JM: Indeed?

GS: Yeah.

JM: Some of your, um – some of your impressions of –

JB: [request for a pause]

JM: Oh, we'll stop for a moment.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

JM: Okay. We're back after a short break to get a little, get a drink of water. Um, Dr. Simmons, let me ask about, um, how you gathered yourself up and began to take charge in a SNCC leadership kind of way, [laughter] context, however your model was – you can tell me about that – with this band of students coming to the county, and, yeah.

GS: Oh, boy, yeah. You know, it's, it's unfortunate, uh, that – I wish I had that photogenic or photographic memory where I could just pull back, uh, those scenes. There are some scenes, you know, that I have, often where we were having a great laugh or at a church or something. But I have no idea [laughing] how on earth I was able to do that. I really, now, I guess, I must say that having been, uh, brought up in a church where I played a, um, leadership role, and in my high school, you know, I was editor of the school paper, I was the president of a high school sorority, uh, I was the president of my Girl Scout troop, because I remained a Girl Scout until I graduated from high school. So –

JM: Elected by your peers in Atlanta to serve on the SNCC Council.

GS: Yes, exactly. So, you know, all of this had prepared me, but little did I know that, you know, because I never would have thought – but you know. So, organizing, um – I had been brought up and had done that from an early age, you know. So, once the shock of it all, and then, you know, when they would call us and tell us, “Two are showing up at the bus stop. Get

somebody down there to pick them up, you know, so they won't be standing around. Somebody will spot them," you know. It just – it sort of started happening, you know. We've got to organize.

And then, living with Mrs. Sphinks, uh, she being the leader, and I'm living in the house with her. And, uh, she was – [30:00] even though she wasn't as old as my grandmother, she reminded me of her, you know, so active in her church and so active in her community, the NAACP chapter there and all.

JM: And you had grown up in your grandmother's home?

GS: Exactly, seeing the same kind of thing, you know. My folks, because in Memphis, they could vote, and my grandmother and grandfather, they were always trying to get people registered to vote, so I had seen that, you know. And, uh, even with the terrible Jim Crow that we had there, uh, even though blacks did not run for office until much later in my high school life, they would come to the black churches to campaign. So, I had seen that. So, you know, there was some sense of how you would organize this stuff, you know. But, um, when they told me, it seemed to me like, "I'm not prepared," because, you know, I just saw it as so different. But those skills just came to the fore, you know.

JM: What, um, emerged in that summer, um, in terms of the range of projects you set in motion – Freedom School, Voter Registration, MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] – um, does any part of that work stand out in some distinct way in your memory against the other?

GS: Hmm. Well, first of all, you know, we really, uh, had a great group, uh, and I think that's probably true for every site. Um, but, um, you know, just thinking back about those volunteers, you know, how they just came in there and rolled up their sleeves and, you know, got to work. We had great difficulty initially getting an office, so our first office was on Mrs.

Clayton's back porch. And when it rained, we'd have to run inside with the mimeograph machine and all of our papers and typewriters and stuff, and go into her living room and set up shop there.

But we finally got this man to rent, a black man, a wealthy man, who had had a nightclub that was closed down in terrible shape, finally got him to rent it to us at an exorbitant price. And, you know, just remembering how the people in the community and how we all went in there and pretty much remade that place, I mean, you know, put windows in, and because it had been boarded up, it was in terrible shape, you know. So, the community just turned out. It was like a barn raising kind of thing. That just, you know, was a wonderful thing.

And, of course, it was terrible that it was firebombed and destroyed, but while it was – once we fixed it up, there were our offices, we held the Freedom School there, we had a library there. So, that was such a wonderful thing. We also had some young women who wanted to set up what was called a Freedom Nursery School, so not only did we have a Freedom School that taught, you know, first through twelfth. And then we started, uh, doing, uh, literacy for adults in the evenings. That was just wonderful.

Also, though, the, uh, the mock Voter Registration Project that we launched all across the state, where people actually came to the offices to register in a mock to show that if blacks had been given the privilege, they would. Uh, the organizing of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party chapter and, uh, seeing how the people just took that and ran with it. So, I think there were so many wonderful things that just let me – I mean, that shaped my life and my whole sense of what people can do, uh, people with not a lot of formal education, uh, but once they catch it, they run with it. And that's what happened. They were running with it, and so were we, many times

trying to keep up them, you know. Uh, so I just have a wonderful overall memory of that period, I think, as being one of the most important in my life.

JM: Yeah. How did you, um – [35:00] let me point to a couple of things on the calendar of those, that near horizon after your arrival, through the summer months, um, that were, of course, very difficult: um, the discovery of the, the confirmation of the deaths of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, and then, different episode but also a very serious matter, the Atlantic city MFDP debacle.

GS: Oh, yeah, um-hmm.

JM: I'm wondering kind of how, how you were evaluating both your project in a narrow term in Laurel and the wider effort against circumstances like those.

GS: Um-hmm. Well, you know, I did not go with our group. Uh, I certainly was very involved in getting our group ready. And then, we went to Jackson where we had the state convention. And then, that's where the delegates were picked, and we had two people from Laurel to go as a part of the state delegation.

Um, and, you know, just the disappointment of what happened there, uh, because I know the people – and I, too – you know, we thought that we would be seated, you know. We just couldn't believe, because we were naïve, you know, about the political system and, uh, didn't understand, you know, that President Johnson was going to throw us under the bus, as they now say, in order to keep the Dems, the Regulars, uh, in his camp. You know, we didn't know how this whole thing worked.

You know, that had a profound effect on all of us. And I think it certainly affected the SNCC workers, the seasoned SNCC workers, and jaded us in some ways, you know, because it's

like politics over people, even when people are *dying* to do this, still politics was elevated, and I think that jaded a lot of us.

JM: Yeah.

GS: Yeah.

JM: How did you, um, think your way through the very difficult question of stay on or depart at the end of the summer?

GS: Oh, yeah. [Laughs] That, too, um, you know, when you try to think back now that people are interviewing me about it, I try to say, “Wow, how did you make that decision?” Because, of course, Staughton Lynd had helped me to get into Antioch [College], and, in fact, I drove to Ohio with Staughton on my way to the orientation, and we stopped at Antioch for me to have my interview. Uh, because it had, you know, uh, had all been paperwork, and Dr. Lynd had gotten Mrs. King to write me a letter of recommendation. And so, you know, I was headed to Antioch. I wasn’t even going back to Spelman.

But I just couldn’t leave Mrs. Spinks, Mrs. Clayton, and Mr. Richardson, all those wonderful people. It was almost like, “Wow! We’re just getting started. We can’t *all* leave.” And, um, just couldn’t do it. And so, I wrote a letter, and Antioch was very gracious, and they said, “Oh, yeah, no problem. Your scholarship will be here in January.” So, that made it easier.

And, um, then two other women said they’d stay with me, which made it easier. I wasn’t staying by myself. And it just so happened that the three of us all lived with Mrs. Spinks. [Laughs] So, she had taken two others in, and, um, so Linnel Barrett and, um, oh, my goodness, Marion Davidson, both from California, so we stayed on and, uh, we shared our bedroom there, the three of us, for another year.

JM: Um-hmm.

GS: Yeah.

JB: [request for a pause]

JM: We're going to stop for a minute?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a very short break. Um, I'm interested to have you reflect a little bit about, um, [laughs] the leader you became in that crucible of very, very complex circumstances.

GS: Right.

JM: And have you talk a little bit, also on that theme, of the extent to which maybe in a more self-conscious way you began to think [40:00] of yourself now as, you know, a project director, a leader, an organizer, a –

GS: That's a good point. I'm not sure when I might have begun thinking of myself in that way. I think I've written someplace that, when I looked back, uh, without knowing it, that I had a feminist way of organizing, in the sense of I was not for top-down. I mean, you just had to be life and death, you know. And so – but then, SNCC was a, you know, very ultra-democratic, so probably that helped a lot. And so, in our, um – in the project we discussed everything, you know. Sometimes we, like SNCC before me, we'd meet for hours coming to decisions, and that seemed right to me, you know. And, um, so that form of leadership, that's where everybody has a say, you try to come to consensus as opposed to just a vote, unless you just cannot reach consensus. I realize that that was my way of "Let's try to reach a consensus on these things," because all of our lives are on the line, and this project, these people – you know we can hop a Greyhound and go home, but they're *at* home, so everything we do is *so* important, so critical.

And then, also just being a woman, you know, I often had to struggle around issues related to a woman being a project director. Uh, as I've learned, I think there were three of us in Mississippi that summer. Uh, so, and it was – we had to fight for the resources, you know. We had to fight to get a good car, uh, because the guys would get first dibs on everything, and that wasn't fair. So, that was another battle with Jackson over distribution of cars and good typewriters. So, you know, it was a struggle – and, uh, to be taken seriously by the leadership, as well as by your male colleagues.

And the race factor also was a big one. You know, I'm from Memphis. I'd been brought up in total segregation until I met Staughton and some of the other white professors. I'd never had a relationship of equals, you know. So, here was a tremendous thing, so standing up to these white young men who were my age and a few years older, you know, from Stanford, from Yale, I mean. You know, we even had a Goodyear, and I mean of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, one of our volunteers, you know. So, there was class, there was race, [laughs] and gender issues just swirling, you know.

And, um, one of the things that we often don't talk about, but there was sexual harassment that often happened toward the women. And so, that was one of the things that, you know, I took a stand on, that “This was not – we're not going to get a consensus on this. There is not going to be sexual harassment of any of the women on this project or any of the women in this community. And you *will* be put out if you do it.”

JM: I bet – and that is a really interesting point. I bet in those, at that time, I don't – I bet you didn't use the phrase “sexual harassment,” did you?

GS: No.

JM: What would the language have been to employ to make that point then?

GS: I'm wondering. That's a good question. You know, it's like, you know, "Guys, you cannot force a woman to do anything that she doesn't want to do on this project," you know. Because I had a seen a little of that at the orientation and I had seen it prior to going to the orientation, strong-arming women, and, uh, I was furious, you know, because here we are – and I had, you know, had my own, um, situation that happened to me there. And someone whom [45:00] I trusted and thought, you know, I looked up to, and I was sexually assaulted. So, here's like, "Oh, my God!" You know, "We're going into the lion's den and we've got to be worried about our *comrades*?!" You know, that was a no-no. That was an absolute no-no.

JM: As project director in that context, could you on *your* authority, could you have dismissed someone?

GS: I sure thought I could.

JM: Yeah, okay.

GS: And I said I would.

JM: Yeah, right.

GS: I mean, they probably would have been sent to Jackson and had to go somewhere else.

JM: Right, right, yeah.

GS: But that was an absolute fatwa, you know? [Laughs] You are *not* doing that on this project.

JM: If you – and maybe you have, I don't know – if you were, if someone were to talk with those volunteers who came to Laurel and to ask them about what made you so effective – I know this is a sort of self-congratulatory question I'm posing to ask you to answer, but what do you think they would have said, or do say?

GS: It's interesting. One of, um, the SNCC volunteers from Stanford and I have, uh, recently – well, we sort of connected maybe twenty-so odd years ago, and now we've reconnected. Um, and he just sent me something I'm so happy to have, because I have no documents from this period. He sent me a letter that I wrote while I was still in Laurel. I mean, I treasure that. [Laughs] I want to make sure that it – it's already, you know, very fragile, so it has to be preserved by me. Um, but I don't know what they say. That's a good question. Um, I can tell you what I hope they would say. I hope they would say that I was fair and, um, sincere in trying to help us all to stay alive and to keep our community people alive and not lose their property. But I can give you his name and number and email address, and you can ask him [laughter] since we're now communicating.

JM: Fair enough. That's a fair answer. In staying on, were there times – what were the very worst things you bumped up against in terms of the prospect of white violence? You mentioned, of course, and I know that the community, that the, what had become the Freedom House was firebombed.

GS: Yes, it was firebombed. We had, um – and that was, you know, during the time when we had a large number of us, uh – no, that happened after, uh, that actual summer. Then we – I'm getting a bit confused. We had two high school age, uh, young men who were sent to Laurel after the bulk of the volunteers left, Ulysses Everett and Charles – we called him Ben – Ben Hartfield from Hattiesburg. They had been kicked out of the public school and, uh, they were sent to Laurel to work with us, and another, um, local Mississippian from the Delta named John Handy. So, we were a project of six, um, with two high school age young people. John was more close in age to us, but, uh, had not had much schooling, in fact, was illiterate, but a fantastic organizer. And so, we went on. Now, um –

JM: All African American?

GS: Uh, those – yes, those guys, but the women are white women.

JM: Okay.

GS: Yes, yes.

JM: So, it's four and two on a racial count.

GS: Yes, yes. Um, the – after, you know, it was very hard for us to find another place that would rent to us, but we were able to secure another office, but it wasn't anything like what we had created there. And it was a part of a duplex, so people lived next door. It was one of these three-room shotgun places. We sort of got it without telling the folk who we really were and Ben and Ulysses lived in there.

And that place was firebombed also, which was, I mean, just unbelievable [50:00] because there was a man and his wife and children in the other side. And, you know, as everybody down there said, it was an act of God, because when they, um, put the Molotov cocktail or whatever the device was, instead of it blowing the house up, it blew the gas line away from the house. And so, the explosion really – I mean, the house did catch on fire, that side of it, but people were able to get out. And we basically kept that place as our workplace, even with the burns, and the person who owned it didn't repair it. Thank goodness the damage was done on our side. And so, that was a shock, you know, that was a jolt.

And then, we started working on, um, desegregation there in Laurel, trying to integrate some of the little restaurants and things, and people went to jail, and, you know, we had a few marches. So, we really expanded out while keeping the Freedom School going on the, uh, weekends, because kids were in school. At night we would do literacy training. Uh, we were

still organizing for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. So, there were slow times, you know, when things slowed up after all the people left, you know, but we carried on.

JM: Was there any compliance in the county around Laurel, um, with, on the public accommodations front? Because, of course –

GS: No.

JM: None, even despite the – none in that area.

GS: Exactly.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

GS: None, right. And that's what, I think, infuriated people, you know. Jones County, you know, had a big Klan based there, so it was dangerous.

JM: Yeah. Did you have to navigate, um, and have strategies for interacting with, um, local, uh, say, the sheriff? Did you yourself kind of bump up against the sheriff?

GS: Yes, I did.

JM: Yeah?

GS: In fact, um, I don't – I think somewhere I know I've told this story. Uh, I led a little group of primarily high school age students in one of the efforts to desegregate one of the little restaurants. And the sheriff came and pulled a gun and threatened me, and, um, I just kept leading my little group on past him. And he laughed and he cursed and he said, "You know, you're going to get your so-and-so self killed," [laughing] and put his gun back in his holster and let us pass. So, you know, it was just, um, an amazing thing, you know.

And then Ulysses and Ben on another occasion led a group, and they were arrested. And then we led our little group down there to stand outside the jail and sing to them, you know, freedom songs. And we got pushed around but we didn't – they didn't lock the kids up. You

know, so we had a few things like that. In retrospect, I think we did pretty good that we didn't get injured more. I mean, it was property, you know, that they went after, burning crosses and trying to frighten the people, threatening the ministers that their churches would be burned if they kept letting us use the churches, you know, things of that nature.

Mrs. Sphinks on more than one occasion had to, you know, talk about boycotting a church to make the church open back up to us, you know. It was like, "This is our church, and you're not going shut out our Movement people," you know, "This is *our* church," you know. She fought battles *in* the black community, you know.

JM: Yeah. It shows the depth of the fear and the justified depth of the fear.

GS: Sure, yeah!

JM: Yeah, understandable.

GS: And the churches were, you know, the prize possessions, you know, but sometimes those ministers were scared. *And* they were displaced by all these new Movement leaders taking over. They had been the ones going downtown with hat in hand, you know. And now, uh, we were going around them, making demands that they would never have demanded, you know. So, sometimes they didn't like it. Not only were they afraid for their churches, but they didn't like being displaced as *the* leaders, you know.

JM: Of course, yeah.

GS: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. Let me turn the conversation in the direction of, um, Atlanta and your return to SNCC in Atlanta.

GS: Yeah.

JM: And, um, the very, very big and complex question of how, coming out of those kinds of experiences [55:00] and transitioning through '65 into '66, say, you and others are really beginning fundamentally to rethink the model that the Movement should be organized around.

GS: Right.

JM: The philosophy and theory of the Movement, the – maybe what the goals and objectives now should be, re-conceptualized as being something new and different.

GS: Right, right. Yeah. You know, it's interesting. Um, Jim Forman, uh, was responsible for me leaving Mississippi, because he recognized that I was, um – what do we call it now, um, when these guys come back from Iraq?

JM: Oh, shell-shocked?

GS: Shell – no. You know, they have another term for it.

JB: Post-traumatic stress.

GS: Yes! What happened was, uh, just to back up a little bit, uh, we had a very large demonstration in Jackson at the capitol, and I think a thousand of us were arrested. Uh, this was toward the end of my time there, even though I did not know it at that time. I had no intention of leaving. But I was arrested with this thousand people, so many, you know, they didn't know what in the world they were going to do with us. So, what they did was to take us to the fairgrounds, and, uh, we were put in houses that had, they normally use for livestock. And I spent fifteen days there, and it was, uh – we were brutalized very badly, uh, lots of beatings, and, um, all kinds of terrorizing.

Um, so when I got out, I had two car accidents that were my fault, head-on, uh, just – you know. Uh, and at that point, Jim said, "What happened?" And I said, "I don't know." I mean, I destroyed two cars in two weeks. He said, "You've got to come out. It's something wrong with

you,” you know. And I said, “But I can’t leave.” He said, “Well, what good are you going to be to those people in Laurel if you either kill yourself in a car accident or –? Something’s wrong. Just – you don’t have to stay, but I want you to come to New York. I want you to come to New York and, uh, work with the Friends of SNCC.”

So, I went to New York with the promise that I was going back to Laurel. And, um, it’s just so amazing, because I was only in New York about three months, and I worked with the Friends of SNCC, organizing out of the New York SNCC office. But it was three months that on my own time I sort of really found out about the Nation of Islam, and even though Malcolm was dead, but just that whole notion that blacks needed their own land in this country, we deserved it, I mean, that whole idea, which was totally foreign to me, you know.

And then, I lived in Harlem, and those preachers standing out [laughing] on the corner of 116th [Street] and 7th [Avenue] – I started hearing stuff I had never heard in my life, you know, of Black Nationalists. I also, um, met and started going to, uh, the Black Arts Theater, uh, with, um, LeRoi Jones. So, those three months, you know, had a profound impact on me, in terms of, “Hey, there’s a whole ‘nother thought process about what black folks need to do that’s *not* about integration,” which I didn’t know anything about, you know.

So, okay, that happens. But then, Julian Bond is elected, duly elected, and not permitted to take his seat in the Georgia state legislature. And Jim Forman asked me if I would come back, but not to Mississippi, but to Atlanta, to help organize his reelection campaign. So, that’s how I got to Atlanta. But I’ve had three months of hearing a whole ‘nother song I’ve never heard before, you know. And, uh –

JM: And you would carry all that back into the offices at SNCC.

GS: Yes, I do.

JM: Yeah, where there were other people –

GS: There were other people, because that's – um, I meet Michael Simmons, my former husband, who, uh, *did* grow up with knowledge of the Nation [1:00:00], from Philadelphia. His brother was the national secretary to Mr. [Elijah] Muhammad. And, um, he – before he and Malcolm X married, they shared an apartment. And so, my ex-husband had known Malcolm X.

JM: Wow.

GS: Yeah. So, uh, Michael had come to Atlanta, uh, as a part of the, uh, delegation from Arkansas for a SNCC meeting. I recruited him to come to work with getting Julian reelected; also another person who was his best friend from Philadelphia, Dwight Williams. Um, then there was a man there from Mississippi, who had already – he was older than we were and he had been in the military, had been a second lieutenant. And he was at the SNCC meeting and heard about the Julian Bond, so, he came to work. So, this became the nucleus for the Atlanta Project of SNCC, which started out as the Julian Bond Reelection Campaign. And we were to base ourselves in one of the poorest – [sounds of conversation in background]

JM: Excuse me one sec. I don't want to miss that because –

JB: They're gone.

JM: Okay, are we good to come back on?

JB: We're still rolling.

JM: Okay. If you'll describe the Atlanta Project again, please –

GS: Okay.

JM: Just so we get that.

GS: Go back to the people or what?

JM: No, just the –

GS: Okay. So, this – what became the Atlanta Project of SNCC started out as the Julian Bond Reelection Campaign. And we were to set up our campaign headquarters in the poorest and most rundown area of Atlanta, and it was called Vine City. It's now where the stadium is and all. You know, it's – you just – when I go there now I'm so disoriented because downtown Atlanta has eaten that whole area up of shacks and, you know, just terrible, terrible.

So, we set up Julian Bond's Reelection Campaign at 142 Vine Street in Vine City, the main street that ran through, and, uh – little shotgun house and, uh, all around us the issues that have not been addressed to this day: poor housing, *huge* unemployment, first time I'd ever seen a drug addict to know that somebody to tell me what was wrong with that person – you know, I never knew anything about anyone having a drug problem – alcoholism, bad schools. This is what we confronted. And right around the corner was the Nation of Islam's headquarters, also.

And, uh, so, you know, here we are trying to get Julian reelected, which we did; we were very successful. People turned out to vote. He was reelected. But he still had to get, you know, a Congressional action to get his seat. So, you know, this was fodder for the people who say, "You see? You're not an American. You know, you're not really Americans." Um, there's a problem way deeper than civil rights here, you know. So, this was a thing that had my mind wondering, "Is the solution integration? Can we really integrate? Will they ever let us? Will we be accepted as, um, full citizens ever? Or is race so deep that it will never, ever be erased so that we will be seen as Americans?" So, these were the things, you know, we started talking about as a group.

JM: As part of the measure of how your thinking is evolving and you're working through these issues, as part of the measure of that, I'm interested: What was your perspective on, first,

the move to, uh, move whites out of SNCC, and then Stokely Carmichael's [1:5:00] election kind of to upend John Lewis's run in '66?

GS: Well, you see, this is all a part of that, because what happens is that in the Atlanta Project we started discussing "Where do we go from here as a Movement and as a people?" And, um, that nucleus that I've mentioned and others joined us, we literally started with a Wollensak tape recorder, sitting around discussing these issues. And, uh, as often was the case, myself and two other women would type up these discussions. And that became a document that was later credited to Stokely Carmichael as being the author, but it was a group project that had authored what became the Position Paper on Black Power.

So, another important point is that after Mississippi Summer, uh, the racial composition of SNCC changed, because so many of the white volunteers wanted to commit their lives to fulltime. And so the organization expanded, and the numbers changed in terms of the ratio. Now, the Atlanta office, the national headquarters, had, uh, a significant number of whites. And one of the problems that fed the feeling that whites needed to go and organize in the white community was that we would have to go there and often ask for resources and justify them to white members. And so, we'd say, "Well, wait a minute, is this a black organization or what?" You know?

And we had some difficulty, um, after we got Julian elected as we continued being a project, wanting to, and attacking these deep-seated issues that we still have not addressed. We had to justify ourselves often to predominantly white. So, we would say, "But wait a minute! You know, you guys need to go into the white community." So, what happened was it got projected as an anti-white thing.

Now, there was some racial tension. But it was about, “We cannot change the white community. *Possibly* you can. Maybe you can’t, but clearly we can’t even go into the white community to try to even organize.” So, that’s really what our position was: “You go and work in *your* communities. We should run the Black Movement and we need to see where we want to go.”

We noticed that, you know, if you played a Malcolm X tape like we would do, not a tape but a record – we sort of created some innovative ways of trying to organize. So, we started having – we had a truck and we put a loud speaker on it, and we’d go to a vacant lot. And the way that we could get people out, we’d have food, hot dogs. And then, we’d get the people to come so we could talk to them about registering to vote and stuff. But we noticed if you played, you know, somebody like Malcolm, the people would just come out and listen.

And so, it was like, “Do the people want integration? Or is this what the black leadership under white direction have always said is the solution?” So, we began looking at some of these issues. And this spreads through SNCC, so you have Bob Moses and his group, who are now not in Mississippi anymore. They’re working in Lowndes County, Alabama, along with Stokely. Um, so a lot is going on. And then, people have gone to Africa, SNCC folk, a number of them went there. And so, some people are saying, “Well, maybe really African Americans need to go back to Africa.” So, you know, all of this is swirling around.

And when Stokely stands up in Mississippi and says, “Black Power,” uh, and this catches fire, uh, with the people, so many factors start impinging on what was happening in the Movement. Jim was losing control, because he clearly did not approve of any of this, [1:10:00], in spite of what he later went on to do, [laughs] you know, but at that time. And, of course, John Lewis, who was deeply religious and believed *deeply* in nonviolence not as a tactic, but as a way

of life, and being a minister and all, he opposed just talking about, you know, Black Power and all of this. So, there was a real division that came to exist within SNCC around these issues.

And, you know, in all fairness, people like Bob Zellner, whom I've had a face-to-face with after so many years of him having such pain over what me and my group were about. Uh, we gathered in Chicago at the invitation of a professor there to, in front of his class and other people, talk about this break that often is not talked about amongst the SNCC people, the pain that the white, uh, students, volunteers, felt, particularly those who hadn't just gone down there during the summer. They'd been there from the beginning.

And in the case of Bob Zellner, his folks were members of the Klan. He *couldn't* go home. I mean, they'd threatened to kill him. So, I didn't know that until we sat and talked about this two or three years ago, to find out that, for him, SNCC was home. So, for me to say, "You go back to the white community," he said, "They would kill me there. I couldn't go back anymore than *you* could go," you know. So, it was – this was a very heavy time in SNCC, and I think, you know, led to the demise of the organization over time.

JM: Um-hmm. Well, also – other factors, too, are on this list. And let me ask you about the, the statement against the Vietnam War –

GS: Oh, yeah. That certainly –

JM: Yeah? The, uh, the statement a short while further down the road about Israel and Palestine –

GS: Oh, yeah. Oh, right.

JM: So, these are very – I mean, you guys are – you guys have in front of you –

GS: Whew!

JM: Obviously, questions that are still unresolved –

GS: Yeah, that's true.

JM: Internationally, and so it's not as if you weren't, you weren't fairly pointing to very complicated things to work on.

GS: Yes, yes, exactly.

JM: Yeah.

GS: Exactly.

JM: Yeah.

GS: Yeah, you know.

JB: [request for a pause]

JM: Oh, pardon.

GS: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a short break.

GS: Yeah, that's – you know, it's so interesting. I – and I'm not thinking of her name right now. I hope I'll be seeing her in Chicago, uh, the woman that drafted the Palestinian statement. I had forgotten who had done that, but she was at the reunion. And, um, she and I started talking, and she mentioned that she was the person who wrote the initial draft of that. And I just had forgotten all about how that created a firestorm against SNCC, you know. And I was very involved with the Vietnam, anti-Vietnam War statement, uh, the drafting and the working on that. But I had not been at all on the Palestinian issue. So, this woman – I'm hoping to interview her when I'm out in Chicago in October for a Chicago SNCC reunion.

JM: Yeah. What was the vision – tell me, if you would, when you gathered, when the SNCC folks, this new SNCC emphasis gathered up its best thinking and its best effort to envision a better strategy for the future, what – how would you describe that?

GS: Do you mean at that time, where were we?

JM: Yeah, where you were at the time.

GS: Um, I'm not sure that we had a, um, a vision that had coalesced at all.

JM: Um-hmm.

GS: Interestingly, the Atlanta Project staff got together. Uh, we sort of had a mini-reunion and we're hoping to put together a book, which would be wonderful – I'm supposed to help edit it – to try to see, as best we can, where were our thoughts? Because, as I look back on it, I don't think I knew. I think it was very much questioning what I had believed in, uh, wondering, uh, if some of these other ideas that had been a part of [1:15:00] black thought from slavery forward, you know, and I didn't even realize that: that there's always sort of been this two-pronged thing, one that fought to integrate into the country, others that wanted to leave or certainly to create a space within this country for African Americans. So, I think that we didn't know, that we were questioning, uh, wondering what our relationship was to Africa, wondering, uh, what – if not integration, then what?

JM: Can you, um, describe your transition away from SNCC?

GS: Well, first of all, pretty much being thrown out of SNCC, [laughs] you know, in the sense that SNCC was ending – the Atlanta Project as a project was expelled from SNCC. So, I, uh, went to work for the National Council of Negro Women. It was sort of like they caught me, you know, with not having any idea what I was going to do. It really came as a shock when the project was basically told we were no longer a part of the organization.

JM: Yeah. Can you flesh that out a little bit?

GS: Well, you know, it's – it's so interesting. Overtly what happened is different from all that was going on underneath. What had happened was someone sent a check for I believe it was three thousand dollars to the Atlanta Project. And we were told by James Forman that under no circumstances was that our money. I think it was sent to SNCC, but sent to our address, and we put it in the Atlanta Project account. Well, when that came out, that became the hot button issue, that, you know, we were supposed to turn the money over. We said, "We're not, you know, we're going to use it in our work." And, um, then they said, "You have to," and so then there was – a lawyer was brought in, and we literally, uh, fought over – I don't mean physically, but that was the basis for which we were actually put out of the organization.

Um, so – but that was on the top. But underneath, Jim saw us as a totally disruptive element pulling the organization away from the direction in which it had been going and was going, and that we needed to be put out. So we were.

JM: Yeah. Um, maybe since we've just talked right in that moment about Jim Forman, your perspective on kind of the arc of his future thereafter?

GS: Well, I – you know, I really regret I've never had a real conversation with him. You know, I was angry. And here was someone whom I loved so; you know, he had been my mentor, and I looked up to him. Uh, and to end our relationship on that note, you know, was terrible, and I really regret it. And then to see him [laughs] become in the forefront of an aspect of Black Power, you know, over the years, and I really regret we never talked, you know, about that.

But, um, I felt that the issues that he worked on, you know, becoming so visible in the effort to – for reparations, from the churches, you know, that was an amazing thing to me. And I

wondered what happened in his mind. And I don't know if anyone has, you know, interviewed him before he passed away, if we'll get any of that, an understanding of what happened that changed him from the integrationist path, you know.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask, um, let me ask a couple of things. Um, did you have to – or how much did you think about in these years – and we can pick this question up reaching back, say, to Mississippi. How much did you think from '64 to '68 – how often did you think and how, um, much thought did you give to the question of – I'm thinking of the many ways that the white apparatus of law enforcement authority moved to undermine, [1:20:00] uh, domestic organizations that they did not favor –

GS: Oh, God.

JM: COINTELPRO and all the other many ways that that kind of work was done. Was that something that you confronted? How much did you think about it? Did you see it in your own –?

GS: Yeah.

JM: Did you encounter that directly?

GS: Well, it's so interesting, because, you know, having lived about seven different lives, I went to work for the American Friends Service Committee on that very issue. It was called the, um – what was it – the Project on Government Surveillance and Civil Liberties, or something like that. I can't quite remember the title. It had a long title, but that was exactly the work of that project.

And I was recruited and became the assistant director. And my role was to travel across the country and interview – I never heard the term “oral history,” but now I know that's what I was doing, uh, a lot of it on tape – people in not only in the African American Movement, but in

the, uh, American Indian Movement, AIM, in the Brown Berets, uh, the Black Panther Party, um, [Mexican American activist and Chicano Movement leader Rodolfo] “Corky” Gonzales and his group. Uh, I literally interviewed people from those organizations about the role of COINTELPRO [FBI Counter Intelligence Program] in destroying their Movements.

And, um, that project was funded by the Ford Foundation and others. We had staff in Mississippi. Ken Lawrence was our staff, who did so much work on the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. Ken is still in Mississippi. Uh, we had a person on staff in Chicago, a person out on the West Coast, uh, getting – one of the main things we did was to get these individuals and their organizations to get their files under the Freedom of Information Act and to share those files with us. So, all that material is there at the American Friends Service Committee’s office at 1501 Cherry Street in Philadelphia.

Um, so, not only – I mean, did I ever get to think about this and interview people about this and learn how these agencies, first of all, were spying on us. And the reason AFSC got involved was because they found out not only were they as an organization being spied upon, but *all of these Quaker meetings had infiltrators in the Quaker meetings reporting back to the FBI on the Quakers!* You know, and when they found that out, they were furious! That’s why they launched this project. And, of course, we, uh, partnered with the ACLU, the National Lawyers Guild, and some of the other civil liberties organizations to mount this project.

But that’s when I really learned that right there in Mississippi a number of the FBI agents were feeding information to the Sovereignty Commission and possibly to the Klan. I mean, this was – this was a shock. You know, the people that we thought were there to protect us, and I knew they would come around and talk to us. And we talked freely to them, not knowing, you

know, this stuff was being fed right back to the people who were trying to stop what we were doing.

I think one of the really shocking things was when I interviewed people who had been, uh, in the apartment when Fred Hampton had been shot, because I did a lot of work with Black Panther Party people. I actually was taken to the apartment there in Chicago to see it and, uh, found out that his bodyguard had drugged them, uh, so that there hadn't been any shots fired from inside. It was an assassination, you know, by the Chicago police and the FBI.

Um, and in California, you know, I interviewed Panther members, members of US [Black Nationalist group founded in 1965], how they were pitted against one another by agent provocateurs. I mean, this was shocking stuff to learn, that our own government, people we thought were there to protect us or – in many cases were there to disrupt [1:25:00] these organizations.

JM: Yeah. But it had not been, it sounds like, it had not been much on your mind in those years earlier.

GS: No. Not, not, I mean, you know, we didn't, if – I know once there was a guy that joined our project, and we were all a little worried about him, because he was a white Mississippian. That was unusual. And, you know, we didn't know if it was rumor or if he was a spy, you know. But it was sort of like I said, "Well, we want somebody like him to become a part." But a number of the members of our project there in Laurel said, "This guy is a spy," you know. "Watch it! Be careful!" But really we were so open, you know, and, uh, just didn't know about this apparatus at all.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me reach back to the question we touched on a good while ago in the interview, and that was, um, dealing with the, both the near-term and the much longer-term

effects of having really been through traumatic circumstances. You mentioned – it's so interesting that you mentioned that, you know, on emerging from this fifteen days of horrible incarceration and all that terror and trauma that you experienced in a context like that, you come out and you're in two car accidents, just bang-bang, and don't even really –

GS: Um-hmm, know how it happened, yeah.

JM: Yeah. Um, so that's a very obviously suggestive manifestation of just being so overcome in other ways by what you've just experienced.

GS: Um-hmm.

JM: How about – have you thought about – have there been ways you've seen echoes of that kind of experience emerge later in your life? I don't mean the car accidents. I mean – you know, they could become things that have echoes of all different sorts, some perhaps positive in ways, but others very difficult. And I just wonder. So many people – I'm asking this, because so many people who came through the Movement and encountered all of this violence and all of this –

GS: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: It would manifest in different ways, sometimes years later.

GS: Like flashbacks or something?

JM: It could be that. It could be a decision: I need to go move and live somewhere else for a couple of years. I need to go to Africa for a year. I need to go to a monastery for a year.

GS: Right, yeah. [Laughs] I guess in my case, you know, up until, um, I came into academia, I guess I've just been so busy, you know, because from one, you know, Movement to another, um, I really didn't take a break. And, um, I don't know. I don't recall being, um, what I'd consider, uh, damaged long-term, you know.

JM: Yeah, I know. Forgive me. I didn't mean to imply that in my question. It's just that –

GS: No, no! It would be fine if you did mean it! [Laughs]

JM: But people have to struggle with these – what I mean is these things have – they're not trivial things.

GS: No.

JM: They're not things you can easily leave behind.

GS: No.

JM: They're matters of very serious consequence.

GS: Well, I don't think I've ever left them behind. You know, um, I think that – and I think working with students has helped me to see, because as I try to communicate to them those times and I realize they just look at me like, "What is –," you know, "What is she talking about?" And I rely a lot on the films of the Movement, because nobody who's, you know, nineteen, twenty years old growing up in this country can *believe* that this kind of stuff was happening. And so, in one way to have a person who is still able to talk and walk and see tell them, "It happened to me! I'm telling you!" And then, I bring in some of the civil rights vets from here in Gainesville to tell their stories, and we have some films of them and all, trying to communicate that.

But I think that, um, it just – what it has done for me is makes me know that human beings can do very, very bad things to one another. Um, and I guess the years of working with AFSC, and being a part of the first Americans to go into Cambodia after the fall of Pol Pot, and to see the mountain of skulls and bones there, um, as a part of a small group that was flown in by the Vietnamese military to see it and to talk to the few people who were still left in Phnom Penh,

who told us their stories, oral histories [1:30:00] again, right, of what they had lived through. I think, you know, that helped me to understand that this is a *human* problem, you know, what we can do to one another, you know.

So, uh, it definitely, along with my movement into Sufism, the mystical stream in Islam, I think that probably has had such an impact on me understanding this is a human condition, that it needs – not only do we have to change things legally, politically, structurally. We also have to change things in people's hearts and their spirits. And, um, I think that's what helped me to come around to understanding Dr. King's message in a way that I had not and I had rejected. You know, and it brought me sort of full-circle back to nonviolence is the only real way to bring about a change that doesn't leave corpses piled mountains high, or even just wounded spirits and souls and bodies. Um, so, that has a lot to do with my coming back around to seeing how right he was and how it's the only way, no matter how difficult it might be to do it. Um, and it isn't easy, you know. It's not the easy way, but it's the only way that you might be left with people who can work together, uh, and move forward without the pain and all you have when it's been warfare or massacres and the like, you know.

JM: Let's pause for just one sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back on. Um, let me ask to kind of bring us to a conclusion here, and I of course acknowledge that any conversation like this is such a tiny way to engage the story of your life –

GS: Yeah.

JM: And all that you've, all the work that you've done, um, but it isn't a story that ends in the late '60s.

GS: No.

JM: It's – you carry all of this forward with you into very passionate engagement with a range of progressive causes and activist causes and you also engage in a very, um, lovely and involved personal spiritual evolution.

GS: Um-hmm.

JM: And my sense is that some of that long path has brought you, and I've seen in your writings, to a point of new perspective, retrospective kind of comment on what you lived through earlier.

GS: Yes. Yes, I've definitely, uh, [laughs] made a few loops and sort of come back around to some earlier beliefs. Um, the, um, the – one certainly very dire moment in terms of my feeling tremendous feeling of despair for this country, for black people in this country, was when Dr. King was assassinated. That was a very low point for so many of us. But in my case, I experienced it, feeling I was in a totally alien situation at a hotel in Manhattan where I had gone to attend a meeting, uh, for the National Council of Negro Women. And I learned he had been killed, and so I dropped my bags and hopped on a subway and went back up to Harlem and just hung out. And there was rioting going on, and, you know, I didn't know anybody. But when people ran, I ran, you know. Fires were started, you know, rocks. It was a stupid thing to do, but I just felt that I had to vent in some way.

But, uh, a few years after that, um, I, um, I had for a long time carried after '68, uh, a lot of anger toward the country, um, and, you know, believed that it was quite probable that our government had had him assassinated. I didn't buy the one man story, you know. So, uh [1:35:00], I was pretty, pretty, uh, messed up, [laughs] in terms of how I felt about the country and, uh, white America and all.

And then, I meet a Sufi mystic from Sri Lanka in 1971 and begin studying Sufism, the mystical stream, um, in Islam, and really that, those teaching about the human condition and that our life really is a school where we learn things, and that the design from a Sufi perspective is that you learn to embrace the good and to reject the bad in all aspects of your life, no matter what. And, you know, that was hard for me to take. And even with studying with this teacher, Bawa Muhaiyadeen – I spent seventeen years with him, um – gradually, you know, I began to see the wisdom in that.

And it also caused me to reflect back upon Dr. King and his teachings, and my own upbringing in the Christian church, and to re-embrace nonviolence as the only way to bring about deep social change that will last. So, this is – I sort of came back to my Christian teachings of Jesus, as well as Dr. King, through Sufism, the mystical stream in Islam.

JM: Yeah, Yeah. Let me thank you, uh, very sincerely, and it's been a real privilege and an honor to spend this time with you. Thank you so much.

GS: Oh, it's been great to be able to share my story and just to think this will be [laughs] somewhere long after I'm gone. I'm happy to share for whatever good it might do.

JM: Thank you so much.

GS: Thank you. Thank you. Wow.

[Recording ends at 1:37:29]

END OF INTERVIEW