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Interviewee:	Ms. Euvester Simpson
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John Dittmer: Today is Tuesday, March 11, 2013. My name is John Dittmer, and I am here in Jackson, Mississippi, with videographer John Bishop to interview Ms. Euvester Simpson, a leading activist in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. This interview will become part of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

Ms. Simpson, we are delighted to be here today and we thank you for taking the time to talk with us. Let's begin by talking about your early life. Where were you born and raised?

Euvester Simpson: I was born in the Mississippi Delta in Itta Bena, and I lived there until I was about 14 years old. I'm the youngest of seven children. And during part of my parents' earlier marriage, they—well, my father was a butcher by trade. But as times changed, part of their lives were spent as sharecroppers. And when they had times that were good, they would leave the plantation and move to—and once they moved to Greenwood, and several of my siblings were born when they actually lived in Greenwood.

Now, my mother is from, originally from the Mound Bayou area. She was born and lived and grew up until she was 18 on her grandfather's farm. My great-grandfather actually attended college, and I think he must have been in that first generation after Emancipation Proclamation. So, he actually went to college. He was a teacher and he was a minister. He pastored a church and he owned a farm. And my mother was born, and she grew up there until she met my father.

And it's really funny. [Laughs] I have to tell this story if we have a minute to let me digress. My mother once told me how she met my father. It was during revival at my great-grandfather's church. And my great-grandfather owned a car. He actually bought a brand new car. I think it was a Model T. And it was the kind that you had to go out—when you started it, you had to go crank it up.

So, she had met my father during the course of the revival, and within a few days, he had convinced her to elope with him. And she said, well, she was really not sure about it, so she asked God to give her a sign if she wasn't supposed to do that. So, they went out, and she had put on two of everything, two dresses, just doubled up, because she knew she was eloping. And she went—they went out and got in the car. And my great-grandfather—she called him Buddy—and she said, "Buddy went out to start the car, and he was cranking and cranking, and it wouldn't start." And she said, "A brand new car!" And she said, "That was my sign, and I knew it! *But* I ignored Him anyway! I ignored that sign! [Laughter] And so, the next night, the car started, and we eloped."

And when my parents got married, they moved to a farm that was owned by a friend of my great-grandfather's, and that's where they set up their life at first. And while they were living on that, this particular man owned a lot of acreage, and he had many tenants on his land. And so, my parents rented land from him, and they farmed. And life was good until, you know, later on when things changed, and this man lost his land, and my great-grandfather lost his land somehow. And then, they had to do sharecropping and other things in order to make a living for a while.

And when I was maybe 10 or 11, they finally left the plantation and we moved. We actually moved to Itta Bena. And during those years, my oldest sister, I mean my only sister got married when I was nine years old. And she moved to Chicago, and I would spend summers with her. And eventually—now, I'm going to talk a little bit about how the school year, the school system, was set up when I was growing up.

JD: Yeah, please do.

ES: In I'm not sure what year—I attended elementary school at Ellis Rogers. That was on the campus of Valley State University. And by the time—and then I, during the seventh grade, seventh through the ninth grade, I attended school that was in Itta Bena right across the street from where we lived. [0:05:00]

And when I got to the tenth grade, the school system had—the school board had consolidated the entire school system. And they built a brand new school where all the black kids had to be bused in from across the county. And the name of that school was Amanda Elzy. And the problem with that is that, you know, some of the kids—I mean, we, it took us about maybe 45 minutes to get to school, to an hour. But some of the kids lived in, you know, the far end of the counties, and it took a long time for them to get there.

And so, at that point, we had what they call a split session, where we would go to school in the middle of the summer, so the kids could be out to pick cotton or—no, not chop, but pick cotton during the fall. And so, I was the last child that my parents were raising, and they were just kind of fed up with, you know, with the way the educational system was working. And so, she talked to my older sister, and they decided that I would move to Racine when I was fourteen. So, I moved to Racine—

JD: Okay.

ES: To—

JD: Yeah.

ES: To go to high school.

JD: I would—yeah, that is—I want to spend some time on that with the contrast.

ES: Okay.

JD: That was very interesting what you were saying. But you grew up in the Mississippi Delta, which somebody called the most Southern place on earth.

ES: Um-hmm.

JD: Tell us a little bit about what it was like to be in the Delta.

ES: Okay. Let me have a sip of water. My parents were like most of the people, most of the other people in my community. They were, you know, economically depressed. It was totally segregated. All the schools were segregated. The neighborhoods were segregated. Most of the people made their living by either sharecropping or hiring themselves out as dayworkers to go and chop and pick cotton. You know, of course, there were the teachers and the preachers and some shop owners, because everything was totally segregated. You know, we, it was like a self-sufficient community. We had, you know, dry cleaners and, of course, there were lots of churches and beauty parlors, and maybe a convenience store or two. Because my father later in life—this is after, let me see, I must have been 17 or 18—he opened a convenience store and he ran that little store. It was actually built right next to the house that they owned.

But in the earlier years, it was a very close-knit community where everybody looked out for everybody else. And one of the things—but, of course, nobody was, um—I mean, everybody knew their place, I mean, they knew. But most of these people had at some point been independent, and either them or their parents had owned land until probably somewhere around the ’20s or the ’30s. Most people lost their land, and that’s when they became sharecroppers and totally dependent on the white people who had the economic power and everything else. And so, their lives—they felt like they had no power except to do as they were told to do in this really confined economically depressed area. So—

JD: What was—how did you spend your days when you were a kid? Did you work in the fields? Did you—?

ES: Oh, I did a little bit, but, I mean, I was really young when we were—I tried to chop cotton. Wasn’t very good at it, cut it all down, and I wasn’t allowed to do it anymore, which was fine with me, because I’m not an outdoorsy person. I can’t stand bugs. And, I mean, being a country girl from the Delta, you would think I’d have no problems, but I’m scared to death of [laughs] all kinds of bugs and spiders and things. And I was never—I tried to pick cotton. I think maybe once or twice I may have picked about fifty pounds. And, you know, that was not going to cut it, when there were people picking maybe three and four hundred pounds of cotton a day. But you have to remember I was only—you know, I was a kid.

JD: Yeah. What did you do to have fun?

ES: Oh, I played with my friends! Mud cakes, cooking, and pretending to be, you know, cooking. And we didn’t have very many toys. We only received toys at Christmas. You know, I got one toy at Christmas, and then lots and lots of food and fruits and nuts and things. Now, one thing—okay, I mentioned earlier that my father was a butcher by trade. So, what that meant was that in the fall [0:10:00]—now, my brother just reminded me of this recently, because I don't have a great memory of this. But in the fall, all the neighbors would get my father to come around to their house and kill a hog or something. And so, if he was not paid—I don't think he was paid in money. He was probably paid in cuts of meat.

Because I remember once when we were living on a plantation, we actually had a smokehouse. And it was—and once—I mean, we were not allowed in it, but there were—I went in it, and it just about scared me to death. I saw all these great big hams hanging up. And my mother made homemade sausages, and so, it was just packed full of that kind of stuff. And when I was growing up, they also had huge gardens with all kinds of fresh vegetables. And in the fall, my mother would can or make, you know, dry peas and beans, but there was all kinds of fruits and vegetables that my mother—

JD: Did your siblings then pitch in with all the work on the—?

ES: Oh, yes! Yes, everybody did. And I guess, because I was the youngest, I mean, I didn't have to do very much.

JD: Yeah, yeah.

ES: And my sister absolutely hated it, and all of them did not like farming. None of them liked farm work. And I have a brother who lives in Detroit now, and he is—he's 81 years old. So, there was—you know, there was—my mother had like five kids, and then there was a gap, and then she had two more at the end. And so, I'm that last one that she had. But I had a conversation with my brother. He came down here last year and the year before. He's still driving. He gets in his car and he drives down here. I mean, he gets around like he's 60.

So, he was telling me that when he was like—okay, I have seven—there are seven of us in all. I grew up with four, with three other siblings and myself. So, by the time I was three years old, my three older siblings were gone. They just couldn't take it anymore. They left. And my brother, Sylvester, who lives in Detroit, was telling me that when they first left home that they actually went to live with my grandparents for a while. And they, my grandparents lived right outside of Itta Bena in a little community called Berclair.

And that's—and he told me that him and my older brothers, my other two brothers, actually worked for the city of Greenwood, and they worked for the power company. And I had no knowledge of this. And so, they worked for the city of Greenwood, I think, picking up garbage and actually driving the garbage truck. So, and my family, too, is a part of, you know, the Great Migration. They went—as soon as they were old enough, they all left and they went North and they worked in the auto industry. And, you know, they would send boxes of clothes back and things back, you know, when—because they all had good jobs and they bought property. And they were doing well.

JD: Yeah. What were your aspirations? What did you want to do when you grew up?

ES: Well, when I—I thought that I would become an actor.

JD: Uh-huh.

ES: That's what I had a passion for.

JD: Did you go to the movies a lot?

ES: No, not really. Well, yeah, sometimes I went to the movies. But when I was in like the third grade, I used to—you know, I had the leading roles in the plays. When I was in the seventh grade or so, I got picked to have the leading role in the senior production. And, now what happened, though, I probably would have had more experience as an actor, acting, but when I left at 14 and I went to Racine, it was a cultural shock. I went to a school that, out of 2000 kids, there were maybe, like 10 percent of them were black, okay? And so, I joined the Dramatics Club and I never got picked for a part, you know. They were doing *Antigone* and things like that.

And so, I remember that the only part that I ever got was—[laughs] when we did *Winnie the Pooh*. I played the rabbit in *Winnie the Pooh*. Of course, you're wearing all this makeup, and nobody can tell what you are or anything. So, that was a big disappointment. And so, it was just a cultural shock for me to be—all the teachers were white. Even the janitors, the cooks in the cafeteria, everybody was white.

JD: Well, by the time you got there, you had seen things that none of your classmates up North had seen. I was just doing some statistical checking, and the lynching of Emmett Till occurred when you were what—about ten years old?

ES: I was ten. I think I must have been—let's see, that was '54 or '55? [0:15:00]

JD: Yeah.

ES: I was nine years old.

JD: '55, yeah.

ES: Oh, I can tell you about that. I remember we used to get the *Jet* magazine. And, of course, we had heard about Emmett Till. I was the first one to get the magazine and I started flipping through it. And I got to this page where this picture of him was, you know, and oh! I just remember screaming and throwing it across the room and I never wanted to see it again! You know, it was just absolutely horrible, just horrible!

JD: This was the bloated corpse that Mamie Till, Emmett's mother, insisted that the coffin be open.

ES: Exactly.

JD: And thousands of people filed by in Chicago, and it became one of the most famous photographs. What was—what were your folks—you know, what kind of things—do you remember what they were saying at the time? Did they give you—you know, it seems like every kid seemed like that they would think that, "Could I be next?"

ES: Oh, we were all scared, because we didn't know what was going to happen. You know, if they could kill, you know, a teenager for, you know, something as minor as *maybe* looking at a white woman or trying to talk to her, we just didn't know what would happen. And it was not long after that—it was either the year after, I think, that the Reverend George Lee was killed.

JD: Yeah, talk about that. He was a friend of your father's.

ES: He was a friend of my father's, yeah. And my father was a member of the NAACP, but it was—you know, it was kept very quietly. My father went to the funeral. And a couple of weeks or so after that, a newsletter was sent out. Maybe a month after that, a newsletter of his—you know, with pictures of the funeral and all the proceedings and all—was mailed out. And we were still living on a plantation at that point, yeah, because I was nine years old, nine or ten. And we were looking through that newsletter, trying to find, see if my father was in some of the pictures. And we could not find a picture of him, and so we just put it aside. And then, later, one of us picked it up, and there he was on the front cover of that.

JD: Oh, wow.

ES: And just looking down at the casket. And somehow we've lost that, that newsletter.

JD: For the sake of the audience, Reverend George Lee was very active in voting rights at that time and was gunned down. And, of course, nobody was ever tried or convicted of his crime.

ES: Right.

JD: The *Brown* decision, saying that segregated schools were illegal, came out the year before in ’54. Do you have any recollection of that and what—? [Laughs] It had no immediate impact in your area, did it?

ES: No, it had no immediate impact. I mean, things went on as they had always been. We were still in segregated schools. I think maybe it did have some impact, but we just—but indirectly it was that there was some impact. Because that’s—right after that is when they built—or maybe right, yeah, right at that—the school, the brand new elementary school that I attended, starting in the third grade. Before then, the first school I went to was in a church, you know, where they had two teachers, one for the little kids, and one for the older students.

JD: Yeah, that was the time the Mississippi legislature appropriated money to make “separate but equal” [laughs] a fact, thinking they could avoid desegregation. So, a lot of schools got built, not too many laboratories, no libraries with books—

ES: Exactly.

JD: But new buildings were built. I want to go to Wisconsin shortly, but tell me about spiritual life. Was the church an important part of your family’s life?

ES: Oh, the church was *very* important. I mean, you know, they were—like I said earlier, my parents were like everybody else. They were hardworking, churchgoing people. You went to church every Sunday, and then Sunday afternoon, you were back there for the BTU and whatever else, and then, you know, Bible on Wednesday, Bible Study on Wednesday. I mean, the church was really important.

But early on, when my parents lived in the country, they didn’t have church in their, you know, the church that they were members of, every Sunday, because the minister lived somewhere else. And so, he would come every other Sunday to church. But the church was very important in our lives. It was the center of everything, you know, all the social activity, just everything. And that was the only place where people could feel like that they could express themselves and have, and demonstrate their leadership abilities or whatever.

My father was a Sunday School teacher. And I remember, you know, once we were living in Itta Bena, [clears throat] he became [0:20:00] like one of the major Sunday School teachers. And my mother would spend Saturdays, because he loved to have his things all demonstrated—she would use butcher block paper, writing out and drawing his Sunday School lesson so he could demonstrate it on Sunday. So, yes, the church was extremely important.

JD: You said that they decided to send you to Wisconsin with your sister because they were just sort of getting fed up with the school system and the divided—this must have been a tough decision, though, to send your little girl, your last, away.

ES: Well, it wasn’t all that tough, because, like I said, I had spent—you know, I had gone away a couple of summers to live with my sister, and they were coming back every summer to visit, you know. So, I was a fairly easy decision for them. I was the youngest one, and they—you know, they were getting older, and they wanted me to have a good solid education. But it was always a temporary thing. I had always intended to come back and go to college.

JD: Yeah, um-hmm. Tell us—you were mentioning that Racine was much different. [Sound of sirens in background] Expand on that.

ES: It was very different, very different. I was in for a cultural shock when I—especially the school. You know, like I said—

John Bishop: Can we pause and let this siren go by?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: It passed, so continue.

ES: Alright.

JD: Okay. So, Racine, then, was different than the Mississippi Delta. Talk about your experiences there, school, town, how it was to make that adjustment.

ES: Well, the major difference is that for the first time in my life, I actually, you know, interacted with white people. I went to school with them, because back in Mississippi all the schools were totally segregated. But I actually—this was the first time—and I actually had a few friends who were white at Washington Park High School.

And the thing that was different about the school is that it was—I was just shocked at all the—you know, the beautiful library, the equipment that they had. And, you know, I was very athletic, so I played field hockey and soccer, and I took tennis lessons and all that stuff, and I did tumbling and all of that stuff. And I'd never been exposed to things like that. I just didn't even know that that kind of stuff existed, especially for a high school.

But the main shock was that, you know, you were lucky if you had one other black kid in a class with you. But I got along very well, I mean, after a while, but I was really embarrassed to tell people that I was from Mississippi. I got teased about that, you know.

JD: Uh-huh. Accent problems? [Laughs]

ES: About—well, I really didn't have an accent problem. It was just being from Mississippi, you know. And people called it, oh, Bigfoot Country, and all that. So, I just didn't tell very many people that I was from Mississippi, because I was just—I didn't want to be teased about it, you know.

But my sister was on her—had gotten on to her second marriage. So, her husband at that point, when I went to live with her, had a daughter who was about my age, and she was my protector. We went to school together, and she knew everybody, you know, because she had lived there all of her life—well, most of her life. And so, she was very helpful to me. Her name was Ruth, Ruth Days. And we became best friends.

JD: Did you run into any segregation problems there? Or was it a unique experience to go into a restaurant and sit down at the counter and have a Coke?

ES: You know, in—I don't think things were that—were segregated in Racine, you know. So, we didn't have that kind of a problem. The problem that I remember is that during the summers, we didn't have much to do, because the few jobs—you know, Racine is not a really, really big town. It may be, you know, it's probably under a hundred thousand. And the few jobs that teenagers could get all went to white kids.

JD: Yeah.

ES: So, I remember there was an A&W Root Beer not far from where we lived, and I wanted to work there. But, of course, I never got hired. I asked about it. So, the only work that I could get was babysitting for, you know, for my sister's friends. And so, that was—you know, in that regard, there was not that much difference.

JD: Yeah. You came back during your senior year.

ES: I did.

JD: That—I would have thought you would have [0:25:00] graduated up there and then come back.

ES: Well, you know, I wanted to go to college. And my parents thought there may—and I'm not even sure about this, but we thought that there may be a problem with my graduating from a school out of the state, and wanting to go to a public school. Because I was originally going to go to Valley State, until after I got involved in the Movement and, you know, found out about Tougaloo and all. So, they thought that there may be an issue with my graduating from an—you know, and having an address in Wisconsin, and then trying to get into school here. So, I came back and finished up my last semester at Amanda Elzy in Greenwood, and that's the school that I originally had started high school in across the summer.

JD: Uh-huh. While you were gone, we had a lot going on in Mississippi. You had the Freedom Rides, you had the Tougaloo sit-in, and you had the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, coming into McComb, and then moving up to the Mississippi Delta. So, by the time you got back, a whole lot was going on in and around Greenwood, with voter registration campaigns, white violence, police dogs being set loose on demonstrators, the federal government sort of coming in, but not really doing much. Tell us what it was like coming back into that, and what motivated you to jump in with both feet.

ES: Well, when I was in Racine, I had gotten involved with—I joined the youth group, youth chapter of the NAACP there. And we heard about what was going on down here, you know, with Meredith and the Freedom Rides and all. And we actually thought that we could get a bus and come down here—it was a bunch, about twenty students who were, twenty of us, who were involved in the NAACP—but that just didn't happen.

So, when I came back here in the winter, in January of 1963, I mean, things were going full blast. Because we hadn't been back here in a couple of years, and so, I just—I was just—I didn't know what to expect. But, I mean, the Movement was in full force in Greenwood and in Itta Bena. And then, a friend of mine invited me to attend a mass meeting in Greenwood, and this must have been maybe around a couple of months before I got out of high school.

And when I got to that mass meeting, I tell you, it was just amazing, with all the freedom songs and all these young people who are leading things. I mean, I think Hollis Watkins was there, Guyot was there, John O'Neal, Mary Lane. And then, I met my lifelong friend, June Johnson, and I became very close to June and her family. But that night, at that meeting, I decided—I *knew* that I had, you know, just found exactly what I was looking for, and that was the opportunity to work with, you know, with people to change the conditions that we lived in. You know, all my life I knew that I was not going to be living the kind of life that my parents lived. And—

JD: What did your parents think about your getting involved in the Movement?

ES: They were a little bit reluctant, you know, [clears throat]—

JD: Um-hmm. Afraid for you?

ES: To let me get involved in it. I'm going to tell you a story about what my father—he had a conversation with Lawrence Guyot, okay. When I told them—after I graduated high school, I told them I wanted to get involved full-time in the Movement until the fall when I could start college. So, my father was really reluctant. He said, "I tell you what. I'm going to go ahead and let you get involved, but you've got to give me the name of somebody who's in charge over there." And I said, "Well, that's going to be kind of hard because I don't know who's in charge. [Laughing] It looks like it's no one particular person."

And I think my father said, "Well, I heard about this fellow named Guyot." And so, he said, "I'm going call him. You get me his number." My father found a number somehow, and I didn't, because I didn't want him calling and telling somebody to be in charge of me and all that. But anyway, a week or two later, I was in the SNCC office in Greenwood, and Guyot came up to me. And he said, "I got a call from your daddy." I said, "Oh! [Laughs] Don't tell me!" And he said, "And he put me in charge of you. [Laughter] He told me that if anything happened to you, that I'm going to be—he's going to hold me responsible." And Guyot never let me forget that, never!

JD: And you met Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer about that time.

ES: I met Mrs. Hamer.

JD: Tell us about your relationship, your early relationship, impressions, friendship.

ES: Okay. I really got to know Mrs. Hamer—I had seen her around the office. I had heard her sing in mass meetings. [0:30:00] But I really had not actually, you know, gotten really close to her until Annelle Ponder, who was at that point with SCLC, and she wanted a group of people to attend citizenship school in South Carolina. And I was one of the ones who was selected. Mrs. Hamer and June Johnson and several other people were selected to go [clears throat] to the citizenship school. It was a two-week school. And when we got to the bus station—so we were going to ride the bus over there—Annelle said to us—can we stop a minute?

JD: Yeah, um-hmm, sure.

ES: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

ES: Okay, so, when we were [clears throat] getting ready to leave, and we left out of Greenwood to go to Charleston, South Carolina, Annelle said to us, "You know, I will be using the white side of the waiting room whenever we stop, because it's illegal for them to still have two separate waiting rooms in bus stations." And she said, "You don't have to do this, because we're—I'm likely to get arrested for doing this, especially when we're in Mississippi. And I'm not saying that you have to do it. I'm just telling you that if you want to, it's your choice. But I will be doing it."

And so, on the way over there, whenever the bus stopped, we used the waiting room on the white side without any problems. And we were over there for two weeks. And Myles Horton was one of the people, you know, Myles Horton from the Highlander [Folk School], and Mrs. Septima Clark was one of our teachers. And there was a man, was it Esau Jenkins, maybe, was one of the instructors, and I also met Guy and Candie—

JD: Carawan?

ES: Carawan—during that time. And we learned, just learned all the basics about what it meant to be a citizen, what your rights were, how important it was to vote, and what—and that was just demonstrating your right as, you know, as a citizen of this country, the right to vote, the right to elect people to represent you. And what we were supposed to do from that information that we got from the citizenship school was to go back and help and have and conduct workshops to train other people on the importance of what it meant, that it was your responsibility. It was our responsibility to be good citizens by, you know, getting people to register to vote and, you know, to register ourselves and to actually—you know, to carry out and to do the things that—you know, once you became a registered voter, to carry out your civic responsibility as a citizen.

JD: Um-hmm. And with the SNCC project in voter registration, why, you could just move right back into that with what you'd learned.

ES: Exactly. So, by the time—see, at first, you know, SNCC was focused on—I learned this later—on direct action. But by the time I got involved in the Movement, the focus was on voter registration, and so that's what I got involved in, voter registration. I did a lot of canvassing, you know, the door-to-door in Greenwood. June and I were always together, walking the streets. She knew the area, and we walked the streets of Greenwood, you know, and we also went to, in my hometown. We went to Itta Bena.

And, you know, people really didn't want to listen, especially the folks in my hometown didn't want to listen to *me* about anything. They said, you know, "We've been doing just fine, you know, the way we were." I think that they were really just afraid, you know. It's not that they didn't want to. My own parents didn't register until I was involved in the Movement, and my involvement got—my activities got them involved. And they—neither one of them had registered to vote, you know, prior to my involvement in the Movement. But they registered and they both—my father, who was a good bit older than my mother, was in his sixties, up in his sixties, the first time he voted, and my mother was in her late fifties or early sixties the first time they voted.

JD: Wow.

ES: And I will tell you, from that time on until they died, they never missed the opportunity to vote.

JD: That's a wonderful story. Okay, tell us about the bus trip back from South Carolina, one of the most infamous journeys in the Movement history.

ES: Okay, we left, and I can't remember what day of the week it was, [0:35:00] but it was probably a weekend, like, maybe a Friday. So, we all boarded the bus and we just made the assumption that we were going to repeat our activities of using the so-called "white side" of the waiting rooms every time we stopped. And we did that several times. And our last stop must have been in, I guess, in Alabama before we crossed the Mississippi line. And when we got to Winona, and we got off the bus, several of us—

JD: This was pretty near home, wasn't it?

ES: We were pretty near home and we thought, "Okay, we're almost home now. So, no incidents, nothing happened, we're okay." And without even thinking about it, several of us got off the bus, and we went to use the restroom. But before we could even, you know, get inside, there were carloads of highway patrolmen and local police there. And they ordered us out, and we refused to leave. And so, they grabbed us and threw all of us in the backseat of one car, just piled us in on top of each other.

And Mrs. Hamer was one of the people who did not get off the bus initially. When she saw us being arrested, she got off the bus as fast as she could and said—oh, well, I know. When they started first arresting us, throwing us in—Annelle Ponder pulled out a pad and started writing down the license plate number. And at that point, they just threw everybody in, and then Mrs. Hamer got off the bus and says, "What is going on? What are y'all doing? Why are you arresting them?" And they threw her into the car, too.

And when we got to the jail, and I guess we went to the city jail or the county jail—I'm not sure where we were. When we got there, the jailer didn't quite know what to do with us. There was me and Mrs. Hamer and Annelle Ponder and June Johnson and I think Rosemary Freeman. I'm not sure of the makeup of the group. But Annelle Ponder was the spokesperson, and she kept asking questions. And, of course, they called her—

JD: She was an older person, right, and college-educated?

ES: Yes.

JD: And very professional.

ES: Very professional, very soft-spoken, very articulate. And she kept asking why had they arrested us? And, you know, what had we done wrong? And that there was a—you know, we were not violating any laws, because the ICC, which was the Interstate—

JD: Interstate Commerce Commission.

ES: Commerce Commission had already passed this law that it was illegal to have separate waiting rooms, and we were just exercising our rights as citizens, you know, and it was very lawful. And so, the jailer just kept telling her to shut up. And then, she said something to him. No, he asked her a question, and she said, "No." And he wanted her to say, "No, sir," or "Yes, sir." And she said, "Well, I'm not going to say that." She said, "I'll answer your question, but I'm not going to say 'yes sir' or 'no sir.'" And at that point, he just—you know, he started hitting her. And what he did to me—and then, I spoke up and said something, because at this point, I had no fear! I don't know, I mean, what—

JD: You were just a kid! [Laughs]

ES: I was a kid! So, I said—and I had never really, you know, had a confrontation with any white person that, you know—I had never seen the kind of meanness and just evilness that, you know, that I witnessed then. But I still wasn't afraid. So, I said something. And the jailer took—he got this huge—I'll never forget it—this huge ring of keys, and he took them and he jabbed them in my side and stomped my foot and just told me to, "Shut up!" And I was going to keep on talking, and Annelle just said, "That's okay. Don't say anything else."

And then, they put us all in cells. And so, I shared—they had a row of cells. And so, the very first cell was left empty. And Mrs. Hamer and I were in the next one, and then, June Johnson and Annelle were on down the line. Annelle Ponder was the first person that they took out. And since Mrs. Hamer and I were in the cell right next to the empty one, what they did was [0:40:00] that they took us into—they would take you into a cell, that empty cell, and make you lie on a cot.

And there were two trustees who were there, and they were—you could smell the alcohol on their breath. They were—you know, they really didn't want to do what they were doing. But they made them drink, and then they were—they told them, you know, to beat us. So, you had to lie on this cot in that cell, and I could just hear them, you know, hitting. They had this huge strap, and it seems to me it had holes in it, or it had something attached to it.

And they were—I could hear Annelle just kind of moaning. She didn't scream out a lot. And then, finally, they let—they brought her back and they let her pass us, and I could see that her—you know, her face was bloody. She was bleeding. Her dress was torn. And then, they took June out. June was a—you know, didn't look—June was only fourteen. I was seventeen. June was a tall girl, and she looked older. As a matter of fact, she looked older than I did. So, they took her out, and then, the same thing happened with June. Then, they took Mrs. Hamer out.

JD: And she was in your cell?

ES: She was in my cell. And, oh boy, they really worked her over. And I could just hear her screaming and screaming and just, you know, asking them to please stop. And she said, you know, "Why are you doing this?" She said, "You are just like me. You know, you're black like me, so why are you beating me?" And they just—they kept going at it. And finally, they brought her back.

And then, they took me out and took me to that cell. And they made me lie on this cot. And they raised the strap up and just hit me one time. And at that point, the jailer came in and said, "Stop. Take her back to her cell." So, we're thinking that what had happened by that time is that—because two people, one or two people had been left on the bus, and they had gone back to Greenwood, and they told everybody what was going on. And so, they immediately started calling and looking, trying to find us.

And I think what happened—by that time, Guyot also had probably made it to Winona, but they arrested him, and we never saw him. They arrested Guyot, really beat him up really,

really badly. And, you know, I didn't think about this until later. I said, I wonder if one of the reasons that Guyot was so adamant—I mean, he was that kind of a person anyway—he had promised my father that nothing would happen to me.

JD: Oh, yes.

ES: And so, he says, "Oh, my God! I've got to get that girl!" [Laughs]

JD: It would be worse to face your father than the sheriff. [Laughs]

ES: I know! I know! So, Guyot was beaten. And so, they brought me back to the cell with Mrs. Hamer. By this time—I'm thinking it must have been Sunday. It was Sunday night. And Mrs. Hamer was in such pain. Her hands were all black and blue and swollen, and her buttocks was all swollen and hard, and she developed a fever. And the only thing I had was a washcloth, and we had a sink there, which, you know, I could—I kept putting cold water on it and, you know, and putting it on her forehead, trying to bring her fever down. And we didn't get any sleep, of course, that night. And so, what we *did* do, I mean, we decided—you know, when she calmed down a bit, and the pain wasn't so bad, we decided that we would sing some songs.

JD: I had not—that's news to me. I didn't know that.

ES: Yes, we did. We decided to sing a bit. And we did, you know, a few songs. We didn't sing all night, but we did it quietly, you know, for ourselves. And one of Mrs. Hamer's—of course, her signature song is "This Little Light of Mine." We didn't—but she wanted to do the gospel songs. And one of her favorite songs, gospel songs was, um, if I can remember the name of it—"Walk With Me." And we did that one, and it was just powerful, and that calmed her down. And it was like, you know, [sings] "Walk with me, Lord, please—" this is going to make me cry, so I—

JD: That's okay.

JB: It sounds beautiful.

ES: [Speaking with emotion] So, I'll stop. Okay? It's—okay. Can we stop a minute?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JD: SNCC knew that you were there. They had people calling the jail, lawyers calling the jail. And did that have an impact on how you were treated from that time on?

ES: Well, I think it did, because there were no more beatings. And we did—we were roused one night [0:45:00] and we didn't know—they talked about moving us, because I think that they thought that people knew where we were and they weren't quite ready to let us go. So, they talked about moving us in the middle of the night. And we decided—Annelle decided—that we were not going to go anywhere. We were really going to just—because we didn't want to be taken out somewhere in the middle of the night and, you know, and disappear forever.

So, Annelle was really very outspoken at that point and told them that, you know, that we're not going anywhere, you're not going to take us anywhere. And so, they decided not to do that and they put us back in our cells. And I'm just—I'm telling you, I don't remember much of what happened after—we were arrested, I think, maybe on a Sunday, and we stayed there maybe until Wednesday or so. And I don't have a lot of recollection of the day-to-day activities of what happened.

And then, I think it was on Wednesday, Andrew Young, and there was someone else who came with him to get us out of jail. And he informed us that—the first thing he told us, he said, "I've got some sad news," and I'm pretty sure this is right, this is accurate. He told us that Medgar Evers had been killed, had been assassinated the night before. And he said he was, you know, had left a meeting in Jackson, and he was on his way home, and he had been ambushed and killed. And so, you know, the joy of getting out was just totally overshadowed. I really didn't know Medgar. I knew who he was, you know. But it was just a sad, sad day.

JD: Well, for a lot of people, that would have been an indication it's time to get out. I've paid my dues. Let somebody else—what was your attitude?

ES: Oh, my attitude was that I was just getting started! You know, I'm seventeen years old and, I mean, I'm home! And I'm just—you know, this made me more determined to stay involved. And that was Mrs. Hamer's attitude, too. I mean, she said, "I'm not going to let this scare me off." And so, that's when, I think that time in the Winona jail for all of us, especially for Mrs. Hamer, it was like a—it was a watershed event. It was a turning point for her. And after that is when she really came into her own, and she became a national, you know, just a national figure, and [clears throat] with that great voice of hers singing and speaking everywhere.

JD: And she told the story of Winona at the Democratic national convention a year later, with an audience of millions.

ES: Right.

JD: And it was the dramatic point of the entire convention. There was a trial held in Oxford, and you attended.

ES: I did.

JD: There were people who were charged. Talk a little bit about that. That's sort of a footnote, but interesting, I think.

ES: You know, during that trial, [clears throat] I—they got our story, okay. We were in Oxford for maybe—for several days, or probably about a week. And when I took the witness stand—because we were not allowed to hear anybody else's testimony—[clears throat] when I took the witness stand, I was simply asked just a couple of questions: Was I arrested? I said, "Yes." Was I beaten while I was in jail? And so, my answer was, "No," because I got one lick with a strap. And they gave me no opportunity to explain about what I heard, what I saw. They only wanted to know what happened to me. So, I don't really know much about what went on. Like I said, we were not allowed to hear anybody else's testimony, and you were just kept away. And I spent maybe less than five minutes on the witness stand myself.

JD: Well, it seems like the prosecutor, if you can say that, would have been more interested in getting your story out.

ES: No. That was not the case. I was not allowed to elaborate. I don't know about other people, but I was not allowed to elaborate on anything. And I think they seized on the—when I said, "No, I was not . . ." I mean, I don't call—look, when I heard what happened to the other people and the length of time they were beaten, what I got, I thought, was the least of it.

JD: Yeah.

ES: And so—but I never had the opportunity to explain that, you know.

JD: Um-hmm. Things were starting [0:50:00] to happen rapidly in Mississippi then. In the fall of 1964, COFO, which was the umbrella organization of SNCC and CORE and local NAACP and other local groups operating under the COFO banner, decided to have a freedom vote to dramatize to the country that blacks *would* vote if given the opportunity. Tell us about that campaign and your involvement in it.

ES: Well, you know, I think it had been a long-held belief that, you know, that black people didn't want to have anything to do with politics and we wouldn't vote, even if we were given the opportunity to vote. But that campaign was—I mean, it just proved everything, that the power structure was saying about what black people wanted and what we would do.

I got involved in it, and one of the things that I did, though, I mean, from, as a result of my citizenship training—and I had other training, too—I know I went to Clarksdale and I went to another place and I actually did mock precinct workshops, you know, dramatizing what could possibly happen. At this point, I'm 18 years old, and I remember Aaron Henry arranged for me to come to his church and the hope was—

JD: He was the candidate for governor on the ticket.

ES: Yes. And we held workshops at his church. And there was another woman whose house I stayed at, Miss Piggy. And it was just a lot of fun conducting those workshops. And, you know, people just got really, really involved in their roles and all. And what I know, I mean, the results of it is that there was just a huge turnout and people voted, you know. Of course, it didn't really—we couldn't really actually vote, because people weren't registered. But it showed that people had a lot of interest in politics and being able to exercise their right as citizens.

JD: So, all this happened. There was some publicity nationally, not a whole lot, but a lot of the publicity was devoted to a group of white college students who came down from Yale and Stanford to assist in that campaign. And, although the SNCC had been active in Mississippi for several years now, why, the white supremacists were still in control, you now had a revived Ku Klux Klan that was beginning to move, and the federal government was not very helpful. So, you had discussions in SNCC and COFO about maybe having a summer project where you invite hundreds of people down from the North to work in local communities, in part to dramatize the plight of blacks in Mississippi, but also maybe to force the federal government to take action. Were you part of those discussions, because they became rather heated at times?

ES: Well, I tell you what. I was not—you know, I'm 17 years old, and I didn't do a lot of talking. I was there at the meetings. And, you know, I basically agreed with what many people were saying, because the logic of it was that, you know, if the federal government didn't seem to care much about what happened to black people. We were still being killed and still being denied the right to vote. But if we brought down these, you know, the children of affluent people from different parts of the country, and if they receive the same kind of treatment that we've been getting, then, you know, the whole country is going to pay attention. And that is exactly what happened. You know, when they started being arrested and beaten and killed—I remember that I was a part of the—I did go to Oxford for the summer orientation.

JD: Okay, tell us about that. That's a very interesting time.

ES: Well, unfortunately, I mean, again—my mother took sick while I was there.

JD: Oh.

ES: I left after a day.

JD: Oh, I see.

ES: I had to come back home.

JD: Uh-huh.

ES: But after a day or two—

JD: And you were there the first week?

ES: I left after a couple of days, two or three days or so, yes. And there were workshops, you know, demonstrating to people what could possibly happen to you and demonstrating the nonviolent techniques of how to protect yourself, you know, if things happened. And they were, you know, of course, they were dramatized and they were like, you know, overdone to give people a sense of what could possibly happen [0:55:00] and what you have to do in case these things happen, because they could actually get to the point where you could be beaten, and worse, killed.

And before I left, though, we got word that James Chaney and Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—I had not met Andrew, because he was one of the summer volunteers going down, and he left early from the orientation to go back to Meridian with Mickey and with James. So, I never met him. I later met his mother. As a matter of fact, when we were working on the 30th reunion for Freedom Summer, she came down and was a part of that.

JD: So, you came back, and the summer begins with the news that three civil rights workers have disappeared, and everybody understood that they were dead.

ES: Right.

JD: Tell us about that summer and your role in it, your recollections of what went on.

ES: By this point, okay, in the fall of 1963, instead of going to college, I actually moved to Jackson, because I had spent the summer working voter registration in Greenwood and Greenville. And in the spring of '64, I was in Hattiesburg and McComb, you know, doing voter registration.

JD: With the Freedom Days there?

ES: Yes. And then, in the spring of '64, I was in Jackson, and so I started working in the COFO office. By this time, the COFO office was up and running. And as you know, it was made up of SNCC and CORE and the NAACP and SCLC. We all shared a space at the—it was the Council of Federated Organizations, and we shared the space there.

And we had what we called—long before cellphones [laughs]—the WATS line. And so, one of the things that I did was I learned how to use the WATS line, and we had to have somebody staff that WATS line 24 hours a day, you know, in case somebody called in. And the WATS line was there so that if somebody got in trouble and, you know, they needed to get the word out that they were in trouble, wherever they were across the state, and they didn't have access to—you know, didn't have money to pay for a phone or something, you know, to get to a pay phone, they could maybe use somebody's phone and call in and relay the message, and it was free.

JD: Um-hmm. And they were supposed to check in every day, too, weren't they?

ES: They were supposed to check in anyway every day, and so that's why we had to have staff there, manning that telephone 24 hours. And so, part of what I did was I took a shift. I was not out in the field working during the summer, but everybody at some point came through the Jackson office, so I met most of the people who were down that summer.

JD: Who else was working in the office with you?

ES: Um, well, one of the people was the person that I finally married, [laughter] Jesse Morris. He's the father of my five children.

JD: And he had come in from California?

ES: Right, exactly, exactly. So, he was one of the people, actually—you know, Jesse and Bob and Dave were—

JD: Bob Moses and Dave Dennis.

ES: Bob Moses and Dave Dennis were actually, you know, kind of in charge—well, they shared responsibility with running the summer project. And I'm trying to remember, oh, who else was in that office? I met Gwen Gilliam that summer. She worked, because she was a student. She's from Alabama and she—

JD: She was a Tougaloo student.

ES: Was a student at Tougaloo, right, and I met her. Well, I actually met Gwen, I guess, in maybe—yeah, maybe the spring of 1964, and we became really, really good friends. I'm trying to remember who else. There were several people who were—I'm trying to remember if Mary King was there. Casey Hayden.

JD: These were young white women from the South who had been active in SNCC for a while.

ES: Right. Donna Moses, who at one point was Donna Richardson. She and Bob were married. And I don't remember who else was working in that office across the summer, though.

JB: Did you ever come across Worth Long?

ES: Oh, yes! Yes!

JB: Do you have any stories about Worth? He's a friend of mine. [1:00:00]

ES: Oh, Worth is a friend of yours! [Laughing] Well, Worth used to come to town and he stayed at our house many a nights, you know, whenever he would come through and need a place to stay. And Worth was really involved, and he was an oral historian. He liked to go out in the countryside and just talk to regular people and find out what was going on. And I remember later he was instrumental in getting the blues festival up and going, the Delta Blues Festival, and he did a lot of—arranged a lot of the documentation for the blues festival. So, he was kind of a folklorist and he—that's what I remember about Worth. And I saw him recently at—and I was just surprised to see him, because I knew Worth had been sick, but I saw him at the COFO office. There was something going on just a few months ago, I believe, and so it was really good to see him.

JD: Yeah.

ES: Yeah.

JB: I talked with him, and he said he's been feeling better the last year or so.

ES: Uh-huh, yeah. So, it was really good to see him up and about.

JD: Anything stand out in the summer: incidents, things you were involved in, violence?

ES: Well, there was always—there was, you know, violence all over the state being reported. And I'm just—I'm trying to remember. This has been fifty years ago, John, and I'm trying to remember details. If you want to ask me about specific things—

JD: There was something—well, there was something that I came across about your going to a movie at the Lamar Theater or downtown and—

ES: Oh, really?

JD: Yeah. Now, I—

ES: What did I go to see?

JD: It was something, and a young man was—

ES: I bet it was *West Side Story* or something!

JD: Oh, yes. Yes.

ES: I think. Oh, my! I don't remember the details of that, but I do—

JD: Yeah, somebody—one of your friends at the movie was taken out and beaten and put in jail.

ES: You know, I'm sorry, I just don't remember that.

JD: Well, maybe somebody has made that up. [Laughs]

ES: I do remember going to—I don't know. It could have happened. It could have happened.

JD: Yeah.

ES: But I do remember going to the movie theater.

JD: Yeah.

ES: And at that time, you know, integration was just, you know, beginning to take hold, and it was still kind of a, you know, a no-no.

JD: Well, in Greenwood, of course, they had the McGee brothers. You know, they were integrating theaters and getting beaten up and all kinds of incidents.

ES: Right.

JD: One of the major things to come out of the summer project, or Freedom Summer, was the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which was challenging the legitimacy of the regular segregationist delegation at the national convention in Atlantic City. Talk a little bit about FDP and your relation to it and your thoughts.

ES: Oh, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Well, as everybody knows by now, if black people couldn't vote, they couldn't participate in the democratic process. And so, the Democratic Party from Mississippi was almost always an all-white delegation. And the Freedom Democratic Party was formed, and it was made up of a cross-section of individuals, you know, to kind of reflect the makeup of the state. And when we went to Atlantic City—I was not actually, you know, an official part of the delegation, but I went along. I took a bus. And I think Mrs. Hamer was on that bus, and I remember sitting with her.

JD: Well, talk about your experience there.

ES: Okay.

JD: I didn't know that you were there.

ES: Oh, I actually went! Oh, yes!

JD: Yeah.

ES: We rode a bus up to Atlantic City. And when we got there, of course, we couldn't go in. We spent most of our time, you know, just outside the convention center there. But I remember that when a few people, we were allowed in, then we would share the badges to allow as many people as possible. Only a few could go in at a time, so the badges were shared, and I got a chance to go in for just a few minutes. And we heard about Mrs. Hamer's testimony and what President Johnson did, you know, when she was giving that really, really powerful testimony.

JD: He called a press conference to get her off the air.

ES: He called a press conference to get her off the air! But most of our time was just spent, you know, just being there and being outside, [1:05:00] being on the boardwalk, and sometimes singing freedom songs and just giving our support.

JD: Were you talking to people, or was it mainly members of the delegation that were talking to others?

ES: It was mainly members of the delegation.

JD: What was the mood there? For a time after Mrs. Hamer's emotional testimony, did you think you were going to win?

ES: We thought so. We thought so, but, you know, then these factions developed. You know, of course, there were people who wanted to accept the compromise.

JD: Which was two seats at large.

ES: Two seats at large! Two seats! And Mrs. Hamer, and I think Unita Blackwell, and maybe Victoria Gray—these *women*, you know, said, "No! No, we don't want two seats!" I mean, Mrs. Hamer said, you know, "We don't need two seats! *All of us* are tired!" You know? So, she was against accepting the compromise. And there were a couple of people who—well, not a couple. There were a lot of people who wanted to accept the compromise.

And so, at that point, I think, you know, a rift developed between the mostly the rural, you know, activists who had been, you know, down in the trenches really working for—and they were working for more than just a compromise, you know. They didn't think it was fair, didn't think it was the right thing to do to seat an all-white delegation and just offer the Democrats, who had, you know, a composition that was more of what the state was made up of.

JD: What was it like on the bus coming back? Did you—were you depressed? Did you think you had made your point? Were you eager to get back in the field?

ES: Oh, I was eager to get back. At this point, let's see, this is 1964.

JD: Um-hmm.

ES: And, you know, though, after the summer of 1964, things kind of—you know, we were kind of—you know, we weren't sure about the direction that we were going to go in, and things just kind of started to, you know, to kind of fall apart in the Movement. We lost the focus. Okay, you know, the Voting—I mean, the Civil Rights Act, you know, I think at that point had been passed.

JD: Yeah, it was passed, um-hmm.

ES: Okay, and then, the following year the Voting Rights Act was passed. And some of the—

JD: So, it's September of '64. What are you doing? You're back home.

ES: Oh, I decided to—it was time for me to go ahead and go to college.

JD: Yeah.

ES: And so, I enrolled in Tougaloo College, along with several other people: Gwen Gilliam, Hollis Watkins, MacArthur Cotton, and a bunch of other people. We were in the work-study program, so our tuition was paid, you know.

JD: Yeah. And so, your focus then shifted more to education after that?

ES: It shifted to education.

JD: Tell us something about Tougaloo when you were there.

ES: Well, let me tell you, I first heard about Tougaloo—I had no idea what Tougaloo was until—because I was away from here, so I didn't know anything about the colleges. I knew about Valley, because that's where I'm from, Valley State University. But then, one day, we had a Career Day at Amanda Elzy—now, that was a consolidated school that I went to that was right outside of Greenwood—and we had a representative from several colleges. And Tougaloo College was one of the places, and the man was—he was a foreigner. He was a black man, but he spoke French and he had this *wonderful* accent, and I was—and he talked about Tougaloo in such glowing terms.

But I—oh, you know what? I *had* heard about Tougaloo College which I forgot, because I meant to tell you this. When I was growing up, I heard a lot about my great-grandfather from my mother. She said and it's in the family that he actually—that he went to Tougaloo College!

JD: Oh, really?

ES: Yes. I've got a picture of my great-grandmother upstairs, and on the back of it—my mother was always fond of writing stuff on the back of pictures—she's got written down, and I'll show it to you when we're done: "Professor," she called it, "Professor Jeff Davis—Jeff Davis, can you believe it—Pearson." And she said he went to Tougaloo College, and she lists all his wife, Georgia—that's the picture of my great-grandmother—and all of their children, which one of his children was my grandmother, his daughter, [1:10:00] Bertha Pearson. And what he did was that he educated—now, I also have some great-uncles who went to college, okay? One was an accountant, and one did something else.

JD: That’s very unusual for that time.

ES: Very unusual, but you have to remember the times. This was like that first and second generation. This was during Reconstruction.

JD: Yeah, when there were possibilities, yes.

ES: Yes, yes. And so, they were educated and they owned land and everything. And it was that generation, my mother’s generation, after that, that lost everything and went back to that system, well, went *into* that system, the Jim Crow and the sharecropping and all that. And my mother just was—when she grew up, she was, you know, she was very sheltered from the racism and whatever, you know. And then she married my father and she got thrown into this world that she knew nothing about.

But, anyway, where were we? [Laughs] I was talking about something else.

JD: Well, we were talking about being at Tougaloo—

ES: Oh, being at Tougaloo!

JD: And what it was like in ’64, ’65.

ES: Well, in 1964, Tougaloo—well, Tougaloo is a really different place from that. Tougaloo had this history, you know, of being this oasis for the Movement.

JD: Private school?

ES: Private school, small private school. And it was—it had the reputation of really educating people and turning out people who would go on to be lawyers and doctors and whatever. And I wanted so badly to go to Tougaloo. I just didn’t think my parents could afford to send me. But then, after being involved in the Movement, someone arranged for scholarships for those of us who wanted to go. And so, maybe ten of us actually went, started to Tougaloo. So, I went to Tougaloo, but then, I got married the following—early in ’65, I got married and I started having children. So, I went to Tougaloo for two years and a summer.

JD: What was it like—here you were, all hardened Movement veterans—

ES: Oh, boy! [Laughs]

JD: And you’re at a school with a bunch of kids who—most of whom have not—?

ES: It was really difficult to settle down and to, you know, to get involved, to *try* to get involved in campus life. As a matter of fact, I never really, really did. I just felt so removed from that. I mean, I went to my classes and I did what I had to do, in terms of my studies, but I didn’t get involved [static sound problems begin] much in the campus life, except for, you know, I made a few friends.

JB: Excuse me for a second.

JD: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes at a higher volume]

JB: Okay.

ES: So, it was just—it was really hard to make the transition from having been involved in the Movement—I mean, I went to the March on Washington, right? I had met Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and all these people who had been involved in the Movement. And it was just a wonderful, exhilarating, exciting time. And then to leave that and to come back—to move into a whole other world, the academic world, when most of the students there, the girls, were trying to get into sororities and the boys the fraternities. I never did get involved in that. I just didn’t see the point of it. And so, it just happened at a time in my life when I had no interest in doing that. I’m not saying that it’s a bad thing. It’s just that it was just something that I didn’t want to do after having, you know, been involved in the Movement. So, it was—but it was a good experience. I made some lifelong friends at Tougaloo. Tougaloo was like a family, a community in itself.

JD: Yeah. What professors do you remember?

ES: Oh, gosh! I remember, oh, my goodness! Well, Dr. Naomi Townsend. Oh, the great Dr. Naomi Townsend! I was in her class. And she had an upper level—I don't know how I got into that—English class, right? And, boy, she was strict! At that point, girls could not wear pants to her class. I didn't know that. [Laughter] I wear pants all the time, right? I mean, my uniform was jeans for the last couple of years. And you could wear pants to chapel; we had to go to chapel, you know, once a week.

I stepped into Dr. Townsend's class one day, and she said, "Miss Simpson, I will have to see you after class." And everybody started looking at me. They knew what was coming, right? And so, she blessed me up and down [laughs] about, "You do not come to my class with slacks on!" "Okay, Dr. Townsend." And then, I had cut my hair [1:15:00] and I was wearing an Afro. And she said, "And another thing! Why do y'all have to wear your hair like that?" [Laughs] "Can't you just—you know, I mean, you're on a college campus now. Can't you do better than that?" And, of course, I ignored her.

JD: That was early on. There were not many Afros in '64 and '65.

ES: No, not many Afros in '64. And then, on top of that, I used to—I used to ride a motorcycle to school, [laughing] a tiny little white Honda motorcycle, because I lived in Jackson for part of that time.

JD: Yeah, and it's six miles out.

ES: Exactly. So, I tell you, there was some notoriety there among all the Movement people. But I don't know why it was that we were—you know, why we stood out so much, because of the reputation that Tougaloo had. You know, the Tougaloo Nine had been there, and it had been very open and, you know, receptive to the Movement. I mean, we were accepted and got along well with our classmates.

JD: My experience was, and reading, also, was that Tougaloo could mobilize its students, get a whole bunch of people to come into the chapel when there was something going on.

ES: Exactly.

JD: And—but it was really a much smaller group of students who were active.

ES: Um-hmm, yes.

JD: Especially before 1964, in integrating churches and doing things like that. But—remember Dr. Borinski?

ES: Oh, Dr. Borinski! Of course, Dr. Borinski and the forums that he held. Yes, I used to attend those. As a matter of fact, when I went to summer school, he taught me German. So, I only had the one class from Dr. Borinski. But his, I mean, his forums were legendary.

JD: Bring in people who were known internationally, who would come to Tougaloo because they had heard about him.

ES: Exactly, exactly. He was amazing.

JD: Yeah.

ES: Yeah.

JD: Well, I want you to talk about, well, two things. First of all, talk about your life for the last fifty years. [Laughter] And then, well, just tell us about family, about what you were up to, where were you living, what were you doing? We want a full record here.

ES: Okay! Well, of course, I was married, and then raising five children. So, part of that time, I was—I was just a stay-home mom. And then, I kept trying to go back to school, so I went to Jackson State for a while. I thought I wanted to be a nurse. But this is when my youngest child, Jessica—she just had a birthday. She's 35 now.

JD: Is she the attorney?

ES: She's the attorney.

JD: I met her.

ES: Oh, you met Jessica? Okay, okay. So, when she was maybe two, a couple of years old, I went back to school. And I took all kinds of, you know, the sciences, the biology and chemistry and all that stuff. And after about a year of that, I said, "Oh, I don't think I want to do this." So, I stopped that again. And then, I went—in 1986, I believe, I started to—'86 or '87, I started to Millsaps and I went for a semester.

JD: What was Millsaps? Now, this is a predominantly white school, a good liberal arts college in Jackson.

ES: Well, I tell you, Millsaps was, I tell you, the most difficult school that I had ever been to, but I did better at Millsaps than I did anywhere.

JD: Oh?

ES: I was practically a straight-A student, you know.

JD: Oh, wow.

ES: I was going part-time, but the last year that I was there, I was a full-time student and working full-time and raising children.

JD: Wow.

ES: And I did really, really well at Millsaps. I had some really good professors. Mr. Babendure—

JD: Um-hmm, yeah.

ES: Oh, did you know him?

JD: Yeah.

ES: Oh, my gosh! He was just the most amazing man! And he liked me, [laughter] so he took extra time with me. At this point, I'm in my forties, right, you know.

JD: Yeah.

ES: So, I really liked Mr. Babendure, and I had other teachers, too, that I liked at Millsaps. So, Millsaps was really, really—it was very challenging for me, but I enjoyed my time at Millsaps, and I finally graduated. I stopped and then I went back, and so, that last time I was there, I was going full-time.

JD: You must have been one of the old students there. [Laughs]

ES: Oh, I was, and I was right in there with these young kids and I was holding my own. And the students who were younger would say, you know, "Well, you don't have anything to do. You're just here taking a class or two." And I had to correct them: "No, I'm full-time. I'm working full-time. I'm raising children. So, don't ever tell me I don't have anything to do [1:20:00] but study." You know? [Laughs]

JD: Where were you working?

ES: I was working—for a time, I worked—okay, when I started out, the very first job I had was I was a legal secretary for the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. I had gone—I had been in—I got my training for that when—I don't know if you've ever heard of MDTA, the Manpower Training and Development Act.

JD: Oh, yeah. Yeah, um-hmm. Yeah, a Great Society program.

ES: Yes, exactly! So, Hinds Community College got funded for one of those programs, and they had a stenography class that they—or school. And we went to that class for a whole year, five days a week, you know, eight hours a day, to prepare us. And so, the first job that I got was as a legal secretary, and when I got out of that, for the Lawyers Committee. And after that, I went to work for Head Start.

JD: Um-hmm. In Jackson?

ES: In Jackson. Well, Friends of Children of Mississippi is the one I got involved in. It was after the CDGM business, you know. Friends of Children of Mississippi was formed, and I went to—and the director of that was an old SNCC person, Fred Mangrum, at the time—

JD: Oh, yes.

ES: You remember—you know Fred?

JD: Yeah, I know Fred.

ES: Okay, at the time that I was involved there. And then, later, I was an office manager at Voice of Calvary's Health Clinic, because I moved to—Jesse and I moved our kids to the country. We lived in Simpson County for about four years.

JD: Um-hmm, wow.

ES: And so, I worked at a health clinic in Mendenhall, kind of running that health clinic for a while until I moved back to Jackson. And then, after that, you know, I went to college. And then I also worked at Delta State University for a while. This is about in the late '90s in Cleveland, Mississippi.

JD: In Cleveland in the Delta, um-hmm.

ES: I was a program administrator then. We had three AmeriCorps programs. And so, I was one of the people who was running those three programs. But also during that time, I had met Les and—you know, I got a divorce, and so I met Les, and then we were together. We got married. We've been married for 15 years. But prior to that, you know, a year or two before that, I was working with him in his business. He had a consulting business that managed federal and state contracts. And we also did work with the Kellogg Foundation. And one of the things that we did, we were community coaches.

JD: What's a community coach?

ES: A community coach is a person who works with—okay, the Kellogg Foundation had an initiative called the Mid South Delta Initiative. And what they did, they worked in the three states, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, and they funded programs and projects in communities, but these communities had to have involvement, you know, across the boundaries. You had to, you know, be inclusive of, you know, not just black people, but it had to be made up of, you know, citizens across the boundaries in those communities.

And what they did was that they came up with—they found problems in their communities that they wanted to try to correct. And they would write a proposal and get it funded, and they could have, like, maybe a hundred thousand dollars or something to get some of those initiatives worked on. And the coach would coach them in, you know, how to set up their organizations, how to bring the different factions together, just help them through the process of fulfilling the obligations of the grant that they got. And one of the really exciting things that we did during that time, we wrote, you know, a side proposal to get to take several trips to Africa.

JD: Wow.

ES: We took some of the participants in these organizations to—we took three trips, as a matter of fact. We went to Ghana for a two-week period, and we took a mixed group of young people and old people. And then, we went to Senegal and the Gambia once. And on that particular trip, Mrs. Lillie Ayers, who was at that point 75 years old, and she had always wanted to go to Africa, she was on that trip with us. And she was a trooper. She was absolutely amazing. Mrs. Ayers is the widow of Jake Ayers, who was an activist and—

JD: Brought the suit.

ES: He was instrumental on that Ayers case that's still being [1:25:00] played out right now. And then, the last—one other trip that we—we took a group of just thirty-somethings and under. And the whole thing that we wanted to do—we hooked up with a group called Travel and Learn. And we planned an itinerary that would, you know, just expose—some of the people had never even been on an airplane.

JD: Wow.

ES: And they went, you know, from the Mississippi Delta to Africa. And they interacted with, you know—they got introduced to international travel, got introduced to, you know, to be living in other cultures and sometimes roughing it and sometimes, you know, living better than they had been living at home, you know, because we stayed in really great hotels.

JD: That must have been fun, too. [Laughs]

ES: It was! It was amazing. It was really, really fun, yes. So, then, I also did social work. The last thing I did was that I worked with, um, um, let's see, one of the—let's see, I can't think of the name of it now—the development groups, the community development groups. And they had a program, an aging program, and so I did social work for about three years, working with people who had been victims of the Katrina storm.

JD: Oh.

ES: And these were older people who had been displaced, and they had moved to the Jackson and surrounding areas.

JD: Wow.

ES: And we were helping them navigate the system, just, you know, trying to get resources for them, whether it was health care or, you know, a ride to the doctor, food, just whatever they needed. And so, I did that, and that was very, very rewarding.

JD: Yeah.

ES: I'm still—you know, I still keep in touch with one or two of the people that I worked with, the cases that I managed.

JD: Oh, that's wonderful.

ES: Um-hmm.

JD: You have been living in Mississippi most of your life. You have participated in the most important social movement the country has seen since the crusade that freed the slaves, and you've seen a lot of change take place. And the final question is for you to tell us what you think the major positive changes that have taken place in the state as a result of the Movement, and what needs to be done. What are the major problems facing us today?

ES: [Laughs] Wow. Alright. Well, of course, some of the positive things is that—you know, there is a lot of surface changes, okay? And, well, I mean, there are a lot of changes that you can't really quantify either-or. But some of the major changes is that—okay, during the Movement, one of the major things that happened is that black people, you know, got a sense of who they, a better sense of who they were, and that they started to re-evaluate and to re-think about who they were and their worth and began just to see themselves in a different kind of way, to see that they were not powerless.

And we always have power, but they had—we had somehow given up our power to other people. But in order to get it back—you know, when change is coming, it's sometimes—like Bernice Reagon sings, she starts out on one of the songs on one of her albums, says, "When you see change is coming, if you want change, you have to walk into the storm, and *when you get to the other side*, things will be different." And so, that's, you know, kind of how I see what the Movement—people actually just, you know, not knowing what was going to happen to them, they actually walked into the storm because they needed and wanted change. And things *have* been different.

So, now, I live in this neighborhood when, you know, 50 years ago, I couldn't have lived here. You know, it's predominantly white. The houses are nice in this neighborhood. I can live—people can live anywhere they want to live. We—the schools, now, that's a different story. The schools in Jackson, you know, there was white flight from the schools. Most of the white people go to, still go to, I mean, at this point, they're in private schools. The academies are still, you know, very much alive. The public schools are probably 90 percent black. So, in that regard, we're about where we used to be.

And people always point to the change as being, you know, the number of black elected officials that we have. But that's—that's a change, but I don't know how that has, you know, played out for the average person, how that has really benefited the masses, you know.

JD: So, what are the major problems, then, facing?

ES: The major problems are still [1:30:00], I mean, you know, crime. I'm just looking at our area here.

JD: Yeah.

ES: There's lots of crime. The school system is, in Jackson and some of the surrounding areas, not very good. And so, you know, we're trying to work on that. And, as it happened, you know, we have a lot of black elected officials. You know, we have a black mayor. We have the school board is mostly black. We have our city council is predominantly black.

But what has happened is that, you know, economically, the power structure hasn't really changed all that much, you know. All the major businesses are still owned by white people, and a lot of them have moved out of the Jackson area, out of the city of Jackson, and into Madison County and Rankin County. And so, what has happened, you know, the tax base has been eroded. And so, if you don't have money to fund the schools, you can't really, you know, improve it all that much. And so, some of the schools are really in bad shape, you know. Every year they do a report card on the schools, and there are just way too many of them that are, you know, C and D and sometimes F rating. So, we still have a lot of work to do, and I think most of it is on education.

JD: Yeah.

ES: And trying to control crime in this area—you know, there's not—there's hardly a week that goes by that some—and it's mostly in this, you know, black-on-black crime—that some young black man is not shot, you know, or killed another one. And when I was a kid growing up, that kind of stuff was so—

JD: Yeah.

ES: I remember *one case* of a black man killing another one, just one, the whole time that I was growing up. And it was so traumatic that I had nightmares about it. I only knew one of the men. I knew the one who got killed. And it was just—it went through our community like wildfire when this man was killed. And now, it's just so ordinary that you just don't—you hardly blink an eye when you hear about it, you know.

JD: Drugs and gangs imported from the North. They weren't around.

ES: Exactly, exactly. Nobody knew anything about that kind of stuff.

JD: Your children grew up in that time of transition. This is the final question. Talk about your kids, what they're doing.

ES: Okay! Let me start with my oldest one. His name is Earl. He owns a small construction business, so he's, you know, he works for himself. He has a small crew. Sometimes it's ten people, depending on the jobs that he gets, and sometimes it's four or five, you know. So, he lives in Madison, but his business is in this area. My next son is Orlando. He's a fireman, and so, that's the major thing that he does. Well, Earl is married. He has four children. Orlando is also married. He has three.

And my next son is Omar, and he has a couple of kids. He's not married. And he is an IT specialist. And his job was bought by another—I mean, his company was sold to another company, so he lost his job three years ago. And at that point, he decided that he would go back to school. I mean, he has a degree in political science. He went to Rollins College. Orlando went to Alcorn College. Earl went to two years at Hinds Community College. And Omar decided that he would go back and get a degree in computer engineering, so he's getting close to finishing that up. He's at Jackson State.

And then, the next one is T. Of course, you know T. And she has a doctorate and she's teaching at the Ohio State University. And then, my youngest—

JD: Has a book coming out.

ES: [Laughs] Has a book coming out, hopefully within the next year or so. And my youngest child is Jessica, and she's an attorney. She went to—she graduated law school at Michigan, and she's been a practicing attorney now for, I think, seven years or so. And she worked for a local law firm here in Jackson. And that's it.

JD: Euvester Simpson, thank you very much for inviting us in. This has been a wonderful time for me.

ES: [Laughs] Okay.

JD: And I'm sure that the people at the museum and the many people who are going to be viewing this will share my sympathy. Thank you again.

ES: Well, John, thank you. It was so good to see you. [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs] Yes, it is, even in this setting!

ES: [Laughs] In this setting and, you know—

[Recording ends at 1:34:46]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council