

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Ms. Carrie Lamar Young
Interview Date: September 26, 2011
Location: Her home in Little Rock, Arkansas
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 2:05:25

John Bishop: We're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Monday, September 26, 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 in Little Rock, Arkansas, to do an oral history 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.

And we're very privileged today to be with Ms. Carrie Lamar Young in Little Rock at her home. And Ms. Young, thank you very much for the warm welcome, and it's nice to be with you, a real privilege and honor. Thank you.

Carrie Young: Thank you.

JM: Let me, um, let me start, if I could, with having you talk just a little bit about, uh, your family, your community, coming up in Barton, Arkansas.

CY: Okay. Well, my parents, um, Lazarus Lamar, and my mom, Lottie Lamar, uh, gave birth to four girls and two boys, which I was the youngest of the four girls. Um, I don't remember actually living at Barton. I remember living at Lexa [Arkansas], which is about, oh, four or five miles from Barton. Um, and we lived there in Lexa till I was, uh, I think fourteen. And we lived, uh, moved to West Helena.

But during my stay in Lexa, we actually, um, did sharecropping, um, raised our own gardens, um, raised our own cows, chickens, hogs, uh, worked the, you know, worked the cotton fields. That was before soybeans came in, [laughter] so I was glad to see soybeans. [Laughing] That meant I didn't have to pick so much cotton or chop so much cotton.

Um, we had our own depot where the train came through and we could catch the train and ride the train from Lexa to Helena down on Cherry Street and do our shopping and stuff. That was exciting. And all the children always got a chance to go with Mom when she went shopping in Helena. Um –

JM: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents as persons?

CY: Well, my dad, he was, um – I think he went through the third grade. But educationally speaking, he was a real sharp man, very smart. He loved math. He worked in an ice plant that we had in Lexa and, uh, didn't do much work with us in the field. Mom was in the field with us. Um, she was a midwife. She delivered most of the babies in our area. Uh, and not just any midwife, either, but she was the midwife that, if there was a breach baby coming into the world, people would come and find her, because she had that skill in her hands. I call it the laying on of hands [laughs] –

JM: Yeah, sure.

CY: That she knew how to manipulate the womb and get that baby to turn around so it could come out right. When I was twenty-three, I found out that my mom didn't know how to read or write. She was actually able to conceal that from me. I don't know if the rest of the children knew it or not, but she was able to conceal that from me until I was twenty-three.

JM: Had they come up in that area of the Delta in Arkansas? Is that where their families had been?

CY: Well, my mom, uh, was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi. And my dad was born in Palestine, Arkansas, which is right outside of Forrest City between Memphis and, uh, Brinkley [Arkansas]. Um, and my dad and mom both, uh, grew up on plantations, which, uh, one of my uncles, you know, gave me some real depth information about their history and what their names were before it became Lamar. Because, most black people don't like to talk about that. They kind of keep it hush-hush, because they don't want to identify with their past, but most of the elders in my family, because of my participation in the Civil Rights Movement, they felt like I needed to know all about our family that they could, you know, share with me.

So, my Uncle Virgil [Lamar], who was, um, he worked [0:05:00] in the steel mills in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for years. And when he would come home, you know, he was like, "I'll tell you whatever you want to know, you know. Just ask." [Laughs] So, that's what I did and learned a lot of things about my dad's side of the family from, um – the plantation name was Raymond [Plantation]. But once they left the plantation, my great-great-grandfather changed their name to Lamar. Where he came up with Lamar, my uncle didn't know that, but he did share that much with me. And my dad came from a family of like ten sisters and twelve – it was twelve boys. Um, and my grandfather lived with us for a while when we was in Lexa. He lived to be like a hundred and four before he passed away.

And, uh, my mom's side of the family, I really didn't know that many of them. Her dad I know died last. Her mom died when they was pretty young. So, she had a sister in Memphis named Fannie Brown, uh, and both of her brothers lived in West Helena. Well, one of them lived at Barton. James Bell lived at Barton, and George Bell lived in West Helena, and they had a slew of children, [laughs] I mean, a large, large family, but close.

JM: Your grandfather, who lived to be a hundred and four, and you said he lived with you when you were a child –

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: So, depending on when he – I presume, then, that he had been born prior to the Civil War.

CY: In the 18 – um-hmm, in the 1800s, because he died about 1960 – it was in 1960-something.

JM: Oh, okay, okay.

CY: Umm.

JM: Interesting.

CY: He whittled, too. He whittled and made us rings and musical instruments. He would make us rings out of buttons and stuff like that and make us flutes out of the bamboo, uh, stalks or stems, whatever [laughs] you call them. So, we looked forward to him coming and spending time with us. He'd spend so many months with us.

And then, I had an aunt named Aunt Bessie that, uh – her name was Bessie Lipsey, L-I-P-S-E-Y – and, um, they lived out in an area called LaGrange, L-A-capital G-R-A-N-G-E, and she had like thirteen children. Well, he would stay with them sometime and then he would come and stay with us sometime. And we looked forward to that. That was always an awesome time.

A lot of our family had moved to Chicago. In the spring and summer they would come visit us. We just looked forward to that. That was like Christmas for us. [Laughs]

JM: Tell me about your home and where exactly you lived in Lexa.

CY: Okay. My home in Lexa was a triplex shotgun house. That means it was three houses in one building, but all three houses were shotgun units. We lived on one end. It was a single lady named Miss Mary that lived in the middle. And then, the Walker family lived on the other end. The Walker family had about – the husband and wife and fourteen children, and they all lived in those three rooms.

Um, it was really rural. My dad, um, hunted mostly in the wintertime for the meats that we ate. Um, at that time in our life, we still had smokehouses. So, when somebody killed, slaughtered a hog or a cow, they would get together, you know, and do that. And the backyard would be full of those big old, uh, cast iron pots that set over a stack of wood or whatever, had like the three legs on it.

And we cleaned chitlins [chitterlings], washed – we had #3 tubs just lined up. You'd get all the waste out of one in one tub, rinse them in the other one, take them over to the other one until they got pearly white, you know. And, I mean, you could see, like in an opal ring, you could see those colors in the, uh, entrails after they were cleaned.

We did the cracklings right out there, where you would take that fatback and throw it over in that grease – well, actually it created its own grease. You just put it in the hot pot, and after awhile the grease would begin to bubble on the top, and then them cracklings would float up to the top. And, I mean, you know, that was just a heyday. [10:00] [Laughs]

JM: Umm, umm. How about, how about school?

CY: School was [sighs] – it was necessary, it was important, it was significant in our lives, but in my younger years in school, we would get taken out of school to make sure we had ample enough income and supplies and things that we needed to get us through the winter. So, the books that we had, most of them didn't have backs on them, pages were missing, because we would get the books that had Barton High School stamped in them, or something like that, or another school, and that's what we had to do our studies from. Um, I guess I got a little bit fortunate, because me being the youngest girl, uh, when my sister that's a year older than me started to school, I started to school, too. So, I got a jumpstart [laughs] on everything.

And, uh, being a girl, too, and my age, I didn't get pulled out of school as much as some of my other siblings did, because I couldn't do what they could do. So, I helped Mama to quilt, to can – I got a chance to wash over three hundred fruit jars every year and make sure that, you know, we had food canned to get us through the winter. Um, picked pecans, walnuts, the black walnuts – I love black walnuts today. Um –

JM: How did your parents –?

JB: Joe, can we pause for just a second?

JM: Sure, let's stop for a sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Did the refrigerator just come on?

JM: I think it might have.

CY: It may have.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: I was about to ask [JB coughs] how your – in circumstances like that, um, how'd your parents help you, all of the children, come to understand how to navigate through Jim Crow, how to be alert to the things that you needed to be alert to? Was it overt, and did they tell you directly? Did they –?

CY: Um, I guess a lot of it was exposure and observing how they handled situations. And I was the child that my older sister named me Minerva [her nickname because she had so much nerve], because I didn't have a problem asking questions or adventuring out. Um, and usually when we asked our mom about, uh, situations, she would always refer us to the Bible. And I think that may have been one thing that kind of covered up her, uh, lack of education for me, because to me she had so much wisdom and so much knowledge about different things that I just assumed she could read and write. And, uh, she stayed on top of us to make sure we could read and write, you know.

But she always – one thing she taught me, she said, “Don't ever be afraid to ask anybody for anything. If you need something, ask for it. There's only one of two answers you're going to get. That's yes and no.” So, when I needed something, I'd jump over that fear that would come up, you know, and go for it. And usually I was blessed, you know.

So, um, I knew instinctively, because I had a couple of experiences that went on in our community, where one night, um, I noticed my daddy left home with a gun, and I knew he wasn't going hunting. And I asked him where he was going. He said, “Oh, me and the boys, we're going to hunt some coons.” And when he got to the end of the road, he just all of a sudden disappeared.

Then I found out later that it was a situation that went on that day where one of the merchants' daughters in the town had accused one of the young black boys of raping – well,

asking her to have sex with him. And, uh, the father of that son had went and handled the situation the best he knew how to handle it with her family. But something happened that they didn't feel like they needed to take a chance and leave this child to be exposed to whatever might happen once the sun went down.

So, they guarded the entrance to the community that night by them, they just loaded up both sides of the road with people with shotguns to protect this young man. Plus, the young man that she accused, he was shy [15:00] and probably had some, uh, special needs that was going on in his life, you know. And, uh, it took us years – it took me years to get my daddy to finally share that information with me of what actually happened that night.

JM: You said there were, um, other things that you remember, too, about incidents as you were growing up?

CY: Um, oh, [laughs] one, uh, in Lexa where we lived in years that I could remember, I'd say from five years until I was about thirteen or fourteen, we used to work in the fields. And some of the people that we worked for, there were white people that was poor like we were – they worked out there. Then, there was, every now and then, Mexicans and Chinese were working out there, which I always thought was strange, [laughs] but they came in from somewhere.

JM: This is in cotton?

CY: In cotton. And, uh, one of the young girls, me and her was about the same age, she used to always have these conversations with me about, you know, what blacks were and weren't, and what white people were and weren't, and stuff like that. And one day me and her was having a little altercation up in the cotton wagon, [laughs] and my daddy just happened to be

walking by when I was getting ready to – well, I had actually picked her up, and I was fixing to throw her over the wagon. And, uh, my daddy was like, “Cat!” And I put her down.

And we had exchanged some words, you know. There are some old, uh, [laughs] old sayings, jokes, uh, what they call the dozens, you know how you would put people down and stuff, and so we had exchanged all those words. And I had got past that. I was just ready to get rid of her, you know. Of course, the Lord sent my dad by to take care of that.

And years later, believe it or not, before my dad passed, I ran into this girl again. She worked for Western Union and she was holding up the old black people in Helena. This was in the, uh, late '80s. And the Western Union closes promptly; whatever their closing time is, you know, they're going to close down. So, I walked in there with my daddy. It was on a Saturday morning. And, uh, it was about six people in the line, about twenty minutes to twelve, and she was sitting there on the phone talking.

And I said, uh, “These people need to be waited on?” He was like, “Yeah.” He's saying, “And they close at twelve o'clock.” And we was going up there to get some money that he was waiting on. So, I walked up to the counter, you know me and my little bold self. I said, “Excuse me.” “I'll be with you in a minute, ma'am.” [Laughs] I said, “Okay.” I go back. She keeps right on talking, wouldn't even look up at the people. She's just on the phone with her little conversation.

So, I went back up there. I said, “Excuse me.” I said, “What time do you close?” She said, “Twelve o'clock.” I said, “When twelve o'clock comes, you're going leave, right?” “That's usually the procedure.” I said, “Well, let me tell you something. If you don't get up out of that chair right now, you won't be sitting in it come Monday morning!” And she put that phone down, and all the people in there was like, “Who is this woman?” You know?

So, when we left, my daddy said, “Do you know who that was?” And I went, “No, I don’t and I don’t care.” I was mad! You know, I was just really – ugh! He said, “You remember the Wootens that lived in, uh, [laughs] Lexa?” I said, “The Wootens?” He said, “Yeah. You know the little girl you was going to pitch out the wagon?” I said, “You’re kidding!” He said, “That was her.” I said, “She hasn’t learned anything yet, has she? Still don’t respect people!”

JM: Right, right. Did, um, did Lexa have – did you live – you lived in sort of the small town of Lexa?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. Did Lexa have, uh, a specific racial geography? Was it divided?

CY: There was a demarcation called the railroad tracks.

JM: It was the tracks.

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

CY: And on the one side of the tracks was the – on our side, the black side, was, um, the train station. You caught it from our side. And next to that, at one time we had like a café was across the street from the train station, so when people were waiting, they had somewhere they could go sit and eat. We had a little garage, because a few people had trucks, you know. They used them for farming and stuff.

And then, around the bend over here, was the Muscalino family that basically raised all of the vegetables and things for Safeway [grocery store chain] and the, you know, the [20:00] markets that was in, um, West Helena and Helena. And I think they were a German family. Um,

and we did most of our farming, we did with them, because, you know, you tried to pick the nicer people to work with.

And there was another man we used to work for, his name was Homer Childs [note: Young was not certain if this surname was “Charles” or “Childs”]. I loved that man. He was a sweet man. He used to protect me at the weigh scales, because I couldn’t pick cotton, a bunch of cotton. I was blessed to pick a hundred pounds. And if you didn’t get a hundred pounds of cotton in my family, you got a whupping right there under the scales. So, I got frequent whuppings under the scales. [Laughs] And a lot of times he would be standing there begging my mama not to whup me.

So, cotton season, when we was picking cotton, that wasn’t my favorite time of the year. I didn’t like that at all. And that was like my motivation to graduate from high school and leave. And that’s exactly what I did.

JM: Right, right. How long did the cotton season –?

JB: Joe, can we stop for a sec?

JM: Sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We’re back.

JM: How long did the cotton season last for?

CY: Um, normally, I would say – I’m trying to think. It was either August, we would start picking cotton. Sometime it would go through the fall school season till it got too cold, depending on how big the owner’s property was. And when it got cold, they did what they called snap-cotton or pull-cotton. It would just take the burrs and all and leave it to the gin to

separate the hulls from the cotton. But before that, you had to get your fingers down in the bulb and pull the cotton out. Of course, you didn't have cuticles. [Laughs] They were gone.

JM: Umm, umm.

CY: And, uh, that was – that was my nightmare.

JM: What was a typical day or week in cotton-picking season?

CY: Sunup to sundown.

JM: And you were lucky, as you say, if you get a hundred pounds?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Because you were –

CY: I was small.

JM: You started picking cotton at what age?

CY: Four.

JM: As young as four.

CY: I was picking it in a – what they call a foot tub. I'd pick it and put it in there, and then when it'd get too heavy for me to actually pick it up, I'd take it and give it to my mom. And then they had, they had seven-foot, uh, sacks, and they had three-foot sacks. When I did get big enough for a sack, that's what I started with was like a three-footer, and it would take me all day long to fill that thing up, you know. [Laughs] And it wasn't a hundred pounds of cotton when I got through with it. And I'd be working hard, but it was just – you know, and as I grew up, I would tell my mom, "My hands is not made for picking cotton!" I didn't mind chopping it, but picking, it just wasn't me. It wasn't me.

JM: Yeah. What were your brothers in age in relation to you?

CY: Uh, my youngest brother, he was three years younger than me, and my oldest brother was five years older than me.

JM: So, typically when you started working in cotton, in the cotton harvest, there would have been five children picking and then one younger brother?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. And what – do you remember what you got paid?

CY: I remember like three-fifty [\$3.50] a day. [Laughs] That was my, like, highest I can remember. That was for chopping, getting the grass out from around it and everything. And paying you per hundred pounds was something about three dollars, four dollars for a hundred pounds of cotton. Then, as soon as I left, got out of high school, everything went to ten and twelve dollars. I was upset about that. I said, “But you know what? One thing about it, I don’t have to go back there!”

JM: Did your mom get fair treatment at the end of a day picking at the weighing station?

CY: I don’t think so.

JM: Yeah.

CY: Now, when we got big enough that we knew how to add and all that – that was my job. I had to keep everybody’s weights when they’d go up there, and me and the owner had to jive. Of course, you didn’t get to argue with him too much about, you know, what your totals were versus his totals. With Mr. Homer, I could do that.

JM: Yeah. And your father, you said, worked at the ice plant?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: What was that – what was his job like? And what was that plant like?

CY: You know how they used to make the hundred-pound blocks of ice? That's what he did.

JM: In Lexa?

CY: Um-hmm. And he also worked at the gin.

JM: Oh, yeah?

CY: So, at the gin, the waste cotton that was there, my mom would use that to make quilts for the bed, and the pillows, stuff like that.

JM: What was your father's job at the cotton gin?

CY: He ginned the cotton.

JM: Oh, he –

CY: And he would actually, you know, he knew how to clean [25:00] the little forks, the things that went around and around to separate the cotton from the hulls. He could do all of it. But, basically, he was the one up in the thing that would pull that suction part down to get the cotton out of the trailers.

JM: Right, right. Um, I haven't asked you yet about church.

CY: Church was – I enjoyed it. I went when nobody else would go. I would be up every Sunday morning, ready to go. I liked to sing. There was one pastor that used to come and get my mom to let me go to church with him during his revival time. And, uh, I would sing for him, and the ladies would get happy and throw their purses at me and scare me. [Laughs] I did that with him probably from the time I was five until – that last time I remember going with him I was about nine years old. And then, my mom stopped letting me go for some reason. I guess I was growing up or something, you know.

JM: Yeah.

CY: I may have said something to her that said, "It's time for her not to go anymore."

JM: Um, what was the church? Which church was your family's church?

CY: I grew up, uh – our family church was First Baptist Church of Lexa. Uh, Reverend Debro was our pastor. And Mr. – I think his name was Gus Wilburn. He was our superintendent. He would go and ring the church bell. And they lived like across the field from us about as far as from my house is from that house over there. And there was a big old walnut tree that sat in between our houses. That was my favorite spot. And, uh, when he went to church, I went to church. When he'd ring that bell, I'd gone on up there. I'd say, "Mama, can I go to church now?" And she'd say, "Yeah, go ahead on." And I'd go up there. I'd get a chance to play the piano – I could play the piano by ear – and, uh, just had a good time.

And then, there was another lady named Miss Molly Richardson. She used to have a sunshine band in her backyard every Saturday evening. And their house sat on a hill, and we had Kool-Aid and cookies. And then, there was another lady named Miss, uh, Cora Martin. She used to do the, uh, sacramental bread and wines once a month. So, the Saturday before we had that, after I got up pretty good size, I would go spend that Saturday with her and help her to get all that stuff prepared. Of course, we'd have a lot of fun and wake up everybody in the community laughing. They would say, "Cat over at Martin's house!" [Laughs]

So, we – that was – my, uh, Christian experience was something awesome that I didn't really understand until I was about forty-five, I guess. And, uh, it came after about five or ten years of seeking what salvation was all about, you know. And I realized that I had probably been saved since I was like four years old, but I just didn't understand fully what it was all about.

JM: Yeah, yeah. I'm sure we'll come back to that theme. I want to ask you, too, um, about Phillips County. Um, that was obviously the location of the, uh, Elaine Massacre in 1919.

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: And, um, I wonder if – was that a part of your awareness as a child, that the county had that specific history of a race massacre?

CY: It came up probably when I was in my middle teens.

JM: Okay.

CY: Uh, we were working down there, and one of the things I noticed was the earth was cracked and it was hard. You know, like, if the temperature outside was in the 80s or 90s, it was like that ground would just crack, like parchment. And when your hoe hit it, it would like, *ding!*, something like that. And I was like, “Why is this ground so hard?” I just – I hated to go down there. And after awhile, with the children complaining, they would begin to tell us about, “It’s probably from the blood that’s in the earth.” It was like, “Why is there blood in the earth?” You know. And they shared with us about the massacre down there and the race riot and everything.

JM: Yeah. Was there anybody, um, in the community active in the NAACP as you were coming up?

CY: Not in West Helena that I was aware of.

JM: Yeah.

CY: And, uh, personally, I never heard of the NAACP until about 1965.

JM: Well after you’d begun with SNCC.

CY: Right. Well, I didn’t – see, I started working with SNCC around 1965. In 1957, [30:00] when they had the Little Rock Nine, even though I lived two hours away in today’s transportation system, if the news came there, I never heard anything about it. We didn’t have TV. We had our first electricity in our house in 1958. [Laughs] So, and that was over then, you know. But, uh –

JM: It didn't come up at church or –?

CY: Um-um.

JM: Yeah, and no black newspaper in the community.

CY: No.

JM: And your mother, as you said, couldn't read.

CY: Right.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about, um – you mentioned earlier that you had, you had a strong sense even as a child of ten, twelve-ish, that you didn't want to spend your life in that world, that you wanted to graduate from high school and go on. Can you say a little bit more about – did you have a sense of what going on from there might mean, and what your plan might be?

CY: I really didn't. I just knew that the life I was living in, that wasn't what I wanted to do.

JM: Well, I guess you did say that you had some extended – members of your extended family who, say, had gone north to work in places like Pittsburgh or –

CY: Right, um-hmm. And, um, I guess in 1961 my oldest sister, she went to Mississippi to attend Mary Holmes Junior College [in West Point, Mississippi]. And, of course, we *all* worked diligently to get her in that college. Uh, she went there for two years. And she was sick, but she was a very strong Christian young lady. After her second year there, she went to Columbia University in New York City and she was studying there. That was in 1963, and she died while she was there.

And I think that, for me, that was like, um – it was probably my disconnect from pursuing an education at a higher level, because even, um, in the schools that I grew up in, black folks have their own little caste system that if you don't look a certain way and your skin color isn't

light enough and you don't come from the right family background, you get discriminated against as much there as you would in the white community. And that was my experience in school. It didn't matter what my grades were or how I excelled at one level or another – and, and I had to fight through that in my senior high school play, because, you know, uh, talent speaking, I had the arts. I could sing. I could memorize what I needed to memorize to get a part in a play or something like that. I was good at spelling. And I like competition, you know. Um, but I got fought so much in that that if you don't want me to excel over here, then I'm just not even going to try over here, you know.

And my worst subject in school was math, but fortunately my teacher was a very nice man. I never will forget him. His name was William Rush, and he went on to get a Ph.D. in mathematics. And after I graduated from high school, I met him when he was writing his thesis and I got to type up his thesis for him. [Laughs]

JM: Umm. Um, we'll come back to the particulars of your high school, because I really want to talk some more about that, but –

JB: Joe, I'm going to stop for a sec.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back after just a quick break. Um, Ms. Young, let me ask you about – you mentioned a moment ago that very little news came into the community, through the '50s anyway, and you got electricity in your home in '58. Did news of the emerging direct action phase of the Movement after 19 – in early 1960, did that come into your awareness? Sit-ins and protests around the county in the early '60s, was that –?

CY: Only because of people like Myrtle Glascoe and Howard Himmelbaum.

JM: Tell me about those folks.

CY: Um, I think Howard Himmelbaum was the first group to come though there, and he came though with a man named Jim Jones from Lewisville, Arkansas. Um, I think Bill Hansen may have been with them. It was four or five of them. And they came and got a meeting with one of the local churches to tell, you know, share with us what they were doing and everything.

And at that time the focus was, um, voter education and trying to abolish poll tax, because at that time when people went to vote they had to pay a dollar to register to vote. [35:00] And most of them couldn't even write their name. They just did an X. And, of course, their vote probably got flipped on to the side the minute they turned around, if they waited till then. They probably did it in their faces.

So, I went to all these meetings. And they wanted to know, you know, if I would work with them and all that. And, of course, I said, you know, "You'll have to go ask my parents." [Laughs] And they did and got permission for me to work with them. And I was probably one of the few girls in the community that, uh, just stepped up and did something. I remember another man that was there, Jerry Casey. He was one of the first young men to get involved. And at that time, we had moved to West Helena. We was not in Lexa. We moved to West Helena in 1964, 1964, and that was 1965, coming into that school year of '65-66, I believe it was.

And, uh, the people, especially the black fathers, they were afraid, because they knew that that meant the white community was going to begin to backlash on everything that happened, and the families would have to suffer and stuff. So, my dad was like, "You need to be careful messing around with them civil rights, uh, workers." And that was the only time he ever said anything to me. He never said anything else after that. And years later, you know, I

quizzed him about it, you know. And he was like, “Well, I just – you know, I just was wanting to protect you.”

JM: Sure.

CY: You know.

JM: Yeah. And there was a lot of violence.

CY: Very much so. They did some, uh, drive-by, uh, what they call Molotov cocktails that they threw at the civil rights workers’ places where they lived. And, uh, if it hadn’t been for like a pole or something that was right there to block it when they threw it, it would have went into the house. That happened on several occasions.

And, uh, then they started harassing the civil rights workers by arresting them for being vagrants [laughs] and take them to jail. And, of course, you know, you had to come up with money. And they knew that these – most of them were either college students or college professors that were just there for the summer, maybe. But most of them after they got there, they may not have stayed in West Helena, but they went somewhere else and continued to do the work that they were doing there.

Uh, we had people come in – as a result of the first group, we had, uh, Julian Bond came, Andrew Young, Stokely Carmichael, um, I want to say Eldridge Cleaver and Marion Barry, they came through there. Most of them, they’d come, and like we’d have a meeting for two or three days in a church. The other thing they realized when, um – matter of fact, I’m the person that sat on this storefront every day, got everybody in West Helena to come by and sign my petition to abolish poll tax. And that was an assignment that Howard Himmelbaum gave me to do, who later on became my husband.

Um, we realized that people couldn't read or write, so we got one of the churches to allow us to, um, teach people how to read and write and, specifically, to learn how to sign their names. So, when it came time to vote, they could register, fill out that application, because one of the things that came up was, um, the white community was, um, trying to force people to have to fill an application out, which is where that voter education application came from. So, in order to do that, you needed to know how to read and, specifically, you should at least know how to sign your name. You could get somebody else to fill the application out for you, but you needed to sign your name. So, we got one of the churches – I think it was, uh, First Baptist Church that let us use their basement. And a couple of the civil rights workers would work with them on reading and writing a couple of nights a week.

And so, things like that we had to change around because we'd get word that the white, uh, Klan or whatever they called their selves – not all of them would – you know, they wanted to fit into that name, [0:40:00] were just vigilantes. They would wait till it got dark and try to come through there and bring physical harm to the different ones.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me – I want to spend even more time here, talking about all this history in yet more detail. Can you, can you take me back to – I think the, as I, as I have read, and you can tell me if this sounds right or not, that the SNCC folks – um, and you've mentioned a few of them, Howard Himmelbaum, Jim Jones, Bill Hansen, others – first came into Helena and West Helena, um, as I have it, in the spring of '63, and the first demonstrations, sort of active protests, in Helena were November of '63.

CY: It may have been, because I know I spent a whole year after the voter registration, because I didn't get out of high school until '66, so I was reflecting back that that had to be before '64.

JM: Yeah.

CY: Um, I know there was a guy named James Hill, Stanley Tillman, um, and I think Michael Simmons came with that group. Some of those guys, or one of them was from Portland, one was from Seattle, and Mike, I think, was from New York. Uh, but I remember, uh, Stanley Tillman was an athlete and, uh, he spent a lot of time getting to know me. I wonder about him sometimes now. But he asked me, he said, if I had – if it was any sports that I wanted to do that I had never been able to do in my life, what would it be? I said, “Well, I always wanted to learn soccer,” and a couple of times at Eliza Miller [High School] we tried to get a little soccer team going, but a lot of people didn’t seem like they were interested in it.

And I said, “And I’d like to bowl, too!” He said, “Well, do y’all have a bowling alley?” And I was like, “Yeah, but they don’t let black folks go there.” Because at that time, when they came, on the streets you still had water fountains that had “Whites Only” on it, you know, and signs on the bathrooms and stuff, “Whites Only.” If, *if* you were blessed enough to be able to drink water or use the bathroom in some places, it would have “Colored.”

And, uh, so Mr. Tillman came up with this idea one day that we was going bowling. [Laughs] And I, you know, I told Mama, I said, “Mr. Tillman is going to teach me how to bowl, Mama. Is it okay if I go?” She said, “Yeah, you can go.” So, we went to the only bowling alley we had. It’s between Helena and West Helena, and that area is called Midland Heights.

So, we went in. He knew all of the ins and outs of bowling, so he went up to rent the shoes. They wouldn’t rent him the shoes. He said, “Well, we need a lane.” She’s like, “Well, you can’t bowl without shoes.” He said, “Yeah, sure we can.” He said, “Are you going to let us have the lane or not?” So, she let us have the lane.

We got over to the lane. He said, "Take your shoes off." Took the shoes off, we kept our socks on, and we proceeded to bowl. I got a chance to bowl a whole game before the police showed up. [Laughs]

JM: Was this before or after the Civil Rights Act? Do you remember?

CY: [Coughing] Excuse me. [Coughs] Ask your question again.

JM: Was this before or after the Civil Rights Act had passed?

CY: This is before the Civil Rights Act had passed.

JM: Okay, this is before June of '64.

CY: Yes.

JM: July of '64, yeah.

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah. And was Mr. Tillman –?

JB: I'm going to just pause for water.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: I just wanted to ask was Mr. Tillman white or black?

CY: He was black.

JM: Okay.

CY: He was a big guy about six-three, probably weighed a good two hundred pounds, you know.

JM: Were you –? Excuse me.

CY: He was, you know, a fairly attractive young man, pleasant guy. He wasn't threatening when you saw him, you know.

Um, when the police got there, they tried to intimidate me by asking me my name and who my parents were, and stuff like that, you know. And I didn't have no fear of any man, never did. And I said, "Why do you want to know my name?" He said, "Who are your parents?" And everybody knew my daddy as "Bigum," but he was like six-one, weighed about a hundred and eighty pounds. As my mom described him, he was "tailor-made." [Laughs]

So, he was like, "Oh, I know Bigum!" He said, "Does your daddy know you're out here?" I said, "He does." "Well, I don't think he knows what you're doing." And he made us put on our shoes and leave, you know. We didn't try to fight back or anything. We just [0:45:00] put on our shoes and left. But my first game ever in life I bowled 98. [Laughs]

JM: Were you surprised that they, were they – were you surprised that you got –?

CY: Asked to leave?

JM: No, surprised that they let you bowl in the first place?

CY: Yeah. It's just they wouldn't let us have shoes. But Mr. Tillman, I guess, kind of shocked the lady that was waiting on us that she didn't know how to deny us the lane, even though she had denied us the shoes. So, she let us have the lane, and he was like, "No. We'll bowl anyway."

JM: Yeah. Take me back to the first – how did you first hear about these young civil rights workers coming into the community?

CY: I don't remember. They just sort of popped up.

JM: Yeah. And describe some of these folks. For example, you've just called him "Mr. Tillman," but he wasn't that many years older than you were, and you were young.

CY: Well, he was in college and he may have even graduated from college.

JM: Okay.

CY: I was still in high school.

JM: Right. So, he's early twenties, and you're fifteen-ish.

CY: Yeah.

JM: Yeah, okay.

CY: Exactly. So, I don't know, I guess just because they were bigger than me. [Laughs]

JM: Well, in that sense, they're a lot older. But, in looking back, they're not.

CY: And, of course, they didn't want me to call them "Mr.," either. But, you know, that was the training. If people were older than you, you know, you greeted them as "Mr." and "Mrs."

JM: So, tell me about these folks and how you began to make sense of them, because they're coming in to take on the civil rights fight, and it's pretty, you know, it's difficult and dangerous work. So, how did you begin to come to understand these people?

CY: Talking to them. We had meetings in their homes, you know, to explain what it was that we were trying to do. Um, and I don't remember any of them even mentioning the Little Rock Nine in our communication. They may have. It may have escaped me, because I may have had this tunnel vision about how I could solve my problem right there in West Helena, you know.

Um, but we came to Little Rock within the first probably twelve months after they were there, because I remember us coming to a meeting in Ferndale, which is a little community west of here. It was a Presbyterian village. And we went there and had like workshops every day for like two or three days. And there were quite a few people from my community that went, because I know I had a cousin that was there that was like nine or ten years older than me. She was married, as a matter of fact.

And, uh, because we tried to get the whole community in there, but people weren't as stick-to-itive as I guess I was, because I wanted to be in *everything* that was going on. I wanted to know what was going on, how it was played out. I participated in, um – after I graduated from high school, we had, um, different sit-ins and demonstrations here in Little Rock to open up the state capitol, and people got pitched out on their faces, I mean, literally.

JM: That was the cafeteria demonstration?

CY: Yes, um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

CY: And they threw, uh, mustard gas bombs on us, uh.

JM: Yeah. You mentioned earlier in the bowling alley incident that you didn't, you didn't, you didn't fear any man. Do you think it was just a part of – how did you come to be a person who didn't have fear in situations like that? Do you have a sense of that?

CY: I think it was probably – in Lexa, even though the separation was there, there was a certain, like, camaraderie between the blacks and whites that lived there. There was a support in times of crisis that it seemed like both sides of that track could come together.

JM: This is in Lexa?

CY: Um-hmm. And, uh, like the Muscalinos, the way they treated people, they were just nice people. You know, Mr. Homer Childs [per note above, the surname may have been Charles], too. You had one or two families that stuck out on both sides of the track that could, said, “No, I'm better than you.” You know what I'm saying?

And, um, but it was a rural, small community. Had our own post office; had our own railroad station. We had our own garage. We had our own restaurants. We were like a self-

sustaining place. And even if you went there now, you was like, “This place got stuck in time,” you know, but some people are going back there to live.

JM: Yeah. What do you think the total population was, maybe?

CY: It probably was, um, two thousand people, something like that.

JM: Yeah. And the racial split would have been approximately –? [0:50:00]

CY: It may have been about even.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Because I think the county back in those days, the county overall was about fifty-six, fifty-seven percent African American.

CY: Um-hmm, yeah.

JM: And the move to – why the move to West Helena?

CY: Um, probably just my parents getting older. Uh, it wasn't so much focus – and then, we had two – the two oldest children were gone, one had died and one was, uh, had just signed up to go to Vietnam, uh, the oldest son. So then, the next oldest daughter, uh, she was a special needs child. And then, the next oldest child was my sister who was a year older than me, so we were all kind of young, you know. And I think that probably is what caused us to move to West Helena, because it was like more modernized. But even in West Helena, we wound up going to the cotton field again. [Laughs]

And that wasn't a very pleasant thing. I think shortly after I got there, um, I was in the cotton field one day. We went on a bus to a place called Snow Lake [Arkansas], which is on the other side of Elaine. And, uh, five young men attempted to rape me. And the water boy, um, happened to come through, and they was hollering, “Meat on the house! Meat on the house!” And this one very muscular young man – he was a football player – he stood up in my back with

his knees. And, of course, I suffered for the next, I don't know, twenty years, till I finally had to have some surgery behind all that.

And, uh, I was *so* mad! I wanted them dead. I wanted them locked up. And I know it was the Lord, because when we got ready to leave that field that evening, the bus got stuck. When we was trying to get the bus out, the steering wheel came off the steering column. [Laughs] We didn't get out from down there until about one or two o'clock in the morning.

And when we passed the police station in West Helena, I was going through, because I wanted that bus driver to stop and let me go in there and turn them in. He wouldn't do it. So, we went home, and I told my mom about what had happened. And you could hear folks screaming and hollering all over the community, because their parents was beating their behinds.

And I guess about two or three days later, my daddy came in the house, and I was laying down. I was hurting. And he walked in and said, "How's my – he had little name he used to call all of his pets that I won't say on camera. He's like, "How's my little so-and-so-and-so?" And I said, [screams] "Aghhhh!," just hollering. And my daddy said, "Get my baby out of here and take her to the doctor!"

I didn't know what shape I was in until I was headed to the doctor. They had the ambulance come get me, and when that ambulance went across the railroad tracks I almost died. And I was in the hospital for like three weeks behind that.

JM: Ugh!

CY: So.

JM: This was after your move to West Helena?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Oh.

CY: And that was another thing, you know, that, uh, helped me to want to just get out of there.

JM: You said these were five white teenage boys?

CY: No, they weren't white. These were black guys.

JM: Oh, oh, who had gone out with the group to –?

CY: Um-hmm, to work in the fields.

JM: And so, hence, that's when you said that you could – so, the word spread that they had attempted this, and so their parents came after them to punish them?

CY: Yeah.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Can you, um – whew. Can you tell me a little bit about your impressions of, um, Jim Jones, Howard Himmelbaum, Jerry Casey?

CY: I looked up to all of those guys. They were like giants. I guess now the way I would describe them, they were all my Moses, you know, someone who came to bring relief and liberty, not only to me, but to the whole community. Um, and it just seemed like the community didn't wrap themselves around these people enough, you know.

And I guess if I had got a sense [0:55:00] of everybody being onboard with them, I probably would have changed my whole attitude about wanting to leave. But after two and a half years, I didn't see that, so when it was my time to go, I left. As a matter of fact, when I left, me and Howard Himmelbaum was secretly engaged, but I wasn't waiting on him! [Laughs] I said, "I'm gone! If you want to marry me, you're going to have to come where I am!"

JM: You left the morning after you graduated.

CY: I sure did, and went to D.C.

JM: The next morning.

CY: And got employed two or three days after I got to D.C. with the Head Start program, went into training, and, uh, did very well. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah. We'll come to that, too, but let me – I want, if you would, still some more details about the campaign in West Helena. Um, you worked extensively on the effort to gather signatures to repeal the poll tax.

CY: Um-hmm. And we were successful.

JM: How did that go? Can you describe that whole process?

CY: It was lonely [laughs], because there was nobody there but me most of the time. I just sat on this one man's, uh, the front porch of his business. I can't remember. I think it was Mr. – [whispers] oh, Lord, what was that man's name? Oh, I can't remember his name. He had a bunch of boys.

JM: In West Helena?

CY: Um-hmm. But I sat on his storefront with a little table in front of me and a chair and the sheet. That's all they had to do was put their name on the petition to abolish it. If they couldn't write their name, they put an X, and I wrote their name for them. And, um, I guess I did that for two or three weeks, something like that, until we felt like we had everybody's name on there. And during that time was when, uh, Howard Himmelbaum proposed to me. [Laughs]

JM: Do you want to talk about – I'd be very interested, if you're comfortable doing it, talking about building this relationship with a young white man in West Helena in the –

CY: It was very secretive. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah.

CY: It was secretive to us, let me put it like that, but it wasn't such a secret to most people that was around us, because, you know, when two people care for each other, everybody knows it. You know, you think you're hiding it, but you're not hiding it.

Um, as far as in the black community was concerned, maybe one or two people was concerned about it from the black community. There was a couple of young men that had tried to talk to me before Howard came on the scene, and one of them made the statement, said, "So, you're going to, uh, take a white man over a black man?" I said, "I haven't taken any man," you know, and we just left it at that.

Then I had an older guy, who was one of my daddy's friends, or supposed to have been one of my daddy's friends, he, uh, saw me going to church one Sunday morning and decided to make a derogatory statement toward me. And when I got back home, he was sitting on my front porch talking to my daddy. So, I just stopped right there and told my daddy what Mr. Ernest [Key] had said to me when I was on my way to church. And he got the threat of his life that day. But, um –

JM: How'd your parents weigh that circumstance?

CY: My relationship with Howard?

JM: Yeah.

CY: My mom loved Howard. [Laughs] My dad probably did, too, but you know how you dads have y'all's way of expressing your feelings and sentiments and everything. Uh, my dad was afraid for me. That was really the bottom line when I asked him later on, you know, how did he feel about me being in the Civil Rights Movement and everything. He was afraid. He was afraid that his daughter was going to get hurt. He was. He was very afraid. Uh, he said,

as far as Howard, he liked Howard. He said he didn't feel like, um, he would have treated him any different had he been a black man.

But my mom, she made sure that Howard knew how she felt about him, you know. She thought we was married before we got married. She did tell me that later on. [Laughing] When I invited her to come to my wedding, she was like, "I thought y'all was already married!"

But we weren't, you know. We just worked close together and everything. We went on different trips, as we had marches and things like that to go to, because, um – I'm trying to [1:00:00] remember if he was in Memphis when Martin Luther King got killed, but I know Myrtle and I was there together. We shared rooms with Stokely and Eldridge Cleaver and a couple of other guys that was there. Um, Howard may have been somewhere else, because there was a whole bunch of different type of activities and marches and things that was going during at that time.

JM: Were you ever – I'm sorry.

CY: Go ahead.

JB: Can I ask a question?

JM: Sure.

JB: Going back to the poll tax, since there were a lot of poor white people, that probably affected them as well. Were you also getting them to sign the petition against the poll tax?

CY: It was just a focus on the West Helena community, that segment that was covered, like, uh, a community called New Addition, um, then West Helena itself. Um, and see, the thing you have to understand about poll tax, to my understanding, white folks didn't have to pay poll tax.

JM: In practice, yeah.

CY: Right. It was, uh, meant to hinder the blacks from, uh, being able to vote. It wasn't about – that wasn't what it was about. [Coughs]

JM: Were you ever arrested in West Helena [CY coughs] or elsewhere before, before you moved away?

CY: Was I ever arrested? One time I was because I was hungry [clears throat]. Excuse me.

JM: Let's take a little break, yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: Okay, we're back after a short break. Ms. Young, let me ask, um – you were just, we were about to talk about an arrest.

CY: Oh, yeah. One time I was down home. It was after I had left, and I was married at the time. And, of course, you know, the struggle continued on for a bunch of years, and still do, but actually active as part of SNCC and then a group that we created here in Little Rock called the Black United Youth.

JM: I want to ask about that, too, yeah.

CY: Uh, we would still go to West Helena, Earl, Blytheville, McGhee, uh, wherever there was an unrest and still the Jim Crow law, you know, being enforced against our people. Um, we went down to West Helena one summer to work the whole summer. That was the idea. So, after we had been down there, I guess, about three or four days, we didn't have any money. [Laughs] And we were hungry and we were tired and we were hot, you know. And even though my parents lived there, you know, my parents were very poor. We'd been poor all of my life.

I said, "Well, let's just go ask them for something to eat." So, we went into a grocery store – I think it was, uh, Big Star. We went into the grocery store, and I asked for the manager, told him who we were and what we were doing, and we was just hungry and we were wondering if you would just give us some meat and bread, you know. They wouldn't give us anything and they had this whole store full of food, you know. And I said, "Well, I think I'll just get me some bread and meat." And that's what we did.

And they called the police on us, took us to jail. [Laughs] And when I got to jail, and they found out who I was, they went and got my daddy and brought him back up there. He said, "Girl, what are you doing? Did you get picked up for stealing food?"

I said, "Daddy, I did not steal the food. I went in there and I asked for it, and he wouldn't give it to me, so I just took what I needed to eat. That was it! I didn't try to hide it," you know. Of course, they let us go, because they knew my daddy, they knew my upbringing and everything. He said, "I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

JM: Was that in West Helena?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Was it a black, uh, controlled store?

CY: Um-um.

JM: Or white controlled? Oh, it was white controlled.

CY: It was a food chain.

JM: Yeah, okay.

CY: You know.

JM: Yeah.

CY: And, uh, the police officer said, "You better be glad people know your daddy."

JM: Yeah.

CY: And I said, “Well, you know, we’ve all grown up to believe that if when you need something, you ask people for it, and they have it to give, then they should share it with you.” I said, “And y’all didn’t do that.” I said, “You taught me that, but that’s not what you’re doing.”

JM: Let me ask about, um, let me ask about the wider SNCC effort in the Delta in those years. Did you have, did you have – did you go with SNCC folks, say, to places like Gould and Forrest City for demonstrations, or did you pretty much in the high school years, were you sticking around West Helena?

CY: I stuck around West Helena. The Gould – uh, Worth Long was in Gould, [1:05:00] him and, uh, I think it was Laura Foner.

JM: Uh-huh.

CY: They were both in the Gould area. We had people in Gould. We had people in Little Rock, people in West Helena, people in Pine Bluff.

JM: Yeah, and Forrest City, too, I think.

CY: Yeah, but that was later. Forrest City came like after I was out of high school.

JM: Okay, okay.

CY: I think they had tried to go into Forrest City a couple of times. And I think the very first time they went through there it was a terrible shootout. And I think that’s why people kind of backed off, you know. Um, and even in the difference between Helena and West Helena was in such contrast that, uh, the young man, James Hill, that I was telling you about, he went to Helena to do some work, and they arrested him.

And the judge, with everybody sitting in the court, threatened him by saying, because he was twenty-one years old, he already had a master’s degree, I believe in engineering. He said,

“Nigger, if you’re smart enough to have a master’s degree at twenty-one, you ought to be a smart enough nigger to get the hell out of Helena before you find yourself floating up like Emmett Till.” That’s what he said to him. That was Judge Hester [note: she was uncertain of the surname here; it appears likely that she was recalling Judge Douglas S. Heslep, a municipal court judge and attorney in Helena in those years]. And that young man left right after that, too.

JM: Did you – you mentioned that one occasion when you were coming up when your father and other men in the black community set out a guard, an armed guard, to protect that young man.

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, did your father and other men in West Helena, did they have to step forward or organize themselves in that way to provide some protection to the black community in West Helena in those years?

CY: They probably did, but we didn’t know about it.

JM: Okay.

CY: You know, if things came up, you know, um, there’s this group called the Masons, which is basically, you know, the Masonic Lodge that’s in the community. And I think that’s the force that comes together. And there’s not a whole bunch of mouthwork that goes on. People just come together and take action and do what need to be done.

JM: Let me ask you, too, about, um, when SNCC arrived in Helena. You had mentioned earlier that it’s not – it would be, it would be a mistake to think about the black community always in these instances as being perfectly unified in their opinions, because there’s a lot of different perspective.

CY: A lot of different perspectives.

JM: And people are situated differently.

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: So, I'm curious about your recollections about how different parts of the black community reacted to the arrival of SNCC, because some people welcomed them and some people didn't.

CY: Didn't. And some just ignored them like they didn't exist, you know.

JM: How about the pastors? What was their reaction?

CY: Um, some of the pastors received them. A lot of the churches in West Helena the pastors didn't even live there. They lived in Memphis or they lived in Mississippi, and they drove in on Friday evening or Saturday evening, you know. So, they didn't – they had a great escape, so to speak. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah.

CY: It was the Deacons and the Mothers of the Church that, more or less, you had to deal with to get into the church itself.

JM: Who helped – in Helena, who helped the SNCC folks find a Freedom House? Do you remember? Was there a –?

CY: They never had a Freedom House in Helena.

JM: Oh, I –

CY: They had one in West Helena.

JM: Yeah, okay.

CY: And then, we had – I think we had two or three, because Myrtle [Glascoe] eventually set up her own personal home there, you know. And then, the guys had a house and

the young women had a house. But most of the young women, we would try to set them up in homes, you know, where there was a father and a mother, secure living situation.

JM: Yeah.

CY: Because when Myrtle first came, she actually lived in the house with us, um, and that's the thing that impacted her so much about my family, the love that she experienced there, even in our poverty-stricken state. Um, she was just amazed how, you know, we could open up our arms and our home and everything and receive a total stranger into our home. But that was the way my parents were, you know.

I lost an uncle because our family just believed in helping people, and he allowed a hobo – we called them hoboes then, not homeless people, because you didn't stay in that state, you know. [1:10:00] The idea is that you would recoup, you know. So, you help a man along the way until he could get back on his feet. And this man woke up in the middle of the night and, uh, split my uncle's head with an ax, and the ax bounced off of his head to his wife's head to one of his children's head. Of course, he was the only one that actually died. But it never stopped my family from extending a helping hand to people.

JM: Can you tell me about Myrtle and her arrival and how you came to know her?

CY: Um, she came to work in the summer program with SNCC.

JM: In '64?

CY: It must have been '64. She came out of Oakland, California, in a little old Bug. I had never seen a Volkswagen before in my life. [Laughs] And, of course, Myrtle was, uh – when we saw her, she was a white woman, but she was actually a black woman. Uh, her hair was long and curly, you know, very fair. And, uh, we were just fascinated with her little bitty car. She decided she wanted to stay, but she needed a place to stay. And me and her just – I guess we hit

it off immediately. She became my big sister that I had lost like a year or two before she showed up.

JM: Your older sister died of leukemia in New York, yeah.

CY: Um-hmm. And, uh, she wound up staying with us, and we got closer and closer. Eventually, you know, she moved out after I guess she got comfortable in the community. She rented her a little house up the street from us. And I could go up there to visit and help her to cook and stuff like that. She was kind of a vegetarian all of her life, so she was in the right community to get all the vegetables she wanted.

But, uh, when she would go somewhere, I would get her to ask Mama to let me go with her, you know. That's how I got to travel, because if it was just me and the guys, I wouldn't have went. [Laughs] You know, "No, that's my daughter." And then, after a while, after my mom and them got to know them real good, she said, "Y'all better protect my baby, now. You look after her. That's my baby." So.

JM: So, because of Myrtle, your experience in the whole Movement changed quite a bit, it sounds like.

CY: Um-hmm, it did. Um, I got a chance to go to Atlanta to different marches and things that was going on there, uh, fighting against, uh, people being refused entrance into colleges, universities, and stuff like that. Uh, I think I spent about a week over there one year. I was like, I'd never seen anything like it in my life. Uh, I don't who this – it may have been the president of one of the black colleges over there that we spent like three or four days in their home. But it was like constant meetings and planning and strategizing. Um, it was interesting.

JM: This was while you're still in West Helena?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Before you moved, yeah.

CY: Yeah, it was before I moved.

JM: And those meetings you were describing were in Atlanta.

CY: Yes.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Huh. Did you have a sense in these years of the tensions that were emerging in SNCC? Obviously, I'm sure you did, that, and –

CY: Yeah.

JM: And how Bill Hansen and Reverend – is it [Ben] Grinage?

CY: Grinage.

JM: Are trying to lead SNCC's Arkansas program forward.

CY: Yeah, I heard little conversations going on, you know. Um, I guess I didn't enter into any of it because I just felt like it was something that would pass. Everybody was in the struggle for the same reason, you know, and you're going to have little squabbles. Like little children, you, you fight this hour, and the next hour you're okay. [Laughs] Um, and then, sometimes when you're dealing with pastors, too, they, you know, they have another way of looking at stuff that you have to learn how to get past. So, and Bill, he was like a – he'd say what he had to say and then he would just go on off, you know.

JM: Bill Hansen?

CY: Um-hmm. Uh, and he had his own family, you know, so he had his privacy that he had somewhere to go and just block everything else out. So, you never knew, unless you were with him, what was going on in his heart, and the same thing with Reverend Grinage.

JM: Yeah. And Bill Hansen had married Ruthie Buffington, right?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: So, they were married by the time you would have –

CY: They were married when I met them.

JM: Yeah.

CY: [Coughs] Yeah. [1:15:00] And some people, you know, in my heart, I guess, I just knew they weren't going to stay around long, because it was sort of like with Jim Hill. When he got threatened and he left, you know, I could appreciate him leaving. I didn't want him to leave, [laughs] but I could appreciate him leaving. That was his life, and he had to do what he thought was best for himself. But, uh, everybody has a family. They had somewhere to go. They didn't come to live. They came to see what they could do to help and change things in our community. And there were some effective changes.

And even when I graduated from high school and went to D.C., I spent – what, six months? Actually, I spent almost a year there. I did spend a year there, because I didn't get married until March of '67. Um, it was, uh, getting married and continually living in the struggle, you know, um, being cautious not to walk down the streets holding hands and stuff like that, you know. That was really when it became alive to me, after we got married.

And, um, I was like, “You know what? If I can't be myself, I might as well not be living in this world.” So, people just had to deal with who I was and who I was married to, and if they wanted to be ugly, that was okay. You know, if I felt like I needed to respond to it, I did. If I didn't need to respond to it, I didn't.

So, and after a while, I mean, we had enough friends that we could socialize with that running into the negativism periodically – it really didn't bother me. It didn't bother me and I don't think it bothered Howard. I don't, because, uh, in the black and white community, we developed a lot of friends. We did.

JM: Yeah. After, um – I want to ask a question and then we'll move on past '66 and reach some of those, some of that history. How did you balance all your involvement in the Movement with getting finished through high school? Was there a lot of –?

CY: Um, just participating in things that was going on in the community at night, um, staying on track with school during the day, you know. Um, if there were activities outside of the community, usually it was on the weekend. If it was something during the week, then I just didn't participate in it, you know. Um, and I guess my last three months or so of high school, uh, I don't know if we did that much traveling. We may have.

I know it was always something going on in the community, you know. Um, every now and then somebody would get threatened. We'd have to deal with that, um, stand guard. We could – with Jerry Casey being on the team and being one of the young men from the community, he had friends and family that he could call upon to help give oversight and protection and security around one of the Freedom Houses.

That was – it was just one house they just, two or three times, I know they tried, they shot into it once. They threw a couple of Molotov cocktails at it a couple of different times. And because they were nearby, I think after a while they realized that people were looking, you know, protecting these places where the guys were living and everything, and they backed off.

But it – like Michael Simmons, I know he was one of them. He didn't make no bones about it. He said, "Man, I'm not dying up in here for nobody!" You know. Do you know Michael?

JM: No.

CY: But he's, he was just a down to earth type person. So, I think he stayed like one summer and then he left.

JM: Well, your – that, that recollection brings to mind, of course, the whole, that tension inside SNCC, especially in these years, '64, '65, '66, the whole, the questioning about the whole theory and practice of nonviolence, and if that –

CY: Yeah. Now, that I remember because of, uh, our desire to help Martin Luther King, and Martin positioned us to get killed all the time. You know, his activities positioned people to get killed. It's no [laughs] question about it. And SNCC's focus was nonviolence.

Um, [1:20:00] and, of course, H. Rap Brown and the Black Panther Party came out of that, because some people were saying, "I'm picking up my gun," you know. "This killing of blacks gotta stop." And so, the Black Panther Movement came out of that. The, uh – what was it? The National Liberation Army came out of it, with, um, the students coming out of Cornell University with the guns strapped around them and stuff, which one of those young men was from Little Rock, Ed Whitfield. You probably know him, don't you?

JM: I don't, actually.

CY: And he lives –

JM: Oh!

CY: I think he lives in Chapel Hill, doesn't he?

JM: What was his first name?

CY: Ed.

JM: Oh, I do actually know about Ed Whitfield, yeah, yeah.

CY: Um-hmm. Um, let's see, it was Ed, Larry Dixon, and Eric somebody. I forget what Eric's last name was. But it was the three young men that was on the front of that paper. They all came – the two of them came home with Ed when he came, and I think they may have stayed a year or two before they actually left. And when they left, Ed left and came to North Carolina

to further his education and actually got married and lived there for several years and may still be there. Um, but those, um – I guess that was part of the reason why I was in Memphis when, um, Martin Luther King got killed.

JM: Yeah. Can you tell me about from '66 through '68, and then we'll even go beyond that? So, you left in May of '66?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: To Washington.

CY: Right, and stayed up there until actually that Christmas of '66. And right after Christmas, I came to Little Rock, and me and Howard planned our wedding. And went to New York in March, got married, stayed up there for six weeks.

Um, then after that, just came back and kind of – I was going to school to become a keypunch operator with, uh, OIC, which was the Opportunities Industrialization Center that was a new organization, to the South anyway, to try and help blacks, um, acquire vocational skills where they could get into the job market and make a decent living. So, I got in that class so I could get me a skill and go to work.

And, of course, I became a [pause] – I'm trying to look for the name for it. [Laughs] I was suing people left and right for not hiring me, and I knew I was qualified, and I was passing their tests to get the jobs and stuff. So, I won a couple of major lawsuits in Pulaski County, uh, for class, not just because I was black, but because of women and blacks.

JM: Yeah, class actions.

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: And Pulaski County, just for the record, that's, that's here in Little Rock.

CY: Right.

JM: Yeah.

CY: And, uh, one of those companies was AMF Cycle and the other one was National Old Line Life Insurance Company. And AMF actually left Arkansas and went to Israel, I believe, and opened up their company over there. I found that out in the last couple of years. [Laughs] And, uh, National Old Line, I mean, that was a major, major win for women and blacks, because they had a lot of women working for them.

JM: When did you begin filing those suits?

CY: In 1967.

JM: Wow, as soon as that, yeah. That was just after you and Howard came back here.

CY: Right.

JM: Yeah.

CY: I graduated, um, from OIC that same year, I believe it was, and I got a job with the state capitol as the first black, uh, office worker in the administration office, through much toil. [Laughs]

JM: Right, because prior that, there was the whole episode of –

CY: Not even being able to eat there, and the cafeteria was still closed and everything. So, um – when I started to work there, though, I was, I was hired to work in, uh, the motor vehicle department. Very tough area to work in. Um, you know when you go and purchase a vehicle and you had to – at that time, it was a [1:25:00] three-part paper that was like four-by-five or something like that. And every one of those pieces of paper had a different handwriting on it, because the individual was the one that filled it out. We were allowed three mistakes per batch, and in each batch was anywhere from three hundred to five hundred pieces of paper.

Well, Mrs. Carrie Himmelbaum was up to the task, but my director just didn't want me there. And God had positioned in the computer environment a young man that, uh, we were friends of his family. And the very first night my husband picked me up, they took the tags off the vehicle and ran a check and found out I was married to this white guy. And I guess at that point this man just determined he was going to get rid of me.

So, after my ninety-day period, he told my supervisor to get rid of me. He didn't care how she did it; just do it. So, she was very sympathetic and, in her dismissing me, she told me that, um, if I needed a reference, she'd be more than glad to give me a reference. She said, "But Mr. Lozano wants you out of here." I said, "Okay." I didn't part – I said, "I'll take the reference letter." [Laughs]

And, of course, I went home and told my husband what had happened. So, we went to John Walker, attorney John Walker, and, uh, told him what had happened. We worked up all of the details. We didn't even get to court on that one. We just went straight to Governor [Winthrop] Rockefeller and, uh, gave him all the paperwork. And he set up a meeting and everything. So, here I'm going up in there to the conference room for the governor, great big old office. I ain't never been in an office this big, big table, big chairs, you know, and, uh, my name on every folder. So, I'm just standing there observing everything.

And Director Lozano comes in the room and sees my name on the folder and picks it up and says, "When I get rid of somebody, don't nobody hire them back!" And about that time Governor Rockefeller came in the door, and he said, "Well, you can just go to your office and get your things and leave, because you won't be working here anymore." [Laughs]

JM: So, the governor just fired the head of the Department of Motor Vehicles because he had illegally terminated you.

CY: Exactly.

JM: Yeah, and it's an interesting thing about – I wonder what you thought about Rockefeller, because he's that curious case. He's the first Republican governor elected in Arkansas since Reconstruction, and it was because, partly because of all the voter work –

CY: That we did.

JM: Exactly!

CY: And it was, um, I think a lot of it was because of, uh, the Human Resource Council [note: this was likely the Council on Human Relations] that, um, Mr. Elijah Coleman was the head of at the time and another young woman, his secretary, Barbara Graves. She was white, and I think Barbara may have even been from Stuttgart, Arkansas. So, you know, [clears throat] people on the team came from, uh, all different directions of Arkansas, um, different races, different ideas, but all with a forward vision.

JM: And wasn't your husband working for –?

CY: The Arkansas Council on Human Relations?

JM: Yeah.

CY: He – I don't know if he was with them or if he was with the Urban League. He did some – I think he did like some freelance work for the Arkansas Council on Human Relations.

JM: Okay, okay.

CY: Um, because, you know, people, believe it or not, I think some of the people was like, "Well, I don't know if we should hire a white man to work for us," you know. They didn't just come out and say it. But they didn't want to see us starving, okay? [Laughs] Uh, so he did a little freelance stuff and he finally landed a position with the Urban League.

JM: But Mr. Coleman headed up the Human Relations Committee?

CY: Right.

JM: Yeah, okay.

CY: And, see, Howard had his way of dealing with things that I think he threatened some people, and I think Mr. Coleman was one of those people. He liked him, but he wasn't sure he wanted him around. Um [pause], I lost my thought.

JM: Well, you, you got your job back.

CY: Yeah.

JB: Let's pause for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay, we're back after a short break.

CY: Anyway, I got my job back, [1:30:00] but let me just back up and make this point. In getting the job, they ran me around from the Revenue Building, which was like two blocks west of the state capitol, back to the state capitol about three or four times. It was hot, and they were paving the asphalt, which made it even hotter and smelly. So, after about the second time of me walking down there and walking back, walking down there and walking back, I decided to take my shoes off, not knowing what was going to happen to my feet.

But after I walked down there barefooted and walked back, there was a young man on the state capitol grounds that knew me, a white man. He said, "Aren't you Howard Himmelbaum's wife?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Why are you walking with your shoes off?" So, I began to explain to him what was going on.

He just sat there and observed everything. And he put it in the paper. [Laughs] And the paper that he worked for wasn't the *Arkansas Democrat* or the *Arkansas Gazette*, which is now

the *Arkansas Democrat*. It wasn't either one of them. It was another freelance paper. It may have been the *Arkansas Times*, I'm not sure. But, uh, he put it in there, you know, so that people would hear about it. And then he called Howard to tell him what was going on.

JM: And the story that he wrote was about how you were getting the runaround on all this –

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: And you had taken your shoes off because –?

CY: My feet were getting tired! Have you been to the state capitol?

JM: Yeah, yeah.

CY: Okay. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah, yeah.

CY: And, uh, it took me like weeks to get all that black tar off the bottom of my feet, by the way.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

CY: But they finally got the idea that this woman is determined, and she's not going away, they decided to give me the test there at the state capitol in the administration office. And what they gave me the test on was something that I could have done with my eyes closed, literally. They gave me thirty minutes to take the test. I had to program my own card and do all this, which I was very proficient at. I did all that and then took the test four times, and I still had time left. I just got tired of taking it and stopped.

JM: Did it four times instead of one time, yeah.

CY: So, I got hired to go to work for the motor vehicle department, and after he fired me, and the governor rehired me, then I actually began to work there in the administration office until I quit.

JM: And then, there's the irony of, as you say, you go to work in the capitol as the first African American working there, and you've got this Republican governor elected with all this black support, which is what gets him into the office, and then you can't eat in the cafeteria.

CY: Right.

JM: Yeah.

CY: So, it's – it was quite an experience, though.

JM: How did you and Howard continue your involvement, because, as you say, you're going to be in Memphis in '68?

CY: Well, it's just – [pauses]

JM: Were you still formally – I mean, SNCC is really kind of beginning to come apart in '67, '68.

CY: Yeah, but – I mean, me and him stayed married until 1978, I believe it was. Um, I worked most of that time. But – oh, I know what I did. After I left the state capitol, I went and put in application with Kelly Services, so I could work part-time. That way I could not take a job or take a job. [Laughs] And, uh, that worked out fine for me until I got to that point, you know, that I wanted my own car, I wanted this, you know how it happens. And so, I wound up going to work for American Life Insurance Company, I believe is what it was called. I worked for them a couple of years, and then I went to work for Southwestern Bell and worked for them for fourteen years.

JM: Yeah.

CY: But during that time between probably '68, '69 to '71, it was active in the BUY, Black United Youth, um, then traveling to Memphis, Atlanta, West Helena, McGhee, uh, Earl, Arkansas. I was in Earl, Arkansas, the night that, um, they had decided they were going to force the black children to go to – [1:35:00] they closed the black high school and forced everybody to go to the white high school. So, uh, because of the Black United Youth group, people were coming to Little Rock asking us for help. So, we would go to support them. And it was probably a good thing we were there, because, I mean, they beat people that night.

I was walking by this little old lady. And this state trooper came in between us, and he had his .357 magnum up, going – he'd pull his trigger and say, "Run, nigger! Pow! Run, nigger!" And this little old lady on this walking cane, right? And he finally reached over and knocked her walking cane out from under her. And I was like, "Do this man see me over here?!" Because he acted just like he didn't even see me!

And they were going behind bushes and beating people, and I'm walking! And then, this pickup truck comes by, people running, police shooting, just to scare people, because I guess they knew we didn't have any weapons and stuff. But we really did have weapons, but they weren't with us. They were in our car.

[Clears throat] And, um, so we got back to the house. Uh, I believe Ed [Whitfield], Larry Dixon, and Eric was with us, Robert Broadwater, myself, a young woman named Katenga, um, and we got back to the house where we had started from. And, of course, everybody had their guns out.

JM: This is in Earl?

CY: In Earl. And, uh, I don't remember exactly what year that was, but it was the year they desegregated the high schools. Now, of course, like I said, they closed the black high school.

JM: Yeah.

CY: Left the white one open. And, uh, word got back to Little Rock that I had been picked up by these white men in a pickup truck, and they drove off with me. So, attorney Walker called the governor, and the governor sent out the state, the National Guard to see what was going on and everything. [Laughs]

So, when I got back to Little Rock, because I actually – I became an expert driver because of the Movement. And, uh, we were driving a Mustang. My friend, Bob Broadwell, had a Mustang. He said, "Carrie, you drive, and I'm riding shotgun." There were about four or five of us in the car. I drove, got out of there and got back, and Howard said, "John got the [laughs] National Guard headed to Earl looking for you." So, he said, "You better get on the phone and call him."

JM: Because you hadn't been picked up by that –?

CY: No, um-um. But they was – I mean, the way they was driving, they was driving and knocking people over and stuff like this. And I don't know how that word got to him that that had happened. But I called him and let him know what was going on. And then, of course, they wanted to meet with all of us and find out exactly what had happened and everything. And it was – I mean, it was the craziest thing. All the marches I'd been in, I had never seen anything go as haywire as that, and through no provocation of anybody that was there! The police just decided they wanted to be bullies!

JM: Right, right. Tell – can you take me back and tell me about Bobby Brown and BUY?

CY: Bobby Brown was like a –

JM: And the philosophy, too, of BUY.

CY: The philosophy was just to protect the black youth, especially in the college environment, make sure that they had student union representation, you know – and you're probably aware of that, being from Chapel Hill, because that was one of the things that they were fighting for when I went to Durham – um, having black leadership within that system and not just putting our children into the institutions of higher learning and have no representation or consideration, for that matter. That's basically what it was all about.

And it had to also start in the high schools since we were now integrating, or desegregating, all of the schools on all levels. It needed to be in the high schools, as well. So, that was our focus, and we were trying to get the students to, you know, come home and share what's going on in the schools that you know is not right. That if you feel like your teacher is not treating you properly, come share that.

Well, I think the parents kind of blocked it. We had a few young men to come in, um, especially from what we called the South End of Little Rock, and a few from West Little Rock, because [1:40:00] their parents seemed to be, um, economically a little stronger, more secure than the children that was in East Little Rock. East Little Rock was your more poor class of people. College Station was kind of an isolated black community of its own that was very strong, uh, economically and spiritually, and is to this day. [Laughs] And, uh –

JM: So, Bobby Brown. Tell me about – oh, I'm sorry.

CY: Bobby was *militant*. That was Bobby. And Bobby had influence of the street guys. He and the street guys were really, really tough. So, Bobby Brown from Little Rock, Bob Broadwater from Blytheville, which is like northeast Arkansas, who was also a graduate of Philander Smith College.

JM: Here in Little Rock.

CY: Yes, and he was married. His wife was a teacher. And he was a news announcer with KOKY radio station. [Phone rings]

JM: Oh, let's take a little break.

CY: [Coughs]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back after a short break for the phone. You were just describing, uh, uh, uh, Bob – is it Broadwater?

CY: Broadwater.

JM: And KOKY.

CY: Yes. He was a grad – Bob Broadwater was a graduate of Philander Smith. He worked at KOKY at the time I met him, under the directorship of a man named Larry Hayes. And, uh, both he and Larry were focused on bringing the black perspective to the media, uh, so that people would know exactly what was going on. And because of that, he and Bobby Brown became collaborators together.

But, of course, Bob Broadwater being from where he was from, he was interested in becoming and playing an active part in the Movement as well. So, they kind of had some little clashes, too, power struggles, uh, mainly because Bobby Brown was, like, hated white folks. I

mean, I'll just put it out there. His thing was, "I hate white folks. I don't want to have nothing to do with them," you know. Bob Broadwater is, "Man, we can't work in this world without all the people," you know, "and we have to learn how to work with each other."

And we battled that through getting, uh, Governor Rockefeller elected as governor. We had, you know, factions going on on the inside and stuff like that, but – you know, dealing with, "What is our alternative? Okay, let's go talk to Governor Rockefeller ourselves. We – let's get the Urban League out of the way. Let's get the Arkansas Council on Human Relations out of the way. Because we don't want nobody selling our vote."

You know, we deal with that today, so – and John Walker was involved in all these negotiations as well – um, because [clears throat] the struggle today, if you allow certain people to take your words to establish things, then you get booted out, and the people don't get served. So, that was our concern and our focus that, if we're going to elect this man governor, he needs to know what it is that we want – not what y'all want, but what we want.

And, uh, Bobby, he was a good bodyguard, okay? [Laughs] He had that, uh, that pizzazz that was needed for any struggle, for any person in power. You need somebody that can have the strong arm and know how to communicate, too. Um, I don't think he was ever able to really, um, bring his vision to the community where people could receive him, you know. But there were those of us, and I was one of them, I respected him for what he brought to the table, you know.

His sister was like a forerunner because of her participation in the Little Rock Nine and everything. I know his family had gone through a lot because of that. People may, after years, um, appreciate what happened [1:45:00] as a result, but when you're in it, they're afraid. And

sometimes even the silence is worse than those who are speaking out, and I know that affected him.

JM: Yeah, yeah. What took you down to Memphis in '68?

CY: Just –

JM: To hear Dr. King?

CY: Not so much to hear him as to support him.

JM: Yeah.

CY: To be there for protection, to be eyes and ears. Um, that's basically what we did, uh, to increase the view, you know. A lot of times they didn't want the sisters there because they knew when Dr. King showed up on the scene, there were going to be guns aimed at him. They knew that. Um, and like I said earlier, that's why the Black Liberation Army came, that's why, um, the Black Panther Movement came – it was for the protection of a leader, nothing else. It wasn't to go out and kill white folks. It was for protection of a leader. Uh, we may not have agreed with all of Dr. King's methods of getting where he wanted to go, but we didn't want to see him dead, you know. And we all played a part in the struggle and got things accomplished in our own way. And, uh, the wrong people were the closest to him. That's all I can say, because if the right people had been closest to him, I think he would have lived a little longer. But, um, there isn't nothing you can do about that.

JM: What was your frame of mind in the late '60s after Dr. King is killed, and you're obviously married to a white man you've met in the Movement, and, um – but the Movement has changed quite a bit by the late '60s from its earlier form? Can you recall your sense of perspective on this society, if its prospects were very positive, if –?

CY: I didn't see, um – I saw some change, but I didn't see the change I wanted to see. Wrong people got in office, wrong people got the best-paying jobs in corporate America, uh, people got access to higher education – and in all those three categories I just named, I think people very casually forgot where they came from and how they got to where they were. The story was not kept alive. And those of us who wanted to continue to talk about it, like a Bobby Brown or a Carrie Himmelbaum, we got put down or pushed to the side, you know. Um, “Don't want to hear that. America is okay now.” But now we're in 2011, and we know that America is not okay.

JM: Yeah. What changes did you hope that the Movement would produce that weren't emerging?

CY: Um, mine personal was economic change, um, blacks in business, okay, uh, to have the same access. See, my, my, my struggle was not about being as good as the white man. My struggle was about – and I think everybody's was, and people lost focus on that – it was about civil rights. It was about holding up the Constitution of the United States of America.

And I saw a shift when people began to come back from the Vietnam War. I saw a major shift because of the drugs that came with it. White America became addicted to drugs. They had to stand before the judge just like black people did. And *white people* changed the law to protect their children! That's what I saw!

That's what I see today. They just killed that young man, Mr. Davis [Troy Anderson Davis put to death September 2011 by the State of Georgia, despite much controversy as to his guilt].

JM: In Georgia.

CY: No evidence whatsoever! You know, that's not a country that's growing! And those are the things that people should be talking about. Not only black people should have been out in their yard, but *all* people should have been out in their yard, saying, "No, we're [1:50:00] not going to let you do that. You can't do that. This is 2011. We don't kill people without evidence."

JM: Right. This is a man, just for the record, this is a man who was executed last week in Georgia by Georgia state authorities for, purportedly, for a murder twenty-two years ago. And everyone up to and including the former Republican Attorney General of the United States petitioned the state not to move forward with the execution. Yeah.

Um, did you, how long did, how long did your – moving into the 1970s, how long did you have an organized framework for continuing your activism? How long did, how long did, uh, BUY persist in an organized form?

CY: Um, I believe up until about 1970, '70, '71, somewhere in there, yeah.

JM: Did you have organized vehicles after that for your activism?

CY: Uh, no. No more so than – most of the things seemed to generate out of Atlanta. You had the SCLC that had been, um, developed, um, the Southern Cooperative, and there was another group, too. And they all, it's like everything merged into Atlanta and kind of went out from there. Um, Mr. [Floyd] McKissick's group, you know. Um, and then, of course, Julian Bond went into politics. Andrew Young went into politics. Marion Barry went into politics. And it, you know, again, it's like the vision was lost with them. These were great opportunities that we missed.

JM: How did you read [Barack] Obama's election?

CY: How did I read it? [Coughs] Can I say the n-word on there?

JM: Sure.

CY: [Laughs] I saw – in Little Rock, looking from Little Rock, um, but I could do it nationally. But from a personal perspective, um, I saw a numbness in Little Rock. I didn't see people looking at a man who, um, had achieved, um, acceptance as a political leader and a possibility to run this county. It was like there was just a flat-out refusal to even look at him until after the primary.

And, matter of fact, I sent out an email last week in a response to a big blast that somebody put out about us coming together and supporting Obama. And I suggested that we put our money where our mouth is, because, number one, that's the first thing he needs to be reelected.

And then, I shared with them how I felt threatened when he first ran for office, because I just – when I read about him running and I knew the things that he had already tried to do and accomplish as a political figure in America and in the State of Illinois, I said, “You know what? I can't find any reason why I shouldn't support this man after all I have struggled for in America to get blacks in a position like this.” He fit every category, okay?

And I was offended in several areas. The first one I was offended in is that we would ask him for a résumé. In sixty years of my life, I've never heard of a president, a person running for presidency, asked to give a résumé.

JM: Do you mean a birth certificate?

CY: [Clears throat] No, résumé. He was asked for a résumé. [Clears throat] The birth certificate came later, you know.

JM: That was a whole other issue, right.

CY: Uh, I mean, the only résumé you're ever supposed to need is to be an American citizen, right? Born in America, rather, and be what – twenty-one?

JM: Forty. [Note: U.S. Constitution establishes a minimum age of thirty-five years for eligibility to serve as president.]

CY: Forty? And he met them! As long as he was senator, wasn't nobody questioning where he was from.

JM: Yeah.

CY: [Laughs] You know what I'm saying?

JM: When you were saying the numbness, are you saying in the black community? Certainly in the white community, there was a whole other issue.

CY: I think I'm saying in the black community, in the black community here, [1:55:00] and maybe it was just because this is a Clinton favor or something.

JM: Yeah. Oh, right, right, right, right, right.

CY: So, I had – and they're going to come out here in a little bit, but I have my box of memorabilia where I went online to the Democratic website and ordered a little flag for my vehicle and signs for my windows and all this stuff. And I would drive down the streets, and people would look at me like I was crazy. I got asked to be quiet in a place, a public place, that I spent money to get my taxes prepared every year, because I was talking about Obama in a positive way.

JM: Wow. Yeah.

JB: Joe, I want to pause for just a minute to, um –

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: We're back after a short break, and we have swapped drives, hard drives, for the recording. So, uh, Ms. Young, you were talking about President Obama.

CY: And President Obama, one thing I would like to say. Um, overall, I support him, um, and I'll say this with no hesitation: The main reason I supported President Obama is because he was a black man that was qualified. Number two, I don't agree with everything President Obama has done, and I probably won't agree with everything he'll do in the future. But no other president have I had the opportunity to vote for have I ever agreed with everything that he said or did, okay?

And, uh, I will say this to black America: If you can't, um, usher yourself into a spirit of support and cooperation with President Barack Obama, and you'll probably hear this after the fact, so if you *didn't*, you need to examine yourself, because you missed one of the greatest opportunities of your life. Our parents died for this day. Our children have died for this day, both black, white, Jew, Indian, Chinese, what-have-you, have died for the day to have a black man as a president of the United States of America. And for us not to have supported him *the way we could have*, and whether we like to admit it or not, we have done some deliberate things to hinder prosperity and success in America in the last three years. Can't deny it!

Um, I think as a president, I would have loved to seen him be a stronger Christian, and not, uh, signed some of the things into law that he has, because they just go against Christianity. Um, I think people's, um, freedom of speech has been compromised for the hate word. I think it's a trick of the devil, and people need to fight for their liberty to speak whatever they want to speak. And we should be mature enough to either hear it or tune it out.

As a black woman in America, I've had to deal with that all my life. So, if I want to call a person, uh, a faggot, I shouldn't have to worry about going to jail for that. That's part of my freedom of speech. If I want to call somebody a nigger, that's part of my freedom of speech. My dad called my mom that all the time as a pet word, okay? So, it's about the hearer and the giver and the state that it's being used in. But because America is so caught up today having a black person in office, they want to cut off every liberty you can think of.

JM: Umm. Let me ask you about, um, let me ask you about your year in Durham in, I think it was 1970-71, is that correct?

CY: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

CY: It was interesting. [Laughs] Um, I had several reasons for wanting to go. I think [2:00:00] a lot of my reasoning had to do with, um, acceptance. Had nothing to do with the fact that I was married to a white man at the time, because I was married to Howard Himmelbaum at the time. Part of it was acceptance. I needed to know black folks. The black folks that I knew growing up in West Helena I didn't like, and they didn't like me.

JM: Your family was not one of the elite black families, so to speak.

CY: There you go. That's right. Now I'm with people who are supposed to be fighting for equal rights and liberty and justice for all, uh, and I had the understanding that just because the name of the school was Malcolm X Liberation University, it wasn't a black/white thing, but it's about education, you know, and understanding who you are.

And we actually studied the different races and the different ethnic groups in Africa and in Mexico. And we learned martial arts, you know, which is about self-control and all this, you know. Um, we looked for opportunities in the community to participate in different things where

we could support. We even came to Chapel Hill a couple of times with some activities that was going on over there and participated in those things.

Um, but even there, people couldn't see past color. And I had a couple of people that didn't appreciate when my husband came to visit me. I think it was either Thanksgiving or Christmas. Some of the people didn't know that I was married to a white guy, right, so it became an issue. So, I said, "You know what? It's time for me to go." Because where racism is I don't want to be there.

We are all created in God's image, and that's how I look at people. I try not to see white and black. And if you bring it up, I might look at you and say, um, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ?" If you don't believe Jesus is the Christ, I say, "Oh, then you *are* white," and that's the way I'll treat you. But if you tell me you believe Jesus is the Christ, I can't see you're white, because if you don't have the understanding it's going come. [Laughs]

JM: Are there other – I have one remaining question, too, but are there other, um, other issues that we haven't touched on that you'd like to touch on?

CY: No, I don't think so. Um, I'd like to say this.

JM: Yeah, please.

CY: As having the opportunity to sit here and be interviewed by you all, I would like to thank Myrtle Glascoe and people like her, who understand that there are people like me out here in the field who gave all they had to give to the struggle of equal rights for all men and women, not only in America, but in the world. And I think you gentlemen are doing a fantastic job. Um, I'm sure if you think of something when you get home that you left out, you know you can feel free to call me, and we can elaborate on it at a later date.

JM: Thank you.

CY: But I'd just like to thank the Lord for this opportunity and thank the Lord for a wonderful director that I have at Modern Woodmen of America, named Albert Hurst, Jr., Albert T. Hurst, Jr., who gave me time off to come home and do this interview with you all.

JM: Oh, wonderful, thank you. One final question, um, on our side; it's sort of a point of personal privilege, but also connects to the Movement. You knew someone John knew, and that was Worth Long.

CY: Oh, yes! [Laughs]

JM: And I wonder if you give a description of Worth?

CY: Um, Worth Long was an odd man – a sweet man, but he danced to a shore-nuf different beat. He was always very pleasant, very respectful. Um, he kind of flowed with the wind, you know, when he was around you. He just – he always had a little bag on his arm and he was just always pleasant. He really was. Um, I never really got to know him, because he wasn't around that much in the area where I was. [2:05:00] But when he would come to West Helena, he would make sure he came to visit my parents.

JM: Yeah. Well, it's been a real honor and a privilege, Ms. Young. Thank you so much for the warm welcome.

CY: Thank you.

JM: And it's been a wonderful thing to set this down for the collection. Thank you so much.

CY: Thank you. Uh-oh, I've got to sit here, don't I? [Laughs]

JB: Yeah, just sit there for one second, yeah.

[Recording ends at 2:05:25]

END OF INTERVIEW